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The media and children sexuality – an anthropological approach

Anna Brosch

Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Silesia

Abstract

With the information age exploding through television, music video-clips, computer games and the Internet, children encounter increasingly frequent portrayals of sexuality. Images of sexualized children are becoming common in advertising, magazines, television programs and films aimed at children as well. Children, particularly girls, are dressed, posed and made up in the same way as sexy adult models which blurs the distinctions between adult, youth and child. Therefore the transition from child to adult status is becoming more ambiguous and complex than perhaps was the case in earlier times. Moreover, children focus on sexualizing themselves rather than pursuing other more age-appropriate developmental activities whereby they seem to be maturing physically and showing an interest in sex at an ever earlier age. Therefore the question arises as to whether children's exposure to sexual content from media sources may have effects on their sexual behaviors and attitudes.

This paper presents a findings which are set against historical debates about the impact of sexualized culture and show a review of literature on the sexualization of childhood from an anthropological perspective. The available studies suggest that the media do have an impact on children due to the spread of sexual and relationship norms, which rarely depict sexually responsible models. There is also presented a survey among pupils in gymnasium, which explores young people's perspectives of sexuality, sexual identity within the context of sexualized culture and examines how young people discuss these issues. More longitudinal research, especially with early adolescents is needed to learn more about how media content is attended to, interpreted, and incorporated into developing sexual lives.

Key words: anthropology of sex; children; sexualization; the media

Introduction

“In the Beginning was sex and sex will be in the end...” (Goldenweiser, 1929, p. 53) – this opening sentence suggests that sexuality has been an important focus for anthropological investigation. In fact, anthropology's relationship to the study of sexuality is more complex and contradictory. This is because sexuality is constructed within historical relations of difference, “embedded in political, ideological, social and economic systems” (La Font, 2003, p. 69).

Research on sexuality has figured prominently in anthropology since the formative years of the discipline. Work carried out in the 1920s and 1930s by Margaret Mead and Bronislaw Malinowski on a number of different societies in the South Pacific and Melanesia was pioneering both in developing cross-cultural comparisons of diverse sexual mores and customs and in legitimizing ethnography as a key methodological approach for the study of sexuality. This emphasis on the sexual meanings and behaviors among other societies as a kind of mirror that can be used to contrast with and often question the values of Western societies. This issue has been an ongoing theme in anthropological research, from early studies on the subject of sexuality on up to the present. From the 1930s until the 1970s, there was a silence in anthropology on the topic of sexuality, which was subsumed under the subfield of marriage and reproduction (Lyons & Lyons, 2011). During the late 1970s “sexual morality and ideological assumptions about sexual roles are analyzed in terms of the formation of subjects fit for historically specific socioeconomic relations” (Truong, 1990, p. 4).

Since the mid-1990s, growing anthropological attention has focused on structural factors that shape sexuality in different social settings, and on political struggles that have emerged in relation to sexuality. As the research focus has expanded to these areas of social concern, anthropologists studying sexuality have been increasingly influenced by work in feminist theory, social sciences, and have also emphasized the ways in which sexuality intersects with other axes of power and identities. Anthropologists in the early twentieth century wanted to explain the ways in which culture naturalizes sex and a fixed sexual identity (see: Vance, 2008).

In the last decade, a major topic of concern has become the 'sexualization of culture', which is highly polarized and is internationally debated. Both poles of the debate, accept that there has been an increasing sexualisation of society. However, they differ in the conclusions they draw. Many researchers from different countries (e.g. Hamilton, 2010; Levin & Kilbourne, 2008; Papadopoulos, 2010) present a strong case that children, especially girls, are being prematurely sexualised by media and commercial culture including magazines, television, films, cartoons and music videos. Others will question whether things are really changing, pointing out that a moral panic about the sexualisation of children will tend to produce 'more suspicious readings' of cultural material (Kleinhans, 2004, p. 19).

Sexualisation of children in the contemporary media

In the age of social transformation associated with the dissemination of new technologies almost every aspect of personal lives is changing. (Copik & Szymik, 2014, p. 12). There is evidence that teens now use more media for longer periods of time at younger ages, and sexual content in the media has increased during the period 1985-2005 (Rich, 2005, p. 329). It must be emphasized that contemporary media plays a powerful role in the socialisation of children and adolescents, and it may be particularly important in shaping young people's sexual knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours given their limited access to other sources of sexual information (Goldman, 2000, pp. 11-17). The different types of cultural material providing to children are inter-linked by their participation in 'the culture of celebrity', and they cross-reference each other, sometimes explicitly. These types of cultural material together account for the bulk of sexualising influences on children today.

As popular culture becomes more sexual the levels of sexual behaviour could escalate and attention-seeking sexual behaviour could become more common among older children and teenagers. Moreover, as images of sexualised children become more common in advertising and marketing material, it is also possible that younger children will also develop more attention seeking sexual behaviours (Lamb & Brown 2006, p. 48). Sexualisation is defined as the imposition of adult sexuality on to children and young people before they are capable of dealing with it, mentally, emotionally or physically and the use of sexual attributes as a measure of a person's value and worth (Papadopoulos, 2010, pp. 5-6). The trend towards increasing sexualisation of children is also likely to continue, and the potential for harm to children will increase in parallel.

In discussion of the sexualisation of children it is often noted that in developed nations children now reach puberty earlier than they did in the past. To place these physical changes in context, however, experts in childhood development often note that children's emotional and cognitive development has not advanced at the same pace (e.g. Levin & Linn, 2004; Linn, 2005). As a result, children's bodies are maturing before they are psychologically mature, thus there are unprepared to deal with sexualising pressure. An increasing emphasis on a particular body type as the ideal is central to the evidence of sexualisation.

The evidence also indicates that young people do not have the capacity to make free and informed choices about whether or not they sexualise themselves. Tizzy Asher argues that even teenage girls 'do not realize that assuming the role of seductress will limit their own sexual expression and will strip them of power, though it may feel otherwise' (Asher, 2002, p. 23). It is important to recognize 'the lack of agency little girls have in the process of becoming desirable' (Merskin, 2004, p. 128). In particular, children attempting to make choices about their sexualis-



ation from the powerful combination of a range of images offered by advertising and marketing with the existence of peer group pressure. Thus children's attitude to their appearance and behaviour in a sexualised way may be due more to a fear of being socially disadvantaged by not doing so than any perception of advantages to be gained.

The literature on the effects of sexual content in the media is still underdeveloped, with only few studies at this time. However, these studies all indicate significant correlations between viewing of sexual content in the media and sexual activity. Victor Strasburger acknowledges that such correlation might simply reflect the fact that sexually active teens may seek out more sexual content in their media, but points out that the single longitudinal study completed at the time of writing demonstrated a more direct causal link. It concluded that among nearly 1,800 American teens aged 12 to 17, increased exposure to sexual media doubled the chance of their having initiated sexual intercourse or increased activity in the following year (Strasburger, 2005, p. 277).

However, it is not easy for any society to agree on where the line should be drawn in matters such as the sexualisation of children, let alone to agree on how such a line might be enforced.

The media's portrayal of women

Depictions of women in the media emphasize that women should look in overtly sexual ways. Contemporary women have become entangled in a web where a perfect sexual image of females has become the norm, that they are effectively trained about how to present a hypersexualised version of themselves (Reist, 2008, p. 10). It can be said, that women as objects of desire has become a crucial element to the industries' economy in achieving both pleasure for the audience and profit for the companies (Railton & Watson, 2005, p. 115). Throughout the all media, the representation of women correspond almost to a pornographic version of sexuality that involves sexual servitude to men. In this case "sex is displayed as something purely physical based on female exhibitionism" (Durham, 2009, p. 73). For example video clips, so popular among teens, have always been somewhat sexually inclined but in recent years it has become even more obscene and in some cases has descended into pornography (Wright, 2011, p. 70). In one recent analysis of popular music videos, researchers found that in 84% of the videos analyzed, women were shown to be dancing in a provocative nature (Walter, 2010, p. 33). However, it is extremely important for young girls to be aware that the majority of images in many cases presents exaggerated and eroticised versions of women (Durham, 2009, p. 65).

As such, it is appropriate also to treat girls' magazines and television programs as promoting the general importance of looking sexy, even where they are not advertising specific products. Young girls in particular are becoming increasingly influenced by the fashion, music and advertising industries that advertise that "they should look „hot” not later but now" (Reist, 2008, p. 42). Michael Flood (2009, p. 391) suggests that "exposure to media which sexualises girls and women is associated with greater acceptance of stereotyped and sexist notions about gender and sexual roles, including notions of women as sexual objects".

As a result, girls are growing up alongside sexually saturated images, but because of limited life experiences, they do not question the sexual images they see. It is argued that marketers use hypersexualised images because „sex sells” and as a result the more sexualised the material we see, the more desensitised we become to it (Hamilton, 2010, pp. 55-56).

Moreover for girls, the ideal body is based upon the ideal woman's body – slender but shapely, dressed somewhere between prettily and provocatively, with clothing emphasizing certain body parts (Tiggeman, 2005, p. 362). Beauty ideals are presented as part of 'complex cultural scripts that link thinness and attractiveness to happiness, desirability, and status' (Tiggeman, 2005, p. 364). Beyond the effects of highly idealised media images on children's body satisfaction, some child development experts note that as children are exposed to increasingly sexualised popular culture, those children who have 'rebellious, creative or freethinking tendencies' are at particular risk (Linn, 2005, p. 138).

Methods

Based on the evidence above, it seems reasonable to explore youth's sociocultural attitudes toward appearance, social comparison with media models, body satisfaction and self-esteem. The survey was carried out at the end of 2014 in public gymnasium in Silesia region in Poland. The sample consisted of 63 both 29 males and 34 females aged 15-16.

The respondents filled in an anonymous questionnaire based on the SATAQ-3 - Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire-3 (Thompson et al., 2004, pp. 293–304), which is a 30-item measure of endorsement of Western sociocultural beauty standards depicted in the media. Items are rated on a five point response scale ranging from definitely disagree (1) to definitely agree (5), with higher scores indicating greater media endorsement. According to the original version the SATAQ-3 has four subscales:

1. Information - perceptions of mass media as a source of information about appearance ideals (INFO) – 9 items.
2. Perceived Pressures - reported pressure from mass media to change one's physical appearance (PRESS) – 7 items.
3. Internalization-General - the assimilation of mass media portrayals of attractiveness ideals into self-identity (INT-GEN) – 9 items.
4. Internalization Athlete - the internalization of mass media portrayals related to having an athletic physical appearance (INT-ATH) – 5 items.

Data were processed with the statistical software package STATISTICA 10 (Stat Soft Polska). Student data were *t*-tested for each categorical variable by gender.

Results and discussion

The average awareness score in each subscale for all participants was: in perception of media information (INFO) $M=2.79$ (range 1.78–3.67, $SD = .46$), reported pressure from mass media (PRESS) $M= 3.1$ (range 2.29–4.43, $SD = .45$), the assimilation of mass media portrayals of ideals (INT-GEN) $M= 3.2$ (range 2.22–4.56, $SD = .53$) and internalization of an athletic physical appearance (INT-ATH) $M=3.41$ (range 1.8-4.4, $SD=.61$).

As shown in Table 1 there were statistically significant gender differences on almost all of the SATAQ-3 subscales, excluding information about body ideals (INFO). Girls reported significantly more perceived pressure (PRESS) and thin ideal internalization (INT-GEN) than boys. Otherwise, boys reported significantly more athletic-ideal (INT-ATH) internalization than girls.

Table 1
 SATAQ Means, Standard Deviations and Results of *t* test, by gender

Variable	<i>M</i>		<i>SD</i>		<i>t</i>
	Female	Male	Female	Male	
INFO	2.82	2.76	.46	.47	.53
PRESS	3.23	2.94	.49	.35	2.63*
INT-GEN	3.55	2.79	.41	.31	8.25**
INT-ATH	3.11	3.76	.58	.44	-4.94**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

As the data has shown the media plays a significant role in the development of body image and self-images of adolescent both boys and girls. This powerful influence is derived from the media's ability to present such images in ways, which seem normal and acceptable, when in actuality many of the images of perfect bodies have been airbrushed or digitally altered. The images that infiltrate the minds of young people effectively manipulate their sense of self, especially with regard to their physical appearance. But they will never be able to look like the made up famous people in the media or the idealistic models in advertisements, therefore the cycle of unhappiness and disappointment in themselves continues. This negative effect is especially harmful to adolescent females, as they tend to be the primary target of these types of stereotypes.



There is no doubt that the media is promoting these unrealistic and unattainable body types so that negative self-images will be fostered in young people leading them to buy the products being advertised and thusly promoting and supporting the consumerist, mentally unhealthy dynamic life style in which we currently live.

Images that often portray young people as sexual agents who accept or even desire sexual interaction suggest that youth are capable to such interaction in the way that adults do. However sexualised images do not prepare adolescents for the realities of sexual contacts. In summary, although evidence for a causal relation between exposure to sexualised images and earlier sexual activity in teens is still very limited, the available evidence suggests that such a relationship does hold. It should be emphasized that in Poland, the age of sexual consent is set by state laws is 15. Moreover a causal relation between exposure to sexualised images and earlier sexual activity is supported by psychological theories, in particular cultivation theory and social learning theory. Cultivation theory suggests that television and other forms of media tend to cultivate acceptance, at a broad cultural level, of the beliefs, values and perspectives they portray. While social learning theory and socio-cognitive models suggest that individuals develop mental 'primes' and 'scripts' from material viewed which can then guide later behavior. It therefore seems likely that a pattern of increased exposure to sexual media leading to earlier sexual activity might be found among Polish teens, similar to the pattern found among American teens, but such research has not yet been undertaken in Poland.

Conclusions

The opportunity cost to youth of focusing on developing a sexualised appearance and personality is that they will thereby have less time to devote to other things. This is a general harm that is additional to the specific physical, psychological and sexual harms related to the sexualisation of young people discussed above.

There is a risk that sexualisation will lead youth, particularly girls, to spend a large proportion of their time, money and mental energy on conforming to sexual stereotypes, and being distracted from other activities that may well contribute more to their short and longer term happiness. Although paying some attention to physical appearance is important and may be enjoyable for teens, excessive focus on particular forms of physical appearance is likely to limit their overall development rather than foster it.

It should be emphasis that protecting youth from sexual harm does not mean protecting them from age-appropriate materials on sex and sexuality since to maintain them in ignorance can foster sexual abuse and poor sexual and emotional health. In addition, sexual images presented in media should be moderated by parental involvement, including discussions, and by their sexual, emotional and cognitive responses as well as the type of material and the duration and intensity of viewing.

Thus, further research is warranted, aimed at understanding the mechanisms of how the media's role affects adolescents' awareness and internalization of ideal body, which may in turn lead to the development of body dissatisfaction and may be critical in preventing unhealthy weight-control behaviors.

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Anna Brosch

Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Silesia
Grazynskiego 53, 40126 Katowice, Poland
anna.brosch@us.edu.pl