

*To what extent does the sexualization of young girls and women in Western culture perpetuate sexual violence?*

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In the highly sexualized cultural milieu of Western societies in the current era and digital age, women are commonly portrayed as sex objects through socio-cultural norms, media and pornography. The effects of sexualization (ie. the objectification of women in advertisements, dehumanization and victimization of women and the accessibility of explicit pornography) pose dangers to the development of young girls and women as well as the society in which we live. In this paper I explore to what extent the sexualization of young girls and women in Western societies perpetuate sexual violence. This research primarily draws from academic essays on feminist theory and studies done on the content of media. In the research found, there is a link between the objectification of women and the acceptance of sexual violence. While the sexualization of women does not cause sexual violence it does incite beliefs that reinforce the dehumanization of women. These conclusions indicate the need for comprehensive sexual education, the empowerment of young girls through their non-physical attributes and a shift in the common narrative around the accessibility of sex.

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## **Part I: Introduction**

Since 1998, over 17 million women have been victims of sexual assault in the United States alone (Vagianos). In contrast, since October of 2017, over 120 public figures in the United States, including actors, a former president and lawmakers, have been accused of sexual misconduct as part of the #MeToo movement. These statistics are astounding and upsetting. What is the breakdown in our society? When did society lose touch with its respect for women? The prevalence and presence of sexual objectification and rape culture in the daily lives of women in Western societies has become so embedded into cultural norms that women and young girls are often unaware of its daily impact on their choices, actions and the ways in which they are treated. Popular advertisements, movies, TV shows, video games, clothing and music frequently reference sex and more specifically, sex that objectifies women. Starting from a young age, women are advertised as sexually available, desirable objects, accepting of the normalized dehumanization to which they have become accustomed. The implications of the everyday occurrence of female objectification are farther reaching than one may have been lead to believe. The sexualization of women and young girls in Western societies has perpetuated and normalized sexual violence in part due to the portrayal of women as sex objects through socio-cultural norms, pornography and media.

Though the notions of sexualization, objectification and self-objectification of women are often regarded as feminist issues, but they are in fact *human* issues, and ones that must be brought to the forefront of human rights conversations. With the birth of the 21st century, a new era of sexual discourse was brought to life, born from technology and social media. The implications that digitized and social media have on women and young girls by emphasizing the

existing culture and attitude of acceptance around sexual objectification has influenced the discourse around sexuality in the current era.

## **Part II: Historical Context and Background**

*Sexualization*, according to the Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls released by the American Psychological Association (APA) is defined as a concept consisting of four main parts;

- ❑ a person's value stems only from that individual's sexual appeal or behavior and all other characteristics of that person are excluded;
- ❑ individuals are held to beauty standards that equate physical attractiveness with being sexy, they are described by their "sexiness";
- ❑ individuals are sexually objectified—that is, made into a *thing* for others' sexual use, rather than seen and valued as a human with the capacity for independent action and decision making;
- ❑ sexualization is when sexuality is inappropriately forced or pressed upon a person.

Additionally, sexual harassment, abuse, assault and exploitation - in the form of prostitution and child pornography, are extreme forms of sexualization (Zurbriggen et al. 14,23).

'Rape culture', is a term and concept often used when discussing the sexualization of women. Just as sex and sexualization are related, so are sexualization and rape culture. The sexualization of women lays the groundwork upon which rape culture exists. Feminists introduced the concept of rape culture in the 1970s to highlight the ways in which society was blaming and shaming victims of sexual assault and in turn normalizing male sexual violence (WAVAW). Stemming from a shifted understanding of perpetration, a common belief of rape culture, is that women 'egg on' men by dressing or acting in 'provoking' ways. Rape culture also

perpetuates the idea that men cannot be raped. In this cultural milieu, rape is identified as an expected and normalized fact of life and rape culture allows men to act as they please without being held accountable. A common public response to rape focuses on avoidance rather than deterrence. The sexualization of women contributes to rape culture by supplying a constant stream of images to the mainstream, in which women are depicted as dehumanized and degraded versions of themselves.

Rape culture then leads to rape myth acceptance, a concept that was also coined during the 1970s. Rape myths are defined as the attitudes and false beliefs about rape - created by rape culture - that perpetuate the way society views and responds to rape. Common rape myths include: the belief that women lie about sexual assault and rape in order to gain attention and the admission of rape with claims that the women led the man on, or that she deserved it. These myths ultimately lead to the minimization of the seriousness of rape (Burgess and Crowell 66). Men are proven to be more believing of rape myths than women (Peter and Valkenburg 386), however rape myths are commonly believed and spread throughout college campuses in the United States. Culturally, there is a tendency to stay quiet about experiences of sexual violence as shown by statistics published by the American Association of University Women, which illustrate that in 2014, 91% of colleges reported zero incidents of rape (Becker). Rape education has increased on college campuses supporting the message of avoidance, however recurrent behavior shows behavioral change is slow and arguably on the rise. What has changed, in very recent years, is that more women are finding the strength to come forward and admit they have been victims of sexual crimes.

When examining and studying the sexualization of women and rape culture, one will inevitably be introduced to the idea of objectification and self-objectification. Objectification is a psychological action of degrading humans to mere objects. It can create a dehumanizing perception of female bodies and body parts. The objectification of women's bodies can also be defined as the compartmentalization of women's body parts into objects available for use and pleasure in ways others see fit. Objectified women are seen as less competent and less human (Awasthi 2-3). Embedded within objectification is self-objectification. While objectification is the outside perception of oneself, self-objectification is how an individual perceives themselves. Self-objectification is a process of socialization where from a young age girls are taught to think of and treat their own bodies as objects of others' desires. They see and treat themselves as things to be evaluated and looked at purely for their outward appearance. Self-objectification is the result of the pressures and societal norms that put emphasis on how you look and the importance of 'sexy'. As a result, young girls learn to self-objectify to receive the affirmation and validation of societal pressures. The APA Task Force agrees stating that, "Though portraying oneself solely as a sexual object to be looked at is sometimes viewed by girls and women as exercising control over their sexuality (e.g., at some social networking Web sites), presentation of the self in this way can be viewed as a form of self-objectification" (Zurbriggen et al. 17). In other words, self-objectification is the sexualization of self through behaviors and outward bodily portrayal, sometimes disguised as empowerment. Not surprisingly, this process has severe consequences for many girls, including mental health struggles, eating disorders and intellectual performance (Awasthi 3). To understand the viewing of women as sex objects, one must also have a clear image of the relationship between objects and subjects.

Activist, scholar and radical feminist, Catharine Mackinnon wrote an academic essay titled, *Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: "Pleasure under Patriarchy"*. While this piece was written almost 30 years ago and many of the perspectives of Mackinnon are somewhat dated, she contextualizes the gender-role stereotypes in sexual encounters and how they relate to and perpetuate the belief that women are sex objects. In sexual encounters, women are the objects and men are the subjects. Subjects act independently, with free will and individual power, yet objects are acted upon and used how the subject would like. Mackinnon even goes on to explain how the objectification of women can be overcome by women's acts of agency and this can ultimately reduce sexual violence:

If women were to escape the culturally stereotyped role of disinterest in and resistance to sex and to take on an assertive role in expressing their own sexuality, rather than leaving it to the assertiveness of men, it would contribute to the reduction of rape.... First, and most obviously, voluntary sex would be available to more men, thus reducing the 'need' for rape. Second, and probably more important, it would help to reduce the confounding of sex and aggression. In this view, somebody must be assertive for sex to happen.

(Mackinnon 321-322)

This citation embodies the controversial perspectives Mackinnon takes and the idea that it is partly women's responsibility to avoid being raped. While this is a radical and dated stance, one can see how the powerful and unspoken roles of women and men in sexual encounters could potentially lead to unhealthy and even dangerous sexual interactions thus transitioning us to the idea of sexual agency. The notion of sexual agency is one that is often referred to in feminist theory. In a broad sense, sexual agency is the ability to make sexual choices according to one's

will, free from coercion. Experiencing oneself as a sexual agent means feeling in control of one's sexual decisions and experiences. The concept of agency stands as a justification and reasoning for women to act as they please; even if one's actions are potentially sexually objectifying or dehumanizing, they can be dismissed with 'well she is exercising her agency'.

The evolution and purpose of sex is a concept that has taken many forms and changed over time. The evolutionary perspective (a modern perspective of primeval times) of sexual behaviors viewed the reproduction of an individual's genes as the primary use of sexual intercourse. In order to be successful in creating offspring, males would procreate with as many women as they could to increase their chances of making children (Burgess and Crowell 51). Yet the men would not stay as father figures, because that was not their role in the relationship. In fact the men had little responsibility in the matter outside of mating with the woman. The book *Understanding Violence Against Women* suggests that men who had difficulty finding sexual partners may have been more likely to use sexual coercion or rape to get what they wanted. By taking an evolutionary perspective on this claim, one can achieve a further understanding of the potential roots of sexual violence. There has been extensive research done on 'forced copulation' among non-human species, a term used to address sexual coercion in animals. Forced copulation is a tactic used by some homo sapien males to increase the chance of reproduction and this concept puts rape culture in a larger scientific perspective that can be extrapolated to human males (DeClue 420). While this evolutionary perspective of sexual violence is one that can be referenced and utilized as a basis for further research, it is important to understand modern factors as well. The evolution of sex has changed over time based on outside cultural and social influences. For example, a counter argument of rape from an evolutionary perspective says that



sexual coercion and violence does not only come from a desire to reproduce one's genes as rape also often leads to no reproductive consequences (Burgess and Crowell 52). This proves that the evolutionary perspective of rape cannot be fully followed in the discourses of sexual violence in the modern era.

Sexualization, rape culture and objectification are notions from which the *action* of sexual violence is born. The term "sexual violence" is an all-encompassing, non-legal term that refers to crimes like sexual assault, rape, and sexual abuse. However there are varying types of sexual violence including intimate partner violence, incest, child sexual abuse, drug-facilitated sexual assault, sexual coercion, and date rape to name only a few variations. Just one aspect of sexual violence is rape. As discussed earlier, sexual violence began at the beginning of human time and can be described and understood by the evolutionary perspective of sexual behavior.

The ways in which Western societies have accepted the prevalence of sexual violence has changed over time and with every era. For instance, in the 1800s men were legally allowed to physically reprimand their wives, a law that was supported by the Supreme Court. In the late 1800s, many advocated for wife-beating to be considered a crime, although few men were ever brought to justice for it (Burgess and Crowell 50). The examples used here are also examples of the patriarchal culture that is persistent, even now, in the current era. In patriarchal culture men generally hold the power through decision making roles, while the systems of government and societal norms are controlled and created by men; women are excluded. In the current era, patriarchal norms have been overridden and protested, but the structure of many Western societies is based upon patriarchal power and these structures would be nearly impossible to change. For instance, until the 1990s, marital rape was not recognized as legitimate, further

pushing the longstanding belief that a woman is property to be used how the man would please (Burgess and Crowell 50). Since the 1960s and the beginning of the most powerful feminist movements, sexual assault, date rape and sexual harassment have all become mainstream and highly debated topics, though this has not curbed their widespread presence. This widespread presence may be attributed to the media and newfound acceptance of the discussion of these topics as well as women finding a collective voice in speaking out that societal norms must change, something that was seen as taboo before the mid 20th century.

As one can see, the topics and wide range of subjects that the sexualization of a culture and sexual violence cover are diverse. Areas of study that address these issues range from psychological approaches to ethical and sociological approaches. The sexualization of women and the ramifications that come from it are widely viewed as feminist issues. The concept of objectification itself is one viewed as a notion central to feminist theory (Papadaki 2). This is a narrative that must be shifted. In fact it is a human issue, the sexualization of women affects us all in conscious and subconscious ways. These effects can manifest in the way of relationships, unfair expectations about sexuality and gender and on more extreme levels, if the sexualization and media objectification of women and girls continues, it may perpetuate or increase the sexual exploitation of girls, violence against women, forms of pornography, stronger beliefs of sexism and the prostitution of girls (Zurbriggen et al. 30). Most debates in this area of research stem from this argument: are women reaching their full potential as feminists and freely acting agents when depicting themselves in openly sexual ways or are they objectifying themselves in ways that could potentially harm them? In order to begin answering this question, one must understand the socio-cultural context and milieu in which the sexualization of women takes place.

### **Part III: Research and Analysis**

There is no one answer to sexual violence, nor for if the sexualization of women perpetuates sexual violence. In truth, the effect that the sexualization of women has on societies is still uncertain due to the amount of factors that play into the sexualization of a culture. The factors that could be researched and analyzed in the realm of the sexualization of women are expansive and include but are not limited to: rape culture; the psychological studies of why men rape; sex work and the varying arguments for and against prostitution; sexual exploitation in the new millennium; the difference between gender and sex and the social construction of gender; the accessibility and availability of pornography; the dominant portrayal of women in the media; and finally the socio-cultural norms and contexts that lay the groundwork for all of these factors to develop. However, the specific factors I will examine include how the socio-cultural norms in Western societies oppress women, the influence of pornography in a world where it is quickly obtained and at the fingertips of young children in a matter of seconds, and the ways in which the media portrays women and young girls. Each of these sub-topics feed into and construct the basis upon which the sexualization of women can be identified.

### *Socio-cultural Norms*

The socio-cultural norms that exist in Western societies and perpetuate violence against women are deeply ingrained in the workings of daily culture. For instance, a study referenced in *Understanding Violence Against Women* found that men who are raised in patriarchal family structures, where traditional gender roles exist, are more likely to become violent adults (through rape or battering), than men who were raised in egalitarian homes (Burgess and Crowell 60). This is a way in which men can obtain power and remain dominant over women in order to fulfill the traditional gender role of patriarchal households. While this is an extreme example and

it clearly does not hold true for all men who are raised in households with traditional gender roles, it does show that gender role stereotypes contribute to a culture of victimization. Violence against women is often a learned behavior. One third of boys who have been abused or exposed to violence between their parents become violent adults (Burgess and Crowell 62). The socialization of young boys has direct ties and implications to future violent behavior.

Institutional influences that reinforce gender-role stereotypes include some organized religions, the workplace, the U.S. military and the media (Burgess and Crowell 63). It may be difficult for young boys to escape these negative socializations especially when they are evident in sports teams, places young boys are drawn to and gain exposure to adult male role models during formative years. Many words used by competitors and coaches to describe weak performance or encourage other athletes are dehumanizing and degrading towards women. ‘You throw like a girl’ or ‘you are playing like girls’ are common phrases yelled at athletes in order to motivate them, these ‘insults’ normalize the notion that women are weak and it is an embarrassment to act like one. In fact, sports teams have been said to “reinforce already aggressive tendencies” and “[team sports] are a risk factor for sexual aggression” (Burgess and Crowell 63). Furthermore, the socialization of children touches on the double standard between traditional gender roles. For example, parents socialize their daughters to resist sexual advances and ‘not get raped’ meanwhile sons are taught to initiate sexual activity but they are not taught to ‘not rape’. The documentary, *The Mask You Live In* (2015) derives from interviews and studies that in general (though there are many exceptions) boys are stereotyped as ‘weak, mama’s boys’, or ‘faggots’ if they demonstrate qualities or attributes that are believed to be inherently feminine (The Mask You Live In). It should not come as surprise to societies then if they have been forced into the

masculine role of domination, sometimes resulting in violence. These societal, institutional and familial attitudes and foundational norms further exacerbate the negative effects of patriarchal culture.

The article *Technologies of Sexiness: Theorizing women's engagement in the sexualization of culture* by Adrienne Evans et al. addresses the socio-cultural context in which women have become sexualized beings. Rosalind Gill argues that:

...whilst respecting the voices of women in research, feminist academics should critically engage with the cultural context in which women make these choices (the ways in which women dress) and not assume that participants can behave as if apart from their cultural context. (qtd. in Evans et al. 117)

This confirms the importance of first understanding the culture in which the sexualization of women takes place so that its effects can be determined and better understood. Feona Atwood, a prominent academic and author on the subject of the sexualization of the modern world, believes that the sexualization of modern societies is on the rise, especially in consumer culture because 'sex sells'. According to Atwood, in an article titled *Sexed Up*, a sexualized culture is defined as: "a contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities; the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes... the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay; our fondness for scandals, controversies and panics around sex..." (Atwood 4). Sex is becoming less taboo, more visible and more explicit. These are some of the factors that play into and prove the onset of a new attitude towards sex. The ways in which society is experiencing sexuality is changing as a result of the commodification of sex through social media or cyberspace. The commodification of sex is a process of turning sexuality,

reproduction, bodies and sexual acts into commercial products and objects that cater to the desire of consumers. This process has led to the reality that sex is no longer something to be anticipated, instead it is immediate and readily available, “These narrative shifts significantly change the ways in which we are able to conceptualize and experience sexuality” (Atwood 3). The narrative around sex is changing in the present-day world. Atwood goes on to say that the relationship between sexual representation and sexual reality are becoming confusing and no longer clear. In fact, the representation of sex has been exaggerated, sensationalized and glamorized and it is not depicted for the intimate and private human act that it is. Brian McNair, who is referenced in *Sexed Up*, attributes these changes to a wider shift in Western societies due to a “popular demand for access to and participation in sexual discourse” (qtd. in Atwood 6). The mainstream depictions of sex also showcase sex role stereotypes, including male dominance and female submissiveness. When women are shown as sexually submissive, it proves the belief that even they believe themselves to be objects of sexual desire. This shift in sexual discourse opens up a plethora of questions to be asked and answered. The modern day implications of the democratization of sex are two-faced and can lead to new representations of sexism.

A notion termed “Sexually objectifying environments” by Dawn Szymanski, Lauren Moffitt and Erika Carr, in the article *Sexual Objectification of Women: Advances to Theory and Research*, about the objectification theory, illustrates another sexist aspect of the cultural context in which sexualization is permitted. *Sexual Objectification of Women: Advances to Theory and Research* illustrates how the United States condones and cultivates a culture of sexual objectification. From this cultural norm, more extreme forms of sexual objectification are born and may result in sexual victimization (rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment) (Szymanski

et al. 11). The objectification theory allows one to understand how socio-cultural factors influence women psychologically and it provides explanations for what cultivates this culture. Objectification theory also highlights how self-objectification can be heightened due to specific environments in which sexual objectification may be encouraged. These environments stem from the long standing patriarchal social structures and systems that give women little control over their situation, provoking anxiety and stress (Szymanski et al. 18). Sexually objectifying environments (SOEs) are defined as places where traditional gender roles (men are powerful, dominant and controlling; sex is viewed as a conquest for men and women are believed to be property) are prominent, there is a high probability of male domination, women are likely to hold less power than men, attention is often drawn to women's physical attributes and there is approval and acknowledgment of the male gaze. An example of this kind of environment is the Hooters chain restaurant, yet it is important to know that SOEs could be a variety of different places including any work environment where sexual remarks, seductive clothing and sexual advances are tolerated (Szymanski et al. 22). SOEs often have a disproportionately larger number of men than women within the environment itself. Evident in the example of Hooters, there are supplementary factors "... that may contribute to the creation of an SOE, including the presence of alcohol, the regulated encouragement of sexualization (i.e., flirting, smiling), and/or the promotion of competition between women" (Szymanski et al. 25). In these environments it is more likely for men to mistake friendliness for flirtation which gives off a misperception of sexual intent. While many of the lapses in judgment that men encounter in these environments are soon made clear, these misperceptions have been linked to men's perpetration of sexual assault and sexual harassment further showing how sexual objectification leads to sexual

violence. SOEs are the result of a patriarchal society, the U.S. mainstream culture being mainly patriarchal: male-dominated, male identified and male centered although this may seem invisible to many because it is so deeply rooted (Szymanski et al. 23). In this systemic patriarchy, women find themselves in fewer positions of power, maintaining environments of male domination. Within these sexualized environments, women are more likely to self-objectify, the effects and consequences of which are far-reaching. Self-objectification can lead to misperceptions of consent; a self-blaming for others sexual violence; a lack of self-confidence, self-control and self-respect; and a further perpetuation of the idea that male sexual violence is normal and accepted (because if a woman sees herself as an object, then she also sees men as subjects who can use her as they please).

### *Self-Objectification and the Media*

In societies, predominantly Western, that promote, encourage, and sell idealistic women and sex to young girls, there are negative repercussions and results that come from the sexualization of women in the media. The lack of cognitive development in young girls affects their ability to process sexualizing and objectifying cultural messages and ultimately there will be negative and subconscious consequences, from the media, for women and young girls. The cultivation theory (Gerbner et al. qtd. in Zurbriggen et al. 3), states that when people are exposed to media content or other influential parts of modern culture, people will gradually start to associate and see the world in ways that relate closely to how they have seen or heard the world portrayed around them (Zurbriggen et al. 3, 19). Women and young girls are implicitly influenced by the images they see and the things they hear in the form of song lyrics or TV shows that refer to women in objectifying manners. A prime example of sexually objectifying



lyrics is Sir Mix-A-Lot's "Baby Got Back", which says "Cause you notice that butt was stuffed deep in the jeans she's wearing. I'm hooked and I can't stop staring. Oh baby, I wanna get with you and take your picture. My homeboys tried to warn me, but that butt you got makes me so horny." In these song lyrics, he is referring to her "butt" as an object and sexual conquest. It is within this milieu that the concept of self-objectification is introduced.

Studies examining the objectification of bodies when they were uncovered or covered have shown that women's self-esteem and confidence in their mental capacity are negatively impacted due to the amount of clothes they were wearing. Women's performance on a math test was much lower when wearing a bikini than when they wore a sweater and took the same test, because they exhibited decreased intellectual performance due to self-objectification (Awasthi 3). Self-objectification also reduces the physical performance of girls. The APA Task Force says that the more girls viewed themselves as objects through self-objectification, the more limited their physical performance was when throwing a ball (3). The pressure and power that self-objectification has over young girls and women, starting as young as the age of 12, is cause for many negative consequences including mental health risks, heightened social anxiety and the mental and physical performance of women. It creates opportunity for body shaming when women compare themselves to the cultural standard and frequently come up short (Szymanski et al. 8). This creates a culture of weakness around women which often leads to increased fear about physical safety and a decreased sense of confidence when it comes to defending themselves during a physical attack of any sort (Szymanski et al. 12). Self-objectification keeps women as 'less-than' humans and it supports the notion and limiting belief that they are objects of sexual attraction and little more.

As one can see there is a vicious and unfair double standard and disadvantage keeping women at a disadvantage in society. Women are called sluts and prudes, neither of which are positive, while men celebrate their sexual conquests. In this way, women do not know what to think, they are confused and conflicted, often trying to disguise who they are, while also remaining an object of desire. In an article entitled *From Attire to Assault: Clothing, Objectification and Dehumanization - A Possible Prelude to Sexual Violence?*, women were coined “self-objectifiers” and described as perpetrators of the sexualized culture. This is a controversial and difficult stance to take because while women may be objectifying themselves, they are doing so within a culture that repeatedly teaches them that male sexual desire comes through objectification. This stance further cements the unfair double standards women face: one must self-objectify in order to be looked upon as a sexual being *but* if a woman objectifies herself, she is perpetuating a culture of negative sexualization. It is not an easy decision and choice for women to make and it once again places the responsibility of changing sexualized culture into the hands of women. An article from the U.K. continues that “... the sexualization of culture provides a backdrop against which we can understand the tendency of young women to define themselves in terms of physical attractiveness and the tendency of men to see the female body as a commodity” (Melrose 165). Women try to imitate the “popular”, the “trendy” and the “sexy” images of women by dressing in an objectifying manner themselves, but then they are blamed for continuing the culture of sexualization. It is true that men are not alone in perpetuating this cycle of objectification, women objectify themselves without even knowing it. Women often play into the stereotypes and sexualized culture and men buy the stereotypes, in turn reinforcing the cycle of objectification.

The same article concluded that while self-objectification does not lead to sexual violence (it may lead to an acceptance of it), objectification of the human body does lead to sexual violence: “sexual assault and violence is a consequence of a dehumanized perception of female bodies that aggressors acquire through their exposure and interpretation of objectified body images,” Awasthi writes (3). In other words: “Provocative dressing leading to sexual objectification biases the perception of sexual violence”(3). This is extremely controversial and many feminists differ on this argument: can a woman choose to dress in a provocative way without objectifying herself. This question remains hotly debated, yet even the suggestion that provocative dressing can in fact be empowering and objectifying simultaneously opens up a new discussion about femininity. Even though this article was specific to the link between clothing leading to sexual violence rather than a general examination of a sexualized culture leading to sexual violence, it supports the claim that a sexualized culture does in fact perpetuate sexual violence.

As depicted in the research, the ‘sexing up’ of Western societies and cultures is leading to the commodification and objectification of women's bodies. Women’s bodies are then regarded as things that can be enhanced, modified and exploited by both themselves and others. Bodily exploitation can take the form of sexual violence and harassment as well as prostitution and the selling of women’s bodies to fulfill the sexual needs of others. This cycle fosters a toxic and unrealistic view of women and sex.

### *Media*

In Western societies, women remain oppressed to this day (Evans et al. 117). However the popular and sexualized image and portrayal of women has changed over time. Even looking

through magazines or Playboy issues spanning the 20th century, one can easily see the ways in which the “beautiful” image of women’s bodies has changed over time. However, the dominant trend of the portrayal of women during the 20th century and now, in the 21st century, is a white, heterosexual, slim, upper class women. You can see her everywhere, on billboards, in TV ads, on the back of magazines. One also sees the replication of her in the way girls dress and in the onslaught of media portrayals telling adolescent girls how to be skinny and sexy. Patriarchal culture has played a large role in developing this common and popularized image of women. MacKinnon, argues that male supremacy in a society controls all systems institutions, and women can never be truly free of their dominators. She also writes about the female sexuality as a function and product of male sexuality. Women live in a dominated culture and even when they feel free they are trying to live within the dominant structures that men have created for them; their freedom is limited (Evans et al. 2). While women may feel as though they are choosing how they act and show themselves to the world, they are in fact living within structures created by male desire and a woman can never truly be free of that pressure. These societal structures in which women are placed, are evidence of the socio-cultural norms that perpetuate female objectification and the normalization of sexual violence.

Some of these socio-cultural norms and societal structures are reinforced in the media. Feona Atwood has written multiple articles about the ‘pornification of culture’ or ‘sexing up’ of contemporary culture (Melrose 163). This is happening in advertising because pornographic imagery and sex ultimately sell. In the Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (APA) there are a plethora of examples and evidence of the ways in which media portrays women and girls as sex objects. The mediums in which these are consistently happening, include but are not limited to

the following: television, music videos and lyrics, movies, magazines, sports media, video and computer games, advertisement for things from beer to cars, clothing, cosmetics and toys for children. There is an inundation of ‘sexed up’ images that are so frequent and common it has become the norm and women and young girls may not even realize the ways in which they are being influenced by them. Media content is a direct reflection of culture and people buy what is available to them, persuading themselves that the content they are purchasing is what they would like to see. Not only are women portrayed in sexualizing manners, sexual violence towards these women is also common place in the media. Take television as an example, in 81 TV episodes examined, 84% of those episodes showcased at least one incident of sexual harassment. The most common incidents were sexist and demeaning comments made by men towards women about their bodies or demeanors (Zurbriggen et al. 5). In another study done, 74% of the episodes analyzed contained one incident of gender harassment in the form of jokes, where more often than not, these jokes were followed by laugh tracks (Zurbriggen et al. 5). This tactic of subconscious coercion done by the creators of the shows, creates a sense of normalcy and humor around harassment.

In advertisements and music videos, women are often portrayed as sexually ready and available for the pleasure of men. Gail Dines in a TED Talk called *Growing Up in a Pornified Culture*, says that many women in advertising have epitomized the “Fuck me” look that spreads itself across magazine covers. Merskin (2004) is quoted in the APA Task Force:

... the message from advertisers and the mass media to girls (as eventual women) is they should always be sexually available, always have sex on their minds, be willing to be

dominated and even sexually aggressed against, and they will be gazed on as sexual objects. (p. 120).

What young girl does not want to be wanted, what girl does not desire to look like the women she sees on the magazines in the checkout line of the grocery store? Many of the articles in the magazines that girls ages 8-18 frequent are focused on making themselves look 'hot' and 'sexy' (Zurbriggen et al. 7). Advice columns and articles about dieting, hairstyles and cosmetic use are targeted towards making girls desirable for the male gaze, self-improvement is disguised as something for women, when in reality it is for men. In an analysis done on advertisement photographs in two popular men's magazines, Maxim and Stuff, 80% of women were depicted as sex objects (Zurbriggen et al. 10). Multiple studies show that magazines have increased the amount that women are portrayed as decorative objects (literally objectifying them) by 10-20% in all studies except one that found no change. Not only are women shown as sexually available and provocatively dressed, it was also found to be true that female models were much more likely than male models to be put in a submissive and sexually exploitive position, 80% of women were posed in sexually exploitive postures while this was only the case for 17% of men (Zurbriggen et al. 11). These examples confirm that women are unfairly used and exploited for their bodies in advertising. The massive exposure to media and TV that adolescents experience in which women are depicted as being sexually harassed or aggressed against, has a powerful impact on the adolescent mind due to their unfinished cognitive development. The link between self-image and media was also explored in the section on *Self-Objectification and the Media*. However cognitive theory and development can be used to understand the link between behavior

and media. The frequency with which these inappropriate sexual acts take place may provide an explanation for the acceptance of sexual violence and the defense of rape myths.

Though the sexualization of women may be more obvious than one is willing to admit, there is another more disturbing way in which women and girls are being sexually socialized. There is a culture of pedophilia that has become prominent in advertising, pornography, clothing brands aimed for young girls and in popular culture in general. There is an eroticization of girls and their presumed sexual innocence (Renold and Ringrose 390), this phenomenon has been coined the “Lolita Effect” after Nabakov’s controversial novel about a grown man’s obsession with a 12 year old girl. Advertising and media imagery often follow trickle down and trickle up frameworks where young women and girls are ‘adultified’ and adult women are ‘youthified’. The distinctions between girls and women are blurred. Magazines for young girls show adult women sexily clad in school-girl skirts, licking lollipops and wearing Mary Janes, socks up to their knees, but all of the clothes are advertised to be for young girls. On the flip side, clothing stores for girls aged 7-12 are being sold thongs printed with popular cartoon characters on them. In France, perfumeries are selling scents for young girls with names like, “Fleur d’interdit” or “forbidden flower”(Zurbriggen et al. 14). Calvin Klein ads show young girls in jeans, holding dolls with the slogan of “13 going on 18” or in the underwear campaign where a young model declared “Nothing gets between me and my Calvins” (Zurbriggen et al. 13). Young girls and women are being thrown many different images and pictures of how they should dress: young girls want to look older and more mature, like the women in the magazines, while adult women want to look younger, more innocent and untouched. These ideas stem from the sexual eroticization of the media. Women of varying ages and generations are being coerced and urged

into unnatural states of sexual being: for older women it is sexual innocence and discovery that they seek, while younger girls strive for fertility and sexual maturity.

The rise of social media has also allowed for this pedophilic culture through self-objectification to continue. A case study on three adolescent girls that came out of the UK, examined the complexity and ways in which teenage girls subjectify and objectify themselves on social media. The article analyzes three case studies of young girls who are exploring their sexuality and sexually self-objectifying themselves in order to embody the aura of older sexual beings, as that is what has been deemed sexy by popular culture. These young teen girls sexually objectified themselves on their social media platforms by dressing up as the Playboy bunny, identifying themselves as “sluts” and posting videos of explicit dancing (Renold and Ringrose 396-400). The conclusions of this study counter argue that the sexualization of Western culture from a feminine perspective is not so cut and dry, exploring the difficulties of differentiating sexual victims versus sexual empowerment and sexual innocence. The media in Western societies is allowing the acceptance of things like child pornography and pedophilia which teaches men that younger girls are acceptable as sexual partners (Zurbriggen et al. 17). The normalization of pedophilia could in turn lead to child sexual abuse or a rise in child pornography.

The media has perpetuated and normalized sexual violence by exposing viewers to “... sexist beliefs and acceptance of violence against women... Several studies have shown that women and men exposed to sexually objectifying images of women from mainstream media (e.g., R-rated films, magazine advertisements, music videos) were found to be significantly more accepting of rape myths, sexual harassment, sex role stereotypes, interpersonal violence and



adversarial sexual beliefs about relationships than were those in control conditions”(Zurbriggen et al. 33). This is an important finding when looking at how the media has affected viewers admission of sexual violence. This further shows that media does in fact influence the mindsets and behaviors of their consumers.

### *Pornography*

In addition, pornography is a medium on which women are objectified, sex role stereotypes are reinforced, and sexual violence is normalized. Mackinnon understands the patriarchal society to have set roles between women and men: women are objectified and men are the objectifiers. A very clear example of this is pornography. Women exist within pornography, solely for the purpose of male pleasure. An article from the U.K. about sexual exploitation in the 21st century references Angela McRobbie who has continuously argued that in the pop culture of the modern era, there has been a ‘fulsome rehabilitation of porn’ which supports the ‘hypersexualization of pre-teen girls’. Pornography has been mainstreamed and it is no longer ‘divorced from the heartlands of advertising, branding and consumer culture’ (Melrose 163). Pornography is common place and it has become a hotly debated topic in the sphere of feminist theory because of the controversial implications it raises.

In comparison to the other topics beneath the umbrella of sexualization, there has been an extensive amount of research done on the effects pornography has on the belief that women are sex objects. The history of pornography is hard to conceive, however Pornography has been around for hundreds of years, manifesting in different and sexually explicit ways. With the advent of printmaking in the 18th century, pornography literally began to fly off the shelves. Originally, it was meant as a protest, a self-proclaiming freedom of body and choice for both

men and women, but unfortunately in the new and highly digital age of the current era, pornography has democratized sex in negative ways (Atwood 3). By the democratization of sex, one means to say that the act of sex has become easily accessible. In fact, 12% of all web sites on the internet are pornography sites and 25% of all internet search engine requests are for pornography (Zurbriggen et al. 10). On average young boys are first exposed to pornography at 12-13 years of age and "...nearly 90% of the top watched scenes on porn sites have at least one aggressive act if both physical and verbal aggression were combined" (Dines). These acts often show women sexually enjoying and accepting these acts of aggression with looks of pleasure or neutrality (Dines). Pornography is one of the best examples of women being displayed, depicted and emphasized as sexual objects available for male pleasure (Papadaki 5). Indeed, "... pornography participates in its audience's eroticism through creating an accessible sexual object, the possession and consumption of which is male sexuality, as socially constructed; to be consumed and possessed as which, is female sexuality, as socially constructed" ( qtd. in Papadaki 5). Pornography has normalized and perpetuated sexual violence because in the most quickly accessible pornography found from a Google search, there are scenes of women being sexually aggressed against. It is also an unrealistic ideal of sexual intimacy between partners and for many young boys and men, pornography is their sexual education (Dines). Again, Mackinnon defends her position that pornography is harmful and reduces women to nothing but objects,

If pornography has not become sex to and from the male point of view, it is hard to explain why the pornography industry makes a known ten billion dollars a year selling it as sex mostly to men; why it is used to teach sex to child prostitutes, recalcitrant wives and girlfriends and daughters, and to medical students, and to sex offenders; why it is

nearly universally classified as a subdivision of "erotic literature"; why it is protected and defended as if it were sex itself (Mackinnon 327).

The belief that pornography perpetuates and normalizes sexual violence does not come without counter-arguments and a fair amount of push back. The problem with this belief, say Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer, is that it ignores the fact that men are capable of interpreting and deciphering pornographic materials and they do not necessarily imitate what they see in pornography (qtd in Papadaki 4). Pro-pornography feminist, Leslie Green, suggests that pornography is not a core cause for women's objectification and gender inequality, and that it holds no more power over people than the influence of TV, books, music videos and fashion (qtd in Papadaki 4). In a comprehensive article called, *Can Pornography Cause Rape?*, Don Adams makes the claim that pornography can count as 'incitement' to rape *and* if we accept pornography as the cause of rape then we are letting the rapist off the hook because we cannot also say that the rapist caused the rape (Adams 2). Many sex offenders consume fair amounts of pornography and some point to pornography for playing a causal role in at least some of their sexual assaults (Adams 7). So while pornography may not be *the* cause of sexual violence it *can* incite violent urges, further cement the belief that women are sex objects, and normalize violence against women.

The sexualization of women in a socio-cultural context that permits women to be objectified in the media provides one possible answer for the prevalence of sexual violence in Western cultures. The APA Task Force concurs, "...studies have shown a connection between stereotypical attitudes about women's sexuality and aggressive sexual behavior... adversarial sexual beliefs, rape myth acceptance and sexist beliefs about women are related to aggressive

sexual behaviors...” (Zurbriggen et al. 33). Furthermore, images of children in sexually exploitive positions and poses further normalizes abusive practices such as child abuse, child prostitution, the sexual trafficking of girls (all forms of sexual violence) and the viewing of young girls as acceptable sexual partners (Zurbriggen et al. 34). The watching of pornography cements the belief that women are sex objects, only in more graphic and explicit ways that clearly show women being dehumanized in sexual encounters.

The highly sexualized cultural milieu of Western societies today, created by long-standing socio-cultural norms, lays the groundwork for the sexualization of women. Women are sexualized in explicit manners in advertisements, TV shows, song lyrics, music videos, clothing, cosmetics and most obviously in pornography. With the information gathered for each one of these factors, one is able to conclude that the sexualization of women and the normalization of violence against women is perpetuated by socio-cultural norms, objectification, media and pornography.

#### **Part IV: Conclusion**

Ultimately the research has concluded that although the sexualization of women is not a direct cause of sexual violence, it is proven to perpetuate the idea that women are sex objects, available for male pleasure and use. The sexualization of women in Western societies has perpetuated and normalized sexual violence in part due to the portrayal of women as sex objects through socio-cultural norms, pornography and media.

This issue is especially important and relevant in the present-day United States. The allegations of sexual assault, harassment and violence have skyrocketed with new found empowerment for women backed by the #MeToo movement. As an example of deep rooted rape

culture in our society, the response of doubting the validity of the claims of harassment made by women is pervasive and continues to be a barrier for women from coming out about their experiences with sexual violence. As a society, the questions about how these men of power, who were trusted and revered, became so abusive and corrupt, are at the forefront of women's and men's minds. The events that led up to the #MeToo movement are prime examples of the ways in which society has allowed rape culture and the negative sexualization of women to perpetuate. A terrifying example of society's perpetuation of sexualization and sexual violence is shown when Gail Dines questioned an unnamed convicted rapist about why he had committed the act of rape and he responded with, "the culture had done a lot of the grooming for me" (Dines). The thought that society prepares men to sexually assault, harass and abuse should spur not only women into action, but men as well. This is a fight that both men and women must contest together.

Physical intimacy and sexuality should be something that society as a whole is taught to respect. Sexuality and all that is involved within that, is a defining factor of how humans identify themselves, it is a natural part of human life. The perception of sex is ambiguous and within our society it has become mainstream and ever present. However, there's a lack of education and intergenerational intimate conversation around sex because of the discomfort around the subject that persists.

The sexual education that adolescents receive in the United States is fear-based and reactionary as the method of abstinence-only sexual education is the most prevalent in the United States (Lanford 62). Many of these programs are part of public school curriculum, which allows parents to opt their children out, further separating children from experiencing any form of

sexual education. Not surprisingly, sex is simultaneously seen as nonchalant and taboo. Adolescents and adults often feel uncomfortable talking about sex, let alone asking for support when making sexually oriented choices. The widely adored film, *Mean Girls* (2004), exemplifies sexual education in the United States when Coach Carr who is teaching the sexual education course yells, “Don't have sex, because you will get pregnant and die! Don't have sex in the missionary position, don't have sex standing up, just don't do it, ok, promise? OK, now everybody take some rubbers.” This scene, while humorous, is an uncomfortably accurate depiction of sexual education in our schools. The answer to this nation wide problem is comprehensive and communicative sexual education and sexuality. Not only do adolescents need to be set up for success as sexual beings by understanding sex, but they also need to be prepared to have healthy discussions and communication with their sexual partners.

The narrative that sexual encounters include ‘male aggression’ and ‘female reluctance or submissiveness’ must be broken and rewritten. This will also help to combat the normalization of victim blaming, date rape and male sexual violence. Paramount to education is starting the process earlier to teach autonomy and agency to adolescents and teens so they are knowledgeable and equipped when they come of age. In order to combat sexualization, girls must be taught and shown that self-empowerment can come through attributes outside of extrinsic beauty. The cultural narrative must be shifted and in order to do that, women, girls, men and and boys must first recognize and fully understand the culture in which they reside.

While understanding agency and the objectification of women as exclusive from each other is valuable, the tension between female agency and the oppression of female empowerment through objectification gets at the core of the issue of sexualization. Can women, as freely acting

agents, represent themselves how they choose without being objectified or objectifying themselves? Can women represent themselves in a sexual way without being oppressive to themselves? How can women be sexual beings without being objectified or dehumanized? These are questions that feminists are constantly faced with, but so is everyday society and everyday women. It is here that the complexity of feminist theory is showcased and it is nearly impossible to provide an answer. While all women are exposed to the notion of sexual objectification, they may not fully understand or comprehend the implications that objectification has on them. All women can take part in combating these questions by first becoming educated and aware of the cultural milieu in which they live. Understanding objectification and how it may be confused with empowerment and vice versa. From there, women can use their agency and independent decision making skills to choose how it is that they would like to present themselves to the world. If each woman is educated on this issue, then each woman is fully equipped to face the wrath of society and the choice between self-empowerment or potential objectification lies in their hands. The key is that they first know what it is they are choosing to do and the risks involved. Self-empowerment through sexuality and the objectification of women is yet another topic that must be addressed in comprehensive and communicative sexual education and added to the mainstream discourse about sexuality.

In addition, given the prevalence of media and now social media, in our society, it is critical that individuals explore how they can continue to consume the media in a way that minimizes the effects of sexualization and objectification. There are two answers to this question that can be immediately provided, the first is awareness: awareness of the objectifying content that you consume on a daily basis, whether that be song lyrics, TV show imagery or words,

magazine covers, advertisements or the images, photos and text that is made public on social media. Once you become aware of the presence of objectification, one will begin to see that it is more common than was originally believed. This awareness then leads to choice through ethical consumerism. If you do not agree with the way that *Cosmopolitan* depicts women or the ways in which *R Kelly* sings about consent, then make the choice not to buy *Cosmopolitan* or listen to *R Kelly*. The second answer is resistance through activist groups that speak out against the sexualization and objectification of women. These groups would be most successful if both women and men, girls and boys banded together and supported each other when opposing these issues. Resistance begins in the form of conversation and education but has the potential to grow into a movement that protests the unfair and graphic sexualization of women. The choice is *yours*, but no matter what, use your awareness to the benefit of yourself and others.

Conclusively, as a society it is our duty to stop teaching women to not get raped or sexually aggressed against and start teaching men *and* society that sexual aggressiveness and the objectification of women is unacceptable, disrespectful, and irresponsible. Until society recognizes women as equals with full agency and sexual power, rather than objects ready for the taking, and people claim full understanding that the sexualization and objectification of women has negative repercussions, sexual violence and the fear of sex and all its shortcomings will continue to prevail.



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