



STOP: The Sexualization of Women & Girls

This essay argues that the current mainstream Western beauty ideal in the United States both fetishizes the prepubescent female body and infantilizes the adult female body. This intersection works together to create impossible standards for women and girls and ultimately can perpetuate sexual violence against women and girls.

Introduction

Short hair. Body hair. Pubic hair. Makeup. Height. Relationship/sexual history. Societal beauty standards for women are constantly evolving. In my experience as a straight white cisgender woman, I have personally encountered and been affected by the Western standard of beauty. Men have told me that I wear too much makeup, that I am too tall, and that I don't shave nearly enough "to ever be able to hold a man down." These are three categories within the standard of beauty, but there are literally hundreds of more categories through which we place women into boxes and label them as traditionally beautiful or not, and do so in a way that is racialized, ableist, and ageist. As I have examined many of these categories, I have noticed a union between what we see as beautiful in women and the qualities of prepubescent girls. Additionally, within the media's sexualization of women and girls, there is a growing emphasis for young girls to appear more mature than their body or age reflects. This essay argues that the current mainstream Western beauty ideal in the United States both fetishizes the prepubescent

female body and infantilizes the adult female body. This intersection works together to create impossible standards for women and girls and ultimately can perpetuate sexual violence against women and girls.

How Beauty Standards Affect Us

Bessenoff's (2016) research tells us that social comparison is a huge factor in self-esteem and body satisfaction for women. Media exposure to thin ideals relates to concerns about weight, body dissatisfaction, and behaviors of disordered eating. When we are told or expected to look a certain way and we do not fit that description, we feel dissatisfied with our bodies and either carry this dissatisfaction with us or attempt to change our bodies because of it. Bessenoff's work is framed by specifically thin idealization and representation of thin bodies in the media, however, it is valid to consider that the representation of women and women's bodies in the media, aside from only size, are real pillars upon which "real women" can and do compare themselves to others. For example, Chapkis (1986) frames this perfectly with Cathy's story of losing a breast to breast cancer, "I mean how can a woman with one breast try to match those ideas put out about how

we are supposed to look? I can't" (p.27). Women with one breast are not a specific demographic group I'm trying to bring attention to here, but rather, that being thin is not the most present and prioritized part of every woman's bodily insecurity. There is an intersectional approach to look at here; not every woman will be affected by the same standard of beauty. Through considering the intersection of multiple identities that make up every individual, we can better understand how certain standards affect women of all identity categories. Chapkis (1986) ultimately states that feminism should be about embracing diversity and difference, not ignoring it. Presenting this research without taking an intersectional approach on beauty standards and their impact would not be beneficial nor productive to this conversation. Beauty standards do not affect all women equally. The properties that beauty standards emphasize are simply unattainable for many women. For example, the Western standard of beauty is predominantly centered around thin, young, able-bodied white women. Many women are unable to meet this standard simply by virtue of their intersecting identities.

Patzer (1985) tells us that beauty cannot truly lie in the eye of the beholder when the same people are consistently being identified and recognized as more attractive than others. Being perceived by others as attractive is not necessarily a privilege; being attractive to others is not inherently a good or bad thing. For many, even most women, being perceived as attractive can lead to harassment in the workplace or catcalling on the street. That being said, Patzer (1985) brings attention to how understanding the way that attractiveness, in particular facial attributes, individually affects us, can give us a broader understanding of how the world works. In general, the more attractive a person is, “the more positive the person is perceived, the more favorably the person is responded to, and the more successful is the person’s personal and professional life” (Patzer, 1985, p.1). This notion of how your physical identity impacts your understanding of the world is reminiscent of epistemic privilege. This phenomenon tells us that marginalized identities can better understand how systems of power work and how they oppress due to their marginalized place within the system than dominant identities can

(Moya, 2001). If how attractive we are impacts our understanding and experience of the world, we have to consider the vice versa, that those who are perpetually seen as unattractive are seeing and experiencing the world differently than those society perceives as traditionally attractive.

Sexualization of Women and Girls is All Around Us

“In a recent Twitter exchange, one activist mother called the sexualization of girls and women ‘the elevator music to American culture’” (as cited in Moloney & Pelehach, 2014, p.119). Objectified female bodies are inescapable in American, and more broadly, Western culture. Between social media, popular culture/media, and societal norms, those of us existing in Western culture probably have at least a handful of experiences where we could identify this objectification in excess. For example, there are a number of oversexualized toys marketed for young girls, such as baby dolls wearing revealing clothing and excessive makeup. These are not regular Barbie or Bratz dolls, they are toddler-aged dolls in adult clothing. This is only one example of the excessive objectification of female bodies. I think it is important to

mention that it is okay to appreciate women's bodies, especially bodies that are not frequently represented in mainstream media. Sexualizing baby dolls that are quite literally marketed for young girls as toys can send a dangerous message. The representations of women's bodies that we see throughout our childhood and lifetime is not something that affects us in the moment we consume it and then disregard once "real life" resumes. These representations leave lasting assumptions and implications about women --their appearance and their behavior-- that stays with us for longer than the screen stays on, or much longer than the dolls are in our usual toy rotation. It goes beyond after we log off Instagram.

Evidence for this long-lasting media ideology of women comes from Moloney and Pelehach (2014), when in 2011, undergraduate college students were shown news stories describing the use of "adult" clothing and makeup for young girls. They discussed an English department store called Primark and the U.S. clothing chain Abercrombie and Fitch, which both had recently created a line of padded bikinis for girls as young as 7 years old as well as a clip from *Good Morning America* of the rise of a 5-year-

old "makeup guru." When this group of undergraduate students, primarily 74% women, were asked why girls as young as seven need padded bikinis or why a 5-year-old needs to be an expert at makeup, they initially responded that the girls were "just having fun and imitating their mothers" (Moloney & Pelehach, 2014, p. 122). The instructor giving the presentation counteracted this response stating that this 5-year-old is learning two lessons very early in life: "(1) Her appearance is not satisfactory the way that it is, and (2) changing her appearance to match that of current adult female beauty norms merits her adulation and attention" (Moloney & Pelehach, 2014, p.122). Once the undergraduate students had this perspective presented to them and were introduced to Objectification Theory, there was a change in thought pattern. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) illustrate Objectification Theory as:

Objectification theory posits that [sexual objectification] of females is likely to contribute to mental health problems that disproportionately affect women (i.e., eating disorders, depression, and sexual dysfunction) via two main paths. The first path is direct and overt and involves [sexual objectification] experiences. The

second path is indirect and subtle and involves women's internalization of [sexual objectification] experiences or self-objectification (p. 1).

It is important to understand the initial response of this particular demographic group is indicative of how deeply rooted our distorted concepts of women and girls are. There is a supplemental conversation to be had here: child beauty pageants. When young girls emulate adult female bodies, they are praised and given awards for their effectiveness as grown women. This phenomenon is expressing that when young girls are perceived as mature, adult women, they are more valuable than in their present, prepubescent bodies. More than the media, the objectification and exploitation of women's bodies is ideological and does not go away if we turn off our TV. The objectification of women's bodies is a social norm, an ideological state apparatus, it goes on even if we as individuals reject it. The objectification of women's and girl's bodies is fundamentally different from the sexualization of women and girls' bodies, yet they are interconnected. Objectification makes a whole person into an object for consumption, like in advertisements and prostitution. Sexualization makes something like a

person that isn't overtly sexual and creates a space where that thing is sexualized, like the bikini segment of child beauty pageants.

Bragg et al. (2011) analyze the part that consumer culture plays within childhood sexualization, with sexualized goods in particular. Products marketed for adolescents that embody sexual innuendos, gender roles, or sexualization of certain body parts, baked into their names or purpose, are deemed 'sexualized goods.' While searching for such products, they were few and far between. Regardless of this, young girls and adolescents are praised when they embody adult women characteristics. It is important to consider that products marketed for gender and products marketed for adolescents are not hard to find, but products for adolescents are not commonly sexualized goods. No condom company is selling 'teenage condoms.' This idea does not so much attribute that children and teens are not sexualized, but it leans us toward the notion that this sexualization is not for the 'benefit' of children or teens, but for another demographic group. "Although sexualization is usually presented as a relatively new phenomenon, there are significant

continuities with debates from earlier periods that we believe have similarly insidious consequences for girls in particular” (Bragg et al., 2011, p. 280). The ‘Let Girls Be Girls’ initiative which began in January 2010, was created in an attempt to stop retailers from selling products that ‘prematurely sexualize’ children. Let Girls Be Girls was created by an influential parenting website called “Mumsnet” (2011). Bragg et al. (2011) illuminate through use of focus groups that when we engage in discourse about the sexualization of children in our media, it is not being taken lightly by those affected: children and their parents. Even so, the resources that are readily available to parents on the early sexualization of children are lacking in sophisticated language.

Starr (2015) breaks down the lack of literature on early sexualization into three main issues: (1) Sensationalizing the issue with shocking stories or ‘sexy’ images/covers; (2) Overstating research findings and their application in regard to children; (3) A simple lack of research on early sexualization. In general, the rhetoric of these texts is not universally digestible. Parents, students, and researchers are looking for different things in terms of knowledge, research, and resources on

early sexualization. First of all, the research that does exist is predominantly centered on the United States. Research is also primarily focused on teen girls and women, yet it is being applied to young children without mention that this data may be vastly different in the experience of children. Starr (2015) brings attention to the fact that the objectification of women and girls in media is not solely consumed by and impactful on women and girls, but across people consuming media.

The APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) defines “sexualization” as when one or more of the following is present:

- a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics;
- a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy;
- a person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or
- sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person. (p. 1).

It is important to note that while this APA Task Force is criticized for a multitude of reasons, this particular definition of sexualization is referenced in a plethora of resources. Bragg et al. (2011) criticizes this definition for homogenizing a diverse range of issues that they consider to be a single phenomenon.

Commodified sexuality, meaning women's bodies are reduced to commodities or objects to be bought, sold, and owned, is brought to life through APA (2007) identifying similarities between both mediated and material forms of selling sex. This directly places the physical buying and selling of women and girls' bodies in the same arena as selling advertisements of women and girls' bodies. For example, both prostitution and magazine advertisements are examples of female bodies being bought and sold. In the United States, particularly within mainstream media, sexualized images of girls are undeniably prevalent. Due to this, women and girls are far more likely to be sexualized and objectified than men and boys are. Typically, both young boys and girls consume a lot of media. Lerum and Dworkin (2009) illuminate that, just because boys and men are not sexualized and objectified in the same

way or to the extent that women are, this does not mean that the media and societal norms aren't projecting other ideas about masculinity to men and boys. Aside from ideas about masculinity, the APA Task Force (2007) states that pornography may affect men's sexual attraction to women in comparison to the unrealistic standards of pornography. This exposure to objectified women and girls is happening at younger and younger ages, which is only further perpetuating the deep-rooted distorted perception of women and girls. APA points out that a girl's interactions with their parents, teachers, peers, and others typically reinforce the media-displayed messages: that sexualization is just part of being a girl, it is normal, natural, and unproblematic.

Self-objectification is a huge part of the sexualization of girls. Self-objectification is defined by APA (2007) as "girls internalize an observer's perspective on their physical selves and learn to treat themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated for their appearance" (p. 17). The conversation of self-objectification, not specifically when it comes to girls, but women, revolves around a spectrum of pleasure and danger. Women are allowed to and

should be empowered in their bodies and should not feel ashamed for wanting/seeking out pleasure. Women's empowerment and women's risk of danger are not mutually exclusive concepts, they exist in conjunction. Assigning more value to one over the other, especially when risk of danger is framed as less important than women's empowerment, is problematic, especially for individuals with intersecting marginalized identities who are already at a higher risk of danger and discrimination. The APA Task Force recommends certain interventions for parents, teachers, and girls themselves. The most advocated-for topic within these interventions is increased media literacy curriculum in schools. With the growing state of social media and children's increased accessibility to it, media literacy curriculum is something that we can no longer put off.

Critiques of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls goes one step further. Lerum and Dworkin (2009) state that we must understand the context of this report in terms of the people it is coming from, where the sources are coming from, and who this information will ultimately impact, which is North American populations.

Lerum and Dworkin center their critique on the goals to facilitate sexual agency and pleasure, sexual rights, and sexual health for women and girls. The most effective critiques by Lerum and Dworkin are the conflation of objectification, sexual objectification, and sexualization, and the under emphasis on women and girls' sexual agency and resistance.

The APA Task Force (2007) frequently uses unclear language and places certain terms without realizing their ultimate implication of the ideas they are presenting. The under-emphasis on women and girls' sexual agency stems from the context of sexual objectification. Frequently, assumptions are made about women and girls' lack of sexual agency or lack of capability to have sexual agency. This critique does not belong to only this APA Task Force, women's sexual passivity is a centuries-old assumption of women's sexuality. The reason this was not addressed within the Task Force is because those who have been critiquing this notion of women's sexuality are more focused on the institutional and sociocultural systems that impact sexualization of girls and women than about generalizing specific demographic groups, i.e., women. This focus is not prioritized

by the researchers in the APA Task Force.

In an attempt to find how adults perceive the overt sexualization of girls, Díaz-Bustamante-Ventisca and Llovet-Rodríguez (2017) administered an online survey to adults that included several photos of girls aged five to twelve. When compared to the non-sexualized images of girls, adults critically undervalued the sexualized girls in the context of intelligence, social, and moral aspects. Díaz-Bustamante-Ventisca and Llovet-Rodríguez illuminate the fact that childhood sexualization is particularly negatively impactful on girls. It is important to consider the sample of survey participants as well as the potential difference in results of an online survey in comparison to in-person results. There is room for reaction time, consideration for 'the kind of response a researcher might want,' and ingenuine responses. The perception of sexualized girls, while undeniably present, continues to be criticized.

Doucouré released her first feature film in 2020, *Cuties*, and she received a lot of backlash against the film for exactly what it is critiquing about society, the sexualization of young girls. This is a French language film

about a group of pre-teen girls in a dance group. Amy, an 11-year-old who comes from a conservative Sengalese Muslim family, wants to join the dance group. We see Amy grapple between conservatism and sexualization, like the other girls in the group. But ultimately Amy takes this one step further and oversexualizes her dance moves in hopes that doing so will make the other girls like her more and be more interested in her participation in the group. *Cuties* (2020) is double-edged: it is shocking to see young girls in such a graphically oversexualized fashion, but this film would not have the same impact if we could not experience Amy's transition from conservative to quite the opposite. As an adult, it is uncomfortable to see girls sexualized in this way, but as a former girl, I understand the impulse to want to fit in. Amy is 11 years old. A lot of discourse on *Cuties* is asking why this young fictional character may have wanted to objectify herself using sexually provocative dancing. I would argue that some social or cultural force likely pushed her to feel obligated to match up with the other girls in school. There is a strong societal critique here by Doucouré (2020), however, it is difficult to see past the blatant sexualization of these real actors, real

children. The controversy of this film alone has interesting implications on the discourse on the overt sexualization of girls. *Cuties* was almost removed from its streaming platform, Netflix, and there was public outrage directed at Doucouré (2020). What is disturbing about *Cuties* is precisely why we must watch this film: to understand how childhood sexualization is rationalized and accepted into nearly every young girl's life.

When young girls are sexualized in these ways and it becomes increasingly normalized, we desensitize ourselves to sexualized images and ideas about young girls. This desensitization does not let us consider the implications of the rhetoric of young girls, their autonomy, and their lack of ability to consent. When many women feel expected to remove their pubic hair because the dominant standard of beauty tells them to, we must consider where this standard is stemming from. Young girls are expected to appear older, more mature, and “sexy” while grown women are expected to appear youthful and hairless. We are reserving and prioritizing beauty for able bodies that appear young. When we prioritize bodies that appear young, it pushes the narrative that bodies are only attractive when they are young. This is a

dangerous conundrum and can place young girls at risk of sexual violence.

**We Must Define Pedophilia
Explicitly
(Or, We must Examine the
Relationship between Pedophilia
and the Sexualization of Girls)**

Pedophilia is not, by definition, the abuse of children by adults. Pedophilia is the adult experience of attraction or desire for romantic or intimate affiliation to persons under a legal age of consent for an extended period of time (Seto, 2012). Historically, humans did not live as long as we typically do now. Breure (2013) uses this fact to state that the reason many men feel an attraction toward teenage girls is due to a biological response: they simply aren't pregnant yet. This fact is used to give a potential explanation as to why many men of all ages find teenage girls attractive. According to Breure's *Are All Men Pedophiles?* (2013), there are multiple subcategories under pedophilia, including exclusive, being an individual is only attracted to children, and non-exclusive, being an individual is attracted to both children and adults. Additionally, there are subcategories based on age 'preferences,' including infantophilia and hebephilia. Infantophilia is the

experience of attraction to children ages one to three, hebephilia is the experience of attraction to post-pubescent minors, usually around ages 15-19. However, pedophilia, attraction towards children going through puberty, is the most commonly used term for the experience of attraction to minors.

Prevention Project Dunkelfeld (PPD) in Germany is one of the very few clinical support services for child sexual abuse prevention in the world (Vice, 2019). PPD unfortunately does not have many emulators around the globe. There is a very different discourse on pedophilia in Europe than in the U.S. For example, there are European public service announcements regarding attraction toward children and resources to contact. This is not the rhetoric on pedophilia everywhere in the world. In the U.S., we do not see that kind of P.S.A. There is one doctor in the U.S. working for prevention of child sexual abuse, Elizabeth Letourneau. This is simply not enough. This lack of prevention and intervention resources combined with the normalization of sexualization of girls is putting children at risk.

In this essay, I have argued how dominant Western beauty standards

function to fetishize prepubescent female bodies and infantilize adult female bodies. I have also argued that the sexualization of girls and women can contribute to pedophilia. When we do not acknowledge or talk about this relationship, it prevents intervention. This topic is important because oversexualizing women and girls affects and harms more people than women and girls and is likely contributing to sexual harm of children in the U.S. In order to address this oversexualization and create a safer place for young children, we have to start addressing the sexualization and objectification of women and girls.

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