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Sexualisation of Women

The sexualisation and objectification of girls in popular culture

Pornification of Girlhood

In an age of supposed Girl Power, many girls are feeling power-less.

The pressure to conform to an idealised body type in a sex-saturated culture which values girls who are thin, hot, sexy and bad is taking a massive toll. Many young women today feel imprisoned by their imperfect bodies.

Young women have been led to believe their bodies are all they have to offer the world, their primary allure. Not their talents, intelligence, creativity, values, spirituality, or the things they do to make a positive difference in the world.

When the movement for sexual equality was overtaken by the movement for sexual liberalism, to be free came to mean being free to rap your legs around a pole, flash your breasts in public, girls-gone-wild style, or perform oral sex on school boys at weekend parties in lieu of the good night kiss.

Our culture is permeated by sexual imagery. What was once soft porn is now popular culture. We're seeing the pornography of everyday life. This pornification of culture contributes to hostile sexual attitudes and the oppression of women and girls. Girls come to see their own sexuality in pornographic terms.

I have three daughters so I take this stuff pretty personally.

Courtney E. Martin observes in her book *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters* (Free Press, New York, 2007) that self-hatred has become a rite of passage for teenage girls - "the frightening new normalcy of hating your body."

- A Mission Australia national survey of 29,000 young people aged 11-24 found body image was the most important issue for them;
- One in 100 adolescent girls in Australia suffers anorexia;
- An estimated one in five are Bulimic;
- One in five 12-year-old girls uses fasting and vomiting to lose weight;
- One in four teenage girls in Australia want to have plastic surgery

Too many girls are trying to imitate half-starved “celebrities”, obsessed with trying to conform to impossible-to-attain highly sexualised images.

Should we be surprised when we see the messages they get? Magazine covers regularly compare women’s bodies. Maxim’s “Top 100” had Aki Ross at number one hot woman. The problem is she is made out of computer pixels - she’s not even real. Women are pressured to aspire to images that are not even real.

Girlfriend magazine, while having a positive body image/self respect policy, admits it photoshops women in its magazine - including its own staff.

Objectification is reinforced everyday through embedded sexual content everywhere you look .

According to the American Psychological Association in its very important report of the Taskforce on the sexualisation of girls,

“A culture can be infused with sexualised representations of girls and women, suggesting that such sexualisation is good and normal”.

Let me take you on a tour of what’s currently on offer for young girls

- “Gone are the days of voluminous, bulky and cumbersome underwear... These days underwear has become briefer, bolder and more stylish. There is even underwear to complement different moods you wish to portray: frisky, seductive or mysteriously alluring”. This is the way one British web search company Jellydeal introduces the latest trends in little girls' underwear;

- Deron little 'ho wear, by Beyonce Knowles mother;
- Baby high heels;
- Baby Makeover;
- 'Bralettes', padded, decorative bras and g-strings featuring cherries and the words "eye candy" and "wink wink" in the children's wear sections of department stores;
- Christmas undies for children with slogans "Try Jingle These" and "Unwrap Me";
- T.shirts for babies with slogans, "Breast Fed Baby: Stick around for the show", "Hung like a five year old", "All mummy wanted was a backrub", "F!# the milk, where's the whiskey tits", "I tore mummy a new one", "I enjoy a good spanking", "All daddy wanted was a blow job" and "I'm too sexy for my diaper";
- Girl's T.shirts with the slogan "Porn Star". Other t.shirts declaring: "Hotter Down Under" and "My Name Sounds Better Screamed." Abercrombie and Fitch had a T.shirt with the slogan "Who needs a brain when you have these?" Yet another seen on a Melbourne street last week: "I wanna do you now." *Girlfriend* advertises a T.shirt with the slogan "Make me Hot Mr Sex Pot";
- Advertisements for downloadable mobile phone wallpaper in *Dolly* and *Girlfriend* - "Instant slut - just add alcohol", "Save a virgin, do me instead", "Sex, when it's good it's good, when it's bad it's still good";
- Magazines like *Girlfriend* and *Dolly*, which have even younger readers, offer little assistance to girls who may be under pressure to perform sexual acts their boyfriends have learn about through pornography. Take *Dolly* for example, which had a section titled "OMG my boyfriend wants me to..." followed by three sexual acts (oral, anal, hand job). Does *Dolly* suggest it could be a crime depending on their respective ages? No. These magazines help reinforce the view that girls are merely live sex toys for men;
- *Girlfriend* had a Playboy T.shirt giveaway, in which it described Playboy as "the must-have brand for cool girls";
- Playboy makeup line: 'Tie me to the bedpost blush' and 'Miss Playboy lip gloss'. Should be called disgusting old man in silk pjamas lip gloss.

Girls are wearing the brand of the global sex industry and they think it's about cute rabbits. We're challenging that with our anti Playboy t.shirt.

- The "Peek-aboo" pole dancing kit was marketed online for children through a British toy company. It included a "sexy" garter belt and

DVD “demonstrating suggestive dance moves”. The kit promised to “Unleash the sex kitten inside...simply extend the Peekaboo pole inside the tube, slip on the sexy tunes and away you go!”... “Soon you’ll be flaunting it to the world and earning a fortune in Peekaboo Dance Dollars.” There are pole “fitness” class for children in Sydney. Little girls are being taught how to turn tricks.

Girlfriend informs readers‘ that a pole dancing pole is, like, a really good present to give a girl. In fact, it’s “The #1 item on every girl’s wish list. She gets fit...you get to watch”;

- Dolly cover - “Pimp up your singlet”. Why do girls need to “pimp up their singlet”?;
- A shop that is the “official home” of the Beanie Babies also sells sex toys. Blow up dolls, including a particularly degraded grandma doll, are on open display in What’s New stores (see Julie Gale submission to the Senate Inquiry into sexualisation of children);
- Bratz dolls in sexualised clothing, miniskirts, fishnet stocking and feather boas. They look like they should come with their own pimp. “All nine Bratz Babyz™ know how to flaunt it, and they’re keepin’ it real in the crib!” says the manufacturer;
- Miss Bimbo game. “Become the world’s hottest Bimbo” - that’s the aim of the online Miss Bimbo game being played by little girls around the world. Girls advance in the game by losing weight, having makeovers, including breast enhancement, and picking up boys in the Bimbo club;
- The Australia Institute did a content analysis of a sample edition of Barbie Magazine, Total Girl and Disney Girl and found up to three quarters of the content was sexualising material;
- Ashlee Simpson poster in “Girl Power” read by 10-year-olds. Shows her with bare chest, partially covered by a jacket, and pulling downward on one side of her trousers;
- The readers of men’s magazine *FHM* voted Nicki Webster, who was then 16, one of the 100 sexiest women in the world;
- Lee Jeans ads - brought to you with compliments of the Advertising Standards Board which says they are not inappropriate because no breasts or genitals showing, and lollipops very popular with young people today;
- Advertising/billboards: “Want Longer Lasting Sex? For A Star Performance” (the girl in this ad looks about 14); SPRITE sexy; “Bite me” hamburger company; Clinique. These slides show

how complete is the migration of images from porn into everyday advertising;

- Horseland's *Winter Collection 2008* catalogue contains a full page ad for "Flex Appeal" riding gear, featuring a teenage girl flexing a riding crop as though preparing for some sado-masochistic action;
- "Made for Sex", front cover heading on Picture Magazine - little girls see this when they go to the milkbar. Numerous teen porn titles in milkbars, convenience stores and petrol stations inciting sex with minors, promoting rape and incest.

The sexualisation of culture has contributed to the rise in cosmetic surgery procedures.

- Botox is now being pitched to young women as a "preventative" against wrinkles - 17- year-olds have been reported as having the treatment in Australia;
- Growing numbers of teenage girls are having breast implants. *ZOO Weekly* ran a competition for readers to "win" girlfriends \$10,000 worth of breast implants as a prize to the girl "who deserves it most". Readers vote on who should win. "It's impossible to think of a more romantic gift than new breasts. it's the gift that keeps on giving," wrote the editors;
- *My Beautiful mummy* - book by Florida Plastic Surgeon to explain mummy's new nose and tummy tuck. We're seeing the mainstreaming of cosmetic surgery. *Cosmetic Surgery Magazine* is in with women's magazines in newspapers. 266 pages of swollen breasts and features on vaginal rejuvenation;
- Teenage girls are also undergoing Brazilian waxes. Girls describe feeling ashamed if they aren't shaved. 13-year-old girls receive photos of shaved/waxed genitalia on their mobile phones from boys at school, encouraging them to look the same;
- Girl.com.au a Melbourne-based site allegedly devoted to "empowering girls" promoted waxing on its website, along with High School Musical Two and Disney movies. "Nobody really likes hair in their private regions and it has a childlike appeal. Men love it, and are eternally curious about it", wording on the site said.

Pornography has become the handbook for many boys. Even girls are looking to porn for guidance. One 14-year-old quoted in Joan Sauers book *The Sex Lives of Australian Teenagers* said "I just copied what I had seen from porn, he enjoyed it.

Unilever promotes highly degrading portrayals of women with their brand Lynx/Axe (a brand that targets teen boys) while claiming to care about self-esteem in women and girls through its Dove “body love” program. The ‘Bom Chicka Wah Wah’s’ - used to promote Lynx/Axe, sum up current sex industry inspired attitudes to female behaviour.

We’re also witnessing the normalisation of violence as sexy

- Soft porn flicks masquerading as music videos on Saturday morning TV, feature the gyrating hips, cleavage and pelvic regions of women depicted as sexually hungry and never satisfied. Violent lyrics about men doing it to women and women begging for more, feeding the notion that violence is “sexy”. The music industry is become intertwined with the porn industry;
- T.shirts for men made and designed in Australia: “It’s not rape it’s surprise sex”;
- Loula - full page colour ad in Harper’s Bizarre, out in time for International Women’s Day, depicting a murdered woman in the boot of a car to promote the opening of a new Loula store in Melbourne. This if course happened to a Melbourne woman, Maria Korp. Thanks to those of you who joined with WFA to get this campaign stopped;
- America’s Next top model “Crime Scenes episodes”. The models had to do a photo shoot depicting them as dead. The one who looked the most sexy in death won. “She’s beautiful and dead!” exclaimed one of the judges;
- Glitter Geek website - girls can download glitter saying things such as “Stop Banging on my ribs you stupid heart” and “Cut my pain away in a time full of so much sorrow”.

There’s also a rise in advertising based on turning girls and women against each other.

- Skins She sportswear “Get a body to die for - and watch women line up to make your funeral arrangements”;
- Paris Hilton film “The Hottie and the Nottie” which has the theme, “The beauty of one girl is directly proportional to the ugliness of her best friend.” Playing women off against each other at a time when they need to stick together.

To conclude:

Sexualisation contributes to exploitation and violence. It puts girls in danger. Says the APA:

“The sexualisation of girls may not only reflect sexist attitudes, a societal tolerance of sexual violence, and the exploitation of girls and women but may also contribute to these phenomena.” (American Psychological Association, p.3)

Pressing social problems that disproportionately affect girls both directly and indirectly, including violence against girls and women, sexual exploitation of girls, forms of pornography, and prostitution of girls, may be maintained or even increased if there is a continued and escalating sexualization of girls...The sexualization of girls and women may contribute to broader societal consequences such as sexism, sex bias, and sexist attitudes.

The messages delivered by a culture obsessed with body image and sex limit the freedom of girls to explore other facets of their lives, keeping them ‘in their place’ as objects of sexual attraction and beauty, significantly limiting their free thinking and movement in the world.” (APA 220)

WFA published a magazine-style research paper *Faking It: The Female Image in Young Women's Magazines* to help young women recognise and resist the negative messages they receive from popular culture.

We need a new movement of women and girl advocacy....and we need courage.

(Courage drawing by Judy Horacek)