



The Prevalence and Trivialization of Female Sexualization, Violence and Exploitation in Entertainment



OCTOBER 11 ~ INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE GIRL CHILD

A special report in honor of the
International Day of the Girl Child



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Two years ago, the United Nations declared October 11 as the “International Day of the Girl Child” to promote girls’ human rights, highlight gender inequalities that remain between girls and boys, and address the various forms of discrimination and abuse suffered by girls around the world. This year, the UN theme is “Empowering adolescent girls: Ending the cycle of violence.”

“Empowerment of and investment in girls are key in breaking the cycle of discrimination and violence and in promoting and protecting the full and effective enjoyment of their human rights.”

- United Nations Resolution 66/170

As our contribution to this special day, the Parents Television Council® (PTC) has chosen to present a review of three separate studies we conducted addressing sexualization, violence, and sexual exploitation of females on primetime broadcast television. Each study was conducted by analyzing primetime scripted programs.

Our findings suggest that underage girls are rapidly becoming the new female image of sexualization, sexual exploitation, and violence in the media.

Specifically, we found:

- **Violence against women and teenage girls is increasing on television at rates that far exceed the overall increases in violence on television.** Violence, irrespective of gender, on television increased during the study period only 2% from 2004 (N=3840) to 2009 (N=3929), while the incidence of violence against women increased 120% during that same period (N=195-429). (*For purposes of this study “incidence” is defined as the number of storylines that included female victims of violence*).
- Although an adult female character was more likely to have sexualizing dialogue or depictions in their scenes, the likelihood that a scene would include sexual exploitations was higher if the female characters were younger adults.
- **The likelihood that a scene would include sexual exploitation was highest when the female characters were underage.**
- Sexually exploitative topics targeting underage girls were more likely to be presented as humorous compared to adult women.
- Topics that targeted underage girls and were presented as jokes including: sexual violence (child molestation), sex trafficking, sexual harassment, pornography and stripping.

- Thirty seven percent of all sexual exploitation observed during the study period was intended to be humorous.
- The presence of an underage female was associated with higher amounts of sexualizing depictions compared to the onscreen appearance of an adult female. Though an older female character is more likely to have sexualizing dialogue in the scene, a younger female character is more likely to portray sexualizing behaviors onscreen.
- Out of all the sexualized scenes depicting underage or young adult female characters, 86% of those female characters were presented as only being of high school age.
- **Only 5% of the underage female characters communicated any form of dislike for being sexualized.**
- One or more instances of implied nudity and/or sexual gestures (e.g. suggestive dancing, erotic kissing, erotic touching and/or implied intercourse) were in every onscreen scene that contained sexualized depictions of underage girls.
- **Every television program airing within the three study periods was rated by the respective broadcast television networks as being appropriate for viewing by children aged 14, or younger.**

PTC recognizes that central to every parent's concerns is not only the issue of a child's attitude towards sex, but also the process by which knowledge, attitudes, and values about sexuality are acquired. Past and present research continues to demonstrate the power of media as a highly persuasive device for delivering images and messages into our homes. The result is that today's youth are growing up with a media-market version of sexuality.

Conclusion

If media images communicate that female sexualization, violence and sexual exploitation are neither serious nor harmful; the environment is being set for these issues to be viewed as trivial and acceptable. By reminding the world of our research findings, the PTC hopes to reignite an international dialogue about the sexualization, sexual exploitation and violent depictions of teenage girls in our entertainment media. In order to make a positive, qualitative difference in the lives of young girls and women, such a dialogue demands the involvement, awareness, and commitment to positive change by every segment of the marketplace, including:

- Parents, who must pay closer attention to the numerous and often harmful media images and messages their daughters are consuming in entertainment;
- The creators, performers and distributors of entertainment media, who must understand the magnitude of their influence and the role they play;

- The advertisers, whose media dollars underwrite television programming that contains harmful content;
- Industry commentators and journalists, whose critical observations help to influence the behavior of the entertainment industry;
- Our public servants, who have regulatory oversight of the public airwaves and who must ensure that the public interest is being served;
- And young girls themselves, who must secure a greater understanding of these troublesome issues and take an active and aggressive stance, either individually or collaboratively.

Definition of “Sexualization”

For purposes of this study, “Sexualization was defined as the act or process of sexualizing. It refers to the making of a person, group or thing to be seen as sexual in nature or a person to become aware of sexuality. It also refers to the making of an interpersonal relationship into a sexual relationship. The American Psychological Association (APA) regards a person as being sexualized in any of the following situations:

- A person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or sexual behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics;
- A person is held to 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. (Especially relevant to children).

(Referenced from the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls)

Definition of “Sexual Exploitation”

PTC has adopted the UN Secretary General’s definition of “sexual exploitation” which is, “any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another.”



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