

The Media Portrayals of Sexuality and Its Effects Essay

Abstract

The paper discusses media portrayals of sexuality and how they affect people's behaviors and perceptions of sex and sexuality. It begins by acknowledging the significance of media in modern life and then proceeds to highlight how this technology is saturated with sexual content. The paper argues that this exposure to media sexuality has an effect on the individual. It highlights the two sexual development theories supporting this view, which are cultivation theory and practice model.

A number of the negative effects of consumption of sexual material from the media are discussed. They include negative emotional experiences for women due to pervasive objectification, perpetuation of negative stereotypes, and the promotion of sexual activity among the youth. The positive impacts include the promotion of sexual health, change in attitude towards non-heterosexual sexual behaviors and creation of sexual awareness. The paper concludes by noting that while the focus has been on the detrimental effects of sexual content, media presentation of sexuality can play a positive role in human development.

Introduction

Popular media is one of the most powerful technologies in the world and it plays a significant role in societal life. The media informs people's views about the world and it is likely to influence how an individual perceives the world around him. A characteristic feature of contemporary media is the frequent portrayals of sexuality. Carroll (2012) declares that sexuality is present in almost all media and the entertainment media seems to be almost obsessed by sexual imagery.

The saturation of sexual content in mass media is based on the opinion that "sex sells". Researchers suggest that sexuality in the media has an effect on the sexual beliefs and behaviors of individual. This paper will show that while the focus has been on the negative impacts of media portrayal of sexuality, sexual content on the media can have a positive effect on people's behaviors and perception of sex and sexuality.

The Media and Sexuality

Carroll (2012) observes that since the early 1990s, representations in the mass media have become more explicitly erotic. The images presented by the media today are explicitly or subtly sexual. According to Ward, Day and Epstein (2006), popular media is saturated with sexual content and imagery, which appears in over 80% of the programs popular among the youth.

Sexual content appear in various forms including nudity, suggestive dressing or language, flirting, and even scenes of sexual intercourse. Various forms of independent media are used to portray sexuality. Visual media portray sexual behavior using various characters in popular shows and movies. Strasburger (2008) observes that the scripts of most TV shows are full of sexual innuendos and jokes. Movies are full of sex scenes and Strasburger (2008) declares that 80% of movies shown on Cable TV contain sexual content that often involves unmarried couples or prostitutes.

Sexual content is also presented through advertisements on print and visual media. Advertisements seek to excite the audience about the product and to achieve this sexual images are used. Carroll (2012) remarks that most advertisements use sexual images or suggestions to provoke or entice the viewer even when there is no relationship between the product being advertised and sex.

Sexuality is also depicted in other media including music videos and video games. Over the past two decades, music videos have emerged as a form of media where sexuality is even more pervasive. Aubrey, Hopper and Mbure (2011) single out the music industry as one of the avenues that have heavily capitalized on the sexualization of women. Female performers and dancers in music videos are often shown skimpily dressed or even nude. These individuals are depicted as hypersexual and promiscuous sexual objects. In video games, most of the female characters are sexualized and objectified. Carroll (2012) note that the female characters often have attractive bodies and revealing clothes.

An important point in the media and sexuality issue is that the media does not always convey ideal messages about sexuality. According to Ward et al. (2006), there is a domination of a

recreation orientation to sexuality in popular media. Instead of promoting sexuality within the context of a romantic relationship, sexual activities often take place for recreational purposes.

The media idealizes the concept of fun and consequence free sexual activity. Another significant aspect of media sexuality is that it promotes stereotypical sexual roles. In most cases, women are featured as mere sexual object. In the media context, the value of women is based solely on their physical appearance and their ability to attract men. On the other hand, men are depicted as primarily sexual creatures whose main objective is to seek and engage in intercourse with women.

Arguably, the single most important reason for the saturation of our media with sexual content is due to the understanding that sex sells. The public continues to be fascinated with sex and there is an unquenchable appetite for sexual content. Carroll (2012) declares that the naked body is still “a primary means of selling products and improving ratings” and this had promoted blatant portrayals of sexuality by the media.

Due to this saturation with sexual content and imagery, it is widely accepted that popular media plays a critical role in the sexual socialization of American youth as well as the development of sexual values and behavior in the general population. Typically, parents would like to be a key source of information for their children about sexuality. However, this has not been the case and in modern times, the media has become the most important resource on sexual information for many youths. Strasburger (2008) observes that long before parents deem it appropriate to discuss sex with their children, the media will have already provided most of the information on the topic to the children.

Theories on Sexual Development and the Media

A number of theories have been proposed to explain the manner in which media depictions of sexuality affect the viewer. One traditional theory is the cultivation theory, which proposes that the more time a person spends consuming media the more likely he/she is to accept its fictional images as reality (Ward et al., 2006). According to this theory, people are at risk of adopting the beliefs and idea about sex portrayed in mass media.

Regularly viewing the repeated portrayals of glamorous, casual, risk free sex might cause the audience to adopt similar beliefs about sex in the real world. Ward et al. (2006) are careful to note that the cultivation theory does not imply that frequent media consumers are “mere passive sponges that allow their attitudes and beliefs to be twisted and altered by all the media they consume” (p.60). Rather, the theory suggests that media consumption reinforces existing attitudes and makes them easily accessible.

A contemporary theory explaining the role of media in sexual development is the media practice model. This theory advances that while there exists a correlation between the consumption of sexual content and the development of sexual identities, there exists no evidence of causality (Watson & McKee, 2013).

As such, the model suggests that it could be that young people who are starting to develop sexually are more interested in sexual content in the media and therefore look for it. The media practice model considers that there is a divergence in the selection of, exposure to, and interpretation of media content among consumers. Carroll (2012) confirms that media consumers access the media with different needs and motivations and what they take away from the media is influenced by why they came to it.

Impact of Media Portrayal of Sexuality

Since sex is a common theme on mass media, it can be expected that this will have an effect on the sexual behavior and attitude of individuals. Some of the effects are negative while others are positive.

Negative Impacts

Media has contributed to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes regarding sexuality. The presentation of women as sex objects has led to increased objectification of females by their male counterparts in the real world. Due to media influence, some men develop the idea that women are primarily sex symbols whose primary reason for existing is to please men. Research indicates that the representation of sexuality by the entertainment media has had a detrimental effect on black women (lacey, 2008).

The media is full of exploitative images of black women and consumers are used to viewing black women's bodies objectified and sexualized. Lacey (2008) asserts that the super-sexualized, sexually accessible and sexually deviant mythologies associated with Black bodies are specifically detrimental and demeaning to the black woman. By presenting black women as hypersexual and promiscuous individual, the media helps to propagate negative stereotypes about these women.

The practice of pervasive sexualization and objectification of women in the media leads to negative emotional experiences for most women. The media makes it seem like a woman's worth is solely based on her physical appearance. It then goes on to present a picture of what the ideal physical form of a woman should be. The media has perpetrated the rigid standards of beauty that are typified by slim women with perfect skin and beautiful hair. This leads to high levels of body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem among women who do not possess this supposed ideal physical form constantly promoted by the media.

The objectification of women also makes it seem like men are constantly judging women based on their physical appearance (Calogero, 2004). Due to exposure to this concept from the media, women develop the idea that their bodies are on constant display to the male audience and this creates an over conscious to physical appearance by women. Calogero (2004) declares that women experience anxiety about their bodies and body shame since they are conditioned by the media to always anticipate a male gaze. Media portrayals of sexuality therefore lead to negative emotional experiences for many women.

The media has been blamed for promoting sexual activity especially among the youth since it presents sexual encounters as normative. Strasburger (2008) reveals that frequent exposure to sexually oriented genres may cause younger viewers to overestimate the frequency with which youth sex and extramarital affairs occur. Through exposure to numerous incidents of teenage sex and unmarried intercourse, the youth may develop the notion that "everybody is doing it".

Strasburger (2008) warns that the media might have a negative impact on sexual behavior since it presents sex as a "casual pastime, a romp in the hay, with little or no consequences" (p.218). The media plays a role in pressuring teenagers and young adults into engaging in sexual