ForeWord Reviews

SOCIAL SCIENCES

The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and What We Can Do About It
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When toddlers don mini skirts, platform shoes, and eyeshadow on Halloween and declare they are dressed like their favorite doll, perhaps it is time to look at the ways that sexuality is presented to impressionable minds.

Durham, a professor of journalism and mass communication at the University of Iowa, cites examples including Bratz dolls, billboards, and young Britney Spears' first risqué music videos to demonstrate that adolescent girls, who should be developing their own identity, have become commodities and objects of desire, envy, and violence in the eyes of adults and their peers. She terms this unhealthy transition the "Lolita Effect."

"The American media ideal of female sexuality has been getting progressively younger over the years," Durham writes. Actresses who once symbolized sexuality, like Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, and Sophia Loren, "simply could not meet today's standards of sculpted muscularity and narrow-hipped leanness. They looked too much like mature women to have present-day appeal in an era of the Lolita Effect."

Like Barbie dolls, many of today's "sexiest" media stars—apart from being younger than ever before—have impossibly "thin, yet voluptuous" bodies and perfect complexions. Girls are taught from an early age, in magazines like *ELLEgirl* and *Seventeen* (which is regularly read by girls as young as thirteen), that slender bodies and Western features are "hot." For the majority of young girls, self-esteem issues are sure to result from the clear message that they don't measure up.

Durham goes on to discuss the ways that violence is connected to sex in slasher movies and video games like *Grand Theft Auto*, giving young men and women a distorted view of reality and the idea that the female body is an object meant to be used at will.

The author has conducted research on sexuality in the media and often cites reactions from students in her classes. When she showed students a shoe ad that depicted a man stepping on a woman's face and an ad featuring a topless woman with a company name branded on her back, the students called the ads "sexy."

"I ask them to imagine a puppy, or a little boy, in these situations: they are shocked," Durham writes. "The images of violence are only arousing when the violence is aimed at girls."

Each chapter ends with suggestions for discussing the topics with young men and women in the reader's life. Durham believes the way to combat the Lolita Effect, which has far-reaching effects, including child prostitution in the US and abroad, is through media education and consumer advocacy involving both young men and women. Informed citizens "have the option of turning off, boycotting, and disengaging from media that denigrate or insult girls," she writes. A list of resources provides readers with more opportunities for researching the Lolita Effect and ways to combat it.

The Lolita Effect is a disturbing but important look at a phenomenon that is happening right under our noses.

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