Sexualization of Girls: Addressing Criticism of the APA Report, Presenting New Evidence

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Abstract
The Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, published in 2007, is one of the most frequently accessed APA reports. The task force was formed and report was compiled in response to concerns regarding the impact of sexualization on girls and society at large. This article presents a review of research published since the report was released to examine the continued presence and impact of sexualizing material. In addition, we review the new evidence in light of critiques of the report that followed its publication. Finally, we present emerging ideas regarding prevention and interventions. While general findings of the original report hold true, and some criticisms have been addressed, the present review suggests the need for more research on childhood, rather than adolescents and adults, and more research using samples that have gender, sexuality, racial, and ethnic diversity.

Keywords
sexualization, objectification, girls, media

In 2007, the American Psychological Association’s Task Force (APA TF) on the Sexualization of Girls published its report. It continues to be the most downloaded report on the APA website and at the time brought an empirical focus to what was just becoming a national conversation (Silverstein, 2010). The Task Force first defined sexualization:

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 l sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person. (APA TF on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007, p. 1)

The Task Force then collected evidence, both anecdotal and empirical, for the sexualization of girls. It separated research that presented evidence for exposure to sexualizing material from research that found consequences to girls, boys, and the general public. Finally, it made recommendations with regard to prevention that was based on the literature that was available and practice known to the psychologists contributing to the report. One of the recommendations was for continued and focused empirical research and this update, 10 years later, shows how researchers heeded this call.

Soon after the report was released, critical responses emerged (Duschinsky, 2013a, 2013b; Egan & Hawkes, 2010; Lerum & Dworkin, 2009; Renold & Ringrose, 2013). One criticism of the report came from those who believed the risk focus contributed to a renewed moral panic about female sexuality in general and positioned girls as vulnerable or helpless, thus reinforcing age old stereotypes (e.g., Duschinsky, 2013a, 2013b; Egan, 2013; Egan & Hawkes, 2010). Some of these critics wanted to see girls represented in the report as greater agents in their own sexual development. A second criticism focused on the research presented which did not cover or draw many conclusions about sexualization and its effects on girls of color or LGBT girls (e.g., Egan, 2013; Gill, 2012; Renold & Ringrose, 2013). A third criticism also focused on the participants of the research studies cited, in that the report too often extrapolated from research on adults to make comments about girls and adolescents or used research on adolescents to make comments about girls (e.g., Hatch, 2011; Lerum & Dworkin, 2009).

These criticisms continue to be worthy of consideration. Thus, in addition to carrying out an update that reviews evidence for sexualization and potential deleterious effects of sexualization on girls and boys, we explore whether the

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criticisms have been addressed by the newer research. Because a major criticism of the original report was that the report did not distinguish between studies that focus on adults and those that focus on children or adolescents, we take care to note the samples used when we examine whether there is continuing evidence of sexualization. We also take care to look specifically for evidence of sexualization separately from body image research. We also address the criticism of lack of diversity through attention to the samples chosen for newer research. We end by discussing whether the original conclusions of the APA TF on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) report still hold and to what extent new research addresses the criticism leveled at the older report. We focus on research published since the report was released.

Evidence for the Sexualization of Girls

This update first examines the evidence for the sexualization of girls that has been published since 2007. The majority of research has looked at the presence of sexual content in media, as well as sexualized material in media, television, movies, music videos and lyrics, advertising, sports media, and clothing. Although the bulk of current research has focused on societal messages that come from media, it is important to note that the sexualization of girls is a greater cultural issue. Sexualization can occur through interpersonal relationships, including family members (e.g., Starr & Ferguson, 2012) and peers (e.g., Petersen & Hyde, 2013). Girls continue to be judged by their sexuality (Valenti, 2010) and are increasingly presented in sexualized ways (Graff, Murnen, & Krause, 2013).

Media in General

Adolescents today spend approximately 9 to 11 hr a day on media (Common Sense Media, 2015; Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010), and the media adolescents watch and listen to have been found to contain a high level of sexual content as well as content that disproportionately depicts women as sexual objects, which is generally referred to as “sexualizing” content (Collins, Martino, & Shaw, 2011; Wright, 2009). In addition, in a study of adults, media was found to continue to portray a sexually objectified and unrealistically thin body ideal (Greenwood & Lippman, 2010). While adolescents consume, interact with, and make their own media, they are still shaped by and rely on it for messages about sex, gender roles, and relationships (Eyal & Ben-Ami, 2017; Hartley, Wight, & Hunt, 2014; Len-Ríos et al., 2016). In particular, one study found that 57% of adolescents, ages 14 to 16 years, identified media as an important source of sexual knowledge (A. Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, Coles, & Jordan, 2009).

Television

Studies in the United States and other developed nations have shown that upward of 75% of television programming contains sexual content (Al-Sayed & Gunter, 2012; Eyal, Raz, & Levi, 2014). It should be noted that sexual content may not be as problematic as sexualizing content, that is, portrayals of women as sexual objects. Portrayals of women in primetime and reality-based television as sexually objectifying occurs in 45% to 50% of cases, and these portrayals include body exposure that reflects cultural standards of beauty and thinness (Flynn, Park, Morin, & Stana, 2015; Smith, Choueiti, Prescott, & Pieper, 2012). In recent research on sexualization in children’s TV programs, Mcdade-Montez, Wallander, and Cameron (2017) randomly sampled 32 episodes of 10 top programs (averaging three episodes per program) identified by White and Latina girls. Sexualizing content was present at an average of 24 incidents per program. Every episode had sexualizing content, with 72% targeting female characters. White characters were sexualized more than Latina characters with regard to wearing heavy makeup or wearing sexualized clothing, but Latina characters were represented more in the categories of “wearing high heels” and “wearing revealing clothing.” Some severe forms of sexualization that were looked for were not found to be present (e.g., sexual aggression). However, the coders did find sexist comments, sexual harassment, attempts at manipulating a person into a romantic relationship, and unwanted sexual touching in the children’s programming they examined.

Movies

Ward, Moorman, and Grower (2018) reviewed research from 2000 to 2017 and write that very few studies have investigated the prevalence of the sexualization of girls and women in feature films despite their prominence and high consumption by adolescents. However, research on sexual content (not studied in terms of whether it is sexualizing or not) shows that there is a high level and it involves more women and teens than men and adults (S. Bleakley, Jamieson, & Romer, 2012; Callister, Stern, Coyne, Robinson, & Bennion, 2011; Nalkur, Jamieson, & Romer, 2010). A review by Nalkur et al. (2010) found that 84.6% of films, including those intended for children, contained at least one segment of sexual content. Specifically, 68.2% of G-rated films, 82.0% of PG-rated films, and 85.0% of PG-13–rated films contained sexual content compared with 88.3% of R-rated films. A recent study also found a trend toward hypersexualized female protagonists in action films, more than one quarter of which were rated PG or PG-13 (Heldman, Frankel, & Holmes, 2016).

Music Videos and Lyrics

Music is present in the lives and household of children and adolescents, lyrics passed on in schoolyards, and videos of favorite entertainers sought out online. It is also well known that music videos both objectify and degrade women (e.g., Turner, 2011; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). Depending on the
study, 59% to 84% of videos contain sexual messaging (Turner, 2011; Ward, Reed, Trinh, & Foust, 2013). In music videos, women and female artists are consistently shown in more sexual ways than men and male artists, including the display of more body parts, provocative dress, and sexually suggestive dance and behavior (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Frisby & Aubrey, 2012; King, Laake, & Bernard, 2006; Wallis, 2011; Ward et al., 2013; Ward, Rivadeneyra, Thomas, Day, & Epstein, 2012). Black women are more likely to be shown in provocative dress, but White and Black women are equally likely to be shown suggestively dancing and revealing body parts (Ward et al., 2012). This difference varies by genre with rhythm and blues, rap, and pop music containing more sexual content than rock and country music videos (Frisby & Aubrey, 2012; Turner, 2011).

Music lyrics have been found to allude to sexual intercourse in 37% of popular songs, in a study that defined popularity by the Billboard rankings, and when sex is mentioned in songs, 65% of these references were degrading in nature, meaning that they disrespected women (Primack, Gold, Schwarz, & Dalton, 2008). Specifically, men are often referred to as sex-focused and women as sexual objects, with rates of 39% and 36%, respectively, in rap and hip-hop music (Avery, Ward, Moss, & Uskup, 2017). Studies have also found that sexual content in music has significantly increased from 1960 to the 2000s. References to sexual behavior and sexual objectification in a sample of top 50 songs have both increased fourfold with rates of sexual objectification increasing from 6% in the 1970s to 31% in the 2000s (Smiler, Shewmaker, & Hearon, 2017). Consistent with Avery et al. (2017), rates of sexual content varied across genres, ranging from 14% in rock to 32% in rhythm and blues and 70% in rap music.

Advertising

Little research has been done on the presence of sexualized girls in advertisements. But as in the APA TF on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) report, it is important to look at the world around girls and the sexualized advertisements of women that they may see in magazines or on media aimed at adolescents. Studies have found TV commercials showcase sexually objectifying portrayals of women, with a prevalence of partial female nudity (Lunceford, 2012; Nelson & Paek, 2008). Women are often disproportionately suggestively dressed, compared with men, to connote sex appeal. In an analysis of 254 TV commercials, 52.7% of women were dressed in a sexually suggestive manner in comparison with only 6.6% of men (Prieler & Centeno, 2013). Similar trends have been found in print advertisements. In a content analysis of 1,988 magazine advertisements, when women were present, they were depicted as sexual objects 51.8% of the time (Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008). Rates of this were highest in men’s magazines (76%), closely followed by 64% in adolescent girls’ magazines, and 56% in those intended for adult women.

Magazines

Magazines are a source of both advertisements, discussed above, and stories that promote the sexualization of girls and women. An analysis of four decades of Rolling Stone magazine covers found that sexualized images of men and women have increased, though women continue to be more frequently sexualized than men (Hatton & Trautner, 2011). One study of girls’ magazines concluded that the prevalence of the sexualization of girls in these magazines has increased over time, with more images of girls in low-cut T-shirts and tight-fitting clothing than ever before (Graff et al., 2013). These researchers found increased sexualization of women and girls not only in Seventeen, but also in Girls’ Life, a magazine for preteen and younger girls.

Products

Although the analysis of a variety of products for adults might yield evidence of sexualization in marketing, only a few studies examine products for children, focusing on gender stereotypes as much as sexualization. One study analyzed Halloween costumes, Valentines, dolls, and action figures for gender stereotypes. The researchers found that in their category of “hyper-feminine” cues, the most common cue for female-gendered characters was that the character was wearing revealing clothing. Indeed, more than half of the female characters that were analyzed wore revealing clothing, whereas only 20% of the male characters did (Murnen, Greenfield, Younger, & Boyd, 2016). With regard to dolls, Boyd and Murnen (2011) write that the Monster High dolls replaced the Bratz dolls which replaced the Barbies, with each replacement more sexualized than the former. Starr and Ferguson’s (2012) study in which they presented 60 six- to nine-year-old girls with two paper dolls to choose from, one clad sexily and one not, found that girls choose the sexily clad doll to represent their “ideal self” as well as the doll they thought represented the kind of girl who would be “popular.”

Video games are another kind of product used by children that has been analyzed with regard to sexualizing images. Most studies focus, however, on adult games. Content analyses of video games have reported on the high prevalence of sexualized characters (Downs & Smith, 2010; Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009); particular attention has been paid to the stereotypical and sexualized nature of female representations (Burgess, Stermer, & Burgess, 2007; Summers & Miller, 2014). Specifically, in adult games, female characters were more frequently portrayed as attractive, sexy, helpless, and innocent, whereas male characters were portrayed as muscular and powerful (Miller & Summers, 2007). Limited research (to be reviewed below) has studied the effect of video games on children and adolescents.

Sports Media

As highlighted in the APA TF on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) report, the body of research that focuses on women in
sports media continues to be minimal in comparison with the widespread coverage of men’s sports. There is not only a lack of inclusion but selective inclusion that takes place and contributes to the way that we perceive women in sports. Sports that are perceived as more feminine, such as tennis or gymnastics, often have more media coverage, whereas sports such as basketball and soccer are less objectified in the media and portrayed as more masculine sports (Varnes et al., 2013). In addition, when female athletes are given media coverage, it is generally regarding their personal lives and stories, rather than their performances (Sherry, Osborne, & Nicholson, 2016).

When women are featured, female athletes are often more objectified and sexualized than male athletes, particularly in sports marketing and advertising (Darvin & Sagas, 2017; Nezlek, Krohn, Wilson, & Maruskin, 2015; Wannaberg, 2011). Female athletes are shown wearing sexualized uniforms, such as skirts for tennis, short shorts, or bathing suits for volleyball (Nezlek et al., 2015). They are also often portrayed with sexualized poses that draw focus to their physical appearance rather than their athletic performance (Sherry et al., 2016). While sexualized female athletes have been rated as more attractive and desirable than nonsexualized athletes, they are also seen as less intelligent, capable, athletic, and self-respecting (Harrison & Secarea, 2010). To compound the situation, female athletes themselves have been blamed for the way they are portrayed in the media and told they are using the wrong kind of media attention techniques, as if this were their choice alone (Toffoletti, 2016). We have yet, however, to see research that examines the impact on girls and whether the empowerment messaging around girls and sports counteracts these images.

Clothing

As previously stated in the APA TF on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) report, girls’ choice of clothing is related to the development of their identity; thus, it is concerning when girls are encouraged to wear clothing that highlights their sexuality, as if this were the only or most important part of their identity. In a study of 15 national stores, researchers found that almost 30% of the clothing items for preteen girls (represented on their websites) had sexualizing characteristics, were associated with what is commonly thought of as sexiness (e.g., red satin lingerie), or were clothing that emphasized a sexualized body part (e.g., a push-up bra; Goodin, Van Denburg, Murnen, & Smolak, 2011). One focus group study of girls of color shows them perceiving sexualized clothing as enhancing a girl’s confidence when done correctly (Lamb, Roberts, & Plocha, 2016), but they also describe the constant policing of girls around the thin line between confident and slutty (as Brown, 2005). They also describe how girls of color are more likely than White girls to be punished in schools for wearing outfits that administrators think of as sexy (Lamb et al., 2016).

Since the publication of the APA TF on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) report, the news media annually presents sensationalized stories of “sexy” Halloween costumes. Research conducting an analysis of 821 costumes and girls’ choices shows the prevalence of both over-sexualized feminine characters and infantilized portrayals of princesses (Sullivan, 2012).

Pornography

Pornography is the quintessential sexualized media that now reaches more than 90% of boys and more than 60% of girls are exposed to during their teen years (Sabina, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2008). Some argue it is the norm for sex education (Hunter, Figueredo, & Malamuth, 2010; Morgan, 2011) and teaches adolescents how to understand sexual interactions (Peter & Valkenburg, 2010, 2011). While male adolescents first enter the world of pornography around middle school, girls enter a bit later (Allen & Lavender-Stott, 2015). What they see is designed by a commercial business to draw them in so that they become paying customers. It is also designed in a way that perpetuates myths about women’s sexuality and encourages sexism and violence against women (Dines, 2010). Klaassen and Peter (2015) looked at the first scene of 100 of the most popular videos from each of the four of the most popular websites and found that 93% of those contained violence against women.

Consequences of the Sexualization of Girls

As in the APA TF on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) report, there have been a greater number of studies of the effects of sexualization and objectification on young adult women than on adolescent girls. Even rarer is the study of the effects on preadolescent girls. Just as it is fair to demand more research on girls, it may also be fair to assume that girls who are exposed to the same material as adolescents risk the same negative consequences. The subsequent sections update the literature on the consequences of sexualization on girls, following the format of the original report.

Consequence: Self-Objectification/Self-Sexualization

Self-objectification or self-sexualization can be seen as a consequence of living in a society that prizes a girl’s sexuality above other features of her personality, her accomplishments, and her interests. Sexual objectification can be described as a focus on appearance, viewing oneself in an objectified manner, as an object for others’ gratification without regard for one’s own needs or desires (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Holland & Haslam, 2013). Sexual objectification tends to be used in the literature as synonymous with self-sexualization, although critics have found this problematic (Lerum &
Dworkin, 2009). Research has shown that girls, ages 10 to 15 years, with higher levels of internalized self-sexualization wear more sexualized clothing than girls with lower internalized sexualization (McKenney & Bigler, 2016). Furthermore, girls, ages 10 to 13 years, with higher levels of self-sexualization have been shown to have higher levels of body surveillance and body shame than those with low levels of internalized sexualization (Tiggemann & Slater, 2015). Frequent exposure to sexually objectifying media has been linked to higher self-sexual objectification in adult women (Vandenbosch, Muise, Eggermont, & Impett, 2015) and in girls (Tiggemann & Slater, 2015). Exposure to and identification with media portrayals of Black women as sex objects was related to African American adolescent girls’ emphasizing beauty and appearance, although self-sexualization was not measured in this study (Gordon, 2008). In adult women, higher levels of self-objectification have been found to be associated with lower sexual self-esteem, sexual self-competence, sexual satisfaction, and sexual self-efficacy (Calogero & Thompson, 2009; Claudat & Warren, 2014; Ramsey & Hoyt, 2015). Sexual objectification is also linked to higher self-surveillance, or the habitual monitoring of one’s body and appearance (Aubrey, 2006), in adolescent and young adult women, which in turn predicts poorer body image as well as depression and anxiety (Grabe & Hyde, 2009; Ward, Seabrook, Manago, & Reed, 2016).

Consequence: Sextist, Stereotyped, and Rape Supportive Attitudes

While the original APA TF on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) report suggested that consuming sexualizing media may lead to greater acceptance of traditional gender roles, the double standard, interpersonal violence, and rape-supportive attitudes in young adults (Ward, 2002; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006), recent research has continued to link exposure to sexually objectifying images to greater support for sexism and the objectification of women (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2015b). While men’s consumption of sexually objectifying media has been linked to greater objectification of their romantic partners, which is linked to lower levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction (Zurbriggen, Ramsey, & Jaworski, 2011), we can wonder if the same will be true of adolescent boys. In a Dutch longitudinal study, Peter and Valkenburg (2009) found that adolescents who were exposed to sexually explicit media were subsequently more likely to view women as sex objects.

Furthermore, consumption of music videos has been linked to greater acceptance of harmful beliefs about sex and sex roles. This exposure has been specifically linked to believing that when women say “no” to sex, they really mean “yes” (Van Oosten, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2015). Exposure to hip-hop music videos with highly sexualized content led male participants to show greater objectification of women, stereotypical gender attitudes, and acceptance of rape at posttest compared with men who were exposed to videos with low sexualized content (Kistler & Lee, 2009). Films have also been studied for their impact on relationships. In one study of sexualized women in superhero films, exposure to sexualized-victim images of women decreased egalitarian gender role beliefs (Pennel & Behm-Morawitz, 2015). Research on pornography use indicates increased exposure is associated with hostile sexism and less egalitarian attitudes toward relationships (Hald, Malamuth, & Lange, 2013) as well as increased belief in rape myths and decreased likelihood to intervene in a potential rape scenario among both male and female users (Brosi, Foubert, Bannon, & Yandell, 2011; Foubert, Brosi, & Bannon, 2011). Although many of these studies cited use college student samples, male and female adolescents, ages 12 to 15 years, in Belgium, who played a video game with a sexualized female character later expressed more tolerance of rape myths and of sexual harassment than teens who played the same game with a nonsexualized character (Driesmans, Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2015).

Attitudes toward girls’ potential and future opportunities may also be affected by sexualization. Starr and Ferguson (2012) used pictures of paper dolls to explore fifth-grade girls’ perceptions of same-age peers who dress in sexualizing ways. They found that when a fifth-grade girl was dressed in sexualizing clothing, she was seen as less intelligent, less competent, and less moral than when she was dressed in childlike clothing. Findings also suggest that adolescent girls with sexualized online profile pictures are regarded as less attractive and less competent by peers than girls with non-sexualized pictures (Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016). These findings jibe with research on women wearing more provocative attire in comparison with conventional or plain attire were seen as less intelligent, less capable, less moral, and lacking in self-respect (Gurung & Chrouser, 2007), which in turn may have ramifications for their academic and vocational endeavors, creating barriers to success (Daniels, 2016).

In addition to social and mainstream media, the sexualization of female athletes has contributed to a devaluing of women’s athletic abilities and disrespect for women among girls and young women (Daniels & Lavo, 2013; Darvin & Sagas, 2017). Sexualized images of female athletes encourage a focus on women’s physical appearance and perpetuate an ideal body image for women among women (Daniels & Lavo, 2013; Zurbriggen & Roberts, 2013) and boys (Daniels & Wartena, 2011) looking at female athletes. Viewing sexual portrayals of female athletes has been linked to increased self-objectification for female consumers (Nezlek et al., 2015; Varnes et al., 2013).

Consequence: Poorer Mental Health

Body concerns and dissatisfaction are typically measurements that researchers connect to the potential for disordered eating and/or depressive symptoms. Several studies document the
connection between exposure to sexualizing media and body concerns, but most use samples of adult women. Bell, Lawton, and Dittmar (2007) documented increased body dissatisfaction in women after viewing sexually objectifying videos. Exposure to sexualizing media also have been related to feelings of shame, appearance anxiety, body dissatisfaction, and eating disorders in young adults (Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2009; Miles-McLean et al., 2015; Moradi & Huang, 2008; Szymanski, Moffitt, & Carr, 2011). This exposure is also associated with low self-esteem, depressed mood, trauma symptoms, and depression in young women (Miles-McLean et al., 2015; Szymanski & Henning, 2007).

These effects have been explored in research on sexual minority women with mixed results (Engeln-Maddox, Miller, & Doyle, 2011; L. B. Watson, Grotewiel, Farrell, Marshik, & Schneider, 2015). Engeln-Maddox et al. (2011) did not find a significant link between sexual objectification and body surveillance or body shame in lesbian women. However, L. B. Watson et al. (2015) demonstrated that sexual objectification predicted body surveillance, body shame, and disordered eating in lesbian women via the internalization of cultural standards of beauty. Furthermore, body surveillance consistently predicted body shame which then predicted eating disordered behavior (Engeln-Maddox et al., 2011; Haines et al., 2008). Given these results, it is difficult to know whether these findings would extend to adolescent girls. It is also relevant to note that there is no current research on the effects of the sexualization on transgender girls, but instead, researchers have referred back to the effects on cis-women from the APA TF on the Sexualization of Girls report (2007; Serrano, 2009).

Consequences: To Sex, Behavior, and Relationships

Exposure to sexualization has an impact on how adolescents act and perceive others, including what they may expect in their own sexual encounters (Martino, Collins, Elliott, Kanouse, & Berry, 2009; Ragsdale et al., 2014) and how they perceive others’ sexual activities (A. Bleakley et al., 2017; Frison, Vandenbosch, Trekels, & Eggermont, 2015). It has also been seen to affect their attitudes toward relationships (Hartley et al., 2014; Len-Ríos et al., 2016) and knowledge of safe sex practices (Jones, Biddlecrom, Hebert, & Mellor, 2011; A. F. Watson & McKee, 2013). Teens who consume more sexualized media have lower expectations of contracting a sexually transmitted infection (STI) or getting pregnant than teens who consume less (Martino et al., 2009; Ragsdale et al., 2014). Adolescent use of sexualizing magazines has been linked to the internalization of cultural beauty standards, self-surveillance, and engagement in French kissing and intercourse (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2015b). In addition, boys’ exposure to sexualizing magazines increased the importance they assigned to girls’ body size and sexual body parts; it also made them more likely to endorse dating strategies that focus on appearance (Ward, Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2015).

Movies have been found to play a role in shaping adolescents’ attitudes, cognitions, and perceptions about sexuality, sex roles, and sexual relationships (A. Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2011). Exposure to sexualized media is related more to increased sexual behaviors in White adolescents than for Black and Latino adolescents (Hennessy, Bleakley, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2009). Black adolescents exposed to risky sexual behavior in Black films were more likely to engage in sexually risky behavior than those exposed to mainstream films. Exposure to sex in media does appear to be related to sexual behaviors; however, it is also true that sexually active adolescents may expose themselves more frequently to sex in the media than nonsexually active teens (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2011). On a related note, adolescent pornography use is associated with reduced relationship and sexual satisfaction with real life partners (Morgan, 2011), and exposure to X-rated movies predicts experiencing dating violence in Black adolescents (Raiford, Wingood, & DiClemente, 2007). In addition, a recent study found that pornography consumption, particularly at a younger age, was related to engagement in more submissive behavior in girls (Sun, Wright, & Steffen, 2017), and another found that higher pornography use was associated with higher engagement in degrading behaviors in adults (Bridges, Sun, Ezzell, & Johnson, 2016).

Research on video games shows that adolescents who played with a sexualized avatar experienced an increase in self-objectification compared with those who played with nonsexualized avatars; effects were unrelated to how often the adolescent played video games (Vandenbosch, Driesmans, Trekels, & Eggermont, 2017). In adults, playing a video game depicting sexual objectification of women and violence against women increased rape myth acceptance in men but not women (Beck, Boys, Rose, & Beck, 2012). College women exposed to sexualized avatars experienced higher levels of self-objectification, and in turn higher levels of rape myth acceptance, than those exposed to nonsexualized avatars (Fox, Ralston, Cooper, & Jones, 2014). Other studies on adults have found that exposure to sexualized avatars versus nonsexualized avatars can reduce women’s self-efficacy (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009), promote hostile sexism (Fox & Bailenson, 2009), make men more tolerant of sexual harassment (Dill, Brown, & Collins, 2008), and increase sexual harassment (Yao, Mahood, & Linz, 2010).

In experimental studies on college students and adults, viewing sexually objectified women in media increased participants’ support for sexist statements and traditional gender stereotypes (Kistler & Lee, 2009; Pennel & Behm-Morawitz, 2015). There has also been support for increased tolerance of sexual violence and harassment following objectifying media exposure (Aubrey, Hopper, & Mbure, 2011; Galdi, Maass, & Cadinu, 2014). Furthermore, in male participants, this exposure has led to increased rape myth acceptance,
victim blaming, and decreased empathy for victims (Beck et al., 2012; Fox et al., 2014; Loughnan, Pina, Vasquez, & Puvia, 2013; Romero-Sanchez, Toro-Garcia, Horvath, & Megias, 2015).

Positive Alternatives and Potential Interventions

The original APA TF on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) report discussed some ways in which girls can be supported to challenge the impact of sexualization. The report highlighted possibilities for media education in schools, education that came from within the family, sex education, the power of sports, and efforts by girls themselves. The following research provides an update on similar institutional and social interventions. While girl activism has much more support of late (Brown, 2016), the following group of suggestions supports the same methods recommended in 2007.

Media

Although critics voice concerns about the perils of media, it must be recognized that media as a whole is not homogeneous, but allows for diverse formats and representations of girls and women. Girls not only consume media, but they are also involved in the production of media. Girls use online forums, Instagram, Twitter, video diaries, and the like to share their experiences of media, the culture of sexualization, and how it makes them feel (Gill, 2012). Girls have also used social media to engage in activism around sexuality (Brown, 2016). Some of these efforts include fighting back against sexual violence and “blaming the victim” discourses and reclaiming the word slut to empower girls (Ringrose & Renold, 2012). However, it is important to note that dynamics such as age, class, and race affect one’s participation and may carry more risk for girls with less privilege (Brown, 2016; Ringrose & Renold, 2010, 2012).

Education

Some sex education programs address sexual content in media (Lamb, 2013a, 2013b). Education can help to construct a more holistic understanding of healthy female sexuality and help girls navigate through contradictory sexual messages (Allen, 2011; Fields, 2008; Gilbert, 2014; Lamb, 2010; Lamb et al., 2016). Girls may benefit from monitoring their engagement and participation in media, paying attention to the way in which men and women are portrayed (Jackson & Vares, 2015). Programming should focus on critical engagement with media, considering how media participation has the possibility for empowerment (Stokes, 2007). Education may also address the role and impact of technology on relationships, including use of social media and dating sites (Daniels, 2016).

Education around feminist ideals may also be part of the answer. Murnen and Smolak (2009) found that across 26 studies, when women with feminist views were compared with women who did not have feminist views, those with feminist views were less likely to internalize idealized media images of women. They were also more likely to report body satisfaction, perhaps due to an ability to critically evaluate and reject negative cultural models.

Sports

General participation in extracurriculars has not been found to contribute to or prevent self-objectification (Tiggemann & Slater, 2015). Some research, however, has shown that viewing female sporting events is connected to having positive expectations for female athletes (Daniels & Wartena, 2011; Darvin & Sagas, 2017). So, increased media coverage of women’s athletics may have positive effects for girls and women and encourage participation in athletics (Daniels, 2009; Daniels & Lavoi, 2013; Daniels & Wartena, 2011; Darvin & Sagas, 2017). Studies have shown that increased athletic participation is linked to increased self-esteem in girls and shifting body perceptions from appearance to physical ability (Varnes et al., 2013; Zurbriggen & Roberts, 2013). More research on the effects of sports participation for girls is needed with regard to possible prevention of self-sexualization.

Parents

In two studies, parental attitudes have been studied with regard to sexualization of girls. Authoritative parenting style in mothers, as well as mothers who are less materialistic and more religious, may help their daughters be less affected by exposure to sexualizing material, or may prevent exposure (Starr & Ferguson, 2012). Parental monitoring of Internet use is related to less harassment online in adolescents who perceived their parents to monitor their Internet use versus those who did not perceive parental involvement (Khurana, Bleakley, Jordan, & Rorem, 2015). Parental attitudes and direction are an unmined source of data that could be helpful in preventing the harm that may be done by exposure to sexualizing media and marketing.

A Reconsideration of the Criticism

There has been considerable research in the area of sexualization that has built on and extended the research available in 2007 when the original APA TF published its report. Some of this research has addressed the problems identified by critics, but much of it has not. In this update, we have considered these criticisms while tracking the research. For example, we have noted when the race and age of participants reflect the criticism of the earlier report in that it focuses on predominantly older adolescent or young women.
We also have looked carefully at the agenda or tone of the research within publications rather than within media response to publications.

**Older Participants**

Empirical research continues to demonstrate the sexualization of girls in media and its effects on girls and adolescents; however, researchers’ tendency to use convenience samples of young adults remains a problem. In a recent meta-analysis of 54 studies on sexualizing media use and its effects on self-objectification (Karsay, Knoll, & Matthes, 2018), very few studies that were published after 2007 focused on younger girls (Grabe & Hyde, 2009; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013, 2014, 2015) or teens (Meier & Gray, 2014; Miller, 2007; Vandenbosch et al., 2017; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015a, 2015b). The vast majority of the research collected data from college student populations. While theorists continue to agree that much objectification and self-sexualization starts before adolescence and is solidified in the teen years (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Lamb, 2010; Lamb & Peterson, 2012; Tolman, Bowman, & Chmielewski, 2015), very few studies involve girls or, for that matter, boys. Those who do research in this area continue to use college student samples but go on to make recommendations for girls and teens. Although it is difficult to study this topic using a child sample, not only because of accessibility, but also because surveying and interviewing children requires more careful consideration of their vulnerabilities, such efforts remain important to ensure results are not improperly generalized as well as to support the idea that sexualization is a problem for girls.

**Lack of Diversity**

While several researchers have involved African American adolescents in research on sexualization, objectification, and exposure to sexualizing material (Gordon, 2008; Hennessy et al., 2009; Lamb & Plocha, 2015; Raiford et al., 2007), much of the continued work in this area focuses on Black media itself and the frequent representation of Black women as sexualized (Avery et al., 2017; Frisby & Aubrey, 2012; Heldman et al., 2016; Turner, 2011; Ward et al., 2012). The presumption has been that exposure to sexualized Black women will influence the self-sexualization or mental health of Black adolescents. In the scant empirical literature, this presumption may have been shown to play out. While exposure to sexualized media is related more to increased sexual behaviors in White adolescents compared with Black or Latina adolescents, Black adolescents exposed to risky sexual behavior in Black films have been more likely to engage in sexually risky behavior than those exposed to mainstream films (Hennessy et al., 2009). Also absent is literature on adolescents with disabilities or LGBT adolescents. Although Randazzo, Farmer, and Lamb (2015) explore the effects of sexualized media on LGBT women, the finding might hold for adolescents: that queerness is not a static category and media representations make it appear so, and that treating the female body in a degrading way can have an effect on all women. Needless to say, research on sexualization, objectification, and exposure to sexualizing and objectifying material needs to extend to more marginalized groups, including diverse groups of Asian American, Native American, and immigrant girls and boys, as well as those who identify as queer or those who are disabled, to name a few absent populations.

**Ignoring Girls’ Agency**

We have seen a growing number of qualitative studies that engage girls around the issues of sexualization, objectification, its intersection with sexual harassment in schools, and girls’ take on media. For example, Lamb et al. (2015) interviewed a diverse group of high school girls in focus groups regarding what they believe is “sexy.” Ringrose and Renold (2012) used ethnography to capture girls’ agency in situ. Tolman and Ringrose (2018) interview girls from fee-paying and public schools to explore Whiteness, being Black, and its intersection with class and country of origin. Qualitative studies may be better able to explore the intersection of class, race, and ethnicity, as well as the sexual agency that critics of the APA TF on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) report requested (e.g., Lerum & Dworkin, 2009). Interviews of adolescents and college-aged women found them engaging with the culture around the issue of agency, knowledgeable about claims that girls are “too sexy too soon” or imitating overssexualized media, while also reproducing a discourse that sometimes sounds supportive of the sexism that underlies objectification. Several authors write of the neoliberal discourse of choice (Attwood, 2007; Bay-Cheng, 2015; Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Gill, 2012; Gonick, 2006), that proclaims sexual agency, and these authors describe how girls and young women can support choices that put them at risk and reproduce media and male expectations of sexiness. The concept of neoliberalism, as it has been used by feminists to address girls’ agency, refers to the creation of an ideal subject who is entirely self-determining and responsible then for any victimization that might befall her. It is important to make clear that documenting girls’ voices does not necessarily provide evidence of their agency; instead, taken as a whole, these studies provide evidence that girls engage with cultural discourses about agency, reproducing as well as resisting them (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Jackson & Vares, 2015; Lamb & Plocha, 2015).

**Creating a Panic**

Given this review is limited to scholarly research and does not review popular media writings, it is impossible to assess whether research contributes to what some have called a
panic in the culture about girls’ sexuality. Starr and Ferguson’s (2012) research that girls preferred dolls dressed in sexualized clothing to dolls dressed in nonsexualized clothing received significant publicity at the time it was published (Abbasi, 2012), and more recently (Shellenbarger, 2017), perhaps because it involved actual girls and did not extrapolate research on adolescents to girls. Moreover, the Halloween holiday appears to perennially bring out news stories about sexy Halloween costumes for girls (e.g., Hines, 2015), but an analysis of mainstream media responses to research on sexualization is beyond the scope of this article. Egan (2013) also noted that the “panic” that was reflected in multiple magazine stories of girls’ sexualization following the APA TF on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) report is not new. Whether or not there is a media panic about research on sexualization is not a proper critique of the scholarship; it is instead a cultural critique. Furthermore, whether or not scholarly authors write in a way that could support a “moral panic” approach can be understood by examining the language in their conclusions and recommendations. This review, however, did not systematically analyze the language in the conclusions.

**Conclusion**

This update suggests that research that has followed the APA TF on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) report has continued to confirm the presence of sexualizing media and marketing and its problematic effects. The criticism that this is a risk-focused analysis still holds. So, while researchers examine the risks of sexualizing media, they need to explore how girls and boys resist risk, how they create their own media, critique mainstream media, and explore their own developing sexuality. As the critics suggest, researchers might also be more open to exploring the pleasures youth talk about in qualitative research when discussing sexualizing media, self-sexualization, objectifying others, and pornography. If researchers can examine their pleasures as well as risks, there may come about new recommendations for alternatives.

Other criticisms leveled at the APA TF on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) report also still hold. Researchers continue to use convenience samples of college students and extrapolate these effects onto girls. This practice must be supplemented by studies following girls’ consumption of sexualized media, its effects on them, and how they make sense of it. Furthermore, we urge researchers to use not only correlational research, but also longitudinal research methods to follow the influence of media over time. Qualitative studies will also help us to better understand how girls and adolescents are interacting with the media as they navigate gender and intersectional identity development.

Researchers continue to use primarily White samples with select studies investigating Black youth media use. While this is a start, there is still a need for research using more diverse samples, including Asian American, Native American, and immigrant girls and boys. With increasing diversity in the country, research must follow with appropriate representation, not only in specific enclaves, but considering intersectionality as well.

LGBT girls and girls with disabilities are two additional groups clearly exposed to sexualizing media but about whom we have little information with regard to effects. To capture all underrepresented groups, we propose that this may require a shift in methodology to capture more subjective experiences and step away from imposing a conventional lens.

With regard to whether this research contributes to an age-old moral panic about girls’ sexuality is generally not a critique to be leveled at the researchers. It is a problem of culture and media. Still, it is in the recommendation section of most research articles where authors have some leeway with regard to the interpretation of their findings and recommendations, and so it is in this section that they can best position girls as agents. Recommendations that focus on parental authority and restrictions can unfortunately position girls as dupes or passive recipients of knowledge and rules, unable to wend their way through the media onslaught on their own or with peers. Recommendations that point to girls’ own use of media, their activism, and their ability to critique media from several perspectives seem to do exactly what the critics want sexualization research to do: empower girls to understand, confront, and critique that which might influence them in ways unbidden. In this new period of girl activism, one in which girls themselves, for example, write blogs, protest, and contribute to organizations that focus on equal rights (Brown, 2016), it is important to look at what girls are doing to bolster their self-concepts, mental health, and physical well-being and to focus on those activities that help them not just to choose (as neoliberal agents) to reclaim a “sexiness” that the culture has already deemed normative, but also to revisit these notions and make changes in their own lives and the lives of others. In this way, empirical research can be put to important use by those who work as advocates for girls and can protect from contributing to panics which are unlikely to produce real change in the lives of girls and women.
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