

Sex Sells... a harmful narrative about women

How women oversexualizing themselves in mainstream media is regressing the feminist movement.

By Ariana Hensley



It is no secret that women have had a long and rather disgusting history of being sexualized by men and the media, but, recently, women found a way to combat this objectifying narrative: to take their sexuality into their own hands. This solution, however, is full of error and is creating more problems than it is solving.

It is essential to distinguish between the sexualization of women and women expressing their sexuality.

The Associated Press defines sexualization as "occurring when a person's value comes only from her/his sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics, and when a person is sexually objectified."

This is different from the topic at hand, which is women oversexualizing themselves. This is a person creating a strong narrative around their sexuality, not others making it for them.

As a society, we have thankfully reached a point where most respectable people understand how women being objectified and sexualized by the media is terrible. Still, we need to venture further into the conversation and realize the harm in women sexualizing themselves.

When women in the mainstream media portray themselves as hypersexual beings, it perpetuates the idea that all women want to be seen as similarly hypersexualized, which isn't true.

Every individual woman has a way they wish to be perceived which is unique to them. People go to great lengths to build a reputation and shape public perception by their choosing.

Some women want to be admired sexually and openly display their sexuality, which is ultimately their choice, but when it is the norm in the media, it promotes the idea that all women want to express their sexuality and be seen as sexual beings by men.

Some women choose to be more private with their sexuality. When men think that all women want to be hypersexual, it strips women of their choice to be sexual or not, leading to their sexualization rather than their expression of sexuality.



An example of this choice being stripped away is how singer Billie Eilish portrays herself in the media. The 19-year-old singer has created a brand around herself that includes donning baggy clothes to shield herself from objectification.

Even despite her deliberate clothing choices, when the public got their hands on a picture of her in a tank top when she was barely 18, there were countless comments objectifying and sexualizing her.

Celebrities who sexualize themselves and rely on this attention from the public create a type of dialogue around their bodies that have normalized objectifying speech about women, which applies to more than just those who wish for it.

The over-display of some womens' sexuality leads to the unwarranted sexualization of other women.

Backstepping on Body Neutrality

Society has gone through numerous phases of body perception, which has brought us to one accepted by many: body neutrality.

The body neutrality movement aims to shift societal focus from physical attributes to value nonphysical characteristics more. Its goal is to defy the idea of a person's body and appearance defining their value.

Body positivity emphasizes that every person's body and appearance are beautiful, while body neutrality stresses the idea that a person's body and appearance aren't important.

This movement is making strides in society, but women who sexualize themselves in mainstream media challenge this progression.

When celebrities like Kim Kardashian use their looks and bodies to sell perfume (something not having to do with their bodies), it puts too much emphasis on a woman's body. It narrows the qualities women possess to something strictly superficial.

There is no doubt that women in the media are praised for their physical attributes more than nonphysical. It is also true that women's bodies are emphasized more than men's.

Young girls seeing this are left to assume that society values their bodies more than anything else, which causes a plethora of insecurities and undermines their intelligence and personalities.

While this is a consequence of the years of the sexualization of women in the media by men, it is also a consequence of women sexualizing themselves.

A woman putting so much emphasis on her own body still results in too much emphasis on a woman's body.

With this being said, I understand that it is not one person's responsibility for another's insecurities, but to put so much value into the qualities making others insecure is harmful. Society has gone through countless phases of body perception, which has brought us to one accepted by many: body neutrality.





Why do some women want to be seen so sexually?

There is an important question that we must ask ourselves when discussing the matter at hand: Do women want to be perceived so sexually, or is it a result of internalized misogyny taught by a society that says they should want to be?

The concept of internalized misogyny is recently gaining more attention. It is defined by the University of Missouri- Kansas City as "when women subconsciously project sexist ideas onto other women and even onto themselves."

Being raised in a misogynistic society has consequences on a person of any gender. For women, the effects involve seeing themselves and other women in a particular light.

Young girls see women in mainstream media half-naked and acting extremely sexual. What's worse is that they also see young girls being sexualized as well.

Suppose girls see that beauty standard and learn that their value is derived from their appearance and sexuality. In that case, they will have a warped perception of their appearance and their sexuality.

Healthy sexuality cannot be linked to society's perception of a person's sexuality.

With society's significant influence over a girl's perception of her sexuality, one must consider the possibility that women only want to display their sexuality so openly because they have been taught that it directly correlates to their societal value.

With this being a sad possibility, women sexualizing themselves in the media is not a way of reclaiming power over their sexuality but rather a way they are unknowingly conforming to and promoting misogynistic ideologies.

But is it Slut-Shaming?

It feels old-fashioned to criticize the clothing, or lack thereof, of influential women. The criticism, however, is not because of their sexually provocative behavior but because of the consequences for women.

While women should have the freedom to wear as much or as few clothing they wish, it is too idealistic to pretend there are no consequences to influential women's actions.

In a perfect world, free of sexism, objectification, sexual assault, and gender inequality, this would be no issue, but since we do not live in that world, we should not act and talk as though we do.

There are consequences. Women are being objectified, young girls are being sexualized, and society is praising it.

Unfortunately, the blame doesn't belong on the women owning their sexuality, but rather on the people using it as a weapon against others. Still, until certain women's choices to display their sexuality don't affect other women's choice to be sexualized, I must urge those using their sexuality to prioritize other attributes over physical ones.