

*The Impact of Sexualised
Images on the Mental
Health of
Ageing Women*

Social Work Masters Research
Rochelle Hine

2010

The bottom half of the slide features a dark blue background with several decorative elements. In the lower right corner, there are three sets of concentric circles, resembling ripples in water, rendered in a lighter shade of blue. These circles are positioned behind the text of the author and year.

Interest in the topic



Definitions

- **Sexualised Images:** Present the subject in such a way as to give the impression that they are sexually available. This may be achieved by the use of specific types of clothing, the position, pose, context or props used, or the facial expression of the subject.

Baldwin (2006, 72): *“showing cleavage, viewing breasts or nipples through clothing, very short skirts, overall increase in skin/body exposure, and/or the presence of sexually suggestive posing, such as having legs spread apart”*.

Definitions

- **Self-Image:** Self-image can be literally interpreted as the mental image one has of oneself.

Wilton (1999, 57): *“a conversation between the body and the social, in which the ‘matter’ of the conversation is continually created and recreated in the dynamic, temporally located, interlocution”*.

Definitions

- **Gender:** United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (1995, cited in Judd, Armstrong & Kulkarni, 2009,105):
“The term gender refers to the economic, social political and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female. In most societies, men and women differ in the activities they undertake, in access and control of resources, and in participation in decision making. In most societies women as a group have less access than men to resources, opportunities and decision making”.

Definitions

- **Mental Health and Wellbeing:**

World Health Organisation (2001, 1):

“A state of wellbeing in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”.

VicHealth (2005, cited in DHS, 2006, 13):

“Mental health is the embodiment of social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Mental health provides individuals with the vitality necessary for active living, to achieve goals and to interact with one another in ways that are respectful and just”.

Literature

- **Embodiment, objectification and violence**

- Gender and embodiment, history of women's bodies portrayed as sexual objects

Wolf, 1990; Millet, 1971; Greer, 1970; Foucault, 1977; Tebbel, 2000; Rosewarne, 2005; 2007

- A focus on an ideal of beauty that preferences youth, marketing that deliberately promotes feelings within women of dissatisfaction with their bodies and operates to pathologise normal ageing processes

Roberts & Waters 2004, Tiggemann, 1996

- A relationship exists between accessing pornographic material and the development of sexually aggressive attitudes and behaviour

Malamuth et al., 2000

- Objectification de-humanises, violence can be understood as a logical consequence of transforming a human into an object

Kilbourne, 1999

“Sexist stereotypes... representing men as desiring and creative subjects, and women as the beautiful, sometimes sadistically manipulated, images of the desiring male gaze”.

Moscovici, 1996, 63-64

Literature Review

- The media

- Women are marginalised in the media, especially older women

Friedan, 1993; Itzin, 1986; Reichert & Lambliase, 2006; Hanger, 2006

- A narrowly defined concept of 'beauty' pervades

Baldwin, 2006; Boyle, 2005; Galician & Merskin, 2007; Reichert & Lambiase, 2006; Stark & Whisnant, 2004; Tiggemann & Slater, 2004

- Limitations of media regulation; the private and individual solitary mode of television consumption distorts and divides the power of the consumer to exert any control over media content as there is little sense of collectivity

Craik et al., 1995

Literature Review

- **Mental health impacts of sexualised content**

- Self-objectification: leads to depression, anxiety, eating disorders and sexual dysfunction

Roberts & Waters 2004

- The experience of being increasingly devalued as the ageing process progresses may result from cultural preoccupations with youth and beauty

Fodor & Franks, 1990

- Exposure to images promoting a thin ideal have a cumulative effect on body dissatisfaction on women across cultures and ages.

Victorian Government Department Family and Community Development Committee, 2005

Methodology

Qualitative research methodological framework and design, grounded within Feminist Standpoint Theory.

Processes:

- Media content selection
- Sample selection and recruitment
- Focus group preparation
- Focus group implementation
- Data analysis of the media content, focus group content and focus group dynamics and discourse.



TOP TIP
"I use a lot of hydrating cream on my face. In planes, it gets dry quickly, so I always figure out the number of time zones I'm going through and plan the most restful connecting flights."



Television:

~'The Great Outdoors'-
Sunday, 6:30pm, Prime

~'So you think you can Dance'-
Sunday, 8:30pm, Ten

'Desperate Housewives'-
Monday, 8:30pm, Prime

~'Today Tonight'-
Tuesday, 6:30pm, Prime

~'Home and Away'-
Tuesday, 7:00pm, Prime

~'All Saints'-
Tuesday, 9:45pm, Prime

~'Days of Our Lives'-
Wednesday, 1:00pm, Win

~'Spics and Specs'-
Wednesday, 8:30pm, ABC

~'Neighbours'-
Thursday, 6:30pm, Ten

~'Inspector Rex'-
Thursday, 7:30pm, SBS

~'Charlie's Angels'-
Friday, 8:30pm, Win



Findings

Strong Themes:

1. *“And it’s destroying them”*: Concern for the harmful impact of sexualized images on the vulnerable.
2. *“You’ve got to look sexy”*: The media’s portrayal of sexual content with a focus on physical appearance and youth.
3. *“I felt blooming awful all the time...”*: Descriptions of the impact of viewing sexualized images.
4. *“I think we can overlook a lot”*: Denial of the impact of sexualized images.
5. *“You just don’t see people like me”*: Marginalization of women in the media.

“And it’s destroying them”

- Unhealthy portrayals of what constitutes a ‘normal’ sexual relationship
- Little content around the consequences of sexualised behaviour
- Targeted toward the most vulnerable

“...we have the media for young people to see it so often and so explicitly it’s a scary thing. Its very frightening and you’re frightened for the young people.”

“You’ve got to look sexy”

“Telling them to, you know, flaunt it all, how to sit to make the best exposure or hopefully attract - I don’t know who they think they’re attracting the attention of.”

“I felt blooming awful all the time...”

“Yes of course you feel old you feel fat you feel wrinkled you feel... I don't know, like you're past your used- by date.”

“I just can't watch, I've never been able to watch commercial television for years and years because of their advertising which involves a lot of that sort of stuff you're showing today and, like you can let it wash over you but I don't, I can't let it wash over me because it sort of offends my spirit.”

“I think we can overlook a lot”

“I really do think you get to a stage where you accept the way you look and the way you are.”

“So long as you know that’s what it is ... it’s not real, and you can’t judge it on your experience.”

“You just don’t see people like me”

“Even the ones who are older are ... very well preserved. And you just don’t see people like me, which is a shame really.”

“I guess it’s to do with feeling a bit marginalised, that the pitch wasn’t at us in any of that. The pitch might be at our husbands or something perhaps maybe but it wasn’t at us. We’re not the, we’re on the edge of it, we’re not the focus of these images.”

Conclusions

- Sexualized images in the media do have an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of older women
- The resilience of older women in contending with an increasing prevalence of sexualized images. Women's substantial knowledge, skills and resourcefulness in combating the images and their self described marginalization were also illuminated.
- The need for the media and health sectors to adopt innovative strategies to address gender issues inherent in the proliferation of sexualized media images in order to minimize the negative mental health impacts experienced by ageing women.

Recommendations

- Further research to investigate links between sexualisation of women, gender inequity, and sexual assault
- Research around the impact upon particular marginalized population groups such as women with disabilities, Indigenous women, women who are same-sex attracted and women from culturally diverse backgrounds
- Studies in the areas of sexual diversity, rurality and the media
- Advocacy to strengthen and consolidate the validity of considering sexualized media images as a public health issue.

Recommendations

- The relationship between sexualized media images, mental health of women and violence against women are issues that justify increased public attention.
- Advocacy for stronger and more effective media regulation



“Looking at advertising and media images, it is often declared that there are no negative effects in the viewing, since it is known that the portrayal is unreal and often even laughable. Yet ...day to day viewing of media imagery parallels the funhouse mirror; it is also laughable, but, as it becomes the standard of how we view ourselves the images no longer are seen as funny, but, rather they require us to carefully evaluate which mirrored images are our own and which are distorted” (Baldwin, 2006, p. 25).