

# Introducing *Sexualization, Media, & Society*

Sexualization, Media, & Society  
 April-June, 2015: 1-4  
 © The Author(s) 2015  
 DOI: 10.1177/2374623815588763  
 sme.sagepub.com



As the inaugural editorial board, we are honored to announce the introduction of *Sexualization, Media, & Society* (SMS), a new research journal intended to disseminate high-quality scholarship examining the influence of sexualized media in all forms on individuals, relationships, communities, and society. Hosted by Wheelock College and Virginia Commonwealth University, this new journal adopts a critical perspective aiming to integrate social, behavioral, political, economic, ethical, cultural, and health research into a comprehensive academic and professional resource.

Around the time of this writing, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (James, 2011), an erotic tale about an emotionally troubled business magnate who seduces a virginal college student into the world of bondage-discipline-sadomasochism (BDSM) in his “Red Room of Pain,” has become a global phenomenon. The book has been translated into 52 languages and sold more than 100 million copies, and the movie has grossed over US\$550 million dollars in the 3 months since it first opened. The success of this book has inspired two sequels (*Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed*; James, 2012a, 2012b) and a vast array of products and activities, including dominatrix-themed yoga classes, cookbooks (*Fifty Shades of Chicken*; Fowler, 2012), nail polish, body lotions, wines, and, of course, lingerie and “adult toys” (Hershings, 2015). Despite its evident commercial success, the *Fifty Shades* enterprise has not been without controversy. Numerous media critics, popular culture analysts, and an array of scholars are spending increasingly large amounts of ink discussing the merits and impact of the book and film (Bonomi, Altenburger, & Walton, 2013; Comella, 2013; Downing, 2013; Hollomotz, 2013).

This increasing commercialization of sex is not limited to books and films marketed to adults. Scholars and journalists have documented the prominence of sexual themes in nearly every aspect of children’s lives, including advertising, clothes, accessories, toys and games, music, and other entertainment media. For example, the hit television show *Toddlers and Tiaras* has been intensely criticized for its sexualization of young girls (Henson, 2011). The show outraged viewers when it released images of a 3-year-old contestant dressed as a prostitute, an imitation of the outfit worn by Julia Robert’s character in the opening scenes of *Pretty Woman* (Ziskin & Marshall, 1990). Marketers target tween girls between the ages

of 9 and 12 to sell them padded push-up bras, kiddy thongs stamped with slogans that scream “juicy” or “wink, wink,” and even bikini waxes (Durham, 2008; Krupnick, 2011). Along with beauty tips, teen magazines cover flirty innuendos and relationship advice, such as “Hooking Up Do’s and Don’ts” (Gunter, 2014; Zurbriggen & Roberts, 2012).

Access to and production of a wide array of intensely sexualized material is increasingly available through the Internet. It is estimated that 12% of all Internet websites are pornographic, 40 million Americans regularly visit pornography online, 35% of all Internet downloads are pornographic, and 25% of all search engine requests, or 68 million per day, relate to sex (Weiss, 2013). Pornography is now the first and major form of sex education for adolescents and young adults (Hunter, Figueredo, & Malamuth, 2010; Sabina, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2008). Recently, Google attempted to limit explicit sexual content in Google blogs. Almost immediately, the backlash against Google erupted, swiftly and effectively. Within 3 days of first reports, the company issued a statement indicating they were not moving forward with this change (O’Connor, 2015). Google was attempting to respond to a digital environment where commercial pornography is a massive economic force (Johnson, 2010) dominated by images of violence and aggression (Bridges, Wosnitzer, Scharrer, Sun, & Liberman, 2010).

As these stories indicate, issues surrounding sexually explicit material are highly contentious and increasingly in the public discourse. Among academics, pornography has endured as one of the most combative and divisive areas of research, splitting feminist researchers across the academy into warring factions. The Internet has only intensified these debates now that access to sexual material for people of all ages and for all types of tastes or preferences is practically unlimited. The explosion of hypersexualized media raises questions community practitioners, activists, academics, politicians and health care professionals are just beginning to ask. What effects do these materials have on individuals, couples, families, communities, and societies? How should we balance the importance of freedoms of speech and expression with limitations by age, content, or labor protections? Are there political, health, or psychological effects at the production, distribution, and consumption levels? If so, what might these be and how ought our polity to respond to such effects? How do these images shape



sexuality and promote or discourage sexual health? What are the political and economic implications of commodification of sexuality?

Attempts to respond to the rise of this new pornified culture include governments, such as the United Kingdom and Iceland, developing policy changes in response to the public health challenges associated with sexualized media (Grossman, 2013; “Online Pornography”, 2013); academic and professional organizations, such as the American Psychological Association (APA), creating taskforces and published reports addressing the mental health consequences of the sexualization of girls (APA, 2007); activists organizing online forums, blog spaces, marches, and summits to call attention to this topic (e.g., [www.sparksummit.com](http://www.sparksummit.com)); health advocates developing self-help websites for those struggling with pornography (e.g., [www.fightthenewdrug.org](http://www.fightthenewdrug.org)); and the general public and parents expressing concerns about the saturation of sexualized images as adolescents gain increasing access to technology.

While widespread interest in this topic has generated numerous studies on sexualized media, they are idiosyncratically dispersed throughout a variety of academic journals, including journals in the fields of communication, psychology, sociology, economics, political science, women’s studies, law, nursing, and other health professions. The need to create an international, interdisciplinary journal that provides a single outlet for this thematic content is evident.

Questions about sexualized media and their effects were the focus of a 2013 Blue Ribbon Symposium sponsored by the Virginia Department of Health, where experts from around the world gathered to develop a public health response to the effects of adolescent exposure to hypersexualized media. This conference represented a significant shift in the way in which pornography and hypersexualized media are approached. Moving away from questions of sexual agency, morality, and speech, this landmark conference brought together a diverse set of interdisciplinary scholars, activists, community leaders, and health care professionals to begin to develop a public health response to the pornification of our culture. It was at this meeting, during a lunch conversation among five colleagues, all of whom expressed frustration about the diasporic nature of this work, that SMS was first conceived. Those five colleagues now collaborate as the coeditors for this new research journal: Drs. Ana J. Bridges, Deirdre M. Condit, Gail Dines, Jennifer A. Johnson, and Carolyn M. West. Collectively, we had been conducting research for more than 50 years; yet, despite our collective “wisdom” on the topic, among ourselves and in our work, we continued to grapple with the questions raised by hypersexualization and the unlimited access to endless forms of sexual expression. We shared our common frustrations with accessing the relevant research because it routinely appeared in a dizzying assortment of journals and publishing outlets. We expressed our exasperation at the seemingly perdurable chasm between scholars and practitioners, and we lamented about the sparse opportunities to collaborate we had each experienced. It was then that one of us said, “Well,

how about *we* create a journal that would solve all these problems?” And so we have.

Following the advice of Walt Whitman, “be curious, not judgmental,” we decided SMS would provide a critical examination of sexualized media, with a dedicated eye focused on questions of health broadly defined such that this journal can be a resource for a wide array of academics and professionals, one that integrates social, behavioral, cultural, and health research. We strive to promote a nuanced understanding of the heterogeneous nature of sexualized media and their associations with individual and public health; intimate and family relationships; sexual, gender, ethnic, and racial identities; social and political organizations, communities, and cultures; and institutions and global economic structures.

Furthermore, as editors we aim to encourage a critique of the representation of sex through sexualized media and their impact on human lives, but we maintain that to examine critically sexualized media is *not* to be critical of sex. In fact, we see promoting healthy sexual development and leading a fulfilling sexual life as critical to the well-being of individuals and society. Incumbent in that perspective, however, is the acknowledgment that understanding “healthy sexual development” is *itself* an important and contestable question within the spirit of this journal.

Our aim is to create a safe space for interdisciplinary, critical, and nuanced discussion about sexualized media, including pornography and hypersexualized popular culture, and how these media define, create, impact, and shape our public and private worlds. We seek to explore questions such as:

- What constitutes hypersexualized media? How are both “hypersexualization” and “media” identified? Delimited? Understood? How are we to understand differences and distinctions among “types” of sexualized media? Does the representation or platform for delivery of hypersexualized media modify their impact?
- Is the degree of sexualization represented in media a new phenomenon in human history? Do changes in access, content, or other intrinsic elements impact consumption, ingestion, and reproduction of human sexuality, sexual identity, and sexual health?
- What impact, if any, do sexualized media have on our conceptualizations and implementations of sexual behavior? Are these implications the same across various social locations and social groups?
- If pornography is a form of sexual education, what sort of educational messages about sex does it provide? What do adolescents learn from the images? Does this shape their sexual behavior? Does pornography relate to sexual behavior in the same way across cultures and social groups?
- How do we approach sexualized media politically? How do sexualized media inform policy making? What are the political implications of access, regulation, distribution, production, or widespread consumption of increasingly sexualized or pornified materials?

- How are gender, race and ethnicity, sexual identity, age, physical ability, and other forms of diversity represented in pornography, and what are the implications of these on the larger community?
- What are the economic and business models of sexualized media? How are these media created, sold, consumed, and profited? What are the social, behavioral, economic, political and/or health implications of the commodification of sexuality?
- What are the legal implications of sexting, revenge pornography, and other forms of explicit media? How are issues of consent, ownership, and victimization handled in the eyes of the law? What gaps in the law exist that relate to new technologies and sexualized media?

We ask similar questions in our own work. Jennifer A. Johnson, associate professor and chair of sociology at Virginia Commonwealth University, uses social network analysis to reveal the political economy of the online pornography industry. Ana J. Bridges, associate professor of psychology at the University of Arkansas, studies the impact of sexual media on individuals and couples. Deirdre M. Condit, associate professor and chair of political science, considers the implications of political discourse and law on issues of reproductive rights and health. Carolyn M. West, associate professor of psychology at the University of Washington, studies the racialization of sexualized media and the way in which race is used to amplify the erotic nature of the images. Finally, Gail Dines, professor of sociology and chair of American Studies at Wheelock, has been studying and speaking about the pornography industry and the growth of the pornified culture for over 35 years, including a recently released TEDx talk (2015).

We are aided greatly by an outstanding editorial board from scholars and professionals across a range of disciplines, including journalism and communications, human development, women's studies, social work, literary studies, public health, psychology, and sociology. Some of our board members are activists, documentary filmmakers, clinicians, and directors of nonprofit centers. They represent geographic and disciplinary diversity. Many have long and illustrious careers investigating pornography and sexualized media. Altogether, they represent leaders in the field of inquiry, and all are committed to the dissemination of outstanding scholarly work in this area. We are thankful for their service.

On behalf of all of us associated with SMS, we promise to bring you the most responsible, current, and thoughtful research articles on sexualized media currently in production. For maximum impact, SMS will be published through an open access model enabling scholars, practitioners, journalists, members of the public, and other interested parties to access its content for free, without the need for a journal subscription. As SMS begins what we believe will be a long intellectual journey of exploration, we welcome contributions, comments, reviews, and reader feedback at any time. We invite you to be a partner in this fledgling undertaking by serving as a manuscript reviewer and by submitting your own original research articles,

case studies, first-person reflections, artistic and philosophic works, and book reviews. If you are interested in serving as a reviewer for the journal, please contact us.

We would like to thank the President's office at Wheelock College and the Dean's offices of the College of Humanities and Sciences at Virginia Commonwealth University for the financial and collegial support both have shown to get this journal off the ground. Through their generosity, both offices have signaled a commitment to preserving open access to high-quality research to improve the lives of people. We would also like to thank Nicole Poulin and Robert Franklin from the Virginia Department of Health for their energy and support, without which the intellectual seeds for this journal would not have taken root. Finally, we would like to thank all those who contributed their time and energy to making the 2013 Blue Ribbon Symposium such a success. During those few days in June, the vitality brought by professionals, activists, intellectuals and community leaders was electric and generated enough energy to produce a journal two years later. From all of us at SMS, we would like to thank you for your inspiration, support, and commitment!

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