

Chapter 1—The Implicit Meanings in Explicit Content

“In our culture, sex is becoming more and more visible, and more explicit.”¹

Feona Attwood

It is hard to argue with this statement by Feona Attwood, a media and communications professor who studies sex in contemporary culture. The adjectives “explicit” and “visible” were well chosen: together they provide a very accurate summary of the current, sexualized state of our media and wider culture.

Greater openness about sexuality is not necessarily a bad thing. Positive, age-appropriate sexual materials, delivered in the right context, are especially good for teens trying to make sense of their emerging sexuality. Unfortunately, with producers and celebrities increasingly relying on twerk-and-grind imagery and excessive displays of skin to attract attention, much of the sexual content in today’s popular culture is both negative in tone and inappropriate for the ever younger audiences that encounter it.

It is not just the visibility and explicit nature of sexual content that is of concern, but also the implicit messages this content delivers about sex and sexual roles. Pop culture depictions of sexuality are dominated by stereotyped views of gender, traditional notions of male-female sexual relationships (known in academic circles as the heterosexual script), and sexual objectification of women. These three elements pervade the media aimed at adolescents and perpetuate some very harmful ideas about male and female sexuality. They also provide a foundation for the issues discussed in the remainder of the book, so I will take some time to define them here.

Gender Stereotypes

If we dig deeply enough into the negative messages in sexualized media, we can see that gender stereotypes are at their root.

When we are born, we have no idea what it means to be a boy or a girl. Traditional notions about gender, long-established in our culture and passed onto us by the adults in our lives, provide lessons in how to be “appropriately” masculine or feminine.

In most Western countries, traditional views of masculinity define boys and men as naturally rational, assertive, aggressive, tough, competitive, and possessing physical, mental, and social strength and power. This masculine ideal holds the highest value in our society. Boys and men might not follow its every rule, but it is the standard against which they are measured and to which they compare themselves.

¹ Attwood, Feona. “Sexed Up: Theorizing the Sexualization of Culture” *Sexualities* 9, no. 1 (2006), p. 82.

Traditional femininity positions women quite differently from men. They are considered gentler and more emotional than men, passive, weaker, less assertive, and more inclined toward restraint and self-denial.² (These attitudes persist despite societal shifts that show more women taking on the role of breadwinner^{3,4} and more men acting less as provider and protector of the family and more as partner in life and parenting.)

These socially constructed ideals of masculinity and femininity tell teens what their response should be to their sexual urges and how they should behave in a sexual relationship: boys, as aggressive and physical beings, should pursue sex with lusty vigour and confidence; girls, excessively emotional and less tempted by carnal desires, should choose love and commitment over down-and-dirty sex.

A boy's gender socialization begins early and often lays the groundwork for his future attitudes toward sexual roles and dating. The trajectory starts in the preschool and primary grades, when girls and boys receive very different messages about what their gender means, and continues to the pre-teen and teen years where lessons learned in childhood are reinforced in the media and culture that surround boys.

Consider the most basic aspect of childhood: play. While many girls and boys today are comfortable playing with a wide range of toys—girls with building toys, boys with kitchens and baby dolls—there is one particular type of imaginary play targeted to girls exclusively: “pretty play.”

This kind of play involves girls dressing up as princesses or pageant queens, putting on makeup, accessorizing with jewellery, pretending to enjoy a spa day, or playing with high-heeled, mini-skirted, often sexualized dolls that emphasize fashion and having the right look. The toys used in this kind of play place an emphasis on appearance that is absent from toys targeted to boys. A boy who dresses up as Iron Man or a police officer is doing so to play an active role, not to be admired or gazed upon as a princess or pageant participant might.

Unwitting adults add to the problem by complimenting girls, but not boys, on their appearance and making fashion and shopping a focus for their daughters but not their sons. The differences in treatment are not lost on children and can affect behaviour and attitudes. Many young girls develop a concern for appearance that boys of the same age simply do not. For their part, boys see the considerable effort girls put into being “pretty” and may begin to view that trait as far

² Milestone, Katie and Anneke Meyer. *Gender & Popular Culture*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012, p. 19-21.

³ Wang, Wendy et al. “Breadwinner Moms” *Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends* May 29, 2013 <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/05/29/breadwinner-moms/> Accessed July 22, 2013.

⁴ Milligan, Kevin. “What the data shows about female breadwinners in Canada” *Macleans* June 10, 2013 <http://www2.macleans.ca/2013/06/10/what-the-data-shows-about-female-breadwinners-in-canada/> Accessed July 22, 2013.

more important than the other attributes girls might possess, setting the stage for future evaluations of their female peers and the development of the so-called male gaze.

Another narrative that runs through the culture of young children is boy-as-hero. Many pop culture vehicles show males in the leadership or hero role, whether in the superhero genre itself, in male-dominated cartoon franchises, or video games. (The latter category includes one of the most egregious examples: Princess Peach from the *Super Mario* franchise, the damsel in distress who is in constant need of rescue by Mario.) Part and parcel of the male hero role is the diminishing of relationships. Unlike many female characters who worry over husbands or boyfriends, busy male heroes do not have time to think about love and romance. There may be nothing overtly sexual in the male hero and lovestruck female tropes geared to younger children, but they do reinforce stereotypical notions of men as less vested in their emotions and relationships.

Other stereotypes start young and can affect boys' later sexual socialization. Stoicism is one of them. It is seen every time an adult exhorts a boy not to cry or tells him to "suck it up" or "act like a man." The message is loud and clear. If you are a boy, you need to deal with your problems in silence; you do not cry or talk about what is bothering you. As boys enter their pre-teen and teenage years, this stereotype can be particularly damaging. Boys who are discouraged from talking about life in general may become reluctant to talk about matters sexual. In our rather uptight culture, sexuality is a hard subject for any young person to broach; being male just makes it that much harder. Male independence is another stereotype that comes into play here. Boys raised to believe they should never ask for help may refrain from asking questions about sex so they can maintain an air of self-sufficiency and prove they are man enough to figure out sex on their own.

Physical ideals are also rooted in stereotypes of men as strong and dominant. In recent years, there has been more emphasis on the perfect male form in our culture. This shift has had an impact on boys' body image and their perceptions of what makes men attractive. Hint: a 6-pack is often part of the package.

As boys get older, they are introduced to another idea that is based in gender stereotypes but has a more direct impact on sexual socialization: the heterosexual script.

Heterosexual Script

Sociologists refer to scripts as programs for behaviour that are learned early in life. People store these scripts in their memory and use them to guide their actions.⁵ Sexual scripts give people cues about how to behave in a sexual relationship and what to expect from a sexual partner. Among sexual scripts in our culture, the heterosexual script trumps all others.

⁵ Huesmann, L. Rowell. "An Information Processing Model for the Development of Aggression" *Aggressive Behavior* 4, no. 1 (1988): p. 13-24.

The heterosexual script is based heavily on traditional (and stereotyped) gender roles. In this script, sexual exploration is considered perfectly acceptable for assertive, physical, and inherently sexual males, but not for supposedly passive and self-denying women. Instead of being “players” like the guys, women and girls are expected to act as sexual gatekeepers, enforcing limits on sex and even their own desires. The imbalance in the script is even seen in the slang we use to describe sexual roles: males with a lot of sexual experience are praised as studs, while women who “get around” are considered sluts, tramps, or whores.

This double standard does not just affect girls, but also boys who do not conform to the stereotype. As psychologist Michael Wiederman notes, a boy who expresses doubt or a lack of sexual interest may have his masculinity questioned⁶ since, according to the script, he is supposed to seek sex at every opportunity.

As described by psychologist Deborah Tolman and colleagues, the heterosexual script teaches people that sexuality carries different meanings and consequences for boys and girls. It consists of three major elements:

- sexual double-standards which state that sexual desire and experience are appropriate and normal for males but not for females who risk losing their “good girl” status if they appear sexually assertive;
- courtship strategies in which males are active and open in their pursuit of sex and females are far more passive and subtle;
- attitudes toward commitment where girls seek out faithfulness and devotion in their romantic and sexual relationships and boys choose to play the field.

In our popular culture, male characters enact this script by actively pursuing sex, sexually objectifying women, avoiding commitment, and taking the lead in sexual encounters. Female characters act out their part in the heterosexual script by using passive strategies to attract males (waiting to be asked out, exploiting their looks), seeking relationships instead of casual sexual encounters, and setting limits on sexual relationships; that is, fulfilling their role as sexual gatekeepers.⁷

The film *Don Jon* presents extreme cases of each. Lead male Jon is a serial seducer of women who boasts to his friends about his string of weekly conquests. Jon is also addicted to pornography, finding it far more satisfying than “real pussy.” He eventually falls for Barbara, a woman who loves romantic films and believes that “real” men, motivated by love, will do whatever a woman wants. She refuses sex with Jon until he has demonstrated his commitment to her by enrolling in a college course to better himself, meeting her family, and bringing her home

⁶ Wiederman, Michael. “The Gendered Nature of Sexual Scripts” *The Family Journal* 13, no. 4 (2005): p. 496-499.

⁷ Tolman, Deborah et al. “Rethinking the Associations between Television Viewing and Adolescent Sexuality Development: Bringing Gender into Focus” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 40, no. 1 (2007): p. 84.e9-84.e10.

to meet his parents.⁸ With its R-rating and serious subject matter it is doubtful that many adolescents will see the film, but it provides an excellent, if deliberately exaggerated, example of the heterosexual script for adults to consider.

The idea of male insatiability, in clear evidence in *Don Jon*, is also built into the heterosexual script. Psychologist Janna L. Kim and colleagues note that males often present their sexual feelings as uncontrollable, while women may try to appear less interested in sex and not prioritize their sexual desire. This element of the script may be slowly changing as more films and television programs show women wanting and pursuing sex, but the feminine ideal is still associated with a more chaste and patient approach to sex. News headlines of young women taking their lives after being bullied for “slutty” behaviour, cited in the introduction to this book, demonstrate all too clearly that this “purity myth”⁹ is still a strong cultural force.

What is the danger of the heterosexual script? Kim and colleagues believe it may normalize traditional attitudes toward male and female sexual roles. The normality of the heterosexual script may also mean that many adults fail to notice its strong presence in teen media:

Indeed, it is because the Heterosexual Script is so invisible and perceived to be so natural and normal that its potential impact on adolescents’ sexual decision-making is so formidable.¹⁰ (Capitalization present in the original.)

In other words, although it goes largely unnoticed, the heterosexual script can teach teens a lot about how to behave and what to expect in a sexual or romantic relationship. The lessons are not all positive. As we have seen here, the script reinforces many sexual stereotypes: promiscuous studs versus good girls, females valued for their appearance and openly objectified by males, and, in the words of psychologist L. Monique Ward, men as “sex-driven creatures who have trouble being faithful.”

For boys, the script can also reinforce the wider cultural message that sexual experience is central to their masculinity—that the more sex they have, the more manly they are. On the other hand, by implying that turning sex down will make them appear less masculine, the heterosexual script can deny boys their sexual agency, making them feel as though they have no choice but to say “yes” even if they would rather say “no.”¹¹

The heterosexual script is conveyed not only through the behaviour exhibited in popular culture, but also through the objectifying imagery in our media environment.

⁸ *Don Jon*. Directed by Joseph Gordon-Levitt. Los Angeles: Voltage Pictures, 2013.

⁹ Valenti, Jessica. *The Purity Myth: How America’s Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women*. Berkeley: Seal Press, 2009.

¹⁰ Kim, Janna et al. “From Sex to Sexuality: Exposing the Heterosexual Script on Primetime Network Television” *Journal of Sex Research* 44, no. 2 (2007): p. 146-7, 156.

¹¹ Tolman et al, p. 84.e10.

Sexual Objectification

Sexual objectification is often misunderstood. Many people confuse “erotic” with “objectifying,” believing that any time skin is shown, a person is being objectified. While that is often the case, it is not always so. Sexual objectification is not present in every sexual image or narrative. It occurs only when a person is “treated as a body (or collection of body parts)”¹² or dehumanized¹³ and made into a thing for others’ sexual use rather than being seen as a thinking, feeling person.

Sexual objectification takes many forms:

- Minimizing of a person’s individuality. Faces might be removed or obscured so the person in a photograph or video is seen simply as a body. This trait is closely related to the concept of “reducing to body” or identifying a person solely in terms of their body or body parts. For women, the focus is normally the bottom, cleavage, or legs. For men it is the chest, bottom, and genital area.
- Violability, or making a person appear vulnerable. The subject—invariably a woman—may be positioned below the camera in a reclining or submissive position, with her legs spread open or clothes being pulled off.
- Silencing, which is generally accomplished by removing a face or head, reinforcing the idea that a person is to be gazed upon but not have any agency of his or her own.¹⁴

Subordination is another potential sign of objectification. In the 1970s sociologist Erving Goffman talked about the “ritualization of subordination,” a phrase he coined to describe the ways advertisements featuring men and women use body positioning and posing to reinforce ideas about gender and, depending on the content of the ad, sexual roles. Men leaning over women, physically dominating the space, or exerting some kind of control over a woman who is lying down or in another position of submission are hallmarks of the ritualization of subordination. Submissive poses include:

- Recumbent positions which, at the time Goffman wrote, were more typical among female models than male. Goffman believed this position signalled sexual availability and hinted at the violability mentioned above since someone who is lying down is less capable of

¹² Fredrickson, Barbara L. and Tomi-Ann Roberts. “Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women’s Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 21, no.2 (1997), p. 174.

¹³ American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. (2010). *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*.

<http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf>, p. 1.

¹⁴ Papadaki, Evangelia (Lina), "Feminist Perspectives on Objectification", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),

<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/feminism-objectification/> Accessed February 23, 2013.

initiating “physical defense of oneself.” This pose is still very common in advertising today.

- Bashful knee bend, in which a woman is standing a bit off-balance, making her seem a less forceful presence.
- Canting postures, which involve twisting or bending the body away from the camera or lowering the head, denoting submissiveness, subordination, and appeasement.

Sexually objectifying images are common in media, especially in the world of advertising.

Clothier American Apparel had been one of the worst offenders, up until its bankruptcy filing in October, 2015.¹⁵ The restructuring forced the company to take a look at all of its operations, including, apparently, its advertising. New CEO Paula Schneider noted in 2015 that she was seeking a way to “keep American Apparel’s grittiness” while getting rid of imagery that was “totally over the line,”¹⁶ a phrase that describes a rather large swath of the company’s advertising output over the past ten years.

An ad from December, 2013 typifies the American Apparel approach. Although promoting underwear, this print ad did it in a very objectifying manner, showing a woman’s bum as she leaned over a bed, with the sheer underwear leaving precious little to the imagination.¹⁷ In fact, the company’s entire archive features a dizzying array of similar shots: spread-eagle or bum-up women reclining on beds or floors, looking vulnerable and overtly sexualized with their faces often not shown. Similar imagery appeared in a late 2014 campaign by designer Alexander Wang which showed a female model lying with her head back and eyes closed, naked, save for the jeans scrunched around the bottom of her legs.¹⁸ The advertisement was ostensibly about jeans but the model’s apparel was clearly never intended to be the focal point. In late 2015, I Love Ugly—a retailer of men’s clothing in New Zealand—made headlines around the world for its sexual objectification of women. To promote a new line of men’s jewellery, the company

¹⁵ Thomson Reuters. “American Apparel Files for Bankruptcy Protection” October 5, 2015. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/business/american-apparel-chapter-11-bankruptcy-1.3256563> Accessed October 12, 2015.

¹⁶ Bain, Marc. “American Apparel is in a hole , so it’s good that its new CEO is not at all like Dov Charney.” Quartz, June 17, 2015. <http://qz.com/425294/american-apparel-is-in-a-hole-so-its-good-that-its-new-ceo-is-not-at-all-like-dov-charney/> Accessed December 7, 2015.

¹⁷ American Apparel. “The Stretch Floral Lace Panty” *Photo Archive*. December 26, 2013. <http://www.americanapparel.net/photo/video/photo/details/index.html?i=3116&n=8> Accessed January 22, 2014.

¹⁸ Sanghani. Radhika. “Why these naked women make me feel uncomfortable.” *The Telegraph* December 4, 2014. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/11273072/Naked-celebrity-women-make-me-feel-uncomfortable.html> Accessed December 4, 2014.

photographed men's hands laden with rings, but placed those hands a naked woman's breasts, bum, and vaginal area.¹⁹

It is not just the fashion industry that is culpable either. American restaurant chain Carl's Jr. has taken sexual objectification to new depths, routinely zooming in on the cleavage, legs, and lips of the bikini-clad models who star in the company's commercials. And then there is Hooters, where objectification is built right into the name and present throughout its marketing. A pair of television ads from 2014 featured the Hooters girls being run through some football-styled drills by former NFL coach Jon Gruden. Slow motion is used to highlight bouncing breasts as the voiceover notes that Hooters girls make football more fun to watch.²⁰

As I noted earlier, however, not all sexy images are objectifying. Consider a well-known campaign by fast-fashion retailer H&M. Designed to market the company's line of men's underwear, the ads featured a muscular and bare-chested David Beckham standing upright and staring into the camera. Mr. Beckham's body was being used to sell a product, but his ads were not objectifying to the same degree as those described above. His posture and direct gaze did not imply submissiveness, a loss of autonomy, or violability, and, with his highly recognizable face fully visible, his individuality was not in question.

This contrast between images that are sexual and those that are sexually objectifying is important to note. Men may be showing more skin in popular culture, but that does not necessarily translate into sexual objectification. Although there is a shift occurring, in many cases, barely-dressed men are posed in ways that demonstrate their physical power. When women are eroticized they are often objectified as well, reduced to body parts (typically breasts and bottom), and posed to look seductive and available or even vulnerable and violable.

Repeated viewing of sexually objectifying images of women can affect young men's attitudes, strengthening their belief in stereotyped gender roles and making them more likely to view women only as sex objects.²¹

Is the impact of male sexual objectification the same? No one knows the answer to that question yet. There are relatively fewer instances of men being sexually objectified in our culture, so there is less research into the possible impact of such treatment. But men are not getting off scot-free either. Whether or not they objectify, sexualized images contribute to the distorted body ideals that have become standards of attractiveness in our society. Such images focus on one body type for each sex—lean and muscular for men, slim and buxom for women—while also sending the

¹⁹ Vagianos, Alanna. "Sexist Ad Campaign Reminds Women They're Nothing More than Objects." *The Huffington Post*. December 4, 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/sexist-i-love-ugly-ad-campaign-reminds-women-they-are-objects_5661a889e4b072e9d1c5bbf5?cps=gravity_2246_-7225116397627993971 Accessed December 4, 2015.

²⁰ Hooters. "Jon Gruden and a bunch of Hooters Girls walk into a stadium..." *YouTube* August 27, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqsMbESWdR8> Accessed December 7, 2015.

²¹ Owens, Eric W. et al. "The Impact of Internet Pornography on Adolescents: A Review of the Research" *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity* 19, no 1-2 (2012), p. 106.

message that the body is the most important gauge of a person's attractiveness and worth. In a sexualized media environment, sexual appeal takes on greater importance and people swayed by media messages (including men) may begin to see themselves as less desirable if they do not conform to societal ideals of perfect, sexy bodies.

What Does It All Mean?

Gender stereotypes and the heterosexual script are well established in our media and wider culture and remarkably persistent, despite changes in the economic and family roles played by men and women. From the time they are very young, boys are immersed in gender stereotypes, learning that the "ideal" male is strong, independent, and not prone to excessive displays of emotion. As boys get older, these familiar notions collide with social norms about male-female relationships to create a picture of males as sexually assertive and entitled to act on their urges in ways that females cannot. Objectification sets up a view of women as something to be visually consumed, evaluated in terms of sexual appeal, and, in extreme cases, used only for sexual gratification.

Together, these elements—gender stereotypes, the heterosexual script, and objectification—exert a powerful influence on boys' understanding of male sexuality. The strength of these elements is reinforced by their ubiquity, with all three appearing regularly in media rated from PG to R and, of course, X.