Porn-cultural Industries: female children and teenagers' eroticisation

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Abstract

The communicative landscape is filled with representations of women filtered by a male gaze, in which space is given mainly to standardised female images, precisely sharing a central role in the body dimension. This paper examines the portrayal of women's bodies within cultural industries, focusing on the profound impact of these images on the socialization of gender and sexuality in young girls. It analyses how the hypersexualized media landscape, particularly images that are sexualizing children, affects self-perception and can contribute to serious social issues, including the proliferation of child pornography facilitated by digital technologies. The paper investigates the entrenchment of stereotypical gender images, leading to self-objectification and adult-like sexual self-presentation in female children, often pressuring them to meet restrictive beauty standards. Furthermore, the research underscores the limited scholarship – particularly within Italian contexts – on how media-driven sexualization connects to the sexual exploitation of minors. Emphasizing the urgency of counter-narratives, this paper advocates for balanced media representations that encourage positive gender and body image socialization, fostering spaces free from objectification for children and teenagers.

Keywords: pornography, stereotypes, media.

1. Introduction

In the first part of this paper, the focus of our analysis will be on the representation that cultural industries give of women's bodies and the impact produced by these images on female children and teenagers in the process of socialisation with gender and sexuality. Further investigation will be then devoted to the effects that the proliferation of sexualised images can have on the rise of new crimes, gaining unknown characteristics thanks to digital technologies. In particular, the relationship between the proliferation of stereotyped gender images, the internalisation of these models by girls, the self-production online of sexualised images of minors and the increase in child pornography offences will be explored.

The media constantly convey contents in which women in particular are represented with special attention to bodily details. The communicative landscape is filled with representations of women filtered by a male gaze, in which space is given mainly to standardised female images, precisely sharing a central role in the body dimension (Bucchetti & Casnadi, 2022).

The media keep focusing on this dimension in complicity with the fashion, fitness, make up and cosmetic surgery markets. The ideal of beauty imposed on women is highly restrictive, as it implies a ban on getting old and an obligation to seduce, showcasing the erotic content of their bodies (Capecchi, 2011). Aesthetic rules are rigidly defined. As in any experience we have we learn how to be a body, how to live

it and how to represent it, it is important to think about what we have learnt since our childhood about masculinity and femininity (Priulla, 2022).

If in the past sexual objectivation mainly referred to young women, in the last few years even female children are represented in an increasingly sexualised way. Sexualisation is a complex phenomenon, in which several physical characteristics – such as degrees of nudity, sensuality of outfits, provocative and allusive body postures or face expressions – are closely interrelated (Hatton & Trautner, 2011). In short, while attention to physical aspects is a way to reduce a person to a body, sexualisation is a way to reduce a body to an instrument of pleasure and sexual desire (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

The American Psychological Association defines sexualisation according to four indicators:
- A person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, 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
- Sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person

Media representations, aiming at sexualisation and hyper-enhancement of physical details, have a strong influence on the perception people have of their bodies, making women believe that the basis of their value resides precisely in their body. The media have an even more disruptive impact on juvenile imagination; in fact, they set symbolic codes and rules that build the image of social reality.

The gender-related imagery nurtured by the media exercises forms of influence on the ways in which younger people internalise gender traits and consolidate their identity (Ciofalo, Leonzi & Quercia, 2021). What we read, listen to and see can either deconstruct or reinforce the perception of what we mean by male or female. Even sexuality is socialised through the media, as they produce images and narrations associated to rule-like statements of masculinity and femininity, rigidly dividing what is male and what is female. Through the stories that we are constantly told about men and women, we get to understand what is believed to be acceptable and what is still not intelligible in gender performance (Harvey, 2023, p. 39).

In a culture where since childhood personal value has been linked to the sensuality of physical attributes, women and young girls end up facing intense pressure, pushing them to work hard on their bodies in order to meet unrealistic standards of beauty (Spaccatini, 2019).

These strategies of representation have increasingly been targeting female children: it is easy to come across images emphasising parts of their bodies, enhancing sexy outfits, thick make up, sophisticated hairstyles and high-heeled shoes (Attimonelli, 2009). In this way, a process of adultisation of female children is started, increasing the risk of *self-objectification*. In self-objectification, girls internalise an observer's perspective on their physical selves and learn to treat themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated for their appearance (APA Report, 2007). Constant exposure to gender-stereotyped media contents can result in this objectifying perspective being internalised: they think about themselves as someone else's object of desire (Caso et al. 2019). Female children may even learn to think about themselves as bodies ready for someone else's use and pleasure and define themselves not just in terms of abilities and skills but of physical appearance.

The cultural discourse on the body moves between control and risk, between subjectivity and social order, between discipline and hedonism (Stagi, 2008). Beauty is actually a job, with little space left to simplicity and naturalness; according to these aesthetic standards, women must always be perfect and fitting in every situation.

2. Media and Gender Stereotypes

Media products have been nurturing the imagination since childhood, with an impact on young people's capitals of self-esteem, very often connected to the erotic one. The complexity of cultural texts, moreover, strongly influences their construction of identity, influencing the activities of impression management and self-presentation.

> Children's media experience is also characterised by the transversality of products and characters that not only cross the boundaries of individual TV and digital channels or platforms, but are also present in their world through material consumption (toys, clothing, etc.). In this context, children can combine platforms and content, giving rise to personal multi-media repertoires that are constructed from both the need to reconcile play and media consumption activities with the already intense rhythms of everyday life, and the availability of products and devices (Vittadini & Milesi, 2015, p. 95).

The media, toys and other products of entertainment are a particularly powerful source of influence not only because they provide female children with standards of beauty that are prescriptive and unrealistic, but also as they specify how to reach these targets related to their physical appearance.

"Traditional" and social media are highly attractive stages of sexualisation dynamics (Ward et al., 2016; Fasoli et al., 2018; Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016) for audiences composed by minors.

If we consider TV products for children, a clear example in this sense is represented by the Italian cartoon *Winx Club* (Sigismondi, 2015), where the protagonists are young and hyper-sexualised fairies. Even the toy market produces dynamics of sexualisation: for example, Bratz dolls, seductive and appealing, with face proportions and features that are out of the ordinary: fleshy lips, enhanced cheekbones, tight clothes and thick make-up. They represent an exasperation of the doll that for decades combined subservient femininity and consumerism: Barbie, which strongly contributed to conveying an icon of femininity. Barbie, after all, is the representation of a woman according to male imagination and expresses a mute femininity (Bernardini, 2011), in spite of the effort made in the last few years by its manufacturing company Mattel to refute accusations of sexism: for example, by increasing the range of Barbie's body models by adding disabled dolls and reproducing the features of successful women. In the Italian context, the captain of the National women's football team Sara Gama and astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti (Capecchi, 2022) have been featured; additionally, with the cultural marketing operation carried out in 2023[1] to launch a film which has divided critics and gained large audiences.

Whereas cartoons and toys play a determining role in developing gender identity at very young ages, during the teenage years TV series become a reference genre in

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[1] *Barbie*, directed by Greta Gerwig and film starring Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling, USA 2023.
The film was nominated for seven and won one award (Best song) at the Academy Awards.

representing young sexuality. The media make a special contribution to a social construction of sexuality through teen drama, greatly followed by teenagers: they represent an important space where models of sexuality are narrated (Rossi, 2013). In these narrations, everything revolves around the daily life of a group dealing with common problems such as friendship, sexuality, love and family tensions[2]. Characters in these TV series become proxies to think about oneself and one's sexuality (Burgio, 2021). The media work as "intimacy technology" (Kavka, 2008), able to get closer to spectators and to produce affection and emotions (Gavrila, 2020). It is important, then, to investigate the body models and expressions of sexuality in this kind of narration, from which young audiences can draw inspiration.

In the media dynamics of sexualisation and in their evolution as analysed in these pages, the process of normalisation of pornographic products has been crucial.

Over the years, the ability of pornography to influence the most disparate aspects of contemporary culture has increased, giving rise to the so-called pornification of culture: a sociocultural phenomenon according to which fragments of pornographic signs and symbols migrate towards popular culture, usually through media influence, becoming a visual imperative of our daily life. Narration is filtered by a male gaze which seems to mould the female figure on the basis of a porn-erotic fantasy.

Pornhub, the most famous pornography hub in the world, is a fitting example of porn acceptance. It is based on the free offer of large quantities of pornographic material, organised by genres and subgenres and categorised by tags. It is the first pornographic-oriented social network: audiences access contents and at the same time they can produce and talk about it (Ciuffoli et al., 2018; Maina & Zecca, 2017). By proposing pornography as a socially legitimate, shared genre of entertainment, the Pornhub platform has revolutionised the interaction between audiences and pornographic content: it embodies the mainstreaming of porn culture; thanks to its popularity, pornographic content has, in recent decades, emerged from the obscurity of sexualised material to become ubiquitous in popular culture (Paasonen, Jarrett & Light, 2019); finally, it legitimises pornographic aesthetics, which become normal and every-day (Lanfranco, 2022).

A "soft-porn male gaze" also persists in media representations addressed to a target made up by children and teenagers (Mapelli, 2022). Some of these images arouse a vaguely child-like pornographic sense.

Body objectivation and identification with adult models can easily lead to an instrumental representation of sex, in the sense that sexuality can be conceived and experienced as if it were a traded commodity, to the detriment of the relational and emotional aspects.

3. Girls as audiences

We briefly report on the results of a research study on the gender imagery of child audiences. The data we discuss is part of a larger project devoted to the representations of femininity that girls perceive as desirable (Cava, 2024). Studying the meanings that girls construct on the representation of women offers us an interesting perspective on the short-circuit that can be triggered between sexualised media images and erotic self-representation.

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[2] The most successful teen dramas of recent years include *Skam* (2015)*, Elite* (2018) and *Sex Education* (2019).

The study was carried out using diaries[3]. We asked 30 girls aged between 8 and 11 from three cities in Northern, Central and Southern Italy (Milan, Rome and Messina) to write short diaries in which they described their favourite female media protagonists. The girls were supposed to point to their favourite woman, describe her characteristics, explain the reasons for their choice and highlight the traits in which they would like to resemble their chosen star. The main aim of the research is to try to understand the relationship between the representations of the feminine in Italian media content and pre-adolescent girls' audiences by investigating the processes of identification and projection with a favourite character.

The qualitative methodology adopted, although it does not provide us with statistical-probabilistic representativeness, has allowed us to explore the interpretations through which the imagination of the child spectators is made explicit.

We chose this target group because they are halfway between childhood and adolescence; they are spectators born and raised in a digitised social context (their media consumption experience is characterised by the integration of different platforms); they already have a fair command of language and of the ability to render a personal view of the media narratives one comes into contact with; at this age, moreover, a progressive conquest of autonomy in terms of physical environments, media habits and living spaces begins.

The life context of these girls is characterised by a proliferation of technological platforms and the interconnection of product and character flows. It is a context of overabundance of symbolic offers (Vittadini & Milesi, 2015). The interaction with social platforms in which to negotiate the representation of oneself is constant and the contact with celebrities with which to try to identify oneself is continuous. These are girls for whom smartphones, social networks, the web and consoles are an integral part of the socio-technical environment and symbolic repertoires (Frezza, 2013) that have contributed to creating their shared semantics (Aroldi, 2012).

The analysis of the thirty diaries revealed three macro-categories useful for classifying the characteristics of the women described and loved by the girls: attractive bodies, independent personalities, digital tutors. In this paper, we will elaborate on what has emerged in terms of the body models in which they identify themselves.

The representation of femininity to which girls are attracted is often associated with beauty. The aesthetics of a sexy body exerts significant fascination. Models of corporeality often follow classical canons. The images of idealised beauty, of slim, toned, 'perfect' bodies to which they are exposed, conditions the gender performance to which girls seem to aspire (Gotz & Lemish, 2012).

The girls' fascination with Elettra Lamborghini emerges from many diaries. They recognise this singer's physical power and wealth. Looks have always been an important element in the construction of a musical star. In the case of Elettra Lambor-

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[3] In social research, the first use of personal documents was by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918-20). These narrative artefacts present themselves to researchers as collections of lives to be explored and, in our case, as repertoires of gendered images originating from interaction with the media. We believe that diary-writing not only puts us in touch with the lived experiences of the people we choose to study, but is a valuable resource for investigating the imagination, intentions, desires and meanings that lie behind the apparent simplicity of a recounted event. As Thomas and Znaniecki taught us, it is interesting to reflect on the veracity of the accounts one works on. For the two authors, in the case of Waldeck's account, what matters is that he reveals how he thinks he should have behaved as a young man in Poland and that this is a true picture of his idealised version of himself. In the case of the diaries of the girls featured in our study, it will be important not so much to consider their writings as absolutely adhering to what they really think in terms of the image of femininity conveyed by the media, but rather to understand their testimonies as performances of gender.

ghini, the artist's image almost overshadows her music. She is a brand, the protagonist of a transmedia story in whose ramifications the fans follow her. The way she presents herself in concerts, in video clips, in her many TV appearances and on social media is part of the performance itself. Its narrative works well beyond the music market and trans-medially expands to the realms of leisure and lifestyle[4]. It is interesting to consider how in the diaries of the young girls who identify Elettra Lamborghini as their most popular star, they all refer to a desire to twerk[5] like her. The choice by these little girls of an icon with an ostentatious, driven and provocative sensuality would seem to adhere to the stereotypes imposed by the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975): a body portrayed as an object of desire, with a strong reference to sexual imagination. These sexualised representations can influence the way one looks at oneself and one's body and may exert a certain pressure to commit oneself, from childhood onwards, to unattainable standards of beauty (Spaccatini, Pacilli & Tomasetto, 2018).

The body presents itself as a display to the outside world, the key to success and happiness (Gavrila, 2020).

The video clips starring Elettra Lamborghini depict her in luxurious locations, surrounded by sensual dancers who make breasts and buttocks vibrate to the rhythm of reggaeton music. Rather than a passive object, however, the sexualised representation of the 'twerking queen' seems to present an active sexual subject, who is in charge of her own desire and chooses to represent herself in these ways (Gill, 2008).

A sexualised imagination is especially evident if we look at the diaries of 11-year-old girls, who dwell a great deal on the description of hair length, proportionate measurements, shiny nail varnish and an impeccable shape. They are impressed by the ever-perfectly-made-up faces, recognising in these 'media women' the absence of flaws. These girls style their identities after the sexy celebrities who populate their cultural landscape; they sexualise themselves when they think of themselves in objectified terms.

In the next section, we will reflect on how this internalised sexualisation can have the effect of increasing the risk of minors being victims of online abuse.

4. The risks of a pornification of culture

The web has allowed easy and safe access to porn, making pornographic content "ordinary", almost trivial in its wide availability and easy access.

The social implications connected to a wider spread of this content cannot then be ignored. It is not our intention to demonise pornography, a term used to describe material of a pornographic nature representing adults engaged in consensual sexual acts and legally distributed by the industry. Pornography implies the presence of consent and legal rules that make it lawful: both preconditions are lacking when dealing with a context of abuse and exploitation involving minors.

A cultural acceptance of adult pornography, together with the proliferation of increasingly eroticised images of female children can result, for example, in an expansion of the child pornography market.

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[4] She is a true digital brand: her career began in the music scene in 2018 with the success of her hit Pem Pem with 4.3 million viewings in less than a week and more than 100 million viewings on YouTube. From then on, she has become a media star, featuring in reality shows, having successful catchphrases and millions of followers on Instagram.
[5] Twerking originated in the Ivory Coast tribal dances and was a fertility rite. The Cambridge Dictionary defines it as "a style of dancing that involves bending low and moving the bottom and hips".

In the case of pornography, forms of deviance on the web can reconfigure the distinction between producers and consumers as more complex. Exchanged material, in fact, increases and it is increasingly difficult to identify those responsible for sharing it.

Child pornographers have always used the web to exchange material and groom victims; in the past, they acted on chats and forums, now they prefer social networks. The web offers the guarantee of anonymity, the freedom to express their deviant sexuality, which would otherwise be considered impossible and in some cases would not be expressed, as it is considered socially unacceptable. New forms of abuse have arisen: sexting (exchange of sexually explicit media content, usually nude or semi-nude images and videos via smartphones or social network chats); sextortion (forcing someone to send sexually explicit videos or images); grooming via chat, and live distance child abuse (Cava & Carzo, 2020). What is more, anonymity guarantees easier access to child pornographic material. It is then possible for sexualised images to be the result of editing of a non-pornographic photo, but, once online, the distinction between representation and reality becomes too difficult to draw and this should lead to further reflection about the danger of the trend towards the erotisation of female children's images described in the first part of this paper.

In recent years, the circulation by minors of self-generated material consisting of explicit images of a minor taken or filmed by the minor, has greatly increased, with 81% of cases being girls between 11 and 13 years old; 9 out of 10 victims are between 3 and 12 years old (Telefono Azzurro, 2023).

Data indicates that child sexual abuse online is a gender crime that disproportionately affects girls compared to boys (Council of Europe and ECPAT International, 2024).

The pervasiveness of digital worlds and tools represents an accelerator of increasingly serious phenomena of sexual abuse.

Through platforms, minors share even very intimate parts of themselves, which can mean dangers in case of practices such as looking for new friends online, starting contacts on the web with unknown people and posting personal details.

Curiosity and fun, which are often the reasons behind this behaviour, can increase the risk of sexual victimisation. On the web, teenagers access a group of peers which is extended in terms of quantity, time and space (Cava & Pira, 2015). In particular, social media represent a relational universe in which minors find their fulfilment, through those defined by Gardner and Davies (2013) as the three Is.

The first I is Identity, that is the new way in which to conceive their identity, which becomes public because created for the online world: I am what I want others to see of me. The second I is the concept of Intimacy: emotions run on smartphone keyboards, thus avoiding physical relations; and lastly, I for Imagination, where technology and apps can become flywheel of imagination exponentially increasing one's creative potential, if used positively and carefully.

In these online spaces, teenagers look for information about their body and sexual practices. The digital space, in fact, also allows a new form of sexual socialisation, experimenting a variety of sexual scripts. It is a technological extension of the minors' bodies. Minors today show a great potential in creating and sharing media content by mixing, tailoring and commenting on it. It is precisely the familiarity of the youngest with the languages of digital cultures that allows them to appropriate the products of the cultural industry, actively participating in the "platform landscape", thanks to streaming or on-demand practices, and even Social TV and the many dedicated apps.

These higher skills observed in younger people are often translated into reper-toires of images, increasingly attractive to those who are attracted by child bodies.

Online damage to minors' image and life is reproduced every time material about them is seen. It is known that an image on the web is replicable unlimited times and therefore it can always be seen. This is one of the most dangerous risks of the net: losing the ability to forget. It is a "perpetual damage" to reputation and privacy be-cause images permanently record the abuse and harass minors for years afterwards, thus having long lasting effects. This violation is repeated every time new spectators fix their gaze on the child's pornographic image. Nothing is forgotten on the web, what is online is there forever. This indelible accumulation of memories makes the violation of children's bodies even more serious.

5. Concluding Remarks

We have explored the relationship between the sexualisation of girls and societal issues such as child pornography. There is still limited research, especially in the Italian context, on the potential associations between the sexualisation of girls and the sexual exploitation of girls.

If sex and desire are recurrent frames in the visual content of contemporary media communication, the awareness that the taboo of child eroticism and the fact that vo-yeurism by an adult eye towards a world of innocence are some of the male visual pleasures of the contemporary collective imagination cannot of course be ignored (Muzzarelli & Marra, 2018). The topic of the representation of eroticism and sexual provocation when such bodies visibly belong to unripe beauties with alluring child-ish manners and glances must confront us with a reflection about the need to generate counter-narrations, which deviate from the stereotyped models described in the first part of this paper and that can return female and male children to a freer childhood (Oliverio Ferraris, 2014).

With particular reference to female children and teenagers, who are the main vic-tims of this process of early eroticisation of childhood, it is not possible to ignore the risks connected to the power of media content in channelling their experiences. It is then important, on one hand, to work on building through the traditional agencies of socialisation a communicative appeal able to strike a balance in the relationship be-tween young women, gender media representations and sexuality; on the other hand, on media which, in their role as social builders of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), can radically help social change, breaking up the very same stereotypes they have contributed to create.

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