

Adolescent girls' interpretation of sexuality found in media images

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Abstract

Sexuality among females in Hong Kong is influenced both by the Chinese cultural trait of conservatism and the western cultural trait of active agency. The current study examines adolescent girls' negotiation of their sexuality through consumption of female images in media. A qualitative study was conducted. Twenty adolescent girls aged 15 to 18 in Hong Kong were asked to take pictures from the media they consumed that could illustrate "what girls or women should or should not be; and what girls or women should or should not do". Interviewees' responses to sexuality issues were examined. Analysis of interviews and images captured found six dominant themes on sexuality, including (1) defining and evaluating sexiness, (2) intimate relationship, (3) marriage, (4) pregnancy, (5) deviant sexual relationship, and (6) health concerns for women. Interviewees showed clear and vivid distinction between "good" and "bad" sexiness. Glamorous presentation of female bodies was glorified while revealing the female body solely to attract male attention or in the wrong context was scorned. Most of the interviewees expressed aspirations for romantic heterosexual relationships, and professed the desire to be wives and mothers. Being single and child-free was not registered as a dominant way of defining respondents as females. Adolescent girls' perception of sexuality embraced traditional as well as modern values.

Adolescent girls' interpretation of sexuality found in media images

Introduction

A television commercial for a Japanese restaurant featured a boy ordering a kid's meal. A female waitress wearing a low-cut blouse set the meal before him. There were close-up shots of the waitress's breast cleavage. The boy became joyful at the sight of the waitress (Youtube, 2009). The commercial received 185 complaints of indecency, bad taste, and unsuitability for children. The advertising authority condemned the ad as inappropriate because it created an association between the joyful mood of the child and the woman's body (Hong Kong Broadcasting Authority, 2009).

Complaints such as these are common in Hong Kong as parents and the public are concerned about the depiction of sexual images in advertising and its impact on children.

[Hong Kong people in general are conservative about sexual topics.](#) A survey in Hong Kong revealed that respondents found advertisements offensive because the advertisements were sexist, contained nudity, or contained sexual connotations. Chat-line services, condoms, dating services, and female contraceptives were perceived as most offensive products and services (Prendergast & Ho, 2006). The evidence indicates that depiction of sexuality in the media is a major concern in Hong Kong society.

Youths in Hong Kong, however, are becoming more open to sexual topics. Sexually explicit materials are displayed in newspapers, outdoor poster ads, magazines, television programs, music videos, and movies. Sexual images of youth icons such as Lady Gaga and Britney Spears are easily accessible by children and youth in the media. Gender and sexuality is at the core of how we construct our identities (Gauntlett, 2008). Lee and Fung

(2009) suggested media play a powerful role in constructing ideologies and discourses about gender roles and identities. As adolescents seek to establish their own values and attitudes about sexuality, it is important to examine how they consume and interact with visual images that communicate sexuality to them. What visual images about sexuality are the most interesting to them? How do they define sexiness? How do they perceive an intimate relationship, marriage, and pregnancy? In the current qualitative study, adolescent girls were asked to take photos of female images from the media that were about proper gender roles and identities, and discuss how they relate to these images. Themes on sexuality are often embedded in the discussion of gender roles and identities. The results will help us to better understand the current attitudes toward sexuality among girls in Hong Kong.

Literature review

Female adolescent sexuality

While sex is a biological attribute as a male or a female, gender is the psychological and sociological construct of what it means to be a male or a female (Rice and Dolgin, 2005). A person's identity is made up of many components of the total self, including the physical, sexual, social, vocational, moral, ideological and psychological characteristics (Grotevant, Thorbecke, & Meyer, 1982). Adolescents are often more aware of their sexual identities than their morality or ideology (Rice and Dolgin, 2005). Sexuality is defined as sexual attitudes, arousal, behaviors, communication, desires, and responses (Harvey, Wenzel, & Sprecher, 2004; McKinney & Sprecher, 1991). While some scholars are concerned about the physical health condition of female adolescents with regard to

pregnancy and STD prevention, other scholars are concerned about the empowerment of adolescent girls in their sexuality. Lamb (2010) asserted that healthy sexuality for girls should put emphasis on sexual desire, subjectivity, and pleasure.

How do adolescent girls acquire certain attitudes or behaviors about sex and sexuality? According to Bandura's (1986) social learning theory, a child learns about sexuality and sex-typed behavior through a combination of reward, punishment, direct instruction, as well as modeling. Boys and girls are socialized in different ways. Parents, teachers, peers, and the mass media are important socializing agents that tell males and females what behaviors are socially acceptable or appropriate. Television plays an important role in the socialization of sexuality because the programs and commercials contain much information about gender roles and gender identities (Rice and Dolgin, 2005).

Media influence on sexuality

Sexual content in the media has been criticized as containing gender-bias and sexism (Beal, 1994). Females are often portrayed as sex objects in advertisements (e.g., Ferguson, Kreshel, & Tinkham, 1990) in men's magazines (Baker, 2005), in video games (Downs & Smith, 2010), and in music videos (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011). Media messages are pervaded by sexual content, but less than one percent of media including television, music, movies, and magazines contain information about sexual health (Hust, Brown, & L'Engle, 2008).

Research revealed statistically significant positive correlation between adolescents' sexual behavior and consumption of sexy media (Pardun, L'Engle, & Brown, 2005). Longitudinal studies found that exposure to sexual contents in media predict adolescents' initiation of sexual behavior (Brown et al., 2006; Collins et al., 2004) and pregnancy

(Chandra et al., 2008). There is evidence that adolescents' sexual behaviors have high correlation with their consumption of sexual media contents.

How do adolescent girls interpret sexuality from the media images? Buckingham and Bragg (2004) asked pre-adolescents and adolescents aged 9 to 17 in England to keep a diary writing things they saw in the media. Participants in the study perceived media as a key source of ideas and information about sex, relationship, and love. They learnt about sex and relationship as an independent agency. Vares, Jackson and Gill (2011) interviewed pre-adolescent girls aged 10-13 in New Zealand about their media consumption. Their responses to media varied greatly. All of them evaluated the sexualized media critically, showing that they were aware of social and parental concerns in the consumption of sexualized media contents.

A qualitative interview study revealed that pre-adolescent girls aged 10 to 12 in Hong Kong were very conservative in sexual attitudes. Interviewees asserted that girls should not wear sexy clothes, should not engage in pre-marital sexual relationships, and should get married and have babies. In response to a sex scandal in the media, they perceived that girls should not take intimate photos with their boyfriends and should not put unreserved trust in their sex partners (Chan, 2011).

In view of the undesirable consequence of consumption of sexual images in the media, scholars have introduced media literacy programs as a strategy to enhance adolescents' critical use of the media (Brown & Bobkowski, 2011). A study found that respondents had a better understanding of the media influence on their sexual behavior and were more critical toward the sexualized media after receiving media literacy training (Pinkleton, Austin, Chen, & Cohen, 2012).

Culture and sexuality

[How does the culture have an impact on adolescents' sexuality?](#) Individuals hold different meanings of sex and sexuality because of their differences in gender expectations (McCabe, Tanner, & Heiman, 2010). As a former British colony, Hong Kong has laws encouraging gender equality in terms of education and employment (Chan, 2000). Hong Kong is a society where adolescents are influenced by both western and Chinese cultures. Chinese culture has denounced premarital or extramarital sex, and has placed high value on women's virginity and sexual fidelity (Liu et al., 2006; Tang, Wong, & Lee, 2001). There is a tension between the individualistic values in western cultures that advocates sex as a personal pleasure and the collective values in Chinese culture that restricts sex to the context of marriage and child-bearing. Values in both cultures are expected to affect young people's attitudes toward sexuality (Woo & Twinn, 2004).

By law in Hong Kong, adolescents aged 16 or above can legitimately engage in sexual behavior (Hong Kong Legal Information Institute, 2012). Results from the Youth Sexuality Study conducted every five years by The Family Planning Association of Hong Kong (2007) indicated that adolescents and young adults aged 18 to 27 are increasingly open to sexual intercourse. The percentage of respondents in secondary forms 3 to 7 who had sexual experience increased from one percent to thirteen percent for boys, and 0.2 percent to eight percent for girls in the past fifteen years. About 5 percent of adolescents had sexual behavior below age 15. The acceptance of cohabitation before marriage also registered an increase among young adults. A spokesperson for The Family Planning

Association of Hong Kong remarked that youths' attitudes toward sex were relatively conservative when compared to most western developed countries. The association worried that the youths were not well-prepared in terms of sexual knowledge to cope with the increased openness in sexual attitude and activity (The Family Planning Association of Hong Kong, 2007). Use of contraceptive practice was low among youths in Hong Kong. The Family Planning Association (2007) reported that the most youths aged 18 to 27 who had sexual intercourse in the past half year had not sought advice on the adoption of contraceptive measures.

Sex education in Hong Kong

[Do adolescents in Hong Kong receive education to help them make informed life choices about sexuality?](#) The Education Department published guidelines on sex education in secondary school in 1986 (Education Department, 1986). The guidelines aimed to equip students with values and skills in making decisions and communicating about sexual issues. New guidelines on sex education in schools were issued in 1997 (Education Department, 1997). It extended the coverage to kindergarten level of study and gave greater emphasis to gender equity as well as gender roles (Fok & Tung, 2000). The 1997 guidelines attempted to equip students with comprehensive knowledge about sexuality and the consequence of sexual activity; prepare students to explore their attitudes toward sex, marriage and family; establish decision-making and communication skills, and to develop responsible sexual behavior (Education Department, 1997). Surveys found that schools in Hong Kong have become more positive in promoting sex education. However, survey findings indicated that secondary school students demonstrated a low level of

sexual knowledge, especially in relation to adolescent marriage, the probability of pregnancy, and sexual activity (Ip, Chau, Chang, & Lui, 2001). The shortage of trained teachers was perceived as a major obstacle for effective sex education (Fok, 2005). Survey results indicated that there were differences in perceived learning needs in adolescents' sexuality among teachers and secondary school students. Teachers perceived that personal skills in dealing with sex were important learning needs while students perceived that sexual health topics were important learning needs (Tsui, 2009). To conclude, the literature found that sexuality is a significant component in the construction of self-identity among adolescents. The sexualized media often contains gender bias. The consumption of sexual media contents affects young people's sexual attitudes and behaviors. To better understand how adolescent girls interpret the abundant female images in the media, a qualitative study was conducted.

Methodology

Auto-videography approach was adopted, followed by an individual interview (Belk & Kozinets, 2005). Videographic data were collected by asking interviewees to take photos from the media in their everyday experience. The advantage of using this approach is that the videographers are more self-directive in their photo-taking, showing what is important to them and what they are interested in rather than what may be of interest to the researchers. Visual elicitation can be conducted from the photos the interviewees took in the individual interviews (Belk & Kozinets, 2005).

Procedures

A [snowball sampling](#) was adopted to recruit interviewees (Berg & Lune, 2012). [An interviewee referred the researcher to her classmates, who in turn, referred the researcher to another classmate to participate in the study.](#) This approach was employed because it is an appropriate strategy to recruit respondents with certain interests and characteristics necessary in the study. It involves identifying adolescent girls in Hong Kong and they were then told to find other potential respondents to participate in the present study. The limitation of snowballing is that it ignores the voices of other adolescent girls who were not contacted (May, 1997).

Data for the study were collected from June to December 2010 in Hong Kong. Prior to the face-to-face interview, each interviewee was asked to take 7 to 10 digital photographs each day for a week. Because sexuality is at the core in constructing individuals identities (Gauntlett, 2008), the following instruction was given to elicit responses about how media images construct sexuality: “please take images from any media that are about *what girls or women should be or should not be, and what girls or women should do or should not do.* These images could come from all kinds of media, including newspapers, magazines, outdoor posters, television programs, subway posters, web sites, books and so on. The media should be that which is used in daily lives. The media could be aiming at people like you or aiming at people who are different from you.” [Written consents from the interviewees and written permissions from interviewees’ parents were received before the interviews commenced. Parents were informed about the instruction their children received from the researchers.](#)

The interviews took place at the interviewees’ schools. The interview involved a review of the photos and a discussion of how the images in the photos may help to

elaborate the interviewee's perspective on sexuality and gender identities. The list of questions asked is shown in the Appendix. The photos taken by each interviewee were saved to the authors' computers. The interviews were conducted in English together with a graduate female research assistant hired for the project who speaks both English and Cantonese. The interviews took 18 to 61 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed by the research assistant.

Sample

Altogether 20 interviewees participated in this study. All interviewees were girls aged 15 to 18 recruited through personal networks. Ten of them were studying at a Chinese medium school and ten of them were studying at an international school with English as the medium of instruction. Sixteen interviewees were Chinese and four were Caucasians. Because of the high tuition fee charged by international schools, students studying at international schools more often came from the middle and upper-middle income class. Students studying at the Chinese school came mostly from lower to middle class families.

Data analysis

In the present paper, sexuality is operationalized as content related to (1) defining or evaluating sexiness; (2) attitudes toward courtship and sexual behaviors; (3) perception of intimate relationships including heterosexuality and homosexuality; (4) pregnancy, birth, and birth control. The list of questions did not explicitly mention sexuality. When the interviewees commented on what girls should be or should do, the issues related to sexuality were frequently brought up spontaneously. For example, interviewees took a

certain picture and reported that the girl in the picture engaged in compensated dating and girls should not do that.

Themes related to the operational definitions of sexuality were listed and categorized into an excel file. Themes unrelated to sexuality were not analyzed in the current paper. Throughout the process of data analysis, a comparison analysis method was used (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Responses from the photos the interviewees took were compared and contrasted across the sample systematically and constantly (Strauss, 1987). Major themes were identified through repetition, as well as searching for similarities and differences by making systematic comparisons across units of data. The theme classifications were identified. Disagreements as to classification of the themes were discussed. [The authors reached consensus in assignment of themes after discussion. The Kappa value for themes was 0.79. The inter-coder reliability test indicated substantial agreement.](#) Finally all themes related to the operational definitions of sexuality were agreed upon by the authors. Representative quotes and photos are presented in the following section. Because of the small sample size and the exploratory nature of the study, we do not compare the findings between local and international school students, nor between Chinese and Caucasian participants.

Validity of the current qualitative study was examined (Maxwell, 1996). The interview transcripts and data were detailed that provide whole picture of the study. [The results of the current study were similar to previous studies \(Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Vares et al., 2011\).](#) Credibility was noticed because the interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed by spending sufficient time on them, and the interview transcripts were read multiple times.

Findings

Altogether 146 pictures collected by interviewees were about sexuality defined operationally in the previous section. **Two interviewees did not report any theme that is related to sexuality.** Analysis of the interviews generated six dominant themes on sexuality. These themes include (1) defining and evaluating sexiness, (2) intimate relationship, (3) marriage, (4) pregnancy, (5) deviant sexual relationship, and (6) health concerns for women.

1. Defining and evaluating sexiness

When interviewees were asked to show images of what girls or women should do or should not do, interviewees reported sixty times about how they define sexiness and their evaluation of sexiness. Most of the participants commented that girls or women should not dress too sexily, expose too much of their bodies, or assume poses that are too sexy. Results found high level of consensus in the categorization of sexy clothes or sexy poses. The images considered too sexy included outfits revealing most of the breasts or hips, bikinis, very short trousers, or nudity. Poses that make the breasts the focus of attention were considered as sexy. Interviewees used expressions such as “not right”, “not good”, “offensive”, “ridiculous”, and “want attention for the wrong reason” to describe these female images.

A typical quote is as follows:

“That’s a two page and the choice of words “Naked Ambition” (Figure 1). She is a beautiful woman but she doesn’t have to be offensive this way.” (age 16, an international school student)

[Insert Figure 1 about here]
Figure 1. Image of sexy pose.

Besides general description such as “not right”, or “not appropriate”, five interviewees explained explicitly why girls and women should not express themselves in sexy ways. Three interviewees disapproved of sexiness because the sexy images did not match the depicted contexts. For example, an interviewee showed a picture of a woman cooking in a television program called Beauty’s Kitchen. She wore a low-cut dress. When she bent down, she exposed her breasts. *The interviewee considered that the sexy clothes are not needed in the cooking context and was therefore considered inappropriate.* One interviewee opined that sexy clothes cheapen the talents that women have. Another interviewee considered that girls need to respect their image and therefore should not wear sexy clothes. *She also emphasized that sexiness is inappropriate if she is too young.* She showed a photo of Miley Cyrus in sexy clothing and gave the following comment.

“She is under age and I don’t think it is right to do that because it’s just wrong showing your body like that. And this was placed all over the internet. She wanted attention and she got the wrong kind.” (age 15, an international school student)

Five interviewees took pictures of *lang-mos* and demonstrated disapproval of their sexy images because of their bad intentions. Here are two typical quotes:

“This is a lang-mo. A lang-mo is a name in Hong Kong given to the young female models. They wear these kinds of sexy clothes in order to catch media attention. This lang-mo is holding a human-figure cushion using her image. I think the image on the cushion is too seductive. She should not do that. It is bad for her.” (age 17, a local school student)

“She is a lang-mo. It’s just about breasts. You see her in advertisements everywhere. I know girls compare themselves a lot to these lang-mos. These girls are getting a lot of wrong attention.” (age 15, an international school student)

Four out of twenty interviewees showed approval of girls and women wearing sexy clothes. One interviewee took an image of a woman wearing a low-cut dress. The

interviewee considered her elegant and glamorous. Another interviewee took an image of a fashion ad with two young girls in sexy and trendy wear. The interviewee said she liked the image a lot and considered them sexy, but healthy. One interviewee took the image of Penélope Cruz and admired her sexiness and beauty. One interviewee took the image of a girl wearing a tight T-shirt and underwear. The interviewee commented that she looked good. She was sexually suggestive, but not too offensive.

Three interviewees perceived that there were differences between Chinese and western ways of expressing sexiness. They observed that western sexiness appears to be wild and aggressive, while Chinese sexiness appears to be cute, innocent, and submissive. Here is a typical quote:

“I think the sexiness in expatriates’ eyes and in Chinese eyes is different because sexy in Chinese people is more subtle but for expatriates it is more wild and explicit. I think Chinese people will find the woman in this sexy picture (Figure 2). She doesn’t have to wear little clothes.” (age 18, an international school student)

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2. “A Chinese person will consider her sexy”.

One interviewee mentioned that she perceived differences in the portrayal of female images in local as well as western magazines. In her words:

“The girls portrayed in Hong Kong media are completely different from that in the western magazines. This girl in the local media looks quite innocent and she’s not very revealing...Chanel is meant to be a very sexy brand but then she looks really sweet and innocent. It is some sort of cultural thing to Hong Kong where the girls have to look pure and innocent.” (age 16, an international school student)

Images of women wearing sexy clothes originated mainly from two sources. The first source was advertisements of fashion, beauty products, as well as slimming services. The second source was entertainment news of models and media celebrities. Sexy images seldom originated from ordinary consumers. In terms of media, sexy female images

mainly come from magazines and the internet.

2. Intimate relationship

Interviewees altogether mentioned thirty-three times about how girls or women should relate to their boyfriends. Seven interviewees demonstrated admiration for intimate relationships with boyfriends. They took pictures showing women and men holding hands, French kissing, or in intimate poses. Some of the images were taken in exotic contexts such as a beach at sunset. Interviewees expressed admiration of the closeness of people in courtship. They appreciated the romantic environment and the nice feeling of being loved. Seven interviewees expressed disapproval of imbalances in relationships, such as girls controlling their boyfriends, or girls doing everything to please the boyfriends. They disliked magazine editorials that give advice on ways to manipulate the relationship. An interviewee showed an article of advising girls how to dump their boyfriends. She commented that the magazine should not tell girls that they always have to be in control in the relationship as “Being on the top of things doesn’t mean you are in a good relationship”. An interviewee showed a magazine article titled ‘list of five things guys want’ and said that girls do not have to provide everything the guy wants. An interviewee showed three photos and commented that women do not always have to be under the control of men in relationship. Two interviewees took images from a Korean movie “My wild girlfriend” and commented that the female character in the movie was bad because she was very rude to her boyfriend. Another interviewee said this female character in the Korean movie was mean and aggressive. However, she thought that nowadays girls need not be gentle and submissive to boyfriends. [Assertiveness was](#)

sometimes needed. One interviewee reported that girls should not be abused physically by her boyfriend.

Two interviewees expressed dissatisfaction toward focusing too much on physical beauty in courtship. Interviewees found it stereotypical and unreal. For example, an interviewee showed a photo and said,

“It’s like a model. I want a boyfriend that is good looking. A good relationship has to be attractive people together. You know, but the reality is not true.” (age 17, an international school student)

On the whole, adolescent girls in this study showed appreciation of romance relationship with boyfriends. Interviewees in general disapproved control and manipulation in relationships. They expressed that physical attractiveness should not play an important role in relationship. Interviewees seem to assume heterosexuality in romantic relationships. Only one interviewee mentioned homosexual relationships by commenting that all the pictures she took were typical shots of a boy and a girl and there were no same sex couples.

3. Marriage

Interviewees altogether mentioned twenty times about how girls or women should behave in marriages. Ten interviewees expressed that a woman should marry a man and set up a family. They considered marriage as an important part of a woman’s life. One interviewee reported that she wants to get married and have a family someday. The images that they took to illustrate their views were mostly images of brides. Two interviewees stated that they prefer to stay single. Among them, one perceived that a single woman can be as happy as a married woman. The other one reported that she can manage her life and did

not want to depend on another person. Although interviewees thought highly of the importance of marriage, only two interviewees reported the benefits of marriage. One of them captured an image of a couple and remarked that “they seem to understand each other in every aspect and they are very happy”. One interviewee commended that “girls deserve a marriage that will be happy for them”. Interviewees did not express the values of marriage and family to them in a deeper sense. Interviewees on the other hand rolled out various responsibilities of married women. These include supporting the husbands, massaging the husbands who came back from work, not arguing with the husbands, organizing family activities, and doing house work. A photo of Michelle Obama promoting government policy was showed by an interviewee as an illustration of supporting the husband.

On the whole, adolescent girls in our sample supported marriage. Images of brides were appealing to them. Two interviewees expressed a preference for being single because of an aspiration for independence.

4. Pregnancy

Interviewees altogether mentioned fifteen times about girls or women in pregnancy. The images that went with the conversation were often images of a mother holding an infant or images of a pregnant woman. Six interviewees thought that married women should have babies. Among them, one perceived that women have the duty to continue the family name of the husband. Two perceived that women should be mothers because it is great to be a mother. The others did not give a reason. Here is a quote to illustrate why women should be mothers.

“A woman should have babies. It is very special to women as men cannot do it. Only we have this ability. Also, it is good to be a mom. A good mom should understand their children and should prepare the foods for the husband and children.” (age 17, a local school student)

One interviewee reported that a female should get married and have plans for babies.

Two interviewees considered that images of mother with baby would influence women to have babies. Three interviewees reported that girls should not have pre-marital pregnancy. The movie posters of *Juno* and *2 Young*, as well as a web-page of the organization *Mother’s Choice* triggered a conversation about pre-marital pregnancy. They considered pre-marital pregnancy unacceptable in society, and saw it as negative to the well-being of the mothers and the families. Here is an illustrative quote:

“This is a Hong Kong movie about a girl aged below 18. She has sex with her boyfriend and gets pregnant. It has a negative impact on all the people around them. The young couple doesn’t know how to take care of the baby and they don’t have money. They face a lot of difficulty because of the unexpected pregnancy.” (age 17, a local school student)

On the whole, most of the interviewees shared positive perceptions about pregnancy within the confines of a traditional family.

5. Deviant sexual relationship

Interviewees altogether mentioned twelve times their disapproval of various deviant sexual relationships including compensated dating, prostitution, casual sex, blackmailing a man after sex, sex with an animated character, sex addiction, and using the female body to advance personal material interests. An interviewee showed an item from entertainment news and said,

“An artist in Japan failed in her study. She becomes a prostitute in order to get into the entertainment business. This is not a good way to get what she wants.” (age 17, a local school student)

Here is another quote:

“This is from a local newspaper. She is promoting a cushion with her image in bikini. The cushion is a way for her to earn money. I don’t think that a woman should earn money by using her body. (age 17, a local school student).

Interviewees condemned these behaviors on ethical grounds. They perceived that a sexual relationship should not be used as a payment or a bribe.

6. Health concerns for women

Four interviewees mentioned health concerns six times. One girl took two different print advertisements advocating cervical tests and a webpage of artist Chow Wai Man advocating breast examination. Two interviewees took the same image of a print advertisement with a celebrity advocating cervical examination. One of them expressed liking the advertisement because the celebrity is promoting something woman should do. One interviewee took an image of a poster about a sexual health test. She said, “It is important for a woman to have a cervical test to prevent her from cancer. A woman should have regular check-ups”. In general, interviewees perceived that women should have check-ups and tests to protect them from female specific health hazards.

Discussion

In this qualitative study, researchers asked twenty girls aged 15 to 18 in Hong Kong to take pictures from the media they consumed that told them what girls/women should be or not be and what they should do or not do. During the interviews, themes on sexuality and themes about intimate relationships were brought up and analyzed. These interviews and images illustrate their interpretation of sexuality through media images. Based on the

images captured and the discussion of the images captured, we have the following five observations about adolescence girls' perceived sexuality of themselves and other girls and women.

First, interviewees hold a conservative attitude toward sex. They disapproved of sexy images, the use of the female body to attract the opposite sex, as well as pre-marital sexual relationships. A majority of the interviewees see sexual images as inappropriate and a diminishment of women's talents or reputation. In the current study, adolescent girls were able to articulate their disapproval of sexy clothes based on intention. In the case of lang-mos, interviewees demonstrated scorn for dressing up in sexy clothes in order to catch media attention or to sell certain products. The conservative attitude toward sex is consistent with previous survey findings (e.g. Ip, Chau, Chang, & Lui, 2001) and the observation of the Family Planning Association of Hong Kong. The result was also consistent with a study that adolescent girls criticized sexualized media instead of passively affected by it (Vares et al., 2001). It may probably be attributed to the dominant discourses on parenting and education in Hong Kong that place a strong focus on female chastity (Ho & Tsang, 2002). Adolescent sexual expression is constructed as "deviant" and is often associated with danger, low moral standards, crime or even psychological disorder (Ng, 1998; Wong, 2000). Interviewees' differentiation between Chinese and Western definitions of sexiness indicated that interviewees realized that Chinese culture plays a role in down-playing the expression of female sexuality. Adolescent girls in the present study reported their perceived differences in the portrayal of females among the global and local media. They commented that females in the local media were often portrayed as pure and innocent, while females in the global media were often portrayed

as sexy and wild. To our knowledge, no previous studies have documented such difference. Further research is needed in this area.

Second, compared with younger pre-adolescent girls in Hong Kong, adolescent Hong Kong girls shared more of a consensus about the standards of sexiness than pre-adolescent girls. In a study on pre-adolescent girls aged 10 to 12, interviewees showed a wide range of standards toward the definition of sexiness. For examples, some interviewees perceived that clothes simply exposing the shoulder or the belly were sexy (Chan, Tufte, Cappello, & Williams, 2011). In the current study, adolescent girls' definitions of sexiness showed more similarities than differences. They were also more receptive to sexy images. In Chan et al's (2011) study, none of the interviewees aged 10 to 12 approved of sexy images. In the current study, four interviewees showed appreciation of sexiness when female bodies are presented in an elegant or trendy manner. It indicates that self-expression of sexuality becomes more acceptable among older adolescent girls when it is done in a "proper" manner.

Third, interviewees revealed aspirations for having intimate relationships with the other sex, getting married, and having babies. An overall impression is that they are looking forward to heterosexual intimacy with affection, commitment, and responsibility. The result is consistent with previous findings that girls are affected by social norms stating that they should have romantic attraction of someone of the opposite sex (Simon, Eder, & Evans, 1992). Similar to the results of a previous study, the media representation of brides often triggered their aspiration for marriage (Durham, 1999). [This indicates that the interviewees are making mental preparation for family lives.](#) However, interviewees were more likely to embrace responsibilities than enjoyment from marriage. The

satisfaction of emotional support and personal growth in marriage were rarely elaborated in details. Interviewees' attitudes towards the importance of the family were consistent with previous survey findings (Ip et al., 2001). Interviewees also perceived the importance of fertility in marriage. Most of them thought that it would be great to be a mom. Being single or being child-free was established by a few of the interviewees as options for them.

Fourth, interviewees aspire to natural and balanced intimate relationships with the opposite sex. Although a few interviewees demonstrated some level of submissiveness by emphasis on assisting husbands and the need to show gentleness to boyfriends, in general interviewees showed disapproval of manipulation, control and imbalance in intimate relationships. It showed that adolescent girls did not endorse traditional patriarchal order. There is evidence that adolescent girls are aspired to gender equality in intimate relations, despite the prevalent entertainment media and advertising content that promote gender inequality and sexual stereotypes (Lee & Fung, 2009; Wu, 1995). It suggests that at least some adolescent girls in Hong Kong are seeking a pure relationship of equals, where everything has to be negotiated (Gauntlett, 2008).

Adolescent girls' perception of domestic roles of women in this study provides evidence that the female audience's cultural perceptions of females and their sexuality are being socialized by the mass media. A study of gender roles in children's television advertising in Hong Kong found that the female roles were family-oriented and belonged to the private rather than the public realm (Moon & Chan, 2002). A content analysis of role portrayal and beauty types of female figures in magazine advertisements found that over half of the advertisements studied portrayed females in decorative roles. Two thirds

of the female characters in advertisements adopted a classic/feminine beauty type (Chan & Cheng, 2012).

Fifth, interviewees were receptive to health messages specifically about cervical cancer and breast cancer. It shows that health educators are doing a good job in priming young girls to be sensitive to health issues concerning women.

Limitations and future studies

The current study was a qualitative study of a small convenience sample. The findings can not be generalized beyond the sample. The data may suffer from social desirability bias. The participants may tell the researchers what they believe he or she wants to hear. Adolescents are aware that they are perceived by the society as innocent and media-incompetent (Buckingham & Bragg, 2005). They may regurgitate hegemonic ideologies about gender and sexuality. This may be accountable for the conservative views expressed on sexuality. The interviews were conducted in English and some of the girls may not be that expressive in English.

The girls are instructed to use the media as a starting point for discussing their perspectives on sexuality. Further research can be conducted to elicit direct responses about how media images construct sexuality. Definition of sexiness can vary from person to person. A further study can use a set of female images with different degrees of sexiness to be shown to all participants to solicit what they think of these images. We can also compare the perception of different female images across groups of participants from different cultural backgrounds. Future studies shall construct statements from the interviewing transcripts to develop a scale on attitudes toward sex and sexual issues. The

scale can be put to test by a quantitative method on validity, as well as be used to assess the perceptions toward sexuality among respondents. Further research can also be conducted using same methodology among adolescent boys to understand their interpretation of sexuality from media images.

Conclusion

To conclude, a study was conducted to examine adolescent girls' media consumption and perception of sexuality. Analysis of interviews and images captured found that adolescent girls' interpretation of sexuality focuses on six dominant themes, including defining and evaluating sexiness, intimate relationship, marriage, pregnancy, deviant sexual relationship, and health concerns for women. Interviewees adopted a conservative attitude toward overt display of sexiness. Interviewees showed clear and vivid definitions of "good" and "bad" sexiness. Glamorous presentation of female bodies was glorified while revealing the female body solely to attract male attention or in the wrong context was scorned. Most of the interviewees showed aspiration for romantic heterosexual relationships, and demonstrated the desire to be wives and mothers. Being single and child-free was not registered as a dominant way of defining them as females. Interviewees aspired to equality in intimate relationships and disapproval of control, manipulation or yielding. Adolescent girls' interpretation of sexuality seems to be based on a mixture of both traditional values as well as modern values. There is evidence that adolescent girls are active and critical media consumers. The research process enables us to gather a rich and diverse body of information about media consumption and the understanding of its contents.

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Appendix. List of questions

1. From these pictures, what do you think about what girls or women should be or should not be?
2. From these pictures, what behavior(s) do you think are appropriate or inappropriate for girls or women?
3. When you think about what you see everyday about what girls and women should be or should do, are they mostly positive images or mostly negative images?

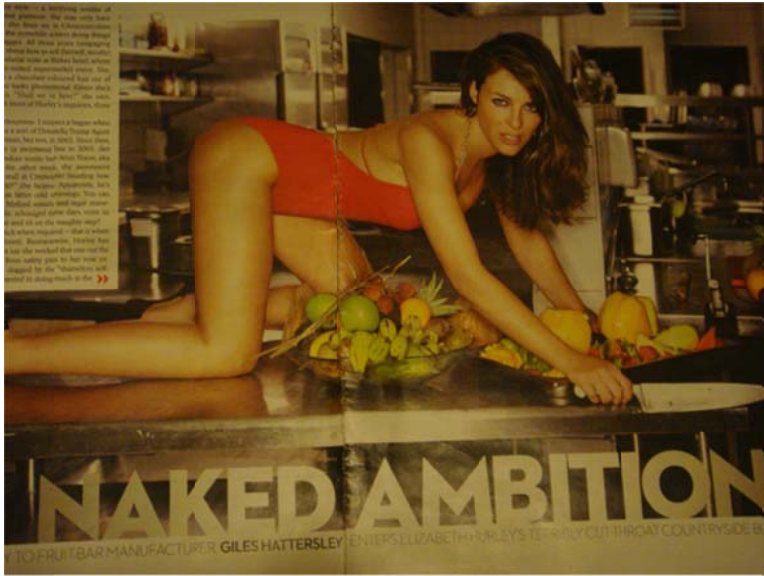


Figure 1. Image of sexy pose.



Figure 2. "A Chinese person will consider her sexy".