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Book Review

Sexualized Media Messages and Our Children:
Teaching Kids to be Smart Critics and Consumers

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Sexualized Media Messages and Our Children: Teaching Kids to be Smart Critics and Consumers by Jennifer Shewmaker (2015). Santa Barbara CA: ABC-Clio.

In this book for concerned families, youth educators, and media literacy advocates, author Jennifer Shewmaker draws from a research cannon on the relationships between child development and gender stereotypes perpetuated by media to demonstrate the importance of media literacy. Dr. Shewmaker posits that young women are growing up bombarded by the message that their primary value is determined by their sexuality. As transmedia campaigns gain increasing popularity and technology becomes more pervasive, youth are exposed to more media, including sexualized advertisements and entertainment. Explorations of media literacy and sexuality tend to focus on the psychological and behavioral impacts of media literacy skills, such as improving self-esteem and decreasing risky sexual behavior. Works on media literacy and sexuality with less practical applications examine how media tropes and narratives perpetuate gender stereotypes and limit cultural beliefs. Media literacy research and practice illuminates the transformative power of critical thinking and of media deconstruction to support youth and their communities in changing from passive consumers to empowered ones, often with the tools to become media activists. Shewmaker artfully balances a research-based approach to sexualized media effects with practical conversation starters, de-construction exercises, and case studies. Shewmaker emphasizes how interpersonal variables mediate children's responses to the media and offers many tangible examples of media literacy interventions that can empower parents and their extended community.

Beginning with mediating variables, Shewmaker outlines the channels, forms, and interpersonal social structures that facilitate children's media consumption. Children's psychosocial development stages are also taken into account, as she positions children as largely unaware audiences of media, based on studies finding that many children cannot differentiate between advertisements and entertainment content. She outlines some of the predatory behaviors of advertisements aimed at youth and other insidious media tactics with sexualized toys, magazines, and television programming. Shewmaker's tone is cautionary as she warns of negative media effects including low-self esteem issues, risky sexual behavior impulses, gender stereotyping, and body image issues that develop primarily subconsciously during media consumption. The systems that exacerbate sexualized media consumption include gender norms and a highly pervasive and manipulative celebrity culture.

This book emphasizes the influential power of the people and institutions in children's lives that can provide guidance in dealing with sexualized media. The support system that can intervene includes family, community systems, and policy-makers. Shewmaker suggests that these parts of children's interpersonal ecosystems can work together to facilitate awareness of harmful media messages, share tools for becoming empowered consumers, and provide a supportive network for safe conversations about sexualized media while taking into account influencing factors like peer pressure. Since the interpersonal sphere of influence is highly emphasized as a powerful lever to transform children's media consumption, the book primarily addresses families, caregivers, and adults who are in the position to debrief media consumption with children as well as potential collaborative community partners like schools, churches, and primary care providers.

By focusing on the predatory effects of mainstream media, Shewmaker overlooks the re-appropriation of mainstream media by minorities and the malleability of cultural norms, especially in light of emerging participatory media trends, which in turn could provide a more empowering approach to media literacy. She similarly does not address the effects of intersectionality on media consumption and sexual behavior; such as media contexts where overt sexual pleasure is valued, including many of Beyonce's songs. By focusing on psychology-based evidence of the powerful subconscious influences of media, the book implies that the media dictates the standards for sexual behavior. For example, Shewmaker writes that, "Research shows that exposure to sexual content not only predicts sexual activity and pregnancy, but may also hasten it" (p. 12). These types of harrowing statistics are prevalent in the book and serve to vilify the media; whereas qualitative data could reveal the complicated relationships youth have to sexuality and relationships that extend beyond the influence of media.

Shewmaker omits discussion of correlating variables and diversity in demographics that effect media consumption habits and sexual behavior. Her linear approach implies that youth adopt risky sexual behavior from the media without considering many potentially confounding factors such as access to sexual health education and non-judgmental mentors to discuss healthy sexual habits with. Furthermore, Black Feminist theory illuminates how sexualized media can be a subverted expression of resistance and empowerment. As Media Studies researcher Rana Emerson explains, "the juxtaposition and concurrence of sexuality, confidence, and independence in music videos can be interpreted as the re-appropriation of the Black female form in response to its history sexual regulation and exploitation, emerging in the assertion of her own sexuality in order to gain her own sexual pleasure." To omit such relationships toward sexualized media can silence empowering relationships to media and sexuality that do not fit the norms of modesty prescribed in this book. Thus blaming the media for risky sexual behaviors may provide a convenient scapegoat to skirt deeper conversations of sexuality and ethics. While it may be easier to have a target to blame, the resulting protectionist tone does not necessarily empower youth to engage in healthy, safe, consensual sexual activities through such an antagonistic view of media.

Another limiting definition might be Shewmaker's explanation of confidence expressed by controlling one's sexual behavior (self-efficacy). She explains how confidence comes from the ability to control one's sexual behavior, which might be problematic in tying up self-worth with reward-based performance in addressing gender and sexuality. For instance, to Shewmaker, confidence seems to be measured by the decrease in risky sexual choices and in resisting sexual pressure. She goes on to explain how Bandura describes self-efficacy, as stemming from successful task performance, especially when validated from trusted others. While having safe sex and communicating boundaries are healthy habits to promote, defining confidence as minimizing risk misses qualities important to well-rounded sexuality such as self-worth. Shewmaker does analyze how a positive psychology framework, particularly Martin Seligman's tenants of well-being and flourishing, can bolster positive media literacy and sexual identity skills. She ties positive psychology into sexuality as a way to promote a meaningful life. Yet she reveals moralistic motivations in expressing her concerns about media messages where "sexual pleasure is an end itself and the pursuit of romance and beauty

endorse the idea that pleasure is something to be pursued. No deeper meanings are attached to these pursuits; rather experiencing pleasure is a hallmark of the life that is promoted by sexualized media." Ultimately, Shewmaker posits that it is up to the support network and role models in children's lives to mediate the discussions of sexuality, media, and empowerment.

Even though central arguments hinging on media effects research reduce the complexity of relationships between media and youth sexualities, the book is full of useful and interactive media critique exercises. The last chapter, "Promoting Media Activism and Creation" offers a few brief exercises such as rewriting stories, deconstructing ads, and remixing media. Shewmaker provides good examples of consent and the importance of connection, competence, and caring in positive youth identity development. In addition to specific exercises, she offers core values to return to during sexualized media conversations. These include understandings of context, mutuality, honesty, and acceptance. She also encourages a proactive approach in suggesting parents and role models point out media portrayals that defy gender stereotypes to reinforce positive influences.

The book provides a balance of research on the effects of sexualized media on children with specific examples of themes for discussion with youth and frameworks to develop media critiques. However the book does not address larger related issues of gender disparities or the political and economic inequities in society that inform media production and consumption. In addressing gender, Shewmaker does not refer to the performative or fluid qualities of gender and implies a heteronormative approach in conversations about gender. Though she does not address gender theory, Shewmaker provides helpful conversation starters that are rooted in positivity, community engagement, relationships, personal interpretations, feelings and meaningful life choices with an emphasis on open and non-judgmental speech. Beyond the personal sphere, she encourages questions that deconstruct media by examining the messages conveyed, the intended target audience, and potentially more appropriate target audiences. She gives specific advice to parents, such as avoiding negative body-image talk and consciously consuming products that don't promote gender stereotypes and sexualization. Every chapter ends with a section titled "In Their Voices" that provides examples of teenagers, parents, empowerment non-profit leaders, advocates and more who share their struggles, breakthroughs, and media literacy methods. Shewmaker supplements these cases with first-person narratives of applied media critiques with her daughter and teaching experiences. These examples are touching and may help parents relate to analytical media conversations they've had with their children.

While the book provides excellent critical thinking questions, it does not provide scaffolding for integrating this community-based approach to media literacy interventions nor recommendations for translating media critiques into health behaviors. It also does not include context about the media industry, influences, and policy-level systems of change that could be helpful for the readers desiring to take advocacy action. Perhaps this content can appear in a future edition. This edition provides a strong blueprint for examining the various micro and macro influences on (and social systems around) children's media consumption, and begins to offer interactive and adaptable activities for media critiques. Ultimately, Shewmaker makes a powerful argument: when the people in a youth's interpersonal network can understand the ways that child experiences media, they can help the child become a more empowered media consumer.