

College Student Identity and Sexual Behavior: Self Expression or For-Profit Enterprise?

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The formation of student identity for traditional-aged college students living on campus is an ongoing process with a multitude of influential factors. A student's identity or perception of themselves almost always changes dramatically as a result of living on campus, being independent for the first time and being exposed to new viewpoints. The identity formed when a young adult is at college carries into adulthood, and thus is of utmost importance for researchers to understand (Horowitz, 2008). An integral component to college student identity is that of sexual behavior (APA Report, 2007; Horowitz, 1986; Jackson, 2000; Horowitz, 1986). However, Choate and Curry (2009) noted that inappropriate sense of one's sexuality and sexual behavior in general can have serious consequences for proper development. Thus it is integral that we have a clear conception of sexual behavior as it relates to college student identity.

Student identity, specifically the part related to sexual behavior can be viewed through a sociological lens. A sociological lens may provide a richer and more complex understanding of the relationship between sexual behavior and college student identity. Sociology is concerned with how societal forces help to shape and motivate individuals (Lemert, 2010; Neuman, 2008). This power to shape individual motivations is not a neutral phenomenon however. Often, these forces may have counterproductive outcomes and can even be exploitative in nature. Viewing the sexual component of college student identity through a critical sociological lens demonstrates that there are

a number of societal forces which seek to exploit this facet of college identity for private profit.

Therefore, it is important to not only consider the entirety of the student identity process, but to carefully examine and evaluate each of its components including sexuality.

A Short History of Sexual Behavior in the United States

From a sociological standpoint, the history of sexual behavior has been shaped by various societal forces, such as religion, economics and politics. In order to further understand college student sexual behavior as it relates to their student identity, sexual behavior in the United States, and particularly college students, must be put in historical perspective. This will allow the reader to better understand the prevailing social, economic and societal forces that have shaped and continue to shape sexual behavior of college students.

After the Civil War, women increasingly attended college. While men were still a majority, more and more women were pursuing higher education (Schwartz, 2002). In turn, more and more women were educated and independent. While higher education does not mean that a woman will have more sex, higher education levels do correlate with higher levels of sexual partners for women. The reasons are varied, but delayed marriage, living in close quarters with men and focusing on careers play a role (Schwartz, 2002; Weis, 2003).

The latter half of the 19th century also was a time of rapid industrialization. More women began

to take jobs outside the home, immigration increased because a cheap labor force was needed, and the standard of living increased (at least for the middle and upper classes). This rapid industrialization and the subsequent societal changes, such as women working in factories and increased immigration further changed sexual norms (Sheehan, 1989; Weis, 2003). Women, and mainly young single women, entered the workforce which brought them into closer contact with general society and the public sphere in general. The influx of immigrants and the new sexual practices and norms that came with them, helped to alter attitudes towards sexual behavior (Weis, 2003).

During the first half of the 20th century, women continued to enroll into college. College administrators, while always worried about potential temptations and vices of men and women living in close quarters, were forced to allow co-ed dormitories simply as a way to keep up with growing female enrollment numbers (Schwartz, 2002; Weis, 2003). Young men and women were increasingly living together in co-ed dormitories with less and less supervision. Not surprising, sexual activity became more common place and accepted (Schwartz, 2002).

Other factors contributed as well. Beginning in the early 1900s, movie theaters became popular as film and photography advanced. In 1924, Henry Ford began mass production of the Model T. The proliferation of automobiles and movie theaters in the early 20th century, as well as the beginnings of co-ed college dormitories, allowed for higher degree independence for college students. As a result, premarital sex and other sexual practices increased dramatically in the early 20th century (Weis, 2003). Due to the aforementioned societal changes, attitudes towards sex began to loosen during the “roaring” 1920s. Instances of “making out,” “heavy petting,” and even premarital

intercourse were becoming more socially accepted, albeit reluctantly, by many. The old system of “courting,” where a man would court a woman by meeting her family, spending time at her house, etc, was gradually being replaced by the phenomena of dating. Young men and women, and particularly college students, could now escape the watchful eye of their parents in model-T’s and movie theaters or college dorm rooms (Weis, 2003).

In addition, not just the physical space of the movie theater encouraged sexual activity, but also what was on the screen. Sexual icons such as Mae West and other starlets captivated the minds of young boys and gave young girls inspiration (Weis, 2003). Similarly, shorter hair cuts for women (called “the bob” and popularized by flapper girls) and shorter skirts became more fashionable. The changes in the movie industry (and later the advent of television), as well as the changes in fashion began a societal trend which we are in the midst of experiencing today. The media, Hollywood and the advertising and fashion industries have become important venues which impact sexual behavior, especially for college students (APA Report, 2007). The later section of this paper will discuss the impact of these various industries and how they affect sexual behavior and college student identity.

During World II, once again women were recruited into the factories. This time however, their involvement was much more pronounced due to the US’s protracted role in World War II. Familiar images of Rosie the Riveter, with her now famous motto “We can do it!” spoke to many young women. Women took the jobs of men and they excelled. The sense of equality and independence for women began to grow, drawing on over a century’s worth of inspiration. This sense of equality and independence exploded during the 1960s and 1970s (Shulman, 1980; Anderson, 1995). This explosion was prevalent on college campuses. As

the women's liberation movement grew, the attitudes toward sexual behavior underwent further change (Anderson, 1995; Horowitz, 1986).

It is important to understand that the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s was a movement of liberation and emancipation for men, women and for sexual behavior itself (Anderson, 1995). Men and especially women were seen by the members of the sexual revolution as sexual beings. Repressing sexual behavior due to archaic societal or religious norms was thought to be deleterious. Sexual behavior was seen as a beautiful act between a man and a woman, and it was something to be encouraged (Anderson, 1995).

De-eroticized Sexual Behavior in the Culture Industry

This brings us to the present day. The 1990s and the 2000's are marked by an increasing openness toward sex. Undoubtedly this increasing openness is due to the efforts of previous generations. However, the new open attitudes toward sex also allowed for new industries and enterprises to arise and make a profit (APA, 2007; Bancroft, 2002). This is not to say that profits have never previously been made from sex (i.e. position is the oldest profession!), but what began to develop from the open attitudes toward sex was a profitable sexual industry (Weis, 2003). This profitable nature of sexual behavior becomes evident when viewed through a sociological framework. It became obvious that there was profit to be made from sex. The notions of de-eroticization and the culture industry can act as a starting point for this assessment.

Sex has long been a topic that engenders debate and controversy. It is also a topic which is multi-faceted. One such facet is economical. Marcuse (1992) argued that in modern capitalistic society, sex had become "de-eroticized." Formerly,

in the 19th century, Marcuse stated that sexual activity between two people bordered on the sublime. Further, sexual activity was in some ways a liberation from the mores and norms of traditional society. However, during the 20th century, sex had been usurped by capitalism and business. He cited examples such as advertisers using sexy woman to promote products or companies that used attractive male models to promote cigarettes, toothpaste and deodorant. Sex used to be an erotic escape, but Marcuse argued it had been de-eroticized. While it may seem at odds with the notion of sexualization, de-eroticization and sexualization compliment one another. While the term erotic usually implies unique sexual practices, Marcuse saw eroticism as something beyond sex, as the mystical union between male and female (Marcuse, 1992). So de-eroticization is the loss of this mystical attribute of sex, not any heightened or unique sexual activity itself.

Similarly, Adorno and Horkheimer (1969) argued that a "culture industry" was at work. The culture industry included the movie industry, the music industry, advertising companies, fashion designers and the mass media. Culture, and its many forms such as art, music and dress, was no longer expressions of true creativity or artistic sentiment, but now commodities sold for profit. Sex was an integral part of this culture industry. Male and female models exuded a hold on society. Their sexuality was used to control the masses and to help sell cars, cigarettes and deodorant. More than this, Adorno and Horkheimer (1969) saw the culture industry as method of control, used by the holders of power in society. It helped the leaders of society shape norms and values for the society, norms and values that yield profit and obedience. It is important to note here that the culture industry is not a monolithic entity. Rather it is a convergence of many different business and industries, such as

the media, the movie, music and fashion industry to name a few, that exert a collective effect on society (Kellner, 1992) and the degree and portrayal of sexuality present within the society.

There is a distinct difference between healthy sexuality and exploitative sexuality. The concept of *sexualization* has begun to attract progressively more attention and concern over the past several years (Zurbriggen, 2007). Both Marcuse (1992) and Adorno and Horkheimer (1969) have given us a preliminary framework for understanding the phenomena of sexualization. Using the notions of de-erotization and the culture industry as starting points, it becomes possible to penetrate more deeply into the phenomena of sexualization by drawing on more recent authors and studies.

Since the late 1970s, sex and sexual references have become common place images on primetime television and prime time advertising (Patterson, 2005). Sex on college campuses has taken new form as a result of the societal forces of the past 130 years. Exclusive dating has been largely replaced by “hook-ups” and “booty-calls” which can be described by noncommittal relationships used solely for sexual enjoyment (Bancroft, 2002). Casual sex is openly encouraged and promoted. Casual sex and numbers of sexual partners are equated with male dominance and female independence (Bancroft, 2002). These attitudes are reinforced by media images (Zurbriggen, 2007).

In addition, whole industries have grown around these new, looser attitudes toward sexual behavior and the intersection of sexual behavior and student identity. Clothing lines with revealing tops and bottoms, provocative swimwear, the entertainment, music and advertising industry, as well as the fragrance industries have all capitalized on the new attitudes toward sex. Further, a sex

industry has also developed, sexual stores, pornography and service companies that provide sex toys are a lucrative business (Patterson, 2005, Weis, 2003). These new industries have benefited tremendously from a more lax attitude toward sex. In addition, they also help to foster more lax attitudes toward sexual behavior, which in turn strengthens their industry (Weis, 2003)

As noted earlier, Marcuse (1992) argued that during the 19th century, sex was seen as liberation from the traditional mores of society. Lying next to your lover in a field and making love under the stars was a sublime act and a way to stymie the status quo. Violation of a sexual norm (i.e. premarital sex) was a form of rebellion. But this has all changed. Instead of bucking against the repression, the sexual act has become repressive itself. Many times the sexual act is done in the service not of love or escape, but rather for societal forces largely outside the control of the two partners. Booty calls, hook-ups, friends-with-benefits, all these notions help to increase the profits of condom companies, fragrance companies, the fashion industry, the entertainment and movie businesses and really the culture industry itself. The sex act is usually seen by these students as an expression of individuality, identity, or rebellion (Horowitz, 1986). However, this “individuality,” when looked at through the framework of de-erotization and the culture industry, can be seen as an exploitive constraint which has robbed sexuality of its sublimity. Students unwittingly fulfill the roles pre-ordained by the culture industry. These roles include; the macho male, independent and sexual female, “horny” college kids, etc (Bancroft, 2002).

Of course, Marcuse (1992) and Adorno and Horkheimer (1969) only laid a preliminary groundwork for the understanding of sexuality as a component of identity. Later thinkers and have explored this many faceted notion from a variety of

angles and in much more depth. For instance psychologists, educators and parents have grown increasingly concerned over the blasé and exploitative nature of sexuality in today's children and young adults. It has become a problem with potentially harmful repercussions (Levin, 2005). There is a distinct difference between healthy sexuality and sexuality that is used inappropriately or for profit know as *sexualization*. Satcher (2001) defines healthy sexuality as an integral portion of sound mental and physical well-being and consisting of mutual respect between participants. Sexuality becomes sexualization however, when one of the following conditions occurs (APA Task Force, 2007):

- A person's other character traits become less important than sexual appeal
- A person's attractiveness is based upon "being sexy"
- A person is viewed as a "sex object" or seen as something for sexual use of others
- A person has been inappropriately connected to sexuality

The APA Task Force on Sexualization of Girls (2007) stated also that this developing trend is located in three distinct arenas: society and its contributions, an interpersonal area and self. Contributions of society include the norms, practices and beliefs of the culture. The interpersonal area is how the person is treated by and encouraged to behave by others in their lives such as teachers, peers, and parents. The area of self is composed of the way a girl may view herself and how she may present herself to others based on her personal ideas and perceptions of herself.

This notion of sexualization is a key component to de-eroticization and the culture industry. Sex is turned into a commodity for profit

by way of sexualization. Further, this process of sexualization no longer begins in high school or college, but from a far earlier age (APA Task Force on Sexualization of Girls, 2007). The cultural contributions to sexualization can be seen in television programs, commercials, music videos and advertising (Ward, 1995). Today's youth have been inundated with sex in every aspect of their lives. Much of their lifestyle is focused around technology and all forms of electronic media. According to a report by The Kaiser Family Foundation (2003) 68% of teens have a TV in their bedroom, 51% of girls play interactive computer games, and both males and females spend over an hour a day on the computer alone visiting web sites and etc.

Television is a major focus for teens and young adults and is often unmonitored by parents. By the time a student is residing in a college dorm, the television habit is firmly instilled. Much of the programming on television objectifies women. Lampman (2002) determined in a study of TV comedies that 23% of sexual behaviors noted were derogatory comments, looks and gestures toward female characters and 16.5% were about nudity. Another prime focus in television is the prevalence of sexual harassment. Grauerholz and King (1997) analyzed 81 TV episodes and showed that 84% had one or more cases of sexual harassment. The most frequent comments described women in a derogatory manner followed by comments that focused on women's body parts. These cases illustrate the component of sexualization that objectifies women as well as places sexuality of a higher degree of importance than personal traits.

Music videos and lyrics are also perpetrators of sexualization. Gow (1990) determined that 44 to 81% of music videos have sexual content with the majority of this being the sexual objectification of women. The objectification is present in that the roles are decorative, such as posing or dancing, as

opposed to displaying musical prowess. Women in many music videos are dressed in revealing clothing or displaying varying degrees of nudity. It is far more prevalent for women to be shown in this manner than men. Ward (2002) showed that 71% of women in music videos were shown to be dressed provocatively as opposed to only 35% of men. The lyrics to the popular songs also sexualize or even degrade women. Many of the lyrics composed by rap artists and R&B contain language that contributes to objectification. Martino et al (2006) found that 70% of these songs had negative sexual connotations. Even artists popular with the younger adolescents, such as Miley Cyrus and Brittany Spears, contribute to this increasing problem with their videos and lyrics.

Advertising is a large contributor to the sexualization of women. Women are used to advertise everything from cars to beer. These women are often used as decorations, for example, posed seductively against the vehicle for sale. "They are treated as appendages to the product rather than as active consumers or users of the product" (APA Task Force on Sexualization, 2007). Beer commercials are often aired during prime-time sports programming times and these commercials also frequently feature young, attractive, scantily-clad women as enhancements to sell beer. Rouner, Slater, & Domenech-Rodriguez (2003) analyzed 72 beer and nonbeer ads and labeled 75% of the beer ads as "sexist." These types of advertisements are not just seen on TV however. The print media such as magazines are also involved in the sexualization of women. Women are dressed revealingly up to three times more often than men are in magazines designed for fashion or fitness (Reichet, Lambiase, Morgan, Carstarphen, & Zavoina, 1999).

Yet another facet of cultural contributions to sexualization is products. Cultural model theorists have stated that marketing displays products to

young people in ways that become a model for behavior and self-image (Bachen & Illouz, 1996). These ideas may depict experiences about which they have limited knowledge or insight and therefore can color their judgment. The concept that cosmetics, certain clothes and various beauty products and treatments create the "ideal" is a dangerous idea that many teens and young adults have embraced. Marketers have promoted the concept that the use of their products transforms the ordinary into the desired and the bombardment of this concept is not able to be withstood. The long-term repercussions are yet to be determined but there is evidence that while developing their identities teenagers and young adults model what they see older women doing (Bussey & Bandura, 1992). If the representatives in advertising are their role models with their blatant portrayal of sexual objectification, our young adults are in danger on a multitude of levels.

The other two arenas that sexualization occurs within other than cultural are interpersonal and intrapsychic (APA Task Force on Sexualization, 2007). Parents can contribute to the sexualization of their children by reinforcing societal expectations such as what is perceived as correct dress and behavior for both boys and girls. Parents that allow girls to undergo plastic surgery for example may be contributing to sexualization. In 2005 over 77,000 surgical procedures were done on teens 18 and younger (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2006). Teachers can also contribute to sexualization of girls. Villimez, Eisenberg and Carroll (1986) showed that teachers behave less favorably towards girls that do not demonstrate the traits society prefer, such as being thin. Peers too play a role in sexualization. Both girls and boys urge others to conform to certain behaviors and mannerisms in order to be popular, Adler, Kless, and Adler (1992) show that a girl's level of

popularity is based on how pretty she is and her level of flirtatiousness and attractiveness to boys. Sexual harassment is also present in peer relationships. This can occur in as early as fifth grade (APA Task Force on Sexualization, 2007).

Girls have begun to sexualize themselves thereby composing the final arena of sexualization. By “buying into” what the culture of society is selling they are making the choice to be sexualized. Girls and boys do indeed purchase the clothing thought to make themselves desirable in the eyes of the opposite sex. They model their behavior and appearances after sexy celebrities. They feel they may gain social clout and starve off rejection by doing so (Tolman, 2002). College males tend to feel emasculated if they have not had sex by their freshman year. Similarly, college females feel inadequate and ugly if they have not been chosen for sex (Bancroft, 2002). These feelings of emasculation and inadequacy can be alleviated by tapping into the power of the culture industry. In a truly exploitive process, the culture industry, in the form of models, products, ads and lyrics can ameliorate the sexual pressure it applies to college students but really to all people in general. Sexual deficiencies are not located solely in the self. Rather, the self is one component in a vast and overarching sociological framework.

An important task in the maturing process or the finding self identity is the sense of self as a sexual being (Arnett, 2000). It is increasingly critical that society does not impose incorrect concepts of sexuality on today’s young adults creating behavior patterns that are dangerous to both the individual and society. Individual motivations cannot account for the whole of sexual behavior. The famous sociologist, C Wright Mills, urged researchers to use their “sociological imagination,” which calls for a complex understanding of societal factors and their influence

on individual (Neuman, 2008). It is evident that there are many societal factors which helped to shape attitudes toward sexual behavior, and with it, identity of college students. By placing the motivation of sexual behavior and identity formation solely in the individual, we as a society will be blind to the powerful and exploitive forces which are changing the way students and society in general, interact with each other in regards to sexual behavior.

Concluding Thoughts

The sexualization of girls may also have undesirable effects on men and boys (APA Task Force on Sexualization, 2007). Due to the societal expectations of what constitutes female attractiveness, the pressure to find an acceptable partner is increased (Schooler & Ward, 2006). Males that find that their partner does not “measure up” to what is expected by society may be increasingly unlikely to commit to a relationship or degree of intimacy. Burn and Ward (2005) demonstrated a negative correlation between undergraduate male students’ satisfaction with romantic relationships and masculine beliefs. These male students demonstrated beliefs such as dominance and objectification. It is difficult to maintain stability in a relationship without empathy, which is not present if the female is viewed as an object (Herman, 1992).

Sexualization also has a negative impact on society. General social attitudes and beliefs will become progressively more negative. Social issues such as violence against women, pornography and prostitution may escalate (APA Task Force on Sexualization, 2007). Institutions within society, such as schools and places of business will be disrupted through increasing displays of sexism and sexual bias, harassment and discrimination. Educational achievement may decrease due to the

increasing preoccupation from both males and females in promoting a sexual image that is perceived acceptable. The career choices of students may also be impacted. Yoder & Schleicher (1996) showed that male college students preferred girls for romantic partners that were involved in careers that were “sexy,” as opposed to STEM.

Ignoring the sociological aspect to sexual behavior as linked to college student identity can have grave consequences. Unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease and the AIDS virus are usually listed as the most severe consequences unrestrained sexual behavior. And while these are the most serious repercussions, there are also other occurrences that are less documented (Bancroft, 2002). While physical STD's are always a risk, Bancroft speaks of “mental STD's.” Sexual activity is an intimate and personal act. As noted earlier, there is a healthy measure of sexual activity that individuals naturally partake in. However, as a result of the proliferation of noncommittal relationships, booty calls and one-night stands the border between healthy sexual activity and sexualization is increasingly blurred. And while this may not hold true for all students, Bancroft (2002) noted how many students cannot partake in sexual activity with a partner and forget about it the next day. Loneliness, emptiness, feelings of regret and self-esteem issues are some “mental STD's” that afflict many students (Bancroft, 2002, Zurbriggen, 2007). Due to the new attitudes toward sexual activity, the culture industry is exerting control and accumulating profit. It may be college students, as well as the rest of society, that has to pay the price.

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