SEXUALIZATION, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND VIDEO GAMING

CultureReframed

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A little over a decade ago, the popular American clothing or 'lifestyle' retail chain, Abercrombie & Fitch, advertised push-up bikini tops for girls aged 7 and 8 (*CNN, 2011*). British-based global retailers such as Primark and Tesco sold similar items. The latter also stocked a pole-dancing kit, complete with lingerie and fake money, in its toys section (*BBC, 2010*). After public outcry, Tesco moved the stripper pole from toys to fitness. Primark withdrew the preadolescent push-up bras. Abercrombie simply recategorized the swimsuit, adding, "We agree with those who say it is best 'suited' for girls age 12 and older." "Oh, well," responded one writer to Abercrombie, "then it's fine, because what 12-year-old doesn't need a padded bikini?" (*Williams, 2011*). According to the fashion industry, however, most girls need them, since about one-third of their clothing was sexualized that year (*Goodin et al., 2011*).

All of this was more than ten years ago (*see also Graff et al., 2013; Gunter, 2014; Zurbriggen & Roberts, 2013*). Since then, the sexualization of women and girls has not diminished but increased. It extends to dolls and action figures (*Boyd & Murnen, 2017*), Halloween costumes (*Sherman et al., 2020*), advertising (*Condeza-Dall'Orso et al., 2021*), television shows (*Aubrey et al., 2020*), movies (*Heldman et al., 2016*), popular music (*Division 46, 2018*), and more (*Sales, 2016*). Sexualization is especially prominent across the two arenas of contemporary culture that are the topic of this research report: social media and online/video gaming. Even before the marketing of toy stripper poles, the American Psychological Association (*2007*) released a special report on the sexualization of girls. A follow-up study in 2019 confirmed the ongoing "presence of sexualizing media and marketing and its problematic effects" (*Lamb & Koven, 2019a*). The same researchers, in a report for Culture Reframed titled "[The Sexualization of Girls: An Update]()," again affirmed "the presence and problematic effects of sexualizing media and marketing" (*Lamb & Koven, 2019b*). These problematic effects, as this report outlines, include anxiety, depression, disordered eating, body dissatisfaction, and cognitive impairment.

Another problematic outcome is sexual assault. The "cultural pressure" from advertisements that depict girls dressed like seductive adult women denies girls their own sexual agency and developmental trajectories (*Gerding, Speno & Aubrey, 2018*). The ubiquitous "imagery of girls as sexual objects of male desire" too, may desensitize adults to child sexual abuse and "lower intentions to seek sexual consent." There is evidence to back up this assertion. A study of young people, aged 14-21, in Spain found that more than 60% of their social media selfies were sexualized (*Sarabia & Estévez, 2016*). Many of the girls who posted these photos had been contacted by groomers.

Sexualization is not the same as sexual development or sexuality. The latter are healthy aspects of individual identity, expression, and experience. Sexualization, by contrast, refers to cultural norms that value persons on the basis of their physical attractiveness. While the variation and plasticity of human sexuality is expansive, moreover, sexualization imposes on people a narrow range of stereotypical and largely illusory ideas about visual appeal. In this way, sexualization opposes individual sexual freedom by seeking to control and monetize sexuality.

Raising reasoned words of caution about the sexualization or 'pornification' of the online ecosystem in which young people—really, all of us—now dwell is not, therefore, anti-technology, anti-social media, anti-gaming or anti-internet. It is an effort to harness these technologies to acknowledge and celebrate gender and sexual diversity. Furthermore, online interactions do not stay online. They impact everyday life, as we will see. Viewing sexy selfies on social networking platforms, for just one example, increases the likelihood of sexual activity among adolescents (*van Oosten et al., 2015*). Whether or not this is concerning hinges on personal morality. But the empirical fact of the linkage attests to the blurring of the online and offline lives of young people. According to the World Health Organization (*2021*), one in three women experience physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner, or sexual violence by a non-partner. The sexualization of girls is not, as the pornography industry and others would have us believe, unfounded 'moral panic.' It is a matter of preserving basic human rights. With these preliminary comments in mind, this report surveys recent research[1] on the harms of sexualization in social media and online/video gaming.

Social Media

Overview

According to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (*2020*), tweens (aged 8-12) spend 4-6 hours daily in front of screens (e.g., smartphones, tablets, and gaming consoles). For teens, the figure is closer to 9 hours. Young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are often at risk of developing addiction-like screen use (*Nagata et al., 2022*). The more time they spend online, in fact, the more likely they are to have an impaired "quality of life" (*Stiglic & Viner, 2019*). For much of their online time, young people are viewing, liking, and posting to social media. In February 2023, for example, US children were spending an average of 113 minutes each day on TikTok, 90 minutes on Snapchat, and between 10-20 minutes each on Pinterest, Facebook, Reddit, and Twitter (*Statista, 2023a*). Fully 95% of American teens watch YouTube; over 60% are on Instagram (*Vogels et al., 2022*). Social media is woven into the everyday social life of tweens and teens everywhere.

It is useful to remember that social media has been enmeshed with the sexualization of girls and women from its beginning. Snapchat, originally called Picaboo, was developed so that racy photos sent by male university students to young women would quickly disappear. More famously, Mark Zuckerberg devised Facebook at Harvard in order to judge the looks of his female peers. Not long ago, Facebook had an app that would

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[1] About two-thirds of all sources were published within the past five years; almost 90% are within the past decade.

identify which of one's friends had posted a photo of someone in a bathing suit. That seems gender neutral. But the real aim of the app was to make it easy for men to view women in bikinis. Indeed, the app was allegedly beta tested by fraternity men (*Bahadur, 2013*), who often post sexualized photos of women on social media (*e.g., Yan et al., 2022*).

Peers encourage many young people to upload sexualized selfies (*Trekels & Eggermont, 2021; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2023*).[2] The media is also a source of encouragement.[3] The "sexualized images shared by celebrities," reported in one study, "were perceived to further reinforce to girls that they can receive more attention and validation by posting similar photos of themselves" (*Papageorgiou et al., 2023a, 471*). "It's just a day-to day-thing," said one young teen to the researchers. But this ordinary activity, as another young woman stated, conveys a troubling message: "that you're nothing but your body." The message to boys, said several girls interviewed during the investigation, is that females are not equal to males because they are only valued for their sexuality. This message is received not only by teens but also by younger children. Hence, six-year-old girls exposed to sexualized media desire thinner bodies and to wear "significantly sexier clothing" (*Slater & Tiggemann, 2016*). By this young age, "girls have already begun to internalize contemporary sociocultural beauty ideals."

Objectification

In early September 2023, I conducted a brief search on YouTube for "bathing suit." Most of the videos featured women, many in sexualized poses. It only took me a few clicks on the suggested videos to see naked women's breasts behind beaded outfits, skimpily attired models for Whipped Cream Swimwear, and "Micro Bikini Try On Haul." None of these videos displayed overt pornography. All of them, however, showcased sexualized femininity.Later that same month, I typed "girl" into YouTube. Most of the people who appeared in the resulting videos were white. Many were most certainly not girls but fully developed women wearing, moreover, bikinis or thongs. One site was titled, "ultimate beauty hacks for popular girls." When I again searched for "bathing suit" in early October, the first item to appear on the page was "Sexy See-Through Swimsuits." Sexualized social media is now the norm for even ordinary online searches.In fact, Instagram's algorithms prioritize posts showing bikini-clad women or bare-chested men (*Kayser-Bril, 2020*). To quickly reach followers, it matters less what you say than what you are wearing— or not—when you say it. Google's search engines similarly favor sexualized women, especially women from the Global East and South, more so than sexualized men (*Urman & Makhortykh, 2022*). Here, again, what you see online is often determined by how little is worn by women.One study gauged the negative psychological effects of moderate

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[2] Girls' self-sexualization is also fostered by many parents (Chen-Yu et al., 2021). For adult perceptions of the harms of sexualized social media on adolescent girls, see Papageorgiou et al. (2023b).

[3] Including sexual reality television shows such as MTV's Jersey Shore (Vandenbosch et al., 2015; see also de Vries & Peter, 2013)

and heavy social media use by asking young people for self-assessments of happiness, depression, suicidal ideation, and coping with problems (*Twenge & Martin, 2020*). The girls were impacted more than the boys. Much of this harm arises from sexual objectification, which is a type of sexualization. According to The American Psychological Association (*2007*), sexual objectification transforms a person "into a thing for others' sexual use." The person is not seen as possessing "the capacity for independent action and decision making" —that is, thoughts, emotions, and agency worth respecting.

Sexualization and objectification erase a person's voice, desires, and individuality. Both are mainly imposed on women and increasingly on girls (*Daniels et al., 2020*). Both effectively disassemble a woman or girl to her breasts, thighs, and genitals. As one study discovered, young people who watch sexualized music videos are 'primed' to look at women's sexual body parts more than their faces (*Karsay, Matthews, Platzer, & Plinke, 2018*). In this way, sexualization and objectification socialize young people to treat women and girls as similarly to inanimate sex dolls.[4] Many studies have tied the posting of sexualized selfies on social media to self-objectification by girls and women, both in the West (*e.g., Bell et al., 2018*) and in Asia (*e.g., Zheng et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2021; Liu & Chareonrook, 2022*). The more that girls and women are exposed to sexually objectifying media, the more they adopt an external viewer's perspective on their own bodies and perceive themselves as objects. Of course, the vast majority of women and girls do not 'measure up' to the pornified standards of female beauty rampant in social media and popular culture. Hence, self-objectification among women gives rise to and intensifies low self-esteem, diminished life satisfaction, negative body image, shame, and disordered eating among girls and women (*e.g., Mercurio & Landry 2008; Tiggemann & Williams, 2012; Moya-Garófano & Moya, 2019; Veldhuis et al., 2020*).

Young girls themselves, in fact, often flag body image as a major concern regarding social media (*Papageorgiou et al., 2022*). They have good reason to be concerned. Instagram use results in greater self-objectification by young women (*Fardouly et al., 2018; Abrams, 2021*). In fact, documents uncovered by The Wall Street Journal showed that the harms of Instagram to teens' mental health were known by its parent company, Facebook (*Vincent, 2021*). In general, "exposure to messages that sexualize girls and women contributes to girls' tendency to believe that sexual attractiveness to males is an important aspect of the female gender role" (*Bigler et al., 2019*). Once girls have internalized these messages, they "create an increasingly sexualized environment for others and themselves" that perpetuates sexualization and exacerbates its deleterious effects. On Facebook, female university students in the US tend to "present themselves in significantly sexualized ways," especially those who pin their self-worth to their appearance (*Ruckel & Hill, 2017*). In the UK, about one-third of all Instagram posts by female university students feature sexualized self-images (*Bell et al., 2018*). More generally, girls and young women are

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[4] Through advances especially in AI (artificial intelligence), the sex doll industry is booming. Popular brands include Silicon Wives and First Love. Among the many offerings of the latter are "mini dolls," including Nita, who has the body of a porn performer but the height of the average 10-12-year-old-girl. She is dressed in a school outfit.

far more likely than boys and young men to post profile photos on social media that show seductive behavior and revealing clothing (*Van Ouytsel et al., 2020*). Some studies suggest a lower incidence of this objectification for minority women (*Kapidzic & Herring, 2015*); others claim it is higher (*Ward et al., 2023*). Most evidence, however, suggests that social media reflects and encourages female sexualization worldwide.

Thinness, Dieting, and Shame

Sexualized objectification in social media and other arenas of contemporary culture leads to body shame, body surveillance, and unhealthy eating. Numerous studies show that, especially for girls and young women, the exposure to sexually suggestive materials online, including on social media, leads to heightened bodily self-surveillance and lower levels of body esteem (*Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012; Peter & Valkenburg, 2014*). Additionally, the more girls and young women post and view appearance-focused images on Facebook and Instagram, the greater they are dissatisfied with their appearance, scrutinize their bodies, and strive for thinness (*Meier & Gray, 2014; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Cohen et al., 2017; Hendrickse et al., 2017; Tiggeman & Slater, 2013, 2017; Fardouly & Rapee, 2019*).[5]

These negative effects hold true even for images which have been obviously altered or photoshopped and clearly labeled as such (*Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2019*). At the same time, adolescent girls often confuse manipulated social media selfies for reality (*Kleemans et al., 2018*). In fact, the common practice of retouching selfies actually heightens the negative effects (*Harrison & Hefner, 2014*). The "more young people are active and engaged" on social media, concluded another study, "the greater their self-worth fluctuates as a function of their physical appearance, and the greater their enjoyment of being perceived as a sex object" (*Manago et al., 2015, 10*). Vulnerable girls are especially prone to these detrimental outcomes (*Scully et al., 2023*).

While sexualized social media images of adolescent girls often highlight thinness, they emphasize muscularity for boys (*Skowronski, Busching, & Krahé, 2021*). Boys and men, too, do not internalize objectification to the same detrimental degree, as noted above. Hence, in one study, young male and female non-Instagram users viewed appearance-focused profiles for one week (*Casale et al., 2021*). Compared to a control group, the women, but not the men, registered greater body dissatisfaction and "an increase in the extent to which they define themselves and their self-worth by their physical appearance" (*Casal et al., 2021, 2882*).

Sexualized social media also impairs healthy eating. It fosters binging and dieting in both girls and boys (*Dakanalis et al., 2017; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Balantekin et al.,*

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[5] For the negative effects of sexualized music videos on girls and young women, see Karsay & Matthes (2020).

2018). But, again, the effects are more acute for girls, who are more likely to suffer body shame. Hence, many girls around the world respond to sexualized images, especially on social media, through eating disorders, which include purging and the use of laxatives (*Tiggeman & Slater, 2013, 2017; Jongenelis et al., 2016; Dakanalis et al., 2016: Kwon et al., 2022; Dane & Bhatia, 2023*).

Similar outcomes occur when girls and women view fitness genres on social media (*Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017*). So-called "fitspiration" or "fitspro" images, too, are often highly sexualized (*Carrotte et al., 2017; Arya & Rai, 2017; Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Dignard & Jarry, 2021*). As a result, the received messages from these images may "distract users from health goals" (*Murashka et al., 2021*).A related and even more harmful genre is called 'thinspiration' or 'thinspo.' These images are also frequently hypersexualized. In both respects, they have much in common with the dangerously unhealthy social media feeds, blogs, and websites that promote anorexia (*pro-ana*), bulimia (*pro-mia*), and eating disorders in general (*pro-ED*). The harmful impact of these images, too, afflicts mainly girls and women (*e.g., Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Feldhege et al., 2021*).

Anxiety, Depression, & Self-Injury

About ten years ago, something called the 'bikini bridge' made the rounds on social media. The phrase refers to the gap between the lower abdomen and the fabric of a bikini bottom that is suspended between the hip bones when worn by very thin women. In many instances, as a quick search of Google or Twitter will show, the bikini bridge highlights an unhealthy body coupled to the extremes of sexualization. The bikini bridge, however, began not as a real phenomenon but as a prank on 4chan, a notoriously misogynistic and pornographic 'image board' that allows anonymous users to post photos and comments.[6] The hoax went viral (*Drenten & Gurrieri, 2017*), and turned into a real trend.

On social media, the bikini bridge was promoted by female 'influencers.' These women promote products by attracting large audiences through seductive selfies (*Drenten et al., 2019, 2020*). Women and girls who view these photos typically score high on assessments for body dissatisfaction, negative mood, and self-objectification (*Pritchard et al., 2023*). The social media feeds of many influencers, too, as discussed in a Culture Reframed report, "[OnlyFans is Only Porn: The Online Ecosystem of Webcamming and OnlyFans](#)" (*see Silverman, 2023*), contain links to sites on platforms such as OnlyFans. There, too, they and other 'content creators' —including all the top performers on Pornhub—sell pornographic videos

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[6] For cyber-misogyny, which intentionally weaponizes the sexualization of women, see especially Jane (2017) but also, more recently, Sobieraj (2020), Bates (2020), and Hall et al. (2023), among others.

Other popular trends on social media that sexualize women on female sexualization include the #thighgap and the #boxgap (a visible space between a woman's thighs, just below her genitals).

To be sure, many online magazine columns highlight the health hazards of these trends (*e.g., Fargo, 2023*). But others do not, such as the recent article in the Times of India (*2023*), "What the thigh gap says about your sex life." The article included absurdities such as "Having a wide gap means you are sexually energized and experimental." These and other sexualized memes and trends communicate the dangerous message that a woman's value and success hinges on her ability to publicly show off an unrealistic body. The cultural obsession on social media with female thinness and sexuality threatens young women's physical health. It also poses hazards for mental health.

For example, various research studies have linked the regular use of social media, including touching-up or taking multiple selfies, to a variety of mental health ailments, including depression, worsened mood, and anxiety (*Mills et al., 2018; Kelly et al., 2019; Lamp et al., 2019*).[7] The more one compares oneself to others on social media, the more likely one is to have body dissatisfaction and to be driven to thinness (*Jiotsa et al., 2021*). Sexualized objectification in general leads, as we have seen, to shame, body dissatisfaction, and body surveillance.[8] It also gives rise among diverse groups to depression, anxiety, emotional dysregulation, lower self-esteem, hostility, and, as a "core" risk factor, non-suicidal self-injury (*Duggan at al., 2015; see also Grabe et al., 2007; Impett et al., 2011; Jones & Griffiths, 2015; Hanna et al., 2017; Ward et al., 2023*). Outside the West, sexualized objectification, too, is related to depression, suicidal ideations, and somatic complaints among adolescent girls (*Kahumoku et al., 2011*).

Along the same lines, among young women in New Zealand aged 13-16, taking sexualized selfies was "positively associated" with narcissism as well as, more to the point, cyber-aggression and cyber-victimization (*Stuart & Kurek, 2019*). One dimension of that narcissism was "exploitiveness," which includes immoral, selfish, or shameless acts. Not surprisingly, narcissism was also associated with the posting of nude selfies on the notorious online bulletin board, Reddit (*Miller, 2022*).

We should also consider another version of adolescent self-injury that is "positively predicted" by the habitual use of social media: the desire for cosmetic surgery (*de Vries et al., 2014; Walker et al., 2021*). Among young adult women in Poland, for example, active Instagram use "correlated with the respondent's willingness to undergo breast augmentation" (*Skrzypczak et al., 2021*).

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[7] In this regard, note that Facebook users who present a more authentic self-expression, as opposed to an idealized sexual self, have greater 'satisfaction' (Bailey et al., 2020).

[8] For a general review of social media and body image, see Vandenbosh et al. (2022).

In recent years, social media has seen the rise of a "body positive movement," sometimes dubbed BoPo. These postings, blogs, and websites showcase bodies—typically of women— that diverge from conventional stereotypes of beauty promoted by the media and also pornography. One can find celebrations of "fat positivity," indigenous bodies, disabled bodies, minority bodies, large labia, and more. These types of social media postings can help stem the relentless drive for thinness (*Cohen et al., 2019; Fasoli et al., 2023*). At the same time, even these postings and websites, which are frequently sexualized, often give rise to body objectification, body surveillance, and consideration of cosmetic surgery (*Schettino, 2023*).

Impaired Cognition

There is evidence that the consumption and production of sexualized social media— specifically, objectification and sexualization—can impair the ability to think clearly and process information.

A review of research over the past two decades concluded that internalizing the objectifying gaze "compromises cognitive functioning" (*Winn & Cornelius, 2020*). This impairment includes reduced cognitive performance, less verbalization, decreased agency, and the inability to harness appropriate cognitive resources to complete tasks. Since objectification affects women and girls more than men and boys, the gender implications of these findings are considerable. In another study, diverse women—White, African American, Latina, and Asian American— scored lower on mathematics after wearing a bathing suit as opposed to a sweater (*Hebl et al., 2004*). A more recent study found that middle-school girls in the US who often posted and consumed appearance-focused social media experienced greater body shame (*Daniels & Robnett, 2021*). This heightened shame, in turn, "predicted lower self-expectancies" and higher "perceived costs" in time and effort in regard to math and science.

Primary school children, too, when exposed to sexualized media also experienced short-term cognitive decline in math skills and working memory, especially girls (*Pacilli et al., 2016*). Likewise, internalized sexualization reduces achievement motivation (*McKenney & Bigler, 2016*). Young people become more preoccupied with their physical appearance and validating social relationships than with their schoolwork.

A review of emerging research on the brain highlighted how adolescents are particularly susceptible to social media. They possess underdeveloped and fast-changing "neural systems that are associated with behaviors that are important for social media use" (*Crone & Konijn, 2018, 7*). These include social reward processing (*e.g., reacting to acceptance/rejection and peer influence*) and emotion-based processing (*see also Firth et al., 2019*). This way, young people have stronger, more impulsive reactions to social media than adults.Hence, adolescents are apt to signal their approval of photos on social media

that have already garnered many previous likes (*Sherman et al., 2016*). This occurs, in part, because photos with more likes, as a kind of "social endorsement," triggers greater brain activity in youth, that is, "heightens responses in reward circuitry and leads to differences in behavioral decision making." Since sexualized photos, as discussed earlier, tend to receive more attention and compliments than non-sexualized images, sexy selfies posted to social media are likely to adversely impact the decisions and behaviors of young people.

Another aspect of the relationship between social media and cognition pertains to the evaluation of certain types of photos. Young women, we have seen, are under considerable social pressure to post sexualized selfies. When they follow this cultural script, however, they suffer reproach—especially by other women. Young women dressed in sexualized clothing are seen as "less capable, competent, determined, and intelligent" and "less moral and lower in self-respect" (*Graff et al., 2012, 766*). Similarly, young women who post sexualized profile photos on Facebook are negatively evaluated by female peers in regard to physical and social attractiveness, and "task competence" (*Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016a; see also 2016b*).

Sexism and Consent

Research shows that the more adolescents are exposed to sexualized media, the more they post similar content online (*Bobkowski et al., 2016*). In turn, the regular engagement with sexualized social media can lead to harmful sexual behaviors. For example, one study showed that Instagram users—both men and women—exhibit greater sexist attitudes and gender stereotypes than Instagram non-users (*Plieger et al., 2021*).[9] A different investigation concluded that elementary school-aged children see sexualized girls to be "decidedly" less athletic, less nice, and less intelligent than nonsexualized girls (*Stone et al., 2015*). Likewise, if prepubescent girls who are dressed in revealing clothes are harmed, they are judged to be more worthy of censure and less deserving of assistance than girls wearing non-revealing clothing (*Holland & Haslam, 2016*). Equally alarming is that male university students in the US who consume and post sexualized images of women on social media believe that they can determine a woman's sexual consent merely by glancing at her profile and other photos (*Smith & Ortiz, 2023*). These studies show how sexualization and social media can sustain sexual violence and potentially lead to rape.

Earlier, I mentioned that young social media users often link self-worth to their perceived physical appearance and to the "enjoyment of being perceived as a sex object" (*Manago et al., 2015*). This same study also found that sexual objectification led to "feelings of body shame, which was then associated with lower levels of sexual assertiveness." The statements used in the test to assess sexual assertiveness included "It is hard for me to

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[9] A sociobiological study linked women's sexy selfies to income inequality, since sexualization in this view "enhances a woman's value as a mate" in the "sexual marketplace" (Blake et al., 2018).

say no even when I do not want sex" and "I find myself doing sexual things that I do not like."[10]

Research shows that the consumption of pornography, too, like social media, gives rise to sexual objectification (*Willis et al., 2022*).[11] Many young people are exposed to porn through social media, including in developing countries (*Fibrila et al., 2021*). In fact, the greater use of social media makes it more likely that an adolescent will use porn (*Meilani et al., 2023*).[12] The consumption of sexualized images on social media must be seen as part of a wider continuum that includes online pornography.

Research correlates boys' use of pornography with gender stereotyping and sexual objectification (*Bigler et al., 2019*).[13] Along the same lines, exposure to sexualized media and objectified images of women has been linked to sexual harassment, endorsement of rape myths (*e.g., 'she deserved it'*), and tolerance of sexual violence towards women (*Galdi et al., 2014; Ward, 2016; Awasthi, 2017*). This may partly account for the popularity of social media memes which poke fun at sexual "choking" (*Herbenick et al., 2023*). But this activity is neither fun nor safe. "Choking" is, in fact, a misnomer. It is non-fatal strangulation and poses dire harms to victims (*Huibregtse et al., 2022*). This social media promotes dangerous sexual practices in ways that diminish the importance of consent.

Sexualized social media can erode sexual consent in other ways. Undergraduate women who post sexy selfies engage in self-objectification, we have seen, in order to gain public attention (*Ramsey & Horan, 2018*). The same study also discovered that women who pinned their self-worth to social media acclaim also tended to see "sex as a source of power." Among the same women, however, the posting of sexualized photos was positively related to "less confidence in the ability to communicate during a sexual encounter." In other words, women who create and consume sexualized social media do not gain enhanced sexual agency—they lose it. Furthermore, women who enjoy sexualization—the very women who post sexualized selfies—"tended to feel more objectified by their partner, which in turn related to lowered relationship satisfaction" (*Ramsey et al., 2017, 258*). Similarly, an earlier paper concluded that "consuming objectifying media was associated with increased partner-objectification, which was related to decreased relationship satisfaction" (*Zurbriggen et al., 2011, 460*). In this way, too, sexualized social media can diminish the role of consent in sexual intimacy. We can also see the diminishment in sexual consent through the common use of social media to boast of sexual exploits, which has been occurring since the heyday of My Space (*Moreno et al., 2009*).

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[10] The researchers used the Hulbert Index of Sexual Assertiveness; its many questions can easily be located online.
[11] Porn use also engenders negative body image for both men and women (Paslakis et al., 2022).
[12] A female Hentai character, active on social media, has a popular pornographic website (Dines & Sanchez, 2023).
[13] Sexualized social media can also trigger recovering pornography addicts (Martini and Gangadharbatla, 2023).

Social media bears on consent in another way. Teen girls who post suggestive or sexualized content on TikTok and other platforms to gain popularity and validation are often caught unaware by the response (*Jargon, 2022*). Many lack the developmental resilience, social skills, and mental health to handle the misogynistic comments and the overtures by sexual predators (*see, relatedly, Kamar & Howell, 2023*). Social media glamorizes self-sexualization. But the reality is often very different.

Double Standards and Loss of Agency

Sexualized social media perpetuates the age-old double standard that penalizes girls for engaging in the same activities that award prestige to boys. Posting provocative photos is a way for girls and young women to conform to peer pressure and media ideals, as we have seen, and to attempt to increase their popularity (*Mascheroni et al., 2015; Baumgartner et al., 2015*). When they do so, however, they are often condemned (*Salter, 2016*). In contrast, boys are given more latitude to publicly display their bodies.

Social media is often touted as allowing for the expression of new forms of identity. One study claimed that posting sexy selfies on Tumblr, for example, "can become a practice of self-care and crucial self-awareness, allowing participants to transform their own selves" (*Tiidenberg, 2020, 147*). That may be true for a few. But the double bind I just identified constrains any such creativity for girls and women. This can be seen vividly on Fotolog, a large social networking site popular in Spain, on which girls freely and playfully experiment with their identities and the conventional codes of gendered display (*Willem et al., 2012*). Yet the girls still largely adhered to overly sexualized self-representations, thus undermining the argument of agency. A more recent study from Spain, in fact, concluded that adolescent girls experience "more social pressure" than boys to model "heteropatriarchal ideals"of beauty on social media (*García-Navarro et al., 2021*).

Furthermore, girls rarely read or share counter-messages about the sexualization of social media (*van Oosten, 2021*). Girls, too, feel a lack of self-efficacy in challenging this sexualization, which also speaks against any simple claims of female agency in digital spaces. According to the same study, girls perceive sexism on social media from an individualistic or neo-liberal perspective. It is, in this view, the responsibility of each person to make their own decisions rather than, say, to address the issue at the level of politics or policy. Girls receive few strategies for minimizing harm or coping with sexualization (*Papageorgiou, 2023b*). The onus is always put on them to not post this, and not post that. As a result, many girls see "selfies" as expressing the self, and her own choices, when in truth, selfies reflect a wider sexist "gaze economy of digital culture" (*Grindstaff & Valencia, 2021*).

This is not to suggest that girls are simpleminded, passive, or submissive. Young women strategically negotiate notions of sexiness promoted on social media (*Naezer,*

2020). But we must not forget the reason why global advertising is now annually approaching $1 trillion: images sway behavior. This is as true for gaming, as I now show, as it is for social media.

Video and Online Gaming

Gaming is big business. More than 3.4 billion gamers globally are expected to generate over $187 billion in 2023 (*Wijman, 2023*). Unfortunately, a sizable portion of that revenue arises from sexualized, violent, and misogynistic representations of women. The digital gaming landscape includes both traditional video games as well as online or web-based games. The latter require an internet connection, and are played through desktops, laptops, tablets, phones, smart TVs, and other online devices. By contrast, video games are played through special consoles such as Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo Switch, and other devices. Many are handheld, or otherwise self-contained; other devices connect to TVs or monitors. There is also an emerging virtual reality ecosystem, involving the use of special headsets. How many games are there? It is hard to say. But Xbox currently hosts 10,053 games, while the App and Google Play stores together offer another 700,000 games. Throughout the vast and diverse cyber-verse of gaming, one thing remains consistent: sexualization and misogyny (*see, e.g., Cote, 2020*), as well as sexual harassment (*Tang et al., 2020*).

Perhaps the best summary of the state of gaming was voiced by a male Korean high school student: "Female characters always seem sexual. We can see inside the skirt of the female characters; the more they expose their bodies, the greater their defense power… The male characters are dressed in uniforms while the female characters are stripped" (*Choe et al., 2020*). Put another way, the male gaming characters, or avatars, are attired in protective armor. The female characters are barely covered by bikinis.

Sexualized Avatars

In the US, slightly less than half of all gamers are female (*PlayToday, 2023*). The figure for Asia is far less, at little more than one-third. If we roughly estimate the percentage of female gamers at 40%, then we can say with some certainty that 1.3 billion girls and women play online and video games worldwide. That is a substantial number. But in many ways, the gaming industry has yet to acknowledge the presence of women as equals (*Yokoi, 2021*). In fact, many male gamers reacted poorly when new data revealed that most owners of the Nintendo Switch handheld console were women (*Zwiezen, 2023*). Not surprisingly, female gamers are often viewed as sexual prey (*Kelly et al., 2023*). They are seen as less competent than male gamers, and deserving of sexist disdain (*see also Gestos et al., 2018*).

The harms of sexualization in gaming, as on social media, generally hinge on objectification (*Karsay et al., 2018; Skowronski et al., 2022*). Female characters in games are overwhelmingly sexualized. "Compared with a decade ago," in fact, "more female characters are showing up in video games, but they are more likely to be sexualized today" (*Geena Davis Institute, 2021*).

Still, twice as many playable game characters are male as female (*Lin, 2023*), perhaps even more (*Cooper, 2022*), and they speak more often, too (*Rennick et al., 2023*).

Twenty years ago, a large percentage of the female characters displayed low-cut necklines, visible cleavage, and unrealistically large breasts (*Beasley & Standley, 2002*). This was true not only for games rated "M" or mature, but also for "E" games geared at "everyone." More than a decade ago, too, the ratio of male to female primary characters in best-selling console video games in the US—made for Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo devices—was 7 to 1 (*Downs & Smith, 2010; see also Summers & Miller, 2014*). Far more female characters were shown partly or fully nude and dressed inappropriately for the task at hand. They also displayed more unrealistic body proportions—especially in games rated "E." Little has changed. In major gaming magazines, male avatars are typically celebrated for their abilities, such as flying, speed, and fighting skills (*Miller & Summers, 2007; Santoniccolo et al., 2023*). The female characters are portrayed as sexy, helpless, and innocent. They also wear more revealing clothing. Indeed, some gaming developers train particular attention on the physics of female avatars' animated breasts, so they bounce alluringly (*Rogers & Liebler, 2017*). By and large, gaming magazines treat female avatars as "vacant pinups to be ogled or irrelevant sidekicks to be tolerated" (*Fisher, 2015*). In gaming culture, moreover, the same study found that 'real gamers' are generally seen as men, not women.

The sales of a video game rated "teen" or "mature" decrease if the image displayed on the box highlights a female character (*Near, 2013*). But depicting a non-central female character who is sexualized actually increases sales. The gaming community, in other words, especially the boys and men, prefers "the marginalization and sexualization of women in video game box art" – and, of course, in the games themselves.

Rape Threats

Many video games combine the sexualization of women and girls with violence (*Stermer & Burkley, 2012*).[14] This is especially disturbing since what happens in games, as on social media, does not stay online or in the game. Online "cultural zones of exception," in which the everyday rules of social life that govern violence and sexuality are abandoned as a

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[14] Some games include homophobic (Shaw & Friesem, 2016) and racist (Malkowski & Russworm, 2017) elements and characters.

type of "moral holiday," entail everyday consequences (*Atkinson & Rodgers, 2016*). Gaming impacts everyday life.

Games strive to induce an 'immersive' experience, what is often called 'flow,' so players feel as if they are fully in the reality of the game.[15] In a study of undergraduate students, gamers registered an increase in hostile sexism when they directed aggression against sexualized female characters (*LaCroix et al., 2018; see also Salter & Blodgett, 2012*). This was especially true when players reported high levels of immersion. What happens in the game, in other words, could impact the wellbeing of women and girls outside the game. Another study concluded that "playing violent-sexist video games increases masculine beliefs and decreases empathy for female violence victims" (*Gabbiadini et al., 2016*). This causation was particularly robust "for boys and young men who highly identified with the male game character" (*see relatedly Blackburn & Scharrer, 2019*). Here, again, games pose real harms in the off-line world.

Many studies show that sexualized game avatars lead to self-objectification (*e.g., Vandenbosch et al., 2017*). Sexualized characters can also prompt an increase in rape victim blaming (*Noël et al., 2021; see also Guggisberg, 2020*). The two effects can join together. Women university students in the US who played or watched online games that featured sexualized characters experienced greater self-objectification than participants who played or watched non-sexualized games (*Fox et al., 2015*). This, in turn, led to higher levels of rape myth acceptance among the women (*see also Fox & Potocki, 2016*).

Men exposed to sexualized game avatars become tolerant of real-life sexual harassment (*Dill et al., 2008*). They are also more likely to endorse rape myths (*Driesmans et al., 2015; Beck et al., 2012*). And, needless to say, men who objectify and thereby dehumanize women have a higher proclivity to engage in actual rape (*Bevens & Loughnan, 2019*).

Horrifyingly, some games allow players to rape other characters. One game, called Rape Day, was released on the widely used gaming platform, Steam, which boasts more than 120 million monthly players. The 'game' —I hesitate to use the term here—was pulled from the platform, but only after an online petition (*Evans, 2019*). A Japanese game, RapeLay, allowed a male character and his friends to gang-rape a teenage girl on a subway platform (*Lah, 2010*). Other games feature rape, too (*Schott, 2017; Hoffin & Lee-Treweek, 2020*). Over the years, moreover, cyber-players have hacked into games in order to reprogram male avatars to rape female gamers' characters (*Stoeffel, 2014*).

Perhaps the most infamous video game series is Grand Theft Auto or GTA, which consists of 16 different titles. GTA does not only showcase fast cars. The game also features prostitution and strip clubs. Gamers can manipulate their characters to have

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[15] For negative effects of immersion on the everyday life of female games, see Kuss et al. (2022).

sex with prostituted women. If they so choose, they can also have them hit and beat the women, and then flee without paying, which is tantamount to rape (*Allen, 2014*). A character can even kill the prostituted women after sex. Although GTA is rated "M" for mature, children have played it for years (*Olson, 2010*). That is concerning since playing violent video games, according to a multinational meta-study, "is associated with greater levels of overt physical aggression over time" (*Prescott et al., 2018, 9887*). Similarly, "exposure to violent video games is positively related to adolescent aggression" (*Shao & Wang, 2019, 7*). These studies make plausible the proposition that games which feature sexual assault and rape could similarly lead to illegal real-life sexual misconduct. There is some evidence to support this suggestion. A study of French youth aged 11-19 "showed that general video game exposure was significantly related to sexism, irrespective of gender, age, socioeconomic status, and religion" (*Bègue et al., 2017, 4*). Furthermore, male gamers tend to stereotype the female player, or "gamer girl," as highly sexualized (*Drenton et al., 2023; Harrision et al., 2016*). Often, as I noted above, violence and sexualization come together in gaming. The most notorious incident was GamerGate, when Zoë Quinn and female gaming journalists were threatened with vicious violence and even rape after Quinn called for more women in the gaming community (*Salter, 2018; Quinn, 2017; Wu, 2014; see also Gray et al., 2018*). What happens in sexualized and violent games does not stay in the games, especially in regard to women and girls.

Gaming and Pornography

Young people who excessively play online and digital gaming are, compared to their non gaming or moderate gaming peers, more likely to display the "pathological" use of pornography (*Stockdale & Coyne, 2018, 265*). Children who play violent games, too, have a greater likelihood of exposure to online pornography (*Hou et al., 2022*). In fact, it is easy to seamlessly move from an online game to an online pornography website. Often, the two are one and the same. Consider the Steam platform, which offers almost 30,000 online games. Anyone can sign up for an account. All that is needed is an email address and the willingness to check a box declaring "I am 13 years of age" - still a legal minor - "or older." But even if Steam asked users to declare that they have reached the age of legal majority, there is no published evidence that this sort of 'age gate' has ever proven effective at barring minors. The Steam website displays a list of "Popular Tags," the terms used by users to find games. In August 2023, the list included 3,476 "Sexual Content" games. Many were free. Some of these sexual games are so pornographic that gamers have uploaded scenes to Pornhub and xVideos. These 'tube sites' (named after YouTube) require no registration, fee, subscription, or verification of age to access. A minor could easily move from a "mature" game on Steam to a video on YouPorn with only a few keystrokes.

Half of all US kids are estimated to have played games on Roblox, another popular online platform (*Lyles, 2020*). Roblox games are playable by phone, computer, or Xbox. There is no minimum age. The platform, in fact, has over 28 million worldwide daily users under the age of 13 (*Statista, 2023b*). Not all games on Roblox are harmless. The site also

hosts sexually explicit chat rooms and sex games, euphemistically called "condo games," as well as digital strip clubs (*Clayton & Dyer, 2022; see also Crawford & Smith, 2022*). None of these sites are barred to kids. Online websites, as well as YouTube videos, instruct users on how to find porn games on Roblox. Additionally, unscrupulous gamers have snuck actual porn onto Roblox, which kids have

stumbled upon by accident (*News4Jax, 2019*). Pop-up ads for pornographic websites, too, have suddenly appeared during children's online games (*Anderson & Gardner, 2021; Smith, 2015; Root & Melnykov, 2018*). Myriad websites, too, provide links to hundreds, if not thousands of free porn games, many of which feature realistic-looking characters. Rarely do these websites block entry by children, too. One such site included games categorized as "Pokémon" and "Rape Sex."

Not surprisingly, the porn industry itself seemingly tries to lure in minors by showcasing pornified versions of children's games. On Pornhub, for example, any user, even a child, can easily view several thousand videos tagged Fortnite, Minecraft, or other children's games. It is just as simple to find #Roblox porn on Xvideos, or to browse the more than 144,000 "game girl" clips on Xnxx. So much porn is based on the game Overwatch—rated in the US for ages 13 and above—that Wikipedia now hosts an "Overwatch and pornography" page. A search for the game on Pornhub in October 2023 resulted in 6,809 videos.

Mental Health

Many of the damaging consequences of sexualized gaming in regard to mental health are similar to those of sexualization on social media. For example, a British study compared girls aged 8-9 who played "age-appropriate" appearance-focused games, such as Dream Date Dress Up, to those who played more innocuous games like Penguin Diner. Those who played the former games scored higher for body dissatisfaction (*Slater et al., 2017*). The same girls also preferred more stereotypically feminine careers. Another study found that "female adolescents were almost twice as likely to experience depressive symptoms, suicidal behavior, or being bullied in relation to time spent playing video games or in other nonacademic computer use than male adolescents" (*Lee et al., 2017, 4*). Similarly, undergraduate women who played video games with sexualized heroines scored lower on self-esteem than those whose games featured non-sexualized heroines (*Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009*). The sexualized characters, too, led to overall reduced self-efficacy.

The social context of gaming, too, can adversely impact women and girls?. Sexual harassment, as noted above, is rife in the gaming community. This harassment can trigger rumination in female gamers (*Fox et al., 2017*). This type of obsessive thinking, which rehashes the situation over and over again but leads to no productive resolution, is

predictive of emotional distress and depressive symptoms. The online sexual harassment of female gamers, too, gives rise to anxiety and distress as well as loneliness (*McLean & Griffiths, 2019*). To escape their torments, the women often play alone or move regularly from one team to another. They often play anonymously, too, by hiding their gendered identity (*Cote, 2017*). Gaming harassment also causes some female players to engage in self-blame as a coping strategy (*Wong & Ratan, 2023*).

All this amounts to a tax—at once cognitive, emotional, and exhausting—imposed on female gamers that is not demanded of boys and men.

Numerous research projects have concluded that many children and young people are at risk of, or suffer from, "pathological gaming" (*van den Eijnden et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2019; Coyne, et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2021*).[16] Symptoms include higher-than-normal levels of depression, aggression, shyness, stress, anxiety, insomnia, and loneliness, as well as lower school performance. Girls are also at risk of these ailments, although typically at lower rates than boys (*Ohannessian, 2018*). Older female gamers, too, can succumb to internet gaming disorder (*Lopez-Fernandez, Williams, Griffith, & Kuss, 2019; Lopez-Fernandez, Williams, & Kuss, 2019*). They, too, like many men, turn to gaming to quell anxiety and depression (*Laconi et al., 2017*).[17]

One positive effect of gaming among young women is the positive correlation between gaming and an interest in pursuing careers in computer science (*Shah et al., 2023*). But the pervasive sexualization in gaming, and its attendant misogyny, violence, and harassment, drive many girls and young women away from gaming (*Fox & Tang, 2017*). This, too, is an undeserved tax imposed on female gamers that is not equally asked of their male peers, something that in the long run will prevent women from contributing to the development of cyberspace and technology more generally.

Predators

Many gamers broadcast or livestream their playing to audiences on YouTube and various gaming platforms. These streaming services include Twitch, which is owned by Amazon, Facebook Gaming, Kick, Caffeine, Mobcrush, Mixer, and Steam. Livestreaming helps gamers forge community, engage in playful boasting and rivalries, and learn new strategies.Similarly, most gaming platforms allow players to communicate with other gamers through chat and direct messaging (*DM*) services. These features, too, allow gamers to swap tips, engage in team play, create friendships, feel that they are a part of a wider community, and so forth. For younger children, these online interactions help

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[16] The World Health Organization (Darvesh et al., 2020) and the American Psychiatric Association (2023) both recognize gaming disorder as a behavioral addiction.

[17] The same study reports on gender differences in motivation for gaming. Women, for example, unlike men, are more motivated to play in order to forge social relationships.

enhance communication and social skills, too. But the same services facilitate sexual harassment, as we just described. They also allow malevolent actors to reach out to kids. Indeed, a "considerable portion" of youth [in the US] have experienced online child sexual abuse (*Finkelhor et al., 2022*) In the UK, online grooming cases have increased 80% in four years (*NSPCC, 2022*).For example, sexual predators have used the chat feature on the Roblox platform to contact and groom children into sending sexual photos (*Stonehouse, 2019*). The same is true for Fortnite, the hugely popular online game that has attracted hundreds of millions of players. The minimum age to set up an account without parental approval on Epic Games, the developer of Fortnite, is 13. Otherwise, the company requests permission from a parent or guardian. But there is no verification process unless required by national law.

Fortnite players form alliances during games, and thus interact by voice and text chat. This has allowed predators to try and lure children into sending sexual photos (*BBC News, 2019*). Sometimes the predator engages in 'sextortion' (*Enos, 2018*), a kind of online extortion that uses sexual photos. The perpetrator first gains the user's trust, which is not necessarily difficult if the user is a child or a young teen yearning for an intimate relationship. Typically, the predator pretends to be a child himself, or a willing romantic partner of whatever gender his victim desires. Then, the perpetrator convinces the victim into sending nude or sexual photos. At that point, the victim is threatened with literal exposure—say, to their parents or school—if they do not send more photos or money (*see Thorn, 2023*). The Australian eSafety Commissioner, a governmental regulatory role, called Fortnite a "honey pot" for predators since it so easily allowed them access to children (*Foster, 2020*).

In 2019, Fortnite ran advertisements on YouTube. The algorithms of the video sharing platform then posted the ads to videos that featured young girls. The videos were not pornographic. Nonetheless, pedophiles were attracted to them, sometimes timestamping when a girl in the video inadvertently exposed her nipples or genitals (*Hamilton, 2019*). In some instances, the pedophiles exchanged their contact information on WhatsApp or Kik—two global messenger services—so they could later share more videos in private.

Discord is probably the most popular global communications and file sharing network for gamers. Its estimated 563 million users (*Statista, 2023c*) interact through voice, video, and text messaging. In recent years, Discord has expanded greatly beyond the gaming community, too. Teens now "use Discord for everything from studying for classes to watching Netflix together" (*Minor, 2023*). Users can also link Discord with their Spotify music streaming accounts. Discord is not only beloved by gamers and teens. It has also been used by sexual predators and promoters of self-harm (*Goggin, 2023*). Self-harm mainly afflicts girls and women. Discord has an age minimum of 13, but does not verify, which allows people of all ages to freely chat.

In many ways, then, online and video gaming entangles users with legal pornography

and obviously illegal childhood sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. Gaming, too, we have seen, like social media, consistently sexualizes girls and women, and thus puts the mental and physical health of users and the wider public at risk.

Conclusion

Despite the substantial evidence, as presented in this report, concern over sexualization on social media and gaming is not shared by all scholars. Some say it is tantamount to "legitimizing the expression of contempt for…young women" and thus "acts as a cloaked expression of sexist attitudes" that "governs the participation of women within the online public sphere" (*Burns, 2015, 1717*). But this view is misguided. It ignores the virulent misogyny that normalizes sexualization as the primary lens through which women are expected to attain visibility within the public square. Others inexplicably assume that any efforts to flag unhealthy sexualization is cover for "increased control and surveillance" (*Tsaliki, 2016*). This, too, is false. Ironically, "increased control and surveillance" is precisely the business model of the global porn and social media industries. For them, sexualization is a profit-driven tool to attract hundreds of millions of users in order solely to monetize their data.

Most commonly, concerns about the harms of sexualization to young people are dismissed as little more than the resurrection of old-fashioned puritanism and Victorian-era notions of angelic children in need of saving from their own sexuality. But this invective—"virulent public panics" (*Mulholland, 2015*), "pathology-based rhetoric" (*Senft & Baym, 2015*), "essentialized" views of sexuality (*Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020*)—is a tired, uninformed, and unsophisticated rhetorical ploy.[18] Many of these researchers claim to fly the banner of pro-sex feminist scholarship. But, in reality, their endorsement of sexualization does little to libertate the sexual autonomy of young people. Only by calling out the inherent sexism in the conventional representations of social media and gaming can we truly democratize the digital ecosystem to a wide range of sexual and gender identities.[19]

Indeed, teaching strong feminism is perhaps the most effective way to reject and resist the detrimental effects of sexualization and misogyny perpetuated by social media (*Feltman & Szymanski, 2018*) and gaming (*McCullough et al., 2020*). It is also demonstrably effective to teach critical media literacy (*Burnette et al., 2017*).

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[18] Equally tiresome is the almost-mandatory congratulatory nods to Foucault and social theory du jour (e.g., Charteris & Gregory, 2020).

[19] This addresses Egan's (2013) claim that the concern – she calls it "frenzy" - over the sexualization of girls simply projects white middle-class anxieties onto the bodies of young women.

The point of freeing childhood from the sexualization of social media and gaming is precisely to decolonize the sexuality of young people (*cf. Kitching et al., 2021*). In this way, young people of all genders and sexual identities can reclaim ownership over their intimate lives, express their sexuality as they choose, on their own terms, in their own ways.

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