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Maresa E. Kelly

Marian University - Indianapolis, mkelly726@marian.edu

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THE MEDIA'S IMPACT ON BEAUTY AND THE SEXUALIZATION OF WOMEN

Maresa E. Kelly
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Abstract

This paper compares the sexualization of Brazilian women and women from the United States. By juxtaposing the standard of beauty in Brazil to the standard of beauty in the States, comparisons could be made between what men, women, and the media consider "beautiful", and how the definition changes between these groups. In order to reach a conclusion, participant observation was done in various regions of Brazil, during which student interviews took place.

KEYWORDS: Sexualization, Beauty, Brazil, Women, Media

SITUATING THE ISSUE IN THE UNITED STATES

The sexualization of women by the media is everywhere. All one has to do is turn on the TV, walk down the street and see the millions of billboards, or scroll through any social media feed. Women are constantly told that the right thing to do is be "hot" or "sexy." Everything we, as women, do has one purpose - make ourselves desirable.

However, although women are constantly bombarded with such images, they are still blamed for their own sexualization. Journalist Paulina Pinsky claims that this is not something that can be overlooked. When Pinsky attended the Women in the World Summit in 2014, the topic of the sexualization of women in the media was discussed. The panel reacted in a way that was appalling to Pinsky, to say the least. Some comments included: "'I don't understand why girls are taking pictures of themselves with their tongues out. Boys don't want to see that!', 'Maybe they should go to girls school to 'focus'?' 'Instead of doing their math homework, girls are sending nudies!'" (Pinsky, 2014, para. 4-5). These comments epitomize the miscommunication about the sexualization of females by the media.

The panelists at the convention were meant to be "experts." The purpose of the conference was to inspire and empower women - how had they ended up getting blamed for their own sexualization? The answer is simple - there is a clear disconnect between the media and "real" women. Moreover, many people don't realize that women and young girls "emulate what they see in the media" (Pinsky, 2014, para. 7).

Pinsky goes on to state that she "did not describe [herself] as "smart" until about six months ago." Until then, when asked to describe herself, she would have simply given a physical description of herself (lingering on the aspects of her body she thought were acceptable, but being sure to mention the areas that needed improvement). She goes on to claim that she wasn't

the only one that did this. When she would see friends and family members, they would tell her "something about my body that was 'right.'"

Brigit Katz claims that when we discuss beauty, we tend to talk about models, movies and unattainable standards of perfection. However, she claims that a study done by Dove shows that more than ever before women claim that their conception of beauty is shaped by "'women in the public domain' and social media." Katz goes on to say that this influence is not always a positive one: "A 2014 Dove study found that women wrote 5 million disparaging tweets about beauty, most of which were about themselves." Seventy-eight percent of the survey sample went on to say that they feel the portrayal of women on social media is unrealistic (Katz, 2015, para. 3).

Young people receive negative images of women from a plethora of outlets - one of which is pop music. The "Top 15" currently has 6 songs that have lyrics depicting women in a negative light and very few that empower them. The hit song, "The Shape of You" by Ed Sheeran, for example, states: "I'm in love with the shape of you/We push and pull like a magnet do/Although my heart is falling too/I'm in love with your body" (Sheeran, 2017). These lyrics serve as constant reminders to young women that their greatest value to society is supposedly their body. As a young person, it is very difficult to feel empowered as a woman when every time a song comes on the radio it depicts women as objects that are controlled by men. Pop music is particularly destructive because young people look to music (and the artists that produce it) to see what it means to be attractive, and to see what the ideal lifestyle looks like. However, when these songs and artists are all about the sexualization of women, it has devastating effects.

A study done by the University at Buffalo (N.Y.) contends that the portrayal of women in popular culture and media over the last several decades has "become increasingly sexualized,

even 'pornified'" (USA Today, 2011, p. 14-15). The researchers examined *Rolling Stone*

magazine covers from 1967-2009 to measure and compare the sexualization of men and women.

The researchers found that "representations of women and men indeed have become more

sexualized over time and women continue to be more frequently sexualized than men. For

example, women are more often photographed in less clothing, in provocative positions, etc. In

the 1960s, 11% of men and 44% of women were sexualized. In the 2000s, 17% of men and 83%

of women were sexualized- of those images, 2% of men and 61% of women were

hypersexualized" (USA Today, 2011, p. 14-15). Although it is clear that sexualization is an issue

that effects both men and women, clearly the issue plagues women more so. Although it isn't bad

for a woman to be depicted as "sexy", the harm comes when women are depicted as objects that

are simply designed to be objects of pleasure for someone else.

      Many young women are easily impacted by the sexualization of women by the media.

They open Instagram and are bombarded with unrealistic images of women. From the celebrities

that photoshop their pictures before posting them, to the various ads that show women nearly

nude, to their own friends that perfect their makeup and filter before posting a picture. Sadly, this

is the reality of today's world. Like Paulina Pinsky, girls often think they are nothing but their

physical features. They think that if they are "too" skinny, or "too" big, a man will never want

them. Even worse, they believe that because a man would never want them, they have less worth

as a woman. This is the constant struggle women face - they are constantly told what it means to

be beautiful, and that our natural beauty is not enough.

      An article from *Elite Daily* (self-described as "a site for and by women who are

discovering the world" *http://elitedaily.com/about/)* entitled "Life Through A Filter: The

Dangers Of Perceiving Instagram As Reality" describes women's daily struggles to differentiate

reality versus social media. One of Instagram's models, Essena O'Neill (see index page for photographs 1A & 2A) recently took strides to expose the truth about her Instagram account by "changing her Instagram account to be named 'Social Media Is Not Real Life'" (Arundel, 2015, para. 1). Moreover, O'Neill went back on old posts and changed her captions, exposing the truth behind each picture (admitting that at times she would even be paid to diet extensively in order to "get the perfect shot") (Arundel, 2015, para. 3).

Although the media definitely causes women to have unrealistic expectations for beauty, women can reclaim the media as their own. It's clear that the media has a great deal of power over us all, and this can be extremely destructive. However, acknowledging the power that the media has is the first important step to reclaiming beauty. Many women have taken it upon themselves to reclaim what it means to beautiful. Brigit Katz notes the multitude of beauty bloggers that have emerged in response to the hyper-sexualization of women by the media. These women tackle the traditional definition of beauty in society by posting unedited pictures and videos of themselves - blemishes and all (Katz, 2015, para. 4-8). Women like this are a reminder that as women, we always have the power to reclaim what it means to be beautiful. The Canadian Women's Health Network defines the hyper-sexualization of girls as "being depicted or treated as sexual objects. It also means sexuality that is inappropriately imposed on girls through media, marketing or products directed at them that encourages them to act in adult sexual ways" (2012, para. 3.) Examples of this include marketing thongs, or lacy bras to young children. Simply typing in "sexualization" or "hyper-sexualization" in the web offers up more examples.

SITUATING SEXUALIZATION IN BRAZIL

Brazil is often called "the land of beauty." That said, the sexualization of women and standards that women are held to in terms of physical appearance is increasingly harsh in Brazil. Larry Rohter, author of the article, "In the Land of Bold Beauty, a Trusted Mirror Cracks," claims that "Brazil may be the most body-conscious society in the world" (Rohter, 2007). However, up until recent years, Brazil's idea of beauty has been different than the rest of the world's (particularly North America or Europe.)

Brazilian beauty traditionally meant that they had "a little more flesh, distributed differently to emphasize the bottom over the top" (Rohter, 2007). This idea of "um corpo de violão" or "guitar shaped body" (see index page for photograph 1B) is epitomized by the doll Susi who, "reflecting the national aesthetic, was darker and fleshier than her counterparts abroad" (Rohter, 2007, parg. 10). However, the invasion of the "Barbie aesthetic", models, celebrities, TV, and medical makeovers are leading Brazil further and further away from their traditional concepts of beauty.

Mary del Priore, a historian and co-author of "The History of Private Life in Brazil," states that traditionally, "plumpness was a sign of beauty, and thinness was to be dreaded." However, today in Brazil it's "the rich…who are thin and the poor who are fat" (Rohter, 2007, para. 5). Although both the traditional and modern beliefs about women have the potential for harsh consequences, traditionally, women were taught to embrace their bodies. That is a sharp contrast to today - a government study released in November of 2007 claims that "the percentage of the population taking appetite-suppressants more than doubled between 2001 and 2005, making Brazil the world champion in the consumption of diet pills" (Rohter, 2007, para. 12).

Del Priore claims that this shift is a "feminine decision that reflects changing roles." She claims that as women move out of the home more and more, they want to feel powerful and free. One way to do this is to adopt international standards of beauty, and leave those of traditional Brazilian society by the wayside.

In order to achieve this "international beauty," Latin American women are increasingly willing to spend money on beauty products. In 2014, Brazilians spent $30.248 billion on beauty and personal care products (Conger, 2016, p. 70). Brazilian customers are crucial to the cosmetic industry. Lucy Conger, author of *Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder (and the Cash Register),* relays that the Brazilian sector of L'Oreal ranks 4th in the world: "[I]n 2015, L'Oreal consummated its purchase of the Rio-based Niely brand of hair care and coloring products which had sales of R$405 million ($113 million) (Conger, 2016, p. 70).

Marle dos Santos Alvarenga and Karin Louise Lenz Dunker, authors of *Media Influence and Body Dissatisfaction in Brazilian Female Undergraduate Students,* studied possible associations between media influence and body satisfaction in a sample of Brazilian female college undergraduates. Because evidence from literature demonstrates that media often acts as an important bias in weight and eating problems (i.e binge eating, anorexia, bulimia, etc), and because it is known that frequent exposure to thin bodies by the media (e.g. magazines and TV) could lead to body dissatisfaction, Santos and Dunker hypothesized that the greater exposure one had to media, the higher the body dissatisfaction would be.

Santos and Dunker found that "64.4% of students desired to be smaller, 21.8% desired to be equal and 13.9% to be bigger than their actual figure" (2014, Abstract). Prior to participating in the study, all women answered the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire. It was found that the women scored higher on the SATAQ than any other

population around the world. Moreover, "the younger and overweight students were the most influenced by the media." Santos and Dunker conclude that "Besides the relation with body image, it is also affirmed that SATAQ's subscales have strong relation with weight control practices" (2016, p. 2). By making this claim, Santos and Dunker acknowledge that many factors are at play when discussing body image. However, it is an irrefutable fact that the media negatively influences Brazilians' ideas of body image.

Brazil, the land of beauty, is constantly looked to by other countries for standards of what it means to be beautiful. Brazilian women are constantly portrayed by other international media outlets as hyper sexualized. While I acknowledge that it may be ethnocentristic, when American women think of "Brazilian," the first thing that comes to mind may very well be a Brazilian bikini wax. This simple fact is a prime example of Brazilian women being sexualized by the world. Moreover, Brazil is well known for their carnival celebrations. During this celebration, women often wear extremely revealing clothing, dance in a manner that dehumanizes them, and often become objects in the eyes of Brazilian men, and the rest of the world (Barbara, 2014).

The Brazilian culture is one of over-sexualization. Sex isn't a bad thing. However, when women are degraded and looked at as objects- things to be used for pleasure then thrown away, it is time that we, as a society, reevaluate the images we are producing.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH

After undergoing participant observation and research in Brazil from June 1-10 in Rio Grande do Sol, I find that the idea of women's beauty for Brazilian women has been corrupted by the media. The main method of research that helped to reach this conclusion was interviewing Brazilian citizens. Two interviews were particularly helpful in reaching these conclusions- Luane Mattos and Vera Daisy Barcellos. Interviews took place at venues including Canta Brasil School, a Brazilian Community Center, a City Council building, and the non-profit organization, THEMIS

The first interview took place with Luane Mattos - a Brazilian student. When asked "What do you think is considered beautiful in Brazil?" she answered, "I would have to say blonde girls with green or blue eyes and big thighs." When asked why, she claimed that it was because of television shows like "Pânico na TV and Big Brother Brazil." These shows show countless women in bikinis, mini skirts, and crop tops [see index page for photographs (1C & 2C for Pânico na TV and 3C for Big Brother Brazil)]. These shows are extremely popular, therefore they have extraordinary influence over Brazilian culture. Particularly due to the fact that the women who star in these TV shows are meant to be "normal, everyday people."' For this reason, their physique seems more attainable. This is, of course, a falsity, because the stars of reality TV shows are hand-picked to look and act a certain way.

Moreover, the media mass produces white, European women on TV. In an interview with Vera Daisy Barcellos, she claimed that "you don't see any black on TV." Vera has been fighting for black beauty- curly, natural hair, black skin and noses, etc.) all of her life. Vera went on to say that "when you do see black women, they are hyper-sexualized." She mentioned this was particularly present during Carnival festivities in Brazil.

Brazilian Carnival is an event that makes millions of dollars off of the exploitation and sexualization of men and women- particularly black women. A principal example of this is the former Carnival star Rosa Luna (see index page for photographs 1-2D). Luna, an Afro-Uruguayan star who "became synonymous with Montevideo's annual Carnival from the 1950s until her death in 1993" (Sztainbok, 2014), was a national icon, solely because of her physical features.

Due to Rosa Luna's sexualization by the media, Brazil, and the world, black women in Brazilian culture feel extremely misrepresented. When black women are present in the media, they are seen not as strong, powerful women, but as objects to be fantasized about. Due to their blatant lack of accurate representation in the first place, they obviously, (and justly) feel ignored not only by the media but by their own society.

Overall, regardless of age, race, or sexual orientation, there was an overwhelming consensus among women interviewed. The media consistently makes women feel that their natural bodies are not adequate. However, what the media wants (a thin, white woman, at times forced to starve herself to meet societies expectations), and what men want (a "curvy" woman) seem to be starkly different. Once again, making it difficult to be a woman in Brazilian culture.

COMPARATIVE CONCLUSIONS BETWEEN BRAZIL AND THE UNITED STATES

After comparing research done locally in the United States, as well as abroad in various regions of Brazil, I conclude that both the United States and Brazil have warped concepts of beauty due to the media. Although the United States and Brazil have obvious styles, fashions, etc., that are relative to each country, there are several overlapping trends.

Trends that women generally follow in both of these countries include desiring to be thin, having tan skin, big hair, white/straight teeth, long legs, and a large butt and breasts. Furthermore, in both the United States and Brazil women feel added pressure from certain magazines (*Cosmopolitan, Vogue, Elle*) that are targeted toward. These magazines use women female models that are extremely thin. However, other magazines (*Playboy, Maxim, GQ*) that are generally targeted toward men use female models that are "curvy." This makes it extremely difficult to be a woman in our society- the media is constantly throwing conflicting images into their consumers laps. Therefore, at the end of the day, it makes it difficult for anyone to be comfortable in their own skin.

In another interview with college student Daniela Dora Eilberg, light was shed on the high rate of butt lift procedures done in Brazil. Eilberg mentioned that one reason Brazil has such a high number of procedures is due to people coming to Brazil from all over the world because "we have the best surgeons there are" (personal communication, June 4, 2017).

Overall, Brazil and the United States alike have a long way to go before being able to claim that their media outlets offer accurate representations of women. Both countries' citizens have been negatively affected by the media's harsh judgments and boundaries of what a "beautiful woman" is but as student Luane Mattos so elegantly phrased it: "If I'm not beautiful here…I guess I'll just have to be beautiful somewhere else." (personal communication, June 8,

2017). It is so important to acknowledge the disparities women must face, if we can ever hope to gain equality for all.

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1A (Social News Daily, 2015)
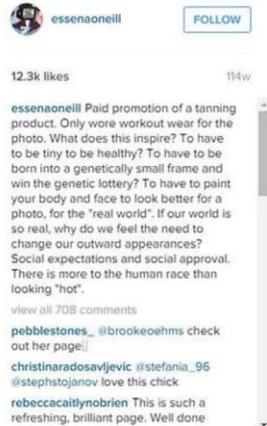
2A (Social News Daily, 2015)

2A

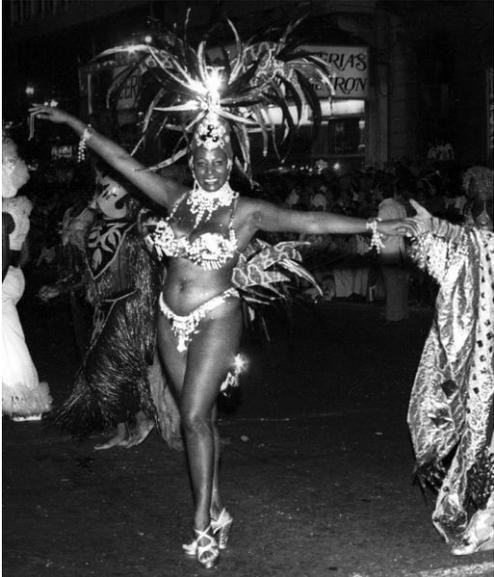1B (Menezes, 2015)

1C (Beraldo, 2013)

2C (Beraldo, 2013)

3C (Beraldo, 2013)

1D (Homenajearon a la "Diosa de Ebano, 2015)   2D (Homenajearon a la "Diosa de Ebano, 2015)

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