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Kara Chan

Hong Kong Baptist University, karachan@hkbu.edu.hk

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Tween Girls' Sexuality and a Media Scandal in Hong Kong

Kara Chan

Adolescents today are more confused about their sexuality than they were in the past. With the development of birth control measures and the rise of the feminist movement, adolescents have moved from viewing sex as forbidden to viewing sex as accessible and interesting, yet terrifying (Rice & Dolgin, 2005). Researchers have found that youths around the globe are more likely than previously to have pre-marital intercourse, and the age of their initial sex experience has been declining (Michael et al., 1994). Unfortunately, many adolescents are not prepared to deal with intimate relationship with the opposite sex and have difficulties handling relationship problems. They have insufficient knowledge about sexually transmitted diseases and birth control. As a result, early sexual behaviors often turn out to be unsatisfying (Rice & Dolgin, 2005).

As society becomes more open to sexual topics, there are more opportunities for people to abuse that freedom. Children and youth are increasingly exposed to sexual images. Sexually explicit materials are present in newspapers, youth magazines, television, music videos, and movies. Scholars in the United States have expressed concerns about the sexualization of young girls, as demonstrated through the marketing of scantily clad dolls to 6-year-olds, or teens turning to heiress Paris Hilton and pop star Britney Spears as role models. The Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls of the American Psychological Association concluded that sexualization has negative effects on various aspects, including cognitive functioning, as well as physical and mental health. According to the Task Force, sexualization occurs when people value a woman or girl predominantly for her sexual appeal or behavior; hold her to a narrow standard of beauty; equate her physical beauty with sexiness; view her as an object for sexual use; or inappropriately impose sexuality on her. The Association called for the development of media literacy programs in the current school curricula to promote healthy activities for girls, and of a more comprehensive sex education program for boys and girls (American Psychological Association, 2007).

Hong Kong provides an interesting example of a society in which youths are equally exposed to both Western and Chinese cultures, which may have implications for their attitudes toward sex and sexuality (Woo & Twinn, 2004). Over 95 percent of the Hong Kong population is Chinese. In the traditional Chinese culture, premarital sexual activity is considered a deviation from the societal norm (Goodwin & Tang, 1996). There is evidence from higher rates of pregnancy termination that adolescent pregnancy in Hong Kong is increasing (The Family Planning Association Hong Kong, 2000).

Hong Kong is a media rich society. Televised messages are seen in homes, on public transportation, in public areas such as shopping centers, and on the Internet. Outdoor posters and advertisements fill the busy streets, the subway stations, and public vehicles. Over 700 titles of newspapers and magazines are published. Free newspapers are distributed in major business areas, housing estates, and subway stations. Over 70 percent of the households in Hong Kong have personal computers connected to the Internet (Census and Statistics Department, 2009a). Mass mediated messages are considered important socializing agents with regard to values, beliefs and attitudes (Comstock, 1991; Strasburger and Wilson, 2002). Media and communications are a central element in our society, while gender and sexuality are at the core of how we construct our identities (Gauntlett, 2008). Because the media are filled with messages about images of males and females, there is a need to study how the young female audience consumes and interprets these images. Specifically, the study focuses on how tween girls define sexiness and the evaluation of sexiness, how they see intimate relationship with the opposite sex, and their attitudes toward sex as well as sexual behaviors.

Literature review

The “Tween” market segment

“Tweens” is a sub-teen consumer segment (Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003; Siegel et al., 2004). The segment is defined by age and the concept is based on the idea that these children are “in-between” childhood and teen-hood (Cook & Kaiser, 2004; Siegel et al., 2004). Tweens are typically defined as 8- to 12-year-olds (Siegel et al., 2004). In the present article, we focus on 10- to 12-year-olds, which we consider to be the older part of the tween segment. This phase of life is of particular interest because of the salience of sexuality during it, not just for the young people themselves, but for adults who impose all sorts of disciplinary practices on them (Ho & Tsang, 2002). Tweens are also considered to be powerful influencers of their parents’ consumption as well as consumers with a considerable direct consumption of their own (Andersen et al., 2008). Lindstrom (2004) proposed that the global direct – and indirect – tweens’ consumption was no less than 1.18 trillion US dollars in 2003. Although some scholars consider tweens a global market segment, recent empirical studies found that tween consumption and responses to marketing communication were motivated differently in cultures of individualism and collectivism (Andersen et al., 2008).

Sexuality in Hong Kong

As a former British colony, Hong Kong has laws protecting women from gender bias in terms of education, employment and pay packet (Chan, 2000). Free education is provided to all children, both males and females, between the ages of six and sixteen. The proportion of females with tertiary education is similar to that of males (Census and Statistics Department, 2009b). Because of improvements in education, economic development, and the influence of the Western feminist movement, the status of women in Hong Kong has achieved significant improvements during the past two decades

(Lee & Collins, 2008). The Hong Kong government takes an active role in promoting gender equality. The Equal Opportunities Commission was established in 1996 and introduced the Sex Discrimination Ordinance. The Women's Commission was set up in 2001 to promote the well-being and interests of women in Hong Kong (Lee & Collins, 2008).

As a Chinese society, Hong Kong is influenced by the Chinese paternal oriented culture that discourages gender equality. Confucianism influences a majority of the population. The Chinese tradition favors males as they are responsible for passing down their family names. Chinese culture accords greater esteem, privileges, and status to males, and there are more restrictive prescriptions for the role of women. The virtues of a woman are defined narrowly in her role as wife and mother (Cheung, 1996).

Since 1981, The Family Planning Association of Hong Kong has conducted a territory-wide survey entitled "Youth Sexuality Study" every five years in Hong Kong. The findings of the latest "Youth Sexuality Study" in 2006 showed that the percentage of students in secondary forms 3-7 (equivalent to US system grade 9 to first year of university) who had sexual intercourse experience was 13 percent for boys and 9 percent for girls. Both percentages were higher than that reported in 2001. Among these sexually active respondents, 52 percent of males and 57 percent of females experienced their first sexual intercourse at age 15 or below. However, the rate of contraceptive practice was low. Trend analysis revealed that "public intimacy between two sexes", "premarital sex" and "cohabitation" were more acceptable among respondents. The acceptance of other people having "multiple dating partners", "multiple sexual partners" and "induced abortion" demonstrated a decline. Similarly, "premarital sex" and "cohabitation" were also the most commonly accepted behaviors of other people among youths aged 18-27 (The Family Planning Association of Hong Kong, 2007). The spokesperson of The Family Planning Association of Hong Kong commented that Hong Kong youths' attitudes toward sex and sexual intercourse behavior were still relatively conservative when compared to most Western developed countries. The Association expressed worries that the trend toward increased openness in sexual attitudes and activity among Hong Kong youth was not supported by an improvement in sexual knowledge (The Family Planning Association of Hong Kong, 2007).

A survey of 178 secondary school students in Hong Kong indicated positive attitudes toward the importance of family and the importance of birth control. Male respondents reported a higher level of acceptance of pre-marital intercourse and the use of pressure and force in sexual activity than female respondents did (Ip et al., 2001). The cultural values of female pre-marital chastity and martial fidelity in Chinese Confucian traditions discourage sexual promiscuity among females (Tang, Wong & Lee, 2001). With the recent improvement in education of females, and the social environment promoting a more gender-equal society, attitudes toward sex and sexual behaviors may be changing in Hong Kong and across greater-China. The current study attempts

to update our knowledge on Chinese tween girls' perception of and attitudes toward sexuality.

Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was adopted. The data for the study were collected in March 2009 in Hong Kong. Sixteen interviewees participated. All interviewees were female Hong Kong girls between the ages of 10 and 12 recruited through personal networks. Ten interviewees were studying at local Chinese speaking schools and the remaining six interviewees were studying at international schools that use English as the language of instruction. Two interviewees were Caucasians and the remaining were Chinese.

Prior to the face-to-face interview, each interviewee was asked to take 7 to 10 digital photographs each day for a week. The instruction was: "Please take images from any media that are about *what girls or women should be or should not be*, and *what girls or women should do or should not do*. These images can come from all kinds of media, including newspapers, magazines, outdoor posters, television programs, MTR (Mass Transit Railway) posters, websites, books, and so on. The media should be those you sometimes use in your daily lives. The media can be directed at people like you or at people who are different from you."

The image collection week was followed by an interview, which involved a review of the photos and a discussion of how the images may help to elaborate the interviewee's perspective on the sexuality of males and females. In the current article, sexuality is operationally defined as contents related to any of the following issues:

1. attitudes toward sexiness
2. the definition and meaning of sexiness
3. attitudes toward sex and sexual behaviors
4. perception of intimate relationships, including heterosexuality and homosexuality
5. pregnancy, birth, and birth control

Although the interview questions (see Appendix) do not mention sexuality explicitly, the issues related to sexuality and sexual behaviors were often brought up by the interviewees when they commented on what girls should be or should do. The interviews lasted from 20 to 36 minutes and took place at public and private venues including sports centers, schools, and interviewees' homes. The photos taken by each interviewee were downloaded to the researcher's computer. Some of the interviews were attended by the interviewees' parents, who were asked to remain silent during the interview. The interviews were conducted by the author in the language that the interviewees felt most comfortable with. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed or translated into English by a female graduate research assistant.

All the contents related with the above five issues on sexuality were listed and entered into an Excel file. Marshall and Rossman's (1999) comparison

analysis method was used throughout the data analysis process to link data by constantly comparing and contrasting them (Strauss, 1987). For each item of the content, we analyzed the dominant theme of sexuality. Representative quotes and photos are presented in the following section.

Findings

Analysis of the interviews generated three dominant themes on sexuality: attitudes toward sexy clothes, attitudes toward pre-marital sex and pregnancy, and lessons learned from a media scandal. The following sections elaborate on the three themes in details.

Attitudes toward sexy clothes

When the interviewees were asked what girls or women should do or should not do, six out of 16 reported that girls or women should not wear sexy clothes. Another interviewee said that girls or women should wear proper clothing and not something that resembles underwear. To the interviewed girls, sexy clothes are clothes that expose too much of a female's body. When this issue was brought up, the researcher asked them to select pictures from their photo collections to illustrate "sexy" clothes. Results found great diversity in the categorization of sexy clothes. One interviewee commented that an outfit that exposes the shoulders and the belly (see Figure 1) was sexy. She suggested that these girls should wear something on top. Another interviewee commented that a seductive outfit was sexy (see Figure 2). In particular, clothes that reveal most of the breasts and the buttocks were classified as sexy clothes. The images of women wearing sexy clothes originated mainly from two sources: advertisements of slimming services or beauty products and entertainment news on fashion models or media celebrities.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Sexy clothes were often described as inappropriate, not courteous, or simply not good; the tween girls in Hong Kong generally did not approve of sexy clothes. While most of the interviewees did not explain why sexy clothes are not acceptable, one interviewee provided a functional reason. She thought that sexy clothes **do not adequately serve their purpose**. Showing a girl in a bikini, she commented:

If she goes swimming, she should wear proper swimming suits. I mean those normal ones. I don't think she can swim in this apparel. It's very weird. (age 12, international school student)

Only one interviewee showed a slight approval of sexy clothes. She thought that sexy clothes can show the identities of females:

Some girls and women wear sexy clothes because they want to catch the attention of men. This is needed in some situations. If women wear high-neck or long sleeve clothes, their figures cannot be shown. They may not look that pretty. So photographers will create photos that allow others to see the full figures of women. Then their photos will be much more beautiful. I think the figure is important to women. For example, if a woman is flat-breasted, then she will look like a man. The figure shows the identity of females. (age 12, local school student)

Attitudes toward intimate relationship with the opposite sex and pre-marital pregnancy

The interviewees demonstrated conservative and cautious attitudes toward intimate relationships with the opposite sex. Sexual relationships at a young age and pre-marital sexual relationships were disapproved of. The girls

showed a great deal of concern about pre-marital pregnancy. Three interviewees captured images with the caption “a 14-year old mother” (Figure 3). They thought that pre-marital pregnancy was bad both for the mothers and for the babies. The following quotes demonstrated the disapproval of underage pregnancy:

If she’s gonna give birth to kids, she should be ready. She should be older than 18. If you’re like 14, you are still in middle school and you cannot look after the kid. The kid is not going to have a good life. The kid may need to be sent to a foster home and you don’t know what may happen to the kid. (age 12, international school student)

This is a photo of a 14 year-old mom. I think girls should not get pregnant before marriage or have sex before marriage. The risk is too great. Nowadays people don’t want to take responsibility and prefer to have an abortion. This will cause great harm to the girls. (age 12, local school student)



Figure 3

From these **two** quotes, we can see that the interviewees had negative attitudes toward pre-marital sexual behaviors and pre-marital pregnancy. Disapproval of pre-marital sex seems to originate from fear and disapproval of pre-marital pregnancy. The girls were concerned about the harmful effect of pre-marital pregnancy on the mothers and the babies. They felt that the mother shoulders much responsibility in child care. Personal maturity is a prerequisite of motherhood. If a girl is not mature enough, she cannot handle it. The interviewees disapproved of pre-marital pregnancy to such a great extent that one of them even thought courtship at a young age was unacceptable.

Despite the worry about pre-marital pregnancy, the interviewees generally

supported the notion that girls should marry and have babies. Establishing a family was considered fulfilling and meaningful. Here is one quote:

Girls should get married and have babies. It will bring her life to a new stage and it is meaningful. She can have her next generation. When she takes care of the baby, she can develop intimacy with the baby. The relationship with the children will leave her with many happy or unhappy memories. (age 12, local school student)

Intimate relationships with the opposite sex were perceived to be risky because of the possible bad consequences, such as date-rape and violence. Other than pre-marital pregnancy, the interviewees showed disapproval of all forms of sex trade, including compensated dating and engagement of prostitutions. The following is an illustrative quote:

This is a photo of a group of prostitutes (Figure 4). I think it is bad for a woman to become a prostitute. Why do they work as prostitutes when they could do some proper work? (age 12, local school student)



Figure 4

One interviewee took two pornographic photos of female prostitutes in indecent postures from the newspapers. She commented that these photos are disgusting because the prostitutes are engaged in an improper business. She thought that these girls should be arrested by the police.

The interviewees did not specifically mention whether they supported heterosexuality or homosexuality. We think that heterosexuality was assumed **to be normal**, as they often mentioned not having sex with a **guy**. One interviewee took a photo of two female singers kissing on the stage. She commented that they should not do this. This indicates that homosexuality was not quite acceptable among the interviewees.

Lessons learned from a sex scandal in the media

Altogether seven out of 16 interviewees commented on a sex scandal in the

media that occurred in February 2008. They reported that girls should not allow their boy friends to take nude pictures of them. The sex scandal involved Edison Chen, a popular Hong Kong singer, and at least six female singers. Among these female singers, one was very popular among children and young girls. Nude photos of Edison Chen's sexual partners were released through the Internet after he took his computer for repair. The female popular singers involved in the scandal suffered immediate damage to their careers, as advertisers pulled out product endorsement and performance contracts. At the time of the data collection, the scandal had been revitalized with the news of the court testimony given by Edison Chen and the press conferences of two of the female singers involved. Five interviewees took pictures of the female singers and one took pictures of the male singer.

The scandal appeared to be a real-life social learning experience for the tweens. Several interviewees reported that females should not be involved in taking nude pictures and another interviewee said you should never put 100 percent trust in your boyfriend. Three interviewees used strong emotional words such as regret, silly, and stupid. Four interviewees blamed the female singers for being careless and too casual in their relationships with the opposite sex. One interviewee thought that a female singer was promiscuous. Here is an illustrative quote:

The girls should not have taken those kinds of photos with him. Originally they didn't think others would see these photos and they took them just for fun. But in the end, a lot of people can see these photos. Because of this, Gillian Chung had to step down from show business. She admitted that she was stupid to have loved Edison Chan. She regretted a lot and she scolded him. I think she should have thought it through early on. (age 12, local school student)

Six out of the seven interviewees who commented on the scandal felt the female celebrities involved were victims of the event. The interviewees commented that these girls suffered in their reputation and career because they had made a bad decision. None of the interviewees saw Edison Chen, the male character, as a victim. The interviewees seemed to feel that **the female characters in the media scandal suffered more damage and hurt than the male character.**

Discussion

Based on this qualitative study, we have made the following four observations about tween girls' perceptions about their own sexuality and the sexuality of other girls and women.

First, our interviewees aged 10 to 12 adopted a conservative attitude toward sex. This can be seen from their disapproval of sexy images as well as pre-marital sex relationships. The conservative attitude toward sex is consistent with the dominant discourses on parenting and education in Hong Kong, which emphasize female chastity. Young women are not supposed to have sex before they get married (Ho & Tsang, 2002). Adolescent sexual expression is constructed as "deviant" and is usually associated with danger,

moral problems, crime and psychological disorder (Ng, 1998; Wong, 2000). However, the finding was in sharp contrast to previous studies showing that youth in Hong Kong endorsed rather liberal attitudes toward sex. In 2001, 36 percent of youth aged 15 to 39 considered pre-marital sexual relations wrong. Fifty percent of the respondents found abortions acceptable and 16 percent reported that having more than one sexual partner at the same time was acceptable (Hong Kong Federation of Youth Group, 2001). The evidence therefore suggests that attitudes toward sex and sexual relationship change a great deal between 10-12 years of age and 15 and above. There is need for further research to examine the factors accounting for the change and the role played by various socializing agents in such change.

Second, the interviewees of similar age showed a wide range of standards with regard to the definition of sexiness. Some interviewees perceived that sexually seductive and revealing clothes were sexy, while others felt that clothes simply exposing the shoulder or the belly were sexy. According to Bandura's (1986) social learning theory, girls learn about the standard of acceptable and unacceptable clothing from socializing agents. The wide range of standards in sexiness may reflect the differences in standards of sexiness among parents (especially mothers), school teachers, and friends.

Third, the study showed that the girls had access to a variety of sexy or even indecent images of females. A few interviewees took photos of explicit sexual materials that they had come across. Even though they condemned the images for their indecency, the fact that they took these photos with them indicated that they had an interest in and curiosity to know more about their own sexual identity and sexual life-world.

Sexually explicit media, including magazines, books, and VCD/DVD, are readily available in Hong Kong. Popular newspapers and magazines contain advertisements for commercial sex. The new Internet and media technology give plenty of opportunities for people, including children and youth, to get access to sexual materials (Janghorbani & Lam, 2003). Our study indicated that advertisements of slimming services providers and entertainment news are a major source of sexy images of females. The finding is consistent with American media critic Kilbourne's accusation that "advertisers are the real pornographers of our time" (Kilbourne, 2000). It seems that the prevalence of these images may convey a controversial message to the tween girls in Hong Kong. If girls should not wear sexy clothes, why are all these media celebrities wearing them on glamorous occasions? Is it because females above a certain age have the privilege to dress themselves in a sexy way? Does society have a double standard on sexuality for media celebrities and for ordinary people? Scholars have expressed concern about the effects of sexy images and explicit sexual contexts on adolescents and young adults in many countries, including Hong Kong and other Chinese communities where sexual media are considered immoral (Janghorbani & Lam, 2003). Because of the easy access to explicitly sexual images among the tween girls found in our study, there is a need to empower parents and educators to discuss the consumption of sexy images or pornographic materials and its possible consequences for tween girls.

Fourth, engagement in intimate relationships with the opposite sex was perceived to be risky by the interviewees because of the possible bad consequences, including pre-marital pregnancy, abortion, and the leaking out of intimate images. Regarding pre-marital pregnancy, the girls were concerned about the well-being of both the mothers and the babies. They discussed the responsibility of mothers, and not fathers, in shouldering the care of babies. Through a media scandal exposed in the news, the interviewees “learned” that they should not put unreserved trust in their sex partners and should take care to protect their reputation.

Tween girls’ fear of pre-marital pregnancy is understandable. A study of Chinese pregnant adolescents in Hong Kong found that their reaction to **unplanned** pregnancy ranged from shock and fear to avoidance and guilt. All of them described how they had tried to deny the existence of their pregnancy through various means, including faking their menstrual periods. Some of them also attempted to harm the fetus and trigger a natural abortion (Woo & Twinn, 2004). This indicates that adolescence pregnancy is not acceptable in the Chinese society.

Previous studies have found that media figures play an important role in helping adolescents develop their identities by shifting away from identification with parents, and moving towards autonomy (Giles & Maltby, 2004). How media figures act and react provides adolescents with models for how to think and feel in different situations (Larson, 1995). Media figures also provide adolescents with cultural materials for developing gender role identity, values, and for learning about sexual and romantic encounters (Arnett, 1995; Brown, Childers & Waszak, 1990). In the current study, we found that tween girls seemed to rehearse the threat of being betrayed by an intimate partner through a particular media scandal that had taken place in society. Several interviewees perceived the female media celebrities as victims of the event. The interviewees expressed fear and regret about the loss of reputation as well as professional career of the female celebrities involved in the media scandal.

In the present study, the social learning process was demonstrated by the interviewees through modeling and identification. The interviewees observed the media images in term of what was acceptable or not acceptable. The images captured by the interviewees showed that they paid considerable attention to media celebrities, and often made reference to them in defining moral standards.

Conclusion

The present study provides us with a better understanding of how some female tweens in Hong Kong consume and interpret media images dealing with sexuality. One novel idea in the research methodology was the combination of visual method and the application of qualitative methodology to the study of media effects. A second novel idea was the use of interviewees as data collectors. Based on the images collected, we were able to ask

contextually relevant questions and understand the meanings of the images captured. The research process enabled us to gain insights about tweens' media consumption and interpretation of the content that they pay attention to.

Appendix. List of questions

1. Based on these pictures, what do you think about what girls or women should be or should not be?
2. Based on these pictures, what behavior(s) do you think are appropriate or inappropriate for girls or women?
3. Who creates these images and why do they create them in this way?
4. Are you satisfied with the way images of girls or women are created now?
5. If you were a media owner or a media producer, what would you do in constructing images of young girls or women?

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Figures included in the chapter are taken by research interviewees.

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