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Lights, Camera, Child Abuse: The Toleration of Child Sexualization in Hollywood and the Implications of Abuse for Minority Girls

Gina Sanchez · Wednesday, May 29th, 2019

“Her admirers—middle-aged men and clergymen—respond to her dubious coquetry, to the sight of her well-shaped and desirable little body, packed with enormous vitality, only because the safety curtain of story and dialogue drops between their intelligence and their desire.” In 1937, Graham Greene wrote these words in a review of Shirley Temple’s film *Wee Willie Winkie*. He claimed that perhaps Temple’s popularity with the public was more sinister than it was innocent. In the wake of his review, the magazine Greene wrote for was sued by Twentieth Century Fox, but the controversy over Shirley Temple’s sexual appeal eventually subsided (Chancellor par. 1). However, decades later, startling evidence has emerged including a 2007 study from the American Psychological Association (APA) that claims media which sexualizes children and teens by appearance “may serve to normalize abusive practices such as child abuse, child prostitution, and the sexual trafficking of children” (Zurbriggen et al 34). Evidence pointing to a strong correlation between child sexualization on-screen and its off-screen effects lead to a startling truth: the objectification of children in the media stimulates an entire culture of child abuse outside of Hollywood.

While there is analysis on how the sexualization of children and teens in media influences child abuse outside of Hollywood, these texts do not address how specifically the general population of girls of color are affected off screen by the portrayal of minority characters in Hollywood. It is an issue that has largely overlooked wide-reaching implications in real life and in minority communities, particularly for African Americans and the Latinx communities. Ultimately, the sexualization of minority children in entertainment stimulates and fuels child abuse outside of Hollywood as it disempowers minority girls making them more susceptible to abuse, while empowering potential and future predators.

BUILDING THE SCRIPT: CHILD SEXUALIZATION AND MINORITIES

The thought of a child being sexualized for entertainment is a seemingly obscure thought; however, this idea is turned into a reality in Hollywood. Furthermore, the portrayal of specifically minority child characters in Hollywood ultimately has detrimental effects on children’s agency. As a result of disempowerment, minority girls are particularly at risk of feeling like their voices are suppressed and that objectification is normal because girls’ perceptions of themselves are shaped in part by the perceptions of them that they receive (Bussey & Bandura 1238); and the disturbing reality for minority girls is that they are generally perceived in Hollywood in a hypersexualized

way in both animated and live works. An analysis conducted by Celeste Lacroix on five Disney films showed that teenaged characters of color, including Pocahontas, Jasmine, and Esmeralda were more likely to be sexualized by means of appearance and behavior than teenaged white princesses Belle and Ariel (221). The analysis shows that popular animated films contain largely negative portrayals of minority characters, while reinforcing the belief that white girls are more educated and more elegant as seen in Belle's character in *Beauty and the Beast*. While the analysis is limited in scope, the results reflect a startling assertion that women and girls of color in films, media, and everyday life are subject to greater sexualization (Guzman & Valdivia 212). As young minority girls watch girls their age being sexualized in Hollywood, many will grow up believing it is their role to adopt those same characteristics of objectification. In essence, Hollywood is shaping the entirety of young girl's worldview with little regard for the dire effects that Hollywood's constructed reality has on real life.

Hollywood's menacing narrative for minority girls shines through in multiple different TV shows and films. An analysis of different images taken from the popular Disney show *Bunk'd* shows African American actress Skai Jackson frequently depicted in more revealing clothing than her counterparts, or equally revealing clothing as a clearly older character.



BUNK'D – Disney Channel's "Bunk'd" stars Kevin G. Quinn as Xander, Nina Lu as Tiffany, Peyton List as Emma, Skai Jackson as Zuri, Nathan Arenas as Jorge, Karan Brar as Ravi and Miranda May as Lou. (Disney Channel/Bob D'Amico)

Skai Jackson's clothing reflects the "adultification" of young African American girls in the United States. A Georgetown Law Review found that African American girls are perceived as "more adult-like" than white girls of the same age (Epstein et al 2), which speaks to the reason why Jackson is in as revealing clothing as her older white counterpart. In the popular Disney movie, *Pocahontas*, a Native American teenager is depicted as a highly sexually desired woman by a white settler. Pocahontas's character portrayal ultimately reinforces the stereotype that young Native American girls and women are lustful objects (Pfeiffer par. 2). In *The Book of Life*, the character of Maria is also depicted as sexually alluring with accentuated hips and breasts. According to professors Isabel Guzman and Angharad Valdivia of the University of Illinois, the portrayal of Latinas as women and girls with accentuated hips and breasts reinforces the stereotype that Latinas are sexually desirable as "exotic" and "tropical" objects (211). Across the sample size of characters of color in films and TV shows, children continue to be subject to the concept and belief that they should be adopting the behavior and characteristics of those they view on screen. The list of movies and TV shows both animated and live that contain subliminal messaging of sexualization is startling in that long held sexual stereotypes of adult women of color are consequently implanted into the characters of children (McDade-Montez et al). As Hollywood strives to engage its audience with entertaining plots and character development, it is clear the implications for the portrayal of minority girls is an unabridged concept that is rooted in long held cultural stereotypes of women and girls.

While there is evidence on the hypersexualization of minority women and girls in the media, one study conducted by Elizabeth McDade-Montez, a PhD in Clinical Health Psychology, found that across 10 popular children's TV shows on cable, minority child characters were just as likely to be sexualized as white children (12). However, McDade-Montez recognizes the limited scope in

sample size and even if the rates of sexualization amongst races in McDade-Montez's study are founded, the portrayal of sexualization can affect children of color differently than white children. A study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation in 2010 found that on average, minority children, including African Americans and Latinx, watched more television and movies than white children (Rideout et al 38). While it might be the case in McDade-Montez's study that white actresses were sexualized just as often as minority actresses, minority girls watch movies and television shows at a higher rate and as a result view themselves more often in a sexualized fashion than do white children. Additionally, a study conducted by the Center on Media and Human Development School of Communication at Northwestern University in 2011 found that "Black and Hispanic youth are also more likely to have a TV in their bedroom (84% of Blacks and 77% of Hispanics)" (2). Not only do minority children view more media but they have more access to media itself in the household with the agency to be entertained at their own disposal. When a minority child sits in front of their television or computer looking to be entertained, they are told that their sexualized nature depicted in many characters in shows and movies is what they should be entertained by, and is what others are entertained by.

Another interesting conclusion found in McDade-Montez's study is that more white children are casted in roles than minorities (12). Not only do minority children watch characters like them being subject to sexualization in Hollywood more, but the lack of representation continues to foster a world in which the empowerment of minority children is neglected. For example, McDade-Montez also states, "If...a young Latina sees very few Latina characters portrayed in media, and high numbers of these Latinas are portrayed in a sexualized manner, these limited portrayals may more likely be internalized as reality" (2). Ultimately, roles for minorities are not only underrepresented in Hollywood, but are also portrayed in a largely negative light. Some might say the landscape of media targeting children is increasing diversity as films like *A Wrinkle in Time* and *The Darkest Minds* portray positive and empowering young characters of color who are girls. Reporter Angelica Florio writes, "*The Darkest Minds*, a diverse movie about teens speaking out regardless of their backgrounds or stereotypes assigned to them, is something that all people can benefit from seeing" (par. 9). It is true that within recent years there have been positive examples for some minority groups. However, the long held stereotypes of women and girls of color in Hollywood cannot be diminished by a few select movies containing a diverse cast. There have been few examples in which Latin American or Native American actresses have lead roles in adult media much less children's media.

Additionally, the sexualization of minority children in Hollywood disempowers those already at risk for being abused. Studies show that minority children are more likely to be abused as a result of multiple factors including a trend of low socioeconomic status (Sedlack et al). More analysis found in *Child Abuse and Neglect: Challenges and Opportunities* by doctors R. N. Srivastava and Rajeev Seth, and social worker Joan van Niekerk reaffirm that children in poverty are more likely to be sexually abused (55). It is clear that specifically minority children are not empowered in the media and are subliminally told that sexual objectification in real life is a normal occurrence, which is also a disturbing concept that remains unacknowledged by Hollywood producers and directors. Michael Morgan, a former professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst told the Huffington Post in 2017 that for even adults "stories affect how we live our lives, how we see other people, how we think about ourselves." For children, the effects of media are long lasting and compelling. A report from the American Academy Pediatrics concludes, "Children are influenced by media—they learn by observing, imitating, and making behaviors their own" (1223). As a result, children exposed to hypersexualization in the media especially those who are minorities are influenced substantially by what they view. While it cannot be said that Hollywood single

handedly contributes to the abuse of minority children, it does disempower them by depicting them in objectified roles that minority children are consistently exposed to by watching TV and movies. Hollywood ultimately paints the narrative for minority children that it is *normal* for them to be objectified and sexualized by adults in their own lives.

BRINGING THE SCRIPT TO LIFE: CHILD SEXUALIZATION AND PREDATORS

Hollywood is seen as a space for creative expression with the capability to empower the masses. Unfortunately, Hollywood can empower the wrong people to do awful things. In 1986 a senate committee report claimed, “[a] pedophile needs to know or to convince himself that his obsession is not ‘abnormal’ and dirty, but is shared by thousands of other intelligent, sensitive people.” The sexualization of children in Hollywood does just this. Across movies and TV shows, children and teens are sexualized by means of character action and character portrayal. Studies agree that underage female characters in Hollywood are sexualized at the same rate as adult female characters if not more. Professor Stacy Smith at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism conducted a study in 2009 on the sexualization of teen girls in the top 100 grossing films of the year. She found that teen girls (those classified as 13-20) were just as likely to be sexualized by being depicted in revealing clothing as adult women (1). Additionally, the Parents Television Council conducted a study in 2010 on the prevalence of the sexualization of underage characters in 25 prime-time shows analyzing clothing and sexual behaviour. The study found that female characters under the age of 18 “[were] shown participating in a higher percentage of sexualizing depictions compared to adults (47% and 29% respectively)” (9). As Hollywood continues to sexualize children by means of character portrayal, the culture of abuse outside of Hollywood will continue to be affected. The sexualization of children and teens in Hollywood ultimately validates the impulses that predators have as it advances the claim that mainstream media views children as sexualized objects just as they do. The APA also claimed in 2007 when children are dressed to resemble adult women, “adults may project adult motives as well as an adult level of responsibility and agency on girls” (34). As a result of the sexualization of minority children in Hollywood, predators will only feel emboldened to take advantage of children who are already told by the media that it is normal for them to be sexualized.



Additionally, it has long been said that the goal of producers and directors in Hollywood is to continue to make a profit from productions, as the industry has largely remained financially stable for the past 80 years and wants to continue to make a profit off of movies and television shows (Davidson). While this may be true, a few scenes remain unedited in analyzing the whole picture. For some producers and directors, Hollywood is also a space for them to personally carry out their own perverse agendas. Hollywood gives accused pedophiles like Woody Allen acceptable places for them to interact with children and bring their perverse fantasies to fruition. In *Manhattan*, Woody Allen not only directed a movie about a relationship between an older man and a seventeen year old girl (“Manhattan”), but he casted himself to play the older man giving him a socially acceptable platform to engage in a taboo relationship with a young girl. Hollywood ultimately provided Allen the opportunity to bring to light his own hidden secrets. In 1992, 13 years after *Manhattan* was released, he was accused of sexually molesting his adopted daughter Dylan Farrow. Dylan Farrow’s mother and Allen’s wife at the time testified that she was concerned Allen had sexual impulses directed at Farrow beginning at age 2 (Deb & Leiderman). In 2018, Dylan Farrow gave the disturbing details of the assault she endured in an interview with CBS:

I was taken to a small attic crawl space in my mother's country house in Connecticut by my father. He instructed me to lay down on my stomach and play with my brother's toy train that was set up. And he sat behind me in the doorway, and as I played with the toy train, I was sexually assaulted ... As a 7-year-old I would say, I would have said he touched my private parts ("Dylan Farrow details her sexual assault allegations against Woody Allen").

Years later, Allen began a relationship with his other adopted daughter Soon-yi Previn and they are married to this day (Deb & Leiderman). Allen's harrowing history of accusations of abuse and perverse impulses show that predators in the film industry can turn Hollywood into a space of predicated fantasy rather than a space of innocent entertainment. Predators like Allen who create films depicting sexual abuse directed at minors only embolden predators in real life. It is an issue that has long lasting implications for specifically minority children.

In addition to Woody Allen, Dan Schneider was a respected writer, producer, and director for multiple Nickelodeon shows including the popular show *Victorious*. He launched the career of multiple famous actresses including Amanda Bynes, Ariana Grande, and Victoria Justice who is notably half Puerto Rican. In 2018, Nickelodeon "cut ties" with Schneider after claims of sexual abuse (Delbyk par. 1). Nellie Andreeva of Deadline Hollywood, states that "for years Schneider had been under a cloud of suspicion over the treatment of some younger stars of his shows" (par. 7). A look back at some of the scenes from the show *Victorious* show subliminally disturbing trends in the sexualization of young actresses with Victoria Justice at the forefront. In the show Justice's character is named Tori Vega, and Vega is a last name with common ties to the Hispanic heritage.

In light of the claims against Dan Schneider and an analysis of his productions, the objectification of young girls and young minority girls in Hollywood continues to be an unaddressed topic. However, the fact that an adult man could sexualize children on a popular children's show emboldens other men with sexual desires directed at children for one key reason. In 2002, Alan Rubin, a researcher at Kent State University coined the uses and gratification theory in the book *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research* which suggests people decide what to watch in the media, based on a particular need they want to fulfill. In light of his theory, there is suspicion that beauty pageant TV shows like *Toddlers and Tiaras* are watched by pedophiles to advance their pedophilic impulses, and many members of the public against the production of such shows call it borderline "child pornography" (Tamer 1). His theory is grounded in relation to the productions of Hollywood as films and TV shows target specific audiences. For example, children's media is directed at, targeted to, and watched by children... or so many would think. An alarming conclusion arises from Rubin's analysis: pedophiles watch children's TV shows and movies because first they know children will be sexualized in them, and second they feel as if their impulses are validated when they watch children being sexualized. At first glance, works like Schneider's might seem playful, innocent, and fun for children. After learning about Schneider's allegations and rewatching some of the shows produced by Schneider himself, many will feel compelled to ask themselves: how could someone like him be allowed to work with children? Why were the young actresses subject to overt but subliminal sexualization? Why did no one see the character portrayals particularly those of minority girls like Justice's character as inherently wrong? These are questions that no one in Hollywood seems to be asking until after allegations of sexual abuse reach the surface.

The claim that predators are emboldened by Hollywood's depiction of children and the sexualization of minority children, is also reflected in the rates of sexual abuse by race. As children and teens are increasingly at risk of child abuse at the hands of the portrayal of characters in Hollywood, one aspect of the conversation remains particularly concerning: children belonging to minority groups are at a higher risk of being exploited in real life. The rates of sexual abuse for African American children and those of Hispanic descent are considerably higher compared to white children (Sedlak et al 9). The rates of abuse signal to the disproportionate sexualization of minority children and the sexualized stereotypes they are exposed to. Hollywood is undoubtedly complicit in the disturbing and stereotypical portrayal of children belonging to minority communities as little steps are being taken to combat these suppressive and overtly sexual roles for children. While it cannot be said that the sexualization of minority children in Hollywood causes the real world sexual abuse minorities face, the correlation between media sexualization and sexual abuse in real life is a compelling factor. As long as Hollywood continues to objectify and sexualize children, predators will continue to be emboldened.

Predators are also emboldened by the sexualization of minority children. Children of color are more likely to be targeted as a result of decreased self-esteem at the hands of media sexualization. The APA also states in 2007 that, "diminishing self-esteem arising in early adolescence may make girls particularly vulnerable to cultural messages that promise them popularity, effectiveness, and social acceptance through the right "sexy" look" (20). Additionally more evidence from the book *Child Abuse and Neglect: Challenges and Opportunities* states that children with low self-esteem are at an increased risk of sexual abuse. As young minority girls are subject to decreased self-esteem related to body image issues and increased sexualization through the portrayal of characters in Hollywood (McDade-Montez et al 1), the window of opportunity for predators remains wide open. Predators will only continue to exploit the fact that the portrayal of minority children in media can decrease their self-esteem making them an easier target. While predators will continue to target children despite their sexualized nature in the media, it is clear Hollywood only contributes to and stimulates the culture of child abuse in the United States.

REWRITING THE SCRIPT: ADDRESSING CHILD SEXUALIZATION AND ABUSE

As new movies and TV shows are produced and released, it is crucial that Hollywood start to take serious steps to address this issue by positively portraying young girls. If not, the sexualization of minority girls in Hollywood will continue to stimulate the entire culture of abuse directed at them. Not only does the status quo media culture disempower girls, but it also emboldens predators. Children should not be forced to be critical of the character portrayal in media content as Hollywood should be positively influencing the lives of young girls already. Young minority girls need to know that sexual objectification is not normal; that they too can be empowered in their everyday lives; and that they are worth more than what Hollywood depicts them as.

Growing up, I had very few Latina role models to look up to in Hollywood in a positive manner. When I sat down to watch a show or movie, I did not see characters that I culturally identified with. When I did see young girls like me being portrayed in films and shows, I saw them being characterized in a negative light. It is a problem that plagues minority girls across the country that greatly affects the perceptions that girls have of themselves. Unfortunately, Hollywood continues to perpetuate the problem only further. I find myself wondering how my perceptions of my culture and myself would have changed if I was exposed to a movie or show that empowered girls like me. Imagine a movie that starred a young Latina as a smart and educated aspiring scientist who defied stereotypes. Although this movie does not exist, it is a movie that has the potential to empower;

and empowerment is really what turns a first draft script into an award winning film.

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