

The Consequences of Sexualizing Young Girls in Reality Television Dance Programs

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Daniel Ahadi's CMNS 110 course *Introduction to Communication Studies*. The assignment asked students to present an argument on an important issue in communication studies by presenting a defensible topic assertion, rebutting counterarguments and including course concepts. The paper uses APA citation style.

The reality television series *Dance Moms* sexualizes young female dancers, leading to negative effects on the girls in the series, and on society. *Dance Moms* sexualizes girls by forcing them to employ inappropriate movements, costumes and music. Because of its popularity, *Dance Moms* influences the routines performed in mainstream dance competitions, pushing age-inappropriate dances to new levels. Often, girls do not understand the implications behind their routines, and they become defined by the norms of sexualized dance, unable to escape a society that glorifies the objectification of their bodies. Proponents of sexualized reality television shows argue that viewers are positively impacted by what they see. However, research suggests that television shows that normalize the sexualization of children can lead to an array of negative consequences, including body image issues. In a society fixated on sex and pornography, *Dance Moms* and sexualized dance competitions are dangerous to young girls who do not know what is healthy or harmful when it comes to displays of their sexuality.

“Prosti-tot” is how Christi Lukasiak, the mom of a preteen girl on the television show *Dance Moms* describes her daughter (Hartmann, 2016, p. 5, as cited in Sandlos, 2020, p. 224). *Dance Moms* is a popular reality television show that follows the lives of several young girls who train under their instructor, Abby Lee Miller.

Every week, the girls compete in different dance competitions across America, stirring controversy from the involvement of their mothers, and the harsh treatment they receive from Miller (Sandlos, 2020). However, audiences who consume the series—mostly young female children and adults—seldom question the implications behind the highly sexualized dances. Viewers recognize that in the context of dance competitions, it is normal for girls to thrust their hips, dance to song lyrics about sex, and wear bras and underwear on stage. Dance competitions contribute to a culture that normalizes the portrayal of young girls as sexual objects, the consequences of which are then exacerbated by the popularity of reality television shows such as *Dance Moms*. In this paper, I will explore how *Dance Moms* sexualizes young girls, explain how reality television creates a cycle of sexualization in local dance studios, refute counterclaims, and discuss the impacts of sexualization on society.

Dance Moms employs inappropriate music, costumes and movements, which lead to the sexualization of the young girls in the series. The APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls explains that sexualization can occur when it is inappropriately imposed upon a person (Zurbriggen et al., 2007). The APA's definition of sexuality is evident in dance competitions, where dance teachers force age-inappropriate displays of sexuality upon young, unknowing girls (Zurbriggen et al., 2007). Schultz (2018) explains that in dance competitions, sexuality is forced upon preteen girls in three ways: costumes, movements and music, which all appear in *Dance Moms*. In a routine called "FANTastic," dancers dress in tan bras and booty shorts, imitating topless showgirls (Russell et al.). Dance instructor Abby Lee Miller tells them that "the audience should think that you are nude" (Russell et al., 2018, p. 3). Furthermore, Miller tells her students that they must give "more butt, it's all about the butt," referring to the movements performed in the dance (Cardinal, 2013, p. 9). In another performance to the song "Electricity" by Ashley Jana (2012, 0:43), girls gyrate and grind on the floor to the lyrics, "Can you feel it? Can you take it? Baby it's so electric, so come and play with me." Dance teachers inappropriately impose sexuality because the girls have no idea they are sending sexual messages to their audiences. The girls and their mothers feel extreme discomfort towards the costumes, movements and music, while their dance teacher falsely assures them that their performances are completely normal (Russell et al., 2018).

Dance Moms influences dance competition culture, and vice versa, creating a cycle that normalizes the intensifying sexualization of young dancers. Sandlos (2020) explains that in 2010, eight-year-old girls from a California dance studio

performed a routine inspired by Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies,” where they thrust their pelvises and gyrated their hips. The YouTube video went viral and brought mainstream attention to sexualized dance competitions. Sandlos further argues that the controversy from the video influenced *Dance Moms* to create dances imitating the costumes, music and movements of the “Single Ladies” dance. The routines in *Dance Moms* sparked a wave of dances in local studios that included highly sexualized elements (Sandlos, 2020). Here, I suggest that mainstream dance competitions influence the portrayal of dance on reality television, which is reflected back into mainstream dance competitions, creating a cycle that pushes the limits of sexualization beyond what is imagined. The sexualization becomes increasingly normalized and celebrated as empowering, demonstrating “the danger of a single story,” a concept developed by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2016), where one story can become the only story about a group of people. Normalizing the sexualization of girls in dance competitions demonstrates that one single story—the story of empowerment—has caused society to believe that sexualized dance benefits young children. *Dance Moms* further pushes this narrative by reaching audiences of young girls, making them believe that sexualization is normal, and encouraging them to copy what they see on television.

Proponents of sexualized dances argue that performing in dance competitions is harmless because young girls do not understand the implications behind their dancing (Schultz, 2018). Schultz interviews Dr. Tomi-Ann Roberts, a leading psychologist on the sexualization of girls, who explains that parents allow their daughters to perform sexualized dances because they believe it is cute to watch them shake their behinds. The girls have no idea what they are doing, and the dancing is therefore harmless. Additionally, mothers who defended the girls in the “Single Ladies” dance stated that the dancers were simply doing what they loved, and the dancing was normal in the dance competition context (Russell et al., 2018). However, I suggest that when girls are oblivious to the sexual messages they convey, they are more likely to be negatively impacted. Dr. Tomi-Ann Roberts argues that when girls repeatedly practice a routine with sexualized lyrics, they do not bring “educated ears” to the material and are therefore more likely to become affected by the music (Schultz, 2018, p. 20). Mindless listening leads to negative impacts because girls who dance, or view *Dance Moms*, become defined by the norms of sexualized dance, which makes them oblivious to the sexual messages they convey to their audiences (Sandlos, 2020). Furthermore, Sandlos (2020) adds that girls do not know they can resist against the norms imposed upon them, leaving them trapped in the cycle of sexualization, which ultimately

leads to negative consequences on body image. When watching and idolizing dancers on television, young girls have difficulties navigating themselves in societies that glorify the objectification of their bodies. Children place their self-worth on unattainable beauty and body standards, showing that contrary to what supporters might believe, sexualized dances are extremely harmful (Sandlos, 2020).

Supporters of sexualized reality television series suggest that viewers are positively impacted because they consume the shows for gratifying entertainment purposes (Kelly & Garmon, 2016). Here, I use the example of child beauty pageants because reality television programs, such as *Toddlers & Tiaras*, are extremely similar to *Dance Moms* in the way that children, wearing false eyelashes, hair and nails are portrayed as “sex objects on stage” (Wolfe, 2012, p. 439, as cited in Kelly & Garmon, 2016, p. 202). Kelly and Garmon (2016) argue that the more that audiences consume child beauty pageants on television, the more positively they feel about them. Additionally, viewers do not feel that the children are prone to abuse, creating an overarching positive narrative about child beauty pageants. Although Kelly and Garmon’s study holds its weight, Bretthaur et al. (2007, as cited in Schultz, 2018) provide more convincing evidence that content in television and video games communicates messages that women should be objectified, sexualized and dominated. Television programs for children frequently portray girls wearing tight, revealing clothing, normalizing the sexualization of children from a young age, which creates a stronger belief in the importance of appearance (Stone et al., 2015, as cited in Schultz, 2018). The fact that viewers feel positively about harmful reality television programs exposes the serious issues associated with mass communication. Pavlik and McIntosh (2018) explain that mass media has the function of entertaining the population, which can promote “low culture,” detracting people from actual underlying political issues. Fans of reality television shows that sexualize young girls focus solely on the superficial entertainment factor of the programs, ignoring serious problems, such as the sexualization and exploitation of children.

The sexualization of girls in dance competitions has disastrous consequences on a society that revolves around sex and pornography. A video created by Dance Awareness: No Child Exploited (DA:NCE) (2020) explains that mainstream media, including reality television is today’s pornography. Here, I argue that through dance competitions, children participate in an exploitative grooming process. DA:NCE explains that grooming starts subtly, by encouraging girls to dance in an erotic way, and by broadcasting these dances to an audience of

children who believe what they see is normal. Dance competitions program children to be sexualized and victimized to the point where if pedophiles—who share dance videos amongst themselves—attempt to victimize them, they cannot discern what is healthy or harmful (DA:NCE, 2020). Additionally, dance competitions prepare children to perform in pornography, by cultivating a taste for sex at an early age, and by awarding sexualized dances with a higher chance of winning in competitions (DA:NCE, 2020). In order to resist the grooming process created by reality television, people must develop media literacy skills by questioning media messages and stereotypes, and by considering their wider social implications (Pavlik & McIntosh, 2018). Although reality television portrays dance competitions as normal and healthy, viewers must realize that the underlying messages of sexualization, exploitation and pornography are not at all normal. Bringing attention to an alternative message by highlighting the harms of reality television dance programs protects young dancers around the world.

Dance competitions sexualize and objectify young girls, leading to detrimental effects on the performers and on greater society. The negative consequences are perpetuated by *Dance Moms*, a reality television show that normalizes the sexualization of girls, making it acceptable for local dance studios to inappropriately portray young dancers as sex objects. By doing so, dance teachers put girls at risk for sexual exploitation, body image issues and sex work. Currently, scholarly research surrounding the sexualization of girls in dance competitions and on reality television is extremely limited. Further research could include studying *Dance Moms* and its direct impact on both the participants of the show, and its viewers. Additionally, research could include the consequences of sexualization for different races, genders, social classes, abilities, and the intersection of these factors. Understanding the effects of sexualization for different groups of people assists in finding a solution to the issue of sexualized dance. By resisting the fact that *Dance Moms* is a normal form of entertainment for the masses, viewers save millions of little girls who love the art of dance.

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