

Example of essay on media and sexuality

[Technology](#), [Internet](#)



Sexuality is one of the fundamental precepts of human behavior, but it is one that is relatively poorly understood. Sexuality encompasses a spectrum of behaviors, interests, and choices, from the relatively mainstream to the seemingly bizarre, and even the dangerous. The way the media has portrayed sexuality and sexual issues has changed over time, but one thing has stayed constant: sexuality is continuously discussed by the media, regardless of how it is portrayed or what is normalized and accepted by society at any given time. The way sexuality was perceived in the past is very different from the way it is perceived today, but that does not mean that media and art in the past was neutered and free from sexual content and references to sexual themes and sexuality. The media is one of the the leading factors insofar as changing cultural perspectives on sexuality is concerned, and the impact that the media has on the cultural mindset has only grown with the invention of the television (and later the Internet), as well as the widespread use of social media and other information-sharing technologies.

In the past sex education was considered a sensitive issue that required special treatment within a family setup, now the same can be accessed easily through the Internet. Sex education is being taught in public schools, as well; some parents seem to believe this is a bad thing, but the more open treatment of sexuality and providing children with alternative methods of contraception has significantly reduced the amount of adolescent pregnancies that occur in places that do have some sort of comprehensive sexual education. Weaver, Smith, and Kippax (2002) write, “ results suggest that receiving formal sex education before first sex was associated with

abstaining from sexual intercourse, delaying initiation of sexual intercourse, and greater use of contraception at first sex” (Weaver, Smith, and Kippax, 2002). However, sex education was truly promoted in schools as a specter of a new disease began to creep onto the horizon in the 1980s and early 1990s: the specter of HIV/AIDS. An increase in sexually transmitted diseases as well as the emergence of HIV/AIDS has contributed to the development of a more open sex education, especially as the disease began to affect more members of the community outside of the homosexual community (Nelkin, 1991).

Cases of HIV/AIDS were not recognized in the United States until approximately 1980, when doctors began to see cases of men who engaged in sexual intercourse with other men routinely showing up at hospitals with a rare form of cancer known as Kaposi’s Sarcoma (Verghese, 1994). The media quickly latched onto the new virus that became known first as GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency) and later HIV (Verghese, 1994). It was a testament to the media’s homophobia that the disease that affected so many-- even straight men and women-- was known as GRID for as long as it was. It was not until much later in the spread of the HIV virus that the media began to portray HIV properly: by that time, there was so much misinformation and urban legend built up around the virus that it was nearly impossible to undo the damage that the media had done in terms of perceptions of HIV-positive people.

The media’s spread of falsehoods regarding HIV is one of the reasons that sex education for children is so important; for all of the media’s obsession with sex and sexuality, there are a large number of misconceptions and non-truths that are spread maliciously by the popular media in regards to sex

and sexuality. While some of these myths are merely irritating, some of them-- like the myths surrounding HIV/AIDS, for instance, are downright harmful to those who believe them. Many straight women were infected by HIV in the United States in the 1980s and early 1990s because they did not understand the way the virus was spread; even today, in sub-Saharan Africa, the Catholic Church continues to use the media to spread misinformation about AIDS (Verghese, 1994). This misinformation has led to the misconception that sex with a virgin can cure an individual of HIV; women and children are raped daily due to media misinformation about the spread of HIV (Verghese, 1994).

However, during the early days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the Internet was not in use as it is today. The growth of the Internet meant that more information was available to anyone who wanted it, but also that more misinformation and myth was also available. Weeding out the bad information from the good is a skill that is fundamentally important in today's world. The introduction of the Internet and social media cause people to be exposed to sexual issues at a very young age. This exposure, while not necessarily a negative thing on its face, is turned to a negative influence due to the large amount of bad information contained in media in regards to sexual activities, and the ways in which media pressures children and young adolescents into sexual activities at younger ages.

The problem is that the Internet is largely unpoliced, and thus, anyone can find any information on the Internet, especially in a place like the United States where there are very few legal controls in place on the virtual world. While the Internet can be an excellent resource for people who are looking

for information, it can also be problematic for children and young adolescents who are just starting to discover their sexualities. Gunter (2002) suggests that being exposed to extreme behaviors normalizes those behaviors; for instance, being exposed to violence and sex from a young age normalizes the relationship between violence and sex, and can sometimes lead to participation in relationships that are unhealthy. This does not only apply to young women, either-- young men are just as influenced, if not more influenced, by the perceptions of sex and sexuality that they experience in the media (Gunter, 2002). Controlling exposure to problematic information is difficult because the Internet is so readily available from anywhere; the growing use of other technologies like smartphones and tablets to access the Internet only compounds the problem.

Smartphones are problematic in a few ways. First, owning a smartphone contributes heavily to the amount of time that a person spends online; since most people carry their phones with them everywhere, information can be accessed at any time. No longer are people tethered to a desktop computer or even a laptop to access the Internet; instead, they can access it anywhere globally. However, in addition to being consistently available, smartphones provide other reasons for use to access sexually-explicit media. First, as previously stated, most people keep their smartphones on them all the time, meaning they do not have to share them with others. For people who do not want others to know what kind of content they have been accessing, this privacy can be extremely compelling.

Another aspect of privacy that the smartphone provides for the user is due to its size. A person must be standing relatively close behind the individual to

see what is on the screen; these phones provide privacy that looking at a magazine or reading a book certainly do not provide. Carrying these phones around has also normalized the use of in-ear headphones, meaning that no one can hear what is being played on the phone if the media has audio or video. This makes it much easier for an individual to access sexually-explicit content on their phone in public without worrying that anyone is going to be able to see or hear what he or she is looking at.

The Internet has also changed the mass media industry. Pornography has become a huge money-making venture, and as a result, porn movies have become acceptable in the movie industry. Movies that contain sex and sexuality are readily available for anyone to buy; even with a rating of R, it is easy for people of any age to watch any movie that they wish to see. All these changes indicate that the outlook of sex has changed significantly in the modern world.

The last issue that has been heavily media-influenced in the past few decades is the issue of gay marriage. Gay marriage was not an issue in traditional society, but it is becoming more accepted by societies around the world. In some societies, gay marriage is now legally recognized, and this is due in large part to the changing media attitudes on homosexuality, along with the general liberalization of the masses that occurs over time.

Sexuality has evolved considerably in its conception by the media. The way sex is perceived in the modern world is quite different from how it was perceived in the past, but this is not to say that the changes that have been made are not good, nor that they are bad; change is inevitable, particularly when it comes to sexuality, sexual perception and identity. The media has

played a big role in the transformation of the perceptions of sexuality in the culture as a whole.

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