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7

Sexuality and Mass Media

Hai Ren

Sexuality has been a mainstay of mass culture from the rise of print media and theater in the early modern era to its globalization through popular music, film, television, Internet, and the smartphone. At times the effects of this intimate link between sexuality and mass culture have been obvious. For example, sexual scandals disseminated through the media have dogged government officials from Marie Antoinette to Bill Clinton, Silvio Berlusconi, and Anthony D. Weiner. These stories amuse ordinary people, shape public opinions, and change political landscapes, sometimes in dramatic ways. Even more important in the long run is the significant role mass media—as entertainment, leisure, and consumption—has played in shaping the meanings of everyday life, whether through films from Hollywood to Bollywood, advertisements for "modern girls" from Asia to the Americas and Europe, or shopping centers from Mall of America (Minneapolis) to the New South China Mall (Dongguan) and the Dubai Mall.

This chapter analyzes four distinct cases that highlight the links between sexuality and mass media: representations of the "modern girl" in advertisements for cosmetics and toiletries that appeared all over the world from the 1920s to the 1950s; the proliferation of sexual discourses in US-based mass media, especially newspaper advice columns, since the 1950s; the development of media-driven youth culture in Japan centered around the figure of the *otaku* (geek) since the 1960s; and media activism in China that utilizes the Internet, sexting, and blogs in the early twenty-first century.

These cases enable us to understand three major aspects of the relationship between sexuality and mass culture: how media and its development shape the ways sexuality is talked about and understood by peoples around the world; how information and knowledge about sex are tied to the ways in which power operates to regulate sexuality as normal or abnormal, permissible or prohibited, and pleasurable or risky; and how powerful links between sexuality and mass culture on a global scale work to affirm some sexual norms and moralities while challenging others. We begin by providing a theoretical framework for understanding the cases.

Sexuality and Power

In many societies, sex and sexuality are uncomfortable topics, especially between parents and children, teachers and students, and bosses and employees. For this reason, conventional wisdom holds that a powerful array of social forces—family, religious authorities, the state, and so on—have worked hard to repress sex and sexuality except in the direct service of social reproduction (forming families, producing children, etc.). Pioneer historian of sexuality Michel Foucault argued the opposite, noting that since the eighteenth century sexuality has entered into nearly every domain of society—politics, economics, arts, education, leisure, health, and so on—and has played a central role in shaping human subjectivity, the different ways that we make sense of ourselves and that others make sense of us. For this reason, discourses about sexuality serve not so much to repress dangerous sexual desires but as a "dense transfer point for relations of power: between men and women, young people and older people, parents and offspring, teachers and students, priests and laity, an administration and a population." As a transfer point for relations of power, sexuality is "endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies" (Foucault 1978, p. 103).

Foucault highlights two strategies that society uses to manage sexuality. The first is what he calls the deployment of alliance, "a system of marriage, of fixation and development of kinship ties, of transmission of names and possessions" (Foucault 1978, p. 106). One of its main objectives is to govern the reproduction of social relations. Thus, the deployment of alliance is firmly tied to the transmission or circulation of wealth and enforced by laws designed to maintain normative sexual relations through the regula-

tion of marriage, adoption, taxes, properties, and inheritance, and the proscription of adultery and incestuous relations with blood relatives. The second strategy, the deployment of sexuality, is concerned "not in reproducing itself, but in proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating, and penetrating bodies in an increasingly detailed way, and in controlling populations in an increasingly comprehensive way" (Foucault 1978, p. 107). As Foucault's suggestive language implies, the deployment of sexuality links sexual desire with the production and consumption of commodities.

The Foucauldian perspective on sexuality is a useful framework for understanding the relationship between sexuality and power in modern societies. On the one hand, it explains how societies regulate sexuality though distinctions between what is legal and illegal, permissible and prohibited, normative and abnormal, and so on. On the other hand, it shows how new dimensions of sexuality—beyond the conventional conjugal couple—are continually produced. One way to grasp the relationship between sexuality and power is to study mass culture, especially the ways in which it shapes sexuality through the regulation and control of individuals and the collective citizenry of the nation-state.

Mass-Mediated Culture

The concept of "mass-mediated culture" addresses both historical changes in mass media and the relationship between mass media and consumers. From the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, mass media's influence on culture was tied to the development of new technologies, which ran the gamut from spectacular cinema (famously associated with Thomas Edison and the Lumière brothers) to communicative devices such as the transoceanic cablegram, linotype, typewriter, telephone, phonograph, and wireless and inexpensive photographic equipment. These new media technologies generated a range of media genres with overlapping but distinct implications for mass culture. Focusing on a specific genre such as newspaper, radio, film, television, or the Internet can be useful for understanding the development of a particular media sector or industry but does not allow us to understand an environment or milieu in which several media converge. For instance, although a media company such as Disney is best known for animation films, it has entered into many other media domains, including print media (magazines and books), music, television, video games, retailing, theme parks, and the Internet. Similarly,

Apple was established as a computer company but dropped "computer" from its original name and became one of the leaders in mobile media.

A good way of understanding media's impact on culture is through the concept of "mediasphere," which refers to "the middle ground, setting or environment of the transmission and carrying of message and people" (Debray 1996, p. 26). Media theorist Régis Debray has identified three major types of mediasphere:

> the *logosphere*, when writing functions as the central means of diffusion under the constraints and through the channels of orality; the *graphosphere*, when printed text imposes its rationality on the whole of the symbolic milieu; the *videosphere*, with its devitalization of the book via audiovisual media. (Debray 1996, p. 26)

Since the twentieth century, there has been a general shift in focus from the logosphere (hand-written and oral public communication) via the graphosphere (mechanical reproduction of text) to the videosphere (the recording of audio and visual signs) (Debray 1996, p. 27). Two more mediaspheres have emerged in the twenty-first century: the websphere and the mobilesphere. The websphere is based on the Internet, a digital multimedia and networked form of communication. The mobilesphere is a digital and networked form of communication that operates through the smartphone and other individualized, location-specific multimedia devices.

Because of mass media's close relationship to standardization and mass consumption, scholars have long debated whether mass media work to alienate or liberate their consumers. In the late 1930s and 1940s, members of the Frankfurt School in Germany launched a heated debate over the impact of mass culture on modern society that is still relevant today. On one side, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer developed the concept of "the culture industry" to refer to the industrial production, distribution, and exhibition of cultural products such as movies, music, television shows, advertisements, magazines, and novels. Adorno and Horkheimer used the term to emphasize the way that mass media standardized and rationalized the production of culture (Adorno 1991). For these two scholars, industrialized cultural production undermined the transformative potential of individually produced high art by creating a mass-produced culture of deception that promoted "pseudo individuality" and standardized lifestyles (Horkheimer and Adorno 1995, pp. 124–61). On the other side of the debate, Walter Benjamin stressed the more positive effects of industrialized

cultural production, arguing that, although mechanical reproduction undermined the special "aura" of a unique (irreproducible) work of art, it also created opportunities for a new democratic politics by enabling a wider dissemination of culture through the mass production and consumption of commodities (Benjamin 1968). According to Benjamin, this new cultural politics might be detrimental to high art but could just as easily empower as manipulate the masses.

Most contemporary scholars favor a balanced approach to the understanding of mass culture that looks closely at both the positive and negative aspects of media technologies, especially the ways in which media

> permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault 1988, p. 18)

With these considerations in mind, this chapter addresses three important questions about the relationship between sexuality and mass-mediated culture: What roles do mass media play in shaping the sexualities of media consumers? How do media users negotiate the meanings of sexuality communicated through media? What do we learn about these questions when we examine various national and transnational contexts?

Case 1: Advertisements for Cosmetics and Toiletries from the 1920s to the 1950s—The Emergence of the Modern Girl around the World

The rise of mass-mediated culture is closely intertwined with the development of consumer society. Beginning in the 1870s, the sphere of consumption—previously linked to production for the wealthiest consumers—expanded rapidly as more and more people began to enjoy higher living standards. Expanding consumption led quickly to the proliferation of consumer goods, large-scale advertising campaigns, widespread dependence on credit, and the appearance of department stores. Increased leisure time accompanied the rise in disposable income, and growing legions of consumers spent time away from work in music halls, sports stadiums, and tourist resorts.

From the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, advertising companies helped drive a rapidly expanding capitalist economy by encouraging citizens to consume through a significant shift in its business practices from promoting products to shaping the needs and desires of consumers themselves. This case study illustrates how advertisements for cosmetics and toiletries in magazines and newspapers from the 1920s to the 1950s constructed images of modern girls all over the world in ways that sought to shape consumers as gendered and sexualized subjects.

In cities from Beijing to Bombay, Tokyo to Berlin, Johannesburg to New York, the modern girl made her sometimes flashy but always fashionable appearance. What identified modern girls was the link between their use of specific commodities and their explicit eroticism. Modern girls were known by a variety of names including flappers, *chica moderna, garçonnes, moga, modeng xiaojie,* schoolgirls, *kallege ladki,* vamps, and *neue Frauen* in North America, Latin America, Europe, and Asia. Actual modern girls worked as café waitresses in Shanghai or Tokyo and as factory girls sporting

Figure 7.1 1930s postcard advertisement for La Florida bar restaurant, "The Cradle of the Daiquiri Cocktail," in Havana, Cuba. The illustration depicts Spanish conquistador Ponce de Léon—who according to legend went off in search of the Fountain of Youth—as he shares a toast with a young flapper at the crowded bar. *Source*: Transcendental Graphics / Getty Images.

bobbed haircuts in Berlin or New York. And images of modern girls circulated around the world in the guise of internationally renowned performers, including the Paris-based African American stage performer Josephine Baker and film stars such as Clara Bow, Louise Brooks, Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Ri Koran, Pola Negri, Mary Pickford, Devika Rani, Lupe Vélez, Anna May Wong, and Butterfly Wu. The modern girl was the subject of countless films, novels, and social commentaries, and she was endlessly featured in advertisements for cigarettes, cars, and cosmetics (Modern Girl Around the World Research Group 2005, pp. 248–9).

Advertisements for cosmetics and toiletries appeared all over the world during this period (Modern Girl Around the World Research Group 2005, pp. 250–1). For example, in the United States—the world's biggest producer of magazines and print advertising—such ads appeared in magazines such as *Cosmopolitan, Ladies' Home Journal,* and *Vogue* (catering to white middle- and working-class readers) as well as *The Crisis* (a journal published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and edited by W.E.B. Du Bois) and the populist *Baltimore Afro-American* (a weekly newspaper). Mexican women had access to magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Vogue* as well as weeklies such as *El heraldo ilustrado* and *El tiempo ilustrado* (Herschfield 2008, pp. 39, 51–2). In Germany, the ads appeared in such magazines as *Die Dame, Leipziger Illustrirte Zeitung,* and *Die Woche* (all directed at middle- and upper-class audiences). In the Chinese press, they appeared in treaty port newspapers published in English and Chinese (*North China Daily News* and *South China Morning Post*) and illustrated Chinese-language magazines such as *Ladies' Journal (Funu zazhi)* and *Young Companion (Liangyou),* which addressed an upper- and middle-class clientele. In India, ads appeared in venues such as *The Statesman* (Calcutta) and the *Times of India* (Bombay), major English-language dailies that catered to British colonials and Indian elites. In Africa, ads appeared in the *Cape Times* (Cape Town), a newspaper catering to the white and, to a lesser extent, "colored" populations in the British dominion of South Africa, and in black newspapers such as *Bantu Mirror* (Salisbury), *Bantu World* (Johannesburg), and the *Times of West Africa* (Accra).

Ads for cosmetics and toiletries encouraged young women to become modern girls by using products to cleanse and alter the color and texture of their teeth, hair, and skin and to change the shape and shade of their eyes and lips. This modern-girl aesthetic cut across national and imperial boundaries in ways that implicated and remade female sexuality. Beginning before World War I and lasting into the 1930s, the modern girl appeared

in advertisements with "an elongated, wiry and svelte body . . . [that signi-fied] the attractions and dangers of androgyny and sexuality outside repro-duction." Her body was also depicted as "excessively refined" with individual body parts "elegantly polished, carefully scrubbed, meticulously sprayed or, in an astounding variety of ways, cleaned and covered so that lips, teeth, mouth, hair, skin, armpits, legs and vagina are all stylishly produced" (Modern Girl Around the World Research Group 2005, p. 256). As this list suggests, the modern girl's beauty and youthfulness were often linked to scientific hygiene. Ads also depicted modern girls engaged in activities that were particularly relevant to their daily lives: as film stars, as outdoor and sports enthusiasts, in romantic or intimate poses, and in the process of making up and admiring themselves in front of a vanity or hand-held mirror (Modern Girl Around the World Research Group 2005, p. 260).

The modern girl's activities were inseparable from her sexuality: a par-ticular brand of sexualized femininity that exhibited modern characteris-tics such as self-determination, independence, rebellion, and transgression. The ads also promoted expressions of female sexuality that disregarded the normative gender and sex roles associated with being a daughter, wife, and mother. In Mexico, for example, *la flapperista* (or *la flapperesca*), like her counterpart in North America and Europe, projected the image of a young, active, independent woman enjoying a modern consumer lifestyle and who was neither wife nor mother (Herschfield 2008, pp. 58–9). In China, the figure of the modern girl marked a significant departure from the tradi-tional Confucian image of a woman who submitted to the patriarchal power of fathers, brothers, and husbands and (later on) from the Com-munist Party's image of idealistic (as opposed to materialistic), hard-working, revolutionary women. In all these places, advertising directed at young women (and their admirers) sought to link the consumption of beauty products with a new kind of sexualized female subjectivity decou-pled from traditional gender roles and reproductive sex.

Case 2: From Solitary Sex to Sexual Socialization—Mass-Mediated Sexuality in the United States since the 1950s

While formal discussions of sexuality—in schools, offices, places of worship, and so on—are strictly regulated, when they are permitted at all, informal sex talk in mass media has become increasingly vocal and explicit. Mastur-bation, for example, is rarely discussed openly in school curricula despite

being a common sexual practice and a staple of innuendo, humor, and harassment in everyday life. A historical discussion of media discourses on masturbation shows us how media work to embed sexuality in public debates about social and cultural norms. Mass media address sexual prac-tices such as masturbation in various ways, sometimes as part of its cover-age of medical, health, moral, religious, and educational issues and at other times as entertainment.

Social attitudes toward masturbation across cultures and historical eras have ranged from acceptance to reticence to prohibition. Injunctions against masturbation are especially strong in the Judeo-Christian tradition. For example, Jewish and Christian religious authorities have regularly ref-erenced the biblical story of Onan—punished by God with an early death for spilling his seed on the ground rather than impregnating his widowed sister-in-law and ensuring the family line—as proof of masturbation's sin-fulness, even though Onan's sin was more likely withdrawal before ejacula-tion. And, during the medieval period, Catholic Church authorities such as St. Thomas Aquinas taught that masturbation was not only a "sin against nature" but also worthy of condemnation because of the inevitably impure thoughts that precede the sin.

From the eighteenth century on, religious and medical authorities, espe-cially in Europe and the Americas, came to see masturbation as symbolic of the relationship between the individual and the social world and thus as a major social problem tied to control of boundaries between male and female sexuality and between licit and illicit moralities, pleasures, imagin-ings, and self–other relations (Laqueur 2003, p. 22). On occasion, medical authorities divided on the issue of when and how it was acceptable to evacuate semen for health reasons, for example following overeating and excessive alcohol consumption, but for the most part they viewed the practice with trepidation (Gudelunas 2005, p. 67). In the United States, health reformers—notably Sylvester Graham, who promoted the whole wheat Graham Cracker as a healthy food that helped stifle masturbatory urges due to its lack of spices—endorsed a multifaceted regimen of Chris-tianity, vegetarianism, and athleticism to thwart sexual incontinence, including masturbation. By the 1880s, medical authorities had linked mas-turbation with serious diseases such as tuberculosis, heart disease, and epilepsy, and recommended medical procedures, including male circumci-sion, to help curb the practice. For women, masturbation was also linked to psychological disorders such as hysteria and "marital aversion" (Gude-lunas 2005, p. 69).

The acceptance of masturbation as a healthy and normal practice has been a long, arduous process, especially in societies influenced by Judeo-Christian norms. In the late 1940s, renowned US sexologist Alfred Kinsey and his associates provided some safety in numbers when they reported that 88 percent of males masturbate by age sixteen and 93 percent by age twenty-five. By 1952, the American Psychiatric Association had removed female hysteria from its list of psychological disorders, thus paving the way for the electric vibrator to move from medical device to consumer item. It is in this historical context that we explore how 1970s and 1980s newspaper advice columns in the United States offered space for discussions about masturbation by presenting themselves as a uniquely "safe" environment for sexual discourse.

One of the most widely read advice columns was "Dear Ann Landers." From 1955 to 2002, writing under the penname "Ann Landers," Esther Pauline Friedman-Lederer, a Jewish housewife from Iowa, became one of the most powerful voices in syndicated newspapers with an engaging blend of expertise (provided by a panel of consultants) and a lively down-to-earth writing style. In 1978, *World Almanac* named her one of the most influential women in the world and by the time of her death in 2002 "Dear Ann Landers" was syndicated in 1200 newspapers worldwide with an estimated readership that exceeded 90 million.

"Masturbation" first appeared in Landers's column in 1970, around the same time as the word "rape." In a time of rapid social change—the rise of post-World War II consumer society, civil rights, the women's movement, antiwar protests, and so on—Ann Landers helped readers to understand their own sexual practices. Throughout the 1970s, for example, she advised readers that masturbation was safe and healthy unless practiced compulsively. By the early 1980s, she was reassuring readers "who were wracked with guilt over their self-pleasuring habits" that a Notre Dame provost had confirmed that even leading theologians within the Catholic Church had modified their views on masturbation (Laqueur 2003, p. 77). By the late 1980s, masturbation in and of itself was no longer seen as problem, and Landers's subsequent discussions of masturbation appeared almost nonchalantly in connection with other taboo issues such as cross-dressing.

When she personally endorsed masturbation as a recommended sexual practice on October 24, 1993, however, Landers anticipated the fallout:

> The sex drive is the strongest human drive after hunger. It is nature's way of perpetuating the human race. Males reach their sexual peak as early as 17.
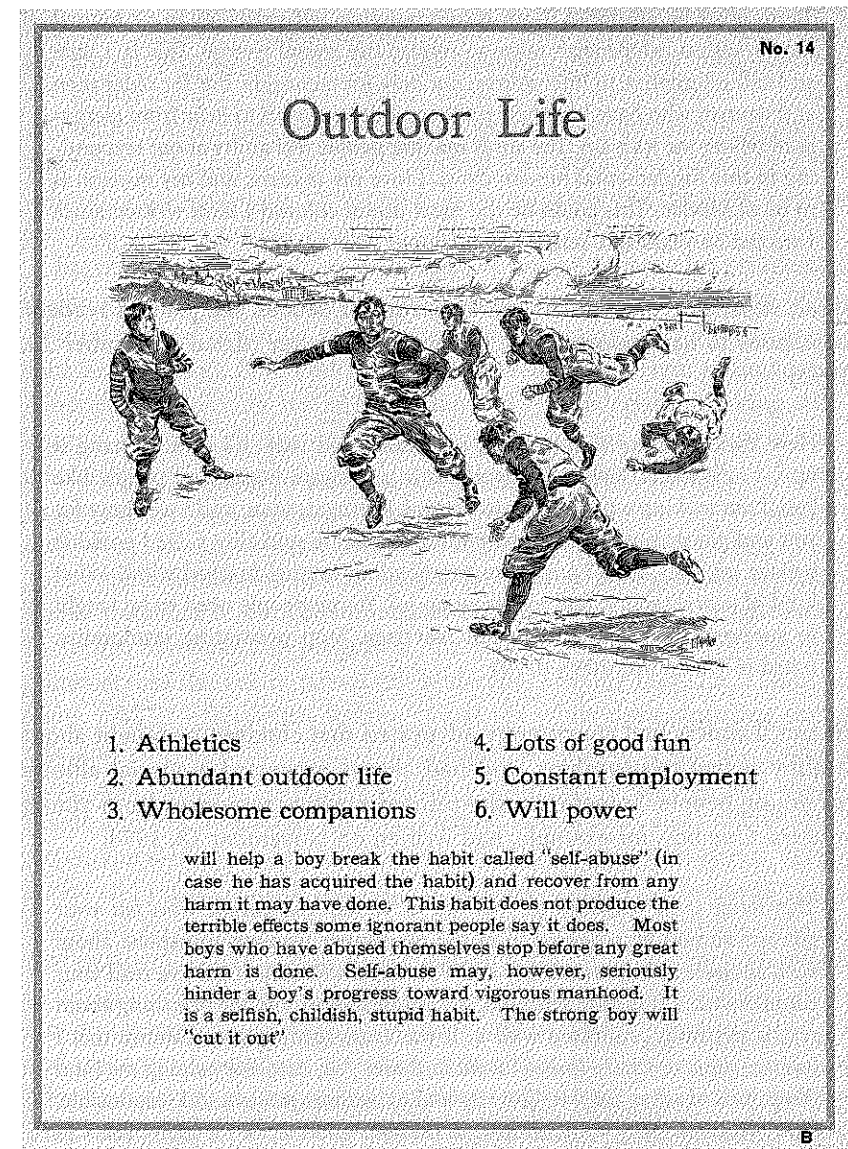
Figure 7.2 Outdoor Life poster. The poster explains that, while masturbation is not as bad as "ignorant people" claim, persistent self-abuse can "seriously hinder a boy's progress toward a vigorous manhood." *Source*: Courtesy of the Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

There must be an outlet. I am recommending self-gratification or mutual masturbation, whatever it takes to release the sexual energy. This is a sane and safe alternative to intercourse, not only for teenagers, but for older men and women who have lost their partners. I do not want to hear from clergymen telling me it's a sin. The sin is making people feel guilty about responding to this fundamental human drive. I love my readers, and my mission is to be of service. This could be the most useful column I have written since I started 38 years ago. (cited in Gudelunas 2005, p. 78)

In an effort to represent the full spectrum of debate, she printed readers' objections to her endorsement, including this letter (dated November 28, 1993):

New York: You are a disgusting, sex-crazed old lady. It's time to hang it up. . . . Pasadena, Calif.: The world is in sad shape because of people like you. I am making a pilgrimage to Fatima, Portugal, soon, and I will pray for you and place your name in the petition basket. Rapid City, S.D.: I couldn't believe my eyes. Ann Landers recommending mutual masturbation! What kind of moral swamp did you grow up in? Young people need to be taught to suppress their sex drives until marriage. Stop promoting immorality. (cited in Gudelunas 2005, p. 79)

In fact, Landers had consistently advocated that children be taught about healthy sexual relationships, and had always expressed a special affinity for young people. Sometimes, she printed positive responses from young readers. One boy, for example, had written on November 18, 1974:

This letter is in response to "No fan of yours," the parent who felt your column should be removed from the newspaper because you spoke about such subjects as homosexuality and V.D. I'm a boy, almost 16. I've read your column since I was nine years old. My parents never told me one thing about sex or anything connected with it. It was from reading your column that I learned most of what I know. I want to thank you, Ann, for helping me (and thousands of other kids) to grow up and to be more mature and responsible. God bless you. May you continue to do your good work for many years to come. (cited in Gudelunas 2005, p. 82)

As these responses show, public discussion of sexuality issues such as masturbation has been hotly contested in US media, leaving some interlocutors angry and others appreciative. What is important is that Landers's column became a means to channel and distribute information about sexual prac-

tices. This case also shows how sexuality is connected to expert knowledge and power through mediated communication. The "Dear Ann Landers" newspaper columns operated within the graphosphere to impose a kind of rationality—associated with Landers as an expert or advised by experts—that represented masturbation as a normal sexual practice. Landers's advice columns thus played an important role in incorporating the topic into the everyday lives of readers around the world.

Beyond the graphosphere, discourses of sexuality have also proliferated in the videosphere, websphere, and mobilesphere, becoming part of the cultural process of sexual socialization. Mainstream entertainment media such as television, film, and magazines have had important influences on American adolescents' sexual formation and sexual decision-making. Adolescents between thirteen and eighteen years of age spend lots of their discretionary time exploring and interacting with mass media that is known to possess sexual content, and adolescents themselves acknowledge that they often turn to the mass media for information about sexuality.

A recent survey found that media directed at young adults represent sexual practices in varied, sometimes contradictory ways (Wright 2009). In terms of television programs, the survey found that popular programs across the entire television landscape—*Family Guy, Lost, That 70s Show,* and *24*—frequently feature casual sex while deemphasizing sexual risk and responsibility. Primetime programs such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dawson's Creek* also tend to portray sex as risk free and recreational, and to characterize male and female sexual roles and preferences in stereotypical ways. In daytime soap operas, sex between new acquaintances is rare and yet sex outside marriage is normal; adultery is a frequent occurrence and yet married partners are happier with their sex lives than unmarried partners. Daytime talk shows feature a variety of guests who engage in deviant sexual behavior, but the predominant response to those behaviors is condemnation. These shows also tend to feature less sexual content and place more emphasis on sexual risk and responsibility. Music videos often feature sexual images and emphasize a hedonistic orientation to sex. And, while they rarely refer to explicit sexual behaviors such as intercourse, they are often sexist and feature very little same-sex sexual behavior.

In contrast to television, feature films generally contain stronger messages about sexual activity, more concrete role models, and more specific examples, and do so in contexts more relevant to adolescents. But, despite frequent references to and depictions of sexual activity, films generally include very few messages about the risks associated with being sexually

active. Moreover, noncommitted sex is typically portrayed as more normative and satisfactory than married sex. In addition, mainstream films are mostly devoid of same-sex eroticism and tend to depict homosexuality as the sexual preference of deviants.

Wright's survey divides women's magazines into magazines for women (*Allure, Cosmopolitan, Glamour, Marie Claire,* etc.) and magazines for adolescent girls (*Seventeen, YM,* etc.). Both genres pay attention to sexual health issues, contain graphic sexual descriptions, emphasize the inseparability of female physical appearance and female sexuality, and send mixed sexual messages. There are, however, two major differences between them. Women's magazines stress that females must develop their sexual repertoire to keep up with male sexual passions, while teen magazines instruct their readers on the ways they might resist men's advances or channel men's sexuality into relational and romantic endeavors. Moreover, while women's magazines devote significant attention to female sexual desire, teen magazines approach female sexuality primarily from a relational perspective. In contrast, mainstream magazines read by adolescent males (*FHM, Maxim, Stuff,* etc.) tend to privilege male sexuality over female sexuality, portray sex between strangers as normative, and assume that males are not interested sexually in other males. In addition, they contain little information about sexual risk or responsibility.

This survey of sexual content in contemporary mainstream media exposes a proliferation of sexual discourses in multiple mediaspheres in US society and, by extension, in global mass media. While Ann Landers's advice column focused on masturbation as a physical and psychological health issue, other venues such as television, film, and magazines have impacted sexual socialization in different ways. These differences reveal how the proliferation of media discourses on sex and sexual practices from masturbation to casual sex have placed sexuality at the heart of modern subjectivity.

Case 3: Media Fans—The *Otaku* and the "Beautiful Fighting Girl" in Japan since the 1960s

Mass media ideas, representations, and advice on adolescent sexual identities and practices do not translate directly into the everyday lives of young people: media consumers make distinctions between fiction and reality and between information and practices as they attempt to make sense of mass-

mediated representations of sexuality. In the process, they distinguish and define the boundaries between what is meaningful and what is not, often actively appropriating media culture by becoming fans of certain genres (comedy, horror, science fiction), of specific products and companies (Apple, Disney, Star Trek), or of various media technologies and gadgets. All over the world, fans of comics, animation, and video games meet regularly at conventions and online; they share and exchange knowledge, information, and creations (fan fictions and 'zines); and many dress up as comic book characters and reenact video game scenes while documenting their activities through stories, photos, and videos.

In Japan—a country famous since the end of World War II for developing new media technologies, entertainments, and cutting-edge gadgets—consumers have a long tradition of incorporating media into their daily lives. Many Japanese media practices have become influential around the world. For example, the popular US-based technology magazine *Wired* devotes a special section of each issue to the consumption patterns of Japanese girls. And many popular terms and concepts in media consumption and production directed at youth around the world reflect Japanese uses (even when the original words are English): manga (comics), anime (animation), and cosplay (costume play).

At the heart of the consuming practices involving manga, anime, and cosplay is the figure of the *otaku,* a term used to refer to passionate fans of anime, manga, and video games. *Otaku* are known for their skills with and knowledge of computer technology and for their encyclopedic, even fetishistic, knowledge of particular strains of visual culture. *Otaku* first appeared in the 1960s in the historical context of rapid developments in production and consumption in Japan. Azuma Hiroki, in his *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (2009), argues that there are three generations of *otaku* (Azuma 2009, pp. 6–7): the first generation was born around 1960 and saw *Space Battleship Yamato* (1974) and *Mobile Suit Gundam* (1979) during their teen years; the second generation was born around 1970 and during their teen years enjoyed the diversified and mature *otaku* culture produced by the previous generation; the third generation was born around 1980 and were junior high-school students at the time the *Neon Genesis Evangelion* media franchise took off in the mid-1990s.[1] Generational differences partly reflect the evolution of media technologies. While the first generation was interested in science fiction and B-grade movies, the third generation is fascinated with mysteries and computer games. The latest generation also experienced the rapid spread of the Internet during their teens and, thus,

their main activities tend to take place on websites and they express particular interest in computer-generated graphics.

Mainstream Japanese culture focuses on negative aspects of the *otaku* phenomenon and views its participants as under-socialized, unhealthily obsessive, and unable to distinguish between fiction and reality. Although manga illustrators first used the term *otaku*—which translates into English literally as "you" and figuratively as "geek"—to refer to each other, by the early 1980s it had taken on negative connotations for the general public. These negative connotations were further solidified in 1989 when police apprehended the serial killer of four young girls, Miyazaki Tsutomu, whose penchant for anime and slasher films caused the media to dub him "the Otaku Murderer."

For many scholars, however, the *otaku* have a great deal to teach us about how to survive and flourish in a media-saturated environment. From a media studies perspective, the *otaku* population exploded after the release of the first VCRs and they have become active users of many media-storage technologies including VCR, laser discs, DVD, and computer hard drives. Over the years, *otaku* interests have grown across media genres, their life histories often becoming inseparable from the development of media technologies, especially analog and digital technologies associated with the videosphere, websphere, and mobilesphere. The *otaku* are not simply anime fans; their practices straddle multiple technologies such as film, comics, and videos. In *An Introduction to Otaku Studies* (1996), Okada Toshio (aka the "king of Otaku") argues that *otaku* have three essential traits: an evolved visual sensibility, advanced referencing ability, and indefatigable desire for self-improvement and self-assertion (Okada 1996, cited in Saitō 2011, p. 13). First, they see like an "aesthete" who has "the ability to find one's own kind of beauty in a work and enjoy watching the growth of its creator"; second, they see like a "master" who has "the ability to analyze the work logically and grasp its structure like a scientist while also looking to steal its secrets like a craftsman"; and third, they see like a connoisseur who is able "to get a glimpse into the creator's situation and the fine points of the work" (Okada 1996, cited in Saitō 2011, note 6, pp. 190–1). From Okada's perspective, then, *otaku* are not passive consumers of mass media but effectively combine active media creation and consumption.

Sexuality plays a multilayered, complex role in *otaku*. One example of that complexity is the invention and development of a series of fictional characters grouped together under the name "beautiful fighting girl"—or, as psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki prefers, "the phallic girl" (Saitō 2011, p. 31). A

typical beautiful fighting girl has huge vacant eyes, an unusually small mouth, and enormous breasts, and she sometimes dresses in lingerie-like armor and carries a grotesque laser gun (Saitō 2011, p. 31). Since the 1964 serialization of Ishinomori Shōtarō's *Cyborg 009* (*Saibōgu 009*) in the weekly magazine *Shōnen Sunday*—made into an anime in 1968—beautiful fighting girl characters have proliferated in comics, television series, films, and video games. They were originally icons intended for young teenage girls

Figure 7.3 *Sukeban deka*. Cover illustration from the first volume published by Media Factory Inc. The beautiful fighting girl in a sailor suit is brandishing her deadly yo-yo. *Source*: © Shinji Wada / Media Factory Inc.

but gradually caught on with *otaku* consumers. For example, in the manga serialization of Wada Shinji's *Sukeban deka* (Boss Girl Detective), which began in 1976, the legendary girl boss (*sukeban*) Asamiya Suki uses a cherry blossom yo-yo as her weapon against evil while she patrols schoolyards that the police are unable to infiltrate. Although the series was initially targeted at young girls who liked strong heroines, when it was turned into a live-action television drama in the 1980s, starring teen "idols" such as Saitō Yuki, Minamino Yōko, Ōnishi Yuka, and Asaka Yui, producers modified the work to appeal to a broader *otaku* audience. The heroines, who originally appeared as tomboys with short hair, became sweet girl idols in sailor outfits (Saitō 2011, p. 100). The shift in image of the beautiful fighting girl characters for the *otaku* market resulted from a number of important media events: the first comic market in 1975, the first sales of the VCR for home use in 1976, and the 1979 publication of the first anime magazine, *Animage*. By enlarging consumer markets in Japan, these events made the beautiful fighting girl a staple in a world of expanding media genres (comics, animated and live-action television series and films, video games, and online videos).

The parallel between the development of various beautiful fighting girl characters and the evolution of media technologies toward digital and multimedia formats in *otaku* consumption practices shows how *otaku* make sense of their life worlds through the logic of multiplicity rather than linearity. An *otaku* often transforms his or her sexuality through mediated fictional characters, producing multiple sexual realities (with regard to body sensations, enjoyment forms, and pleasurable qualities), which can run contrary to mainstream sexual norms. According to Saitō, for example, an *otaku* is a person with "a strong affinity for fictional contexts" who "makes use of fictionalization as a way to 'possess' the object of his or her love," "who inhabits not just two but multiple orientations," and who is "capable of finding sexual objects in fiction itself" (Saitō 2011, p. 16).

Otaku sexuality is thus tied to the ways in which they take pleasure in multiple levels of fictionality and treat everyday reality itself as a kind of fiction. Through fictionalization, *otaku* turn external objects to their own purposes. In cosplay (*kosupure*) and fan magazines, for example, writers often borrow settings and characters from popular anime stories to populate their own scenarios, which they then upload to online forums (Saitō 2011, p. 20). Despite these online fantasies, Saitō argues that *otaku* sexuality operates differently in real life. *Otaku* may be perverse and transgressive in their fictionalized lives but follow mainstream sexual norms and conventions in real life. For example, a male *otaku* may idolize anime characters

but does not insist that real-world women act as stand-ins for his fantasy (Saitō 2011, p. 30). Instead, most *otaku* make clear distinctions between their media-based interactions with fictional characters and their real-life interactions with real people.

The *otaku* phenomenon tells us a lot about the everyday lives of avid media consumers all over the world. Although outsiders often view their relationship with media in negative terms—as unhealthy, obsessive, deviant, and so on—*otaku* and their fellow media "junkies" participate in media culture not just as passive consumers but also as active producers.[2] Recent developments in social media technology by such companies as Facebook, Google, and Amazon involve sharing messages, images, videos, and music and rely heavily on content produced by consumers. In becoming "prosumers" (producer-consumers), media users help generate massive profits for media and technology companies. At the same time, they put many aspects of their lives under public scrutiny, including their sexuality. And the creative responses of *otaku*, prosumers, and others to the mass mediation of their sexuality reveals that human sexuality is far from one-dimensional or fixed at birth, but continuously adapts to cultural changes as we negotiate the boundaries between real and fictional, public and private, and normative and transgressive.

Case 4: Sexting, "Human Flesh Search," and the "Guo Meimei Baby" Incident in Twenty-First-Century China

In the twenty-first century, mediaspheres involving the Internet and the smartphone have emerged as increasingly influential forms of mass media. While *otaku* are active consumers (and producers) who explore their sexuality through anime, manga, and computer games, ordinary users of the Internet and smartphones engage in a less deliberate but no less meaningful way in consuming and producing a wide range of mass-mediated sexual discourses. Among youth who grew up in the contemporary age of webspheres and mobilespheres, especially those born after 1990, one popular practice involves "sexting." To go beyond a simple understanding of sexting as the act of sharing sexually explicit messages or images through mobile devices, we need to examine it in terms of the relationship between sexuality and mass media.

Like other sexuality-related issues such as gender relations, marriage, masturbation, sexual socialization, and cosplay, sexting has become an important aspect of mass-mediated culture because it too marks the

boundaries between public and private, normal and abnormal, and legal and illegal. Thus, its impacts are often greater than we would expect from a simple sexual communication between two mobile devices. In many countries, for example, sexting is influenced by celebrity media culture. In tabloid journalism, paparazzi follow a celebrity and try to take photos and videos or hack email accounts that might include sex-related materials. In this context, celebrities' private lives, including their sex lives, are on public display. Like this celebrity-based media practice, sexting is a public display of private life through multimedia text messages that include photographic, video, audio, and textual information.

Unlike celebrity watching, however, sexting refers to a broader set of practices carried out by the individuals or groups themselves. These materials are uploaded to popular Internet and social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. As sexting materials accumulate on these sites, they become part of a person's life history. Along with many other types of web-based media—such as personal or organizational websites, blogs, and forums—sexting messages are stored online for a long time (if not permanently). Even when messages are deleted, they continue to circulate in some form online. Thus, online materials including sexting materials become part of an individual's personnal dossier. These stored materials can serve to facilitate and enhance communications with others. They can also negatively affect a person's life. For example, in early 2011, married New York Congressman Anthony D. Weiner's camera-phone photos of his crotch—which he sexted to other women—circulated widely online, producing a media-driven scandal that eventually led the congressman to resign.

In China, "netizens," active online users who act as web citizens, have coined the phrase "human flesh search" (*renrou sousuo*) to describe a practice that searches out online sources to reveal information that is unavailable to the general public or intentionally concealed by government authorities.[3] The Chinese "human flesh search" usually targets a particular official or public figure, exposing corrupt government and corporate practices or provoking a celebrity scandal. These searches often include information on the target's sexual activities.

The Guo Meimei case illustrates the role of sexting and blogging in "human flesh search" practices. Guo Meimei, a twenty-year-old Chinese woman who uses the online name "Guo Meimei Baby," regularly posts photos and short messages on her microblog, a Sina Weibo account.[4] One photo, for example, reveals her closetful of Hermès handbags. Another shows her wearing sunglasses and leaning on the hood of a white Maserati,

a luxury car with a price tag of over 2.4 million yuan (about US $370,000) in China. Other photos and entries detail her jet-set lifestyle, describing the orange Lamborghini she drives in Shenzhen as "little bull" and the white Maserati in Beijing as "little horse." Among more than a hundred photos widely circulated and shared on the Internet, Guo Meimei typically appears in sexy and fashionable clothes, including bikini swim suits, tube or push-up tops, and short skirts. Like other Internet photos taken by young women, these pictures include self-shot images of Guo in front of a mirror showing her cleavage, various facial expressions, and her eyes with artificial lashes.

On June 21, 2011, someone on the Chinese Internet commented on the photos and on Guo's job title as "Business General Manager of the Red Cross Society," which was marked with a "V," meaning that her identity had been verified by Sina, the company that hosted the microblog. Within two hours, the message was shared over a thousand times and Chinese netizens began to criticize Guo and the Red Cross Society of China. They raised questions about Guo's personal relationship with an older male Red Cross official, Wang Jun, and about the Red Cross Society's lack of transparency regarding public donations and its business operations. Guo initially defended herself by saying that her company was a commercial operation separate from the Red Cross. As public pressure grew, the Red Cross and Guo claimed they had nothing to do with each other. Through human flesh searches, however, netizens discovered the existence of a shady group called the Red Cross of the Commercial Sector, which was in fact authorized by Red Cross Society headquarters.

On June 24, the Red Cross Society asked the police to investigate Guo. Two days later, Guo apologized online for her "stupid and ignorant behavior" and "made-up identity." Paparazzi-style photographs showed her arriving at the Beijing Airport on June 27 and rushing off in a private sedan. The police launched an investigation and announced two weeks later that Guo did not have any relationship with the Red Cross. Throughout the month of July, the Red Cross took a series of damage-control measures: opening a microblog account, hosting news conferences, stopping operations of the Red Cross of the Commercial Sector, and launching a website for donors who wanted to look up their donation records. In early August, Guo and her mother appeared on *Larry Lang Live*, a *Larry King Live*-style television show on financial and economic issues hosted by Larry Lang (Lang Xianping), a famous Chinese economist. On the show, they attempted to address some of the questions raised by netizens, explaining that the

source of their wealth was not the Red Cross but the mother's investments (especially in the Chinese stock market in the 1990s) and Wang Jun, whom Guo claimed to be her "adopted father" (*ganba*), a real estate broker in Shenzhen rather than a Red Cross employee. And they explained the expensive cars: Guo had received a Mini Cooper as a seventeenth-birthday gift from her mother and the white Maserati from Wang Jun. Following the show's broadcast, Wang's business partner Wong told the *Nanfang Urban Daily* that Wang denied that he was Guo's adopted father. Later, a widely circulated message claimed that Guo's mother was under pressure to admit that Guo was Wang's daughter and had been born after Wang married another woman. Chinese netizens continued to explore whether Guo was Wang's adopted daughter, actual daughter, or mistress and to discuss the broader implications of the case.

With respect to sexuality and gender, the case raises three issues. First, Guo grew up in a relatively wealthy family. Unlike her mother's generation in Maoist China, she never faced problems of poverty. Public response to her behavior throughout the incident demonstrated that, although Guo is from an economically secure background, she was still considered a "risky" subject in Chinese society because she lacks self-control and fails to behave like a good citizen. Guo thus reinforced popular perceptions of spoiled, wealthy youth who lack any sense of social responsibility.

Second, most observers blamed Guo's life trajectory as the spoiled daughter of a single mother who grew up without the guidance of a proper father for her poor behavior and the potential risk she poses to society. The story her mother told on *Larry Lang Live* implied that Wang Jun was not a "normal" parent (whether or not he was the girl's adopted or actual father) and that his expensive gifts were closely tied to Guo's improper conduct. To further fix the "spoiled daughter of a neglectful parent" image in the public imagination, Guo's upbringing conveniently mirrored a familiar storyline from popular youth-focused television dramas such as *The Three Daughters of the Xia Family* (Hunan Television 2011).

Third, the normative trajectory of a Chinese woman's life should progress from courtship to marriage to the birth of a child. Guo clearly violated this norm. For Chinese netizens, the fact that Guo was connected to wealthy businessmen and government officials raised obvious questions about whether or not her lifestyle depended on her sexual relationship with wealthy, powerful men. In numerous online posts, netizens speculated that Guo was a mistress or "second breast" (*er nai*). Although the Chinese expression "second breast" was first developed in the 1990s to describe young women from the People's Republic of China (mainland China) who got involved with married businessmen from Hong Kong or Taiwan, the term has come to refer broadly to young women who become mistresses of married, usually wealthy businessmen or government officials. As many human flesh searches have revealed, a "second breast" for a powerful, wealthy man can expect to receive expensive gifts or properties such as a car or apartment, in addition to living expenses. Thus, in speculating that Guo was a mistress, netizens sought to expose possible corruption at the highest levels of the Red Cross Society.

Guo Meimei's weblogs displaying her connections to wealth, power, and men brought to light a range of larger issues: corrupt charities, inadequate parenting, the social irresponsibility of children from wealthy families, and the widespread phenomena of government officials and businessmen with mistresses. All of these issues highlight the links between sexuality and media. While some netizens condemned Guo's deceptive claims about her relationship with the Red Cross Society and Wang Jun, others pointed out the positive outcome of the incident—that their response to Guo's weblogs enabled netizens to publically express their frustrations with the ways in which the Red Cross operated. And one of the many computer-generated images by netizens even portrayed the half-naked Guo as the leader of an uprising. Another showed Guo as a cover girl of *Time* magazine with the headline in Chinese: "A Second Breast Helps to Save the Country." As a result of netizen activism, the Red Cross Society was forced to become more transparent, for example by allowing donors to verify the amounts of their donations through an online database. Whether condemned as a symbol of decadent sexuality or lauded as the catalyst of social reform, the Guo Meimei incident reveals the complicated relationship between media activism, sexual practices, and social issues in an age dominated by the Internet and smartphones.[5]

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed four cases that demonstrate various aspects of the relationship between mass media and sexuality. These cases cover a range of topics and mediaspheres: advertising campaigns that promoted the sexuality of the modern girl through print media (graphosphere); discourses about masturbation, sex, and sexual socialization that proliferated across mediaspheres (graphosphere and videosphere); the relationship between sexuality and media consumption and production in the *otaku* subculture (graphosphere, videosphere, websphere); and the production of

sexual discourses through online activism (graphosphere, videosphere, websphere, mobilesphere). As these examples demonstrate, it is important and necessary to understand that media and sexuality change historically and across national boundaries. Mass-mediated culture affects the ways in which sexuality is represented, understood, and practiced by peoples. It plays an important role in communicating which aspects of sexuality are considered normal or abnormal, permissible or prohibited, pleasurable or risky. While affirming some sexual norms and moralities, it also challenges others and generates new ones. Thus, studies of the relationship between sexuality and mass media help us to understand broader issues including families, gender relations, citizenship, economics, and politics.

Notes

1   *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is set in a postapocalyptic future in which a group called NERV uses giant humanoid robots piloted by teenagers to battle hostile beings known as "Angels." From the beginning, the franchise generated a impressive array of product spin-offs.
2   See for example Henri Jenkins's 1992 study of avid US television viewers, especially fans of Star Trek.
3   It should be noted that this practice is different from "cyber bullying." On social media sites in the United States, some people publish unauthorized sex-related materials concerning other people, usually sexual minorities and vulnerable young adults, with the intention of embarrassing and harassing them. Cyber bullying is often an extension of bullying in everyday life.
4   Many news organizations have widely reported the incident (e.g. see Wong 2011).
5   This relationship is true of many other cases. In Egypt and Tunisia, for example, some young women used nude (or seminude) photos of themselves as symbols of liberation to protest against their governments during the 2011 Arab Spring. See   www.ibtimes.co.uk/articles/261541/20111205/nude-activism-arab-spring -slideshow.htm (accessed August 9, 2013).

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8

Sexuality and the Contemporary World Globalization and Sexual Rights

Richard Parker, Jonathan Garcia, and Robert M. Buffington

As with other aspects of human behavior, the concrete institutional forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity. They are imbued with conflicts of interest and political maneuver, both deliberate and incidental. In that sense, sex is always political. But there are also historical periods in which sexuality is more sharply contested and more overtly politicized. In such periods, the domain of erotic life is, in effect, renegotiated. (Rubin 1984, p. 267)

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—perhaps more than at any other time in history—have been marked by a sharply contested and overtly politicized approach to sexuality. Indeed, contentious debates around sexuality are one of the defining qualities of contemporary life. At the center of these debates is the clash between advocates of freedom of sexual expression and social conservatives who uphold "traditional" sexual values: an ongoing tug-of-war among distinct stakeholders for the mention, definition, and recognition of sexual rights in arenas ranging from the dinner table to the schoolyard to the United Nations. Effeminate boys are still picked on during recess, but now there is a global social movement against bullying. And, if the world has become smaller to the extent that sexual rights activists, concerned parents, and local educators pay closer attention to sexuality in order to ensure a child's right to safe schooling; it