Issues related to sex, gender and sexuality have remained highly sensitive in Hong Kong. Controversies related to young people and sex continue to spark off intense debates between proclaimed liberals and conservatives. Paradoxically, a new kind of modeling work that draws attention to teenage bodies and sexuality has emerged in Hong Kong in the past three years. Dubbed "pseudo models", "bikini models" or "teenage models", young women are recruited to model at different kinds of publicity functions. In July 2009, teenage models became the hottest topic at the annual Hong Kong Book Fair, when books of photography featuring young women in bikinis and sexy poses proved to be among the best-selling titles. The incident prompted expressions of worry over declining moral standards and set off a debate concerning the roots of the teenage model phenomenon in popular press.

In 2010, more photobooks were launched at the annual Book Fair. To address public concerns, the organizer, Hong Kong Trade Development Council, announced that they would ban teenage models from hosting autograph-signing sessions in the exhibition venue. This decision raised concerns about the imposition of unfair regulations on publishers, as the photobooks had been classified as suitable for readers of all ages by the Obscene Articles Tribunal. What is debatable is that if these photographs are indecent and obscene, they would have been banned from publication altogether under existing laws. The fact that the books were not banned but the models who were photographed were suggests that the dispute was not a legal but a moral one. The ban notwithstanding, the reported sales figures speak of a strong market demand.

In the midst of these emotionally-charged debates, one may at times lose track of some fundamental issues that warrant attention and substantial discussion. After all, who are the perceived culprits and victims? What could be the 'damages' and 'dangers'? Most importantly, what are the lessons that can be learned from these recurring episodes?

Sexualization and Objectification

Hong Kong is definitely not alone in the many debates concerning young women and their bodies. A study of relevant keywords may help us to focus on the key issues at stake. To begin with, the term "sexualization" reflects the escalating concerns about the ubiquity of sex in the media and its potential impact on young people. In the "Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls" (APA, 2007), four conditions were listed as signs of sexualization. The first is that a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior. Second, a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness with being sexy. Third, a person is sexually objectified, which means that he or she is made into a thing for others' sexual use. The fourth is that sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person. The report reviewed evidence for sexualization and self-objectification and discussed the consequences, mostly in negative terms.

The British government has also published several reports on the subject (Bryon, 2008; Bryon, 2010; Papadopoulos, 2010). They set out to address issues such as "excessive commercialization and premature sexualization" (Bailey, 2011:p. 8). There are evident fears that girls are losing their sexual innocence too soon.

Such views of sexualization are not without contestation (Lerum and Dworkin, 2009). Wouters (2010) questioned the negative definitions of the APA, and argued that sexualization is not necessarily bad in nature. The moral indignation regarding sexualization fails to recognize that sexualization is actually about a social and psychic process that has its own historical trajectory. Attwood (2010) pointed out that anti-sexualization sentiments reflect a deep-rooted distrust of young people and popular culture. This argument has generated a new debate about the agency and the roles of women in sexualization (Evans, Riley and Shankar, 2010).

Similarly, objectification refers to the condition in which a woman's body is treated as an object that can be used and consumed for pleasure by others (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Self-objectification refers to a state in which girls and women adopt the observer's perspective and begin to treat themselves as an object (Slater and Tiggerman, 2002). In both instances, women are often perceived as passive dupes or victims. While Hall and Rodriguez (2003) argued that women can take more proactive roles in the expression of their sexual feelings and sexuality, as Coy and Garner (2010: 661) noted in their study of glamour modeling, the issue of agency must be problematized and considered with reference to the fact that the self-sexualization of these women is clearly marketed for consumption and hence reward. In other words, the concepts of empowerment, agency, and "girl power" may be mere marketing hype.

The reductive terms "sexualization" and "objectification" tend to overlook the cultural factors at work and the complexities involved in the production and marketing processes. As Englis et al. (1994) explicated, beauty is multi-dimensional and is always manifested as a "look." It is noteworthy that this "look" is often produced by a group of cultural gatekeepers who orchestrate the setting, make-up, clothing, and model in the encoding process. This process entails planning, coordination, and execution on the production side, and varies among individuals and across cultural contexts. The same consideration applies to the case of teenage models here. Teenage models are but just part of this production process. The roles of the cultural gatekeepers, such as the photographers, designers, managers and marketing executives, should not be overlooked in the overall debate.

Pornography, Erotica, and Sexy Images

It is also important to consider the intricate differences between different kinds of sexually explicit materials. One distinction is between the terms "pornography" and "erotica." Although both describe representations of sex, the former is often cast in a negative light in both descriptive and normative terms (Dworkin, 1981). Erotica is tied to its Greek origin *eros*, which refers to passionate love. It is generally considered to be more pleasant and desirable, as it depicts sexual relationships that are not debased or distorted, but about mutual pleasure (Steinem, 1983).

As Gould (1992) stressed, there is an interplay of influences from community standards, the demands of various markets, and the marketing mix and also value conflicts over the regulation of sexually explicit materials. As a media genre, pornography is subject to legal regulations of varying degrees across countries. Erotica, in contrast, is often seen as an aesthetic delight and artistic pursuit (Webb, 1975). In reality, however, the distinctions between erotica and pornography are not as clear as the polarity suggests, especially when there are legal ramifications for the production of pornography. As the famous quote of the US Supreme Court Justice Stewart states: "I know it when I see it" (see Marcia, 1994:62). The same sexually explicit materials that are obscenity in one person's eyes may be a form of artistic expression in another's. The concern is that if legal intervention comes in too readily, then freedom of expression may be threatened (Nadine, 2000).

Sexually explicit images are highly lucrative (Kuhn et al., 2007), and technological advances have made their circulation much easier. The boundaries between pornography and erotica are becoming increasingly blurred, and there is a vast range of "sexy" products in between. Terms such as "pornograficiation" and "eroticization" are used to describe this boom in sexy images. The rising demand for these products has even enabled some young women to use their bodies as a form of "currency" (Coy and Garner, 2010).

How we make sense of the sexy images of teenage models depends largely on our understanding and definitions of "pornography" and "erotica". Considering the fact that how certain images are looked at and comprehended varies across cultures, how audiences perceive and differentiate sexual representations will reveal some deep-seated assumptions about sex in a particular society. A deepened understanding in this area will in turn inform the design and implementation of sex education programmes in the long run.

The Lessons Learned?

Since the summer of 2009, publications featuring teenage models have continued to capture public attention in the annual Hong Kong Book Fair. Opinions abound in popular press and internet forums. It is time to take stock of these numerous discussions and ask, have we learned any lessons from this recurring phenomenon?

This article suggests that the teenage model's craze has opened up a space for further discussion in at least two directions. First, it is advisable to examine the issue in a wider social context. Instead of putting the blame on certain teenage models, the debates regarding sexualization and objectification prompt one to consider the changing social fabric as well as the changing roles of women. Second, the distinctions between pornography and erotica urge us to review the unspoken assumptions about sex and sexualities, and hence enable us to move on with informed and improved plans in sex education.

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