



Friday, June 26, 2020

Sexualization of youth, complexity, complicity, and uncomfortable truths.

By Kieran McCartan, PhD., and David S. Prescott, LICSW

In the last few days, a story has emerged about actress [Megan Fox](#) and her sexualization in the movie *Bad Boys 2*. In her words,

"I had just turned 15 and I was an extra in Bad Boys II. They were shooting this club scene and they brought me in, and I was wearing a stars and stripes bikini and a red cowboy hat and six-inch heels. [Director Michael Bay] approved it and they said 'Michael, she's 15 so you can't sit her at the bar and she can't have a drink in her hand', so, his solution to that problem was to then have me dancing underneath a waterfall getting soaking wet."

While describing this to talk-show host Jimmy Kimmel, his audience apparently laughs and he makes jokes, including stating that these actions were “perfectly wholesome.” While Megan Fox has since said that she did not feel that she was “[assaulted or preyed upon in what I felt was a sexual manner](#)”, what the story does is reveal some uncomfortable truths about the way that we sexualize you girls and women.

Bay and Kimmel’s actions have been discussed and debated across social media, with blame being laid at everyone’s door for her sexualization. No one has accepted responsibility for what happened, and no account is forthcoming on why it happened. People have blamed her for “consenting”, her parents for not being responsible, Michael Bay for sexualizing her, and the movie industry for just “being that way”. Even Fox herself has stated that the media and society have “mishandled” this situation, describing these experiences as “inconsequential ... I have endured some genuinely harrowing experiences in a ruthlessly misogynistic industry.” Of course, just because Fox did not consider the Michael Bay situation to be sexualization does not mean that it was acceptable.



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SAJRT Bloggers’ Profile

We are longtime members of ATSA dedicated to furthering the causes of evidenced-based practice, understanding, and prevention in the field of sexual abuse.

[The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers](#) is an international, multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to preventing sexual abuse. Through research, education, and shared learning ATSA promotes evidence based practice, public policy, and community strategies that lead to the effective assessment, treatment, and management of individuals who have sexually abused or are risk to abuse.

The views expressed on this blog are of the bloggers and are not necessarily those of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research & Treatment*, or Sage Journals.

The real issue, in our opinion, is that so many adults sexualize youth and are comfortable adults in doing so, particularly in the name of entertainment. Former porn actress Mia Khalifa recently addressed some of the issues involved in an interview for the BBC's [Hardtalk](#), when she described many of the people and processes she had experienced at the age of 21. This is something that we have talked about on previous blogs about pornography; however, it is also important to focus on the social nuances of sexualization.

The major question that arises in this situation involves informed consent. One of the main responses to the Megan Fox is that "she consented" or "she took the money, therefore she can't complain". Each of these is loaded and challenging statements. The first issue is that given her age Megan could not consent; her parents would have to have consented to her appearing in films. We wonder if there is not more to consent in these circumstances. Even if she could have consented, could she have fully understood the implications? If she could not provide meaningful consent, who was responsible for providing consent on her behalf? Who is the responsible authority the parents, the studio, the director? In addition, it is important to keep in mind that under these circumstances, consent is loaded at best. What is this person consenting to? Why are they consenting to it? What pressures exist to consent, and who is looking out for this person's long-term self-interest?

This story also reinforces the complexity and paradoxical nature of our relationship with sex, sexualization, and youth. Megan's story reinforces that while we as a society has no problem consuming sexualized images of youth (as demonstrated by our recent [blog](#) about Pornhub), people don't want others to know about it because it would reflect poorly on them. Jimmy Kimmel's reaction to Megan's story clearly demonstrates this as he joked, brushed it off, said that everyone does it and that some are better at not mentioning it in public. Therefore, for many, it is acceptable to view, think, and do it, but not to mention it. Kimmel's response, while reflecting the beliefs of many, is not helpful. It was, and is an opportunity, for us to collectively think about how we experience and portray sex, sexuality, and how we can best work with people around this.

The reality of Megan's story is that it highlights the social construction of sexuality and sex. Our society has created a narrative that the sexualization of youth is acceptable, allowed the processes that enable this narrative, and has become quietly comfortable with the results. The authors feel it is time to discuss these challenges so that our communities can better understand why we accept this and how we can change the narrative. Some points for consideration include:

- challenging the societal norms around the sexualization of youth.
- accept our responsibility and role in the creation, maintenance, and consumption of this material.
- recognizing that sexualized behavior, especially problematic sexual behavior, exists on a continuum.
- understanding the impact of sexualization on the person experiencing it, particularly where the sexualization is not a direct contact offense.
- the need to confront sexualization at the boundaries or at blurred boundaries as well as how much we are willing to push back.