

The McMaster Journal of  
Communication  
Volume 2, Issue 1  
2005  
Article 5

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# From Bracelets to Blowjob: The Ideological Representation of Childhood Sexuality in the Media

Sonja Weaver

## Abstract

As the theme of sexuality becomes increasingly present in all forms of modern media, aspects of social life become inexorably affected by its incidence. There are a number of issues involving this trend, yet few are more widely debated than those surrounding sexuality and children. The relationship will be examined between childhood sexuality, the media and public opinion, particularly in light of the recent sex bracelet phenomenon that swept through North American elementary schools last year. The strong and foreboding reaction from a variety of media sources and the consequent moral panic within both school systems and households serve to exemplify the potentially misleading relationship between representation and interpretation.

Regarding the subject of childhood sexuality and its media depiction, it will be argued that the often flawed representation of the delicate and complex matter of sexuality by the mass media is often more dangerous than the phenomenon that it serves to represent. By examining the social aspects of childhood sexuality, it will be postulated that over-sensationalized and mediated reactions to adolescents' sexual innuendo games severely detract from far more potent social problems, as the fundamental causes of abnormal childhood sexuality are largely ignored.

**KEYWORDS:** childhood sexuality, media panic, sex bracelets, representation, cultural studies, sex education, parenting

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# From Bracelets to Blowjobs: The Ideological Representation of Childhood Sexuality in the Media

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“Parental alert...we want to warn you...we’re going to turn now to a disturbing new trend in the news among young girls” (Sawyer, 2004)

“A bizarre new kids’ sex craze is sweeping the city’s elementary schools. Girls as young as 11 are stacking colorful rubber ‘sex bracelets’ up their arms while their parents are unaware that each piece of the cheap jewelry represents a different sex act” (Garvey, 2004:5).

“It’s a sign a subculture is there...and open[s] the potential for sexual harassment...It’s frightening what they do know...it’s heartbreaking” (Elliott, 2004:A1).

“I thought this could never, ever happen here” (Garvey, 2004:5).

All over the nation, parents’ mouths are dropping open in disbelief as they collectively read the above words. Many of these liberal-minded adults pride themselves on their relationships with their children regarding issues of sex and sexuality. Most believe they can tell the difference between an urban myth and reality. Upon examination of what they feel to be reputable and objective news sources, such as *Time Magazine*, *The Associated Press*, *The Washington Post* and *The Toronto Star*, their panic grows. It seems that this alarming trend is happening everywhere. Then a parent’s worst fears are confirmed: her twelve year old daughter comes home from school with the multicoloured jelly bracelets displayed on both arms. Even worse, the girl has an idea what each colour represents and is familiar with the corresponding sexual activities. This is a problem.

One may have come to the conclusion that there are indeed many problems present in the situation, including concerns with levels of youth sexuality and society’s control over its children. While the public would typically examine and evaluate information based on the content displayed, critics are more likely to take apart the message at the representational level. Instead of accepting or rejecting what is being said, theorists examine how the information is being portrayed and its relation to the message itself. A disparity in findings usually results. In the case of the sex bracelet craze this very gap may be more harmful to children and society than the supposed sexual corruption that is portrayed.

Semiotics, an approach to textual analysis which has its origins in the works of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, emphasizes the importance of examining a popular culture object and its significance in revealing the underlying belief structures in society. He hypothesized that an audience perceived a word at two levels. First they interpret the denotative meaning – the term for the actual concept. In this case, it is the bracelets themselves (Gripsrud:102). The more important relationship,

however, is the connotative one between the object and the system of popular beliefs and ideals that surround it (Gripsrud:102). While the plastic jewelry is denotatively arbitrary, the attached connoted meaning is extremely marked. The media, and consequently adult members of society, have interpreted that the bracelets represent children's increasing sexualization. A moral panic has ensued, causing parents and educators to believe that action must be taken to stem the heightened sexuality of children.

However, relying solely on the interpretation of an object's connotative meaning can have negative societal implications. Connotation is "regulated by codes, the conventions that link signifiers [the actual object or image] to signifieds [the meaning given to the sign, which is created by the relationship between the signifier and signified]" (Gripsrud:105). When an audience internalizes a connotative meaning, it becomes naturalized as being denotative. Over the past few decades, the media has regularly sensationalized alleged sex crises within society. Media panics, a widespread fear that the subject at hand is negatively affecting culture, have been created by exhaustive coverage of accounts of sexual abuse, the assumed increase of sexuality in children, teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). The connoted meaning that sexuality within adolescents should be discouraged has been adopted as the truth or denotative meaning of anything to do with sex and kids in society today.

Theorist Roland Barthes expands on the notions of connotation and denotation in his examination of semiotics, which is the study of how signs, including language, are manifested and interpreted within a society. Barthes believed that societal values and opinions result from internalized connotative impressions. He argued that, based on the popular Marxist belief that society is controlled by the capitalist motivations of those in power, the connotative meaning that initially was linked with an object was done so purposefully in order to achieve the goals of those who controlled its output. This practice often seems to be employed by the media – a purposeful meaning is given to an object which eventually is naturalized by society<sup>1</sup>. "The mass signification arising in response to signs pouring from the mass media is not a natural process. Rather it is an artificial effect calculated and induced by the mass media to achieve something else" (Griffin, 2003:362). The sex bracelets phenomenon is an example of this process. Before the barrage of media coverage, society was blissfully unaware of the supposed problem. After the media ascribed sexual connotation to the jewelry, society decided that the bracelets posed a threat to the sexual health of its children based on popular ideology that sexuality and children were negatively related.

Barthes' theory points out the dangers of such an association. He believed that since society often unconsciously naturalizes the ideals given to them by the ruling class, it becomes necessary to deconstruct the message and its purported meaning in order to evaluate if the best interests of society are being represented. By deconstruction, Barthes refers to the process of analyzing what the object or phenomenon truly represents, and examining why the popular connotation was adopted by society. He claimed this process to be extremely important because as power-holders in the modern world are motivated by capital gain, honest portrayal may fall to the wayside of their motivations to gain more power and wealth<sup>2</sup>.

The deconstruction of an ideology perpetuated by the dominant class is considered to be a social necessity by most social theorists. The sex bracelets fad and consequent upheaval in the public forum has been extensively evaluated by the media at the connotative level, but society as a whole has failed to deconstruct the actual meaning behind the phenomenon. Since some discrepancy seems

<sup>1</sup> The above paragraph refers to the popular semiotic theories of Roland Barthes, as detailed in many resources on cultural and linguistic theory. For one of many extended accounts, please refer to Chapter 25 of *A First Look at Communication Theory* by Em Griffin.

<sup>2</sup> The preceding paragraph again refers to the general theories of Roland Barthes; please refer to a cultural theory text such as *A First Look at Communication Theory* by Em Griffin for further reference to Barthes' work.

to exist between the actual situation and how it was being represented in the media, it becomes increasingly important to deconstruct the mediated message to determine if it accurately represents reality. The deconstruction of the ideological pre-conceptions of adolescent sexuality in terms of the recent sex bracelet fad suggests that, despite the use of emotive and persuasive rhetoric, the arguments and claims the mass media made on the subjects of both sex bracelets and childhood sexuality were specious and based on biased speculation. Through the examination of academic research studies in comparison to the actual relationship of families and society to children's sexualization, it becomes apparent that this method of misrepresentative connotation is potentially dangerous. The highly volatile public reactions, based on the superficial messages received, create a rift between truth and fiction that could easily jeopardize an already fragile social structure. In this particular case, the situation is the reaction by society to sexual innuendo games played by children in the senior years of elementary school.

Although societal interpretations of childhood sexuality have changed dramatically over the last thirty years, the empirical evidence and academic opinion have barely shifted. An essay by Mary S. Calderone entitled "Childhood Sexuality: Its Nature, Its Importance" for the International Symposium on Childhood and Sexuality in 1980 succinctly captures the general sentiments held by sexual theorists. Calderone argues that a child's experiences during his or her formative period, from birth to puberty, will greatly impact his or her future self-concept and value system.

According to the results gathered from numerous sexuality studies performed throughout the 1970s, it became widely accepted that there are three core developmental stages of a child's sexualization process. The first stage occurs at birth – the assignment of a gender to an infant based on its anatomy. During the second stage, the young child begins to define him or herself based on accepted gender role behaviour. The third and longest section of the sexualization process has to do with how children visibly and internally respond to their developing sexualities<sup>3</sup>. Consequently, the evolution of "the positive body image, self esteem, and sense of sexual competence and mastery that should derive from it" begins (Calderone, 1980:25). Calderone proceeds to examine this process and its impact in the remainder of the essay.

The most influential point that Calderone brings up is the important distinction between normal sexualization in children and how it is responded to by both parents and society. She isolates the point where children learn how to stimulate their sex organs as one of the most important milestones of sexual development. In a 1979 study of four and five year old boys' and girls' sexual perceptions, researchers found that because many of the parents often did not acknowledge or would punish their children's sexual activities when they were very young, the youths came to internalize that their genital region was either something negative, or without function or identity. This period of a child's development is one of the most intensive stages of language acquisition, a process which is integral in the development of a normal "capacity for logical thought and action" (Calderone, 1980:27). She unites these empirically observed facts in a disturbing revelation. Because children "have a 'not-me' feeling about his or her sex organs" (Calderone, 1980:27), they are not able to identify their pleasure role or function in procreation. This can have an extremely detrimental effect on a child's developing sexuality as he or she will not be able to characterize or socially place the impulses that naturally occur<sup>4</sup>.

Akin to the reluctance of parents to give social existence to the sex organs of their children, sexual rehearsal play in older kids is also commonly discouraged by society. Calderone notes that

<sup>3</sup> This three-step process is detailed in Mary Calderone's "Childhood Sexuality: Its Nature, Its Importance" from *Childhood Sexuality: Proceedings of the International Symposium*.

<sup>4</sup> The above paragraph is a synthesis of Mary Calderone's analysis of 1968 study by T. Lidz regarding childhood sexuality. Her complete analysis can be found in her article "Childhood Sexuality: Its Nature, Its Importance" from *Childhood Sexuality: Proceedings of the International Symposium*.

many studies have shown that children require a social element in order to achieve natural sexual development and other research reveal that societies that “ignore sex rehearsal play in their young” see an increase in probability that the children will grow to be sexually healthy adults (1980:28). Her analysis carries an important implication. Coinciding with evidence from many other empirical studies regarding childhood sexuality, she states that “some degree of sex rehearsal play is a specific need for the healthy sexual development of the human young” (Calderone, 1980:28). Failure to recognize the importance of sexual exploration, especially in the crucial periods of language acquisition and the later entrance into adolescence, can have severe negative effects on a child’s future sexual, gender and self-identity.

While Mary Calderone’s claims seemed to be based in fact, the delivery of her essay was very passionate and emotive. In order to ensure that her conclusions were objective, a wide range of books, studies and articles from the 1960’s to the present by a range of authors were consulted. From social theorists to child psychologists, the intent was to discover if the general opinions within academia reflected what Calderone postulated in her essay. Not only was it found that almost every single approach yielded similar conclusions, but the general consensus that a gap existed between reputedly normal childhood sexuality and societal interpretations of normalcy became obvious – an observation that directly related to the sex bracelet phenomenon.

In *What To Tell Your Children About Sex*, author Adie Sueshsdorf firmly emphasizes the irrepressible urges for children to explore their sexuality and the need for parents to be open to this fact. She reassures parents by stating that “while he may talk brashly and openly about sex, he is merely exercising his growing interest in all facts of life” and that this newfound intense desire to explore sexuality is not a negative occurrence; “very likely he has nothing more in mind than to satisfy his curiosity about a new aspect of life” (1959:86). This stated, she urges people to take advantage of this overwhelming curiosity and use it to motivate positive and open discussions about sexuality. In *Understanding Human Sexuality*, Janet Hyde points out that, almost inarguably, “a surge of sexual interest occurs around puberty” (1979:27) and usually follows a sort of script. She states that most children pass through the physical stages of sexuality at their own comfort level, and that it usually follows a specific hierarchy. Her central argument is that children are not easily persuaded to stray from their set levels of comfort and appropriateness<sup>5</sup>. In *Human Sexuality*, Bryan Strong believes it is extremely important that parents and society recognize the need for allowing children a normal progression through stages of sexualization. He also emphasizes that self-exploration, masturbation, questioning and even sex rehearsal play is an integral part of healthy sexual development. It is suggested that children be viewed as “students rather than voyeurs” (Strong, 1979:16) and that their exploration is a natural process in gaining positive gender and sexual identities<sup>6</sup>.

From the research conducted, it became apparent that most authors and researchers regard puberty and the entrance into adolescence to be a pivotal moment in a child’s life. This sentiment is well-expressed in the book *Raising Your Child* by John Flowers:

As puberty approaches, the child’s world is no more. What now occur are the most profound psychological and physiological changes of our lifetime: the development of secondary sex characteristics: the acceleration of both physical and emotional growth; the capacity to reproduce; an increased involvement in both the peer group and the other sex,

<sup>5</sup> This paragraph is a synthesis of the main ideas postulated in Janet Hyde’s *Understanding Human Sexuality*; please refer to the text for a more comprehensive analysis.

<sup>6</sup> The preceding section is a summary of the central themes in *Human Sexuality* by Bryan Strong; a more detailed account can be found within this text.

the desire to behave more independently; and the development of personal values (1982:74).

It is essential that the importance of this stage is recognized by parents and society so children can be appropriately guided to assume healthy conceptions of sexuality. In the midst of the media sensation surrounding the sex bracelets phenomenon, society appears to be disregarding the sensitivity of the issue of a child's developing sexuality. Instead, the subject is being displayed in a raw, abrasive manner that is more likely to invoke criticism than acceptance.

It is also agreed that peer socialization and the construction of independence is a vital process of this period. It is acknowledged that because of society's fear of oversexualized children, peer interactions that should be considered by sexual authorities to be normal and natural are labeled as being wrong or even pathological. Most texts warn that this discrepancy may negatively affect the development of identity and value-structures that should result from a normal progression through the stages of sexual curiosity. In his book *Sex in the Adolescent Years*, Isadore Rubin advises that "instead of decrying inevitable group identification, parents should recognize the importance of the peer group and provide supportive guidance so that the group can be used as an element of progress" (1968:37). The reaction by the public to the sex bracelet phenomenon directly contradicts these well respected academic opinions.

Although there is relatively little material written on the subject, the book *Harmful to Minors*, the controversy-ridden 2002 LA Times Book Prize recipient by journalist Judith Levine establishes itself as a comprehensive critique on American society's views on childhood sexuality. She begins her dissertation by examining the causes of the popular mind frame, blaming prevailing conservative viewpoints and perpetuation of the phenomenon of media panic for creating the now-naturalized notion that children should be shielded from sexuality<sup>7</sup>.

Levine then reveals that society's interpretation of the sexual meanderings of school age children, which are based largely if not solely on its portrayal in the media, is unfounded. Since the sexual revolution in the 1970s, the statistics relating to premarital sex have only slightly increased, and have actually witnessed a slight decrease in the last few years (Levine, 2002:xxv). Despite these refutations, which are only weakly voiced in the sensation-prone media, popular culture holds a strong and seemingly unshakable perception that any form of childhood sexuality will have negative consequences. "The trauma of youngsters' sex, with anyone, often comes not from the sex itself but from adults going bananas over it. As for 'sexual behavior problems' the trauma inflicted by the 'cure' may be far worse than the 'disease' itself" (Levine, 2002:60). Levine explores this naturalized, contradictory ideology throughout the ensuing chapters and attempts to deconstruct the myths that pervade modern society.

Her message regarding the realities of children and sexuality is very simple: it is natural for children to be curious about sex, including imitation, questioning and sex rehearsal play, and unnatural for them to go through with any acts before they are mentally ready for the experience, as previously indicated in this paper. By allowing the subject to become taboo, parents are forcing natural sexual curiosity to be construed as abnormal, causing children to become more susceptible to having misconceptions about sex. "To give children a fighting chance in navigating the sexual world, adults need to saturate it with accurate, realistic information and abundant, varied images and narratives of love and sex" (Levine, 2002:19). However, as a result of the prevailing ideology that negatively correlates sexuality and adolescents, parents today are shying away from discussing anything but abstinence and the horrors of STDs and teen pregnancy with their children. Another

<sup>7</sup>The proceeding summary and analysis revolve around the main themes in *Harmful to Minors* by Judith Levine; please refer to the text for further elaboration.

forum that could possibly offer frank and objective resources about sexuality for adolescents is the education system. But as Levine points out in her evaluation of current practices, this structure may be as seriously flawed as the ideology upon which it rests.

Levine's primary concern with the North American method of sex education is that it gives no acknowledgement to role of pleasure and normality of healthy sex. One of her most convincing arguments that supports this concern is her explanation of the statement: "comprehensive, non-abstinence sex education works. And abstinence education does not" (Levine, 2002:102). At first this claim seems a bit extreme, but Levine goes on to point out two parallel observations. First, most European countries adopt a more comprehensive approach to sexual education. It starts in the early grades and "is informed by a no-nonsense, even enthusiastic attitude toward the sexual; it is explicit; and it doesn't teach abstinence" (Levine, 2002:102). According to American ideals, these adolescents must be out of control and having rampant, unprotected sex. Statistics beg to differ. "Rates in unwanted teen pregnancy, abortion and AIDS in every Western European country are a fraction of our own; the average age of first intercourse is about the same as in the United States" (Levine, 2002:102). Levine suggests that the fear-based curricula cause adolescents to feel not only that their sexual curiosity is wrong, but that they also become uncomfortable voicing their questions or concerns in an educational setting. As these programs operate from the viewpoint that children shouldn't be having sex; appropriate and objective education on contraception, the concepts of love and pleasure, actual normal behaviour and responses are not addressed. Levine suggests that selective and biased education, not supposedly abnormal tendencies to want to have sex, is the true cause of the fact that Americans have higher rates of almost every undesirable result of sexuality.

One important point that she raises is the fact that proponents of the ideological viewpoint often don't take into account the situations in which sexually deviant children live. If the statistics they examined also factored in the social conditions of the children in question, supporters of the concept of today's allegedly corrupt children would realize that engagement in sexual activity at an early age is directly proportional to the familial, economical and social situations in which they live. As Levine states, "the real potential harm for harm lies in the circumstances under which some children and teens have sex [...] not surprisingly, these are the same conditions [negative family values, exposure to crime, poverty and social bigotry] that set children up to suffer many other miseries" (2002:xxxiii).

Levine's critique of this deeply-rooted ideology in American society provides a fresh and startling look at the beliefs and practices of a culture's response to childhood sexuality. Although comprehensive and convincing, her treatise will still likely be met with much skepticism. Her suggestions, though clear and empirically based, are not directly indicative of a revolution towards acceptance of sexual curiosity in children. As members of society are so steeped in the ideological notion that abstinence is the only moral route for adolescents, it would be very difficult to impose a sudden abandonment of these conceptions. However, Levine's critique of current cultural practices is the first step in deconstructing the mythologies that surround us. Hopefully, upon its reading, parents, educators and even children will become more aware of the need for change, as well as recognizing the possible harm current beliefs may be inflicting. Changes, if any, will be gradual, but one could only hope that such a convincing appeal will incite some sort of desire to modify current practices.

Given the context of the above research, an alarming duality arises when one examines the recent sex bracelet phenomenon in western societies. Representing adolescent sexual desire, the naturalized ideologies as examined above caused the public to react with horror towards the notion of children playing a game rich with sexual innuendo. If the opinion and practice of society reflected the research and opinions stated above, the adolescents should be applauded for acting so naturally and have their sexual exploration encouraged. The actual reaction was the exact opposite.



The media depiction of this childhood phenomenon began with a short piece in *Time Magazine* on October 27, 2003. The article reveals that there is a new, risqué trend among American children: the “colorful plastic bracelets popularized by Madonna and Avril Lavigne” now have widely known sexual codes associated with them (*Time*:A1). Kids play Snap: a game where boys try to pull the bracelets off of their female classmates. If successful, the colours are then purportedly used to “indicate what kind of sex they would like to have” (*Time*:A1). The author reveals that the game has gained international popularity and the accessories are called shag bracelets overseas. Although the article indicates that many kids interpret the game as an inside joke, some schools have banned the bracelets<sup>8</sup>.

Very brief and factual in tone, this sole piece went on to create a moral panic about heightened sexuality in school-aged children. Although it seemed that almost no parents, kids or educators in all other parts of the continent had heard of this sexual game<sup>9</sup>, the *Time* article spawned a massive, trans-national response. In the year since its publication, similar pieces have appeared in every major newspaper and television news source. The bracelets have received attention in the press, books, advertisements, television situational comedies and non-fictional programs. Schools all over the United States and Canada have begun to ban the colourful accessories.

One such piece that followed the *Time* article appeared on May 27, 2004 in the *Guelph Mercury*. Although the trend seems to have missed some communities, popularity of sex bracelets in the small Ontario city is on the rise. Using terminology taken straight from the *Time* article, the author warns parents about “the effects of a risky game involving sex and cheap, plastic jewelry” (Elliott, 2004:A1). According to the piece, the problem became apparent when educators sent letters home to guardians informing them that their children were wearing these bracelets and playing sex games. The unsuspecting parents reacted strongly and the accessories were soon banned in many Guelph elementary schools. One mother expressed her shock over the sexual nature of the bracelets: “In a way it’s a real eye-opener [...] I think they shouldn’t be playing those sexual innuendo games” (Elliott, 2004:A1). Although the article does admit that when approached, most kids had no idea about the sexual connotation of the bracelets, it proceeds to cite the array of media attention being given to the issue, all with themes of warning parents of the reported dangers associated with the game<sup>10</sup>.

Most of the relevant media coverage addressed the issue with the same foreboding tone. Parents reacted by snatching the plastic bands off of their children’s arms and sitting them down for a talk about the perils of frivolous sex. Schools reacted by banning the bracelets and severely punishing any student who brought them to class. Kids reacted by rushing out to the nearest store to buy more of the accessories. Even though many of them had been ignorant of the bracelets’ purported meaning previous to the abundance of media coverage and consequent moral panic, youths now readily embraced and discussed the terms associated with the different colours.

Before considering a personal incident that related to the sex bracelet phenomenon, this author reacted with shock at the seemingly clear indication that kids have become sexualized at such a young age. However, it was found that initial impressions began to shift when contemplating the issue from one’s own childhood experiences and impressions rather than relying on the image portrayed in the media. This author recalled an incident that resulted in an entirely new outlook on current events, based on childhood sexual behaviour as personally observed over a decade ago. In

<sup>8</sup> The content of the preceding paragraph paraphrases the article “Parents: Brace Yourselves” that appeared in *Time Magazine* on October 27th, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> This statement corresponds to this author’s research of various news articles, Internet sites and personal interviews (as indicated in the works cited notations).

<sup>10</sup> The content of the preceding paragraph paraphrases the article “Sex Bracelets Dismay Parents” by Kathleen Elliott that appeared in the *Guelph Mercury* on May 27th, 2004.

the sixth grade, youths played a game involving pop can tabs<sup>11</sup>. It was fairly simple: one twisted and pulled at the tab on the top of a can and, depending how it broke off, it had a certain sexual connotation. If the tab just came off, it meant a kiss. If the hinge holding the tab to the can was still intact, it meant either making out or oral sex. If, however, the ring and the anchor both came off, the tab meant to have sex. Girls would wear the tabs on keychains attached to their backpacks, and they were freely exchanged. Analogous to the modern sex bracelet phenomenon, adolescents participating in this game knew entirely well what each act meant, and discussed it openly with their peers. While it must be admitted that these youths did play mock sexual games involving kissing and touching, it must be strongly emphasized that this generation did not typically have intercourse and perform oral sex at age 11. Upon closer consideration, this author's arguably normal upbringing and childhood experiences seemed suspiciously similar to the current sex bracelet fad. A quick search on the Internet revealed a similar trend – apparently pop tab and similar bottle label games involving sex acts being ascribed to an object were actually quite popular. In fact, the idea of games involving sexual coupons within adolescent and preadolescent societies has been around since the late 60's<sup>12</sup>. This consistent pattern, which implies the normalcy of some sexual game-playing in adolescent culture, was not once referred to in any official news article on the subject of sex bracelets, indicating a certain level of mediated misrepresentation. For the first time, this author began examining not what was being said, but how it was portrayed.

The medium is the message. This popular cliché, created by communication theorist Marshall McLuhan, has become the benchmark for modern social theory (Griffin, 2003:342). In fact, academics like McLuhan and Harold Innis, both claiming that methods of portrayal directly affect how a message is interpreted, are considered to be the revolutionary scholars of the post-modern view of society that characterizes modern critical theory. When one examines the diction used in the majority of news sources on the subject of sex bracelets, it becomes apparent that the writers used more of an appeal to the emotive response of a viewer than actual fact. For example, instead of merely explaining the premise behind Snap, it was described by one reporter as “a risky game involving sex and cheap, plastic jewelry” (Elliott, 2004:A1). In this author's analysis, it is difficult to interpret this affective statement as other than an implication of cheap sex, resulting in the negative connotations that accompany such an inference. This is just one example of an entire system of news based on the notion of stirring up the emotions of its audience.

In the post-modern tradition, theorists have strayed from belief in the existence of a definitive reality that, if humans could uncover it, it would be exposed. Instead, academics from most social fields generally agree that the concept of reality has been lost in today's highly-mediated capitalist society. Instead of empirical truth, scholars now believe that the way reality is represented actually becomes the reality itself – perceived meaning rather than inarguable fact now forms the basis of popular thought, opinion and motivation.

This notion was expanded upon by theorists at the Birmingham School, specifically by scholar Stuart Hall. He suggested that all messages are encoded based on the ideals of a specific group and are consequently decoded by the receiver. This process is what creates reality; an audience receives a seemingly objective message, which is actually formed by the opinions and motivations of the sender, and then comes to conclusions on what they feel to be their own volition, when in fact they are subject to the representative reality of the encoded message<sup>13</sup>.

Social theorists have created a name for this process – hegemony. Using the postmodern

<sup>11</sup> This anecdote is taken from the author's personal experience and serves to represent an example from a different generation of childhood sexual rehearsal games; however, it does not intend to be representative of that generation in its entirety.

<sup>12</sup> For one of many examples, please refer to: <http://www.snopes.com/risque/school/bracelet.asp>

<sup>13</sup> This paragraph represents the synthesis of Stuart Hall's theory of representation, as described in many resources on cultural theory. To view one extended account, please refer to chapter 26 of *A First Look at Communication Theory* by Em Griffin.

paradigm of thought, scholars agree that public opinion is based entirely on ideology: a “normally hidden set of rules, codes and conventions through which meanings particular to specific social groups are rendered universal and ‘given’ for the whole of society” (Hebdidge, 2005:68). In essence, people believe they are making conscious decisions to possess certain beliefs and opinions, but are in fact so enveloped in prevailing ideology that the motivation for willful thought is propelled only by the interwoven and internalized beliefs. This structure is created by whoever holds power in the society, usually as a result of capital control. This general idea of hegemony, popularized by Antonio Gramsci, characterizes “a situation in which a provisional alliance of certain social groups exert ‘total social authority’ over other subordinate groups, not simply by coercion or by the direct imposition of ruling ideas but by ‘winning and shaping consent’ so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural” (Hebdidge, 2005:72). Reality no longer exists in our post-modern society; our internalization of hegemonic ideals creates our perception of their representational intent.

Based on capitalist motivations, where the main concern is increasing the rates of consumerism since more money means more power, society is unknowingly enmeshed in the ideological reality that has been created. Those with capital power must choose a medium with which to exercise their ideals, and the media, with its incredible power and influence over modern society and culture, has become the bridge between the public and the power-holders that control it. As virtually every person living in a westernized society cannot escape the reach of the media, all are subject to the ideologies created by those in power.

It is evident that throughout the last few decades, media attention to the subject of cultural and childhood sexuality has been both exhaustive and oppositional. While mass media has become increasingly sexualized in content and has promoted sex as being natural and desirable, the general attitude towards children and sexuality is that they must be protected and allowed to retain their innocence. This is precisely the contradictory ideology that creates the ideal conflict to have within a power and capitalist-based media system. By allowing sex to become a commodity, the media and controlling corporations sell the subject of sex to its audience. Books, films, entertainment and advertising – nothing is left untouched by this prevailing ideology that sex sells. Then, on the other hand, is the increasing tendency to shield children from this side of society. Based on current cultural theory, it becomes apparent why someone in power would want to spread this belief. If one agrees that ideology is perpetuated by capitalist ideals, then the resulting moral panic that creates the alleged necessity for abstinence-based sexual education programs and awareness products such as videotapes, literature and advisory sessions is suitable motivation. By creating internalized beliefs about the dangers of childhood sexualization, the media is selling the public the consequent protection from harm.

The current view on the state of society and the omniscient hegemonic influence of those with capital and political control is very grim indeed. However, Barthes has argued that something can be done to break through the hegemonic powers of the dominant class. His beliefs about the structure and influence of representational signs (known as semiotics, as previously defined) agree with Hall and Gramsci’s theories that ideological notions put forth by those in power have been naturalized by society. He refers to this system as a set of myths which “reinforce the dominant values of their [society’s] culture” (Griffin, 2003:361). The redemptive implication of Barthes’ semiotic system is that, with the knowledge that the beliefs held by society are based on representational signs, the possibility exists for the underlying ideologies to be exposed through the process of deconstruction. In doing so, we must attempt to discover the nature of the values that have been internalized. After accepting that all ideological messages sent out by the media are purposeful, we must deduce why a particular representation was created in the first place. In specific cultural phenomena, the reaction of the public must be assessed. Based on the notion that they are acting out of internalized ideology,

we must examine what effect that has on the subject of controversy. If the consequences are harmful to society either directly or by allowing those in power more influence over the public, every attempt should be made to educate the masses on the potential implications of their reactions. The only way for society to break free of being completely subject to those in power is to go through this process of deconstruction<sup>14</sup>.

The social phenomenon of sex bracelets and the consequent mediated response is a symptom of a graver underlying problem. The reaction to the occurrence is a reflection of the above-mentioned ideologies concerning childhood sexuality that have been internalized by society. Through the process of deconstructing this ideology and uncovering the hidden meanings associated with this specific example, we can begin to evaluate the implications of both the isolated event and the underlying structure. By comparing academically stated fact with the prevalent beliefs of the public, the true conflict emerges.

Based on the empirical research previously mentioned, several facts come to the fore. It is a natural tendency for children to be sexually curious throughout their youth, particularly around puberty. It is also a normal and even encouraged practice for preadolescents to feel the need to socialize their curiosity and newly acquired knowledge. Psychologists also emphasize that this sexually formative period of a youth's life has a very important role in establishing the sexual, gender and self-identity that he or she is developing. Discouraging or condemning this curiosity, including questioning about sex as well as rehearsal play and societal games, can result in poorly developed or unhealthy concepts of sex and sexuality.

An analogous yet contradictory summary can be given for the sex bracelets fad. Parents believe that today's pre-adolescents are oversexualized and should be discouraged from socializing about sex or engaging in sex-related games. Educators agree with this notion and many have banned the bracelets from schools. Kids, in turn, come to believe that the subject of sex and sexuality exploration is taboo and either rebel, wearing the bracelets as a symbol of their independence and sexuality, or agree that the subject of sex is not a social one.

An obvious discrepancy between fact and practice emerges. If one were to accept the logical validity of the above-detailed academic opinion, it must also be admitted that the social reaction to the sex bracelet phenomenon describes exactly what psychologists and sociologists discourage. Teaching children, however inadvertent, that their curiosity is inappropriate can be potentially harmful to their future conceptions of sexuality. As the goal of parents and educators is to create healthy notions of sexuality in adolescents, the nature of this conflict must be examined.

The over-sensationalization of the sex bracelet fad lies at the heart of the problem. Those who control news sources know that people heavily rely on their coverage for truthful depictions of society. They also know that one seemingly innocuous article will likely attract the attention of first a localized public, then spread quickly throughout other news sources and consequently a larger public audience. It is no accident that, after initial reports of the alleged craze sweeping the nation, the subject of sex bracelets appeared in newspapers, television talk shows and even sitcoms. Just as they knew people would rely on the media for a truthful account of current events, they were also aware that, by creating a controversial sensation, these same people would continue to appeal to sources for updates, social commentary and solutions to the supposed problem. How reality compared to the media's portrayal became irrelevant. Because of its power, the representation of the phenomenon in the media became the reality itself. The goal of capital gain through perpetuation and exploitation of an ideology they helped to form was achieved.

Recently, the author informally interviewed a number of children, parents and educators on the

<sup>14</sup>The above paragraph refers to the popular semiotic theories of Roland Barthes, as detailed in many resources on cultural and linguistic theory. For one of many extended accounts, please refer to Chapter 25 of *A First Look at Communication Theory* by Em Griffin.

subject of sex bracelets in order to obtain a first-person account of what was occurring.<sup>15</sup> Although opinions differed, one clear fact emerged. Before the first piece on the phenomenon appeared in *Time*, spawning similar articles all over North America, most kids didn't know anything about this supposed craze and parents were not overly concerned about heightened levels of their children's sexuality. As the popularity of media portrayal of sex bracelets grew, so did kids' likelihood of taking part in Snap and the simultaneous, if not pre-emptive, disapproval of the trend by parents and educators.

When compared side by side, the reality of the situation versus the media's portrayal is oppositional, and it becomes apparent that the mediated viewpoint was the one internalized by society even though personal experience tended to conflict with popular portrayal. Although the media reported that most elementary school kids were taking part in Snap and performing the related sexual acts, the proof of this supposed fact is absent if not contradictory. Initial media coverage barely referred to the opinions of the actual subjects – children – and when it finally did, it seemed overwhelmingly clear that the majority of kids just knew of or talked about the meaning of the sex bracelets and did not carry out with the acts.<sup>16</sup> This directly affirms observations made earlier that children are not easily diverted from a sexual script and level of comfort that is both inherent and cultivated through values and attitudes about sex. Because other exposure to the media had made readers increasingly-sensitive to the perils of childhood sexuality, most people easily adopted the belief that kids were going on a rampant sex craze and an intervention must be made.

Throughout the author's interviews with parents and educators, the impact of the general ideologies surrounding childhood sexuality became apparent, as most adults had a negative outlook on the subject. Most of the parents agreed that kids in the senior years of elementary school are too young to be thinking about sex acts, and that such thoughts should be discouraged. All of them reported that they had first heard about sex bracelets not from their children but from the media. Most admitted that they had accepted the media's portrayal before talking to their children and confronted them on basis of those beliefs. Teachers and principals generally agreed that social sexualization has no place in the education system and thus the wearing of bracelets should be discouraged or even banned. A principal of a public elementary school stated that he had a responsibility to create a no-tolerance policy in order to maintain a safe school environment that "is a solid support system which guides and protects". A sixth-grade teacher expressed a great deal of disgust at the situation she had read about. However, during the conversation she admitted that during her twenty years of teaching pre-adolescents, the majority of her students seemed to be very sexualized regardless of the year or social situation. They would invariably express this in the form of jokes, discussion and games. The author's most interesting and disquieting encounter was with a principal at an elementary school. She seemed offended when asked if she had directly observed these sex bracelets and vehemently stated "we do not have a problem at this school". She went on to claim that, if the trend was to become problematic, she would ban the bracelets and leave the situation for parents to deal with. It was her opinion that educators are "not their [the children's] parents, we are responsible for their education and are only concerned with creating a positive educational setting". This seemed alarming, given the importance of the development of sexual

<sup>15</sup> The proceeding commentary is derived from the author's independent and personal research at the following schools and organizations: Colborne Street Elementary School in Strathroy, Ontario; Byron Southwood in London, Ontario; A.E. Duffield in Lambeth, Ontario, and Kumon Learning Center in London, Ontario; as well as several personal accounts independent of an organization. Because of the sensitivity of the issue and the fact that it concerns minors, the specific identities of the persons interviewed and their respective institutions will remain confidential within the body of this paper.

<sup>16</sup> This statement is derived from the general opinion expressed in multiple news sources (primarily within letters to the editor from enraged adolescents at their misrepresentation in the media), Internet resources and personal interviews.

beliefs and values throughout the very years when children attend elementary school. She also expressed that the very notion of sex bracelets was “horrifying from a feminist’s perspective” because the games “objectified women”. This author found it more than slightly ironic when, shortly after this conversation, two eighth grade girls were witnessed in the hallway arguing over trading bracelets they had hidden under their sleeves.

The author’s discussion with children of various backgrounds from the ages of 11-14 greatly conflicted with the opinions of adults and the media. When an eighth grade boy who attends a private school in London was interviewed, it was found that not only were these bracelets worn but the kids were familiar with the sexual colour-coding and even playing the infamous game of Snap. When asked if anything resulted from this game, the boy furiously shook his head. “No,” he replied “it’s more like for dating [...] like flirting” and indicated that only high-schoolers are allowed to do such things. He admitted that they sometimes have “kissing parties” but that none of them wanted to go any farther, although all knew what farther entailed. He did, however, make sure that I wasn’t going to “tell my mother because I’d get in trouble.”

The most rewarding experience this author had was listening to a forum of five seventh and eighth grade girls discuss what they referred to as the “sex bracelet thing”. The term listen is used because, once asked about these colourful bangles, the girls were more than enthusiastic to delve into their experiences and opinions on the subject. They all agreed they had observed the bracelets being worn and knew what they meant. Some had seen other kids play Snap and a few had even played it themselves. All agreed that they wore the bracelets because they were fashionable, frowned upon, and allowed them to socialize about sex. However, it was unanimously expressed that, if they were to try any sexual act, it was because they wanted to see what it was like and not because they felt they had to. This statement may ring warning bells in a parent’s mind, but the girls all stated that they had clear opinions about what was sexually appropriate for themselves as individuals. One girl, when asked why someone would carry out some of the more explicit acts responded, “those girls wear the bracelets because they want to try those things...it doesn’t matter whether they wear them or not, they’ll still do it”. Four out of the five girls said they “don’t feel comfortable” talking to their parents about sex, mostly because they “don’t understand us” and “think we’re just obsessed with boys”. All of them were angry at the way kids were being portrayed in the media and adults’ consequent response. One girl stated, “It seems pretty hypocritical [...] I’m sure at our age they were doing the exact same things” and the others agreed. They all laughed over the fact that the bigger deal people made out of it, the more kids would want to do it. When talking about Snap, they all agreed that it had nothing to do with giving boys control over them or even wanting to engage in sexual acts, it was just a game that allowed them to talk about “sex stuff”. One particularly insightful girl summed up the general opinion succinctly. “What’s best for you is for you to figure out [and while our parents should help], we have to live our own life rather than the one they want us to live by”. It struck this author that these were fairly astute and mature observations for a group of people that the media labeled as sex-crazed and highly impressionable.

These personal experiences and interviews mirrored the broader conflicts within society on the subject of sex bracelets. It became clear that parents were not communicating with their children and that they heavily relied on media portrayal for information. It also seemed that their concerns were misguided. What it comes down to is the point that adults are worried about kids having sex in elementary school; regardless of the fact that only a small and relatively unchanging amount actually do. Adult society was convinced that the sex bracelet trend was coercing children into having intercourse and cited examples of sexually active kids as supposed evidence. As an elementary school behavioural counselor pointed out, one has to look to the background environment of a child in order to explain any behavioural, including sexual, problems he or she may be having. By

saying that some kids are having sex only because of a game, society is ignoring the more important factors that likely have the greatest, if not all, impact on a child's decision to have sex.

Through the deconstruction of the ideology to which they are accustomed, as demonstrated above, it would hopefully become clear to parents that the need to create an open, nonjudgmental approach to sexuality with their children is more important than initially thought. If this deconstruction does not occur, and the chasm in communication and interpretation of childhood sexuality between parents and children is not bridged, the ideology that discourages anything to do with children and sex other than promoting abstinence will remain intact. As determined in the research outlined above, this system of beliefs that is continually perpetuated through all forms of communication could pose a greater threat to the future of our children's sexual and psychological health than anything those flimsy bracelets could imaginably do.

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