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The Lolita Effect in the Media

> *Lolita, the light of my life, the fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-li-ta.*
>
> V. Nabokov (2001, p. 9)

The mass media, together with popular culture in which it is deeply rooted, are one of the main engines driving the present as well as one of the most effective mechanisms for influencing society. In the current digital era, the media has become the main factor responsible for spreading information, shaping ideas, propagating value systems or building individual identities, which gives the media an important educational and socializing function. According to some experts (Slavíková, 2001; Iłowiecki and Zasepa, 2003; Willems, 2003; Franke 2006; Orolínová in: Ľ. Held et al., 2006; Flaßpöhler, 2007; McGuire in: D. McQuil, 2007; Škodáček, 2007; Paul and Linz, 2007; Lenčo, 2008; Nečas and Trampota 2008), both short-term and long-term influence of the media has to be scrutinized in terms of content as the latter directly and usually imperceptibly influences human consciousness. According to N. Slavíková (2001): "right here is a danger of getting used to certain 'violent scenarios'", since, following A. Bandura's social-cognitive theory (in: Heretik, 2004) and its reciprocal determinism (mutual interaction between behaviours, background, thinking and other human inner processes), the scenarios without direct experience but by observational and imitational learning, are easily learnt by children and youngsters, and eventually become an acceptable way of solving society's problems.

The content of the media often shows a high degree of stereotyping in the way certain topics, individuals and groups are depicted. Through such repeated and consistent representations, the media creates standard features, based on the expectations and aspirations of certain individuals, giving them an impression that particular views and values are obvious and incontestable (Jirák, 2005; Sedláková, 2008). In this way, a deformed reality is created, dependent on pleasure and fun and creating secondary cultural and intellectual illiteracy, an extension of harmful life patterns, wrong attitudes and bad role models (Iłowiecki and Zasepa, 2003). The accumulation of these aspects leads to certain ambivalent phenomenon called "The Lolita Effect".

The name Lolita is associated with a disparity of representations as well as with pre-pubescent charm or even perversity. The conceptual framework is essentially derived from the eponymous work by V. Nabokov, where the central storyline is

that of a love story between a middle aged man, Humberto Humbert, and a twelve-
-year old girl, Dolores Haze (also called Lo or Lolita). The novel, known not only for
its innovative style but also for its controversial theme, was at first deemed by the
critics to be pornographic. The sale of the book was banned, as were both of its film
adaptations (1961 by Stanley Kubrick, 1998 by Adrian Lyne). The subsequent accep-
tance of this book finally incorporated the concept of Lolita into pop-culture, where it
started to function as a symbolic depiction of a provocative, precocious girl.

M. G. Durham introduced the term "The Lolita Effect" into the media sphere
through her book *The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and What
You Can Do About It* (2005). The title is a reaction to the ongoing public discussion
about the spreading of sexualized images of children and adolescents – mostly girls
– throughout the media. According to several authors (Reichert and Lambiase, 2003;
Merskin, 2004; Durham, 2005; Rich, 2005; Rush and La Nauze, 2006; Paul and Linz,
2007; Reist in: Toffotelli, 2008), girls in pictures are usually depicted as if they were
in danger, and since their sexuality is transformed, materialized and exploited, they
grow up convinced that popularity and success are closely tied to "sex appeal". Thus,
"the Lolita Effect" is synonymous with "an invitation to love and lust" represented
as preteen girls. This is clearly demonstrated by prevailing contextual explicitness
of sexual pictures in a wide range of media: on book and magazine covers, in TV
programmes, in movies as well as in advertisements (Merskin, 2004). Even some
consumer products are named after the so-called "literary vixen": a *perfume L de
Lolita Lempicka* (Picture 1), alternatively under its modified name *Nolita* (picture
2) – a hair care product with the accompanying slogan "No limits, no boundaries"...

Picture 1. Source: http://laijamay.com/shop/ images/L%20de%20Lolita%20Lempicka%20 Fleur%20de%20Corail.jpg (accessed: 20.10. 2010)

Picture 2. Source: http://www.beautyof- newyork.com/ upload/nolita-gritgel-8.jpg (accessed: 20.10.2010)

It is easy to connect this representation with the ideology behind men products,
which can be defined, according to L. Mulvey (in: Radway, 2001), as "a man's voyeu-
rism at the sight of a woman," which makes him want to see what to some extent is
covered under the stylized visual design, so that the picture thus transformed amo-
unts to a pleasant, minor transgression. Woman beauty becomes, in its immaturity,

a function of some of the practices of this sexual fusion, framing certain subjective views on women, and even, to some degree, on their passivity. Pictures presented in their static form as prints cannot say "no", their audio-visual form, on the other hand, tends to misrepresent the picture of an individual woman or a girl. According to M. L. De Fleur and E. E. Dennis (2001) if seeing and hearing are synergically inter-related, the effect of such a representation will be long lasting and profound, strong-ly impacting the so-called "audio-thinking" about pre-teen and adolescent girls or adult women in the context of a possible sexual connection. This picture is subsequ-ently automatically introduced into the "real" media reality, and by "hybridization", can be transformed into "the Lolita Effect", a construct negating the dividing line between childhood and maturity. So, a woman is presented as locked in an inter-mediate stage, which essentially consists of the common denominator between the child and the mature woman (stagnation – regression). This is why several scholars have concluded that the mass media supports the notion of looking at immature femininity as a sexual object, which, according to M. Kinsbourna (in: Bussey and Bandura, 1999), is an alarming and wide-spread phenomenon.

"The Lolita Effect" creates an illusion, a promise of "pleasurable femininity" based on restrictive paradigms of pop-culture ideals. Its basic attribute is the "in-nocent childhood" stylized, through make-up, hairdos, jewellery and clothing, into a body speaking the "feminine language". The two opposite poles of *femme fatale* and *femme fragile* are thus intertwined. In this way, a girl's pre-pubescence is trans-formed into female attractiveness whilst still maintaining the child's fragile inno-cence. Therefore, according to M. G. Durham (2005) the media representation of the traditional model of femininity, with a preference for obedience, passivity and powerlessness, is constantly reinforced. "The Lolita Effect" puts girls in a position in which they have become "voiceless": their bodies are objects, exhibited only for their appearance and intended to depict a visually pleasing scene. Their creative-ly shaped look is put on the pedestal of perfection, physiology completely hidden, which promotes the dominance of thinness in the media.

The book *The Lolita Effect* highlights some of the myths promoted by the mass media, which depicts restricted female sexuality, in sharp contrast to a healthy, sub-stantive and progressive sexual image:

- Girls do not choose boys but boys choose girls and they choose the sexy ones. The boys like it. On this basis, M. G. Durham (2005) highlights the media con-tent, which focuses not on how to take care of yourself and your needs but rather on how to become an attractive sexual object to men.
- Girls are supposed to be anatomically ideal goddesses (Barbie doll).
- Girls should take care of their "ideal", based on the motto: "If you have woman's sexuality – show it – seduce."
- "Pretty children". This myth refers to 12–13-year-olds who look older and are more attractive than what is natural for their age. The media represent them as fully developed sexual objects.
- Violence is sexy (video-games, horrors) – media depictions of sexual subor-dination of women to men. On this basis, D. E. Levin and J. Kilbourne (2008) highlight in their research the pressure such myths put on girls to act in a sexually provocative way even before they are able to understand this type of

media content. J. D. Brown, C. T. Halpern and A. K. L. L'Engle (2005) point out the fact that only very few scientific studies have focused on the connection between the sexual content in the media and the attitude of adolescents to it. The few studies that have been conducted indicate that adolescents learn about sex from the media they use most often. Some researchers have found out that young people exposed to video clips with strong sexual message were more inclined to approve of the concept of premarital sex than adolescents exposed to random clips or the standard sexual content depicted on the TV. The study has also revealed that men tend to be driven by sex and have difficulties with staying faithful, while women tend to be represented as sexual objects whose value depends on their physical looks. Researchers also highlight the conspicuous absence of scientific research on the connection between the developmental stages of an individual and his or her reactions to sexual content in the media.

So far, two relevant scientific studies from J. Cantor, M. L. Mares, J. S. Hyde and L. T. Silverman-Watkins, J. N. Sprafkin (in: Brown, Halpern and L'Engle, 2005), using age as the measurement for developmental stages, have been published. They have shown that it is possible to notice different younger and older adolescents exposed to sexually explicit content. The former tend to find such images both embarrassing and confusing. Similarly, other researchers (Merskin, 2004; Durham 2005; Brown, Halpern and L'Engle, 2005; Fichnová, Satková, 2005; Held et al., 2006; Ondrejka, Farský and Spitka, 2006; Škodáček, 2007; Toffoletti, 2008) have also appealed for further research on the afore-mentioned trend as it apparently leads to pathological forms of sexual behaviour. Nowadays, "the Lolita Effect" is having toxic side effects, which we can see experience on a daily basis.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, accredited leader amongst medical organizations focusing on the issue of the media influence, issued in 2005 an official statement about disturbing effects of the media on the physical and mental health of children and adolescents.

The AAP has appealed to TV broadcasters to change the representation of sexuality in non-news programmes in order to promote responsible. The AAP advocates reducing suggestive and stimulating information related to the advertised products (Rich, 2005). In their report, the AAP members summarize the adverse effects the media images can have, categorizing them as follows:
- Needs reception disorders and distorted body image;
- Early unwanted youth pregnancy;
- A predisposition to aggressive behaviour;
- Identification with inappropriate behavioural models and problems with self-perception.

The aforementioned findings have been emphasized by several authors not only abroad (Merskin, 2004; Durham 2005; Rich, 2005; Levin and Kilboune, 2008; Bev, 2009) but also in Slovakia (Ondrejka, Farský and Spitka, 2006; Škodáček, 2007), with all scholars agreeing that the negative influence of the media decreases individual authenticity of growing up and that the dominance of inappropriate sexual images presented in the media encourages the exploitation of children for commercial purposes with the goal of increasing profits for corporations.

"The Lolita Effect" is a recognized phenomenon in the media. Currently, there are calls for international dialogue on the issue, with the goal of initiating actions against sexual exploitation of minors, especially girls. There is a need for in-depth conversation challenging the notion of "immature femininity" as one-dimensional and sexual-only. as it favours the replacement of the multi-dimensional human being with the pop-cultural female commodity for consumption. One way to achieve this is to reduce sexually explicit media content and to warn people about its possible negative consequences. This can be done by providing comprehensible information intended to raise the media literacy of adolescents.

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Efekt Lolitki w przestrzeni medialnej

Streszczenie

Artykuł prezentuje efekt Lolity w przestrzeni medialnej – jest to zjawisko materializowania kobiecego piękna w jego niedojrzałości w bezpośredniej treści przekazów medialnych. W dyskursie teoretycznym zawarto przekonanie, iż dominująca tendencja do eksponowania dojrzewających dziewcząt w celu zwiększenia zysków komercyjnych jest niewłaściwa. Przedstawiając sumarycznie poszczególne pozycje z literatury krajowej i zagranicznej, w szczególności publikację M.G. Durhama *The Lolita Effect. The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and What You Can Do About It* (New York 2005), autorka artykułu zwraca uwagę na niektóre mity prezentowane w mediach jako restrykcyjne spojrzenie na kobiecą seksualność, pozostające zarazem w ostrym kontraście ze zdrową, rzeczową i progresywną wizją seksualną.