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### **girls gone skank: the sexualization of girls in American culture**

Patrice Oppliger, McFarland, Jefferson, North Carolina, 2008, 266pp.,  
ISBN: 978-0786435227, \$35.00, £31.50

Mass communications professor Patrice Oppliger attempts to construct a landmark text on the accelerated and systemic oversexualization of young women and girls in *Girls Gone Skank: The Sexualization of Girls in Pop Culture*. Oppliger has written about pop culture's undeserved authority on prevailing standards of gender normativity in her other book, *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity*, as well. In this newest work, she keenly documents offenses in an array of mediums, from alarming beauty trends to pseudo-pornographic television and shock jock radio shows. She leaves no emblematic stone unturned, headlining each chapter with a distinctive cultural phenomenon, including strippers, plastic surgery and beauty pageants.

Trends, she argues, are defined and popularized by an unmistakable sexual exploitation of young girls. Consequently, girls are socialized to participate in their own abuse by becoming avid consumers of and altering their behaviour to reflect sexually exploitative images and goods. Although an honest effort to comprehensively and ruthlessly tackle this cultural problem, Oppliger's book contains a few fatal assumptions: namely, her reliance on her own standards and anecdotal experiences for locating 'skanky', and her apparent implication that girls devour and identify with cultural phenomena without hesitancy or negotiation.

Positing that society has high-stake interests in confronting damaging representations of women and asking how women participate – or are forced to participate – in their own sexualized oppression, Oppliger's premise is valid. *Girls Gone Skank* reads almost like a girls studies survey handbook, although with a definitive stance: although masquerading as sexual empowerment, current trends are forcing young girls today into a premature sexualized role. Trends' success is owed in part to prevalent insecurity among girls, coupled with 'absentee parenting' and abstinence-driven sex education.

Throughout the book, Oppliger is able to concede with tact and thereby establishes the capacity to both surprise and impress readers. She admits, for instance, that porn industry profit numbers have been ludicrously inflated without compromising her message that pornography is harmful to viewers, sex workers and even (through trickle-down fashion trends) prepubescent girls. Oppliger has a gifted eye for identifying deep-seated societal problems

that others may have continually overlooked without her guidance. However, her catalogue of basic descriptions of cultural phenomena is disproportionately high compared with available in-depth analysis.

For ease of reference, I assume, Oppliger calls girls who emulate these trends 'skanks'. (Oppliger adopts the phrase 'skank chic' to describe current fashion styles.) 'Girls gone skank' superficially seems like a pun on the infamous 'girls gone wild' franchise, but is it not. Despite its convenience, usurping a term with a long-standing history of accomplishing what Oppliger claims she combats (the sexual oppression and exploitation of girls) and applying it to a feminist text needs to be justified. To do otherwise assumes there is no feminist contention about either using the term or what falls under it. In fact, Oppliger's tone and style are undoubtedly the least appealing aspects of this otherwise enthusiastic and passionate text. She oftentimes sounds downright out of touch, such as when she cites [urbandictionary.com](http://urbandictionary.com) – arguably lesser ranked than Wikipedia in terms of academic clout – to define 'eurotrash'.

Although Oppliger asks many hardball questions surrounding how we raise and educate our young girls, she induces the reader to question the glaring want of young girls' perspectives within her text. The myriad ways in which adolescent girls negotiate cultural processes in constructing their own individual and valid identities is an especially integral facet to exploring these issues. To leave young girls' viewpoints out is to assume that because they are attracted to certain fashion trends or television shows, they must necessarily personify implicit cultural messages without a hiccup. Although these questionable cultural phenomena have commonalities identifiable in their shared sexual exploitation of girls, it is essential to include young girls' voices in order to better analyse the different ways pop culture calls are answered or subverted. In doing so, we can better theorize how to dismantle the power of these images.

Oppliger not only includes parents' and teachers' viewpoints in her original research, she also emphasizes their positions in society as the principal site for undoing injurious cultural crazes. Informed and unwavering parenting and comprehensive education are the best tools to inoculate harmful trends, she argues. If girls are culturally oversexualized, she aptly points out, then why are we skirting dialogues about sex and sexuality in our homes and classrooms? I recommend this book for any parent or teacher wondering the same. Scholars, however, would most likely find the laundry-list format, anecdotal references and unquestioned assumptions ill-fitted for academic purposes.

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