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sex·y (adj.) [**sek**-see]

 Dictionary.com defines the word ‘sexy’ as “provoking or intending to provoke sexual interest (n.p.). However, ‘sexy’ is also defined as “interesting, exciting, or trendy” (n.p.). Not only are these definitions drastically different, but they are also open to interpretation, which is why a woman can be deemed as being ‘sexy’ just as much as a new car can, even though a car does not turn a man on in the same way a woman might. How can renowned chef Alex Guarnaschelli claim that a piece of pizza is ‘sexy’ (n.p.), while Peggy Orenstein argues that it is unhealthy for young girls to strive to be sexy, even though that same word drives the process of natural selection? The word ‘sexy’ not only evolved from stimulating evolution itself to potentially sexualizing young girls, but it also can mean different things to different people. The question remains: how do we define sexy, and is the word harmful or not?

 The origin of the word ‘sexy’ dates back to Darwinian evolution and the concept of sexual selection. For sexual selection to occur, a female in a population tends to mate with a male that has a particularly desirable trait or combination of traits (EvoEdu), or a character that is ‘sexy,’ such as the colorful and bright feathers of a male peacock (UntamedScience). The sexier a male is, the more likely it is that a female of the same species will mate with him, and therefore produce “sexy sons” (EvoEdu) that will maintain high fitness, or likelihood to produce many offspring that will survive. Another reason a female is more likely to choose males with different traits is to cause the genetic pool to grow and change. According to Jack Busch, the same is true for humans; Busch claims that the first “rule” of procreation is to “diversify” the species (n.p.). That may seem strange, considering that a human looking for a partner probably doesn’t immediately consider genetic diversity as a key component of an ideal mate. However, Busch provides a compelling argument detailing the fact that humans *do* care about genetic diversity—just not consciously—through a real- life example. He convinces the reader that people unconsciously lean in favor of diversifying the gene pool—a man tends to see a woman with a foreign accent as ‘sexy’ or alluring, because “if a woman hails from a faraway land…she comes from a drastically different gene pool than you” (Busch). This example shows that what is ‘sexy’ to animals is ‘sexy’ to humans, as well, because the meaning of the word ‘sexy’ clearly has evolutionary roots. Busch further backs up his point through this captioned photograph, which, although it seems silly, clearly portrays his point—that ‘sexy’ favors survival of the fittest:

(n.p.)

In fact, much of what men find sexy about women has evolutionary significance, from facial symmetry as a sign of health (EvoEdu), to pheromones as attractors and large breasts as a signifier of fertility (Busch). However, nowadays, sex is clearly not always related to procreation—sex does not necessarily imply mating in human relations any more. Perhaps the change in the way we view sex can explain why roles seemed to have switched between males and females in animals versus in humans. In the animal world, males are the most colorful and the most adorned as they beg for the attention of females. In the human world, it seems, it is just the opposite. So, if the roles have reversed and sex is not always about producing offspring, what does the word ‘sexy’ mean in the context of pleasure?

 The popular television program *Sex and the City* is centered on the idea of sex for pleasure and how women can attain it and gain the attraction of men. In one famous [episode](http://www.tvtdb.com/sexandthecity/transcripts/4x02.php), the ladies of the show explore what makes a woman ‘sexy’ based on Miranda’s encounter with Dave, a man she meets at the gym. Dave courageously approaches a sweaty and disheveled Miranda and admits, “I’ve been watching you for months, and I think that you’re very sexy” (TVTDB). Miranda, totally surprised that a man would see her as sexy at all, let alone in her ratty old gym clothes, explains her astonishment to her friends. She admits, “sexy is the thing I try to get them to see me as *after* I win them over with my personality” (TVTDB). Miranda’s first date with Dave involves him, yet again, calling an uncomfortable Miranda “sexy,” so, on their second date, she tries to live up to her own, and society’s, expectations of how a so- called ‘sexy’ woman should act. She smiles, presses her body up against his, and radiates confidence; but, then, Miranda struggles to understand why he would not so much as kiss her on their second date, even though she was playing the part of ‘sexy’ to its full potential. Miranda thought she was behaving in a ‘sexy’ and “confident” way, but, to Dave, “[she] seemed a little full of [her]self” (TVTDB). While Miranda’s confidence that borders on cockiness turns Dave off, an internet [quiz](http://www.sexytester.com/) entitled “R U Sexy?” deems confidence as one of the main components of sexiness. In fact, the quiz breaks sexiness down into three main components: self- image, confidence, and attitude. If scoring high on these three seemingly good qualities determines sexiness, it is hard to understand the uproar surrounding young girls’ obsession with seeming ‘sexy’ to males. Don’t we want young girls to have high levels of confidence, healthy self- images, and good attitudes? Peggy Orenstain and leading psychologists argue that striving to be sexy does just the opposite, leaving girls with poor self esteem and mental disorders that stem from their poor self- images (n.p.). Perhaps Miranda, instead of trying to impress Dave in particular, was influenced by the media’s typical version of sexy, which is supposedly happening to many young girls, as well.

 There is some debate over whether or not our ‘sexy’ culture and the media affect the mindset of girls as they mature. According to Anita Gurian, Ph.D, "the sexualization of girls...is harmful to girls' self- image and healthy development" (n.p.). Gurian supports her assertion using every day examples such as "a 5- year old girl wearing a t-shirt that says 'Flirt'" (n.p.), as well as an APA report that shows the correlation between sexualized media and girls' health problems, implying that the media is the cause of such negative effects in young girls' images of themselves. Peggy Orenstein agrees with Gurian, claiming that "sexualizing little girls...undermines healthy sexuality rather than promoting it" (n.p.). Orenstein links a [video](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ir8BO4-7DkM) that involves a group of grade school- aged girls dancing erotically, while wearing barely- there costumes, to Beyoncé's hit song "Single Ladies" (n.p.). While Orenstein uses this sexual display to effectively astonish her readers, Renee Cree attempts to dismantle both Orenstein's and Gurian's arguments by appealing to the readers' *logos* instead of their emotions. Although we can see a blatant sexual display in the "Single Ladies" video, which shocks and awes its audience, Cree explains that studies such as the APA report that Gurian references "did not fully take into account the fact that adolescents who are already interested in sex will choose to consume more sexualized media" (n.p.). While this point makes logical sense, it is difficult to push the images from the "Single Ladies" video out of the audience's minds. These arguments are both powerful, but the question remains: should we believe our *pathos* or our *logos*? Can we believe the logic behind Cree's third- variable hypothesis when we are able to see these little girls "playing at sexy" (Orenstein) right before our eyes? Whatever the answers may be, there is no denying that the media is an ultimately ‘sexy’ device, as the [video](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjAVL5zFrlU) “Sexualization of Girls in the Media” shows through its various videos of popular programming and music videos, photographs of magazine articles meant for young girls, and images of ‘sexy’ dolls and other sexualized toys (SPARK). This video proves, by using striking visuals, that the concern of the media with sex is obvious, whether it affects girls or not.

 The harmful measures that young girls may be taking to seem ‘sexy’ has evolutionary roots, as well, just as attraction stems back to sexual selection. In the animal kingdom, while females gravitate towards certain extreme traits in males, these traits are not necessarily advantageous in the fitness of the particular organism. EvoEdu provides a clear example of the harmful effects of a ‘sexy’ trait—a colorful bird may be more likely to attract a mate, but it is also easily seen, which could potentially attract predators (n.p.). The long, voluptuous tails of peacocks may attract a mate, as well, but they are also potential problems when it comes to predators, as comically yet accurately portrayed in this cartoon posted on the website “Principles of Animal Behavior”:

 

Another example is that of the extinct Irish Elk; big antlers were considered ‘sexy’ among female Irish elks. However, although big antlers were preferred in the female community, some of the male elks’ antlers became so incredibly heavy that they caused physical strain, ultimately leading to the elks toppling over via the staggering weight of their own antlers (Untamed Science). The “Principles of Animal Behavior” website provides an [animation](http://eebweb.arizona.edu/animal_behavior/chase/chaseaway2a.htm) of the antler problem, which causes readers to visualize and fully understand the potential harms of sexual selection in evolution:

­🡪 (n.p.) Evolutionarily, large breasts are preferred, and ideal feminine proportions such as wide, baby- bearing hips and a tiny waist are what men find ‘sexy’ or attractive (Busch), but how far can a woman go before she can no longer survive? If Barbie is seen as the ideal woman, how can she survive if her voluptuous breasts deny her of mobility, her unrealistic proportions prevent her from menstruating, and her miniature waist cannot hold all of her organs? According to ‘Dom’s Mommy’ on the “babygaga” [forum](http://forum.baby-gaga.com/about826977.html), that is exactly what would happen to Barbie if she were a real woman (n.p.). ‘Dom’s mommy’ provides a shocking picture that shows if a real woman had Barbie’s proportions, she would look like this:

(n.p.)

‘Dom’s Mommy’ provides this photograph not only to help us visualize what a real- life Barbie would look like, but also to use the ridiculousness of the picture to scare the reader, most likely a mom based on the nature of the website, into thinking twice about what her daughter is playing with and what kind of message it is sending to her. This shock technique is incredibly effective, startling the reader enough to make her think about a seemingly harmless doll in a whole new light. This astonishing, disturbing picture speaks to readers’ emotional appeal, detailing the extreme measures women and girls might take to be considered ‘sexy.’ If Barbie is unable to menstruate, she has zero fitness, and therefore has no hope of contributing to the gene pool—in the most literal sense of the word, Barbie is *not* sexy. But, in other meanings of the word, she apparently is. In terms of evolution, there is no way that Barbie can be sexy—she may as well have giant antlers on top of her head.

 Even if the media is not causing girls to have sex earlier or develop disorders, we cannot deny that the sheer amount of sex on television, on the radio, in movies, through social networking sights, and in advertisements is staggering. We have to admit that the ‘sexy’ culture we live in is sending out some sort of distorted message to young woman about how important sex and being ‘sexy’ are in our society, and whatever effect that message may have, we should search for the most effective way to counter it. One form of rebellion that speaks to most people is humor—not only does humor entertain us, but it effectively and efficiently captures our attention for a long enough time so that it can get its point across. P!nk’s [music video](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BR4yQFZK9YM) entitled “Stupid Girls” comically parodies certain ‘sexy’ celebrities—Jessica Simpson in the burger commercial, Paris Hilton with her sex tape scandal, and music video vixens, to name a few—who demean themselves by wearing barely any clothing and dancing erotically to seem more alluring. The video also pairs these celebrity renditions with real- life examples of regular women who go through drastic measures such as cosmetic surgery and self-induced vomiting to maintain a certain ‘sexy’ figure. This complimentary pairing allows the audience to compare what celebrities are doing to what regular women are doing to be more like those respective celebrities. While the video is making fun of these “stupid girls” (P!nk) who go to great lengths to try to be ‘sexy’ and appealing to men, and the specific situations are comical, P!nk does not take the subject lightly; the comedy just makes the meaning of the song more powerful and drives her point home. In the song she states, “the disease is growing/ it’s epidemic/ I’m scared that there ain’t a cure,” as she implies that feminism is going down the drain as sexualized media is growing and relevant and healthy body images for girls are deteriorating (n.p.). The back-story of the video follows a little girl, holding a Barbie doll, watching this whole spectacle on television. By the end of the video, the girl turns off the television, puts the Barbie doll down, and grabs a football. Not only does the girl’s rejection of the Barbie doll represent her disregard for the ‘sexy’ way society expects her to act, but grabbing the football promotes her own individuality and the gain of a healthy self- image. The point of P!nk’s video is to utilize comedy to point out the serious flaws in these ‘sexy’ societal norms that surround us in the media and enlighten girls so that they are able see the ridiculousness of these norms, and break away from them, in order to be sexy in their own, personal way.

Just as people embrace their own version of what ‘sexy’ is on an individual basis, many discourse communities make use of the word ‘sexy’ other than in its contest with sex, whether for mating or for pleasure. One of such discourse community is the foodie community, which draws on the fact that ‘sexy’ can mean not only sexually stimulating, but it can also mean ‘provocative’ to all of our senses. While food can be sexy in a sensual way, the aspect of food as a sex object has begun to lose its meaning through parody videos, such as PETA’s “Go Veg” [advertisement](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdrmNzeq8JU&oref=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fresults%3Fsearch_query%3Dsexy%20vegetables%20superbowl%20%20commercial%20%3B%26search%3DSearch%26sa%3DX%26oi%3Dspell%26resnum%3D0%26spell%3D1&has_verified=1), which depicts half- naked models making out with vegetables (n.p.). Food is sexy in that it is aesthetically pleasing, arousing a few of our senses, including not only taste and smell, but sight, as well, as related to presentation. Alex Guarnaschelli states, “I absolutely believe that food can be sexy…I may possibly write a bodice ripper…I like [food] so much” (Baked Saloman). In this case, the word ‘sexy’ means ‘provocative’ or ‘stimulating,’ which shows how the meaning of the word sexy has changed in certain contexts. By referencing a “bodice ripper” in context with the word “sexy,” Guarnaschelli pays homage to the most commonly used definition of the word, while still employing a new definition in reference to food as a sexy stimulant to the senses. Food Network stars such as Sandra Lee and Rachael Ray are titling their recipes as being ‘sexy’: “Sexy Soiree” and “Sexy Surf and Turf,” respectively (n.p.). However, the word ‘sexy’ has come full circle in this regard—Guarnaschelli uses the word ‘sexy’ to describe food as being interesting and exciting, while a [video](http://foodnetworkhumor.com/2010/07/a-sensual-reading-of-alex-guarnaschellis-tweets-part-2/) entitled “A Sensual Reading of Alex Guarnaschelli’s Tweets” on the blog “Food Network Humor” twists Guarnaschelli’s take on a ‘sexy’ experience with food into a truly ‘sexual’ experience that “border[s] on porn” (Madison). Another discourse community that is adopting the word ‘sexy’ is the scientific community, as the title “Science is Sexy” suggests. Ioana Patringenaru relates the word ‘sexy’ to science in an attractive way, by referencing the new engineer Barbie, but also in an exciting way, in that science is spreading to mainstream television, reaching out to people and fascinating them (n.p.).

Ultimately, the word ‘sexy’ can be whatever we make of it. Being sexy is important for evolution and survival of the fittest, but the word has become so mainstream that it is potentially influencing girls to aspire to be perfectly generic, which is exactly the opposite of what the word suggests. As Miranda from “Sex and the City” discovers, being sexy doesn’t necessarily mean following the media’s version of the word, but, as P!nk points out, it is an incredibly versatile mechanism of expressing individuality. As long as we, as a society, strive not to get too caught up in the word, we can continue to uniquely utilize it, as foodies and scientists have shown us, in a creative, playful way.

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