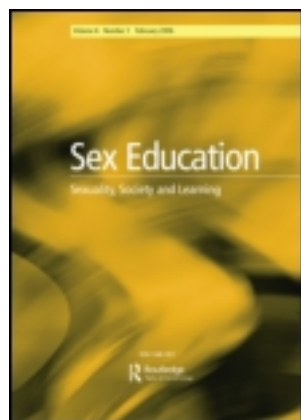




Sex Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/csed20>

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Available online: 04 Aug 2011

To cite this article: Sara Bragg, David Buckingham, Rachel Russell & Rebekah Willett (2011): Too much, too soon? Children, 'sexualization' and consumer culture, *Sex Education*, 11:3, 279-292

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2011.590085>

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Too much, too soon? Children, ‘sexualization’ and consumer culture

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This article presents a critical analysis of how the issue of childhood ‘sexualization’ – and the role of consumer culture within it – has been defined and framed, both within the public debate and in the academic research literature. It counterposes this with some evidence taken from a study conducted in Scotland in 2009/10 about the availability and nature of ‘sexualized’ goods, and the perspectives of parents and children. The article suggests that parents’ and children’s perceptions of the issue are more complex than is typically assumed within the public debate; and that this in turn points to the need for more sophisticated responses at the level of public policy and of education.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing concern about the sexualization of children, and specifically about the effects of commercial marketing and media in this respect. Several popular books addressing these issues and aimed at parents have been published in the past few years, mostly in the United States (for example, Durham 2008; Lamb and Brown 2006; Levin and Kilbourne 2008; Reist 2009). This concern has also been raised at the level of public policy. The Australian government recently conducted a national enquiry on the topic, seemingly prompted by a controversial report entitled ‘Corporate Paedophilia’ produced by the Australia Institute, an independent policy ‘think tank’ (Rush and La Nauze 2006; Australian Senate 2007). In Britain, the previous Labour government commissioned a report in this area in 2009, undertaken by the celebrity psychologist Dr Linda Papadopoulos; while the then Prime Minister Gordon Brown supported a campaign called ‘Let Girls be Girls’, launched in January 2010 by the influential parenting website Mumsnet, which aims to prevent retailers from selling products that ‘prematurely sexualise’ children. The Conservative leader and now Prime Minister David Cameron has also remarked on the ‘creepy sexualisation’ of children in advertising and ‘unsuitable’ pop music – although he has been quite frank about his own daughter’s resistance to his attempts to censor her preferences.¹

The research we present in this article arose from similar concerns. It was commissioned in 2009 following a meeting of the Scottish Parliament’s Equal Opportunities Committee, to which various experts were invited to present views.² Our research set out to provide some empirical evidence about the prevalence and distribution of apparently ‘sexualized’ goods in Scottish shops, and on the perspectives and experiences of Scottish children and parents. The focus here was on ‘sexualized goods’ rather than media – on clothing and toys, and to a lesser extent other branded merchandise (such as ‘Playboy’ products). This brief article inevitably presents only a selection of our

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findings; a more detailed account of these is available in the full report (Buckingham et al. 2010).

Nonetheless, we argue that our research challenges some of the common assumptions and understandings about children, sex and commercial-consumer culture. Responses to the issue are diverse and conflicted, such that it is difficult to provide simple solutions; and although sexualization is usually presented as a relatively new phenomenon, there are significant continuities with debates from earlier periods that we believe have similarly invidious consequences for girls in particular (Egan and Hawkes 2008). In addition, we believe that both the topic and our methods are significant and generative in researching young people's sexual cultures, enabling us to comprehend some of the commonly available discourses and practices young people have to negotiate in developing their sexual and gender identities.

Reviewing previous research

The project began with a review of the relevant literature, building on work undertaken for the UK government's recent independent assessment of 'The Impact of the Commercial World on Children's Wellbeing' (Buckingham et al. 2009, chapter 14). Despite the noise of the debate, we found relatively little useful research and identified significant flaws in existing approaches. The most striking of these is the lack of any consistent definition of 'sexualization' itself. To state the obvious, there are bound to be significant difficulties in defining what *counts* as 'sexualized': different people are likely to have very different views about this, and to interpret and respond to sexual imagery in quite different ways. Yet much of the research ignores this. In practice, it often fails to distinguish between material that is 'sexualized' as opposed to 'sexual' in nature; or it falls back on equally ill-defined terms such as 'objectifying' or 'exploitative'.

The Australia Institute report (Rush and La Nauze 2006) is particularly problematic in this respect, and has attracted widespread – and in our view, justified – criticism as a result (see Lumby and Albury 2008). Part of the report is based on a form of content analysis, yet it fails to distinguish sufficiently between material targeting a teen audience and that aimed at younger children; and the sample for analysis is very small and highly selective. Its readings of this material can only be described as unsystematic and extremely partial; and, in some instances, the authors seem to read strongly adult connotations into images of children. When it comes to assessing the effects of such material, the report draws exclusively on psychological studies, especially laboratory experiments and large-scale correlational surveys. When it comes to the influence of media and marketing, this is regarded as a 'hypodermic' process, in which children are passive victims rather than active meaning-makers.

The American Psychological Association (2007) report on the sexualization of girls has been widely cited as an authoritative review of the field, yet here again the report collapses together studies of a diverse range of issues that it deems to be evidence of a single phenomenon. Its definition of sexualization is so wide as to encompass potentially any kind of imagery featuring physical bodies, in effect equating 'sexual' with 'sexualized' imagery, and assuming that the *meaning* of such images is fixed and can be taken for granted. 'Sexualized' or 'objectifying' images are also compared with a norm of 'healthy' representation that seems indifferent to questions of genre or realism; while children's sexuality, or their knowledge of adult sexuality, is seen as necessarily 'inappropriate'. (A fuller critique of the American Psychological Association study can be found in our report [Buckingham et al. 2010], and in Duits and van Zoonen [in press]).

Linda Papadopoulos' report for the UK Home Office is in our view similarly deficient (Papadopoulos 2010). Like the American Psychological Association report, it asserts that there is consensus among researchers on this issue, but this is only possible on the basis of a highly selective and uncritical presentation of the evidence. Perhaps the most problematic aspect of this report, however, is its implicit connection between the sexualization of girls and violence against women – an argument that, with no substantial supporting evidence, comes very close to a 'blame the victim' logic.

In these respects, all three reports – and the research on which they draw – display many of the fundamental inadequacies of 'media effects' research that have been widely criticized in areas such as media violence (see Buckingham et al. 2008), especially in their simplistic accounts of audience response. Despite the high – and indeed, quite dogmatic – degree of certainty these reports proclaim, the evidence of media influence here is mixed and inconclusive even on its own terms. Little attention is paid here to research on the social and cultural contexts of sexuality, how sexual meanings are established and negotiated, or how children and young people interpret and use sexual content. None of the reports even recognizes the existence of wider debates within feminist cultural theory and research around the 'sexualization of culture'.

There were further limitations in the available research in terms of our specific interests here. Most previous work has been concerned with media (including advertising), rather than sexualized goods or products. Almost all of it has focused on adults (often conveniently available groups of US university students), rather than children; and while this may partly reflect ethical concerns, it would not be unreasonable to expect that children will perceive the apparently 'sexual' connotations of products or media imagery quite differently from adults. Finally, much of the research focuses on girls, leaving aside key questions about the consequences for boys – an emphasis that is symptomatic of the wider anxieties surrounding girls' sexual agency that appear to underlie much of the public debate.

Sex in the shops

In the first part of our research, we attempted to review the range, type and availability of 'sexualized' products aimed at young people under the age of 16. We undertook a survey of 32 retail outlets in different areas of Scotland, including supermarkets/superstores, department stores, clothing retailers, toy stores, sports stores, gift/gadget stores, stationers, outlets devoted to specific branded goods, and popular retail outlets that market goods through a website or catalogue. We undertook 38 observational visits, making systematic field notes based upon a previously piloted data-collection instrument: this included making a description of the location, type and prevalence of children's products in the store, as well as noting other products surrounding them, and how advertising, décor and music were used to market the products. The products we focused on included clothes, cosmetics, toys, food, bedding, stationery, electrical items and accessories such as hair products. We also undertook limited observations at a selection of stores to observe how potential customers engaged with products and their surroundings; and collected visual, organizational and marketing data from 'virtual' stores. We subsequently subjected a selection of products to a more detailed semiotic analysis.

In order both to conduct the initial survey and to identify specific products for further analysis, we had to devise a coding system. This aspect of the study was fundamentally problematic, not least because of the subjective and ambiguous nature of the term 'sexualized'. We therefore began with a deliberately broad and inclusive categorization of goods having potentially 'sexual' meanings, as follows:

- (1) Goods that seem to make reference to sexual *practices* through images, words or humour (including the use of ambiguity or innuendo, e.g. 'blow me' and an image of a fan).
- (2) Goods that appear to make reference to sexual *contexts* through images, words, colours, styles or items: that is, where the familiarity with the item stems from culturally sexualized contexts – for example, stripping (shiny gloves and stilettos), burlesque (feather boa), 'sexy' lingerie (lace, red, black and purple).
- (3) Goods that emphasize *body parts* and shapes that might be culturally associated with adult sexuality; for example, eyes, lips, breasts, cleavage, curves, legs, bottom, skin, groin.
- (4) Goods that duplicate *styles* currently considered 'high fashion' for adults. This includes goods marketed in a way that combines items from a potentially sexual adult context with images, words, or practices (e.g. play) associated with childhood, in such a way as to normalize them as children's goods; for example, Hello Kitty 'Sexy Little Mints', sweets that carry potential sexual connotations by virtue of their name and image.
- (5) Goods that contain a reference to *gender stereotypes*; for example, by over-emphasizing physical attractiveness, associating females with love and intimacy, or associating males with aggressiveness and dominance, through words, images, symbols or activities.

We were aware of the potential overlaps between these categories and that while goods fitting these descriptions might be identified (by some people in some contexts) as carrying sexual or gendered meanings, this might not in itself be sufficient to consider them as *sexualized*. However, we felt that this inclusive approach would yield material that could be further interrogated in later aspects of the study.

Our survey did identify several products that might be described as 'sexualized', at least some of which appeared to be aimed at children: these ranged from Playboy stationery to cosmetics kits in toyshops, as well as various children's clothing items, including bikinis, 'animal print' underwear, 'boobtube' dresses and low-slung trousers. However, the overall results suggest that such goods are not as prevalent as often claimed. Even within our broad coding, many of the stores surveyed contained no examples whatsoever of such goods. This is not to suggest that sexual imagery in consumer culture is not widespread, or that children do not consume products surrounded by such imagery. However, it does suggest that relatively few 'sexualized' products are specifically aimed at children.

Making distinctions

The anxiety about 'sexualization' is of course part of a broader concern about the apparent blurring of boundaries between children and adults (Buckingham 2000). However, the role of the commercial market in this respect is complex and often ambiguous. Spatial arrangements in commercial outlets, such as placing products for adults and children on different floors, or arranging products for children in a sequential manner according to age, can reinforce or even create age distinctions through applying a kind of developmental sequence (Cook 2004). However, what is aimed at children is not necessarily consumed by them, and what is aimed at adults is not necessarily only consumed by adults. Furthermore, proximities can also blur the distinctions between adult, youth and child: for example, in the shop Claire's Accessories, 'childlike' products such as fake cartoon tattoos were placed next to novelty items aimed at the 'Hen Night' market. Age markers can also be blurred by the nature of the products themselves: many clothing items aimed at young

people now are exact copies of fashions aimed at adults, and conversely make-up products for girls are often packaged as toys (as in Toys R Us).

Stores with a cross-generational target group further complicate the picture. These retail outlets – such as Quiz, River Island, or Topman – can be identified as ‘aspirational’ spaces for a number of reasons (Russell and Tyler 2005). They do not appear to target children or young people explicitly, and there are no explicit age markers attached to products, which means they may be used in constructing a potentially desirable ‘adult’ identity. However, the presence of very small clothes sizes (such as sizes four to six for women) and our background interviews with industry contacts both suggest that young people are ‘the target market by default’ for such stores.

If age distinctions are both constructed and blurred in the retail world, gender distinctions seem to be more apparent and more rigidly enforced. They were apparent in the selection of products themselves, and in spatial separation (as in the separate boys’ and girls’ aisles in Toys R Us, for example) and then further reinforced by the use of colours, fabrics, slogans and marketing techniques. Stereotypical images of children were also used to market products – for example, boys were more likely to be depicted participating in activities, while girls were represented as passively ‘looking attractive’. In terms of ‘sexualized goods’, while a few product ranges appeared to be aimed at teen boys (e.g. low-slung jeans in Topman), the majority of goods emphasizing body parts and shapes culturally associated with adult sexuality (category 3 above) were more likely to be aimed at young females than young males. Even so, goods aimed at the pursuit of a ‘feminine’ appearance such as cosmetics, hair accessories, purses, handbags and other articles were much more prevalent than overtly sexualized goods.

However, our observations of children and young people also suggested that shopping was by no means the only focus of activity in retail outlets. On the contrary, commercial spaces often constitute a space of play, a place to meet friends or to engage in other forms of interaction that are not wholly determined by the purchase of consumer goods. This is perhaps increasingly the case in a situation where young people have less access to public space (Buckingham et al. 2010). Children do not confine themselves to children’s stores or children’s sections and so they are bound to encounter a much wider range of goods and marketing appeals than those that are intended for them. A concentration upon sexualized goods *specifically aimed at children* therefore tells us relatively little about children’s actual encounters with sexualized goods or imagery. Whilst it is difficult to establish the influence of the wider availability of sexual imagery in mainstream culture, it could mean that the transition from child to adult status is becoming more ambiguous and more complex than perhaps was the case in earlier times (Buckingham and Bragg 2005).

Parents’ and young people’s perspectives

In seeking out the views of parents and young people, we used open-ended, participatory and deliberative approaches that aimed to avoid being overly intrusive. We worked with three schools, in different areas of Scotland (referred to as S1, S2 and S3).³ We devised three lessons involving a range of activities, which were taught by English and Media Studies teachers as part of students’ normal timetable. These involved activities such as choosing ‘presents’ for a 10-year-old from a range we provided, and debating sets of statements about children and ‘sexy goods’. In each school we observed at least two lessons, collected written materials generated by the activities, and conducted two friendship-based focus groups (with 16 girls and 10 boys). In total, we worked with 57

students (39 girls and 18 boys) aged 12–14 from different socio-economic backgrounds, all of whom were white (including some immigrants from elsewhere in Europe).⁴

We also conducted nine parent focus groups, with 43 participants (35 women and 8 men), recruited partly through the schools and partly through the research team's own contacts. Participants were mainly white (four were from minority ethnic backgrounds), although there was a mix of class backgrounds, parent types (including single parents and a lesbian mother), ages and numbers of children, and religious affiliations. We emphasized that we were not passing judgements on each other, invited personal experiences of the issues involved, and provided stimuli for discussion such as images of children and of some of the products collected in the retail survey. In both cases, we would argue that these more participatory, deliberative methods generated accounts of views and experiences that we would have been unlikely to access through other approaches such as questionnaires or conventional interviews.

Negotiating childhood

Unlike some of the more vocal public commentators in this area, both the young people and the parents offered nuanced and thoughtful responses, which illustrated the complexity of the issues at stake. Whilst both groups tended to agree that childhood was a time of fun, experimentation and play, they differed over whether this should be labelled 'innocence' and the place that (sexualized) consumer products might have within it. All our participants seemed to conceive of growing up as involving 'natural' stages of development towards adulthood, which required the gradual assumption of responsibilities. In addition, they often referred to children's 'rights' – for instance, to make their own decisions, to develop their individuality and express themselves. For parents, these were part of the broadly 'democratic' ideals of childrearing to which they generally claimed to subscribe.

As a result, young people argued, and many parents accepted, that by secondary school or by about the age of 12 or 13, children should, if they wished, have the final say on clothes and items of personal care – 'because when you go to high school you do want more responsibilities and you've kind of got an idea what to wear and what not to wear' (girl, S1). The 'milestone' of secondary school was perceived as significant by parents and by young people:

Mother: Going to secondary school ... they're a bit bewildered when they first arrive and they quickly learn ... And it is at a time when their bodies are changing quite quickly so it all seems to come together. So I'd say really that once they get to secondary school they're kind of off and launched.

Girl 1: About 12 you start realising =

Girl 2: = You start in high school

Girl 3: = And you see everyone wearing stuff like that

Girl 4: = Like all the older people

Researcher: So you're at a school with older people and they're all wearing it so you start realising what?

Girl 4: That's nice

Girl 3: = That's what you should be wearing

Girl 1: ... being grown up. (Focus group, S2)

This emphasis on personal consumption as the key sphere for the exercise of choice was both powerful and paradoxical. It led many parents to argue that sexualized goods were not 'worth the battle' – that is, they would not risk alienating their children or jeopardizing their relationship with them over issues such as clothes and hairstyles. These could be seen

not only as comparatively trivial ('there are worse things they could be doing'), but also as part of the 'natural' rebellion of adolescents against their parents.

However, parents also pointed to the contradictions in the claim that contemporary children are 'growing up too soon'. One pointed out that by the age of 14 she herself had left school, had a job and was running a household, whilst her youngest daughter who was now that age could barely deal with her own laundry (in common with her peers, as other parents also observed). Today's young people do not appear to have as a matter of course any comparable decision-making or 'adult' role – and indeed are subject to competing demands, as this mother acknowledged:

You want them to grow up in some ways but not in others. I want her to be more responsible and act in a more mature way when it comes to helping around the house but I really don't want her to grow up too fast when it comes to her self-image and the way she dresses and the kind of influences that she's subjected to.

'Peer pressure' was another key concept through which growing up and consumption were understood, and was sometimes presented as much greater and more malign than commercial or media influence. Parents acknowledged its power and the need to 'fit in', often recalling its role in their own youth; and sometimes claimed that it caused them to 'allow' purchases of which they otherwise disapproved.

One girl in S1 mirrored these views, explaining she had bought things despite finding them uncomfortable; because her friends had them, they were considered fashionable and a mark of growing older. It was generally same-sex friends that counted, rather than the opposite sex. A girl from S1 described the process in this way:

When I buy something I usually think 'I like that', but [also] I'll usually think like 'will [my friend] like that or will my pals like that' because if I buy it and then they'll think 'oh my god what is she wearing?', like bitch about me behind my back about what I'm wearing.

Boys sometimes spoke in similar terms, as did a focus group in S1:

Boy 1: It feels like pressure because you might want to kind of do what you want.

Boy 2: But if you do that you get slagged and stuff.

However, boys also indicated that such issues were less complicated for them than for girls due to the more limited possibilities of standard male clothing. Our retail survey also suggested this, as did parents. One mother commented, 'Well you don't need to worry about a wee boy dressing to look older and looking tarty or anything'. If boys' relationships to 'sexualized' goods simply did not mean the same as did girls', however, this was not only due to restricted choice but also because boys' consumption was viewed more benevolently by parents than was girls'. We return to the gendered dimension of these issues below.

The ambiguity of 'sexualized' products

Much of the public debate (and indeed the research) in this area implies that 'sexualized' goods are clearly identifiable. Yet our research revealed a lack of consensus in defining what is sexualized and what goods might 'mean', which would make it very difficult to agree generally applicable guidelines. For instance, many parents argued that goods had no inherent sexual connotations; one mother remarked of a make-up set:

my daughter [aged 10], she might put the glitter on but it would be in a wee girly way, because it wouldn't look nice. So that to me I don't think she's making herself sexualized, she would just be dressing up.

Stories about children (male and female) returning from nursery with nail polish on, or receiving make-up as birthday gifts, indicated the extent to which playing with make-up

had become a routine part of the experience of childhood, rather than its antithesis. As a result, parents generally opted to be tolerant:

I'm not crazy about her painting her nails and doing anything like that but then again you don't want to be a complete spoilsport because she sees other people doing it. (Mother of five-year-old)

Similarly, the young people pointed out that the meaning of clothing shifted across context, wearer and time, such that 'something that might be sexy to someone else might not be to others' (girl, S2). (An important exception to the rule of ambiguity emerged in relation to the male viewer, a point to which we return below.) Goods could thus be acceptable in one context (e.g. at a party, school disco or on a beach) but not in others. Their meaning would also depend on how they were used and with what (thus leggings could be 'tarty' if not worn with a long top, and conversely very short skirts or shorts would not be if worn with thick leggings or tights; makeup and hair gel could be 'too much' or 'just right'), and by whom (because of the age-relatedness of particular goods, they would communicate different messages depending on the age of the wearer). In addition, it seemed that if they became 'fashionable', any potential sexual meanings would be at least temporarily eclipsed. Some girls described giving such explanations to overcome parental opposition to certain purchases; while parents for their part not only claimed to understand this, several mothers also recalled their own teenage attempts to increase the sexual signification of clothes (e.g. rolling up the waistband of skirts to make them shorter).

For the young people, demonstrating their knowledge about the nuances of style in this way was one means through which they sought to challenge adults' portrayal of them as ignorant or passive victims of sexualization. Instead, they were keen to show that they were active and skilful consumers. Parents also recognized and even enjoyed their children's expertise in the codes of contemporary youth culture ('they can spot a brand from 50 paces!'). However, parents realized that this could undermine adult authority, if they were seen to be pronouncing on issues they did not understand. Thus many parents tried to understand trends, often finding in the process that they were less obnoxious than they initially feared.

The vagaries of meaning were exemplified in discussions of the Playboy bunny logo, a controversial symbol then appearing on everything from bed linen to fashion accessories to stationery. The students repeatedly told us that they were aware that the symbol carried sexual meanings connected with Hugh Hefner, the television series, 'lassies in the mansion' and sexual exploits, although some were embarrassed to explain this and many were critical of the women involved. A group of girls in S1 said:

Girl 1: The lassies were flaunting and I think that's totally disrespectful.

Girl 2: They have no self-respect.

However, the young people insisted that it had become popular with their age group purely because of fashion, as 'a cute pink bunny'. As one girl from S1 argued:

I don't think it was about what it meant, I think it was just because it was a fashion icon, everybody's getting it so you wanted to get it and all.

In fact, the symbol appeared to be rapidly falling out of favour, as the same girl went on to state:

I want something more grown up rather than just like Playboy bunnies. I just thought it was a bit childish.

Interestingly – and perhaps paradoxically – the symbol here is associated not with being too 'adult', but on the contrary with being 'childish'. (In two cases, the Playboy bunny was

reported as being popular with younger relatives, which participants viewed as a form of aspirational consumption.) Our participants generally described the products themselves in derogatory terms: ‘tacky’, ‘mingin’, ‘tarty’, ‘chavvy’, and ‘neddy’. Even here, however, such judgements were not fixed – in one friendship group, negative evaluations from three girls stopped short when the fourth pointed out that she herself was wearing a pink Playboy sweatshirt.

A majority of parents expressed strong dislike of Playboy products, but there were different logics involved in superficially similar responses. Whilst some parents condemned Playboy along with the sex industry as a whole, others did not: one mother objected strongly to what she described as Playboy ‘grooming’ girls for sex work, but not to her son’s poster of Jordan, on the grounds that Jordan was ‘doing it for herself’ rather than exploiting children. Moreover, dislike did not translate predictably into action, since other factors came into play here. The Playboy-wearing girl mentioned in the paragraph above, a self-identified ‘sporty’ type, related that her mother’s hostility to the brand was outweighed by relief at seeing her daughter in something other than ‘blue trackies’. Another mother explained how she was obliged to lift her ban on Playboy products long enough to match the one that her ex-husband had been persuaded to buy by their daughter.

Parents engaged in sophisticated debates about the meaning of the Playboy logo, pondering its effects on those who did not know or understand its associations, whether it could be seen as just a ‘fashion thing’, a brand no longer necessarily associated with specific goods, or whether purchasing the products meant buying into the sex industry. They were equally undecided about the ethics of explaining Playboy to children, which one mother saw as itself representing an infringement on innocence:

You don’t want to force them to think about things that they’re innocently thinking [is] a nice pink bunny ... Just allow them to be children for that bit longer. You don’t always want to be the one that’s coming in spoiling it ... They don’t need to think about the moral issues of absolutely everything that they do, like what clothes to put on in the morning.

Whilst this portrayal of children’s blissful ignorance contrasts rather starkly with the young people’s assertions of their sexual knowingness, it also illustrates how the ‘let children be children’ argument can support very different paths of action – as compared (for instance) with the Mumsnet campaign.

Responsibility and risk: the dilemmas of individual ‘choice’

Sexualized products were not, in general, seen as a problem for our participants personally, but for a ‘small minority’ of other parents and young people who were ‘irresponsible’. The idea that they might be regulated was unanimously rejected by the young people in our study (unless only for younger children). Whilst some parents indicated that they would like support in dealing with what they saw as commercial exploitation, they too were aware of its potential pitfalls, with much talk of the ‘nanny state’ and scepticism about actual implementation (not least because of the difficulty of definitions, discussed above). Ultimately, participants saw the issue as a matter of individual or parental choice:

If a 10-year-old is allowed to wear thongs and they want to, if they don’t get them out of Asda they’re going to get them out of somewhere else. So you can’t really stop them if that’s what their mum and dad say that they can wear. (Girl, S1)

I’m a great believer in personal choice, so – no, if it’s not in my face and it’s not something that I’m having a real difficulty with bringing up my children with [...] If somebody wants to buy their daughter that, then that’s up to them. (Mother)

It followed logically for parents that it was up to them to take action on sexualized products, if they so chose. However, our discussions also revealed severe limits on such individualized strategies. Parents did not feel they should dictate how children spent money they had earned themselves; they did not want their children to be left out or bullied because they lacked what their friends had; they were susceptible to children's nagging, emotional blackmail, sheer determination and/or devious tactics in subverting their rules, as this young person also noted:

It depends what kind of person you are. If you're a responsible person you'll understand what you can have and what you can't have. If you're maybe not as responsible [...] they want what they want and they'll have it, they might go out and buy stuff and then hide it, wear it outside and stuff like that. (Boy, S1)

Choices made by other people or institutions also limited their own: individual parents might oppose 'pamper parties' or Bratz dolls, but did not feel able to refuse invitations or presents of this kind. Some primary schools held final-year 'proms', encouraging 'adult' eveningwear, limo hire, and so on, which parents found hard to resist even if they wanted to. Further, if 'sex' has become part of mainstream culture, then both products and meanings are ubiquitous, and alternatives are not always available – even from chain stores parents saw as 'respectable'.

Another significant factor related to economic differences, as two single mothers argued:

We don't have a choice because the cheap clothes are like that. So unless you want to spend a lot of money, you have to buy what's there, you don't have the choice –

What I want my daughter to wear to school for skirts I can't get, so she needs to wear things that I don't really [like] ...

Emphasizing choice and responsibility conceals societal structures and constraints, such as social class and economic means. It can set up problematic distinctions between responsible 'citizen-consumers' ('us') who navigate choices successfully, and others who are seen to lack the discipline to do so ('them') (see also Harris 2004; Willett 2008). Such individualizing arguments implicitly stigmatize some people and privilege others, while absolving responsibility from other agencies, such as government or business.

However, it was notable that, unlike parents, young people generally saw the market as neutral or even benevolent. In one activity, groups were asked to rank a set of statements about sexualized goods according to how far they agreed with them. One that was consistently placed low was: 'Manufacturers and stores are irresponsible. They exploit young people by making them think that they *need* to buy sexy things to be cool.' However, in one mixed group, two girls responded to the boys' dismissal of the argument by chorusing: 'You just say that because you don't know what it's like for us!' The language of choice, we would suggest, does not serve young people well in understanding the difficulties and complexities of consumption. It was clear from our discussions that the processes of negotiating 'sexualized' consumption were far from benign, particularly for girls. They involved perpetual self-scrutiny, in order both to align themselves with peers deemed worthy of emulation, and to ensure they maintained a distance from degraded and undesirable 'others'.

Most commonly in this research, those who crossed the line into unacceptable consumption practices and against whom young people measured themselves were designated 'chavs' or 'neds'. These terms refer to the white working class, although none of our working-class participants applied them to themselves. In fact it seemed that the closer the young people were to this designation, the subtler their demarcations became.

Thus, for middle-class students a broad term like ‘ned’ sufficed to indicate who was ‘other’, while amongst working-class students, for instance, one spirited 13-year-old argued that her own style of make-up, bleached-blond hair and piercings marked her not as a ‘Barbie’ (signifying vacuous, man-pleasing artificiality) but a ‘bimbo’ (whose role-playing was more conscious and thus ‘authentic’) – a crucial distinction that might pass undetected by those with less investment in such differences.

Nevertheless, the discourse around ‘chavs’ establishes a connection between social class and the consumption of sexualized products that operates to stigmatize and segregate groups of young people (see Hayward and Yar 2006). Class-based connotations in reading potentially sexual products as ‘tasteful’ or ‘slutty’ have invidious consequences for working-class girls in particular (see Egan and Hawkes 2008; Tyler 2008). This was particularly clear when discussions of responsibility and choice merged with concepts of risk. There was general agreement that some forms of female attire invited particular male attention or behaviour – although few wanted to name this as sexual assault. Some young people even stated outright that such girls were ‘asking for it’, although they denied personally believing this. Parents’ formulations were more careful and even tortuous, as with these two mothers:

You wonder if some of them [men] see as if though they’ve kind of been given permission, in a sense, if they see girls going around dressed like that ...

I’m not suggesting that they deserve anything if they’re dressing like that but I think it does send out the wrong messages.

Nonetheless, such connections implicitly condoned male violence, rationalizing it as a consequence of girls’ choices rather than as having any independent existence. The tendency to blame the victim (and her mother) was expressed poignantly even if not, perhaps, always consciously:

I think as well you would worry if you’d agreed to something, then *it* happened and it was *your fault as well*. (Mother; emphasis added)

Not all parents accepted this logic, of course. One father, a teacher, recounted how he had challenged colleagues in his (Catholic) school for their readiness to describe female students as ‘sluts’ on the basis of their clothing, just as mothers pointed out to sons the double standards the word involved. However, one might argue that ‘newer’ discourses of individual choice are disturbingly receptive to some older arguments that make women responsible for the violence they experience from men, and that in this way they continue to obfuscate women’s experience of unequal gendered power relations. Indeed, the focus on sexualized cultures (in the Papadopoulos report, discussed above) as part of the UK government’s response to violence against women suggests that such attitudes persist even at the highest levels.

Conclusion

The sexualization of children is often presented as a relatively recent development, but it is by no means a new issue. Writers such as James Kincaid (1992) and Anne Higonnet (1998) have analysed the long tradition of children and young people being represented as objects for erotic contemplation (and commodification) by adults. Meanwhile, Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes (2007, 2008; Hawkes and Egan 2008) have traced the history of concerns about childhood sexualization; for example, in campaigns around ‘child purity’ in the late nineteenth century, and in the child-rearing manuals of the 1930s and 1940s. They suggest that such campaigns reflect a strange ambivalence about childhood sexuality: it is both

denied (because children are deemed to be innocent) and yet seen as a potentially unstoppable force once it is 'released' by external corrupting influences. They argue that there are considerable continuities between these historical campaigns and contemporary concerns.

In this article, we have sought to present a critical analysis of how 'sexualization' has been defined and framed more recently, both within the public debate and in the academic research literature. We have counterposed this with some evidence about the kinds of goods actually available, and the perspectives of parents and children in Scotland. There are complex issues involved, which deserve more sustained, contextualized investigation, not least in respect of younger children.

However, the sensationalized media attention and superficial debate about 'sexualization' that we discussed in the Introduction lead us to fear that the issue will continue to be addressed through simplistic and historically myopic policy recommendations. The Papadopoulos (2010) report discussed above, for instance, presents an extensive list of recommendations for the restriction and regulation of sexual material in media and other products likely to be encountered by children; and makes proposals for forms of education that are tantamount to counter-indoctrination. By contrast, our research implies that attempts to define what *counts* as 'sexualized' (or even 'sexy') will be fraught with difficulty, and would be bound to result in extensive legal challenges; and the same is true of attempts to identify and impose 'good role models' or notions of 'healthy' sexuality of the kind Papadopoulos proposes. Education in consumer or media literacy is a potentially valuable strategy, which we would strongly endorse. However, long experience in this field points to the limitations of a rationalistic approach that fails to engage with young people's media experiences and pleasures: media education should not be seen as some kind of moral prophylactic (Buckingham 2003).

Sexuality and sexual knowledge are crucial dimensions in the contemporary western definition of childhood and adulthood, and in maintaining the boundaries between them. But, as we have suggested, this debate brings into focus much broader concerns, and rests on some problematic assumptions – for instance, about children's knowledge and understanding, about what constitutes good or bad parenting, about male and female sexuality, and about the relations between social class, sexuality and taste. These are frequently evoked in allocating responsibility, and indeed blame, for things that we perceive are going wrong in children's lives or in family relationships. All too often our anxieties are projected onto groups of *other* people – here, implicitly, the white working class, and mothers and girls in particular – from whom we seek to distance or differentiate ourselves. This should alert us to the danger that, as with other discourses about media effects, this framing of the issue may distract attention from other, more fundamental – and perhaps more intractable – social problems. For all these reasons, the issue of childhood sexualization is unlikely to go away – but nor is the need for a more considered and careful response on the part of educators, researchers and policy-makers.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Scottish Parliament for their funding of this study; Nika Dorrer for her work on the retail survey and the focus groups; and the parents and young people who participated.

Notes

1. See, for example, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8521403.stm>; <http://www.mumsnet.com/campaigns/let-girls-be-girls>; and, on Cameron's comments, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8521403.stm> and

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1252156/DAVID-CAMERON-Sexualisation-children-too-young.html>.

2. A transcript of this meeting can be found online: <http://www.scottishparliament.cc/s3/committees/equal/or-08/eo08-1702.htm>.
3. Differentiating these schools by social class is difficult, but we can report that, according to the available HMIE (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education) reports, in S1 and S2 the percentage of students entitled to free school meals was above the national average and students' attendance was well below the national average. In S3, the percentage of students entitled to free school meals was well below the national average and students' attendance was well above the national average.
4. Although we would have wished to work with younger children – especially given the nature of the public debate on these issues – this was specifically ruled out by our funders, on ethical grounds. We feel there is a significant need for further research here with younger children.

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