Sexualisation of Young People

Review

by Dr Linda Papadopoulos

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Foreword

When I was approached by the Home Secretary to conduct an independent review on the impact of the sexualisation of young girls on violence against women, I genuinely welcomed the opportunity to take a critical look at this area. As both a psychologist and as a mother, I was very aware that this was a topic that was gaining increasing amounts of attention both in academic literature and the popular press.

Although the original intention of the review was to focus on how sexualisation is affecting girls, it quickly became evident that we could not talk about girls without acknowledging the concomitant impact on boys and the hyper-masculinised images and messages that surround them. The scope of the review was therefore widened to encompass the sexualisation of all young people and to look at how hyper-sexualisation and objectification of girls on the one hand, and hyper-masculinisation of boys on the other, perpetuate and reinforce each other. Throughout the course of the review, what has become very apparent is that sexualisation is a multi-factorial issue and therefore needs to be approached from a range of perspectives, taking into account not only the emotional and cognitive development of children but also the influence of family, culture and society as a whole.

Over the past months, my team and I have reviewed hundreds of articles from the fields of psychology, sociology, education, politics and media. We have interviewed people working on the front-line with abused children and abusers. We have spoken to young people, parents, teachers, clinicians, academics, policy-makers and lobbyists. What came across loud and clear is that this is a very emotive issue – and so, I wanted to ensure that the evidence was presented as objectively as possible so that a public debate could ensue and informed decisions about how to address these issues could be made. This is not an opinion piece, the evidence and arguments presented within this document are not based on conjecture but on empirical data from peer reviewed journals, and evidence from professionals and clinicians. Behind the social commentary and the headlines about inappropriate clothing and games for children, there are the real statistics, on teenage partner violence, sexual bullying and abuse that need to be acknowledged and addressed.

In addressing these issues we must not forget that sexual curiosity is a normal feature of childhood and therefore we need to provide young people with the tools that will enable them to deal with sexual content safely and successfully. I believe that providing our kids with a set of realistic, non-exploitative representations of gender and sexuality would go a long way towards ensuring their healthy emotional – and sexual – development and promoting gender equality.

I want my little girl, indeed, all girls and boys, to grow up confident about who they are and about finding and expressing their individuality and sexuality, but not through imposed gender stereotypes or in a way that objectifies the body or commodifies their burgeoning sexuality. This review is a step towards understanding how, as parents, as educators and as citizens we can take responsibility for creating safe and supportive environments for our children to understand and explore relationships and sexuality – and ensure that they do so in their own time and at their own pace.

1. Executive summary

"How have sex, sexiness and sexualisation gained such favour in recent years as to be the measure by which women's and girls' worth is judged? While it is not a new phenomenon by any means, there is something different about the way it occurs today and how it impacts on younger and younger girls."[1]

1. Violence against women and girls is unacceptable, whatever the circumstances and whatever the context. In March 2009, the government launched the *Together We Can End Violence Against Women and Girls* consultation in order to raise awareness of the problem and explore policy proposals and ideas designed to help prevent violence against women and girls. This report forms part of that consultation.

2. This review looks at how sexualised images and messages may be affecting the development of children and young people and influencing cultural norms, and examines the evidence for a link between sexualisation and violence. The decision by the government to commission this review reflects the importance of the issue and the popular perception that young people (and in particular young women and girls) are increasingly being pressured into appearing sexually available. The report looks at examples and the prevalence of sexualisation in culture and proposes mechanisms by which sexualised messages are being internalised and the consequences of these on young people.

3. The world is saturated by more images today than at any other time in our modern history. Behind each of these images lies a message about expectations, values and ideals. Women are revered – and rewarded – for their physical attributes and both girls and boys are under pressure to emulate polarised gender stereotypes from a younger and younger age. The evidence collected in this report suggests these developments are having a profound impact, particularly on girls and young women.

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[1] McLellan, *Sexualised and Trivialized – Making Equality Impossible*. Quoted in: Tankard Reist (2010)

Sexualisation, learning and development

4. Healthy sexuality is an important component of both physical and mental health. When based on mutual respect between consenting partners, sex fosters intimacy, bonding and shared pleasure.[2] Sexualisation is the imposition of adult sexuality on to children and young people before they are capable of dealing with it, mentally, emotionally or physically.

5. While sexualised images have featured in advertising and communications since mass media first emerged, what we are seeing now is an unprecedented rise in both the volume and the extent to which these images are impinging on everyday life. Increasingly, too, children are being portrayed in 'adultified' ways while adult women are 'infantilised'.[3] This leads to a blurring of the lines between sexual maturity and immaturity and, effectively, legitimises the notion that children can be related to as sexual objects.

6. A number of factors shape the way children and young people are responding to the sexualisation of culture. One of the most significant is the individual child's age and level of cognitive and emotional development. Regardless of a child's level of sophistication, when it comes to internalising media and advertising messages, there is a large body of research from developmental psychologists that attests to the fact that young children do not have the cognitive skills to cope with persuasive media messages.[4] There

is also the cumulative or 'drip drip' effect of exposure to sexualised messages, themes and images over time and in diverse settings. Children and young people now have easy access to material that may not be age-appropriate. Core cognitive learning and developmental theories demonstrate that children learn vicariously from what they see, and that exposure to themes which a child is not developmentally ready to cope with can have a detrimental effect.[5]

7. Children and young people today are not only exposed to increasing amounts of hyper-sexualised images, they are also sold the idea that they have to look 'sexy' and 'hot'. As such they are facing pressures that children in the past simply did not have to face. As children grow older, exposure to this imagery leads to body surveillance, or the constant monitoring of personal appearance. This monitoring can result in body dissatisfaction, a recognised risk factor for poor self-esteem, depression and eating disorders.[6] Indeed, there is a significant amount of evidence that attests to the negative effects of sexualisation on young people in terms of mental and physical health, attitudes and beliefs.[7]

8. If we are going to address this issue then young people need to develop and grow in surroundings where they are admired for their abilities, talents and values. It is important to stress however, that in the diverse, multicultural UK context, cultural, religious and class backgrounds will invariably influence the family's role in mediating sexualised media content

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[2] Satcher (2001)

[3] Evidence provided to the review by Dr K. Sarikakis (2009)

[4] Mayo & Nairn (2009)

[5] Bandura (1971); Bem (1981)

[6] McKinley (1999); Moradi et al. (2005); Polivy, Herman et al. (2002); Tolman, Impett, Tracy and Michael (2006)

[7] Abramson and Valene (1991); Durkin and Paxton (2002); Harrison (2000)

and views of what is appropriate and acceptable. The psychological ramifications of sexualisation, from violence in teenage relationships to self-objectification, are seen across diverse class systems, suggesting that the issue of sexualisation is not confined to either a single race or class.

Sexualised content and the mainstreaming of pornography

9. Children and young people are exposed to an unprecedented range of media content, through an ever-growing number of channels. Furthermore, the proportion of that content which is sexual or even pornographic is increasing at a dramatic rate. Until relatively recently, there was a way to at least try and ensure that these were targeted to the right audience. However, there is no 'watershed' on the internet, and sexualised images and adverts may appear anywhere and are often sent indiscriminately to e-mail accounts and mobile phones.

10. With proliferation comes normalisation. It is no surprise therefore that when researchers examine the content of young people's web pages they find that young teens are posting sexually explicit images of themselves on social networking sites, and self-regulating each other with sexist, derogatory and demeaning language.[8]

11. In order to genuinely understand one of the main factors at play here, namely how young people internalise the messages they are exposed to,

it is important to look at the social scripts children are being influenced by and what makes children susceptible to them.

Magazines, marketing and advertising

12. A dominant theme in magazines seems to be the need for girls to present themselves as sexually desirable in order to attract male attention.[9] Worryingly, there is also a trend for children in magazines to be dressed and posed in ways designed to draw attention to sexual features that they do not yet have. At the same time, advice on hairstyles, cosmetics, clothing, diet, and exercise attempt to remake even young readers as objects of male desire,[10] promoting premature sexualisation.[11] In the case of boys, 'lads' mags' contain a high degree of highly sexualised images of women that blur the lines between pornography and mainstream media. The predominant message for boys is to be sexually dominant and to objectify the female body.

13. Over the past three decades there has been a dramatic increase in the use of sexualised imagery in advertising. While most of this imagery features women,[12] there has also been a significant increase in the number of sexualised images of children.[13] Sexualised ideals of young, thin, beauty lead to ideals of bodily perfection that are difficult to attain, even for the models, which perpetuates the industry practice of 'airbrushing' photographs. These images can lead

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[8] Ringrose (2008)

[9] Carpenter (1998); Durham (1998); Garner, Sterk, and Adams (1998); McMahon (1990)

[10] Duffy and Gotcher (1996)

[11] Rush and La Nauze (2006)

[12] Reichert *et al.* (1999)

[13] Tankard-Reist (2010)

people to believe in a reality that does not exist, which can have a particularly detrimental effect on adolescents.[14]

14. At the same time, marketers are effectively encouraging young girls to present themselves in a sexual way. Bratz dolls for example, are child-friendly characters presented in a notably sexualised way.[15] Pencil cases and stationery for school children carry the Playboy bunny logo. Padded bras, thongs and high heeled shoes are marketed and sold to children as young as eight. Such blurring suggests that it is acceptable to impose adult sexual themes onto children, and potentially relate to children as sexual objects.[16]

Television, film and music

15. Women on TV are far more likely than their male counterparts to be provocatively dressed[17] and scenes of violence against women are increasingly common. A recent report found that depictions of violence against women on TV had risen by 120 per cent since 2004 while violence against teenage girls rose by 400 per cent.[18] There is also a significant under-representation of women and girls in non-sexualised roles in films. In the 101 highest earning family films between 1990–2004 over 75% of characters were male, 83% of narrators were male and 72% of speaking roles were male.[19] By missing the chance to present girls with a diverse range of characters to identify with, the visibility of more hyper-sexualised heroines will inevitably have a bigger impact.

16. Music channels and videos across all genres have been found to sexualise and objectify women.[20] Women are often shown in provocative and revealing clothing and are depicted as being in a state of sexual readiness. Males on the other hand are shown as hyper-masculine and sexually dominant. Research into the often sexual and violent content of music lyrics is comparatively thin on the ground. However, an important connection between sexualised music lyrics and their influence on shaping young people's early sexual activity is that the causality is not just related to sexual content of lyrics, but also to their degrading nature.[21]

New technologies

17. Over 80 per cent of young people use the internet daily or weekly[22] and around a third of 8–11-year-olds and 60 per cent of 12–15-year-olds say that they mostly use the internet on their own.[23] Almost half of children aged 8–17 and a quarter of those aged between eight and 11 have a profile on a social networking site such as Bebo, MySpace or Facebook.[24] While sites set age limits (typically 13 or 14), these are not generally enforced. Social networking sites allow children and young people to create online identities. Girls, for instance, report being under increasing pressures to display themselves in their 'bra and knickers' or bikinis online, whereas boys seek to display their bodies in a hyper-masculine way showing off muscles, and posturing as powerful and dominant.[25] Sexualised

14 Coleman (2008)

15 Evidence provided to the review by the British Board of Film Classification (2009)

16 Buckleitner and Foundation (2008)

17 Eaton (1997)

18 www.parentstv.org/PTC/publications/reports/womeninperil/main.asp

19 Kelly and Smith (2006)

20 Andsager and Roe (1999); Seidman (1992); Sommers-Flanagan and Davis (1993)

21 Matino et al (2006). Quoted in Coy (2009)

22 Livingstone, Bober and Helsper (2005)

23 Ofcom (2009)

24 Ofcom (2008)

25 Ringrose (2010)

self-presentation could also mean that young people are exposing themselves to danger: recently, public attention has focused on the use of social networking sites to sexually solicit underage children and young people.

18. With the rise of the internet, it is not now a case of *if* a young person will be exposed to pornography but *when*. Before the mainstreaming of internet access, it was asserted that the average age of first exposure to pornography was 11 for males[26]; however, latest research suggest that this age is now much lower.[27] A recent YouGov survey found that 27 per cent of boys are accessing pornography every week, with 5 per cent viewing it every day. The survey also found that 58 per cent had viewed pornography online, on mobile phones, in magazines, in films or on TV. Another study showed that a quarter of young people had received unsolicited pornographic junk mail or instant messages while almost one in eight had visited pornographic websites showing violent images.[28]

19. By the age of 15, 95 per cent of young people have their own mobile phone.[29] Mobile phones allow young people easy access to all kinds of online content, regardless of whether or not it is appropriate. Figures show that in 2007, mobile phones were the UK's biggest distributor of pornography.[30] The use of mobile phones as a tool for bullying, controlling or monitoring a dating-partner has attracted considerable media attention recently, and was frequently raised during the evidence sessions held as part of

this review.[31] Mobile phones are also being used for so-called 'sexting' – the sending, often unsolicited, of sexually explicit messages.

20. With advances in technology, video games are becoming increasingly graphic and realistic.[32] At the same time, children are more and more likely to play games without adult supervision: three-quarters of 12–15-year-olds have a games console in their bedroom.[33] Many games feature highly sexualised content and there is a notable lack of strong female characters.[34] The link between violent content and aggression has been cited in several studies[35] and it is widely accepted that exposure to content that children are either emotionally or cognitively not mature enough for can have a negative impact. Whereas parents are not likely to allow their children to watch an 18 film, they are much more lenient when it comes to allowing their children to play age-inappropriate games. This may be because they do not fully understand either the realism or the themes that these games contain.

The role of parents, schools and corporate responsibility

21. The evidence so far indicates that it is time we critically examine the cumulative effect of the media messages to which our children are exposed and how we can mitigate any negative effects resulting from them. Installing filters on computers and locks on mobile phones is of course important. But sexualised content

[26] Bryant (1985)

[27] Greenfield (2004)

[28] Livingstone and Bober *et al.* (2005)

[29] Ofcom (2008)

[30] Juniper Research, Quoted in: Daw and Cabb (2009)

[31] Evidence Hearing Sessions for the Review (May 2009 – July 2010)

[32] Martinez and Manolovitz (2009)

[33] Ofcom (2009)

[34] Dill and Thill (2007)

[35] Anderson and Dill (2000); Freedman (2002); Deselms and Altman (2003)

is everywhere and, often, children and young people are accessing it alone, in a setting that gives them no opportunity to ask questions or discuss their feelings.

22. Parents are a powerful force in shaping their children's attitudes to gender and sexuality and have a vital role to play in supporting their children to cope with and contextualise sexualised images and messages. However, parents can also contribute to the sexualisation of their children in very direct ways. For example, by reinforcing self-objectification through encouraging or supporting the use of cosmetic surgery as a means of 'fixing' poor body confidence or self-esteem – a phenomenon that is increasing at an alarming rate.[36]

23. Schools can help children develop the capacity to interpret and filter information and to recognise and value diversity. As such perhaps we need to consider the value of media literacy and gender studies and begin to see them as core to the curriculum we teach our children. Sex education, too, must focus on preparing young people to form healthy, respectful, emotionally fulfilling relationships.

24. Businesses must also play their part here. There have been numerous reports over the past few years of how major high street retailers have promoted, and then on second thought withdrawn, clothing, games and products for children that are undoubtedly age inappropriate. There is a clear role here for government to support and promote corporate responsibility.

The impact of sexualisation

Body image and gender inequality

25. In the past it was adult women who felt the imperative to look 'hot' and 'sexy', now this imperative is being adopted by younger and younger girls who will inevitably face the same feelings of inadequacy and failure to live up to an unrealistic ideal. The mass media promotes and reinforces an idealised notion of beauty for both men and women, presenting standards – of thinness for women and of muscularity for men – that few can ever hope to achieve. The effects of this are apparent – eating disorders are on the rise. The eating disorder charity BEAT estimates that 1.6 million people in the UK have an eating disorder. The vast majority of these – some 1.4 million – are female.[37] And now we're starting to see what happens when you tweak the message – young women need to be not only thin, but also sexually desirable. As anorexia increases so now does the number of young women having breast implants at an increasingly younger age.[38]

26. It can be tempting to think that girls are taking the brunt, that boys have it easier. But in some ways, the messages we are sending out to boys are just as limiting and restrictive: be macho, be strong, don't show your emotions. Hyper-sexualisation of femininity cannot exist without hyper-masculinisation of males. They feed off and reinforce each other.

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[36] www.cosmeticsurgerybible.com/2007/types-of-surgery/breast-enlargement/breast-implants-linked-to-suicide-risk/105

[37] www.b-eat.co.uk/PressMediaInformation#iHn0

[38] Zuckerman and Abraham (2008)

27. Repeated exposure to gender-stereotypical ideas and images contributes to sexist attitudes and beliefs; sexual harassment; violence against women; and stereotyped perceptions of, and behaviour toward, men and women.[39] Although sexual objectification is but one form of gender oppression, it is one that factors into – and perhaps enables – a host of other oppressions women face, ranging from employment discrimination and sexual violence to the trivialisation of women's work and accomplishments.[40]

Mainstreaming of the sex industry

28. With the ubiquity of sexualisation and the increasing pornification of society has come the mainstreaming of the sex industry, as exemplified by the proliferation of lap-dancing clubs. Sexualisation – and the commodification of women and girls – is now so ingrained in our culture that glamour modelling and lap-dancing are widely viewed not only as acceptable but in some cases aspirational.[41]

29. Sexualisation is tied to economic markets in the forms of beauty and sex industries, that both open and restrict the breadth and variety of identities and ambitions open to young women. A growing number of girls are setting their sights on careers that demand a 'sexy' image. Surveys have found for instance that a high proportion of young women in the UK aspire to work as 'glamour models' or lap-dancers.[42] A report released by the Department for Work and Pensions[43] shows that Jobcentres are routinely advertising for vacancies at escort agencies, lap-dancing clubs, massage parlours and TV sex channels. We are seeing the normalisation of these trades as viable career choices. The fact that both within celebrity and popular culture women are habitually heralded as successful and celebrated for their sex appeal and appearance – with little reference to their intellect or abilities – sends out a powerful message to young people about what is of value and what they should focus on.

Sexualisation and violence

30. Research has shown that adults – including women[44] – who viewed sexually objectifying images of women in the mainstream media were more likely to be accepting of violence.[45] The evidence gathered in the review suggests a clear link between consumption of sexualised images, a tendency to view women as objects and the acceptance of aggressive attitudes and behaviour as the norm. Both the images we consume and the way we consume them are lending credence to the idea that women are there to be used and that men are there to use them.

31. There is a significant amount of evidence linking stereotypical attitudes to women's sexuality and sexist beliefs with aggressive sexual behaviour.[46]

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[39] Kilbourne and Lazarus (1987); Lazier-Smith (1989); UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (1980)

[40] Fredrickson and Roberts (1997)

[41] Coy (2009), Coy and Garner (in press)

[42] Deeley (2008)

[43] www.parliament.uk/deposits/depositedpapers/2008/DEP2008-3155.doc

[44] Johnson & Adams et al. (1995)

[45] Kalof (1999); Lanis and Covell (1995)

[46] Dean and Malamuth (1997); Malamuth and Briere (1986); Malamuth and Donnerstein (1982, 1984); Murnen, Wright and Kaluzny (2002); Osland, Fitch and Willis (1996); Spence, Losoff and Robbins (1991); Truman, Tokar and Fischer (1996); Vogel (2000)

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A recent Home Office survey found that 36 per cent of people believed that a woman should be held wholly or partly responsible for being sexually assaulted or raped if she was drunk, while 26 per cent believed a woman should accept at least part of the blame for an attack if she was out in public wearing sexy or revealing clothes.[47]

Young people, sexual bullying and violence

32. The shocking results of a recent survey carried out by the NSPCC show that for many young people, violence within relationships is commonplace – one in three teenage girls aged 13–17 had been subjected to unwanted sexual acts while in a relationship, and one in four had suffered physical violence. And, although both sexes are experiencing partner violence, girls are suffering more as a result. A significant proportion of the girls surveyed stated that the violence had seriously affected their welfare; for boys, there appeared to be few consequences. NSPCC's Head of Child Protection Awareness Chris Cloke has described this as evidence of a 'culture of confusion about what is acceptable among girls and boys living in today's highly sexualised landscape.'

33. In gangs, rape and sexual assault is increasingly becoming the weapon of choice. Assaulting a girl is used not only to assert power over the girl herself, but also over those who associate with her. And although gangs make up only a small part of society in the UK, the use of violence as a means to punish and control is not just in the domain of sub-cultures – as shown by the results from the NSPCC survey on teen partner violence. It seems that notions of power and control over the

female body, and the pressure on boys to conform to a hyper-masculine ideal, are having a very real effect on young people's day-to-day lives.

34. There is growing evidence from educational and social scientists that girls are facing increasing sexism in the playground and classroom. Researchers have indicated that cases of sexual harassment and forms of gendered and sexualised name calling and bullying may be on the rise in both primary and secondary schools.[48, 49]

Pornography and sexual aggression

35. Pornography shapes young people's sexual knowledge but does so by portraying sex in unrealistic ways. The nature of online pornography is changing: it is increasingly dominated by themes of aggression, power and control, blurring the lines between consent, pleasure and violence.[50]

36. Advances in technology are making pornography more and more accessible to children and young people. There is consistent and reliable evidence that exposure to pornography is related to male sexual aggression against women. Prolonged exposure increases the likelihood of consuming material that depicts either potentially 'harmful' or, what the UK government labels, 'extreme'[51] sexual behaviours such as violent sex, sadomasochism and bestiality. High pornography use is not in itself an indicator of high risk for sexual aggression. However, adults who

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[47] Home Office (2009)

[48] Duncan (2004); Renold, (2003); Ringrose (2008)

[49] Please note, this figure does not include the total number of permanent exclusion in primary and special school settings

[50] Hanson and Tyd´en (2005); Dines (2008)

[51] McGlynn, Ward and Rackley (2009)

are already predisposed to violent activity and who also score high for pornography use are much more likely to engage in sexual aggression.[52]

37. There has been a marked increase in the number of sites that infantilise women. Adults exposed to 'barely legal' or virtual child pornography make stronger links between youth and sexuality than adults exposed to materials featuring older-looking models. They are also more likely to associate sex and sexuality with subsequent non-sexual depictions of minors.[53] When girls are dressed to resemble adult women, people may associate adult motives and even a sense of adult responsibility onto the child. Depicting young girls dressed or made up as sexually mature older women may serve to normalize abusive practices such as child abuse or sexual exploitation.

Child abuse and sexual exploitation

38. Child sexual abuse lies at the extreme end of the spectrum of consequences of sexualisation. The psychological effects of sexual abuse can be devastating, ranging from post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression, to sexual dysfunction, suicide and self-mutilation. It affects a significant number of children in the UK – estimated at over 2 million – although the vast majority of child sexual abuse goes unreported.[54] The majority of those who display sexually harmful behaviour are actually adolescent males, with 25-40 per cent of all alleged sexual abuse involving young perpetrators.[55]

39. An issue of concern is that the sexualisation of girls is contributing to a market for child abuse images (often referred to as 'child pornography' in the media) or sex with children. The fact that young girls are styling themselves in overtly sexually provocative ways for other young people's consumption – whether this be on social networking sites or via photographs sent by email or mobile phones – makes them potentially vulnerable. Young people themselves are now producing and swapping what is in effect 'child pornography' – a fact borne out by the growing numbers of adolescents that are being convicted for possession of this material.[56]

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[52] Malamuth, Addison and Koss (2000)

[53] Paul and Linz (2008)

[54] Cawson et al. (2000)

[55] www.nspcc.org.uk/WhatWeDo/MediaCentre/ MediaBriefings/Policy/media_briefing_sexually_ harmful_behaviour_wda33252.html

[56] Carr (2004)

Conclusion

40. There is broad agreement from researchers and experts in health and welfare that sexualising children prematurely places them at risk of a variety of harms.[57] However, what we need is further empirical evidence in the form of large scale longitudinal studies that will look in detail at the effects on boys and girls of living in a sexualised culture across their development. Many of the mechanisms that have been cited as disseminating hyper-sexualised ideals to children are a consequence of recent advancements in media and technology. Only now are we beginning to see a concerted effort by psychologists and other social scientists to address this issue.

41. Sexualisation is a profoundly important issue that impacts individuals, families and society as a whole. Unless sexualisation is accepted as harmful, in line with the evidence presented in this report, and similar reports from the US and Australia, we will miss an important opportunity here: an opportunity to broaden young people's beliefs about where their value lies; to think about strategies for guiding children around sexualisation and objectification; and to create new tools and spaces for young people to develop and explore their sexuality in their own time and in their own way.

Recommendations

Education and schools

1) All school staff to have training on gender equality. Specialist training should be given to those who teach Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education and citizenship.

2) The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to issue statutory guidance to schools to promote a 'whole school' approach to tackling gender inequality, sexual and sexist bullying and violence against women and girls.

3) References on sexualisation, gender stereotypes and pornography to be included in DCSF's revised Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) guidance for schools. New SRE resource materials should be made available for teachers who work with children with special education needs and learning difficulties.

4) Schools to ensure that all incidents of sexual bullying are recorded and reported separately to other forms of bullying.

5) New practical 'How To' guidance on tackling sexualisation is disseminated to all schools.

6) Primary schools should make specific reference to the influence of the media on body image and personal identity within a new programme of study on 'Understanding Physical Development, Health and Wellbeing'.

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[57] APA (2007); Coy (2009); Malamuth (2001); Tankard-Reist (2010)

Recommendations *(cont.)*

7) A module on gender equality, sexualisation and sexist/sexual bullying be developed as part of the DCSF's Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme.

8) Media literacy should be taught not only through PSHE education but also through English, drama, the arts, history and citizenship.

9) More investment in youth workers to enable them to work with young people outside of mainstream education around the issues of sexuality, sexist and sexual bullying and gender equality.

10) The UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) to further develop its current online resource centre where parents can access internet safety advice.

11) Digital literacy to be made a compulsory part of the national curriculum for children from the age of five.

12) The government should work with internet service providers to block access to pro-anorexia ('pro-ana') and pro-bulimia ('pro-mia') websites.

13) A schools campaign to be developed which promotes positive role models for young men and young women and challenges gender stereotypes.

14) Schools should encourage girls to value their bodies in terms of their physical ability. This should be linked to the work of the 2012 'Get Set' education programme.

15) Local Authorities must be accountable for treating victims of child sexual abuse and ensure that specialist services receive adequate funding for the treatment of children who have been abused.

16) One-to-one confidential help in school/college from a trained professional such as a psychologist to be made available to every child and young person.

Media and awareness-raising

17) A national campaign to be launched to address the issue of teenage relationship abuse, including a specific pack for primary and secondary schools so that they can build on issues arising from the campaign.

18) A working group of high profile women in media together with academics should be set up to monitor and address gender inequality in the media.

19) The establishment of a media award that promotes diverse, aspirational and non-sexualised portrayals of young people.

20) The government to launch an online 'one-stop-shop' to allow the public to voice their concerns regarding irresponsible marketing which sexualises children with an onus on regulatory authorities to take action. The website could help inform future government policy by giving parents a forum to raise issues of concern regarding the sexualisation of young people.

21) Information on body image, self-esteem, eating disorders and e-safety to be included in the government's proposed 'Positive Parenting' booklets for parents of older children.

22) The government should support the Adversing Standards Agency (ASA) to take steps to extend the existing regulatory standards to include commercial websites.

Recommendations *(cont.)*

23) The introduction of a system of ratings symbols for photographs to show the extent to which they have been altered. This is particularly critical in magazines targeting teen and pre-teen audiences.

24) The content of outdoor advertisements to be vetted by local authorities as part of their gender equality duty to ensure that images and messages are not offensive on the grounds of gender.

25) Broadcasters are required to ensure that music videos featuring sexual posing or sexually suggestive lyrics are broadcast only after the 'watershed.'

26) The current gap in the regulatory protection provided by the Video Recordings Act 1984 to be closed by removing the general exemption for 'works concerned with music'.

27) Regulation of UK-based video on demand services to be strengthened to ensure that they do not allow children to access hardcore pornography.

28) Games consoles should be sold with parental controls already switched on. Purchasers can choose to 'unlock' the console if they wish to allow access to adult and online content.

29) This idea should be extended to 'child friendly' computers and mobile phones where adult content is filtered out by default.

Working with businesses and retailers

30) The government to support the NSPCC in its work with manufacturers and retailers to encourage corporate responsibility with regard to sexualised merchandise. Guidelines should be issued for retailers following consultation with major clothing retailers and parents' groups.

31) The existing voluntary code for retailers regarding the placements of 'lads' mags' should be replaced by a mandatory code. 'Lads' mags' should be clearly marked as recommended for sale only to persons aged 15 and over.

32) The government overturns its decision to allow vacancies for jobs in the adult entertainment industry to be advertised by Jobcentre Plus.

Research

33) A new academic periodical to be established and an annual conference series should be held focusing solely on the topic of sexualisation.

34) Funding be made available for research that will strengthen the current evidence base on sexualisation. This should include trend research into teenage partner violence and frequency of sexual bullying and abuse.

35) Clinical outcome research to be funded and supported to find the most effective ways to identify, assess and work with the perpetrators and victims of child sexual abuse.

36) A detailed examination of media literacy programmes should be carried out jointly by the DCSF, and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

2. Introduction

Sexualisation is a growing phenomenon: from magazines to TV to mobile phones, sexualised images and messages are everywhere. Journalists, child advocacy organisations, parents and psychologists argue that this is having a damaging effect on children and young people.[56] This report aims to find out whether this is really the case, and to explore the possible links between exposure to sexualised images and content and violence against women and girls.

This report was commissioned by the Home Office Violent Crime Unit as part of the *Together We Can End Violence Against Women* consultation, launched in early 2009. The consultation called for 'a fact-finding review into the sexualisation of teenage girls'. This, broadly, is the review's remit, although evidence relating to the sexualisation of pre-teenage children and of boys as well as girls has also been included.[58]

The report begins by summarising the background to the sexualisation debate and some of the main theories of how young people learn and develop. It goes on to look at the volume and spread of sexualised images and content by media channel and at the possible impact this has on self-esteem, body image, mental health and personal relationships. It also considers the possible links between sexualisation and violence. Finally, the report suggests

recommendations for research, clinical practice, education and training, policy and awareness-raising.

It is not the intention of this review to enter into a theoretical debate on the precise definition of sexualisation (see Chapter 4). The evidence gathered here suggests that the proliferation and accessibility of sexualised content may be jeopardising the mental and physical well-being of young people in the UK. Our aim is to focus attention on the need for a collaborative approach to safeguarding young people and promoting a healthy transition from childhood to adulthood. This report is concerned primarily with the rights of the child, and with protecting the health, well-being and safety of every child in the UK.

Methodology

The report is based on a critical, thorough and comprehensive desk-based review of available data on the sexualisation of young people. We have drawn on existing government research and statistics, lobby group publications and academic journals in order to build a comprehensive picture.

Stakeholders have also been invited to submit their views on processes and structures relating to the sexualisation of young people and possible links with violence. Those responding to the call for evidence included:

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[58] American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls (2007). Herein referred to as 'APA'

C. Bankes and I. McGibbon – Gangs, TKAP, Violent Crime Unit, Home Office

C. Banatvala, A. Marsden – Director of Standards, Ofcom

M. Banos-Smith – Womankind

C. Barter – University of Bristol

D. Buckingham – Professor of Education, Institute of Education and Director, Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media

O. Campbell and L. Taffe – Advertising Standards Agency

C. Christie – Taskforce on Violence Against Women and Children, Department of Health

M. Coy – Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit, London Metropolitan University

F. Crow – Assistant Director, National Children's Bureau

C. Dawes – Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)

S. Delaney – Team Manager, Birmingham Sexually Harmful Behaviour Team

S. Dyer – Beatbullying

R. Einhorn – NSPCC Sexual Exploitation Service

L. Emmerson – Sex Education Forum

C. Firmin – Race on the Agenda

G. Frances, J. Sharpen and F. Mackay – Members of the VAWG Advisory Group

R. Gill – Professor and Director Centre for Cultural, Media and Creative Industries Research, Kings College, London

D. Glover – Commissioner of Factual Programming, Channel 4

C. Green and H. Elsdon-Smithers – White Ribbon Campaign

D. James-Hanman – Director, Greater London Domestic Violence Project

K. Iwi – Respect

P. Johnson – British Board of Film Classification

M. J. Kehily – Senior Lecturer, Childhood and Youth Studies, Open University

L. Lawrence – Policy Lead on Personal, Social and Health Education, Curriculum Unit, Department for Children, Schools and Families

S. Levenque and A. Heeswijk – OBJECT

A. Martinez – Sex Education Forum

E. Mayo – Co-operatives UK

T. Narducci, Z. Hilton and V. Patel – NSPCC

N. O'Brien – Brook Advisory Centre

T. Palmer – founder, Marie Collins Foundation

A. Ramage – Series Producer, *Sex Education versus Pornography*, Endemol

K. Richardson – Child Exploitation & Online Protection Centre

J. Ringrose – Senior Lecturer, Sociology of Gender and Education, Institute of Education

K. Sarikakis – Director, Centre for International Communications Research, University of Leeds

A. Speechly – Youth Justice Board

3. Background and context

"An integrated approach is necessary to ensuring not only that violence against women becomes universally regarded as an unacceptable and criminal violation of women's human rights, but also that victims of sexual, physical and psychological violence receive the attention and support that they need to be able to escape and resolve their situation."[59]

Violence against women and girls is unacceptable, whatever the circumstances and whatever the context. The UK government is committed to taking action to further reduce the number of violent incidents and to counter the tendency for violence to become 'normalised'. This literature review forms part of a wider investigation into the underlying causes and impacts of violence against women and girls. It sets out to identify how sexualised images and messages may be affecting the development of children and young people and influencing cultural norms with regard to sexual behaviour and attitudes.

Over the past decade, a number of government departments have been working with voluntary organisations to deliver a package of measures designed to protect women and provide support to victims of violence. There are currently 31 legal frameworks in place, covering issues including rape and sexual violence; domestic violence; female genital mutilation; forced marriage; 'honour' crimes; trafficking; sexual harassment; and marital rape.

With regard to children, local authorities and schools are required to work with each other and with other children's services to support the Every Child Matters agenda, which sets out five key outcomes for children and young people:

- be healthy;
- stay safe;
- enjoy and achieve;
- make a positive contribution; and
- achieve economic well-being.[60]

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59 www.un-instraw.org/en/images/stories/Beijing/violenceagainstwomen.pdf

60 www.everychildmatters.gov.uk

Performance against these outcomes is measured by a set of National Indicators, which cover key areas relevant to the sexualisation agenda including supporting children's emotional health and reducing the rate of conception for under-18s.

Some progress has been made. Over the last decade the number of incidents of domestic violence has more than halved while the conviction rate has risen significantly; however, there is still much work to be done. Recent research carried out by the NSPCC and *Sugar*,[61] a magazine targeted at teenage girls, found that 45 per cent of girls surveyed had been 'groped' against their wishes. Another NSPCC study, this time carried out with the University of Bristol,[62] showed that a third of girls aged 13–17 had suffered unwanted sexual acts within a relationship and a quarter had been victims of physical violence. These findings form just a tiny part of the growing evidence for what the NSPCC's Head of Child Protection Awareness Chris Cloke has described as a 'culture of confusion about what is acceptable among girls and boys living in today's highly sexualised landscape.'[63]

The Home Office Violence Against Women and Girls strategy

The *Together We Can End Violence Against Women and Girls* consultation was launched in early 2009. The decision to undertake this review as part of the consultation reflects the importance of the issue and growing perception that young people (and in particular young women and girls) are increasingly being pressured into appearing sexually available, and that this pressure is having a negative impact on both attitudes and behaviours. During the public consultations held by the Home Office in spring 2009, many parents expressed concern about the pressure on teenagers – and even younger children – to appear sexually available and about the sexualisation of young people and its possible links to violence.

Views expressed in recent surveys suggest that violence against women and girls is becoming increasingly 'normalised'.[64] According to a UK opinion poll carried out in February 2009[65] 16 per cent of people think it is sometimes acceptable for a man to slap his partner if she nags him, while 20 per cent believe that it is OK under certain circumstances to hit a women if she is wearing revealing or sexy clothing. As stated above, the NSPCC/Bristol University study[66] found that experiences of sexual abuse and violence within relationships were commonplace among teenage girls.

The international context

The issue of sexualisation is raised in a number of international laws, protocols and initiatives, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1979), the Beijing Platform for Action (BpfA) (1995), and the Palermo Protocol (2000).

CEDAW calls on all signatory states to take decisive action to tackle the objectification of women and girls. Article 5 requires that measures are put in place to modify the social and cultural patterns

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[61] Published in *Sugar* magazine, 23 May 2006

[62] Barter, McCarry, Berridge and Evans (2009)

[63] NSPCC press release, 22 May 2006 www.nspcc.org.uk/whatwedo/mediacentre/pressreleases/22_may_2006_unwanted_sexual_experiences_wdn33559.html

[64] Barter, McCarry, Berridge and Evans (2009)

[65] www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/violence-against-women-poll?view=Binary

[66] Barter, McCarry, Berridge and Evans (2009)

of men and women with a view to eliminating prejudices and practices based on the idea of the inferiority or superiority of either sex and/or on stereotyped roles for men and women. CEDAW also states that the sexual objectification of women plays a role in maintaining inequality between the sexes, and has repeatedly identified links between the portrayal of women as sex objects by the media and the sex industry and attitudes that underpin violence and discrimination against women.

Strategic Objective J2 of the Beijing Platform for Action calls for all states to tackle unbalanced portrayals and the projection of negative and degrading images of women in the media. Article 9 of the Palermo Protocol requires states to discourage the demand that fosters all forms of exploitation (particularly of women and children) which may lead to trafficking.

The American Psychological Association (APA) Taskforce's report on the *Sexualisation of Girls,* published in 2007, explores how sexualisation is affecting young girls cognitively and emotionally, and impacting on their ability to develop a healthy sexual self-image.[67] In 2008, the Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts for the Australian Senate published its report on the *Sexualisation of children in the contemporary media*.[68]

More recently, a French parliamentary campaign, spearheaded by Valérie Boyer MP, has called for all digitally enhanced photographs to be printed with an attached health warning. Similarly, the Real Women campaign, led by UK MP Jo Swinson, aims to encourage the public to challenge and complain about misleading or untruthful advertising, including adverts featuring airbrushed images, to the relevant authorities. Finally, a report on sexualised goods aimed at children was recently undertaken by the Scottish Government.

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[67] APA (2007)

[68] Australian Parliament, Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts (2008)

4. What is sexualisation and why does it matter?

"It is important to analyse cultural representations of gender roles, sexuality and relationships and ask what specific values are being promoted and if these are having a negative impact on child development. Key questions include the impact on children... of stereotyped images of passivity and sexual objectification... the long term impacts of early exposure to adult sexual themes and the ways in which cultural exposure impacts on parents' roles in protecting and educating children around sexuality in a developmentally appropriate way."[69]

Introduction

The world is saturated by more images today than at any other time in our modern history. Behind each of those images lies a message about expectations, values and ideals. Images present and perpetuate a world where women are revered – and rewarded – for their physical attributes and can put pressure on both girls and boys to emulate polarized gender stereotypes from a younger and younger age. It is testament to the extent to which such stereotypes have become 'normalised' that to object is often to be accused of lacking a sense of humour and proportion. As one young teenager told me, "Girls call each other names like ho and slag but its not always serious, sometimes it's just for fun, just a way to tease each other or even as a compliment to tell a friend that she looks hot or sexy".[70]

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[69] Newman, *The Psychological and Developmental Impact of Sexualisation on Children.* Quoted in Tankard Reist (2010)

[70] Evidence provided in a focus group, held as part of the Review (2009)

Introduction *(cont.)*

Attitudes thought to have been eradicated by the gender equality movement have somehow become acceptable again. Suddenly, it seems, it's OK to call a woman a 'bird' or to have her posing semi-naked on the cover of a mainstream magazine, suddenly it's cute and funny for little girls to sing along to misogynistic lyrics of songs, as long as long as it's done for the sake of a bit of simple harmless fun.

However, many researchers, clinicians and educators agree that the ramifications of this kind of 'fun' are far from harmless. The evidence collected in this report suggests these developments are having a profound impact, particularly on girls and young women. Children and adolescents are highly susceptible to the images and messages they see and hear around them particularly when, as is increasingly the case, they are accessing those images and messages alone.

The following chapter examines the various ways in which sexualisation can be defined and how it differs from healthy sexual development. It then goes on to examine how children and young people develop, providing an overview of some of the key theories of learning and development. Finally, it looks at how those theories operate in practice; that is, at how and why sexualisation may be having an impact on children and young people.

What is sexualisation?

"...in the current environment, teen girls are encouraged to look sexy, yet they know little about what it means to be sexual, to have sexual desires and to make rational and responsible decisions about pleasure and risk within intimate relationships that acknowledge their own desires."[71]

Healthy sexuality is an important component of both physical and mental health. When based on mutual respect between consenting partners, sex fosters intimacy, bonding and shared pleasure.[72] Sexualisation, by contrast, is the imposition of adult sexuality on to children and young people before they are capable of dealing with it, mentally, emotionally or physically. It does not apply to self-motivated sexual play, nor to the dissemination of age-appropriate material about sexuality. We should be careful that we do not indiscriminately apply the notion of sexualisation so that any expression of sexuality by children is seen as wrong or problematic.

The idea that sexualisation is increasingly prevalent throughout our culture has been gaining momentum since the late 1990s and is now regularly discussed by academics and researchers. The consensus seems to be that the most obvious manifestation, the dissemination of sexualised visual imagery, while important in its own right, is part of a wider phenomenon: the emergence in the UK of a 'pornified' culture[73] and the encroaching of pornography into many spheres of everyday life.[74] Although some[75] interpret this as a sign of cultural maturity and of the democratisation of the visual field, a more widely held view[76]

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71 Tolman (2002)

72 Satcher (2001)

73 Paul (2005)

74 McNair (2002)

75 McNair (2002)

76 McNair (2002); Paul (2005)

is that the 'sexualisation of culture'[77] is a sign of cultural degradation.[78] To enter into this debate is beyond our remit; rather, our concern is to map out, through clear analysis of the empirical research literature, the possible links between the sexualisation of culture and gendered and sexualised violence.

Broadly, those academics who accept the phenomenon of sexualisation approach it in two ways. On the one hand, so-called 'mainstream sexualisation' describes the democratisation of sex and sexuality and the breaking down of binary oppositions (for example, male/female or heterosexual/homosexual). On the other, there is the commercialisation of sexuality which may well involve the appropriation of feminist terminology such as 'empowerment', 'equality' and 'girl power'. Arguably, this serves to reinforce the dominant male gaze, by ensuring that female sexual expression only gains validity under the surveillance of men; something that may be leading to increases in sexualised violence among young people.[79]

Understanding the current phenomenon of sexualisation

The term 'sexualisation' is used to describe a number of trends in the production and consumption of contemporary culture; the common denominator is the use of sexual attributes as a measure of a person's value and worth. Although sexualised images have featured in advertising and communications since mass media first emerged, the current phenomenon of sexualisation differs from what has gone before in three important regards.

First, the volume of sexualised images and the extent to which they impinge on everyday life are significantly greater than they were as recently as two decades ago. Public spaces are saturated with sexualised images and messages.[80] As a result, they are visible to everyone, including children and young people who may not have the maturity to rationalise and put what they are seeing into context. At the same time, these images and messages are also becoming more explicit. Increasingly, it seems, there is a blurring between the 'mainstream' media, whether in the form of billboard posters, magazine covers, music videos, fashion shoots or film trailers, and the world of pornography.

Second, because of the proliferation of visual images, 'social classifiers' such as gender, class, race and age are being used to present exaggerated constructions of femininity and masculinity. The resulting caricatures – the big-breasted blonde bimbo, the 'dirty old man' – are defined solely by their sexual attributes, attitudes or behaviours.[81] In the case of the blonde bimbo, too, there is a strong link between apparent sexually availability and validation; the 'right' physical attributes and the willingness to submit to male desires are a 'passport' to acceptance, money and fame.

Third, children are increasingly being portrayed in an 'adultified' way while, conversely, adult women are being infantilised.[82] This leads to a blurring of the lines between sexual maturity and immaturity. This is having the effect of sexualising girlhood and legitimising the notion that children can be related to as sexual objects.

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[77] Gill (2009); Zurbriggen *et al*. (2007); McNair (2002); Paul (2005); Rush and La Nauze (2006)

[78] Hitchens (2002); Paul (2005)

[79] Barter, McCarry, Berridge and Evans (2009)

[80] McNair (2002)

[81] Paasonen (2007)

[82] Evidence provided to the review by Dr K. Sarikakis (2009)

The APA definition of sexualisation

In 2007, the American Psychological Association (APA) carried out an extensive review of the impact of sexualisation on young girls.[83] The APA's taskforce provides the following definition of sexualisation as occurring when:

- a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics;
- a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness with being sexy;
- a person is sexually objectified – that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or
- sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.

The APA views sexualisation as a continuum, with so-called 'sexualised evaluation' (that is, looking at someone with sexual intent) at one end and severe sexual exploitation, such as sexual abuse or trafficking, at the other.

This report takes the APA definition as its benchmark, since it accurately reflects the themes emerging from the evidence sessions held by the Home Office as part of the *Together We Can End Violence Against Women and Girls* consultation. Briefly, these themes are that the sexualisation of children and the infantilisation of adult women is having a negative impact on young people's body image and identity and making a significant contribution to the demand for the sexual exploitation of women and children within the UK. We appreciate that academic debate over the precise theoretical interpretation of sexualisation is ongoing; however, our objective here is to better understand the impact sexualisation is having now and to identify effective strategies for combating its negative effects.

Sexualisation, learning and development

A number of factors shape the way children and young people respond to the sexualisation of culture. One of the most obvious is the individual child's age and level of cognitive and emotional development – a Pussycat Dolls video, say, will mean very different things to a three-year-old, an eight-year-old and a 14-year-old.

What is important to consider however is the cumulative effect that exposure to sexualised messages and images will also have over time. Throughout this report, we will argue that the 'drip drip' effect is an insidious but powerful mechanism by which the previously unthinkable becomes widely acceptable, often within a relatively short space of time. To give just one example, cosmetic surgery has moved from being predominantly medical in nature to being the preserve of Hollywood stars to being an accepted part of mainstream culture (see page 58) within just a few years.

Developments in technology play a significant role, and while the internet provides amazing learning opportunities, it also gives children easy access to age-inappropriate materials, which they can access alone, without the input and mitigating influence of an adult who could, perhaps, help them to understand and contextualise what they are seeing.

As the learning and developmental theories outlined below demonstrate, there is a considerable body of evidence to suggest that children do learn vicariously from what they see, and that viewing inappropriate messages or images can have a detrimental effect.

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[83] Zurbriggen *et al.* (2007)

Socialisation theories

Social learning theory[84] is based on the principle that we learn by observing others' attitudes and behaviours and by seeing the outcomes of those behaviours. It also posits a reciprocal relationship between cognitive, behavioural and environmental influences; that is, that behaviour influences environment as well as the other way round.

Gender socialisation theories such as gender schema theory[85] are especially relevant to understanding how hyper-sexualised/hyper-masculinised images can influence thinking and form the basis for individuals' beliefs about how they should look and behave. The central premise is that children learn what it means to be either male or female from prevailing cultural norms and are then either praised (and therefore reinforced) for adhering to these norms or, conversely, punished for going against them.

More recently, Bussey and Bandura have focused on how children's own cognitive processes work alongside the socialisation process that begins to take effect at birth. The argument is that, once they understand what society expects of them with regard to gender roles and standards of behaviour, children start to internalise those expectations and create their own rules. They then, in effect, start to 'police' themselves in line with these self-imposed standards, adapting and monitoring their own behaviour without the need for reassurance and reinforcement from outside.[86]

Cognitive theories

Cognitive theories such as schema theory and cognitive information processing theory hold that social behaviour is controlled by 'cognitive scripts'; essentially, learned patterns of behaviour that individuals can use to control social interaction. As in social learning theory, children learn by observing how others behave, encoding these messages and using them to 'script' their own behaviour.

For example, the combination of seeing how other people behave and exposure to, say, certain adverts and/or TV programmes could lead a child to conclude that, 'For people to like me, I need to look pretty' or 'Being a strong boy means playing rough'. These conclusions will then dictate how they interact with others, the expectations they impose on themselves and others, and how they subjectively assess and ascribe meaning to the world around them. Cognitive scripts can be rehearsed (and reinforced) through fantasy and play, ready to be acted out when the trigger that first prompted the encoding occurs again.[87]

Cognitive theories also cover beliefs that operate at an unconscious level, for example subconscious associations between beauty and thinness.[88] A recent study into how cognitive associations are established uncovered a disturbing manifestation of this phenomenon: after seeing sexually explicit content featuring actors who appeared to be under-age, viewers were more likely to associate sex and sexuality with non-sexual depictions of minors.[89]

Understanding the effects of unconscious processing is particularly relevant considering how so many of the messages that children have to contend with actually target their emotions at an unconscious level. Various studies in the fields of psychology and neuroscience have shown that it is often ones 'emotional instinct' that influences decision making rather than cognitive reasoning. A good

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[84] First articulated by Bandura (1971)

[85] Bem (1981)

[86] Bussey and Bandura (1999)

[87] Huesmann (1998)

[88] Ahern, Bennett and Hetherington (2008)

[89] Paul and Linz (2008)

example is a recent study that found that using a celebrity voice to sell a product could make that product more desirable but only if the voice wasn't specifically recognised;[90] the point being that if people can recognise a voice, they can be consciously cynical about whether they choose to believe the paid celebrity endorsement or not. However, if the voice is only recognisable to the subconscious, then the cognitive filters one could in theory use to moderate the messages are completely bypassed.[91]

This sheds light on children's emotional and cognitive development. So, for example, when a message is linked to positive, desirable feelings or images, it gains an emotional appeal that is independent of rational reasoning.[92] Significantly, the onset of puberty is associated with increased awareness of and responsiveness to rewarding stimuli. So brands and concepts with the 'cool factor' hold out the promise of peer acceptance, thus making them particularly attractive to teenagers.[93]

Cultural theories

Individuals develop and ascribe beliefs and meanings to themselves and the world around them within a specific cultural context. Cultivation theory states that individual perceptions and beliefs are shaped by 'socialising' influences such as the media.[94] In effect, media channels act as 'cultural advertisements', telling consumers what to focus on, what to value and how to value it.

Culture also dictates what is seen as 'acceptable'. Cultural spillover theory[95] argues that when behaviours are accepted in one aspect of life, they become legitimised and therefore acceptable in other areas, without the need for people to give their direct, explicit support. For example, researchers have suggested that the more a society legitimises the use of force to attain ends for which there is widespread social approval (such as tackling crime or deploying military force), the more the use of force becomes legitimised in other domains such as personal relationships.[96] It seems logical to assume that the same principle of spillover may operate with regard to sexualisation, and that the portrayal of women and girls in magazines and on billboards as sexualised objects will lead to their being objectified elsewhere.

Objectification theories

Objectification occurs when an individual is treated not as a person but as a collection of body parts valued predominantly for its use by others.[97] Objectification theory[98] cites the powerful role of visual media (including mainstream films, magazines, advertising and TV) in disseminating images that focus on bodies and body parts which implicitly encourage the viewer to adopt a 'sexualised gaze'. Due to the proliferation of such images, theorists argue, sexual objectification has now effectively permeated our culture.[99] Moreover, this objectifying perspective is becoming internalised, with girls and women increasingly viewing themselves and their bodies from a detached, third-person viewpoint: 'How do others see me?', rather than 'How do I feel?'[100]

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90 Forehand and Perkins (2005)

91 Berridge and Winkelman (2003)

92 Mayo and Nairn (2009)

93 Steinberg (2008)

94 Gerbner *et al.* (1994)

95 Baron, Straus *et al.* (1988)

96 Baron, Straus *et al.* (1988)

97 Fredrickson and Roberts (1997)

98 Fredrickson and Roberts (1997)

99 APA (2007); Tankard-Reist (2010); Australian Parliament (2008)

100 Fredrickson and Roberts (1997)

There are three main aspects to this phenomenon. First, it leads to body surveillance, or the constant monitoring of personal appearance. Second, this monitoring can result in body shame, where an individual feels that their physical appearance fails to meet the standards they have set for themselves based on idealised media images and, moreover, that they are a 'bad person' as a result.[101] Body shame is strongly linked with body dissatisfaction, a recognised risk factor for poor self-esteem, depression and eating disorders.[102] Third, an individual who sees themselves as a sexualised object is more likely to believe that they should control their appearance and that, with hard work and effort, they can reach the (largely unattainable) standards prescribed by the media.[103]

Age and cognitive ability

A meta-analysis of 25 years of research into the effects of media exposure shows clear links both between age and processing ability and between media exposure, attitudes and, by extension, behaviour. The media is a source of learning.[104] In fact it has been suggested that the media acts as a kind of 'super peer'[105] replacing messages from parents or educators and gaining credibility in the minds of young people by assuming an authority of 'coolness'.

Of course, some children and young people are highly media-savvy and well able to negotiate media content.[106] However, there is a large body of research from developmental psychologists attesting to the fact that young children do not have the cognitive skills to cope with persuasive media messages.[107] The APA found that children are vulnerable to media messages because 'they do not comprehend commercial messages in the same way as do more mature audiences and hence are uniquely susceptible to advertising influence.'[108] One commentator has likened exposing children to advertising to 'sending them to the beach without sunscreen'.[109]

Children's ability to interpret messages is directly linked to their ability to understand abstract concepts. No matter how sophisticated a six-year-old is, they simply do not have the abstract cognitive understanding needed to assimilate information from advertisers and the media in the way that an older teenager or adult can.[110] Yet, as we have already suggested, all age groups are increasingly being exposed to the same images and messaging.

Children may also believe that they have understood a message when they have not. In fact, even as children get older they are still susceptible to the hidden advertising and media messages that target them. As Mayo and Nairn put it, 'the stimuli which kids don't really notice and which create emotional associations are the ones that influence them in the most powerful ways'.[111] This needs to be taken into account when studying how children

[101] McKinley (1999)

[102] Moradi et al. (2005); Polivy and Herman (2002); Tolman, Impett, Tracy, and Michael (2006)

[103] Heinberg and Thompson (1996)

[104] Emmers-Sommer and Allen (1999)

[105] Levin and Kilbourne (2008). Quoted in Coy (2009)

[106] Buckingham and Bragg (2004)

[107] Mayo and Nairn (2009)

[108] Kunkel, Wilcox, Cantor, Palmer, Linn and Dorwick (2004)

[109] Cooper (2004)

[110] Mayo and Nairn (2009)

[111] Mayo and Nairn (2009)

are affected by media content, since although they may believe and say that they understand specific messages their behaviours often indicate otherwise.

A recent study from Western Australia examined how interactive advertisement games ('advergames') on a breakfast cereal site influenced children's attitudes.[112] The children were split into two groups: those that played the game and those that did not. When questioned both groups made it clear that they believed that fruit was healthier than the fruity cereal in the advergame they were playing, so the game did not override the healthy eating messages they had been taught – or so they told the researchers. However, when it came time to make a choice between the sugary cereal and other kinds of food, it seems that the advergame had a huge influence with 54% of the group who had played the game making the less healthy food choice as opposed to only 32% in the other group. Advergames work by making implicit associations between the product and the pleasure derived from playing the game. This is what makes certain media or advertising messages so powerful, they can change children's behaviour even though they do not believe that their minds have been changed at all.

All of this suggests that exposing children to images and messages that they are not yet equipped to deal with may well have a negative impact. It also suggests that while children themselves may believe that they can understand and contextualise, say, a Playboy logo on a pencil case or an attack on a prostitute in a video game, such encounters may be having a profound impact on attitudes and behaviour at an unconscious level.

There is evidence to suggest that unconscious emotional connections are much more enduring than cognitive conscious ones. Several studies have underscored the fact that it is not what young people say to a group of researchers (or to themselves for that matter) that influences behavioural choices but rather the associations between behaviours and the 'aspirational' constructs promoting them.[113]

It is important to acknowledge that the way that young people internalise media and advertising messages is complex: young people's attitudes are often based on their subconscious feelings, which can be affected by 'subtle emotional appeals' that are not well controlled by conscious reasoning. In addition, in cases where young people have not developed advertising literacy skills, it is then that conscious learning is often dominated by unconscious learning.[114]

Even where images and messages are being consciously absorbed, without guidance from a trusted adult, children and young people may be unable to understand and contextualise violent or pornographic images or content and assume that they are appropriate models for behaviour and an accurate reflection of how the world works. So, for example, exposure to violent sexual images could lead impressionable young men to assume that women want to be forced into sex, which has serious implications for gender equality in sex and relationships.[115]

Children with learning disabilities may find it particularly difficult to moderate or filter out unhealthy images or constructs. Sara Delaney, team manager of the Sexually Harmful Behaviour Team in Birmingham, speaking during the review's evidence sessions, pointed out that there is a lack of guidance generally on discussing sex and relationships with children that

[112] Mallinckrodt and Miserski (2007)

[113] Dal Cin, Gibson, Zanna, Shumate, Fong and Bargh (2002)

[114] Mayo and Nairn (2009)

[115] Emmers-Sommer and Allen (1999)

have learning disabilities. She indicated that around 40 per cent of the children assessed and treated in her unit have some form of learning disability and that the vast majority of these children are developing their sexual scripts from pornography. She also pointed to a lack of awareness of sexual norms and an increase in inappropriate sexual touching in schools.[116]

Cultural difference

Cultural, religious, and class backgrounds will influence the family's role in mediating sexualised media content as well as what is deemed as appropriate and acceptable. There is a need for more research into how social location affects young people's ability to cope with sexualised content,[117] and how schools in particular might help to mediate sexualised and violent media content and provide tools to support young people.[118]

What we do know, however, is that sexualisation occurs across all cultures and all social classes, although the channels may vary. Sexualised or degrading images of black women are commonplace in hip-hop videos, for example, while fashion advertising is more likely to objectify white women. The psychological ramifications of self-objectification such as eating disorders and plastic surgery (see pages 58–60) also transcend race and class barriers.[119]

Internalisation

There are several theories that attempt to explain the link between exposure to idealised media images and body

dissatisfaction. While it has been suggested that exposure simply exacerbates existing issues and that people with a negative body image are more likely to seek out 'thin' images,[120] there is nevertheless a significant correlation between the internalisation of the 'thin ideal', media pressure and body dissatisfaction.[121] 'Internalisation' describes the process by which an individual 'buys in' to social norms and turns them into guiding principles that inform their behaviour and decisions.[122]

Internalisation has been shown to be the biggest predictor of body dissatisfaction in girls[123] although other factors – including cultural pressure, individual differences in body mass and lack of social support – also play a significant part.[124]

For boys, social pressure is the main cause of body image disturbance.[125] Parental messages are the strongest influence on body image in boys and young men, while parents, the media and, to a lesser extent, the influence of male peers are the strongest predictors of body change strategies.[126] For boys, messages are likely to centre around ideas of physical strength and dominant, controlling behaviour.

Internalisation is also a powerful means by which the sexual norms and scripts promulgated by pornography become normalised and help to shape young people's views about intimacy and sexual relationships.[127] Boys can be made to feel that treating girls as sex objects and/or behaving in an aggressive manner

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116 Evidence provided to the review by
    Sara Delaney (2010)
117 Buckingham and Bragg (2004)
118 Thornburgh and Lin (2002)
119 Abrams and Stormer (2002); Atlas, Smith,
    Hohlstein, McCarthy and Kroll (2002); Barry
    and Grilo (2002); Goodman (2002); Hesse-
    Biber, Leavy et al. (2006); Kolodny (2004)

120 Hill (2006)
121 Cusumano and Thompson (2001)
122 Thompson et al. (2004)
123 Stice and Bearman (2001)
124 Stice and Whitenton (2002)
125 Cash (2002); Ricciardelli and McCabe (2001);
    Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe and Tantleff-Dunn
    (1999)
126 Stanford and McCabe (2005)
127 Allen (2004)

is the key to proving their manliness; beliefs which can be exacerbated by a lack of suitable role models.[128] During the evidence hearing sessions Holly Elsdon-Smithers from the White Ribbon Campaign noted that one of the issues that constantly arises in her work with boys in schools is the lack of healthy male role models. She noted that the 'social scripts' given to boys once again centre around male dominance and control, with boys feeling that they have to prove their manliness by relating to girls either as sexual objects or in an aggressive manner.

Conclusion

Young children have a natural, healthy interest in their sexuality. But when their developing sexuality is moulded to fit adult sexual stereotypes, this can compromise that healthy developmental process. Children need time and space to develop their own understanding, rather than being presented with constructs that they may not be emotionally or cognitively ready to deal with.

Much of the evidence suggests that instead of putting children and young people in control of their sexuality, we are in danger of isolating them from it altogether. And by doing so, creating a situation where young people are so used to 'packaging' themselves for others' consumption that they begin relating to themselves in the third person, where they become estranged from their own bodies.

Wanting to be attractive, wanting to be desired is natural. But it seems that increasingly young women's dominant desire is to be desired. And this need is often to the detriment of other hopes and aspirations. This is illustrated by a quote taken from a recent BBC documentary on glamour modelling where a young aspiring glamour model said:

"It's so nice to get your hair and your make up done then for someone to shout you look fantastic, you look gorgeous. It's a complete confidence boost, an ego boost. I think everyone should do it. Everyone should have a glamour shoot done just for themselves"[129]

This young woman's self esteem is predicated on her appearance being approved of by men and her confidence boosted by fulfilling a superficial, aesthetic ideal. Her point is that self-confidence can be achieved by conforming to certain beauty standards – and of course such conformity is rewarded in industries that trade on and commodify female sexuality.

Children and young people are not only being exposed to an increasing number of hyper-sexualised images; they are also being sold the idea that girls should look 'hot', regardless of their age. As such, they are facing pressures that children in the past simply didn't have to face.

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[128] Evidence provided to the Review by Holly Elsdon-Smithers, White Ribbon Campaign UK (2010)

[129] Quoted in Coy and Garner (in press)

Conclusion *(cont.)*

Children's ability to understand and assimilate information develops over time. Given the proliferation and accessibility of sexualised images, it is almost inevitable that children will come into contact with content they're not ready to understand. Not only can this be upsetting and disruptive, it can also lead them to make assumptions about what's appropriate that could lead them into potentially dangerous and damaging situations.

For adolescents, untrammelled access to sexualised images at a time when they are forming their own identity and coming to terms with their emerging sexuality makes for a potent mix. For any child, the pressure is huge. But what about those children who don't fit the 'norm'? Those who're gay? Those who are disabled or come from a minority ethnic background? The ideal for female beauty is not only narrow and unrealistic, it is also racially biased. Our seeming obsession with the monolithic ideals of gender and beauty leaves such little room for manoeuvre that we are in danger of ostracising and pathologising the vast majority of children that don't conform to that ideal.

Young people need to be allowed to develop and grow in surroundings where their self-esteem is not predicated on their ability to fulfil the hyper-sexy or hyper-masculine ideal, but where they are admired for their individual talents and abilities. At a time when the visual increasingly takes precedence, we are not only teaching our children that looks are all that matters, we are also prescribing an increasingly narrow and limited physical ideal that is, for most of them, virtually impossible to achieve.

5. Sexualised content and the mainstreaming of pornography

"With all the unregulated pornography available online it feels like we're tending a small part of one corner of the garden while a jungle of exploitative imagery grows around us."

Peter Johnson, Head of Policy, British Board of Film Classification[130]

Introduction

Advertising doesn't just sell products; it sells aspirations and identities. The proliferation and accessibility of advertising images and messages make it increasingly difficult to target them at the appropriate audience. With the advent of mobile internet, it is almost impossible to guarantee that messages are only being seen by the age group for which they are intended. There is no 'watershed' on the internet, and many adverts are sent indiscriminately to mobile phones and e-mail addresses. A child with a mobile phone literally has access to pornography in their pocket.

With proliferation and accessibility come normalisation. From the café culture of lap dancing clubs, to push up bras for 8-year-olds, we've reached a point where it's seemingly acceptable to use photographs of barely clad actresses and models, along with sexually explicit strap lines, on the covers of mainstream magazines and stock them alongside the comics in high street newsagents. High street stores sell video games where the player can beat up prostitutes with bats and steal from them in order to facilitate game progression. The message is clear – young girls should do whatever it takes to be desired. For boys the message is just as clear: be hyper-masculine and relate to girls as objects. It's no surprise therefore that when researchers examine the content of young girls' web pages they find young teens are posting sexually explicit images of themselves on social networking sites, and self-regulating each other with sexist, derogatory and demeaning language.

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130 Evidence provided to the Review by Peter Johnson, British Board of Film Classification (2009)

Introduction *(cont.)*

As images that would have been found shocking just a few years ago flood the mainstream, so the boundaries get pushed back further. We're seeing adverts that reference gang rape and adverts where women are reduced to dismembered body parts. In fact the influences of the iconic visual constructs of porn are contributing to the emergence of a caricature of what it means to be a woman. Being beautiful, being attractive, being 'sexy' is no longer about individuality and the characteristics that make a person unique, it's about ticking off items on a checklist: big breasts, big lips, fake tan, fake hair, fake nails – and, of course, youth.

The notion that all young women who are socialised into believing that their worth lies in their sexuality and appearance should have the 'agency' to stand up to these images is naïve. This assumes that: firstly, all these messages are assimilated on a conscious level so can easily be challenged; secondly, that all young women are afforded the opportunity to moderate these messages through healthy parental and peer relationships; thirdly, that their own self-esteem is resilient enough to allow them to question and stand up to prevailing norms; and finally, that their education has afforded them the kind of media literacy that allows them to 'filter out' unhealthy messages. The fact is that many young people don't have these opportunities and, as such, are vulnerable to the messages both overt and covert that are propagated in the world around them.

With a tendency to 'adultify' children and 'infantilise' women, the lines where childhood ends and adulthood begins are becoming increasingly blurred. Girls who haven't even developed secondary sex characteristics are posed to look overtly sexy, while adult women are posed to look submissive and child-like rather than empowered and in control. It's no surprise therefore that for young female actors and musicians, taking their clothes off has become a rite of passage, a way of showing the world that they're 'all grown up now'. While boys are 'allowed' to enter adulthood without needing to advertise their sexual availability or desirability, they are nevertheless exposed to messages that reinforce the idea that they should be primarily motivated by sex and that male desire is something that cannot be controlled. This is having an impact both on boys' attitudes to their own bodies and on their attitudes to and behaviour towards girls.

The following section provides an overview of how the media and advertisers are promoting sexualised images and messages and explores the role of the internet. It also looks at the role of parents in providing support to help their children understand and contextualise what they see and hear. It goes on to look at the various ways in which pornography has entered the mainstream, including through the internet and the proliferation of lapdancing clubs. Throughout, we consider the implications of this exposure on children and young people's emotional and cognitive development.

Magazines

"A more sexualised media hasn't been great for women. We're still labelled. Can't we just do what we like with our bodies? Labelling and stereotypes reinforce our inequality."

Focus group participant[131]

Young people consistently cite the media as an important source of information on sexual issues.[132] In the US, the number of magazines targeting the teen market rose from five to 19 between 1990 and 2000.[133] Nearly half of 8–18-year-olds say they spend at least five minutes reading a magazine the previous day, with 22 per cent spending at least 20 minutes. On average, 8–18-year-olds spend 14 minutes a day reading magazines.[134]

A dominant trend seems to be the need for girls to present themselves as sexually desirable in order to attract male attention.[135] Articles, cover lines, photos and adverts encourage girls and women to look and dress in ways that will make them attractive to men: so-called 'costuming for seduction'.[136] Both language and images are sexualised,[137] with repeated use of words such as 'hot' and cute' reinforcing the idea that these are the qualities to which readers should aspire.

"Women's magazines are a joke. There should be more magazines that empower women and focus on their rights, not just their appearance."

Focus group participant[138]

Conversely, the 'lads mags' targeted at young male readers typically feature highly sexualised images of women that blur the lines between pornography and mainstream media. At the same time, they promote an idea of male sexuality as based on power and aggression, depicting women as sex objects and including articles that feature strategies for manipulating women.[139]

"It's depressing that in this era women and young girls can go into mainstream shops and be bombarded by highly sexualised images of naked young women plastered over men's magazines. Inside, readers' girlfriends are encouraged to send in pictures of themselves topless. In the name of what? Freedom of expression? It's a narrow and damaging version of how young women should behave with regards to their sexuality and their relationships with men."

Karen Bailey,
Stella Project Co-ordinator[140]

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[131] Women's National Commission (2009)

[132] Huston (1998); Buckingham and Bragg (2004); Donnerstein and Smith (2001); Greenfield (2004); Peter and Valkenburg (2007); Thornburgh and Lin (2002)

[133] Teen Market Profile (2005) Quoted in APA (2007)

[134] Roberts *et al.* (2005)

[135] Carpenter (1998); Durham (1998); Garner, Sterk, and Adams (1998); McMahon (1990)

[136] Duffy and Gotcher (1996)

[137] Rush and La Nauze (2006)

[138] Women's National Commission (2009)

[139] Taylor (2005)

[140] Evidence provided to the review by Karen Bailey (2010)

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Children in magazines are often dressed and posed in such a way as to draw attention to sexual features that they do not yet possess, while advice on hairstyles, cosmetics, clothing, diet, and exercise attempt to remake even young readers as objects of male desire,[141] promoting premature sexualisation.[142] Young girls are encouraged to see themselves as objects that must be sexually connected to a man in order to feel complete.[143] While these findings are mainly drawn from the United States, UK magazines feature very similar themes and content.

Airbrushing: portraying images of 'unattainable perfection'

In a recent study of over 1,000 women carried out by consumer cosmetics company Dove,[144] more than two-thirds of women stated that they lacked confidence about their bodies as a result of viewing digitally altered images of models, while a fifth said they felt less confident in their everyday lives. A quarter of those questioned said that images used in advertising made them feel self-conscious about their appearance. Nearly all the women surveyed – 96 per cent – said they would like advertisers to be honest about the extent to which they were airbrushing or digitally manipulating images.

This survey backs the findings of a group of experts and researchers from the UK, USA, Australia, Ireland and a number of other countries. The group recently sent a letter to the Advertising Standards Authority in response to the Authority's call for more evidence on the impact of advertising on body image.[145] Citing over 100 studies into the effects of idealised media images on women and girls and further studies documenting the impact of the muscular ideal on young men and boys, the group reached the following conclusions:

- poor body image is linked to eating disorders, cosmetic surgery, extreme exercising, unhealthy muscle-enhancing activity, depression, anxiety and low self-esteem;

- idealised media images have a negative effect on a significant majority of adolescent girls and women, and this starts from an early age;

- advertising images of average-size models are just as effective as images of very thin women;

- there is a lack of awareness about the extent to which images are being altered; and

- better media literacy can reduce both the negative impacts of exposure and the tendency to internalise the thin ideal.

[141] Duffy and Gotcher (1996)

[142] Rush and La Nauze (2006)

[143] Garner *et al.* (1998)

[144] news.sky.com/skynews/Home/UK-News/ Airbrushed-Pictures-Of-Models-Again-Blamed-For-Womens-Increasingly-Poor-Self-Esteem/ Article/200911415471304?lpos=UK_ News_First_Home_Article_Teaser_ Region_2&lid=ARTICLE_15471304_ Airbrushed_Pictures_Of_Models_Again_ Blamed_For_Womens_Increasingly_Poor_ Self-Esteem

[145] The Impact of Media Images on Body Image and Behaviours, Misc. (2009)

In France, a group of 50 MPs has introduced legislation calling for all digitally enhanced images to be clearly marked. The bill had its first reading in the French parliament in September.

"We want to combat the stereotypical image that all women are young and slim. These photos can lead people to believe in a reality that does not actually exist and have a detrimental effect on adolescents. Many young people, particularly girls, do not know the difference between the virtual and reality, and can develop complexes from a very young age."

Valérie Boyer, Member of Parliament[146]

Advertising

Sexualisation in advertising is not a new phenomenon. Content analyses of TV adverts stretching back to the 1970s show that gender-stereotypical ideas and images are widely used.[147] Nevertheless, over the past three decades there has been a dramatic increase in the use of sexualised images in advertising. The overwhelming majority of these images feature women.[148] For example, in a recent study of 72 beer and non-beer ads randomly selected from prime-time sports and entertainment programming, 75 per cent of the beer ads and 50 per cent of non-beer ads were felt to be 'sexist',[149] and featured women in objectifying roles.[150]

There has also been a significant increase in the amount of sexualised images of children in circulation.[151] Increasingly, young children in adverts are being dressed, made up and posed like sexy adult models; conversely, adult women are being infantilised.[152] Theorists argue that this 'age compression',[153] in blurring the boundaries between childhood and adulthood, is enabling the values perpetuated by some marketers to encroach further and further into childhood.

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA)[154] recently ruled that an advert for American Apparel clothing 'could be seen to sexualise a model who appeared to be a child'. The advert consisted of six photos, with the model gradually unzipping her hooded top further and further until her nipple was exposed. She was styled wearing natural-looking make-up. Although the model in question was actually 23, the ASA stated that some of the shots made her appear to be under 16.

While adults may be equipped to understand why such images are inappropriate, it is important to remember that children and young people are often not.

"Research establishes clearly that most children under the age of approximately eight years do not comprehend the persuasive intent of advertising. Such children lack the capability to effectively evaluate commercial claims and appeals, and therefore tend to accept the information conveyed in advertising as truthful, accurate, and unbiased. Consequently, children in this age range are uniquely vulnerable to commercial persuasion."[155]

146 www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/6214168/French-MPs-want-health-warnings-on-airbrushed-photographs.html

147 Courtney and Whipple (1974); Furnham and Voli (1989); Lovdal (1989); Rudman and Borgida (1995); Russo, Feller and DeLeon (1982)

148 Reichert *et al.* (1999)

149 Defined as sexual and limiting in gender role

150 Rouner, Slater and Domenech-Rodriguez (2003)

151 Rush and La Nauze (2006)

152 Rush and La Nauze (2006)

153 Lamb and Brown (2006). Quoted in Coy (2009)

154 www.asa.org.uk/asa/adjudications/Public/TF_ADJ_46886.htm

155 APA Task Force on Advertising and Children (2004)

Furthermore, the sheer proliferation of such images leads to gradual desensitisation; research carried out among teenage girls found that their objections to sexualised images tended to decrease over time.[156]

Taking steps to protect children

The ASA's remit requires it to have 'special concern for the protection of children' and the Agency has a number of enforceable codes prohibiting, for example, advertisers from targeting children with misleading adverts, adverts that put viewers under pressure to purchase, and any adverts that could cause harm or distress.

Other countries have adopted various approaches to restricting advertising for children. In Greece, toy adverts are banned on TV between 7am and 10pm; Sweden bans all TV advertising aimed at children under 12; while Norway, Finland, and Denmark do not allow sponsorship of children's programmes. The Broadcasting Code of Canada severely restricts children's advertising and bans any adverts that imply a product will make a child happier or more popular. In 2004, the APA's Task Force on Advertising and Children formally backed a proposal to restrict advertising to children aged eight or under in the US. The task force highlights that as adults respond to commercials by automatically applying cognitive filters, which tell them that the commercial intends to persuade them, they expect biased information and interpret it accordingly. Children on the other hand lack these cognitive filters.[157]

Marketing also encourages young girls to present themselves in a sexual way. One tactic is to present characters that children strongly identify with in a highly sexualised way.[158] Bratz dolls, for example, are targeted at four-to-eight-year-olds, yet most dolls in the range are heavily made-up, some of which are dressed in miniskirts and fishnet stockings. Another tactic is to market objects to young girls that are entirely appropriate on one level but which nevertheless send out disturbing messages: putting the Playboy bunny logo on a child's pencil case is a prime example of how the line between sexual immaturity and maturity can be blurred. Such blurring – which also occurs when adult women are presented in an infantilised way (for example, the recent Playboy cover of a model in pig-tails, holding a teddy bear) – effectively suggests that it is acceptable to relate to children in a sexual way.[159] In his examination of sexual portrayals of girls in fashion advertising, Merskin (2004) puts it like this:

> "…the message from advertisers and the mass media to girls (as eventual women) is they should always be sexually available, always have sex on their minds, be willing to be dominated and eventually sexually aggressed against..."[160]

Although the bulk of the research is currently focused on print and TV advertising, it is arguably the case that internet advertising – which can be both interactive and prolonged – has an even more powerful effect on children and young people. That interactivity can encourage children to form strong bonds with brands.

The basic economic concepts are also different. Whereas primary school children can understand the basic

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156 Survey carried out in New Zealand, Clark (2008)

157 APA Taskforce on Advertising and Children (2004)

158 Evidence provided to the review by the British Board of Film Classification (2009)

159 Ringrose (2010)

160 Merskin (2004)

principles regarding the exchange of goods for money, they are less likely to understand how a gaming website may be subsidised by selling advertising space. Increasingly, new psychological research is beginning to show that because of this older children are just as susceptible to advertising messages as those in junior school.[161] Neuro-marketing studies have shown that the reason behind this has to do with the way our brain is configured: the thinking part of our brain (the neo-cortex) responds to cues differently to the instinctive part of the brain (the limbic system). Researchers suggest that many decisions are made based on our instincts rather than conscious reasoning. And since children's and young people's rational responses are less developed than those of adults, they are therefore more vulnerable to media messages.

Children's clothing

"The NSPCC's position on this is that by normalizing sexualised clothing and behaviour, it opens up young girls to being exploited."

Tom Narducci,
senior consultant, NSPCC[162]

From push-up bras for pre-teens to high-heeled shoes for four-year-olds, media reports of age-inappropriate clothing being targeted at young children have become common place. Researchers indicate that marketers use clothes to sell identities to children especially girls, allowing a child, for example, to adopt a 'rock chic' look one day or a 'bo-ho hippy' look the next.[163] The notion of young girls enjoying dress-up is nothing new. The vast majority of little girls have at least one princess dress in their wardrobe, and while there is nothing wrong with role-playing with clothes and enjoying fashion, what is concerning is that many of the choices now available to young girls encourage them to engage and experiment with themes that they may not be cognitively or developmentally ready to engage with. If we accept that girls are to some extent experimenting with their identities through fashion then we need to consider the impact on increasingly younger girls being marketed clothes designed to highlight sexual characteristics that they do not yet possess. By over-emphasizing their sexuality through fashion it may make it harder for girls to value themselves for other aspects of their identity. In their report on the sexualisation of girls, the APA makes the point that when girls are dressed in miniature versions of adult clothes, there is the danger that people will project adult motives, responsibility and agency on girls, and that this in turn may have the impact of normalising the sexual abuse of children.[164]

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[161] Mayo and Nairn (2009)

[162] Narducci T., [http://www.kidglue.com/2010/02/11/parenting-site-campaigns-against-sexualizing-young-girls/] (2010)

[163] Lamb and Brown (2006); Pollett and Hurwitz (2004)

[164] APA (2007)

Corporate social responsibility

Reports published in Australia[165] and the US[166] have called for greater corporate social responsibility and there are signs that at least some manufacturers are prepared to listen to the concerns of those working to safeguard children. In the UK, Tesco agreed to withdraw pole-dancing kits from the toys and games section of its website[167] following complaints from parents. Toy manufacturer Hasbro shelved plans to produce a range of dolls based on the pop music group the Pussycat Dolls, noted for their revealing clothes and sexy image.[168]

In autumn 2009, a group of large companies including Mars, Lego, Kelloggs and McDonalds, announced the launch of Digital Adwise, a set of online lessons aimed at teaching children about online content and helping them to think more critically about media messages. "Children and their parents need to better understand how the internet works, not just as a platform but as a means for advertising," said Nick Stringer, head of regulatory affairs at the Internet Advertising Bureau.[169]

Television

"By depicting violence against women, especially young women, with increasing frequency, or as a trivial, even humorous matter, the networks may be contributing to an atmosphere in which young people view aggression and violence against women as normative, even acceptable."[170]

The world as depicted on TV is disproportionately male and it disproportionately sexualises women and girls. There is also a significant under-representation of women and girls in non-sexualised roles in films. In the 101 highest earning family films between 1990–2004 over 75% of characters were male, 83% of narrators were male and 72% of speaking roles were male[171] Females on television are far more likely than their male counterparts to be provocatively dressed[172]; sexual comments and remarks are commonplace, and are predominantly targeted at women.[173] In an analysis of 81 episodes of different prime-time US programmes, researchers observed that women's bodies were frequently objectified and that they were often subject to insulting allusions to their sexuality and lack of intellect. An average episode featured 3.4 examples of sexual harassment, of which roughly two-thirds involved sexist or sexual comments. Another analysis, this time of workplace-based sitcoms, found frequent comments characterising women as sexual objects and jokes about women's sexuality and bodies.[174]

Violence against women on TV is increasingly common. A US report found that depictions of violence against women on TV had risen by 120 per cent since 2004 while depictions of violence against teenage girls rose by 400 per cent. Over

[165] Rush and La Nauze (2006)

[166] APA (2007)

[167] Fernandez, *Daily Mail*, 24 October 2006

[168] www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,196943,00.html

[169] Ramsay, 'Brands back lessons about online advertising for UK children', Marketing Magazine, November 2009

[170] Parents Television Council (2009)

[171] Kelly and Smith (2006)

[172] Eaton (1997)

[173] Ward (2003)

[174] Grauerholz and King (1997)

the same period, violence occurring irrespective of gender increased by just 2 per cent. In 19 per cent of depicted offences, violence against women resulted in death. In the vast majority of cases (92 per cent) the violence – or its graphic consequences – was shown, rather than implied or described.[175]

Given the fact that the TV often acts as a 'child minder' for many families, it is imperative that parents are aware of what constructs their children are being exposed to – simple measures such as switching the TV on and off to watch specific shows or not allowing children to have televisions in their bedrooms have been found to make a significant improvement in terms of what children are exposed to and how they make sense of it.[176] Spending time to speak to children about what they have seen and how it impacts them has been shown to be one of the best ways to ensure that the messages they receive are moderated and challenged.

It is important to note that research shows that children do question images and storylines based on sex on TV, yet sexualised imagery in advertising and TV has become so 'naturalised' that children typically lack the ability for a cultural critique of sexism. Research illustrates that children absorb the 'male gaze' and conform to a powerful 'heterosexual logic'.[177]

However, there is evidence to suggest that TV programmes can be a valuable source of 'sexual learning', with material from some programmes being used to generate resources which have been used to support the Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education and Media Studies curricula in secondary schools.[178] For example, the Channel 4 documentary, *the Sex Education Show Vs Pornography*, which explores the myths perpetuated by the porn industry, has been used as a sex education tool in some schools.

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[175] www.parentstv.org/PTC/publications/reports/womeninperil/main.asp

[176] Barr-Anderson, van den Berg, Neumark-Sztainer and Story (2008)

[177] Buckingham and Bragg (2004)

[178] Buckingham and Bragg (2004)

The role of parents

Parents are a powerful force in shaping their children's attitudes to gender and sexuality. Girls' interactions with their mothers will tend to inform their own response to cultural messages about thinness and body ideals:[179] there is a clear link between the extent to which mothers focus on their own thinness, their tendency to criticise their daughters' weight and the likelihood of those girls developing an eating disorder.[180] Father's attitudes have a noticeable impact on the gender-typing of children's activities and the extent to which children conform to the norm.[181]

There are some key variations by ethnic group. One US study[182] found that white mothers routinely engaged in 'fat talk' with their daughters, describing the girls as '... surrounded by excessive concerns over physical appearance and talk of feeling fat.' Messages from fathers tended to be critical and often included a sexual element, such as a reference to a daughter starting to develop breasts. By contrast, African-American girls were getting much more positive feedback from their parents. While dieting rates were similar to those for white girls, African-American girls had higher levels of body satisfaction and self-esteem and were less worried about their weight.

Parents can also contribute to the sexualisation of their children in very direct ways. For example, in the US, children's beauty pageants are high profile events. Although the number of children actually taking part is relatively small, coverage in news, TV programmes and advertising means that the phenomenon has entered the mainstream. Increasingly, too, parents are allowing and even encouraging their children to undergo plastic surgery (see page 58) as a means of 'fixing' poor body confidence or low self-esteem.

Conversely, parents also have a vital role to play in supporting their children to cope with and contextualise sexualised images and messages. Researchers point to the damage that can result when children lack the emotional sophistication and psychological development to understand what they are seeing and suggest that the solution is for parents to play a more active role in communicating with their children about sexual matters.[183]

However, there are limits to what parents can achieve alone. It is imperative that companies that promote the premature sexualisation of children for their own commercial interests act more responsibly, and that companies, advertisers and media outlets are aware of and take steps to minimise the negative impact that the images and messages they promote are having on children and young people.

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[179] Ogle and Damhorst (2004)

[180] Hill, Weaver and Blundell (1990); Levine, Smolak, Moodey, Shuman and Hessen (1994)

[181] McHale, Crouter and Tucker (1999)

[182] Nichter (2000)

[183] Levin and Kilbourne (2008)

The internet

"My younger cousins, they're all under the age of 11, and they're now coming into an age where the internet is all they've ever known. When we were young, we were still doing all the [outdoor] activities and the internet wasn't really around. So we've got balance. But maybe in five or 10 years' time that will change." [184]

2009 marked a watershed for the internet: for the first time, companies spent more on online than on TV advertising. The internet is now the UK's single biggest advertising medium, accounting for 23.5 per cent of the total market.[185] For children and young people, this means more and easier access to sexualised marketing imagery and messages, as well as to many other forms of sexualised online content.

Almost all (99 per cent) of 8-17-year-olds have access to the internet,[186] split roughly equally between girls and boys.[187] Since 2008, the number of children with access to the internet in their own bedroom has grown significantly, and now stands at 16 per cent of 8–11-year-olds and 35 per cent of those aged 12–15. In all, around a third of 8–11-year-olds and 60 per cent of 12–15-year-olds say that they mostly use the internet on their own.[188]

A quarter of internet users aged between eight and 11 have a profile on a social networking site such as Bebo, MySpace or Facebook.[189] While sites set age limits (typically 13 or 14), these are not generally enforced. Social networking sites allow children and young people to create online identities. The fact that some, mainly girls, choose to present themselves in a sexualised way has attracted considerable public attention.[190] Interviews with 14–16-year-olds whose online profiles 'raised issues around sexual representation and identity' found that girls are 'under particular and constant threat of failing to meet the pornified and hyper-sexualised visual ideals of "perfect femininity" online'.[191]

"Are we seeing a 'disciplinary technology of sexy', an increasing compulsion for young people to perform as sexual objects online? The increasing normalisation of pornography and sexual commodification of girls' bodies online leads to 'real life' anxieties, conflicts and violence in their relationships at school."[192]

As Jessica Ringrose, a senior lecturer in gender and education, indicated during our evidence gathering sessions, "young girls are presenting themselves as sexually active and sexually available, and young people are encouraged to subscribe to hetero-normative ideas of femininity and masculinity."[193]

Girls, for instance, report being under increasing pressures to display themselves in their 'bra and knickers' or bikinis online, whereas boys seek to display their bodies in a hyper-masculine way, showing off muscles, and posturing as powerful and dominant. [194] Hyper-femininity and hyper-masculinity posit heterosexuality as the norm, influencing attitudes towards homosexuality in schools and beyond.[195] Further, sexualised self-presentation could

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[184] 17-year-old girl, quoted in Livingstone, Helsper and Bober (2005)

[185] Internet Advertising Bureau www.iabuk.net/en/1/adspendgrows300909.mxs (accessed November 2009)

[186] Ofcom Media Literacy Audit (2008)

[187] Lenhart, Rainie and Lewis (2001); Roberts *et al.* (2005)

[188] Ofcom (2009)

[189] Ofcom (2008)

[190] Kornblum (2005)

[191] Ringrose (2010)

[192] Ringrose (2010)

[193] Evidence provided to the Review by Jessica Ringrose, Senior Lecturer in gender and education, IOE

[194] Ringrose (2010)

[195] Ringrose and Renold (2010)

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also mean that young people are exposing themselves to danger from further afield: recently, public attention has focused on use of social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook to disseminate sexualised material and sexually solicit underage children and young people.[196]

The rise of online networking presents considerable challenges for everyone coming into contact with young people.[197] It has been suggested that schools, for example, have yet to address the implications of young people's engagement with social networking sites – activity which takes place away from school but which nevertheless has a profound impact on young people and the way they engage with each other.[198] Similarly, parents and carers must recognise that the internet is increasingly bringing the dynamics of the playground into the home. We need resources to 'guide' young people around new technologies and social relationships mediated through new communication technologies.[199]

Cyberbullying – where victims are harassed via the internet or mobile phone – is consistently estimated to affect around a quarter of secondary-age young people,[200] with some studies putting the figure as high as 75 per cent.[201] Texting and instant messaging are particular areas of concern.[202] Research conducted by the University of New Hampshire found that, while 15 per cent of young people surveyed had experienced unwanted sexual solicitation online, only 4 per cent were targeted via their social networking site. Where harassment did occur, it was

most likely to happen through instant messaging and chat rooms.[203]

Social networking and children

- 49 per cent of children aged 8–17 have an online profile (mainly Bebo, MySpace, Facebook).
- 59 per cent of 8–17-year-olds use social networking sites to make new friends.
- 16 per cent of parents don't know whether their child's profile is visible to all.
- 33 per cent of parents say they set no rules for their children's use of social networking sites.
- 43 per cent of children say their parents set no rules for use of social networking sites.[204]

Children's websites

Many websites for children are perfectly safe and have a high educational and social value. However, some are undoubtedly encouraging very young girls to present themselves as adult women and to focus on their physical appearance to the exclusion of all else.

At *www.missbimbo.com*, girls and boys are encouraged to use plastic surgery and extreme dieting to help their virtual characters achieve the 'perfect figure' and compete with each other to create 'the coolest, richest and most famous bimbo in the world'. The site currently has over two million registered 'bimbos'. At *www.my-minx.com*, girls create avatars who have 'style off' competitions with each other, go clubbing to 'pull' men and take the morning-after pill. Children of any age can play as there is no robust method for checking participants' ages.

196 For example, Slater and Tiggemann (2002)

197 Boyd (2008)

198 Ringrose (2009)

199 Boyd (2008)

200 Action for Children (2005); Li (2006); Smith (2005); Hinduja and Patchin (2007)

201 Juvonen and Gross (2008)

202 Noret and Rivers (2006); Smith *et al.* (2006)

203 Ybarra and Mitchell (2008)

204 Ofcom (April 2008)

Maybe these games are supposed to be 'ironic' but the fact is that they normalise topics ranging from cosmetic surgery to marrying for money as appropriate subject matter for child's play. It is another powerful indication of how the boundaries between what is seen as appropriate for children and what is the preserve of adults is being blurred.

Pornography

"…men are still encouraged through most pornographic materials, to see women as objects and women are still encouraged much of the time to concentrate on their sexual allure rather than their imagination or pleasure."[205]

Pornographic websites constitute around 1.5% of all websites.[206] *Pornhub*, *YouPorn* and *RedTube* are among the top 65 most viewed websites in the UK. They also allow users to upload their own material. Such sites are based on the *YouTube* business model and offer instant and free access to hardcore pornography with no effective access controls in place to prevent children viewing the material.

Each day, search engines deal with around 68 million requests for pornographic material – approximately a quarter of all searches on the net.[207] This, combined with the proliferation of sexualised images in online advertising, suggests that both pornography and sexualised images are becoming more widely available and easily accessible.

It is no longer a case of if a young person will be exposed to pornography but when. A 2008 YouGov survey[208] of over 1400 14–17-year-olds in the UK found

that 27 per cent of boys were accessing pornography every week, with 5 per cent viewing it every day. The survey also found that 58 per cent had viewed pornography online, on mobile phones, in magazines, in films or on TV. Another study, this time of 9–19-year-olds, showed almost one in eight had visited pornographic websites showing violent images.[209]

Exposure to pornography can also happen inadvertently. Nearly 40 per cent of 9–19-year-olds have accidentally seen a pop-up advert for a pornographic site; 36 per cent have ended up on one by accident; 25 per cent have received porn junk email; and 9 per cent have been sent pornographic images by someone they know.[210] The YouGov survey showed that nearly one in five had been sent pornography via email or their mobile phone without their consent.[211]

At the same time, there have been changes in the nature of pornographic materials. The modern trend in explicit 'hardcore' and so-called 'gonzo' pornography is to depict sexual activity free from any pretence of narrative or relationships, and to show participants (especially women) being pushed to the very limits of their physical capabilities, often in a group sex scenario. Many 'hardcore' works also play around with notions of consent, youth, innocence, inappropriate relationships, pain and violence in ways which range from relatively innocuous to extremely disturbing.

A recent report by the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society reviewed research carried out in 12 countries on the use of pornography. It concluded that boys exposed to pornographic material were more likely to see sex as casual and were more inclined to believe that there is nothing wrong with holding down and sexually harassing girls.

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205 Walter (2010)

206 Zook, Report on the location of the internet adult industry. In: Jacobs, K., Janssen, M., Pasquinelli, M. (Eds.) (2007)

207 Ropelato (2006)

208 Sex Education Survey (2008)

209 Livingstone and Bober *et al.* (2005)

210 Livingstone and Bober *et al.* (2005)

211 Sex Education Survey (2008)

The study's author, Michael Flood, said that "there is compelling evidence from around the world that pornography has negative effects on individuals and communities." The point was also made that pornography shapes young people's sexual knowledge but does so by portraying sex in unrealistic ways. In particular, they noted that most pornography is both callous and hostile in its depictions of women.[212]

Pornography and sexual behaviour

"From a young age, boys are taught that they are entitled to consume women's bodies and are also fed unrealistic expectation of those bodies, sex and relationships in general. At the same time, girls are encouraged to embrace this as liberating."

Sophie Taylor, Greater London Domestic Violence Project

There is strong evidence linking consumption of pornography with sexual behaviour. In a study of 718 US high school students from 47 different high school classes,[213] 29 per cent said that pornography had influenced their sexual behaviour. In a European study, 53 per cent of young men reported that pornography had 'inspired' their sexual behaviour.[214]

Research illustrates that high consumption is also linked to the propensity to have sex outside a stable relationship.[215] A survey of 471 Dutch teenagers aged 13–18 showed that the more young people sought out online porn, the more likely they were to see sex as a purely physical function, devoid of empathy. The more realistic the material, the stronger this view became.[216]

Exposure to pornography also influences behaviour outside the sexual sphere. Recent research has suggested that young people that display anti-social behaviour are more likely to have been exposed to pornography. They also report more exposure, exposure at an earlier age, and more extreme pornography use than their peers.[217]

Pornography is increasingly normalising aggressive sexual behaviour, blurring the lines between consent, pleasure and violence.[218] Research also indicates that the more explicitly violent the material, the more likely the viewer is to see women as sex objects.[219] Male 'high pornography consumers' are more likely than low consumers to 'act out' behaviour learned through watching pornography.[220] This has worrying implications, particularly given the growing tendency of pornographic films to feature violent storylines (see page 45).

Over time, young people are internalising the often violent and non-consensual messages and images they see in pornography and coming to accept them as the norm. Pornography is also normalising what until very recently would have been seen as niche practices such as the removal of female public hair, giving a pre-pubescent appearance:[221] a custom that is now permeating mainstream culture.

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[212] Flood (2009)

[213] Hanson and Tyd´en (2005)

[214] Tyd´en and Rogala (2004)

[215] Hanson and Tyd´en (2005)

[216] Peter and Valkenburg (2006)

[217] Bjørnebekk (2003). Quoted in Flood (2009)

[218] Hanson and Tyd´en (2005); Dines (2009)

[219] Peter and Valkenburg (2006)

[220] Hanson and Tyd´en (2005)

[221] Dines (2008)

According to social learning theory, what is important is not necessarily the content of the media itself but rather the implicit values that it represents, which provides the potential for harm. As such, what is of importance here is not simply that a child sees two people engaged in sex, but more to do with the nuances surrounding how the couple relate to each other and the attitudes this reinforces. As much of the pornographic material available today increasingly centres around gendered themes of power and violence, then this is what children will be responding to. Of course, as is the case with all media, effects on the viewer are mediated by the perceived realism of the material and an individual's engagement with it.[222]

'Barely legal' pornography

Despite a US Supreme Court ruling in 2002[223] criminalising 'virtual' child pornography – pornography featuring adults who appear to be minors or computer-generated imagery of minors – there has been an 'explosion in the number of sites that childify women'[224] These include sites focusing on the youthfulness of the females depicted, on loss of virginity, on pairing young women with much older men, and on glamorising incest.[225] There is also a trend for female porn actresses to appear in preambles to the main film talking direct to camera about their early sexual experiences; often, these will allegedly have taken place while the actress was still a child.[226]

There is evidence that such websites encourage consumers to view children as legitimate sex objects. Adults exposed to 'barely legal' or virtual child pornography make stronger links between youth and sexuality than adults exposed to materials featuring older-looking models and are also more likely to associate sex and sexuality with subsequent non-sexual depictions of minors.[227]

"For some men, children became the object of their sexual desire, especially after they clicked on the pop-up ads for teen porn, which led them into the PCP [Pseudo Child Porn] sites, and eventually into real child porn. For some men, the teen sites were just a stepping stone to the real thing, as they moved seamlessly from adult women to children."[228]

Computer games

Online games are by far the most common way in which children aged 8–11 in the UK make use of the internet, with 85 per cent of younger children and 64 per cent of adolescents playing regularly.[229] With advances in technology, games are becoming increasingly graphic and realistic.[230] At the same time, children are more and more likely to play games without adult supervision: three-quarters of 12–15-year-olds have a games console in their bedroom.[231]

Many games feature highly sexualised content and there is a notable lack of strong female characters. In a recent content analysis, 83 per cent of male characters were portrayed as aggressive, while 60 per cent of female characters were portrayed in a sexualised way and 39 per cent were scantily clad. The equivalent figures for male characters were 1 per cent and 8 per cent respectively.[232] Violence against women is often trivialised. For example, in the

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[222] Peter and Valkenburg (2006); Ward and Rivadeneyra (1999)

[223] *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition* (2002)

[224] Olfman (2008)

[225] Dines (2008)

[226] Evidence provided to the Review by Peter Johnson, British Board of Film Classification (2009)

[227] Paul and Linz (2008); *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition* (2002)

[228] Dines (2008)

[229] Ofcom (2007)

[230] Martinez and Manolovitz (2009)

[231] Ofcom (2009)

[232] Dill and Thill (2007)

game *Rape-Lay*, which was for a while available to buy online via Amazon.com's marketplace platform, players take on the role of a rapist who stalks a mother before raping her and her daughters. There has also been a marked increase in the number of games depicting various forms of sexual abuse.[233]

Many popular video games effectively reward children for engaging in violent, illegal activity, albeit virtually. The potential negative effects are compounded by the fact that so many children are playing these games alone. The point was made during the evidence sessions that, while most parents are unlikely to let their child watch an 18-rated film, their attitude to age-inappropriate games is more lenient, perhaps due to their own lack of understanding of the games' themes and content.

The link between violent content and aggression has been cited in several studies[234] and although it is overly simplistic to make a direct link between cause and effect, Byron concluded it is widely accepted that exposure to content that children are either emotionally or cognitively not mature enough for can have a potentially negative impact.[235] This is backed up by children themselves: in a recent Ofcom survey, two-thirds of 12–15-year-olds said they believed that violence in games had more of an impact on behaviour than violence on TV or in films.[236]

Several studies in the past have suggested that violent content can impact behaviour

increasing aggression in children and young people. The same learning processes that underlie these effects are also likely to work with sexualised content affecting sex-role beliefs, emotions and behaviour.[237]

Mobile devices

The proliferation of media and the increased accessibility of all kinds of content is nowhere better illustrated than by the growth in the mobile phone market. By the age of nine, 52 per cent of British children have a phone; by the age of 15, that figure has risen to 95 per cent.[238] Mobile phones allow young people easy access to all kinds of online content, regardless of whether or not it is age appropriate.

The mobile porn industry

The global mobile porn industry is currently worth an estimated $2 billion.[239] Figures show that, in 2007, mobile phones were the UK's biggest distributor of pornography.[240] Globally, telecoms companies made $1.7 billion from 'adult content'. Evidence suggests that a high proportion of queries made via mobile phone relate to adult content.[241, 242]

The use of mobile phones as a tool for bullying, controlling or monitoring a dating-partner has attracted considerable media attention recently, and was frequently raised during the evidence sessions held as part of this review.[243] Mobile phones are also being used for so-called 'sexting'

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[233] Martinez and Manolovitz (2009)

[234] Anderson and Dill (2000); Freedman (2002); Deselms and Altman (2003)

[235] Byron (2008)

[236] Ofcom (2008)

[237] Dill and Thill (2007)

[238] Ofcom (2008)

[239] Juniper Research, cited in Daw and Cabb (2009)

[240] Juniper Research, cited in Daw and Cabb (2009)

[241] Kamvar and Baluja (2006)

[242] Church and Smyth *et al.* (2007)

[243] Evidence Hearing Sessions for the Review (May 2009 – July 2010)

– the sending of, often unsolicited, sexually explicit messages.

A recent survey of 2,000 young people[244] found that 38 per cent of respondents had received a sexually explicit or distressing text or email and that, of these, 55 per cent were sent and received via mobile phones. The vast majority (85%) of 'sexts' were sent by someone the recipient knew. The survey concluded that 'peer to peer anti-social/ predatory behaviour is one of the biggest threats facing our young people today online and via mobile phones'.[245] These findings support Palfrey's contention that in many cases children's safety and security is being undermined by their peers, rather than by unknown adult predators.[246]

Most of the available literature on 'sexting' comes from the US and is based on an online survey commissioned by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.[247] This survey found that 20 per cent of teenagers aged 13–19 have either sent or posted 'nude or semi-nude' images of themselves; findings which have been questioned on the grounds that those responding to an online questionnaire are inherently more likely to answer 'yes'. Others have pointed out that C.J. Pascoe's research[248] in the same area found hardly any mentions of 'sexting'. However, the comparison may be unviable as Pascoe's research had a wider remit, was conducted by an adult in a face-to-face setting and was was largely carried out before 'sexting' became a widespread trend.[249] The phenomenon has also been viewed as 'a modern and slightly

subversive example of teens-being-teens in the context of modern technological opportunity'.[250]

However, while the majority of the literature on the subject recognises that young people have always pushed the boundaries of what is acceptable and that, up to a point, 'sexting' can be seen as a new way of doing something that young people have always done, it also stresses the unprecedented scope of this new media. With this new wider scope comes new risks, the full extent of which may not have registered with teenagers.

Music videos and lyrics

On average, young people listen to music for between 1.5 and 2.5 hours each day.[251] Music lyrics and videos are therefore a significant potential influence on young people. Music videos across all genres sexualise and objectify women and between 44 and 81 per cent of music videos contain sexual imagery.[252] Emerson notes that artists tend to 'portray themselves with a highly stylised and glamorous image'[253] and that that image is often highly sexualised. Arnett supports this, claiming that '...the portrayal of sexuality in popular music has become less subtle, [and] more explicit.'[254]

Women are often shown in provocative and revealing clothing,[255] and portrayed as decorative objects that dance and

244 Beatbullying (2009)

245 Beatbullying (2009)

246 Palfrey et al. (2008)

247 www.thenationalcampaign.org/SEXTECH/PDF/ SexTech_Summary.pdf, retrieved February 2010

248 Pascoe et al. (2007)

249 http://abluteau.wordpress.com/2009/04/08/ which-is-epidemic-sexting-or-worrying-about-it/

250 Dr Richard Chalfen, guest blogger, Center on Media and Child Health http://cmch.typepad.com/cmch/2009/04/ perspectives-on-sexting-past-i.html

251 Martino and Collins et al. (2006)

252 Gow (1990); Greeson and Williams (1986); Sherman and Dominick (1986); Argarbright and Lee (2007); Brown, L'Engle, Pardur, Guo, Kenneavy, Jackson (2006); Peterson, Wingood, DiClemente, Harrington and Davies (2007)

253 Emerson (2004)

254 Arnett (2002)

255 Andsager and Roe (1999), Seidman (1992)

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pose rather than, say, singing or playing an instrument[256] They are depicted as being in a state of sexual readiness, and there is often a focus on their bodies or on specific body parts and facial features.[257] Even where women are the performers, they are often presented and portrayed in an overtly sexual way. Violence occurs in 56.6 per cent of videos and visual presentations of sexual intimacy in over 75 per cent. Perhaps most tellingly, 81 per cent of the videos containing violence also include sexual imagery.[258] Males are often shown as hyper-masculinised and sexually dominant.

In their experiment on exposure to pornography, Zilllmann and Bryant demonstrated that frequent exposure to pornography resulted in both men and women becoming more accepting of rape myths. Put simply, 'rape myths' are a collection of untruths which minimises the occurrence of sexual violence and diminishes the aggressor's responsibility. While this study was primarily concerned with measuring the effects of exposure to explicit sex, it did suggest that milder forms of sexual content, including the depiction of women as sexual objects, might yield similar results.[259]

Research into the often sexual and violent content of music lyrics is comparatively thin on the ground. However, the APA Task Force[260] noted the tendency of popular song lyrics to sexualise women or refer to them in a derogatory manner, citing examples from popular mainstream artists like N-Dubz ('I don't mean to be pushy, pushy, I'm just in it for the pussy, pussy') and 50 Cent ('I tell the hos all the time, Bitch get in my car').

One study based on a sample of 160 songs found that an average of 16 per cent contained sexually degrading[261] lyrics, rising to 70 per cent within certain genres.[262] A 2006 study revealed that, while lyrics from almost all music genres contained sexual content, degrading sexual content was most apparent in rap-rock, rap, rap-metal and R&B. The researchers identified a possible link between exposure to popular music and early initiation of sexual activity, pointing to the prevalence of sexual themes and referring to a previous longitudinal study linking music video consumption with risky sexual behaviour.[263]

It is important to remember here that the possible association between sexualised lyrics and sexual attitudes is not related to the sexual content of the lyrics alone but also to their degrading nature.[264] Lyrics like these are often accompanied by comparable images, for example, rap artist Nelly swiping a credit card through a young woman's buttocks (Tip Drill) and women being walked on leashes (P. I. M. P. by 50 cent).[265] In an article published in the April 2009 issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, researchers found that teenagers who preferred popular songs with degrading sexual references were more likely to engage in intercourse or in pre-coital activities.[266]

The identities celebrated through different music genres like rap and hip-hop has highlighted some of the racist portrayals of young black women. Researchers have suggested that young black girls are

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[256] Arnett (2002); Gow (1990)

[257] Vincent *et al.* (1987)

[258] Sherman and Dominick (1986)

[259] Zillmann and Bryant (1989)

[260] APA (2007)

[261] Sexually degrading, as defined by (Rudman and Borgida (1995)) "An environment that implicitly primes perceivers to categorise women negatively (e.g. as sexual objects in an inappropriate context)"

[262] Martino *et al.* (2006)

[263] Martino *et al.* (2006)

[264] Martino *et al.* (2006). Quoted in Coy (2009)

[265] Coy (2009)

[266] Primack (2009)

being encouraged to align themselves with glamorised versions of pimp/ho chic as a means of attaining personal and social power, but that these portrayals in themselves reflect sexist, racist stereotypes.[267]

Conclusion

More than 30 years ago, cultural theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out that we perceive the effect the media has on us about as well as fish perceive the water they swim in. The evidence suggests that it's time for this to change; time that we take a critical look at the impact of the media messages to which our children are exposed and start thinking about how we can mitigate the negative effects.

The fact is that the ideal of beauty presented in the media is arbitrary and limiting. But for young girls, without the experience and ability to filter those messages, without the confidence and self-esteem to contextualise what they're seeing, the message comes across loud and clear: the only thing that matters is being attractive and the only way to be attractive is to be submissive and overtly sexual. And at the same time, we're telling boys that the less emotion they show and the less respectful they are towards girls, the more 'manly' the become.

The process of internalisation is gradual and insidious. If you're told that being pretty means being thin, that being attractive means showing off a 'sexy body', that objectifying women makes you more of a man enough times, you start to believe it's true. Young people who choose to present themselves and to behave in this way are simply following a script, and it's a script that we keep giving them over and over again.

Of course, young people's reactions to this barrage of sexualised imagery and negative messaging will be informed by a whole host of factors. Socio-cultural factors, family norms, personality variables and education all play a role. Nevertheless, the impact of our tendency to internalise such messages and the implications of this for our sense of self and self-worth should not be underestimated.

Installing filters on computers and locks on mobile phones is important, but

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[267] Coy (2009); Lamb and Brown (2006); Rose (2008)

Conclusion *(cont.)*

sexualised content is everywhere and young people are often accessing it alone, giving them no opportunity to ask questions or discuss their feelings.

Businesses and the media have a part to play, too. To take just one example, how many people must have been involved in the development of the game *Rape-Lay?* How many people either pretended not to notice its content, or pretended that it didn't matter? That game is now no longer available through Amazon.com's online marketplace, and there are many other examples of age-inappropriate games and clothing being put on sale and subsequently withdrawn. But there should be more to corporate responsibility than simply saying sorry after the event. Businesses should be thinking from the outset about what a product, a strapline, an image is really saying to children and young people.

At the same time, we need to find ways to guide children and young people around developing tools as informed media-savvy consumers. They need to be able to understand that a magazine is selling a fantasy, and to distinguish that fantasy from reality. They need to know that images are routinely being digitally altered – in some cases, almost beyond recognition – and they need to be equipped with the tools to moderate and mitigate the effects of the message and images that they come into contact with. It is only when children and their care-givers are given knowledge and skills around media literacy, the rights and responsibilities of sexual relationships, and safe engagement with technologies, that they will be able to navigate, question and challenge the images and messages they are exposed to.

6. The impact of sexualisation

"…pre-adolescents and adolescents are like actors as they experiment with different features of their newly forming identities and try on different social 'masks'. This plasticity may make them especially susceptible to the messages society conveys…"[268]

Introduction

As is the case with body image disturbance, sexualisation occurs on a continuum. You don't have to experience sexual abuse to experience sexualisation, in the same way that you don't have to have Body Dysmorphic Disorder to experience body dissatisfaction.

A sexist song lyric, a doll in full make up and fishnet tights, a pre-teen who wears a push-up bra to get the attention of boys – these examples of sexualisation in action seem benign and, taken in isolation, perhaps they are. But the point is that these things aren't happening in isolation. They're happening together, they're happening to younger and younger children, and in many cases they are not being counterbalanced by guidance from a responsible well-informed adult. And because what is relevant is the interaction of these different social cues or behaviours, taking any one in isolation is usually dismissed as moral panic, with the suggestion that people need to be more relaxed, to

have a greater sense of humour. Unfortunately, it's under the guise of having humour and being open-minded that the all important debates we need to be having are being avoided.

Attitudes change and evolve over time. We are now so desensitised to the objectification of women there is research to show that many young women joke about and regulate each others' behaviour by using demeaning sexist terms. In fact, so normalised has this objectification become that pairing up young babies with sexual innuendo is seemingly commonplace. A cursory web search of cute or funny baby clothes, brings up a host of examples – one of which is a baby outfit with words 'My mommy is a M.I.L.F' with the caption 'Baby wants to let everyone know that his/her mom is a hottie! A cute and funny Creeper or T-Shirt for your baby, infant, or toddler.' Funny or not, this is indicative of how attitudes shape social behaviour.

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[268] Strasburger and Wilson (2002), paraphrased in Zurbriggen *et al.* (2007)

Introduction *(cont.)*

There is strong evidence to show that children learn from what they see, and that they internalise those messages to create their own set of 'rules' and codes of behaviour. From the messages that they get from their parents and peers, to the ads they view and the games they play, children are constantly being bombarded with, and need to make sense of, both overt and covert messages around them.

Interestingly, although we are happy to acknowledge the educational value of games, there seems some hypocrisy when it comes to what we are willing to accept that children are actually learning. Making the point that educational computer games can help develop learning is fine but we can not in the same breath state that violent or gender-stereotyped games have no effect.

It's pretty clear that the mechanisms we have used over the years to tell girls they should be thinner are working. Eating disorders are on the rise with BEAT (a National Charity offering support for people affected by eating disorders) and several other international studies reporting increases. Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness. The mortality rate associated with anorexia nervosa is 12 times higher than the death rate from all causes of death for females 15–24 years old.[269]

Clearly, through various mechanisms, girls have been encouraged to see their value and hence seek to control or affect their lives through being thin and beautiful. Now we're starting to see what happens when you tweak the message to tell girls that they need to be not only thin, but also sexually desirable. Interestingly, as anorexia increases so now does the number of young women having breast implants and at an increasingly younger age. The intent arguably is to feel accepted, to feel desirable and to feel in control of their destinies – after all, as some theorists would argue, the sexualisation of young women is now being re-packaged as empowerment.

It can be tempting to think that girls are taking the brunt, that boys have it easier. It still seems to be the case that a man can be recognised and respected for something other than his looks. But in some ways, the messages we're sending out to boys are just as limiting and restrictive: be macho, be strong, don't show your emotions. Hyper-sexualisation of femininity can't exist without hyper-masculinisation of males. They feed off and reinforce each other.

In this section, we look at how sexualisation is affecting people's confidence, self-esteem and mental health, influencing the way individuals relate to each other and effectively reshaping social norms.

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[269] http://www.anorexia-nervosa-treatment.net/index.php (US statistics)

Body image

"I'm probably going to get my tits done soon. It's not really that big a deal any more. Loads of people do it."

Girl, 15, interviewed by Respect UK[270]

The mass media promotes and reinforces an idealised notion of beauty for both men and women, presenting standards – of thinness for women and of muscularity for men – that few can ever hope to achieve. As girls are hyper-sexualised, so boys are being hyper-masculinised. Of course young people respond to media messages in complex ways but repeated exposure to these images and messages can lead both sexes to internalise potentially harmful messages about their own behaviour, their relationships with each other and, ultimately, their value as human beings.

Researchers agree that the female bodies depicted in the media are getting thinner.[271] There is also evidence to suggest that girls and young women adopt and internalise idealised representations of the female form.[272] An analysis of results from 25 experimental studies revealed that women felt significantly worse about their bodies after viewing pictures of thin models than after viewing images of average- or plus-sized models.[273] Similarly, men were more depressed and had higher levels of muscle dissatisfaction after seeing adverts containing idealised images.[274] For both sexes, exposure to idealised images in

magazines is linked with concerns about physical appearance and eating problems.[275]

Evidence also suggests that '…negative self-evaluation in terms of body weight and appearance is being practised by increasingly younger generations. This includes boys as well as girls.'[276] Children as young as six are expressing dissatisfaction with their bodies and concerns about their weight.[277] A series of group discussions run on behalf of the Girl Guiding Association with girls aged seven and over found that many were seriously dissatisfied with their appearance and weight. Nearly three-quarters of 7–11-year-olds wanted to change some aspect of their appearance. By the age of 10–11, one in eight wanted to be thinner, rising to 21 per cent among 11–16-year-olds and 33 per cent of those aged 16–21. Among this older group, 50 per cent said that they would consider having cosmetic surgery to change their appearance.[278]

The pressure on boys to be muscular may be just as harmful as the pressure on girls to be thin.[279] A study of 595 adolescents found that, while exposure to idealised adverts did not lead to increased body dissatisfaction for boys, it did lead to increased negative mood and appearance comparison for both sexes.[280] A self-reporting exercise involving 14–16-year-olds[281] found that both boys and girls were experiencing body shame and practising body surveillance.[282]

Idealised images also influence boys' attitudes to girls' bodies. A group of 13–15-year-old boys looked at 20 adverts

[270] Focus group consisting of African young people living in South London. Held by Respect UK (2010)

[271] Ogletree, Williams, Raffield, Mason and Fricke (1990); Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson and Kelly (1986); Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann and Ahrens (1992)

[272] Thompson and Stice (2001); Schooler, Ward, Merriwether and Caruthers (2004)

[273] Groesz *et al.* (2002)

[274] Agliata (2004)

[275] Morry and Staska (2001)

[276] Hill (2006)

[277] Flannery-Schroeder and Chrisler (1996); Smolak and Levine (1994)

[278] The Guide Assocation (2009)

[279] Botta (2003)

[280] Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2004)

[281] Knauss and Paxton *et al.* (2008)

[282] Botta (2003)

featuring idealised images of thin women, while a second group looked at neutral images. The groups were then asked to rank 10 characteristics, including slimness and physical attractiveness, according to their importance when choosing a partner or girlfriend. Results suggested that boys were more likely to rate slimness and attractiveness as important after viewing the 'thin ideal' images, and pointed to a link between this and boys' level of concern with their own body image. The researchers concluded that the media was leading boys to have unrealistic expectations of girls and to evaluate them in an unfavourable and unrealistic way.[283]

Body image and sexualisation

"Body dissatisfaction is the discrepancy between someone's actual body size and the ideal body size presented in the media. Body dissatisfaction is so ubiquitous that it is described as normative."[284]

The concept of body image arises often when looking at the issue of sexualisation. The process by which idealised forms of the body are internalised and how this relates to sexualisation and self-objectification is important to consider. There is trend research that suggests that young girls adopt and internalise idealised representations of the female form depending on what is being celebrated and validated by their culture.[285]

Several researchers have demonstrated the way the female body is depicted in the media has become increasingly thin over the years and that body weight trends in fashion and media mirror trends in the wider society.[286] What we need to take note of is why girls have internalised the beauty myth and the thin ideal. The subtle pre-conscious messages linking thinness to success and happiness have actually had a significant impact on young women's behaviour and decision-making. This is evidenced by the increasing focus on body dissatisfaction and rise in cosmetic surgery and eating disorders. Researchers and clinicians have also noted a tendency amongst girls for self-objectification, i.e. the process whereby one becomes more concerned and engaged with how ones body is perceived by others while de-emphasising ones own subjective feelings, and internal awareness.[287]

The case of body image is a good example of what happens if we encourage girls and young women to equate their self-worth with narrow idealised representations of the female form. Perhaps it also gives us some insight into where we are headed with the hyper-sexualised environment that young girls are growing up in today, where the dominant message to girls seems to be to focus on others' sexual interest in and physical judgement of them, rather than their own desires, abilities and interests.

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283   Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2003)

284   Murnen *et al.* (2003)

285   Cash and Fleming (2002)

286   Ogletree, Williams, Raffeld, Mason and Fricke (1990); Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson and Kelly (1986); Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann and Ahrens (1992)

287   APA (2007)

The long-term effects

When girls evaluate themselves against unrealistic airbrushed images it cultivates a feeling of falling short, of not being 'good enough'. This then leads to appearance anxiety – a process labelled by some theorists as 'normative discontent'.[288] Hyper-sexualised, value-laden images and messages that girls are exposed to are having a profound impact not only on their body image but on their sense of self.

The evidence suggests that even brief exposure to images of thin models can lead to acute body dissatisfaction; similar trends emerge from longer-term studies. One such study looked at the impact of giving girls a subscription to fashion magazines on levels of thin ideal internalisation, body dissatisfaction, dieting and bulimia and negative feelings and emotions. The research found that extended exposure was likely to have a long-term impact on 'vulnerable' teenagers.[289]

There has been a subtle but significant shift with regard to what girls are beig validated for. Increasingly, the message being sent out to girls is that youth and beauty aren't enough: they've got to be 'sexy', too. Sexiness and desirability form the core of a girl's value and identity.[290] And when we encourage girls to equate their self-worth with a narrow, idealised – and, for most, unachievable – representation of the female form, we are encouraging them to think of themselves as objects. Girls are becoming more concerned with how others perceive them than with their own interests and desires.[291]

This self-objectification fits well with the current media focus on self-improvement – not in the form of learning a new skill but of enhancing one's physical appearance.[292] The implication is that the antidote to whatever ails you – bad relationships, depression, low-self-esteem – is to change the way you look to more closely resemble the current ideal.

It has been suggested that greater media literacy could help to ameliorate the negative effects of exposure to idealised images.[293] However, some researchers have expressed the concern that, over time, any benefit would be outweighed by the sheer volume of images in circulation, suggesting that, to be truly effective, measures to improve media literacy needed to be accompanied by wider use of average-sized models and initiatives aimed at encouraging society as a whole to take a more critical and questioning approach to the perpetuation of unrealistic ideals.

288 McRobbie (2007). Quoted in Coy and Garner (in press)

289 Stice and Spangler *et al.* (2001)

290 Gill (2007)

291 APA (2007)

292 Brumberg (1997)

293 Yamamiya and Cash *et al.* (2005)

Plastic surgery

"Sexualisation leads to poor self-image and lack of confidence in girls that affects health and the capacity to reach potential."[294]

Rising levels of body dissatisfaction and the de-medicalisation of plastic surgery has led to a major increase in the number of women seeking to achieve the thin ideal by surgical means. The UK spends more on plastic and cosmetic surgery than any other country in Europe, with the total figure for 2009 expected to reach £1.2 billion.[295] As many as 15 per cent of those who undergo cosmetic surgery have body dysmorphic disorder, where sufferers become fixated on what are in reality quite minor physical flaws.[296]

In 2005, over 77,000 invasive plastic surgery procedures were performed on young people aged 19 or under in America.[297] By 2008, the total number of plastic surgery procedures (including minimally invasive procedures) carried out on young people aged 13–19 had reached 219,136.[298] According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons,[299] young people are having plastic surgery to fit in with their peers and to improve their self-esteem and confidence. Evidence also suggests that a growing number of parents are allowing their daughters to undergo plastic/cosmetic surgery in order to treat poor self-esteem or poor body image.[300]

Mental health

Exposure to the sexualised female ideal is linked with lower self-esteem, negative moods and depression in young women and girls.[301] Adolescent girls exposed to adverts featuring idealised women have significantly higher State Depression scores[302]; and frequent exposure to films, TV and music videos featuring idealised images is linked to lower self-esteem[303] (particularly among Black and Latino young people),[304] stress, guilt, shame and insecurity.[305] Researchers have suggested that internalising conventional ideas about femininity leads girls to question their worth as individuals and that, the more depressed they become, the more likely they are to suppress their feelings about their bodies and ignore their own 'authentic' voices.[306]

In a longitudinal study spanning four years, Stice and Hayward *et al.* identified body dissatisfaction, eating disorders and depression as accurate predictors of which girls would go on to develop 'major depression'.[307] Another, shorter, longitudinal study by the same researchers found that although there was no statistical relationship between long-term exposure to thin images, the internalisation of the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction, dieting and bulimic symptoms, vulnerable viewers were suffering adverse effects.[308] Links have also been identified between feeling dissatisfied with one's life and the consumption of online pornography. Researchers observed a vicious circle

[294] Coy (2009)

[295] www.cosmeticsurgerybible.com/2009/news/uk-cosmetic-surgery-negligence-claims-increase/703)

[296] www.cosmeticsurgerybible.com/2007/types-of-surgery/breast-enlargement/breast-implants-linked-to-suicide-risk/105)

[297] American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS) (2008)

[298] ASPS (2008)

[299] ASPS (2008)

[300] ASPS (2008)

[301] APA (2007)

[302] Durkin and Paxton (2002); Mills, Polivy, Herman and Tiggemann (2002)

[303] Rivadeneyra, Ward and Gordon (2007); Ward (2004)

[304] Rivadeneyra, Ward and Gordon (2007)

[305] Stice and Shaw (1994)

[306] Tolman, Tracy, Michael and Impett (2006)

[307] Stice and Hayward *et al.* (2000)

[308] Stice and Spangler *et al.* (2001)

effect, with dissatisfaction leading to more problematic internet use leading in turn to greater dissatisfaction and so on.[309]

Eating disorders

"I think that today's...media puts a lot of pressure on young people. In the last year or so I've started worrying a lot more about my weight and body image. That could be caused by all the magazines I read in a week."[310]

The eating disorder charity BEAT estimates that 1.6 million people in the UK have an eating disorder. The vast majority of these – some 1.4 million – are female.[311] Over time, the fluctuation in eating disorder levels reflect changes in fashion and, therefore, in the 'desirability' of the idealised thin body shape.[312]

"The ratios of bust-to-waist and hip-to-waist measurements of women depicted in Vogue and Ladies Home Journal were low in the 1920s and 1930s, high in the 1950s, and low again in the 1960s and 1970s. ...these ratios varied over time inversely with the occurrence of anorexia nervosa in 10-19-year-old girls. The thin, non-curvaceous standard preceded the time periods when the rates for anorexia nervosa were highest."[313]

Numerous studies link sexualisation and the depiction of women as sex objects to the occurrence of eating disorders. This supports findings pointing to a link between exposure to adverts and TV programmes featuring slim models and inaccurate estimations of body size,[314]

body dissatisfaction,[315] and eating disorder symptomatology.[316, 317] These links cannot be explained away by a prior interest in fitness and dieting.[318]

Furthermore, a study involving 366 adolescents found that exposure to so-called 'fat character TV' (where fatness is portrayed in a negative light and/or as being synonymous with traits like gluttony, untrustworthiness and sloppiness) predicted eating disorders in older girls, while 'fat character TV' predicted body dissatisfaction among younger boys.[319] There is also a link between the consumption of fashion and beauty magazines and dieting practices such as limiting the intake of calories and taking diet pills.[320]

Just as with body image (see page 55), eating disorders are affecting children at a younger and younger age. The same research[321] found that 42 per cent of girls aged 11–16 had either carefully monitored their food intake or restricted their intake of certain foods 'to excess'. Another study[322] surveyed 581 nine- and 10-year-old girls and found that 11 per cent of nine-year-olds and 7 per cent of 10-year-olds scored 'in the anorexic range'. Over a third of girls selected 'ideal' figures that were smaller than their actual bodies. While levels of body dissatisfaction were consistent across ethnic groups, girls from minority ethnic backgrounds scored higher for eating disturbances.

[309] Peter and Valkenburg (2006)

[310] Girl quoted in *Growing up in a material world – Charter on Commercialisation* (2007)

[311] www.b-eat.co.uk/PressMediaInformation#iHn0, retrieved December 2009

[312] Lucas, Beard, O'Fallon and Kurland (1991)

[313] Lucas, Beard, O'Fallon and Kurland (1991)

[314] Myers and Biocca (1992); Sumner, Waller *et al.* (1993)

[315] Irving (1990); Richins (1991); Stice and Shaw (1994)

[316] Harrison and Cantor (1997); Stice *et al.* (1994)

[317] Stice and Schupak-Neuberg *et al.* (1994)

[318] Harrison and Cantor (1997)

[319] Harrison (2000)

[320] Thomsen, Weber, & Brown (2002)

[321] The Guide Association (2009)

[322] DeLeel, Hughes and Miller *et al.* (2009)

Pro-ana and pro-mia websites

Pro-anorexia (pro-ana) and pro-bulimia (pro-mia) websites advocate and encourage the perception of eating disorders as lifestyle choices rather than serious psychological disorders.[323] Sites often provide tips and tricks on how to maintain (or initiate) anorexic or bulimic behaviour and resisting treatment or recovery.[324]

Such websites are widely viewed, and often seem to attract vulnerable young people. In a study of 13–17-year olds, 12.6 per cent of girls and 5.9 per cent of boys had visited pro-ana or pro-mia sites.[325] Girls were more likely to demonstrate a higher drive for thinness, a worse perception of their own appearance and higher levels of perfectionism, making them a high risk group for the development of eating disorders.

Among healthy young women, viewing such sites induced low self-esteem and negative views about their appearance. Viewers also saw themselves as heavier, said that they were more likely to exercise and/or think about their weight in the near future, and were more likely to compare their own image with that of others.[326] In a large survey of university students, women who used pro-eating disorder websites had higher levels of body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance than a control group.[327]

Gender stereotyping

Repeated exposure to gender-stereotypical ideas and images contributes to sexist attitudes and beliefs, sexual harassment, violence against women, eating disorders and stereotyped perceptions of and behaviour toward men and women.[328] Gender-stereotypical ideas and images in the media generate a 'distorted body image by setting unrealistic standards of female beauty and thinness'.[329]

Research into the impact of exposure to both sexist[330] and non-sexist TV adverts found that women exposed to sexist adverts saw their bodies as larger, and experienced a bigger discrepancy between their perceived and their actual body size than a control group.[331] The researchers concluded that sexist adverts 'have direct and socially consequential implications for psychological adjustment and well-being', leading to body dissatisfaction which in turn is linked with depression and loss of self-esteem.

The sexualisation of women – and, more widely, the pornification of culture – can put pressure on boys to act out a version of masculinity based on the display of power over women. Boys are told that being a 'real' man means being in control, particularly when it comes to intimate and sexual relationships.[332] Increasingly, boys are encouraged to construct their identities and to understand and affirm their masculinity through their sexuality and sexual experiences.[333] The acquisition of sexual experience then becomes an opportunity to demonstrate sexual competence or accomplishment rather

323 Royal College of Psychiatrists (2009)

324 Norris *et al.* (2006); Harshbarger *et al.* (2009)

325 Custers and Van den Bulck (2009)

326 Bardone-Cone and Cass (2007)

327 Harper *et al.* (2008)

328 Kilbourne and Lazarus (1987); Lazier-Smith (1989)

329 Lavine, Sweeney and Wagner (1999)

330 Defined as sexual and limited in gender role

331 Lavine, Sweeney and Wagner (1999)

332 Ricardo and Barker (2008)

333 Fracher and Kimmel (1998)

than an act of intimacy.[334] Given this, it is perhaps not too much of a leap to posit a link between the messages being sent out to boys and the normalisation of aggressive – or even violent behaviour – towards girls and women as demonstrated in the next chapter.

Early sexual activity

The UK has the highest teenage pregnancy rate in western Europe.[335] Almost 43,000 girls aged 18 or under became pregnant in 2007. Young people continue to be disproportionately affected by sexually transmitted infections (STIs): despite making up just 12 per cent of the population, in 2008 16–24-year-olds accounted for 65 per cent of new Chlamydia cases, 55 per cent of new cases of genital warts and 17 per cent of new syphilis diagnoses. Although the total number of gonorrhoea cases fell by 11 per cent between 2007 and 2008, the Health Protection Agency's Sexually Transmitted Infections Department believes that there is still a 'substantial pool' of people with undiagnosed STIs.

Sexual objectification

"Although sexual objectification is but one form of gender oppression, it is one that factors into – and perhaps enables – a host of other oppressions women face, ranging from employment discrimination and sexual violence to the trivialisation of women's work and accomplishments."'[336]

Sexual objectification occurs when a person is portrayed solely as a sexual object, and viewed as a collection of sexual and physical attributes rather than as an individual. While media images objectify both men and women, women are significantly more likely to be portrayed in a sexually objectified way. A survey of advertising images found that women were three times more likely than men to be dressed in a sexually provocative way. Around 80 per cent of the images showed women in sexually explicit postures, while in half of all images, women were represented by a body part or parts only, compared with 17 per cent of men.[337]

When objectified magazine images of both men and women were shown to children aged between six and 12, the girls showed significant awareness of body esteem issues and a tendency to internalise the images. Moreover, girls who were uncertain as to how to respond to the thin, sexy ideal presented to them tended to have lower self-esteem than girls who consistently rejected the images.[338] Research also shows that pornography leads viewers – both male and female – to view women as sex objects.[339] See page 46 for more detail.

Lap-dancing and glamour modelling

With the ubiquity of sexualisation and the increasing pornification of society has come the mainstreaming of the sex industry, as exemplified by the proliferation of lap-dancing clubs. Sexualisation – and the commodification of women and girls – is now so ingrained in our culture that lap-dancing is widely viewed as acceptable, 'making the harm of commercial sexual exploitation invisible'.[340] The number of lap-dancing clubs in the UK currently stands at around 300.[341] Increasingly, such

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334 Marsigilio (1988); Nzioka (2001)

335 UNICEF (2001)

336 Fredrickson and Roberts (1997)

337 Reichert (1999)

338 Murnen and Smolak *et al.* (2003)

339 Peter and Valkenburg (2007)

340 Object (2009)

341 Home Office (2009a)

clubs – along with sex shops, topless bars and other similar businesses – are located alongside mainstream entertainment venues, raising their profile and increasing their visibility.[342]

Sexualisation is tied to economic markets in the forms of beauty and sex industries, that both opens and restricts the breadth and variety of identities and ambitions open to young women. Growing numbers of girls are aspiring to careers that demand a 'sexy' image. Surveys have found for instance that a high proportion of young women in the UK aspire to work as 'glamour models' or lap-dancers. A recent online survey that asked 1,000 15–19 year olds to indicate what their ideal profession would be from a list containing careers including doctor and teacher, found that 63 per cent of 15–19 year olds considered glamour modelling their ideal profession while a quarter of the all girls surveyed cited lap dancer as their top choice.[343]

A report released by the Department for Work and Pensions[344] shows that Jobcentres are routinely advertising for vacancies at escort agencies, lap-dancing clubs, massage parlours and TV sex channels: we are seeing the normalisation of these trades as viable career choices. This is based on an economic and cultural context that is giving rise to the increasing uses of a woman's body for male satisfaction through, for example, the international sex trades and hard and soft core pornography industries.

Several theorists have argued that the 'aspirational' connotations now associated with glamour modelling and lap-dancing are reflective of wider changes in our culture; what Rosalind Gill refers to as 'the pornification of culture'.[345] This describes the phenomenon whereby young people are exposed to images and messages derived from pornography in increasingly diverse and disparate areas of society.

This exposure affects all young people, regardless of their background and education. While some might argue that they are making a free choice, commentators have noted that the hyper-sexualisation of culture is beginning to co-opt the language of freedom and choice.[346] When girls are told over and over again not only that their appearance is all that matters, but that exploiting their appearance is a route to success, it is little wonder that many are choosing to take this route. A monolithic view of the 'ideal' women combined with the biased portrayal of such jobs in popular and celebrity culture is limiting, rather than increasing, the choices open to young girls.

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[342] Hubbard *et al.*(2008); Egan *et al.*(2006)

[343] Deely (2008)

[344] www.parliament.uk/deposits/
depositedpapers/2008/DEP2008-3155.doc

[345] Gill (2009)

[346] Walter (2010)

People trafficking

It is difficult to obtain a reliable figure for the number of adults and children being trafficked to the UK for the purposes of sexual exploitation. This is by its very nature a covert crime. However, Home Office research suggests that in 2003 there were up to 4,000 women who were victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation in the UK; and in 2009 CEOP (the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre) estimated that the potential number of child trafficking victims was 325.

The link between pornography and organised crime is a long and established one.[347] Together, pornography, people trafficking and prostitution contribute to a network of exploitation that fuels the global sex trade.[348] According to the UN, global profits from the trafficking of human beings currently stand at around $7 billion, equivalent in monetary terms to the global trade in drugs. As with all economic systems, there must first be demand before there can be supply. In this scenario, it is argued, the demand is being fuelled by the widespread depiction of girls and women as sex objects.[349]

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347 Attorney-General's Commission on Pornography Final Report (1986)

348 Sarikakis and Shaukat (2007)

349 Sarikakis and Shaukat (2007)

Conclusion

The research summarised in this section suggests that there are negative consequences associated with the sexualisation of children in terms of body dissatisfaction, lower self-esteem, sexual harassment and views on sexual violence.

It's unrealistic to assume that we can stop our children and young people from seeing sexualised images and messages. But what we can do is give them tools to help them understand and interpret what they see, and build up their confidence so that they feel secure in their own identity. In the past it was adult women who felt the imperative to look 'sexy'. Now this imperative is in danger of being adopted by younger and younger girls who will inevitably face the same feelings of inadequacy, failure to live up to an unrealistic ideal, and a distillation of their self-worth that it is only based on the ability to attract attention from others.

Children who don't feel happy about themselves are more likely to latch on to things that promise popularity and acceptance. As the evidence in this section shows, all too often that will mean conforming either to the hyper-sexy or the hyper-masculine norm. The evidence suggests that children with low self-esteem, and those without a close, supportive family network, are most vulnerable to sexualised content and most likely to suffer negative impacts. It's a double whammy: there's no one there to moderate their activities so they are more likely to have more frequent and more prolonged exposure to inappropriate material and when they are exposed to this material there is no one there to talk to about it or to help make sense of it.

Many young women now believe that the only confidence worth having is sexual confidence – and while sexual confidence is certainly important it seems that what this hyper-sexualised society is selling to girls is actually a caricature of sexual confidence. From the physical attributes of cosmetically enhanced breasts to the 'sexual scripts' of pleasing your partner 'no matter what', the porn star ideal of sexuality and beauty is certainly not the only and arguably not the best way for young women to attain ownership of their sexuality. Perhaps we need to be discussing with young people that true sexual confidence and sexual liberation means that you don't have to enjoy and accept all forms of sexual entertainment for the sake of seeming comfortable with your sexuality.

Schools can help children develop the capacity to interpret and filter information and to recognise and value diversity. As such perhaps we need to consider the value of media literacy and gender studies and begin to see them as core to the curriculum we teach our children. Sex education, too, must focus on preparing young people to form healthy, respectful, emotionally fulfilling relationships. Focusing on prevention of STIs and the mechanics of sex, while important, does not prepare young people for the complex emotional nuisances, power dynamics, and performance anxiety of early sexual relationships.

Advertising is a multi-billion pound industry because it works – it has an effect – so to say that its impact on young people hasn't been proven is disingenuous. What we need to consider is how the effect of the media interacts with other factors (psychological, familial and social) to bring about a situation where young people's sexuality is commodified and ultimately used against them.

7. Sexualisation and violence

"Violence is something one learns. It requires the desensitisation of the consumer, and his/her emotional distancing from the humanity of the persons involved. Pornography is construed upon the fragmentation and deduction of the female body into parts..."[350]

Introduction

It is tempting to dismiss the link between sexualisation and violence as being too far-fetched. Yet the evidence cited in the previous sections suggests a clear link between consumption of sexualised images, a tendency to view women as objects and the acceptance of aggressive attitudes and behaviour as the norm. In many ways, sexualisation leads to dehumanisation. Both the images we consume, and the way we consume them, are lending credence to the idea that women are there to be used and that men are there to use them.

Sexual abuse and sexual violence are, thankfully, at the extreme end of the spectrum of impacts of sexualisation. Nevertheless, it is imperative that we acknowledge the very real possibility that, say, pornography that shows girls talking with relish about pre-teen sexual exploits, or highly realistic video games where players take on the role of stalker and rapist might start to blur the boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not.

I have already made the point that in the past few years pornography has become a part of mainstream culture. But it is important to note that we are not talking here about idealised or exaggerated depictions of mainstream erotica or sex. Increasingly, porn is dominated by themes of aggression, power and control. And, as the porn industry increasingly pushes the boundaries, so mainstream culture follows suit.

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350 Sarikakis and Shaukat (2007)

Introduction *(cont.)*

By sending out the message that girls are there to be used and abused, there is a danger that we are turning boys into consumers of the female body, who see sex as a means of domination and control rather than an act of intimacy and a source of mutual pleasure. One girl interviewed as part of a recent study on gang violence gave the following explanation for why girls have sex:

"It's to keep the boy happy… to make him like you more and to please him and stop him from having sex with other girls. Sometimes it hurts but you don't want to say anything because then he'll just leave you for someone that will do all the stuff he wants and please him better."[351]

Many of the professionals who work with gangs and informed this review noted that in gang culture, sex is referred to as 'beating' and, increasingly, rape is being used as the weapon of choice to settle disputes or get revenge with gang members by raping girlfriends, sisters and even mothers of their rivals. And although gangs make up only a small part of society in the UK, the use of violence as a means to punish and control is not just in the domain of sub-cultures. The shocking results of a recent survey carried out by the NSPCC show that for many young people, violence within relationships is commonplace. It seems that notions of power and control over the female body, and the pressure on boys to conform to a hyper-masculine ideal, are having a very real – and very damaging – effect on our day-to-day lives.

This section provides an overview of the evidence for the links between sexualisation and aggression, including violence within relationships. It also considers the role of pornography in normalising violent behaviour.

Attitudes to violence

"Images of women as objects or in submissive poses normalises violence against women. Men associate these images with women walking down the street."

Focus group participant[352]

There is a significant amount of evidence linking stereotypical attitudes to women's sexuality, adversarial sexual beliefs, acceptance of the 'rape myth'[353] and sexist beliefs with aggressive sexual behaviour.[354] A recent Home Office survey found that 36 per cent of people polled believed that a woman should be held wholly or partly responsible for being sexually assaulted or raped if she was drunk, while 26 per cent believed a woman should accept at least part of the blame for an attack if she was out in public wearing sexy or revealing clothes.[355]

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351 Evidence provided in a focus group, held as part of the Review (2009)

352 Women's National Commission (2009)

353 See definition on page 50

354 Dean and Malamuth (1997); Malamuth and Briere (1986); Malamuth and Donnerstein (1982, 1984); Murnen, Wright and Kaluzny (2002); Osland, Fitch and Willis (1996); Spence, Losoff and Robbins (1991); Truman, Tokar and Fischer (1996); Vogel (2000)

355 Home Office (2009)

There is also a connection between exposure to stereotypical images of women in adverts and aggressive or violent attitudes. Researchers suggest that, by encouraging male viewers to internalise the notion of women as sexual beings, adverts create a hierarchy within which women are viewed as subordinate and, therefore, as appropriate targets for sexual violence.[356] The repeated depiction of men as dominant and aggressive and females as subordinate and demeaned is arguably perpetuating violence against women.[357]

Adults – including women[358] – who viewed sexually objectifying images of women in the mainstream media were more likely to be accepting of violence.[359] A significant number of men exposed to video games featuring hyper-sexualised characters made judgments that suggested greater tolerance of sexual harassment; in the longer-term, exposure correlated with tolerance of sexual harassment and greater acceptance of the 'rape myth'.[360]

A study of 458 young adolescents examining the relationship between family environment, gender-focused themes and narratives in music videos and attitudes towards sexual harassment[361] showed that, while girls were less accepting of sexual harassment than boys, exposure to music videos reduced their resistance. This was particularly true for girls without a supportive family. For both boys and girls, frequent TV viewing and exposure to pornographic material led to greater acceptance of sexual harassment. The study also identified a link between viewing sexualised images of girls, a tendency to view younger girls as potential sexual partners and a more tolerant attitude towards child sexual abuse.[362]

A recent longitudinal study of 1,000 boys from birth to 25 looked at how their levels of self-esteem affected their risk of violent behaviour. Boys with higher levels of self-esteem at 15 were less likely to be violent offenders by the age of 25, while lower levels of self-esteem were linked to a greater risk of violence at 18, 21 and 25.[363] A survey of 13,650 pupils aged 11–16 from 39 schools across England found that lack of self-concern and low self-esteem were useful constructs in predicting adolescent violence.[364]

Partner violence

"Our research has uncovered, for the first time in the UK, the shocking levels of violence – physical, emotional and sexual – that many girls experience from their partners. Indeed...this may be the most prevalent form of violence girls experience in their childhoods. We can no longer ignore this fundamental welfare problem and the damage it does to girls' well-being and their long-term life chances."

University of Bristol & NSPCC research report[365]

A recent survey commissioned by the NSPCC[366] found that 33 per cent of teenage girls aged 13–17 had been subjected to unwanted sexual acts while in a relationship, and 25 per cent had suffered physical violence. Among boys, 18 per cent had experienced physical violence. Nearly three-quarters of girls and half of boys claimed to have experienced some form of 'emotional violence' from their partner, with girls more likely to have experienced this in a

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356 Lanis and Covell (1995)

357 Murnen *et al.* (2007); Dill and Brown *et al.* (2008)

358 Johnson and Adams *et al.* (1995)

359 Kalof (1999); Lanis and Covell (1995)

360 Dill and Brown *et al.* (2008)

361 Strouse and Goodwin *et al.* (1994)

362 Strouse and Goodwin *et al.* (1994)

363 Boden and Horwood *et al.* (2007)

364 Sutherland and Shepherd (2002)

365 Barter, McCarry, Berridge and Evans (2009)

366 Barter, McCarry, Berridge and Evans (2009)

direct or overt form. Girls and boys who had had a family member or peer behave violently towards them were more at risk of partner violence; outside the home, girlfriends and boyfriends are the most common perpetrators of sexual abuse and violence.[367]

Although both sexes are experiencing partner violence, more girls are suffering and the impact of this suffering is greater. A significant proportion of the girls surveyed stated that the violence had seriously affected their welfare; for boys, there appeared to be few consequences. Researchers also remarked on the level of coercive control apparent in young people's relationships and, again, on the impact of this on girls in particular. Significant numbers of girls were subject to high levels of control overwhere they could go, who they could see and what they could do. Many found themselves under constant surveillance via the internet, mobile phones and text messaging. Such control often led to girls becoming isolated from their peer networks.

Sexualised violence in schools

Sexual harassment, and gendered and sexualised name-calling and bullying are on the rise in both primary and secondary schools.[368] Research has uncovered some alarming examples of how the apparent acceptability of violent behaviour is shaping gender roles and relationships:

"You know K – if she calls me names I'll smack her around the cheek… I'd just grab her and I'd punch her and make them pay for it. I can't help it, it's not me. My hand just goes, 'boom'."

Boy, aged 12[369]

"It's a known fact that boys normally bully girls because they like them. If you hit them it's cos you fancy them… first signs of love."

Girl, aged 14[370]

Statistics from the Department for Children, Schools and Families show at least 120 permanent[371] and 3,450 fixed period exclusions attributed to sexual misconduct in the academic year 2007/08.[372]

The Youth Justice Board reports a rise in recent years in the number of sexual offences committed by young people which result in a pre-court or court 'disposal'. Sexual offences include a wide category of offences which vary in their level of severity, ranging from unlawful sexual intercourse to rape. In 2007/08 alone, 1,302 incidents of sexual offending by 10–15-year-olds were recorded – 29 of which were committed by 10-year-old children[373]. Separate figures drawn by the NSPCC from all but one of the UK's police forces show that children under 18 committed 1,065 sexual offences in the year ending March 2008.[374]

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367 Cawson and Loretto (2000)

368 Duncan (2004, 2006); Francis (2005); Renold, (2002, 2003); Ringrose (2008)

369 Womankind UK (2007)

370 Womankind UK (2007)

371 This does not include the total number of permanent exclusions in primary and special school settings

372 DCSF (2009)

373 Statistics (2004–08), Youth Justice Board

374 NSPCC (2010). Figures obtained under Freedom of Information Act

Gangs, sexualisation and sexual violence

In gangs, rape and sexual assault is increasingly becoming the weapon of choice. Assaulting a girl is used not only to assert power over the girl herself, but also over those who associate with her. The growing threat of sexual violence also means that girls are seriously affected by gang activities; regardless of whether they are directly involved themselves.

Girls also talk of feeling increasingly pressurised by magazines, music and the fashion industry to present themselves in a highly sexual way. They tend to respond to this pressure either by over-sexualising themselves from an early age or by developing a more 'masculine' persona which, in the gang context, means they often found themselves in dangerous situations.[375]

Pornography and sexual aggression

"All this push to get women to buy into porn and its values…is it really empowering? If it was, wouldn't it be empowering for all women?"[376]

'Angela', female prostitute

Evidence points to a link between exposure to pornography and 'sexual callousness', as well as a decrease in feelings of guilt, repulsion and disgust. Prolonged exposure increases the likelihood of consuming material that depicts either potentially 'harmful' or what the UK government labels 'extreme'[377] sexual behaviours such as violent sex and

bestiality. Researchers point to a number of negative consequences linked to the consumption of such material:

"Dispositional changes include diminished trust in intimate partners, the abandonment of hopes for sexual exclusivity with partners, evaluation of promiscuity as the natural state, and the apprehension that sexual inactivity constitutes a health risk. Cynical attitudes about love emerge, and superior sexual pleasures are thought attainable without affection toward partners. The institution of marriage is seen as sexually confining. Increasingly, having a family and raising children is considered an unattractive prospect."[378]

A study of over 800 subjects aged 18 to 26 found that 87 per cent of young men and 31 per cent of young women used pornography, and that 67 per cent and 49 per cent thought pornography was acceptable. There was a clear link between the use and acceptance of pornography and risky sexual attitudes and behaviours, substance abuse and non-marital cohabitation values.[379] However, high pornography use is not in itself an indicator of high risk for sexual aggression. But people who are already predisposed to violent activity and who also score high for pornography use are much more likely to engage in sexual aggression.[380]

In other words, where a person already has a propensity towards violence, that propensity may be heightened by the presence of sexually aggressive pornography.

[375] ROTA (2007)
[376] Walter (2010)
[377] McGlynn, Ward and Rackley (2009)
[378] Zillman (1989)
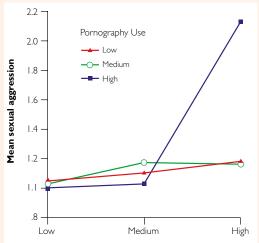[379] Carroll and Padilla-Walker *et al.* (2008)
[380] Malamuth, Addison and Koss (2000)

The Confluence Model

The Confluence Model of sexual aggression shows how a number of factors work together with pornography use to predict levels of sexual aggression. Pornography consumption therefore contributes 'significantly to the prediction of sexual aggression both as a main effect and in interaction with other factors'.[381]

Risk for sexual aggression based on GH x HM x IS

Hostile masculinity (HM) describes personality traits linked to aggression, including insecurity, defensiveness, hypersensitivity and a hostile/distrustful attitude to women.

Impersonal Sex (IS) describes a promiscuous, non-committal attitude towards sexual relations.

General Hostility (GH) refers to traits such as callousness and lack of emotion, which increase the likelihood of developing HM and IS.

As the figure shows, the risk of sexual aggression is highest for those that score highly for GH, HM and IS, and who are also heavy consumers of pornography.

Malamuth and Vega agree that there is a significant correlation between exposure to pornography and both actual, and attitudes to, sexual aggression.[382] This is backed by a further study involving 515 men, which found a strong association between rape and rape proclivity and the use of all forms of pornography. The strongest links were with hard-core pornography featuring scenes of violent rape. Soft-core pornography was positively associated with the likelihood of sexual force and non-violent coercive behaviour, but negatively associated with the likelihood of rape and actual rape behaviour.[383]

These conclusions are supported by a recent literature review,[384] which identified consistent and reliable evidence that exposure to pornography is related to male sexual aggression against women, [385] and while the association is strongest for violent pornography, it is still reliable for non-violent pornography. It should be noted, however, that researchers have also identified a circular relationship whereby those men who are considered as high-risk for sexual aggression are more likely to be attracted to sexually violent media and more influenced by it.[386]

In a critical review of the literature on pornography and links with violence, Itzin, Taket and Kelly (2007) conducted a critical analysis of experimental studies disputed by Fisher and Grenier (1994). The experimental studies were said by Fisher and Grenier to have failed to confirm that violent pornography is associated with anti-women thoughts and acts, citing inconsistent findings due to methodological and conceptual limitations. In the wider review of evidence of harm

[381] Malamuth and Vega (2007)

[382] Allen *et al.* (1995)

[383] Boeringer (1994)

[384] Flood (2009)

[385] Flood and Hamilton (2003)

[386] Malmouth *et al.* (2000)

to adults relating to exposure to extreme pornographic material Itzin, Taket and Kelly concluded that there is evidence of negative psychological, attitudinal and behavioural effects on adults who access this material. This included beliefs that women enjoy or desire rape; lack of empathy with rape victims and a preference for extreme material; and behavioural effects such as aggression in the laboratory after exposure.

Itzin, Taket and Kelly conclude that sexual explicitness per se (as Malamuth (2003) argues) does not have harmful effects; but when a message is presented within a sexually explicit setting it may have a different effect than if the message was presented in a non-sexual setting. This subconscious processes whereby messages in pornography become embodied and engendered with arousal and orgasm live on in feelings and fantasies that are deeply embedded and much more difficult to remove.[387]

It should also be noted that most studies involve adult subjects, although there is evidence to suggest links between violent pornography and aggressive behaviour in younger viewers.[388] A US study of boys and girls aged 11–16 found that greater exposure to R- and X-rated films was linked to greater acceptance of sexual harassment.[389] Another study where the average age of participants was 14 found a correlation between frequent consumption of pornography and the belief that it is acceptable to hold a girl down and force her to have sex.[390]

Child sexual abuse

"It would be unrealistic to assume there is no correlation between the sexualisation and objectification of children and their being sexually abused. ...children are portrayed, and taught to act, as sexual beings. Why should it surprise us if those that wish to abuse children use this to legitimise their actions?"

NSPCC[391]

Child sexual abuse lies at the extreme end of the spectrum of consequences of sexualisation. Nevertheless, it affects a very significant number of children. One estimate[392] puts the number of girls in England who have been sexually abused at 1.1 million and the number of boys at 490,000. Another suggests that as many as 2 million under-16s – and one in five girls – is a victim of 'sexual abuse or violence'.[393] Figures from the US show that disabled children are three times more likely to be sexually abused than able-bodied children; figures in the UK are thought to be broadly similar.[394]

Recent figures from the NSPCC show that over 21,600 sex crimes were committed against under-18s in 2008/09.[395] More than one third (36 per cent) of all rapes recorded by the police are committed against children under 16 years of age.[396] According to the Department of Health, child sexual abuse is greatly under-identified and reported: 72 per cent of sexually abused children do not tell anyone about the abuse at the time.[397] While the majority of abusers are male, the number of female

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[387] Itzin (2000)

[388] Flood (2009)

[389] Strouse *et al.* (1994)

[390] Check and Guloein (1989)

[391] Evidence provided to the Review by Tom Narducci, NSPCC (2009)

[392] London Safeguarding Children Board (2008)

[393] Cawson (2000)

[394] Sullivan and Knutson (2000)

[395] www.nspcc.org.uk/whatwedo/mediacentre/pressreleases/2010_25_january_more_than_21000_child_sex_offences_recorded_last_year_wdn70725.html, retrieved February 2010

[396] *Home Office Statistical Bulletin (July 2006/12/06)*

[397] Caswon *et al.* (2000)

sex abusers in Britain is estimated at between 48,000 and 64,000.[398] The majority of those who display sexually harmful behaviour are adolescent males, with 25–40 per cent of all alleged sexual abuse involving young perpetrators.[399] Some clinicians have noted that the sexualised images of children that are now more common and easily accessible challenge the norms that commonly forbid sexual interest in children.[400]

Victims of sexual abuse can experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), cognitive distortions, anxiety, depression, somatic concerns, disassociation, eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, impaired self-relatedness, behavioural difficulties, relationship problems, aggression, substance abuse, suicide, self-mutilation and indiscriminate sexual behaviour.[401] One study suggested that almost three-quarters of girl victims of 'contact sexual abuse' went on to experience PTSD, while 57 per cent suffered major depression.[402]

The consequences of child sexual abuse can be devastating, and yet, from the evidence sessions that fed into this review, professionals working with victims of abuse pointed out that in many cases, children who experience sexual abuse are not given access to support services, even following assessment. This is an issue that will be explored more thoroughly by the Taskforce on the Health Aspects of Violence against Women and Children when it reports to the government in March 2010.

Child pornography

"When girls are dressed to resemble adult women, however, adults may project adult motives as well as an adult level of responsibility and agency on girls. Images of precocious sexuality in girls may serve to normalize abusive practices such as child abuse, child prostitution and the sexual trafficking of children."[403]

It is a widely held view that the use of child pornography must be considered and understood as "…one practice within a repertoire of child sexual abuse" and not as an isolated issue which can lead to child sexual abuse.[404]

There is very little experimental research on the effects of viewing images of child abuse. However, in a study that sought to examine this by using adult actors that looked like young girls (so-called 'barely legal' pornography), the findings showed that exposure to such pornography led to stronger mental associations between non-sexual images of children and words related to sex.[405] This suggests that viewing sexualised portrayals of children could lead to viewers making these associations even when children are not being sexualised.

An issue of concern that has been raised by experts is that the sexualisation of girls could potentially contribute to a market for images of child abuse. The APA review on sexualisation notes that there is a new trend for 'grooming' children on-line whereby paedophiles join on-line teen

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[398] Lucy Faithfull Foundation (http://lucyfaithfull.org)

[399] www.nspcc.org.uk/WhatWeDo/MediaCentre/MediaBriefings/Policy/media_briefing_sexually_harmful_behaviour_wda33252.html

[400] Emma Rush – *What are the risks of premature sexualisation in children.* Quoted in Tankard Reist (2010)

[401] Briere (1991)

[402] Jones and Ramchandani (1999)

[403] APA (2008)

[404] Kelly and Regan (2000)

[405] Paul (2005)

chat rooms and seduce girls into performing sex acts for money in front of the camera.[406] This specific form of exploitation is tackled in the UK by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre.

Exposure to sexualised images of children and child pornography could potentially increase a child's vulnerability to sexual exploitation and abuse. Sexual images of children may have the effect of normalising child sexual abuse. During the Australian Conference of Child Abuse and Neglect in 2003 it was reported that exposure to X-rated pornography was a significant factor in young children abusing other children.[407] In her research on how 14–16-year-olds present themselves online, Jessica Ringrose made the point that young girls, inspired by the hyper-sexualised portrayals of women around them, are styling themselves in overtly sexually provocative ways for the consumption of other young people. What we are seeing on social networking sites and in 'sexting' is, effectively, children themselves producing child pornography.[408]

As academics in the field have pointed out, modern technology "has transformed the political economy of all pornography, making it possible for almost anyone to be producer, distributor and consumer simultaneously."[409]

Tink Palmer, Internet Watch Foundation, noted in an evidence session for this review that she had encountered several cases where young people were groomed to consume child porn by sex offenders who had made initial contact in on-line chat rooms. Her experience is reflected in research findings that suggest that growing numbers of adolescents are being convicted of possession of child pornography.[410] In accord with these findings are the results of a New Zealand study that reported that among offenders, the largest group trading in internet child pornography were aged between 15–19.[411]

406 Eichenwald (2005)

407 Stanley, *et al.* (2003)

408 Ringrose (2008)

409 Kelly and Regan (2000)

410 Moultrie (2006)

411 Carr (2004)

Conclusion

The evidence set out in this document suggests that there is broad agreement among researchers and experts in health and welfare that sexualising children prematurely places them at risk of a variety of harms, ranging from body image disturbances to being victims of abuse and sexual violence.[412]

Sexualisation devalues women and girls sending out a disturbing message that they are always sexually available. It creates false expectations for girls trying to live up to unrealistic 'ideals', and for boys in terms of how they think a girl should be treated. It increases self-objectification and limits the aspirations and choices that girls feel are open to them. Sexualisation lowers important barriers to child sexual abuse, and undermines healthy relationships, increasing the likelihood of violence against women and girls.

There is both empirical research and clinical evidence that premature sexualisation harms children. There is, however, a clear need for further empirical evidence in the form of a large-scale longitudinal study to look in detail at how living in a sexualised culture affects both boys and girls as they grow and develop.

There are several reasons why such evidence does not yet exist. First, large longitudinal studies require careful development and significant funding: in Australia, the federal government spent two years debating whether the National Health and Medical Research Council should fund such a study. Second, such a study would have to overcome considerable ethical obstacles with regard to breaches of family privacy and the risk of further sexualising child participants. Finally, many of the mechanisms through which sexualisation is occurring are relatively new. Only recently have we begun to see psychologists and other social scientists making a concerted effort to address the issue.

So, we need more research. Nevertheless, we should acknowledge that the research and evidence from child experts and clinicians gathered in this report points clearly to the fact that sexualisation is having a negative impact on young people's physical and mental health, and helping to normalise abusive behaviour towards women and children.

In 2007 the Department for Children, Schools and Families published its Children's Plan[413], aimed at making England 'the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up' and which highlighted the need to reduce the risk to children from potentially harmful media content. To do this, we must first accept that sexualisation, as evidenced in this report and in similar reports from the US and Australia, is harmful. Only then can we begin to develop strategies for helping our young people to deal with sexualisation and create spaces where they can develop and explore their sexuality in their own time and in their own way.

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[412] APA (2007); Coy (2009); Malamuth (2001); Tankard-Reist (2010)

[413] The Children's Plan: Building brighter futures, DCSF (2007)

8. Recommendations

Introduction

I believe that reviews like this one should not only raise awareness and define the issues, they should also look at possible solutions and ways forward. Throughout the course of my work on the review, some people have suggested that the problem of sexualisation is so complex and so endemic that it will be practically impossible to bring about real change. I don't believe that this is the case. Sexualisation is undoubtedly a complex and multi-factorial issue, but social change is always possible, as long as people are sensitised to the need for that change to occur.

The recommendations outlined below are derived from the main themes that have emerged from the review. They have evolved through consultations with professionals who work on the front line in relevant areas and they have been informed by those working with the practicalities and logistics of government policy. What is required is a joint effort by parents, teachers, professionals, clinicians, advertisers, retailers and policy makers. For the greatest social change comes not from addressing one aspect of a problem but from the cumulative effect of many people acknowledging together that change needs to happen.

1) Education and schools

i) Promoting gender equality in schools

Schools have a vital role to play, together with parents, in helping young people to develop healthy relationships, manage their emotions, and challenge the behaviour of some young men towards women and girls.

School staff report that they do not have the skills or confidence to address gender equality. They need to be aware of the significant impact of gender on experiences within school; and to know how to identify and address aspects of the school culture which discriminate against women and encourage or justify gender inequality, sexual bullying and harassment. I believe there is a need for a greater emphasis in initial teacher training and continuing professional development on gender awareness and gender-based volence. I recommend that:

- All school staff should have training on gender equality.
- Staff who teach Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education and/or citizenship should be given specialist training and ongoing support to address these issues through the curriculum.

High levels of sexist bullying in schools suggest that schools must do more to meet the 'Be healthy' and 'Stay safe' outcomes of Every Child Matters,[414] to fulfil their duty to promote well-being and to safeguard their pupils. There is evidence which suggests teachers do not feel confident to challenge the discriminatory attitudes and behaviours that underpin violence against women and girls. Teachers should therefore be given a much greater level of support and guidance. I therefore recommend that:

- The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) issues statutory guidance for schools on gender equality, in order to raise the profile of the issue. The new guidance should be comprehensive, including: how to address gender equality and violence against women and girls in the school Gender Equality Scheme; the school ethos; in anti-bullying policies; safeguarding strategies; the wider curriculum; staff training; and the services and information that schools provide.

- Schools should ensure that all incidents on sexual bullying are recorded and reported separately to other forms of bullying.

ii) Statutory Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education and Sex and Relationships Education (SRE)

As part of the Violence Against Women and Girls consultation, I recommended that PSHE education, which includes SRE, become a compulsory part of the curriculum. Ministers have already indicated that this is their intention. SRE provides important opportunities for children and young people to develop the language and skills they need to be safe and to understand personal relationships. SRE should begin in primary schools and continue throughout secondary school.

It should include setting personal boundaries and understanding what is safe and appropriate touching and behaviour. It should also look at issues like body image and violence in relationships and aim to help young people develop an awareness of the gap between pornography and real sexual relationships. It is imperative that all children receive this level of education and guidance including children with learning difficulties, who often miss out because of their special educational needs. It is also important that teaching staff are equipped to deliver high-quality teaching about personal relationships which tackles sexualisation and that responds to the realities of children and young people's lives. I therefore recommend that:

- Clear reference is made to sexualisation, gender stereotypes and pornography within the Department for Children, School and Families' revised Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) guidance which is currently out for public consultation.

- Practical 'How To' guidance on tackling sexualisation is disseminated widely to schools through Teachernet, the PSHE Association, the Sex Education Forum and other agencies. This would pull together illustrative material of good practice; demonstrate how sexualisation can fit within the existing curriculum including SRE, PSHE education, Citizenship and Media Studies; and detail what resources are available and links to relevant organisations.

- New SRE resource materials are made available for teachers who work with children with special education needs and learning difficulties.

In many schools, effective work is already under way in the areas of violence against women and girls and gender equality. This includes lessons given as part of the

414 www.everychildmatters.gov.uk

PSHE and citizenship curricula, lessons given in other subjects, assemblies and other school activities. However, there is still more that could be done in primary schools. I therefore recommend that:

> • Primary schools should make specific reference to the influence of the media on body image and personal identity. This could form part of a planned new area of learning, 'Understanding Physical Development, Health and Wellbeing', and would help equip primary school children with tools to understand and interpret the images and messages they see in the media.

Almost all primary schools and a growing number of secondary schools are using the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme to support children's emotional wellbeing. I therefore recommend that:

> • A module on gender equality, sexualisation and sexist/sexual bullying be developed as part of the SEAL programme. This should include discussion of body image and objectification.

iii) Media literacy and encouraging activism

While there are many organisations working to address the media literacy needs of the UK population, efforts to date have been fragmented, with little or no co-ordination at either strategic or operational level. As a result, resources may be failing to reach those in most need or to achieve the desired outcomes.

I welcome the government's desire to boost young people's media literacy skills.[415] Any media literacy programme

should equip young people with the cognitive filters to critically examine and challenge the media portrayal of both men and women. It should address concepts such as air-brushing of images and the cult of celebrity, and be linked to education on safe internet use.

Alternative media outlets such as blogs, webcasts and magazines or 'zines' distributed on the web could provide a useful forum for teaching and encouraging young people to critically examine the sexualised or hyper-masculinised images presented by popular media and marketers. By offering young people a chance to create their own content, these channels can promote a powerful sense of validation and ownership.

I therefore recommend that:

> • Media literacy should not only be taught through PSHE education but also through English and drama, the arts, history and citizenship. A 'whole school' approach to media literacy would reduce the burden on PSHE education, ensure that relevant links are made in other subjects and effectively mainstream gender stereotyping throughout the curriculum.

iv) Working with young people outside of mainstream education

In recent years the integration of youth work into other children's services has moved from a universal service to an increasingly 'problem' orientated targeted one. However, there's a great deal of positive work that can be done with young people, not because they are seen as deficient, or victims, or needing to be 'fixed' but as part of more general anti-sexist and gender equalities-based work with boys and girls. I recommend that:

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415 Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, Ed Balls. House of Commons Hansard Ministerial Statements for 14 December 2009

- Increased funding should be made available for staffing, provision and training of existing youth workers so that they feel confident and sufficiently skilled to have discussions with young people around sexuality, sexist and sexual bullying and gender inequality. More materials are also needed to support youth workers to develop such work.

v) Digital literacy and the internet

While the internet brings unprecedented opportunities for children and young people to learn, develop and enjoy, it also brings risks. Children – and their parents – need education to understand and negotiate those risks. At the same time, steps should be taken to make the virtual world as safe as possible. I therefore recommend that:

- The UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) should be supported to further develop its current online resource centre where parents can access internet safety advice. Strategies should be simple and practical, and link to parents' existing life and parenting skills.

From meeting with parents, I appreciate that expecting them to take complete responsibility for their children's digital literacy is both unrealistic and unfair. Our approach to improving digital literacy must be two-pronged, and I recommend that:

- Digital literacy is made a compulsory part of the national curriculum for children from the age of five onwards, and that age-appropriate materials are made available to pupils at every stage of their education.

Pro-anorexia (pro-ana) and pro-bulimia (pro-mia) websites advocate and encourage the perception of eating disorders as lifestyle choices rather than serious psychological disorders. They often provide tips on how to lie to doctors, which foods are easiest to vomit up and advice on initiating and/or maintaining anorexic or bulimic behaviour. I recommend that:

- The government should work with internet service providers to block access to pro-ana and pro-mia websites.

vi) Positive role models for children

Children – especially girls – need positive role models to help challenge gender stereotypes and encourage them to develop their self-esteem based on aptitude and accomplishment, not physical appearance. I would like to put together a working group of inspirational working women to help identify what we can do to help this generation of teenagers realise their potential and shape policy in this area.

An initial project for the group could be a short film featuring a dozen or so inspirational women talking about their achievements, which could then be distributed to schools or made available for download. Schools could be invited to compete for a visit from one of the group members, or the chance to gain work experience with them. Several high profile sports and business women have already agreed in principle to be involved.

A similar scheme for boys could challenge the hyper-masculine ideal and provide alternative role models. The White Ribbon Campaign, for example, already runs workshops where boys can explore issues like gender stereotyping and sexualisation. Such workshops could be funded so that more schools have access to them.

For both boys and girls, there are obvious opportunities for promoting positive role models in the run up to the 2012 Olympics. The ideal would be to work with a range of people, from sport, entertainment and the world of business.

As part of the government's long-term communication strategy to tackle violence against women and girls, I recommend that:

> - A schools campaign is developed which promotes positive role models for young men and young women and challenges gender stereotypes. The campaign should build on the positive work already being undertaken in schools by organisations such as the White Ribbon Campaign and Womankind.
>
> - Schools encourage girls to value their bodies in terms of their physical ability by encouraging them to engage in athletic and other extra-curricular activities. Schools should promote this work by linking it to the 2012 Get Set education programme (run by the London Organising Committee for the Olympic Games). There is a clear link here to one of the core values of the Olympic/Paralympic movement – demonstrating respect for oneself and others.

vii) Support for children who have been abused

Evidence indicates that children who are abused are more likely to display inappropriate sexualised behaviour. Currently, too few children are being treated for the psychosocial consequences of sexual abuse; it is not until they start to act inappropriately that their behaviour is noticed and addressed. Teachers and other professionals do not always have the training and skills needed to identify the early signs of abuse and offer appropriate support.

During the evidence sessions that informed this review, professionals working with abuse victims and teenage sex offenders pointed out that in many cases children who experience sexual abuse are not given access to support services, even after an assessment. We must provide psychological support for every child that has suffered at the hands of an abuser, not rely on voluntary bodies or wait for a child to start 'acting out'. Therefore, I recommend that:

> - Local Authorities must be held accountable for treating victims of child sexual abuse and ensure that specialist services receive adequate funding for the treatment of children who have suffered abuse.
>
> - One-to-one confidential help in school/college from a trained professional such as a psychologist should be made available to every child and young person.

2) Media and awareness-raising

i) A national campaign to tackle teenage relationship abuse

The government strategy, *Together we can end violence against women and girls,* noted my recommendation to run a campaign aimed at challenging the attitudes and perceptions that lead to violence within teenage relationships as the first phase in a broader cross-government communications strategy/campaign. I have worked with the Home Office to inform the development of the Teenage Relationship Abuse campaign, which was launched in February 2010. I also recommend that:

- A specific campaign pack is developed for primary and secondary schools which they can use to exemplify and build on issues arising from the national campaign. This campaign should not be a 'one off' but be run annually, allowing schools time to prepare activities and lesson plans.

ii) A working group to address the sexualisation of women and girls by the media

Since so much of the sexualised content to which children and young people are exposed comes via the media, there is a clear need for a forum where this can be monitored, discussed and addressed. I recommend:

- Setting up a working group of high profile women in broadcast and print media – for example, TV commissioners, presenters, producers, journalists – together with academics to monitor and address gender inequality in the media. This group should meet monthly and work with the government to help it implement its international obligations (see page 20) to tackle unbalanced portrayals and the projection of negative and degrading images of women in the media.

iii) Media awards

It is apparent that there is a lack of aspiration and ambition amongst a large number of Britain's teenage girls. I would like the sexualisation working group to also influence policy and establish what can be done to help this generation of teenagers aim higher. The media might be more likely to provide positive portrayals of both girls and boys if their efforts were acknowledged and rewarded. I therefore recommend:

- The establishment of a media award that promotes diverse, aspirational and non-sexualised portrayals of young people.

iv) Support and guidance for parents

I believe that parents should be given information and support to educate their children about the issues raised in this review. The Teenage Relationship Abuse campaign could provide a useful starting point. Directgov (the official UK government website for citizens) will carry information for parents, and this should be developed, maintained and signposted within government communications beyond the lifespan of the initial campaign.

During the course of this review, many parents have told me that when they see sexualised merchandise aimed at children, or inappropriate imagery being used in advertising, they are not sure who they should complain to. Is it retailers, manufacturers, Local Authorities, the Press Complaints Commission, Ofcom, the ASA, or their local MP? It can be difficult to know who to turn to. I therefore recommend that:

- The government launches an online 'one-stop-shop' to allow the public to voice their concerns with an onus on regulatory authorities to take action against irresponsible marketing which sexualises children. This will also help inform future government policy regarding the sexualisation of young people by giving the public and parents a forum to raise issues of concern.

Parents also have an important role to play in challenging gender stereotypes, teaching their children what is acceptable behaviour and language and helping set appropriate personal boundaries. Initiatives need to be developed that encourage parents to talk to their children about these issues and, where necessary, give them the tools to do so. I recommend that:

> • The government includes information on body image, self-esteem, eating disorders and e-safety in its proposed 'Positive Parenting' booklets for parents of older children and young people.

v) Advertising and magazines

Increasingly, media messages are being delivered via the internet, with companies spending millions on developing interactive advertisements on their commercial websites. These adverts and 'advergames' can be targeted at children or contain offensive content and yet are currently unregulated. I recommend that:

> • The government recognises the work being carried out by the Advertising Standards Authority and supports it in taking steps to close this regulatory loophole by extending the existing standards to include commercial websites.

Evidence suggests that even brief exposure to airbrushed images can lead to acute body dissatisfaction. To help combat this, efforts to raise levels of media literacy should be accompanied by initiatives aimed at encouraging society to take a more critical and questioning approach to the harmful perpetuation of unrealistic ideals. I therefore recommend:

> • The introduction of a system of ratings symbols for photographs to show the extent to which they have been altered. This is particularly critical in magazines targeting teen and pre-teen audiences.

The stereotyped – and often sexualised – images of women that appear on posters and billboards point to a double standard whereby images that would be unacceptable in a school or workplace are deemed acceptable for public display. Realistically, there is no way of preventing children and young people from seeing these images, so I recommend that:

> • The content of outdoor advertisements is vetted by local authorities as part of their gender equality duty to ensure that images and messages are not offensive on the grounds of gender.

vi) Music videos

Sexually provocative music videos are commonplace and easily accessible by children on TV and on DVD. Section 1.20 of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code states that: 'Any discussion on, or portrayal of, sexual behaviour must be editorially justified if included before the watershed, or when children are particularly likely to be listening, and must be appropriately limited.'[416] Yet sexual posing and suggestive lyrics are found in many music videos shown before the watershed. In the case of DVDs, music videos escape the statutory classification required for other types of content by virtue of a loophole in the Video Recordings Act 1984.[417]

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[416] Ofcom Broadcasting Code (2009)

[417] Office of Public Sector Information, Video Recording Act 1984

I therefore recommend that:

> • Broadcasters are required to ensure that music videos featuring sexual posing or sexually suggestive lyrics are broadcast only after the 'watershed'.
>
> • The current gap in the regulatory protection provided by the Video Recordings Act 1984 be closed, either by removing the general exemption for 'works concerned with…. music' or by lowering the threshold at which exemption is forfeited. Proposals to lower the threshold at which music videos lose their exemption are currently before Parliament[418] and should be supported or even strengthened.

vii) Video on demand services

Although the new regulations relating to video on demand services operating from the UK represent a step in the right direction, it is debatable whether the amended Communications Act offers children sufficient protection from potentially harmful content. In particular, the Act only requires service providers to apply access controls (such as credit card payment) to material that 'might seriously impair the physical, mental or moral development of persons under the age of eighteen'.

Ofcom, which regulates UK-based video on demand services, has stated[419] that explicit images of real sex between consenting adults designed to sexually arouse the viewer are not likely to seriously impair under-18s. DVDs containing this kind of content are classified 'R18' and can only be purchased in a licensed sex shop. Yet, according to Ofcom, the same material can be freely provided via video on demand.

I therefore recommend that:

> • Regulation of UK-based video on demand services is strengthened to ensure that they do not allow children to access hardcore pornography. Proposals to achieve this are currently before Parliament[420] and should be supported.

viii) Computers and networked gaming

Parent often feel under pressure to purchase the latest computer and video console games for their children. Although 18-rated games only make up a small fraction of the total number of games on the market, many of the most high profile and best selling releases are targeted at an adult audience. Most responsible parents would not allow their young children to watch an 18-rated film, yet many take a different attitude when it comes to 18-rated games, which are equally inappropriate in their content and style for a young audience. The latest gaming consoles also provide young people with access to the internet, and parents are often neither aware of this increased access nor know how to censor the information that children receive.

While many games consoles offer parental controls, few parents are aware of how to set these up. Parents have a responsibility to speak to their children about the content of games and to be aware of how their children are using games consoles. However, many parents have told me they would like to see games consoles sold with access controls already switched on. I therefore recommend that:

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[418] Digital Economy Bill, amendment 246

[419] Statement on the Ofcom Broadcasting Code – Section Two: Harm and Offence 'R18 Material and its equivalent' pp108 – 124, May 2005

[420] Digital Economy BIll, amendment 251B

- Games consoles are sold with a separate 'unlocking' code, which purchasers can choose to input if they wish to use or allow access of the console to adult and online content.
- This idea could be extended to 'child friendly' computers and mobile phones where adult content is filtered out by default.

3) Working with businesses and retailers

i) Corporate responsibility

There are signs that some manufacturers are prepared to listen to the concerns of those working to safeguard children. Numerous companies have withdrawn products from sale following campaigns in the national press, and the NSPCC is working with businesses to encourage them to look at the implications of making and/or selling products that contribute to sexualisation and objectification. I recommend that:

- The government supports the NSPCC in its work with manufacturers and retailers to encourage corporate responsibility with regard to sexualised merchandise.
- As a first step, guidelines should be issued following consultation with major clothing retailers and parents' groups so that a broad consensus can be reached with regard to what is appropriate for different age groups.

ii) 'Lads' mags'

Many parents have complained to me about the sexually explicit imagery and straplines featured on the covers of so-

called 'lads' mags'. These are often stocked alongside magazines aimed at teenagers or even comics in high street newsagents and supermarkets, flouting the retailers' existing voluntary code of magazine placement. In accord with this, during an evidence hearing session a spokesperson from the human rights organisation Object made the point that:

" ….pornification impacts on how boys and men are encouraged to view and treat women, with far-reaching implications for gender inequality and violence against women. The links between pornification, discrimination and violence against women have been recognised at the international level by the United Nations Convention to Eliminate Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which calls on States to take decisive action to tackle the objectification of women and girls. This requires an overhaul of media regulation to move away from inadequate self-regulatory voluntary guidelines."

I therefore recommend that:

- The existing voluntary code for retailers regarding the placements of 'lads' mags' be replaced by a mandatory code, allowing customers to report retailers who continue to place such magazines at children's eye-level and/or next to publications aimed at children and young people.
- 'Lads' mags' should be marked clearly as recommended for sale only to persons 15 and over.

iii) Recruitment

A report released by the Department for Work and Pensions[421] shows that job centres are routinely advertising vacancies at escort agencies, lap-dancing clubs, massage parlours and TV sex channels. In 2007-08, Jobcentre Plus

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[421]   www.parliament.uk/deposits/ depositedpapers/2008/DEP2008-3155.doc

advertised over 350 vacancies in the adult entertainment industry, including ones for topless and semi-nude bar staff. In allowing this to take place, the government is promoting the normalisation of these trades as viable career choices. I therefore recommend that:

> • The government overturns its decision to allow vacancies for jobs in the adult entertainment industry to be advertised by Jobcentre Plus.

4) Research

i) A multi-disciplinary approach to sexualisation

A multi-disciplinary approach, bringing together psychology, media studies, neuroscience and sociology would help to give a rounded picture of the various factors and offer a more holistic understanding of all the variables at play. I therefore recommend:

> • The establishment of a new academic periodical and an annual conference series focusing solely on the topic of sexualisation.

ii) Improving the evidence base

A great deal has already been written on topics raised in this review, from newspaper editorials to scholarly journals. While there is strong preliminary evidence to support a link between exposure to sexualised content and unhealthy beliefs about sex and relationships and attitudes that support sexual coercion, there is also a clear need for further research. I therefore recommend that:

> • Funding be made available for research that will strengthen the evidence base. There is a particular need for longitudinal research; research into the impact of sexualisation on black and minority ethnic groups, gay and lesbian groups and disabled populations; and carefully designed ethical research into the impact on child populations.
>
> • Funding for trend research into teenage relationship abuse and the frequency of sexual bullying and abuse.
>
> • Clinical outcome research should be funded and supported to find the most effective ways to identify, assess and work with the perpetrators and victims of child sexual abuse.
>
> • A detailed examination of media literacy programmes should be carried out jointly by the DCSF and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

Specific topics for research could include: possible links between sexualisation and child sexual abuse; child pornography and sex trafficking; the influence of portable devices on risky behaviour and levels of exposure to inappropriate content; the risks faced by younger children and those with special educational needs online; the prevalence and impact of 'sexting' and cyber-bullying; the changing media landscape; and public attitudes towards violence against women and girls.

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10. Acknowledgements

Researching and writing this review has been one of the most interesting and thought provoking journeys of my career. I have been very lucky to have the support of a great team behind me to make the task of collating, reviewing and writing up this work possible. A big thank you to Steven McDermott and Louise Bell for helping me wade through seemingly endless reams of research; and to academics like Jessica Ringrose, Katherine Sarikakis and Maddy Coy for the constructive feedback and input.

I am very grateful to the members of the VAWG Advisory Group for their valuable insight into the role that schools and teachers can play in promoting gender equality and preventing violence against women and girls. Thank you also to front-line clinicians and those working in child protection like Sara Delaney, Peter Johnson, Holly Elsdon-Smithers, Davina James-Hanman, Tom Narducci and all the members of the steering group for their invaluable input, help and advice.

A very special thank you to Rhys Scudamore and Trystan Dafydd, whose tireless work and assistance throughout made this project not only possible but a genuinely enjoyable working experience. I am especially grateful to both Jacqui Smith and Alan Johnson who had the insight and bravery to recognise that the sexualisation of young people is an issue that needs be addressed and discussed, and who decided to get the conversation started by commissioning this report.

Finally, and very importantly, I'd like to thank all the children and young people who have helped shape and inform this review by taking part in focus groups and research studies and by sharing their experiences so generously – and in the case of my little daughter Jessica, for reminding me that the way she sees the world around her will inevitably shape the way she sees herself…

Dr Linda Papadopoulos

Dr Linda Papadopoulos is one of the most well-known and respected psychologists working in the UK. Her comments regarding the psychology behind news and current events are often syndicated by the press and discussed by television and radio networks both in Britain and in America.

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