

Little girls in a grown up world: Exposure to sexualized media, internalization of sexualization messages, and body image in 6-9 year-old girls

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Abstract

Despite widespread public concern about the early sexualization of young girls, as yet there has been little empirical examination of potential negative effects. In the present study a sample of 300 6-9 year-old girls completed individual interviews assessing exposure to sexualized media, internalization of sexualized messages (measured via preference for sexualized clothing), and body image attitudes (body esteem, body dissatisfaction). Exposure to sexualized media was found to be correlated with internalization of sexualization messages, itself correlated with negative body image. The findings provide preliminary evidence that sexualized messages appear to be internalized by very young girls which, in turn, has negative implications for how they feel about their bodies.

Keywords: Sexualization, Internalization, Girls, Body Image

Little Girls in a Grown Up World: Exposure to Sexualized Media, Internalization of Sexualization Messages, and Body Image in 6-9 Year-old Girls

There has been increasing widespread public and political concern about the early sexualization of girls in contemporary society and potential negative effects. In response to this concern, the American Psychological Association's (APA) 'Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls' (2007) outlined the evidence for, and consequences of, the sexualization of girls. The report defined sexualization as occurring when any one of the following conditions are met: (1) a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal; (2) a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness with being sexy; (3) a person is sexually objectified; (4) sexuality is inappropriately imposed on a person. The sexualization and objectification of girls and women is argued to have important negative consequences including body dissatisfaction, depression and lower self-esteem.

The mass media are often identified as a powerful or critical contributor to the sexualization of girls (APA, 2007; L. Monique Ward, Seabrook, Manago, & Reed, 2015). A substantial body of work has demonstrated that the media depict women and teenage girls in a sexualized manner, both on television (L. M. Ward, 1995) and in magazines (Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008). For example, popular children's television programs (e.g. *Hannah Montana*, *iCarly*) have been shown to perpetuate cultural stereotypes with boys depicted as valuing girls only for their physical attractiveness (Kirsch & Murnen, 2015). Likewise, a recent content analysis showed that portrayals of girls in American teen magazines have become increasingly sexualized over time from 1994 to 2011 (Graff, Murnen, & Krause, 2013). There is also extensive evidence that young people are avid consumers of these forms of media (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010), making it likely that girls are exposed to a high degree of sexualized media messages from a young age.

What is less clear is whether, and how, sexualized media messages are absorbed or internalized by young girls. While negative attitudes towards overweight have been observed in both Australian (Spiel, Paxton, & Yager, 2012) and American (Harriger, Calogero, Witherington, & Smith, 2010) pre-school children, to date only one empirical study has attempted to determine whether young girls have similarly internalized cultural messages about sexualization. Starr and Ferguson (2012) showed 60 American 6-9 year-old girls a pair of paper dolls, one dressed in sexualized clothing (short jean shorts and a low cut top revealing midriff) and the other in non-sexualized clothing (cargo pants and a sweater). Almost 70% of girls chose the sexualized doll as the one they themselves would like to look like, which the authors interpreted as evidence of self-sexualization. The current study aimed to use a more detailed and expanded version of Starr and Ferguson's (2012) clothing preference task to examine the internalization of sexualization messages in a larger sample of girls. It seems likely that the internalization of sexualization messages will be detrimental to girls' body image. There is now clear evidence that a desire for a thinner body occurs in girls as young as 6 years of age (e.g., Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2005; Jongenelis, Byrne, & Pettigrew, 2014; Lowes & Tiggemann, 2003). While some research has examined the relationship between self-objectification (a concept related to sexualization) and body dissatisfaction and disordered eating in adolescent and pre-adolescent girls (Jongenelis et al., 2014; Slater & Tiggemann, 2010), to the best of our knowledge research has yet to examine the relationship between the internalization of sexualization messages and body image concerns in young girls.

Thus the current study aimed to investigate young girls' exposure to sexualized media, internalization of sexualization messages (through clothing preferences), and body image in a sample of Australian 6-9 year-old girls. It was hypothesized that greater exposure

to sexualized media would be related to increased preference for sexualized clothing, and that preference for sexualized clothing would in turn be related to increased body image concern.

Method

Participants

Participants were 300 girls aged between 6 and 9 years old ($M = 7.19$, $SD = 0.90$) who were in Year 1 ($n = 104$), Year 2 ($n = 104$), and Year 3 ($n = 92$) of primary schooling. The girls were recruited from 11 independent schools across a geographically diverse area of metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia.

Procedure

Following approval by the Institutional Ethics Committee and school principals, girls in Years 1-3 were invited to participate in the study via a letter of introduction and consent form sent to their parent(s). Parental consent was received for 36.34% of invited girls. Girls were individually interviewed at their school by one of two female interviewers. Girls were explicitly told that 'I don't know' or choosing not to answer a question were viable response options and were given a small token of appreciation for their participation.

Measures

Exposure to Sexualized Media. A procedure similar to that described by Aubrey (2006) was used to measure exposure to sexualized media. First, girls were read a list of 18 television programs and 14 magazines popular with this age group (based on viewing and readership figures). Girls indicated the frequency with which they watched each program or looked at each magazine: 'never' (0), 'sometimes' (1), or 'a lot' (2). Two independent coders (female psychology postdoctoral researchers) subsequently rated each program and magazine according to the degree of sexualization present: 'none' (0), 'some' (1), 'a lot' (2), following Vandebosch and Eggermont's (2013) definition of sexualization as a visual and thematic focus on appearance and the body in a sexualizing way. Exposure to sexualized television

and magazine scores were calculated by multiplying the frequency by sexualization score for each program/magazine and summing the products.

Preference for Sexualized Clothing. Participants were presented with an array of 6 figures which showed the same girl wearing six different clothing outfits. Like Starr and Ferguson (2012), the figures were created from a doll dress up website (www.dollzmania.com) with each figure identical apart from her clothing. The clothing options ranged from conservative (1) and gradually increased in ‘sexiness’ to the most provocative and sexualized (6). For example, figure (1) was wearing dark jeans, trainers, and a t-shirt with a picture of an ice-cream on it. Figure (6) was wearing an extremely short black mini-skirt, a blue bustier top, and black knee-high boots (see supplemental material). Participants were told “*Here is Meg wearing 6 different outfits*”, and then asked “*Which outfit looks most like clothes you wear?*” (clothes actual), “*Which outfit would you like to wear?*” (clothes ideal), “*Which one do you think would be popular with other girls?*” (clothes popular girls), and “*Which one do you think boys would like best on girls?*” (clothes popular boys). The girls indicated their responses by pointing to the appropriate figure.

Body image.

Body dissatisfaction. Body dissatisfaction was measured with the girls’ version of the Children’s Figure Rating Scale (Tiggemann & Wilson-Barrett, 1998). This presents nine young female silhouette drawings that range from very thin to very fat. Girls were asked to point to “*the girl who you think looks most like you*” (current figure), followed by “*the girl who you would most like to look like*” (ideal figure). A body shape dissatisfaction score was computed by subtracting ideal figure from current figure. Good test–retest reliability has been found for such figure rating scales with children as young as 6 to 7 years of age (Collins, 1991).

Body esteem. Following Dittmar and colleagues (Dittmar, Halliwell, & Ive, 2006), seven items from the Revised Body Esteem Scale (R-BES; Mendelson, White, & Mendelson, 1996) were used to measure body esteem. The girls responded by pointing to one of three faces that represented “no” (sad face), “I don’t know” (neutral face), and “yes (smiley face). Responses were scored as ‘no’ (1), ‘I don’t know’ (2), and ‘yes’ (3). Responses from the seven items were summed with possible total scores ranging from 7 to 21, with higher scores indicating higher body esteem. Internal reliability was slightly less than adequate ($\alpha = .67$), but similar to that ($\alpha = .71$) reported by Dittmar and colleagues (2006).

Results

Exposure to Sexualized Media

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the list of 18 television programs and 14 magazines that were presented to the girls. It can be seen that of the television programs, *Prank Patrol*, *The Simpson*, *The Voice*, *ABC Cartoons*, and *The X Factor* were the most frequently watched, and for the magazines *Total Girl*, *Barbie Magazine*, *Disney Girl*, *Horse*, and *Saddle Club* were the most frequently read. Table 1 also displays the mean sexualization rating of each of the television programs and magazines.

Preference for Sexualized Clothing

Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations for the sexualized clothing questions. A repeated measures ANOVA determined that scores on the four clothing preference questions differed significantly, $F(3, 858) = 95.35, p < .001$. Post-hoc analyses revealed that compared to their actual clothes ($M = 2.35, SD = 1.21$), girls chose significantly ‘sexier’ clothes for their ideal clothes ($M = 3.85, SD = 1.42$), $p < .001$. In addition, the clothes that they thought would be popular with other girls ($M = 4.38, SD = 1.38$) and boys ($M = 3.64, SD = 1.90$) were both also significantly sexier than their actual clothes, $ps < .001$. Interestingly, the outfit the girls thought would be desirable to boys was very similar to the

girls' ideal clothing ($p = 1.00$), while that which they thought would be popular with other girls was significantly 'sexier', $p < .001$. In sum, girls demonstrated evidence of internalization of sexualization by choosing sexier clothing for their ideal than their actual clothing.

Body Image

Table 2 also displays the means and standard deviations for body dissatisfaction and body esteem. On the figure rating scale, the majority of girls (54.4%) chose an ideal figure smaller than their current figure, while a quarter (24.0%) expressed no body dissatisfaction (same current and ideal figure), and 21.6% desired a larger figure. Statistical analysis revealed that on average girls' chosen ideal figure ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.46$) was significantly smaller than their actual figure ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 1.27$), $t(295) = 7.00$, $p < .001$, indicating a desire for thinness. Nevertheless, scores on body esteem were on average high, suggesting the girls had overall positive feelings towards their bodies and appearance.

Relationships between Sexualized Media, Internalization of Sexualized Messages, and Body Image

Table 2 also displays the correlations between the exposure to sexualized media, internalization of sexualized messages, and body image. In support of the first hypothesis, it can be seen that exposure to sexualized television was positively correlated with choosing more sexualized clothing as desirable for boys and other girls, and exposure to sexualized magazines was positively correlated with preference for sexier clothing for oneself. Neither exposure to sexualized television or magazines showed any significant relationship with the body image variables. However, preference for sexier clothing was related to body dissatisfaction, such that girls who chose sexier clothing for themselves and as popular with other girls showed higher body dissatisfaction, in support of the second hypothesis. In

addition, the choice of more sexualized clothing as desirable for boys was negatively associated with body esteem.

Discussion

The current study investigated the issue of sexualization in a large sample of 6 to 9 year-old girls, specifically examining exposure to sexualized media, preference for sexualized clothing, and body image. In the only other similar study, Starr and Ferguson (2012) conceptualized girls' preference for sexy clothing on a dichotomous measure as an indicator of 'self-sexualization' and concluded that "the vast majority of girls were sexualized" in their U.S. sample of 6 to 9 year-old girls. In our sample of Australian girls of the same age, we presented girls with a range of six clothing choices of increasing 'sexiness' and asked for an actual clothing rating as a basis for comparisons, in a measurement technique analogous to the figure rating scales commonly used for assessing body dissatisfaction. It was found that girls expressed a desire to wear significantly sexier clothing than their actual clothes, here interpreted as an indicator of the internalization of sexualized messages. Further, we were able to show, as predicted, the preference for sexier clothing was related to greater exposure to sexualized media. This is a novel finding that warrants replication and further investigation.

With respect to body image, across the current sample 54% of girls indicated a desire for a thinner figure, comparable to a previous sample of Australian girls aged 5-8 years (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2005). The finding adds further support to the suggestion that by age 6 girls have already begun to internalize contemporary sociocultural beauty ideals. This is particularly concerning given the demonstrated links between body dissatisfaction and other negative psychological health outcomes such as disordered eating (Stice, 2002) and reduced self-esteem (Wertheim, Paxton, & Blaney, 2009).

Importantly, a preference for sexier clothing (for oneself and for other girls) was related to increased body dissatisfaction, while rating sexier clothing as desirable for boys was related to lower body esteem. These relationships, albeit of small effect size, suggest that the absorption or internalization of societal sexualized messages is not benign in terms of young girls' developing body image. While self-objectification has been consistently linked to body shame and disordered eating in adult women and adolescent girls (Tiggemann, 2013), this is yet to be established in younger girls. The present study represents the first attempt to demonstrate a link between sexualization and body image in girls of this age group. Future research might usefully assess other potential negative consequences, e.g., lower self-esteem, of aspects of sexualization in young girls.

As a whole, the findings suggest that it may be prudent for parents to attempt to limit their children's access to sexualized media. Apart from being gatekeepers to access, parents are also influential in the transmission of attitudes and beliefs to their young children. In particular, parents should aim to teach and model appropriate behaviours for their daughters (and sons) that show that girls are to be valued for much more than their outward physical appearance. Ideally such messages would also been reinforced in educational and wider societal settings.

The present findings must be considered in light of several limitations. First, the sample is largely homogeneous in terms of race and socioeconomic status, thus limiting the generalisability of the findings. Second, the sexualized clothing measure purpose-designed for the study has not yet been subject to rigorous psychometric evaluation. Third, the correlational design of the study means that causal conclusions cannot be drawn. Longitudinal research that follows young girls from very early childhood and tracks the development of internalization of sexualization messages and body image over some time is necessary to confirm causal directions.

Despite the above limitations, the present study has provided some of the first empirical evidence to accompany the widespread community debate about the frequency and nature of sexualization. Girls aged between 6 and 9 years were found to have absorbed or internalized societal messages about sexualization, expressed here as a desire for sexualized clothing. Unfortunately such internalization does not appear benign, with the preference for sexualized clothing showing relationships with poorer body image. The full extent of the impact of girls growing up in a highly sexualized world remains to be seen, but these initial findings indicate that young girls do internalize to some degree the messages about sexualization that surround them.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank Ms Anne O'Shea for her invaluable assistance with data collection as well as the schools, parents and children for participating. This research was funded in part by an Australian Research Council Discovery Project (DP0986623) awarded to Marika Tiggemann.

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Table 1. Means (and standard deviations) for exposure to television and magazines and mean sexualization ratings

Television Programs	Mean Exposure Rating (<i>SD</i>)	Sexualization Rating	Magazines	Mean Exposure Rating (<i>SD</i>)	Sexualization Rating
Prank Patrol	1.14 (0.82)	0	Total Girl	0.75 (0.74)	2
The Simpsons	1.11 (0.73)	0	Barbie Magazine	0.50 (0.68)	2
The Voice	1.09 (0.80)	2	Disney Girl	0.44 (0.66)	2
ABC Cartoons (general)	1.08 (0.78)	0	Horse	0.44 (0.70)	0
X Factor	0.86 (0.77)	2	Saddle Club	0.40 (0.65)	0
Total Drama Island	0.76 (0.79)	1	Girlfriend	0.32 (0.56)	2
Horrible Histories	0.74 (0.74)	0	K-Zone	0.29 (0.57)	0
Dance Academy	0.69 (0.77)	2	Lizzy McGuire	0.23 (0.53)	1
Play School	0.67 (0.69)	0	TV Hits	0.19 (0.44)	2
Big Brother	0.50 (0.73)	2	Dolly	0.18 (0.46)	2
The Super Hero Squad	0.45 (0.60)	1	TV Week	0.16 (0.44)	1
Saturday Disney	0.43 (0.71)	0	Cosmo	0.11 (0.35)	2
Home & Away	0.39 (0.65)	2	Cleo	0.11 (0.37)	2
Friends	0.30 (0.60)	1	D-Mag	0.08 (0.33)	0
Neighbours	0.29 (0.58)	2			
Rage/Video Hits	0.19 (0.48)	2			
Lockie Leonard	0.17 (0.46)	1			
It's Academic	0.02 (0.17)	0			

Note: Exposure ratings and Sexualization ratings have possible range of 0-2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for all variables and hypothesized correlations.

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Possible Range	Actual Range	Correlations							
					1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Sexualized Media Exposure												
1. Television	9.65	5.99	0-36	0-28	-							
2. Magazines	5.58	5.43	0-36	0-25		-						
Preference for Sexualized Clothing												
3. Actual Clothing	2.35	1.21	1-6	1-6	.06	.17**	-					
4. Clothing Ideal	3.85	1.42	1-6	1-6	.03	.18**		-				
5. Other girls' Ideal	4.38	1.38	1-6	1-6	.13*	.06			-			
6. Boys' Ideal	3.64	1.90	1-6	1-6	.15**	.01				-		
Body Image												
7. Body Dissatisfaction	0.62	1.52	-8-+8	-4-+6	.11	.01	.08	.12*	.14*	-.01		-
8. Body Esteem	18.92	2.00	7-21	9-21	.07	.08	.12*	-.02	.01	-.12*		-

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$



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Supplemental Material
Clothing preference figures.