

Please cite as: Coy, M. (2013) *Children, Childhood and Sexualised Popular Culture* in J. Wild (Ed) *Exploiting Childhood: How Fast Food, Material Obsession and Porn Culture are Creating New Forms of Child Abuse* London: Jessica Kingsley

Children, Childhood and Sexualised Popular Culture

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Sexualisation of popular culture as a social issue has exploded into public awareness and onto policy and academic agendas. The debates over possible implications of sexualisation have become complex, with definitions and what constitutes evidence of its impact often contested (see Gill, 2011 and Coy & Garner, 2012 for overviews). Yet at the same time, discussion has become focussed on 'early' and 'premature' sexualisation for children and young people. From this vantage point, sexualised popular culture is itself not problematic, only the age at which children and young people engage with it. Generation has trumped gender as the pivot around which commentary and campaigning revolve; feminist analyses have become marginalised. Space for a critical perspective on gender in which to ask questions about how being a young woman/man is influenced by sexualised popular culture has been largely lost.

In this chapter, I reinstate the case for an analysis of sexualised popular culture which recognises the importance of both generation *and* gender, moving beyond populist sound and fury about the contamination of children's innocence. I begin by outlining discussions about how sexualisation is defined and understood, reflect briefly on current policy frameworks and academic perspectives, before exploring the contradictions and confusions of approaches focussed simply around 'age-inappropriate' sexualisation. In the final section I suggest how a gendered analysis can be integrated into conversations with young people.

Sexualisation: definitions and discourses

The term 'sexualisation' is used to describe the mainstreaming of sexual imagery in contemporary popular culture (Gill, 2007). There is little consensus over what constitutes sexualisation and thus to what the term refers, although there is a common recognition that sexual imagery and discourse has increased in volume and visibility. Across all elements of 'this image-based culture' – e.g. advertising, music videos, lads mags - 'the staple... is the youthful, sexualised female body' (Dines, 2011: 3). Several feminist commentators have suggested that the term 'pornification' more accurately captures a cultural style in which the 'codes and conventions of pornography' are evident (Dines, 2011: 3; Whelehan, 2000). These conventions, in brief, include: that women and girls enjoy being sexually available for men and boys; that the most socially prized form of masculinity is defined by sexual conquest; and that this masculinity is shored up by the 'collective consumption of naked women' (Funnell, 2011: 38). Aesthetic codes for women and girls' bodies which originate in pornography, such as shaved pubic areas and breast enlargement surgery, have also become normalised (Dines, 2011; Coy & Garner, 2010).

We need to think here about what social messages about gender are in play. First is the idea that formal equality between women and men renders feminism irrelevant and outdated (see Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). Yet multiple inequalities persist: women are severely underrepresented in political decision-making (Fawcett Society, 2012); the gender pay gap in the UK is 19.7 per cent between men and women's average earnings (Office of National Statistics, 2012); and violence against women, internationally recognised as a cause and consequence of gender inequality, is widespread across all communities (EVAW 2011a; Walby 2011). Discussions about what sexualisation means for young women and men are all too often abstracted from these realities (Coy & Garner, 2012; Gill, 2012).

Linked to this is the idea that using the body for profit is an indicator of women's empowerment (Gill, 2007; Coy & Garner, 2010). Many elements of sexualised popular culture have seeped across from the sex industry e.g. pole dancing classes marketed as fitness; lap dancing as corporate entertainment; pimping as a verb in everyday language (Coy, Wakeling & Garner, 2011). All imply or involve an exchange of a female body which is most prized when youthful. This is lauded as an achievement of feminism, as evidence that individual women can choose to use their body as a commodity that brings them personal gain (Gill, 2007; Gill, 2011). The same argument is used to defend the commercial sex industry. Sexualised popular culture is, therefore, not simply the mainstreaming of sex, but the mainstreaming of *commercial* sex and of values that underpin the global sex industry (Boyle, 2010). This reinforces gender as a hierarchy where women remain defined in terms of the value of their bodies and men are entitled to such bodies for sexual gratification. Multiple intersections with race and ethnicity are also evident: racialised beauty stereotypes for women's bodies and young black women overtly sexualised while black men are presented as predatory (EVAW, 2011a; Gill, 2012).

This is an important point as feminist critical analyses of sexualisation are often traduced as attempts to repress expressions of sexuality. However, these critiques are not rooted in disapproval of sexual enjoyment, but of how it is constructed. It is for this reason that Rosalind Gill (2011) suggests that perhaps we should be referring to 'sexist' rather than 'sexualised' popular culture, and explore intersections with race/ethnicity. If sexualised popular culture is understood as a means of reinstating gender and race as social hierarchies (McRobbie, 2009; Dines, 2011; Walby, 2011), then it should be an issue for all those concerned with social justice. To date, policy and academic responses to sexualisation have somewhat patchily focussed on sexism, but paid minimal attention to how they might be shaped by race/ethnicity and class.

Reflections on policy frameworks and academic perspectives

Policy responses to sexualisation in England and Wales¹ have taken a journey 'from child protection to violence against women... and back again' (Coy & Garner, 2012: 289). An initial review of children's safety and wellbeing in the digital world (Byron, 2008) preceded a specific document on sexualisation commissioned by the Home Office as part of their strategy addressing violence against women. This review by Linda Papadopolous (2010) took

¹ The discussion of policy frameworks here refers primarily to the Westminster government and thus applies to England and Wales rather than all regions of the UK.

an explicitly gendered approach, exploring existing research on links between exposure to sexualised material (including pornography) and attitudes to violence against women. The key conclusion was that sexualised media reinforces heteronormative gender stereotyping by portraying women and girls as sexually desirable and equating masculine sexuality with conquest (Papadopolous, 2010). In other words, sexualised popular culture forms a 'conducive context' (Kelly, 2007) for violence against women and girls. This concept refers to how combinations of social messages and locations normalise certain practices – for example, that representations of women embracing sexual display and men as predatory diminish young women's ability to resist sexual pressure (Coy, 2009; EVAW, 2011a). The review team consulted widely with women's organisations who drew on their practice-based evidence of working directly with young women (and for some, also young men). These organisations recognised that how young people perceive 'doing' gender profoundly influences how they negotiate sexual encounters and relationships. For instance, they can provide multiple, diverse examples where young women link their experiences of sexual violence/harassment/exploitation with messages from sexualised popular culture (Coy & Garner, 2012). These examples include behaviours which appear to young people as normalised since they are so common: ways of sexually invading young women's bodies that reflect recent music videos (e.g. 'dagging'), and notions of women and girls as possessions/commodities that are expressed through language of 'pimping'. It is too simplistic to suggest that young people are passively mimicking actions they absorb from media; what matters is the extent to which these chime with existing social norms and thus appear 'natural' and inevitable (Gill, 2012). In an evaluation of a school-based prevention programme on sexual exploitation, one of the themes articulated by young men about messages in sexualised media was a link with masculinity – 'it's what boys do' (cited in Coy, Thiara, and Kelly 2011; see also EVAW 2011b).

The Papadopolous review also unpicked how popular culture reflects and reproduce gendered social norms, as there are obligations under international human rights conventions to address stereotyped sexualised representations of women in the media (United Nations 2006; Papadopolous, 2010).² Yet despite this progressive approach to gender equality, the review legitimised sexualised popular culture by defining it in terms of 'adult sexuality', which young people will one day be ready to 'deal with' (Papadopolous 2010: 23). This shifts concern to what stage in the life course young people 'should' enter a sexualised cultural landscape rather than the sexualised cultural landscape itself (Coy & Garner, 2012).

A change of government in 2010 brought another review, conducted by the Chief Executive of the Mothers Union (Bailey, 2011). While also notionally linked to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government's violence against women strategy, the Bailey review marked a change in emphasis towards defining the 'problem' of sexualised popular culture solely as a matter of age-appropriateness. There are token references to gender stereotyping in clothes and toys but the core of the review is the threat to childhood posed by sexualisation. As I will discuss later in this chapter, the recommendations centre around age restrictions on sexualised imagery/material and ensuring that advertising and various forms of media (e.g television and music videos) are 'family friendly' (see Bailey, 2011).

² E.g. the 1979 Convention of the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and 1995 Beijing Platform for Action.

Alongside policy reviews, an extensive body of academic scholarship has developed. Understandings of the possible issues at stake have been enriched by these multiple perspectives, the dialogue they produce, and thoughtful explorations of definitions and discourses. For the most part, though, academic research and theory has focussed on how sexualisation influences self-image and notions of empowerment, neglecting how these messages might be related to young people's sexual practices and relationships (Coy & Garner, 2012).

The missing piece of the jigsaw in both policy and academia is a gendered analysis that takes in not just femininity but also *masculinity* (for an exception, see Garner, 2012). How young women 'do' femininity, the ways in which they are able to engage with or resist dominant codes and constructions are influenced by the expectations of others. The extent to which (young) women are able to act with a sense of autonomy is shaped – and for many, restricted – by how (young) men assert their greater sense of entitlement to sex.

Research on 'sexting' - the sending and receiving of sexual images between young people - illustrates this well. A recent exploratory study suggests that sexting reflects the 'total normalisation of sexualised communications and imagery that young people are receiving and negotiating in their day to day lives at school and beyond' (Ringrose et al, 2012: 39). Sexualised popular culture is an important backdrop. The significance of gender is also clear and present; girls are far more likely to be the object of 'sexts'. The sending of sexts throughout social networks frequently occurs without young women's consent e.g. where sexual photographs taken for boyfriends are widely distributed on social media. Young people's engagement with technology and social media is integral here, facilitating new means to abuse and harass young women (Funnell, 2011; Ringrose et al, 2012). The authors conclude that the practice of sexting reflects heteronormative notions where doing 'boy' involves sexually invading young women's personal space and they call for further investigation of boys and masculinity (Ringrose et al, 2012). Yet making connections between sexualised popular culture and sexual practices, and asking questions about dominant forms of masculinity, are absent from much debate.

Contradictions and confusions: sexualisation in popular discourse

The role of the media with respect to sexualisation is complicated, not least because it is both a source of sexualised imagery, but also of concern about such images and messages (see Gill, 2012, for an extended discussion). Here I will suggest that in the populist outrage about sexualised popular culture, there are two ways in which contradictions and confusions are evident.

The first is an explicit hypocrisy in tabloid newspapers which heap opprobrium on images and products that present a 'danger' to children, despite having built a core income from sexually objectifying (young) women. For instance, in 2010 *The Sun* newspaper, (in)famous for a daily photograph of a semi-naked young woman on Page 3, waged a campaign against the sale of padded bikinis for girls. This resulted in the withdrawal of such products from major supermarkets and high street shops. With headlines such as 'Paedo heaven on our high street' (Hamilton, 2010a) and 'They're kids, not sexpots' (Hamilton, 2010b), *the Sun*

perpetuates the idea that children (girls) are endangered by sexualised clothing yet remains impervious to their own role in eroticising young female bodies.

The *Daily Mail* has been similarly singled out for the tension between their incendiary crusade against the sexualisation of children, while simultaneously running stories on their website *Mail Online* - with an average of 100 million unique readers per month (Press Gazette, 2012) – which comment lasciviously on young women’s breasts, bodies and bikinis (Gill, 2012; Robbins, 2012). In September 2012, tabloids condemned toddler ‘beauty pageants’ yet published large photographs of young girls in bikinis and makeup underneath headlines that made sexual allusions to ‘cavorting provocatively’ (Eaves et al, 2012). Women’s organisations that gave evidence to the recent Leveson enquiry into the culture and ethics of the media highlighted examples of this incongruity (EVAW, 2012; Object, 2012). Lord Justice Leveson’s final report called attention to:

the unfortunate juxtaposition of the article expressing outrage at a satirical programme on paedophilia and an article commenting on a 15 year-old’s breasts exposes a hypocrisy in relation to the sexualisation of young girls and women that is seen beyond the Page 3 tabloids: some have commented on the awkward co-existence of the Daily Mail’s support for “traditional values” with the Mail Online’s “sidebar of shame” (Leveson, 2012: 663-4).

The second approach is more confused than contradictory, yet also focuses on sexualised popular culture as a developmental issue as if there were little or no impact for adult women. For example, the ‘*Let Girls be Girls*’ campaign launched in 2010 by Mumsnet³, identifies the perils of clothing, toys and marketing that catapult girls into adult sexual codes. Here the ways in which sexualisation is profoundly gendered are acknowledged, as are some negative impacts for adult women, but the focus is on making a difference for the next generation of girls (Mumsnet, n.d.). The Channel 4 campaign ‘*Stop Pimping Our Kids*’ explicitly draws a developmental line in the sand, by defending the use of sexualised imagery in lads mags as their ‘selling point’ which is only problematic when they are stocked at ‘children’s eye level’ (Channel 4, n.d.)

Thus the only available critique of sexualisation within popular discourse centres on preserving children’s innocence (Coy & Garner, 2012). Policy responses have enthusiastically taken up and built on this approach. The Bailey Review (2011) recommended a code of practice for retailers which bars ‘scaled down’ sexualised products for children. Another recommendation proposes restricting advertisements featuring sexualised imagery near schools (Bailey, 2011). Such advertising has been described as a visual form of sexual harassment (Rosewarne, 2007). So while it is a welcome start to curb images that mainstream commercial sex, this specific recommendation can only be a symbolic measure. Children and young people do not only encounter such advertisements on their way to and from school. Almost all public space is likely to involve viewing advertisements on billboards, buses, shop displays that feature women’s bodies in sexualised poses. Significant proportions of young people are also exposed to sexual and pornographic material online

³ A website/online community for parents.

(see Ringrose et al, 2012 for an overview). Furthermore, as feminist campaign organisation Object (2012) trenchantly point out, tabloid newspapers that feature women in sexual display are regularly sold where children can see them.

What underpins this incoherent approach is an unwillingness to ask fundamental questions about how ongoing gender inequalities are reflected in sexualised popular culture. In the next and final section I outline ways to engage young people in these questions as a means of addressing sexualised popular culture in their everyday lives.

Integrating a gendered analysis into conversation with young people

Addressing the potential harms of sexualisation – social and individual – requires an approach rooted in children’s rights and protection *and* gender equality (EVAW, 2011a). While it may be more complex for young people, with limited life experience and social autonomy, to negotiate messages of popular culture, adults are not suddenly self-assured and ‘empowered’ as they cross the threshold into their majority (Gill, 2012). Therefore, both generation *and* gender are critically important. There are a number of potential ways in which discussions of both can be integrated into practice with young people.

First, talking about sexualised *youth* culture reinforces the notion that sexualised popular culture is itself not a problem, only the age at which young people engage with it. While many young people have specific relationships with music, fashion, television, film and indeed digital technology, they do not inhabit an entirely separate cultural field from adults. Limiting discussions to the term – and concept - ‘youth culture’ thus seals the doors on interrogating wider social contexts. Talking about sexualised popular culture in a wider sense avoids stigmatising youth, and will enable conversations about how young people make meaning of all images and messages that they encounter.

A common suggestion is to offer young people media literacy sessions, equipping them with skills to decode the messages they see and discuss the artificiality of image production. This is a welcome start, and has a vital place in enabling young people to think critically about sexualised media. However, as Rosalind Gill (2012) has argued, to view media literacy as an ‘inoculation’ against harmful or negative influences assumes that their newly acquired critical skills will cancel out any other responses that they may have to sexualisation e.g. fun, desire, humour. It also places all responsibility for change on young people, rather than seeking to transform popular culture itself.

Social change is urgently necessary, but in the here and now, perhaps one means of enabling young people to explore a range of responses is to ensure that questions about gender are at the heart of conversations with young people. This also offers opportunities to transform future unequal relations and hierarchies between women and men. Sex and Relationships Education (SRE), or similar classes, need to address ‘doing’ gender and conducive contexts for violence against women and girls (see Coy et al, 2010). Pressures related to sexualisation should form a central theme here (Ringrose et al, 2012). As not all children and young people are in regular education, these conversations need to be taking place in all youth settings.

Identifying popular culture as a site where unequal gender norms are reinstated (McRobbie, 2009), and as a conducive context for violence against women and girls, means that we can, and should, engage young people in an important question: how do gendered representations in sexualised popular culture provide templates for being a boy/man, girl/woman?⁴ For example, what do they make of images which consistently show women and girls semi-naked while men are fully clothed? How do they understand personal and social power – the ‘relationship (if any) between subjective *feelings of empowerment* and actually *being empowered*’ (Gill, 2012: 737)? What meanings, if any, do they attribute to forms of commercial sex that have become normalised leisure and entertainment e.g. lap dancing, pole dancing, ‘pimp and ho’ in music lyrics and as a party theme? How are all these reflected in their understandings of gendered standards for sexual behaviour? How do they view and interpret intersections of race and gender in sexualised imagery? Finally, and perhaps most significantly, how do they negotiate sexual consent and coercion according to what they understand of ‘doing gender’?

Conclusion

Feminism [is] an unfinished project - not only for young people, but for all of us (Gill, 2012: 743).

Addressing sexualisation only in terms of generation without gender is a limited approach. Yet current popular and policy debates around sexualisation focus only on the idea that contemporary popular culture prematurely imposes ‘sexuality’ on children before they are ready to deal with it. We need to be asking questions about the impact of sexualisation for women and girls; for men and boys and how they make sense of it and act in relation to it; and how sexualisation perpetuates stereotypes about masculinity and femininity. This then leads us to conversations about how gendered representations across forms of sexualised popular culture form a ‘conducive context’ (Kelly, 2007) for violence against women and girls (Coy 2009; EVAW 2011a). Women’s organisations that support survivors of sexual violence and carry out prevention work in schools around issues of sexual consent, see in sexualised popular culture the same messages about gender that underpin the dynamics of violence and abuse. Approaches that ignore the significance of gender fail to account for this.

The current emphasis on addressing sexualisation is to achieve a ‘family-friendly’ society (Bailey, 2011). If we reframe this as ‘woman-friendly’, we move closer to tackling the gendered hierarchies that are reinforced in and through sexualised popular culture, and offer young people a different perspective on their present and future everyday lives.

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⁴ In the US, a vibrant activist movement, SPARK (‘Sexualization Protest: Action, Resistance, Knowledge’) was established in response to the American Psychological Association (2007) Taskforce report on the Sexualization of Girls (SPARK, n.d.). Led by young women, SPARK comprises a coalition of individuals and organisations and uses social media to build alternatives and challenges to sexualised representations of women and girls. Such an initiative opens possibilities for engaging young people in feminist critique that enhances their rejection of gendered inequalities, now and as they become adults. See www.sparksummit.com

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