SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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This paper argues that sexualised media is a significant influence on children and young people’s socio-sexual development and in this way contributes to the sexualisation of children. It will provide scholarly and empirical evidence to address each term of reference. National and international commentary and research informs this paper as the rise of globalisation and the internet means that Australian children can access sexualised media and products at the tips of their fingers.

i. **The sexualisation of children and young people in electronic, print and social media and marketing;**

There has been much concern about young girls being portrayed as adultified and women being portrayed as infantilised in mass media (Papadopoulos, 2010). Rush and La Nauze (2006a) in particular, argue that Australian children are being directly sexualised through media advertising by being portrayed in a way that signifies adult sexuality. They contend that girls in particular are positioned, dressed and fashioned in a way that draws attention to their sexual features. Walter (2010) concurs, stating that girls are being positioned as sexually alluring with pouting lips and hands on their hips in contemporary media. Lumby and Albury (2010) argue against these views claiming that these authors ignore the fact that children are socialised within the context in which they grow, and as such wear fashion that reflect the trends of the time and have been doing so since the 1960s. The concerns with children wearing contemporary fashions though appear to revolve around today’s fashion being inspired by a vision of sexuality derived from the sex industry (Dines, 2010). Rush and La Nauze (2006a) add that children are also indirectly sexualised through exposure to sexualised depictions and messages disseminated through the media.

ii. **The exposure of children and young people in NSW to sexualised images and content in public places, electronic, print and social media and marketing;**

Many scholars argue that sexual signifiers in media are omnipresent and there has been an increase in the frequency and intensity of sexualised media over the past decade in parallel
with the growth of the pornography industry. Such media dominate public spaces with sexualised images and messages that are impossible to avoid (Buckingham, Willett, Bragg, & Russell, 2010; Burke, Gridley, & Pham, 2008; Casciani, 2010; Department for Children Schools and Families, 2009; Flood, 2009; Gale, 2009; Levin & Kilbourne, 2008; Media and Women Organisation, 2010; Papadopoulos, 2010; Rush & La Nauze, 2006a, 2006b; Silmalis, 2010; Zurbriggen et al., 2007). Some of the media referred to as overtly sexual include magazines aimed at children and young people, television programs, billboards, music media (lyrics, videos and artists), Internet sites, and advertising, which traverses all these forms (Bailey, 2011; Boynton, 2009; Burke et al., 2008; Department for Children Schools and Families, 2009; Dines, 2009; Gale, 2008; Gill, 2009; Hamilton, 2009, 2010; Levin & Kilbourne, 2008; Olfman, 2009; Papadopoulos, 2010; Rush & La Nauze, 2006a, 2006b). Levin and Kilbourne (2008) claim that more than 80 per cent of popular programs aimed at adolescents contain sexualised content and that children are often exposed to sexual signifiers in media such as music videos, films, video games and song lyrics. Some examples of overtly sexualised material seen in Australian contemporary media include: girls’ magazines that feature articles on how to masturbate males, perform fellatio and participate in anal sex (Boynton, 2009; Gale, 2010); ‘Sexpo’ advertisements on buses, and highly sexualised billboard advertisements, such as the pictured Lee Jeans advertisement (see Figure 1) (Coppel, 2011), which blur erotic zones of adult sexuality and childhood imagery. Recent research found that more than 55% of music videos broadcast on Australian free-to-air television during child friendly time periods - parental guidance (PG) and General (G) - contained some level of sexualised content. Lyrics were the highest type of sexualised demonstration followed by dress, non-dance movement and dance movement. This research also found that music videos by women artists contained the highest frequencies and duration of sexualised content (Ey & McInnes, 2015).

Figure 1 Lee Jeans advertisement (Coppel, 2011)
Whilst it must be recognised that sexualised images have featured in media since mass media first emerged, Papadopoulos (2010) contends that ‘what we are seeing now is an unprecedented rise in both volume and extent to which these images are impinging on everyday life’ (p. 6). Dines (2010) and Attwood (2009) suggest that the sexualised content in general contemporary media resemble soft-core pornographic depictions and conduct. This was evident in the Australian music video research which found that some women artists wore costumes and used apparatus traditionally seen in the pornography industry, such as sex-industry-inspired body-stocking costumes, dominatrix costumes, fish-net stockings and suspenders, fetish heels and stainless-steel nails, and women in cages (Ey & McInnes, 2015).

Whilst both boys and girls are exposed to sexualised media and products aimed at adults (Coy, 2009), many commentators argue that sexualised products are increasingly being directly marketed to children, and such products are primarily aimed at girls (Coy, 2009; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Levin & Kilbourne, 2008; Olfman, 2009; Rush & La Nauze, 2006a). Rush and La Nauze (2006a), Zurbriggen et al. (2007), Carr-Greg (2010), and Lamb and Brown (2006) call attention to the many products available for, and marketed towards, young girls, which they contend places girls at risk of premature sexualisation. Such products include revealing clothing with sexually signified messages, cosmetics, and toys which reflect adult sexuality, such as Bratz dolls. Magazines designed for girls from age 6 that promote teenage popular culture, such as fashion, pop stars, and instructions on how to imitate sexualised dance moves. This exposure to sexualised content is extended by magazines aimed at adolescent girls, which are beginning to promote sexual activity (Boynton, 2009; Gale, 2010). According to Rush and La Nauze (2006a), the design and advertising of such products predominantly promote ideals of beauty and sexuality.

Olfman (2009) claims that ‘pornographic depictions of women and girls have been glamorised, mainstreamed and marketed toward children’ (p. 1). Lamb and Brown (2006) propose that, even in early childhood, through products such as Bratz dolls and videos, girls are encouraged to see their sexual allure as their primary passport to success. The American Psychological Association argue that ‘although these dolls may present no more [sexually] than is seen on MTV videos, it is worrisome’ that these dolls are associated with an objectified adult sexuality and are specifically designed for and aimed at children aged 4-8 years (Zurbriggen et al., 2007, p. 14). Another recent development is the marketing of products to children that are implicitly associated with the sex industry, for example, Playboy stationery, pole dancing dolls, Peekaboo stripper pole, and pole dancing classes for children (Coy, 2009). The Tesco Peekaboo stripper pole includes a ‘sexy garter’ and fake money. It must be noted that, subsequent to community indignation, this item was relocated from the toy department to the fitness section. However, Tesco argued that they had not targeted children, and stated that it was for adult fitness regimes, which does not explain why the product was originally located in the toy section (Business Pundit, 2011). Sexualised depictions in media that affiliate with images traditionally associated with the sex industry and sexualised representation in products marketed towards children do not align with children’s natural sexual development.
iii. The impact on children and young people of growing up in a sexualised culture;

There is limited research conducted with children to identify whether engagement with sexualised media influences their healthy development. There is, however, an abundance of international research that has found associations between adolescents and young people’s repeated engagement with sexualised media and their early sexual activity (Collins et al., 2004; Ezzel, 2009; Hall, West, & Hill, 2011; Martino, Collins, Kanouse, Elliott, & Berry, 2005; Media and Women Organisation, 2010; Newton, 2009; Papadopoulos, 2010; Rush & La Nauze, 2006b; Strasburger, 2010; Zurbriggen et al., 2007). Research specific to adolescent and adult’s engagement with overtly sexualised music media found significant negative impacts including, the acceptance of interpersonal violence against women, sexist stereotypical attitudes, adversarial sexual beliefs, acceptance of rape myths, and the adoption of dysfunctional sexual scripts (Andsager & Roe, 2003; Hogan et al., 1996; Kalof, 1999; Papadopoulos, 2010; West, 2009; Zurbriggen et al., 2007). Other impacts included body dissatisfaction, self-objectification, low self-esteem, eating disorders and a wide range of mental health issues (Levin & Kilbourne, 2008; Olfman, 2009; Papadopoulos, 2010; Starr & Ferguson, 2012). Given the frequency and intensity of sexualised content in contemporary media (Rush & La Nauze, 2006a) and children’s increasing engagement with media (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012; Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2013), the above research validates concerns about negative impacts on children’s socio-sexual development.

Many commentators argue that there is a rise in children displaying problematic sexual behaviours at younger ages (Briggs, 2012; Hamilton, 2010; Levin & Kilbourne, 2008). Australian child psychologists, Joe Tucci argues that this is a result of some children being victims of sexual abuse, however, he claims that more frequently children are showing sexual and/or violent behaviours they have seen in advertising, music videos and gaming (Betts & Rowlands, 2011). Levin and Kilbourne (2008) state that in the United States children are engaging in ‘sandwich or lap dancing: where a girl dances between two boys who press their bodies up against her front and back, and freaking: a dance where a boy and girl grind against each other in a simulation of sexual intercourse’ (p. 83). In Australia and the United States, Hamilton (2009) and Levin and Kilbourne (2008) state that early childhood teachers report that preschool and junior primary children are increasingly emulating sexualised music artists’ dress, jewellery and dance moves, using sexually signified language, acting out sexually, and objectifying themselves. Research conducted in South Australia with children aged 5-14 years found that 27% of children dressed in a manner that signified adult sexuality when attending a school disco and 11% of these children were in years R-2 (aged 5-8 years). When assessing dance, no-dance movement and behaviours that signified adult sexuality, this number increased to 33%; 25% of these children were in year 3-7 and eight per cent were in years F-2. Although many of these observations could not be directly associated with imitation of sexualised music artists, some could. For example many children thrust their crotch at the same time as the artists did during the song ‘Sexy and I know it’, despite not having any access to the visual at the
school disco (Ey & Cupit, 2013). Whilst Hamilton (2009) claims that children are commonly naive about what they are saying or doing, Levin and Kilbourne (2008) argue that children who present sexually become popular, which drives this behaviour. The latter claim is supported by Starr and Ferguson’s (2012) research, which found that young girls conflate sexualised dress with popularity. This is not unexpected given that being ‘sexy’ is marketed as culturally preferred and socially important (Papadopoulos, 2010; Rush & La Nauze, 2006b; Walter, 2010). Further, 50% of girls (aged 6 and 10) and 18% of boys (aged 6 years) and 28% of boys (aged 10) showed a preference for sexualised clothing when asked about clothing they would like to wear (Ey, 2014a).

According to Hamilton (2009), young children who focus heavily on their self-presentation are at risk of missing out on important social developments, such as being spontaneous and having unselfconscious fun. Papadopoulos (2010), Rush and La Nauze (2006a) and the American Psychological Association (Zurbriggen et al., 2007) add that when children have an unhealthy focus on self-presentation, they are at risk of psychological impacts such as body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, depression and eating disorders. Carr-Greg (2010) and Linn (2009) claim that a consequence of children engaging in sexualised media is that children are striving to act like adolescents and missing out on important social and emotional developmental milestones obtained from interacting with same-sex peers and engaging in middle-childhood experiences. Research in South Australia with young children has found that children and are expressing attitudes commonly associated with adolescent behaviours (Ey, 2014a).

The emerging research in this field suggests that children are beginning the follow the same trend seen in the research with adolescents and young people, which is problematic to children’s socio-sexual development.

iv. Adequacy of current measures at state and federal level to regulate sexualised imagery in electronic, print and social media and marketing, and effectiveness of self-regulation measures;

Current media regulations are written very broadly and vaguely and are open to interpretation. In addition, media regulations are largely self-regulated, unless a formal complaint has been lodged by the public, in which the complainant is required to submit a written statement of discontent to the broadcaster responsible for airing material the complainant perceives as noncompliant to that industry’s code of practice (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2009). The broadcaster can respond justifying how the material complies with the regulations, which is relatively easy to do given the vagueness of the code. ACMA only investigates complaints if the matter has been referred to the broadcaster first and has not been resolved to the complainants satisfaction if the complainant refers the matter to the ACMA (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2009).
The following outlines the current commercial television industry code of practice and highlights the ambiguity of the language used that allows broadcasters the freedom to push the boundaries.

‘General (G) classification – Material classified G is not necessarily intended for children but it must be very mild in impact and must not contain any matter likely to be unsuitable for children to watch without supervision’ (ACMA, 2015, p. 26). Visual depiction of violence, sex, nudity, drugs, and social or domestic conflict must be very restrained, brief and contain very little detail. Coarse language must be very mild, non-discriminatory and infrequent. Suicide can only be verbally referenced and must not be presented as normal, romantic, heroic or alluring. Dangerous imitable activity should not encourage dangerous imitation. All elements must be justified by the storyline or program context (ACMA, 2015).

Ambiguous language which is open to personal interpretation include, ‘very mild in impact’; ‘restrained, brief, and very little detail’; ‘mild coarse language’; and ‘justified by the storyline or program context’. How mild is mild in impact? How is this measured? What constitutes restrained, brief and very little detail in relation to violent, sexual, nudity, drugs, social or domestic conflict? What is mild coarse language? By definition on the free dictionary, ‘coarse’ language is described as ‘vulgar, obscene, crude’ http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/coarse?s=t. How can elements of a program not be justified? If it did not relate to the story line, would a producer put it in the program? Without objective definitions, each person can carry a different interpretation, and each element has nothing in which to be measured against.

‘Material classified [Parental Guidance] PG may contain adult themes or concepts but must be mild in impact’ (ACMA 2015, p.15). Much of the descriptions for the PG classification are similar to the G classification, with some additional materials permitted and some changes to the wording. For example, violence, sex, nudity, language, and drugs must be inexplicit and restrained. Verbal and visual representations of suicide are permitted, but should not be promoted. Social/domestic conflict and psychological themes should be handled carefully. Supernatural and mild horror permitted (ACMA 2015). What constitutes inexplicit? How does one justify promotion verses demotion? Finally, what constitutes handled carefully?

Mature (M) rating is ‘recommended for viewing only by persons aged 15 years or over’, ‘impact must be moderate (i.e. higher than mild but lower than strong)’ (ACMA 2015, p.15). Violence can be realistic, but not detailed and sexual violence must be infrequent and restrained. Sexual activity must be restrained, unless verbal, providing it does not increase impact. Nudity must not be detailed or in a sexual context. Drugs and suicide must not be promoted or instructional. Intense adult themes should be handled with care (ACMA 2015, p. 28).

Unclear concepts include moderate impact. The example suggests that the impact can be higher than mild but lower than strong. Mild and strong are not established, thus how can moderate impact be established? How can one depict restrained sexual violence? Sexual
activity is not supposed to increase the ‘unestablished’ moderate impact. How does one measure that?

M15+ is suitable for persons aged 15 years+ ‘because of the intensity and/or frequency of violence, sexual depictions, or coarse language, adult themes or drug use. The impact may be strong’ (ACMA 2015, p. 28). Violence may be detailed, but not unduly bloody/horrific. Sexual violence must not be detailed. Sex may be detailed, however, non-consensual sex should not be depicted as desirable. Very coarse language is acceptable, however it should not be overly frequent or impactful. Drug use should not be detailed or promoted. Unclear concepts in the M15+ classification include, unduly bloody/horrific, and overly frequent or impactful.

Alongside the ambiguity of the language used, new classification times means that adult themes are freely shown on television from 7.30pm every day and between 12pm-3pm on school days. This suggests that all children under the age of 15 years are either in bed by 7.30pm every night, or not watching television, which is unlikely.

**Music Regulations**
The music industry is governed by several media regulations due to its diverse means of broadcasting. These are developed under the Broadcasting Services Act 1992 and include, the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice, Children’s Television Standards Internet Industry Codes of Practice, and the Commercial Radio Australia Codes of Practice. These codes of practice ‘are all subject to content regulations by ACMA’ (Arts Law Centre of Australia, 2006, p. 1). These codes of practice ‘are all subject to content regulations by ACMA’ (Arts Law Centre of Australia, 2006, p. 1). Program content is governed by the codes of practice developed by the industry groups representing each broadcasting sector, which means that, media is primarily self-regulated.

**Music Videos and Concerts**
Codes of practices relating to music developed under the Classification (Film, Publications and Computer Games) Act 1995 include the Labelling Code of Practice for Recorded Music (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995), which are only enforced for audio recordings (Office of Film and Literature Classification, 2005). ‘There is no formal classification system applicable to the performing arts or visual arts (except where these involve multimedia content or are included in a publication)’ (Arts Law Centre of Australia, 2006, unpaginated). Performing arts include live concerts, and musical performance, which is defined as ‘a film wholly comprising of musical presentation’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995; Office of Parliamentary Counsel, 2013). Since live performances and music presentation fall under section 5B of the 1995 Classification (Film, Publications and Computers Games) Act, ‘exempt films and exempt computer games’ classification, music videos are not required to apply for classification (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995; Office of Parliamentary Counsel, 2013). This means that music videos have much more freedom to include highly sexualised material. This is reflected in the high levels of sexually signified content we are seeing in contemporary music media.
Music DVDs
Musical presentation (music DVD) and live performances are not directly governed by the regulations of the 1995 Act. Instead, they are regulated by ‘a system of voluntary labelling guidelines for audio tapes, records and CDs developed by the Australian Record Industry Association (ARIA) and the Australian Music Retailers Association (AMRA)’ (Arts Law Centre of Australia, 2006, unpaginated). ARIA/AMRA (2003) states – any product ‘which contains audio-visual and/or visual material must, pursuant to the national classification scheme, be classified by the Office of Film and Literature Classification Board (OFLC) in accordance with the classification guidelines for film and computer games’ (p. 5). As a result, music videos are not actually regulated by either the OFLC or ARIA

Internet
The Internet is the most difficult medium to be able to regulate material. Although it has a duty to provide systems to enable users to manage access to content in certain circumstances, present filtering technologies are limited and filtering all Internet content is not only impractical, but impossible. Internet Service Providers (ISPs) have an obligation to develop strategies to aid the prevention of access to prohibited content (Internet Industry Association, 2002) in accordance with content code 1 (5.2) which includes:

[5.2.1] (a) encouraging [content providers] to use appropriate labelling systems, in respect to content which is likely to be considered unsuitable for children according to the national classification code, though not prohibited or potential prohibited content;
[5.2.2] (b) and inform them of their legal responsibilities (…) in relation to content which they intend to provide to the public via the Internet from within Australia (Internet Industry Association, 2002, p. 6).

The nature and magnitude of the Internet means that although content providers may be encouraged to label content according to the national classification code, it is very difficult to police and therefore enforce. As with television regulations, a content provider can argue that the language, drugs, violence, sex and nudity are justified by the context.

In relation to educating users to protect children from inappropriate content, ISPs are obliged by content code 1 (5.3) to:

[5.3] Take reasonable steps to provide users with information about;
[5.3.1] (a) supervising and controlling children’s access to Internet content and;
[5.3.2] (b) procedures in which responsible adults can implement to control children’s access to Internet content including, availability, use and application of filtering software and carriage services, and labelling systems (Internet Industry Association, 2002, p. 7).

As a result current media regulations are inadequate to protect children from exposure to sexualised material and other adult themes, therefore contributing to the sexualisation of children.
iv. Is children’s access to sexualised media having an impact of their healthy socio-sexual development?

This has been address under section iii.

v. Measures to assist parents in fulfilling their responsibility to protect and educate children;

The implications of sexualised media for parents are diverse. Current media codes and regulations appear to rely heavily on parental supervision, guidance and media control to protect children from sexualised media. This means that parents need to use a either a restrictive approach to manage their children’s viewing, which is increasingly less effective, given the increase of technologies that allow children greater media access (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2007, 2010), or an educational/instructive approach. An educational/instructive approach involves parents co-viewing media with their children and discussing controversial issues and family values relevant to those issues, and creating guidelines around media with their children. Currently, there are no ‘managing media guides’ actively promoted to parents. Rather, parents are required to seek out their own information and management strategies. Parents need to be supported and provided with opportunities to access knowledge and resources. Such resources could provide guidance on managing children’s exposure to, and interpretation of, sexualised media. One organisation that provides assistance for parents is the Australian Council on Children and the Media (ACCM), who provide information about media and children’s healthy development, movie and App reviews and run conferences [http://childrenandmedia.org.au/](http://childrenandmedia.org.au/). To further support parents, specialised programs could be provided through locations positioned to reach large numbers of parents, such as schools, childcare, and outside school hours care (OSHC). Some parents may not be fully aware of how to identify effects on children’s healthy development, particularly children’s gender role and self-identity development, therefore specialised programs and information for parents about the implications of exposure to sexualised media on children’s learning and development and how to recognise the effects would enable them to better understand and contend with these issues.

Parents need to become more pro-active in expressing their concerns in relation to media content. A South Australian study found clear evidence of parental dissatisfaction about sexualised content seen in contemporary music videos, yet none had actively complained to authorities (Ey, 2014b). Parents’ lack of reporting signifies to media authorities a sense of community satisfaction with current media content and its regulation resulting in continued displays of sexualised content. If parents wish to effect change, they need to become familiar with media codes and regulations, the governing authorities, and the reporting process.

Parents could also advocate for the regulation of sexually signified products aimed towards children. Children want to fit in, and at age 6 to 11 years, they make social comparisons about their abilities, behaviour and appearance (Erikson, cited in Berk, 2012). Children’s desire to conform to societal norms create pressure for parents, resulting in children having
a significant influence over parental purchases (Buckingham et al., 2010; Hill, 2011; New Generations & Cartoon Network, 2011; Sanson et al., 2000; Turner, Kelly, & McKenna, 2006). A culture that produces and markets sexualised music, toys and clothing to young girls cultivates expectations that girls present sexually, resulting in young girls striving to conform to the sexual standards of the culture. Parents can create change through protest against industries which promote sexualised lifestyles for children. In the past, community protest has proven to be somewhat successful in accomplishing removal of products, for example a pole dancing kit was removed from the toy department after community uproar (Business Pundit, 2011).

vi. Measures to educate children and young people and assist them in navigating the contemporary cultural environment;

International and Australian studies have found that children are being affected by the sexualised culture in which they are growing, as they try to comply with the sexy ideals represented in media (Ey, 2014a; Ey & Cupit, 2013; Hamilton, 2009, 2010; Levin & Kilbourne, 2008; Starr & Ferguson, 2012). This suggests that children are not receiving suitable education about media and identity. Currently, Australian children are receiving education on media analysis and media influence from foundation, through the English, Health and Physical Education (PE) and Media Arts curriculum. However much of the content relating to media influence on self is taught through the Health and PE strand and relates to healthy choices up until year 3-4 (ACARA, 2015). It is not until year 4-5 though the Media Arts curriculum, that they begin to explore the role of media in disseminating cultural ideals and the influence of this on shaping perspectives (ACARA, 2014a). Although supporting children’s positive self-identity development is a key focus in the General Capabilities document (ACARA, 2014b) and represented in the Health and PE document (ACARA, 2015), they do not receive specific education about the role in media in shaping self-identity. Gender role development is not explored until years 7-8 and generally revolves around cultural values and stereotyping (ACARA, 2014a, 2015). An educational focus on children’s social-sexual development, including gender-role and self-identity development, needs to be incorporated in education curricula at an age where children are being affected.

vii. Possible measures that the Children’s Advocate can take to assist children and young people to navigate the cultural environment successfully.

Child advocates need to advocate for:

1. a much more conscious policy and strategic approach to improve the regulation of media content for children’s consumption
2. better support and resources for children and their families to limit the premature sexualisation of children through marketing and media
3. Early intervention through formal schooling to educate children to become critical consumers to support children in navigating their way through the sexualised images and messages of contemporary culture.

4. Government intervention to regulate industries where children are potential or intended consumers.

5. Media, clothing industries and businesses to monitored and accountable for sexualised products aimed at children.

6. Media, clothing industries and businesses to become proactive in seeking feedback about their products and establish communication lines where parents can register complaints or commendation, which needs to be taken seriously and acted upon.

viii. Any other related matter.

Government funding for further research on the sexualisation of children needs to be a priority to identify impacts and address regulatory or educational strategies to support children and families living in a sexualised, consumer society where new manufactured risks appear every day.

References


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