



Brief research report

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.

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Introduction

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; 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 (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, Foebr, & 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

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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 Vandenberg 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](#) linked online to this article). 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 6–7 years of age (Collins, 1991).

Body esteem. Following Dittmar, Halliwell, and 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 et al. (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 Simpsons*, *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,

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