



## An investigation of young girls' responses to sexualized images



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### ABSTRACT

Evidence suggests that the sexualization of girls has increased and become more explicit in recent years. However, most of the research conducted to date has focused on sexualization in adults. To address this research gap, this study explored how young Australian girls respond to and describe sexualized and non-sexualized depictions of their peers. Results from 42 girls aged 6–11 years revealed that sexualization was a perceptually salient attribute, with participants readily classifying sexualized girls as a subgroup. Participants also made distinct trait attributions based on the differences between sexualized and non-sexualized girls. The results suggest that young girls respond differently to sexualized and non-sexualized depictions of their peers and are beginning to develop stereotypes based on these depictions. As such, the implementation of media literacy programs in adolescence may be too late and efforts may be required to address this issue among younger children.

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### Introduction

Evidence suggests that the sexualization of women in the mainstream media and in popular culture has increased and become more explicit over time (Goodin, Van Denburg, Murnen, & Smolak, 2011; Graff, Murnen, & Krause, 2013; Reichert & Carpenter, 2004). Young girls are also exposed to this environment, raising concerns about the potential for them to be adversely affected by this trend of increased sexualization (American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007; Papadopoulos, 2010; Smolak & Murnen, 2011). The focus of the present study is whether young girls find sexualization perceptually salient, how young girls respond to this sexualization (as manifest in sexualized depictions of their peers), and the stereotypes held of sexualized peers.

The report of the American Psychological Association (APA) Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) presented evidence suggesting that girls are exposed from an early age to sexualizing content in mainstream teen magazines, prime-time television programs, advertising, music videos and lyrics, and dolls. A recent analysis of the depiction of girls in two teen magazines by Graff et al. (2013) found a substantial increase in sexualizing characteristics across the last three decades. Specifically, the number of sexual-

izing characteristics of girls in *Seventeen* magazine was found to triple over the period. For *Girls' Life*, there were 15 times the number of sexualizing characteristics evident in the depictions of girls in 2011 compared to when the magazine was founded in 1994. The sexualizing characteristics most observed to increase over time and most frequently found in these magazines were low-cut shirts or dresses that reveal the body and emphasize the breasts, tight fitting clothing, and high heels. This is reflected in clothing products designed for and marketed to young girls. In a content analysis of US stores by Goodin et al. (2011), nearly 30% of the clothing items available to young girls had sexualized characteristics (i.e., the clothing revealed or emphasized a sexualized body part such as the chest, waist, buttocks, or legs; had characteristics associated with sexiness; and/or had writing on it with sexualizing content).

According to Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994), consistent exposure to repeated themes and images over time can lead individuals to adopt these same perspectives of the world and themselves, a process known as assimilation. It has been suggested that repeated exposure to depictions of sexualization may lead girls to accept it as normative and ideal (Graff et al., 2013; Smolak & Murnen, 2011). Starr and Ferguson (2012), showed 60 six- to nine-year-olds two dolls, one skimpily dressed in revealing clothes (i.e., a sexualized doll) and the other in trendy yet covered-up clothes (i.e., a non-sexualized doll). A majority of girls chose the sexualized doll for their ideal self (70%) and perceived the sexualized doll as being the most popular (72%). These results support other work suggesting that young girls may associate looking sexy with social rewards such as popularity and attention (Graff,

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Murnen, & Smolak, 2012). However, the forced choice method used in Starr and Ferguson's study limited the range of responses the young girls could provide, which the authors acknowledged could not capture nuanced attitudes or identify equal preferences.

Although it has been suggested that girls may perceive sexiness to be advantageous (Graff et al., 2012), sexualized attitudes and behaviors have numerous negative consequences. Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996) was developed to provide a framework for understanding how the sexualization of women in the Western world can result in numerous negative psychological consequences. Drawing on social psychological theories, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argued that an individual's sense of self is a social construction, and that the way society and other people view and treat individuals will be reflected in the way they view and treat themselves. In a sexualized environment that promotes the objectification of women, individuals are socialized to adopt a third-person view of themselves as objects whose value is dependent on their physical appearance rather than their abilities, resulting in the internalization of narrow societal values relating to physical appearance (Morry & Staska, 2001; Pesa, Syre, & Jones, 2000). As such, objectification theory proposes that girls and women internalize the sexualization to which they are being repeatedly exposed and begin to self-objectify by adopting a critical observer's perspective of their physical self and therefore view themselves as objects to be evaluated. This self-objectification manifests as self-monitoring (also known as body surveillance) in an effort to ensure conformity to cultural standards (McKinley & Hyde, 1996), and has been linked to the development of eating disorders, depression, and low self-esteem (for a review see Moradi & Huang, 2008).

While considerable evidence demonstrates the negative psychological consequences of sexualization and self-objectification in women (for a review see Tiggemann, 2011) and adolescents (Slater & Tiggemann, 2002, 2010, 2015), only a small body of work has explored how self-objectification affects young girls and preadolescents. In a study of 13-year-old girls, exposure to music television videos (with their highly sexualized portrayals of women) was significantly and positively associated with body surveillance, dieting, and anxiety, and negatively associated with confidence in mathematics ability (Grabe & Hyde, 2009). Research with 10- to 12-year-olds (Lindberg, Grabe, & Hyde, 2007; Lindberg, Hyde, & McKinley, 2006), 10- to 13-year-olds (Tiggemann & Slater, 2015) and 11- to 13-year-olds (Grabe, Hyde, & Lindberg, 2007) has also documented the relationship between self-objectification, lowered body esteem, heightened body shame, and increased dieting behaviors. A more recent study by Jongenelis, Byrne, and Pettigrew (2014) demonstrated that girls as young as 6 years engage in self-objectification to an extent similar to that seen in adolescents and women. In this sample of 6- to 11-year-old girls, self-objectification was found to be significantly related to body image and eating disturbances.

As young girls are particularly vulnerable to the messages conveyed by society because they are in the process of developing their identity (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002), it is possible they are being negatively influenced by the proliferation of sexualized images that shape their preferences for a sexualized ideal. However, despite the increasing sexualization of young girls and the emergence of evidence suggesting that this results in the same negative psychological consequences as it does in adults and adolescents, there appears to be little research that has examined how young girls respond to the sexualizing content depicted in images they encounter. An exception is a study by Stone, Brown, and Jewell (2015) that used developmental intergroup theory as a framework for exploring children's stereotypes about sexualized girls. Developmental intergroup theory proposes that if a particular group attribute (such as sexualization) is salient, children will categorize

individuals based on this salient dimension, with the extent to which this occurs dependent on their cognitive abilities (Bigler & Liben, 2007). Given categorization is related to classification skills and classification has been linked with the development of stereotypes, it can be suggested that the ability to stereotype may emerge around the age of 7, which is when the ability to simultaneously categorize individuals along more than one dimension emerges (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

Stone et al. (2015) predicted that children who have developed multiple classification skills would be more likely to (a) differentiate sexualized from non-sexualized girls and categorize them as a subgroup and (b) develop stereotypes and make attributions about the subgroup. They hypothesized that as the media portrays sexualized girls as being attractive and popular, children who have achieved multiple classification skills would also be able to link the sexualized girls with these attributes. Finally, Stone et al. (2015) argued that as children assume external characteristics of the group reflect innate internal characteristics, they may associate external features such as clothing and makeup with internal character traits such as niceness, and therefore may also assume that sexualized girls differ from non-sexualized girls in personality traits.

To test these predictions, Stone et al. (2015) presented 6- to 11-year-old boys and girls with photos of a girl dressed in clothes purchased at a children's department store. Overall, sexualization was found to be a perceptually and psychologically salient attribute, with children explicitly pointing out sexualized clothing and making trait attributions based on the differences in clothing between sexualized and non-sexualized girls. In line with their predictions, Stone et al. (2015) found that sexualized girls were considered to be appearance-focused and were rated as significantly more popular than non-sexualized girls. In contrast, non-sexualized girls were rated as being significantly nicer than sexualized girls.

## Present Study

While it has been suggested that sexualized images directed specifically at young girls have increased (American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007; Papadopoulous, 2010), there is limited research examining the processing of, and responses to, sexualized content by young girls. As noted by Stone et al. (2015, p. 1605), "little research has examined whether children... spontaneously notice the sexualization of girls, whether children have specific stereotypes or beliefs about sexualized girls, and how these stereotypes about sexualized girls are related to their stereotypes about nonsexualized girls and their attitudes about girls in general." Accordingly, the present study aimed to explore how young Australian girls describe and respond to both sexualized and non-sexualized depictions of their peers. Consistent with Holland and Haslam (2016), the present study refers to sexualization as the way in which a target is depicted while objectification refers to the perceiver's attributions of personhood to the target. In line with previous research, it was hypothesized that:

1. Sexualized girls will be objectified by being described predominantly on the basis of their appearance to the exclusion of other trait characteristics;
2. Distinct stereotypes about sexualized girls will emerge, with sexualized peers considered more popular but not as nice as non-sexualized girls;
3. Sexualized girls will be perceived as being older than non-sexualized girls;
4. Significantly more girls will select the sexualized girl as their ideal compared to the non-sexualized girl; and
5. Sexualization will be a perceptually and psychologically salient attribute.

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