



Contemporary girlhood: Maternal reports on sexualized behaviour and appearance concern in 4–10 year-old girls



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ABSTRACT

It is widely accepted that the sexualization of girls has increased markedly over time. The overall aim of the present study was to offer a description of the behaviours of young girls, with a particular focus on potentially sexualized behaviours and appearance concern. A sample of 815 mothers of 4–10 year-old girls completed a questionnaire about a range of behaviours exhibited by their daughters, in addition to measures of their own self-objectification and material concern. It was found that many girls engaged with teen culture and used a variety of beauty products, but few exhibited more overtly sexualized behaviours. Involvement with teen culture, using beauty products, attention to clothes, and personal grooming were all associated with the measure of appearance concern, as were maternal self-objectification and material concern. It was concluded that young girls do engage in 'grown up' behaviours and that such engagement is not benign for their development.

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Introduction

There is no doubt that women's bodies in western societies are subject to a high degree of objectification and sexualization, as evident from the visual representation of women in the mass media. One particularly insidious consequence is what has been termed self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This refers to the process whereby women and girls are gradually socialized to adopt an observer's perspective on their physical self and so come to view *themselves* as primarily an object to be looked at and evaluated on the basis of appearance. A considerable body of research has now demonstrated that self-objectification and the accompanying habitual monitoring of external appearance have a range of negative consequences for women, including increased shame and anxiety about the body, disordered eating, depressed mood, and low sexual functioning (for a review, see Tiggemann, 2011).

To the extent that sexual objectification forms part of women's daily experience, it also then forms part of the sociocultural context into which adolescent and younger girls grow. More concerning still is the documented increase in the sexualization of girlhood. For example, the *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls* (2007) presented clear evidence that the objectification and sexualization of young women and girls has increased over time,

as indicated by the content of mainstream teen magazines, music videos and music lyrics, and by the trend towards provocatively dressed dolls and sexy clothing marketed to younger girls. More recently, Graff, Murnen, and Krause (2013) documented a substantial increase across three decades in sexualizing characteristics, e.g., low-cut tops that emphasize the breasts, in the images portrayed in the magazines *Seventeen* and *Girls' Life*. However, to date, there is little research that investigates the behavioural or other consequences of young girls growing up in this changing cultural environment.

There are, however, an increasing number of popular or anecdotal accounts of 10 year-old (or even 8 year-old) girls wearing sexually provocative clothing, padded bras, and make-up, and in other ways striving to look "sexy" or "hot" (e.g., Durham, 2008; Hamilton, 2008; Reist, 2009). Certainly advertisers have targeted the "tween" market (usually defined as between 8 and 12 years of age, although sometimes starting as young as 6), in an attempt to use "pester-power" (the power children exert through repeated nagging) to influence the purchasing decisions of parents. As yet there is no empirical basis for these anecdotal accounts. Thus the present study aims to document via maternal report the frequency of a range of behaviours, including those that could be viewed as potentially sexualized or too grown up, in a large sample of young girls. In this way it seeks to present a picture of contemporary girlhood.

At the societal level, there is considerable public debate as to whether or not the expression of "sexualized" behaviours (e.g., wearing high heels or make-up) among young girls is actually

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problematic. On the one hand, it is argued that little girls have always dressed up and played at being grown up and thus there is no harm. On the other hand, others (e.g., Zurbriggen & Roberts, 2013) argue that sexualized attitudes and behaviours have negative consequences for both the girl (in instilling a particular self-objectified perspective of herself), and for the broader society (for example, in contributing to the acceptability of child pornography). Thus research needs to investigate whether or not the expression of sexualized behaviour has negative implications for young girls' development and well-being. The present study addresses one particular facet, namely body image.

Although widespread body dissatisfaction has been well documented in adult women and adolescent girls, there is growing evidence that such appearance and body concerns are also relevant to younger girls (Tiggemann, 2013). For example, in their review of girls' body image, Wertheim, Paxton, and Blaney (2009) reported estimates of between 40 and 50% for the number of pre-adolescent girls wishing to be thinner. Although most of the studies have sampled girls aged 9 years and above, some research indicates that weight concerns arise earlier, around 5–6 years of age (Davison, Markey, & Birch, 2000, 2003; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2005, 2006a). Furthermore, as is the case with adult and adolescent women, pre-adolescent body dissatisfaction has been implicated as a precursor for subsequent dieting and disordered eating, as well as poorer psychological well-being (Smolak & Thompson, 2009; Wertheim et al., 2009).

Although all girls are subject to many sociocultural influences, parental attitudes and behaviours are likely to be particularly influential for younger girls (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). Indeed, the expression of many grown up behaviours such as wearing make-up or high heels likely requires active parental involvement, minimally in the form of financial resources. Other research has indicated that daughters' body dissatisfaction and dieting practices correlate with those of their mothers, for both adolescent (e.g., van den Berg, Keery, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2010) and younger girls (Anschutz, Kanters, van Strien, Vermulst, & Engels, 2009b; Lowes & Tiggemann, 2003). Similarly, one study has shown a positive correlation between mothers' and (college-age) daughters' level of self-objectification (McKinley, 1999). The present study sought to investigate whether mothers' own self-objectification would likewise be translated into the expression of particular 'sexualized' behaviours in their younger daughters. In addition, mothers' level of material concern for their daughters was investigated. In attempting to do their best for their children, some parents may strive to provide them with all the 'latest' material things. As desirable consumer goods have been linked to the search for the 'body perfect' (Dittmar, 2008), such a wish may inadvertently contribute to increased appearance concern.

In sum, the overarching goal of the present study was to begin the investigation of 'grown up' or potentially sexualized behaviours among young girls. The first specific aim was to document the frequency of a broad range of behaviours, including potentially sexualized behaviours, in 4–10 year-old girls as reported by their mothers. The second aim was to determine the relationships between these behaviours and appearance concern. The final aim was to investigate the role of maternal attributes. In particular, it was predicted that mothers' self-objectification and material concern would be positively correlated with sexualized behaviour and appearance concern displayed by their daughters.

Method

Participants

Participants were 815 women who were the mothers of 4–10 year-old girls. Mothers were aged between 22 and 53 years, with

a mean age of 37.44 years ($SD=5.12$). Most of them (86.4%) had at least one other child, with the mean number of children being 2.33 ($SD=0.91$). Mothers' mean BMI was 26.62 ($SD=6.12$), which falls into the slightly overweight range (Garrow & Webster, 1985). About a third of the participants (32.2%) had completed an undergraduate degree and a third (36.4%) some sort of graduate study. They overwhelmingly (94.2%) identified as Caucasian/White (0.5% Aboriginal, 2.0% Asian, 0.1% African, 3.2% other).

Materials

The questionnaire was developed for the current study and delivered online. In order to achieve a good response, it was designed to be relatively brief and straight-forward. The initial section asked mothers to report on their daughter, and the second section asked mothers questions about themselves. Demographic information collected was child age and information about siblings, and maternal age, height, weight, highest level of education, and ethnic background. At the end of the questionnaire participants were invited to make further comments.

Child behaviours. Participants were presented with a list of 26 behaviours and asked to rate the frequency with which their daughter engaged in each behaviour on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*, 5 = *always*). These behaviours covered a wide range of domains. In particular, they included a number of 'grown up' or potentially sexualized behaviours, e.g., wears shoes with high heels, wears make up, watches music videos, is interested in fashion and what clothes are 'in.' As we wished to obtain a picture of girls' overall behaviour, the list also included age-appropriate (clearly non-sexualized) behaviours like art and craft, reading, and helping with chores. The complete list of behaviours can be seen in Table 1.

The list of potentially sexualized behaviours was developed on the basis of three focus groups conducted with 17 mothers of 4–10 year-old girls. In these groups mothers were asked their opinions on the issue of 'growing up too quickly' and were asked to identify particular behaviours in their daughters that illustrated the concept. They were able to provide numerous examples that provided the basis for the current list.

Child appearance concern. Daughters' appearance concerns were similarly assessed by mothers' reports on the frequency of seven items addressing the importance of appearance and associated problems. Exemplar items are: 'Asks for feedback on her appearance (e.g., "Does this look good on me?", "Do I look pretty?");' 'Appears satisfied or comfortable with her body' (reverse-coded); and 'Expresses concern about her appearance (e.g., "I don't like my hair/nose/bottom", "I am not pretty").' These items and associated examples were also developed on the basis of the focus group comments. Responses were made in the same response format (1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*, 5 = *always*). Scores were summed to produce a scale ranging from 7 to 35, with higher scores indicating greater concern with appearance. Internal reliability for this newly-constructed scale was adequate ($\alpha = .76$).

Maternal self-objectification. Mothers' self-objectification was assessed by the two most-commonly used measures in the literature (Calogero, 2010). First, participants completed the Self-Objectification Questionnaire of Noll and Fredrickson (1998). In this measure respondents rank ten body attributes in order of how important each attribute is to their physical self-concept. Five of the attributes are appearance based (*weight, sex appeal, physical attractiveness, firm/sculpted muscles, and measurements*), whereas the other five are competency based (*physical coordination, health, strength, energy level, and physical fitness level*). Scores are derived by calculating the difference between the sum of the appearance and competence rankings. The potential range of scores is from -25 to +25 with positive scores indicating a greater emphasis on

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