



The influence of maternal self-objectification, materialism and parenting style on potentially sexualized 'grown up' behaviours and appearance concerns in 5–8 year old girls



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ABSTRACT

There is widespread concern about young girls displaying 'grown up' or sexualized behaviours, as well as experiencing body image and appearance concerns that were previously thought to only impact much older girls. The present study examined the influence of three maternal attributes, self-objectification, materialism and parenting style, on sexualized behaviours and appearance concerns in young girls. A sample of 252 Australian mothers of 5–8 year old girls reported on the behaviours and appearance concerns observed in their daughters and also completed measures of their own self-objectification, materialism and parenting style. It was found that a significant proportion of young girls were engaging with 'teen' culture, using beauty products and expressing some degree of appearance concern. Maternal self-objectification was related to daughters' engagement in teen culture, use of beauty products and appearance concern. Maternal materialism was related to girls' engagement in teen culture and appearance concern, while an authoritative parenting style was negatively related to girls' use of beauty products. The findings suggest that maternal self-objectification and materialism play a role in the body image and appearance concerns of young girls, and in so doing, identify these maternal attributes as novel potential targets for intervention.

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1. Introduction

In recent years there has been widespread concern in both the public and political spheres about the premature sexualization of girls and the idea of girls 'growing up too soon'. The [American Psychological Association's Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls \(2007\)](#) documented the increasingly sexualized cultural environment in which contemporary girls live. In particular, the increased emphasis on appearance and looking 'sexy' is evident in the content of mainstream media such as music videos, music lyrics and magazines, as well as in the tendency for clothing and products aimed at children to contain sexualized features ([Graff et al., 2013](#)).

One particularly damaging consequence of the societal sexualization or objectification of women and girls is *self-objectification* ([Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997](#)). It is theorised that the repeated experience of sexual objectification gradually socialises women and girls to internalise an observer's perspective of their own bodies. This self-objectification is characterised by habitual monitoring of one's outward appearance, and has been associated with numerous negative psychological consequences, in particular increased body shame

and appearance anxiety. These, in turn, are suggested to contribute to depression, sexual dysfunction and eating disorders – mental health outcomes which disproportionately impact women and girls ([Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997](#)). A considerable body of research has now demonstrated relationships between self-objectification, body shame and disordered eating in adult women (for reviews see [Moradi & Huang, 2008](#); [Tiggemann, 2011](#)) and also in adolescent girls (e.g., [Lindberg et al., 2006](#); [Slater & Tiggemann, 2002, 2010](#)). Although the [American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls \(2007\)](#) noted that the sexualization of girls is similarly likely to have numerous negative consequences such as body shame, anxiety, and disordered eating, it also noted the surprising dearth of empirical evidence focused on young girls. A small amount of research has demonstrated that exposure to media predicts appearance-related concerns, dieting awareness and body dissatisfaction in girls as young as 6 years of age ([Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006](#); [Harrison & Hefner, 2006](#)).

While the cultural messages surrounding sexualization, particularly those provided by the mass media, have received the most attention ([Zurbriggen & Roberts, 2013](#)), young girls also receive messages about sexualization via their interpersonal relationships with others. For young children in particular, parents are likely the most influential interpersonal relationship. Not only do parents play a vital role in controlling media access ([Rodgers, 2012](#)), but they also influence how children

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respond to the media. For example, parents can attempt to teach their children resilience to harmful media messages and peer appearance-related comments, as well as teach critical 'media literacy' skills (for a more comprehensive review see [Hart et al., 2015](#)). With respect to sexualization in particular, parents are responsible for the types of products and media their daughters are exposed to, as well as playing a crucial role in the messages their daughters receive. Importantly, parents, particularly mothers, also exist within the same sexualized society and are themselves likely to be affected in some way ([American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007](#)). Thus the present study focuses on maternal attributes that may influence their daughters' attitudes and behaviours. In particular, we chose to investigate the effects of maternal self-objectification, materialism and parenting style.

Early research established links between mothers' body image attitudes and daughters' perceived importance of being thin, dieting and disordered eating behaviours (e.g., [Hill et al., 1990](#); [Levine et al., 1994](#)). Two separate Australian studies have demonstrated links between mothers' and younger children's body image attitudes. In the first, 5–8 year old children's perceptions of their mother's level of body dissatisfaction were shown to positively relate to their own levels of body dissatisfaction ([Lowes & Tiggemann, 2003](#)). In the second, mother's internalisation of the thin ideal was associated with 3–5 year old children attributing positive characteristics to thinner figures ([Spiel et al., 2012](#)).

In the first study to investigate maternal attributes in relation to specifically sexualized behaviours, [Starr and Ferguson \(2012\)](#) found that 6–9 year old girls with higher media consumption who demonstrated what they termed 'self-sexualization' (indicated by choosing a 'sexier' doll as more popular) had mothers with higher levels of self-objectification. In a recent Australian study of mothers of 4–10 year old girls, higher maternal self-objectification was related to more sexualized behaviours, as well as increased appearance concerns in their daughters ([Tiggemann & Slater, 2014](#)).

One challenge increasingly faced by parents in raising their daughters is the consumer driven nature of contemporary culture and associated materialistic values ([Dittmar, 2008](#)). Materialism can be defined as "the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possession" ([Belk, 1985](#), pp. 265). An individual with highly materialistic values believes that the acquisition of material possessions is a central life goal, an indicator of success, and key to happiness. Accordingly, mothers with highly materialistic values are apt to want to 'give their children the best' which, in a consumer driven culture, likely translates into buying their children products and clothing that might reinforce the sexualization of girls.

Materialism and other specific attitudes and practices will feed into, and also reflect, an overarching attitude to parenting, what is known as *parenting style*. Early parenting research identified two main dimensions: *demandingness* (claims parents make on their child which encompasses disciplinary efforts) and *responsiveness* (parenting actions that foster self-regulation which encompasses being supportive of individual needs and demands; [Baumrind, 1991](#)). Based on the dichotomisation of these dimensions, four major parenting styles have been identified ([Baumrind, 1968](#); [Maccoby & Martin, 1983](#)). *Authoritative* parents are those who are high on both demandingness and responsiveness, while *authoritarian* parents are high on demandingness but low on responsiveness. *Permissive* parents are high on responsiveness but low on demandingness, and parents who are low on both dimensions are described as having a *disengaged* parenting style. An authoritative parenting style has been associated with a wide range of benefits for children, including higher levels of school engagement and academic performance ([Boon, 2007](#)), and higher global self-esteem and lower levels of depressive symptoms ([Jackson et al., 2005](#); [Radziszewska et al., 1996](#)). To the best of our knowledge, no research has examined the influence of parenting style on children's sexualized behaviours and appearance concerns. However, given the generalised positive benefits

associated with an authoritative style, it is reasonable to assume that this may also extend to sexualized behaviours and appearance concerns.

In sum, the current study aimed to examine the impact of three maternal attributes (self-objectification, materialism and parenting style) on reported sexualized or 'grown-up' behaviours and appearance concerns in daughters. It was predicted that higher maternal levels of self-objectification and materialism would be related to higher child levels of sexualized behaviours and appearance concern while an authoritative parenting style would be protective.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 255 women who were mothers of 5–8 year-old girls ($n = 67$ 5 years; $n = 59$ 6 years; $n = 72$ 7 years; $n = 54$ 8 years). The mothers were aged between 24 and 49 years of age ($M = 37.95$, $SD = 4.87$). Nearly all of the women (98.4%) had at least one other child, with the average number of children per family being 3.2 ($SD = 0.93$). Mothers' mean BMI of 26.37 ($SD = 6.22$) fell within the slightly overweight range ([Garrow & Webster, 1985](#)). Just over one third of the mothers (35.0%) had completed an undergraduate degree and a third (33.4%) had completed some form of postgraduate education. The overwhelming majority of mothers (94.1%) identified as Caucasian/White, with 2.8% Asian, 0.8% Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander, and 2.4% 'Other'.

2.2. Materials

Participants completed a brief questionnaire that was designed for online delivery. Parents were asked to report on a number of behaviours they observed in their daughter (sexualized behaviours and appearance concerns) and were then asked a number of questions about their own attitudes and behaviours (self-objectification, materialism, and parenting style).

2.2.1. Child sexualized behaviours

Participants were presented with a list of potential child behaviours and asked to rate the frequency with which their daughter engaged in the behaviour using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = always). The specific behaviours came from two subscales identified through factor analysis by [Tiggemann and Slater \(2014\)](#), originally based on focus groups with parents. The first subscale, 'Engagement in teen culture', consisted of 7 items (e.g., 'Watches music videos', 'Is interested in celebrities' and 'Interested in fashion/what clothes are in'). In the present sample, internal reliability was adequate ($\alpha = 0.76$). The second subscale, 'Use of Beauty Products', consisted of 5 items (e.g., 'Wears nail polish', 'Wears lip gloss', 'Wears make-up') and also had acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.71$). These items were interspersed with a number of other everyday (non-sexualized) behaviours (e.g., 'likes playing sport or being physically active', 'likes reading') to present a balanced picture of child behaviour.

2.2.2. Child appearance concern

Following [Tiggemann and Slater \(2014\)](#), eight items addressed the importance of appearance and associated concerns in daughters. Example items include: "Asks for feedback on her appearance (e.g., "Does this look good on me?", "Do I look pretty?")", "Examines/inspects her appearance in the mirror", and "Expresses concern about how she looks in photographs". Mothers were asked how frequently their daughter engaged in the behaviour on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = always). Scores were summed to range from 8 to 40 with higher scores representing greater concern with appearance. In this sample, reliability was adequate ($\alpha = 0.77$).

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