

The Sexualisation of Girls in Popular Culture: Neoliberalism, Choice and Invisible Oppression.

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Introduction

The sexualisation of girls in popular culture has captured both scholarly and public attention in Australia. Almost as soon as Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze's reports, *Corporate Paedophilia* (2006a) and *Stopping the Sexualisation of our Children* (2006b), presented evidence that corporations were sexualising children through their advertising practices, others heralded these claims as obsolete (Egan & Hawkes, 2008). The concerns articulated in the Rush and La Nauze reports, however, have not abated; instead, activists from a range of backgrounds have mobilised against corporate advertising, professionals have published advice books for parents on bringing up girls in this current context, and governments have considered a range of public policy responses (Albury and Lumby, 2010a; Smith and Attwood, 2011). We argue that at this time of heightened awareness and debate it is important to use a feminist lens to examine the way the sexualisation of girls has been framed and discussed. The research reported here specifically examined the way experts and members of the public identified and talked about the sexualisation of girls on a televised debate and an Internet discussion board that followed the broadcast.

Defining Sexualisation

In the last five years the terms 'sexualisation' and 'sexualisation of children' have been thoroughly problematised for being 'too general' and 'difficult to operationalise' (Gill, 2011 p. 65), 'vague and obscure' (Smith and Attwood, 2011 p. 329), and potentially mis/read as anti-sex (Jeffreys, 2011). But at the time of the televised debate, and arguably since, they served to denote a common-sense understanding that children had become a new market and product for a particular version of commodified sexuality.

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Why Focus on a Televised debate and Discussion Board

In 2007, ABC television broadcast the debate-style program *Difference of Opinion: Sex Sells – but at what cost to our kids?* The program focussed on the sexualisation of children in popular culture, and was the first televised debate on this topic whose website included a discussion board forum rather than a comment only page. This televised debate also occurred at a significant moment in the public discussion about the sexualisation of girls in popular culture, when the debate was "simmering and gathering heat" (Albury and Lumby, 2010a, p. 56) as the Rush and La Nauze (2006a & b) reports entered the public arena and just before the publication of the Australian Senate's *Inquiry into the Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media Environment* (2008), and the explosive public reaction to Bill Henson's 2008 art exhibition. The *Difference of Opinion* debate captures a moment when experts and the public were finding their voices in the sexualisation debate and provides insight into the underlying discourses that frame the current debate.

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The Format of the Show

In Australia opinions about the sexualisation of girls can be characterised by a division between those experts who identify the issue as a problem, and those who deny the issue really exists. The ABC's *Difference of Opinion* program had four

expert panellists split along these lines: Professor Catharine Lumby and Associate Professor Alan McKee denied the sexualisation of children in popular culture and, in contrast, social commentator Melinda Tankard Reist and Professor Louise Newman proposed that popular culture is sexually saturated and is adversely impacting children, particularly girls. A subsequent Internet discussion board, hosted by *Difference of Opinion*, attracted 582 posts from 189 contributors responding to the *Sex Sells* debate, providing an insight into the way members of the public understood these issues in 2007. Of course television shows and their accompanying internet forums draw a self-selecting audience and contributors and, therefore, are potentially unrepresentative of wider views. However online forums, Fayard and DeSanctis (2010) maintain, do provide opportunities for “In-depth conversation and a high diversity of participation...because contributors...need only share an interest in a topical area and have access to the Internet (p. 383).

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The contemporary position of women and girls

Feminists working across different academic disciplines have sought to understand the role sexuality plays in the lives of young women and girls in the ‘post-feminist’, neoliberal political landscape.

Young women, in particular, are seen to embody the values of a new meritocracy and to be the major beneficiaries of neoliberal modernisation (McRobbie, 2007). Angela McRobbie proposes, however, that this neoliberal meritocracy is underwritten by a new sexual contract where young women are invited, through consumer culture, to become ‘phallic’ girls, appropriating the sexuality previously reserved for young men. Rosalind Gill suggests that demonstrating sexual agency requires a ‘technology of sexiness’ to be normative; “... indeed a ‘technology of sexiness’ has replaced ‘innocence’ or ‘virtue’ as a commodity that young women are required to offer in the heterosexual marketplace” (2007, p.5). The new sexual contract, identified by McRobbie, regulates women within neoliberal political economies through the extension of consumer culture into political and social fields, a situation she says could be read “as a feminist tragedy” and the “fall of the public woman” (2007, p.734).

Joanne Baker describes a celebratory notion of modern femininity, the ‘girl power thesis’, as hiding the difficult freedoms girls and young women face behind “the lauded concept of choice” (2008, p.3). Baker argues that a discourse of choice has led to a dramatic overstatement of women’s advancement and has disguised social inequality as poor choices that are pathologically based.

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Walkerdine (1997) identifies a discourse of the ‘innocent’ and the ‘precocious’ as the central discursive framework employed to explain girls’ relationship to sexuality, a framework, again, largely mediated through class. However, although girls’ positions within the sexual political landscape are experienced in classist and racially specific ways, a sexualised gaze it is not limited to just some girls. Debunking a key myth that the eroticisation of little girls is the work of a few perverted men who can be accounted for as pathologically sick, Walkerdine argues it is a much more ordinary phenomenon:

Blame is laid at the door of abuse and therefore of pathological and bad men who enter and sully the terrain of childhood innocence and of course

conversely, with the little Lolitas who lead men on. But, popular images of little girls as alluring and seductive, at once innocent and highly erotic, are contained in the most respectable and mundane of locations ... This is not about a few perverts, but about the complex construction of the highly contradictory gaze at little girls ... (1997, p.171).

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Many theorists post 2007 (Thompson, 2008; Albury and Lumby, 2010b) argue that it is time to move beyond the moral outrage of the 2007 'moment' and more critically examine the assumptions, values, anxieties, and assumed evidence and definitions that underlie earlier critiques. We argue that the danger of this recent theorising is not what it draws our attention to but what it does not draw our attention to – the identification of wider practices of power, noting in particular, feminist disavowal, or hesitancy at best, to situate 'complications' within a capitalist context where culture making industries derive profit through sexism (Bray, 2011; Dines, 2011). We agree with Rosalind Gill (2011, p.61) that it is time for feminists to "get angry again!"

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The Methodology

We have analysed the statements made by the panellists appearing on the *Difference of Opinion* televised debate and, also, the responses of members of the public recorded on an accompanying internet discussion board. It is important to note that the participants in the discussion board forums form a convenience or accidental sample and may not be representative of the wider population, but rather a small group of interested viewers and, therefore, display group bias (Herring, 2002).

Transcripts from the program and the discussion board were analysed using a qualitative thematic analysis approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1968). We have used the Internet alias used by each contributor on the discussion board as these aliases are in the public domain. The length and frequency of speech by debate panellists were measured, as were the number and frequency of posts on the Internet discussion board. Debate panellists Catharine Lumby and Alan McKee, whose position was to deny the sexualisation of children in popular culture, dominated the debate, with Lumby speaking for twice as long as other panellists.

On the discussion board 582 posts were organised under 92 threads of discussion, of which 60 threads received at least one reply.

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Findings

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Sexuality: sticky notions of determinism

The position of individuals in a social world dominated by neoliberalism was also clearly evident in the way that contributors sought to express dissent against the sexualisation of girls in popular culture. Frequently posts started with a qualifier designed to ward off counter-criticisms of wowsers, such as "I'm not a prude" (Not_A_Dodo) or "I'm ... not prudish" (Megan) or "I'm no prude by any stretch of the imagination" (ripley). It seems that libertarian positions towards sexuality function within a hegemony that compels people to frame any alternative views, including views not based on religion or biological objections, in terms of such hegemony. Speaking up about their concerns entailed a backlash risk for contributors of being dismissed as 'prudish'. Abigail Bray (2008) argues that public concerns about the

sexualisation of children are often dismissed, regulated and managed through the labelling of such concern as unsophisticated and intolerant moral panic. “Tolerance” Bray writes “has ... emerged as the dominant emotional signature of a cool, politically sophisticated, neoliberal middle-class subjectivity, while intolerance is associated with the vulgar, emotional instability of the reactionary lower-class other” (2008, p.325). Bray convincingly argues that tolerance, as the emergent ruling virtue under neoliberalism, has converged with the corporate sexualisation of girls, leaving people who feel unease about the situation of women and girls vulnerable to being labelled intolerant, or worse, as abusive and harmful.

However, despite a clear unease at the sexualisation of children in popular culture, any feminist understandings of sexual politics were largely absent from the views presented on the discussion board. Instead, discussion board posts were heavily weighted in favour of biological explanations, a re-emerging trend according to Walters (2010), and individualist notions of choosing (Baker 2005) that served to naturalise inequality as inevitable.

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Denying the sexualisation of girls

Catharine Lumby and Alan McKee also denied concerns about sexualisation of girls as being of any importance by claiming that popular culture has no relationship to the sexual abuse of children. Catharine Lumby and Alan McKee sought to place responsibility with perpetrators, but overlooked the social milieu in which sexual abuse happens. On the other side of the debate, panellists Melinda Tankard Reist and Louise Newman disputed the claim that images in popular culture had no impact on paedophilia, arguing that popular culture fetishizes the bodies of young children, sending mixed social messages (also see Walkerdine, 1997; see Bray, 2011 on child pornography).

Catharine Lumby and Alan McKee’s suggestion that the representation of children in popular culture cannot encourage paedophilia and, instead, discourses which raise concerns about children’s representations actually work to sexualise children, was not accepted by the majority of contributors to the discussion board.

Feminist activist Liz Kelly (1996) rejects the use of the term paedophile for the way it enables a comfortable distance to settle in between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Kelly instead talks about sexual abuse being on a continuum of violence; a continuum that allows for different manifestations of the same pattern to be identified. We argue a continuum makes visible the commonalities and patterns between child sexual abuse and a sexualised gaze at children within society and renders redundant an analytical construct which posits physical sexual abuse as a real problem, against a denial of the sexualisation of children as existing or, when acknowledged, as unrelated to physical sexual abuse.

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Education and regulation: producing the neoliberal girl

Parents were widely held primarily responsible for protecting their children and this responsibility meant teaching their children media literacy skills. The education system was also held accountable for teaching such skills but not to the same degree as the parents. Educating consumers through media literacy does not disrupt the ideology of choice; girls are simply being empowered to ‘choose better’. In effect, discussion focussing on media literacy individualised the problem to the extent that

individual mothers were either good or bad, and individual girls were either media literate or not. The gendered nature of parenting was largely hidden by the use of the neutral term ‘parents’. With mothers doing the vast majority of parenting of children, it is women who are held responsible for the impact sexualisation is seen to have on their children. Women carry the double burden of being objects of sexualisation, as well as being held responsible for educating their children in order to protect them from sexualisation.

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Conclusion

This article provides a valuable insight into the discourses that framed the public debate about the sexualisation of girls in popular culture at a particular point in time. Although the ABC’s debate-style program *Difference of Opinion: Sex Sells – but at what cost to our kids?* set up opposing sides between those who identified the problem and those who denied it, the discussion board evidenced no such split. Instead, contributors to the discussion board overwhelmingly identified the sexualisation of girls in popular culture as problematic. A position contributors frequently preface by referencing the dominant normative libertarian sexual mores; commonly saying ‘I’m not a prude, but’.

Throughout our discussion of key themes: the sticky nature of sexual determinism, the denial of the problem and the educative regulation of girls, it is the hegemony of a neoliberal discourse of choice that is most evident. This was seen in the way that both debate panellists and discussion board contributors explained the way sexualisation of children happens and what the solutions might be. The gendered nature of the sexualisation of women and girls in society was readily identified at a societal level, but at an individual level such context was obscured with a discourse of choice overriding broader explanations of the experiences of girls and women. Solutions were also heavily individualised; media literacy was widely held as the key to assisting girls, effectively allowing girls to ‘choose better’ and reinforcing the discourse of choice. Even regulation, which can be understood as operating at a collective, structural level of society between governments and corporations, was discussed in terms of its impact on individuals. Although this was most clearly seen when regulation was being rejected and seen as ‘giving away your freedoms’, it was also evident when regulation was being promoted as assisting parents. Feminist explanations were largely absent from the discussion board, with the different levels of gendered power within sexual realms being frequently understood as biologically natural or socially inevitable. This led to confusion about who benefits from a social arrangement where women and girls are the subjects of a popular sexualised gaze.

In conclusion, through our analysis of the way experts and members of the public discussed the sexualisation of children, we argue this research demonstrates the usefulness of maintaining a sustained critique of hegemonic neoliberal ideas around individual choice. Doing so enables the socio-political context choices are made within to be kept in focus, and politicises who benefits and who pays the price for choices made.