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Children, 'sexualization' and consumer culture

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing concern about the sexualization of children, and specifically about the effects of commercial marketing and media in this respect. It has been raised at the level of public policy, both in the USA and Australia; in Britain, the previous Labour government commissioned a major 'assessment of the impact of the commercial world on children's well-being' (Buckingham 2009), a report on sexualization conducted by a celebrity psychologist (Papadopoulos 2010), and the coalition government that came to power in 2010 yet another review – covering both topics - led by Reg Bailey, the CEO of Christian charity the Mothers Union (DfE 2011). Campaigns have been launched, for instance, 'Let Girls be Girls' by the influential parenting website Mumsnet; publications for parents (e.g. Carey 2011); and newspaper or magazine articles on this theme regularly garner hundreds of responses via online forums. Many voices, in short, are raised to comment on the issue of sexualization.

In this chapter we reflect on a recent research project through which we contributed our own academic perspectives, and through our mediation also those of children and parents, to these public debates. The project was funded by the Equal Opportunities Committee of the Scottish Parliament, which had been lobbied about the issue; it focused on 'sexualized goods' - clothing, cosmetics, toys and branded merchandise such as Playboy - and involved a retail survey and work with Scottish parents and young people. Here, we discuss what our research findings suggest about how such goods may be consumed and interpreted in specific contexts, and how they challenge some of the common assumptions

and understandings about children, sex and commercial-consumer culture. Space does not permit a detailed account of our methods and results, which can be found in the full report online (Buckingham, Bragg, Russell and Willett 2010).

At the same time, we consider how we attempted to challenge some of the terms of the debate, partly by calling on discourses of academic expertise and evidence, partly by constructing the public, as represented by our research participants, as sensible, knowledgeable and measured in their responses. Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, we counterposed their 'good sense' to the 'moral panic' around sexualization. For instance, our executive summary stated that we aimed to provide '*concrete empirical* evidence on the marketing of [sexualized] goods', and 'some *in-depth analysis* of the perspectives of children and parents, in the interest of promoting a *more informed* debate' (our emphasis). These statements imply our own neutrality or dis-interestedness, our concern to facilitate debate rather than engage in advocacy. In addition, they offer a diagnosis; that existing public debate is insufficiently 'informed', on the one hand because it lacks 'evidence' and on the other because what evidence does exist has not been adequately 'analysed'. These positions are not unproblematic, as we will show. At the end of the chapter we reflect on the governmentality of contemporary practices of ethical self-formation in relation to both our research and the topic of sexualization itself.

Sexualized goods and the question of 'evidence'

Our research began with a highly critical review of the previous reports on sexualization referred to in the introduction (e.g. Papadopoulos 2010; APA 2007; Australian Senate 2007). We identified significant flaws in their approaches. These included weak, inconsistent and circular definitions of key terms; partial and unsophisticated analyses of media texts; and uncritical reliance on psychological studies, especially laboratory experiments and large-scale correlational surveys, to support claims about audience responses. In addition, they fail to engage with research on the social and cultural contexts of sexuality, how sexual meanings are established and negotiated, how children and young people interpret and use sexual content, or with feminist and cultural studies more broadly. Most previous work has been concerned with media and advertising, rather than sexualized goods; almost all of it has used adult research subjects, often conveniently available US university students, rather than children; and focuses on girls rather than

boys – which, we suggested, was ‘symptomatic of wider anxieties surrounding girls’ sexual agency that appear to underlie much of the public debate’ (Bragg, Buckingham, Russell and Willett 2011: 281). Our critique was informed by a considerable body of academic literature and research that has dissected sexualization discourse and attempted to analyze rather than moralize the contemporary mainstreaming of sex (e.g. Attwood 2009, 2006; Buckingham 2009; Buckingham and Bragg 2004; Duschinsky 2010; Duits and van Zoonen 2011; Egan and Hawkes 2008; Lumby and Albury 2010; Russell and Tyler 2005; Willett 2008), just as academics have over decades exposed the weaknesses of ‘media effects’ claims in relation to violence and other themes (e.g. Barker and Petley 2001; Gauntlett 1995). Nonetheless, we had few illusions about the capacity of these arguments, however well-founded, to displace popular convictions. After the report’s publication, we individually had lengthy discussions with the makers of a BBC television documentary on sexualization, and Rachel Russell eventually appeared in it, commenting on young people’s perception of specific goods. But the presenter’s questions about research evidence were directed not to Rachel, but to Justine Roberts, the co-founder of Mumsnet and a vocal campaigner. The latter confidently, albeit fallaciously in academic terms, asserted that existing studies demonstrated various negative effects on girls, even acknowledging that they were few in number ‘so far’ as if a vast avalanche of further proof was soon to follow.

The first stage of our research also involved a retail survey of Scottish shops, using a broad five-point coding schema to capture different dimensions of sexualized goods aimed at young people under the age of 16. We began with a deliberately broad and inclusive categorization, in the expectation that it would yield material we could further interrogate in our audience research, as follows:

- (1) Goods that seem to make reference to sexual practices through images, words or humour (including the use of ambiguity or innuendo, e.g. ‘blow me’ and an image of a fan).
- (2) Goods that appear to make reference to sexual contexts through images, words, colours, styles or items: that is, where the familiarity with the item stems from culturally sexualized contexts – for example, stripping (shiny gloves and stilettos), burlesque (feather boa), ‘sexy’ lingerie (lace, red, black and purple).

(3) Goods that emphasize body parts and shapes that might be culturally associated with adult sexuality; for example, eyes, lips, breasts, cleavage, curves, legs, bottom, skin, groin.

(4) Goods that duplicate styles currently considered 'high fashion' for adults. This includes goods marketed in a way that combines items from a potentially sexual adult context with images, words, or practices (e.g. play) associated with childhood, in such a way as to normalize them as children's goods; for example, Hello Kitty 'Sexy Little Mints', sweets that carry potential sexual connotations by virtue of their name and image.

(5) Goods that contain a reference to gender stereotypes; for example, by overemphasizing physical attractiveness, associating females with love and intimacy, or associating males with aggressiveness and dominance, through words, images, symbols or activities (Bragg et al 2011: 282).

This broad coding did identify several products that might be described as both sexualized and for children, ranging from Playboy stationery to cosmetics kits in toyshops, as well as various clothing items, including bikinis, animal print underwear, boob tube dresses and low-slung trousers. However, many of the stores surveyed contained no examples whatsoever of such goods. We concluded that

while there are undoubtedly some 'sexualized' goods aimed at children, there are relatively few of them, and their availability is limited. Children might purchase goods in contexts surrounded by sexual imagery and products, but such products are not necessarily aimed at them (Buckingham et al 2010: 5).

Implicitly our measured tone and content rebuked those who claim that such goods are commonplace; but it is well known that negative findings are under-reported, easily eclipsed by single memorable cases such as a 'paedo bikini'ⁱ or a 'pole-dancing kit for children'ⁱⁱ.

However, the survey did furnish many examples of gender stereotyping on an active/masculine, passive/feminine axis, and quantities of appearance-related goods for girls such as cosmetics, hair accessories, purses, handbags and so on. In addition, we know that children are bound to encounter a much wider range of goods than those

specifically targeted at them. Proximities blur the distinctions between adult, youth and child, as when we found child-oriented products such as fake cartoon tattoos placed next to novelty items aimed at the 'Hen Night' market. Age markers can also be blurred by the nature of the products themselves: many clothing items aimed at young people now are copies of fashions aimed at adults, and conversely make-up products are packaged as toys for younger ages. Stores with a cross-generational target group can be identified as 'aspirational' spaces (Russell and Tyler 2005). They do not appear to target children or young people explicitly and do not attach explicit age markers to products, so may be used in constructing a potentially desirable adult identity; whilst the presence of very small clothes sizes (such as sizes four to six for women) and our background interviews with industry contacts suggest that young people are the target market by default for such stores.

Such evidence could have been (and often is) used to make more sensationalist claims, but we restricted ourselves to acknowledging the shifting boundaries between child and adult identities, citing our own previous work (Buckingham and Bragg 2005) to suggest that 'the transition from child to adult status is becoming more ambiguous and complex than perhaps was the case in earlier times' (Buckingham et al 2010: 40). Even without the other qualifiers, the function of 'more' in that statement is rather unclear – suggesting that features of the consumption landscape have changed, albeit without giving particular historical evidence, in a way that allows them to be read as contributors to 'genuine' anxieties as well as to unfounded 'panics'.

Parents and young people talking about sexualized goods

Our research also sought out the views of parents and young people, using open-ended, participatory and deliberative methods that aimed to avoid being overly intrusive (although discussions were nonetheless at times intimate: see Bragg 2012). We accessed young people aged 12-14 through schools in three different areas of Scotland, devising and observing three lessons related to sexualization that were taught by English and Media Studies teachers as part of the normal timetable, and following up with two short friendship-based group discussions in each school. We also conducted nine parent focus groups, running over 2-3 hour sessions, involving 35 women and 8 men, recruited partly through the schools and partly through the research team's own contacts; there was a mix

of class backgrounds, parent types including single parents and a lesbian mother, ages and numbers of children, religious affiliations, and four participants from minority ethnic backgrounds. In these we invited personal experiences of the issues involved, and provided stimuli for discussion such as images of children and of some of the products collected in the retail survey. Our methods did not give direct evidence of actual practices in which parents or children engage: nonetheless, they do convey the various discursive resources – for example, in ideas about ‘good parenting’, ‘peer pressure’ and so on - on which they draw in making sense of, contesting and renegotiating sexualized goods.

In writing up our data, we emphasized the ‘nuanced and thoughtful responses’ offered by our participants, and how these ‘illustrated the complexity of the issues at stake’. We thereby implied that other commentators on the issue were by contrast strident and crude; elsewhere we have argued that the Bailey review (DfE 2011), for instance, manipulated its survey questions to produce ‘evidence’ of acute concern by ‘9 out of 10 parents’ (Bragg and Buckingham forthcoming). To some extent, our own approach ‘summoned’ precisely the reflective, deliberative selves we claimed to ‘find’: for instance, we explicitly encouraged parents to consider dilemmas and differences of view, and as the research progressed, we put to them significant issues that had emerged from previous groups. Yet it is also worth noting that we prepared in advance some statements about sexualization, intended to prompt debate and focused on what we imagined might be neglected, complex ideas; we never needed to use them, since the issues were invariably – and better - covered during discussions of relevant experiences. In some ways, then, we *underestimated* the capacities of participants, and *overestimated* the uniqueness of the insights generated by academic analysis; the two proved closer than we anticipated, an observation that should trouble the division also found in many moral panic studies between the perceptive scholar and mystified audience or public (Hier 2011).

Developmental and democratic childhoods

The topic of sexualization inevitably invoked much more general ideas about the nature of childhood, adolescence and parenthood. Whilst childhood was universally agreed to be a time of fun, experimentation and play, parents and young people differed between and amongst themselves over whether this should be labelled ‘innocence’ and the place that (sexualized) consumer products might have within it. Growing up was conceived as a

series of natural stages of development towards adulthood, in which children should gradually assume greater responsibilities. Parents generally claimed to subscribe to broadly democratic ideals of childrearing, in which they respected children's individuality or even rights to make their own decisions and express themselves. Going to secondary school at 11 or 12 was seen to be a watershed moment in desiring and deserving these rights:

Girl: because when you go to high school you do want more responsibilities and you've kind of got an idea what to wear and what not to wear (School 1 interview)

Mother: Going to secondary school . . . they're a bit bewildered when they first arrive and they quickly learn . . . And it is at a time when their bodies are changing quite quickly so it all seems to come together. So I'd say really that once they get to secondary school they're kind of off and launched (parent group 2).

Cultural, social and biological changes are presented in these statements as natural, congruent and complimentary, whilst being strikingly dependent on a relatively context-specific age of transition between schools. Different educational arrangements – such as Middle Schools covering the years between 9 and 13, still common elsewhere in the UK – would conceivably generate quite different perceptions of developmental milestones. Parents themselves identified contradictions in the claim that contemporary children are 'growing up too soon', one commenting that by the age of 14 she herself had left school, had a job and was running a household, whilst her youngest daughter who was now that age could barely deal with her own laundry (in common with her peers, as other parents also observed). Another mother in the same group acknowledged the competing demands she placed on her own 13-year-old daughter:

You want them to grow up in some ways but not in others. I want her to be more responsible and act in a more mature way when it comes to helping around the house but I really don't want her to grow up too fast when it comes to her self-image and the way she dresses and the kind of influences that she's subjected to (parent group 1).

Nonetheless, the developmental models of childhood to which our participants generally

adhered suggested that parents should promote children's ability to exercise choice, because this was crucial to healthy maturation; and in practice the main arena in which such essential skills were rehearsed was that of personal consumption. Herein lies a dilemma: parents are often exhorted to be proactive about 'saying no' to sexualized goods. But these are generally a matter of clothes, hairstyles, cosmetics and media, all of which are comparatively trivial. Moreover, inappropriate choices in these respects can be construed as part of predictable, natural adolescent rebellion or even as a step on the way to developing crucial decision-making capacities: both young and older participants referred to 'making our / their own mistakes'. Unsurprisingly, then, parents claimed to prefer negotiation and compromise or, if that failed, devious tactics whereby clothes shrank in the wash, or toys and other items mysteriously went missing. These approaches, they suggested, in practice proved more manageable and liveable than confrontation or diktat. They repeatedly stated that they would not risk alienating their children or jeopardizing relationships over an issue that was ultimately 'not worth the battle', especially since 'there are worse things they could be doing'. Other tropes such as 'peer pressure' – perceived as unavoidable and hugely important in adolescence – or 'getting it out of their system' were also cited as reasons why parents might permit purchases of which they disapproved in principle. In other words, there are competing moral logics involved in responses to sexualized goods, in which parents may have good reason for not taking action. Such evidence suggests that parental concern about the issue may be lower than is often assumed; it also challenges the attempts of some anti-sexualization campaigners to monopolize the moral high ground and portray others as bad, uncaring parents.

The contested meanings of sexualized goods

Attempts to define what is a sexualized product were highly contested by our participants, who argued that goods had no inherent sexual connotations or functions, and / or redescribed them as 'fun', 'fashion', 'play' and even 'learning'. Parents' descriptions of children returning from nursery with nail polish on or receiving make-up as birthday gifts, suggested such goods had become a routine part of the experience of childhood, rather than its antithesis as campaigners have argued. Parents also rejected the notion that their own children were becoming sexualized, emphasising their lack of sexual intent even when consuming such problematic products as thongs or high-heeled shoes. Yet such

arguments reflect – without resolving - the many contradictions and ambiguities in the notion of sexualization itself, particularly with regards to children’s state of mind or understanding, and indeed parents’ potential for self-deception.

Young people were equally insistent that the meaning of clothing shifted according to context (party, school disco or beach), combination (leggings could be ‘tarty’ if not worn with a long top; but very short skirts or shorts were less sexual if worn with thick leggings or tights; makeup and hair gel could be ‘too much’ or ‘just right’), how fashionable it was, and perspective: as a girl from School 2 stated, ‘something that might be sexy to someone else, might not be to others’. For the young people, demonstrating their knowledge of the nuances of style was a means to challenge the idea that they were ignorant or passive victims of sexualization. Some parents too recognized and even enjoyed their children’s expertise in the codes of contemporary youth culture: ‘they can spot a brand from 50 paces!’.

At the time of our research, Playboy branded goods - from home furnishings, fashion accessories to stationery - were highly controversial, their popularity amongst young people making them an icon of childhood sexualization. Students repeatedly declared that they were fully aware of the bunny logo’s sexual meanings, connected with ‘Hugh Hefner’, the ‘lassies in the mansion’ [that is, the television series *The Girls Next Door*] and sexual exploits, although some were embarrassed to explain this and many were critical of the women involved. ‘The lassies were flaunting and I think that’s totally disrespectful,’ declared one girl in School 1, her friend adding ‘They have no self-respect’.

At the same time, students insisted that the logo had become popular with their age group purely because of fashion or as ‘a cute pink bunny’ – and indeed that it was now falling out of favour. Many deemed it ‘childish’, citing in evidence its popularity with younger siblings, or described it in derogatory (class-based) terms: ‘tacky’, ‘mingin’, ‘tarty’, ‘chavvy’, and ‘neddy’. Taking such views at face value provided some ammunition against the argument that Playboy was glamorizing the sex industry for younger generations, and we presented them accordingly in our report. However, we felt there was more going on than this: a number of students were sporting examples of the very goods that they disdained in the presence of researchers, for example, providing a tantalizing glimpse of an issue worth further investigation.

Parents too were undecided about the Playboy logo, heatedly debating not only how far it was inherently associated with the sex industry, but the ethics of explaining this to children. One mother argued cogently that this would itself infringe on their innocence: ‘you don’t want to force them to think about things that they’re innocently thinking [is] a nice pink bunny.... Just allow them to be children for that bit longer’ (parent group 4). Whilst her portrayal of children’s blissful ignorance contrasts rather starkly with the young people’s assertions of their sexual knowingness, by echoing the Mumsnet ‘let girls be girls’ slogan mentioned in the introduction, her argument shows that shared popular sentiment about childhood does not guarantee support for the same policies or stances in relation to sexualized goods. More generally, she also shows how lay commentators can demonstrate authority and competence in marshalling arguments, backed by the credibility that their status as parents gives them.

Regulation of goods and the dilemmas of individual responsibility

Students rejected outright the notion of regulating sexualized goods for their own age group, although rather predictably they were prepared to consider it for younger groups. Whilst some parents indicated that they would like support in dealing with what they saw as commercial exploitation, they too were aware of its potential pitfalls, resistant to what they saw as top-down state-led regulation, and sceptical about actual implementation. Sexualized products might be a (largely unspecified) problem for a ‘small minority’ of ‘irresponsible’ parents and young people, they argued, but were best seen as a matter of individual choice, meaning it was up to parents to take action on sexualized products, if they so chose. The Bailey Review referred to above (DfE 2011) derived many of its recommendations from such arguments, focusing for example on how businesses might assist parents wishing to register offence, feedback or criticism.

However, emphasizing personal choice and responsibility does little to help us understand the difficulties and complexities of consumption. Individualized strategies are limited in several ways: they entail problematic distinctions between responsible ‘citizen-consumers’ who navigate choices successfully, and ‘others’ whose consumption is undisciplined and disordered (Tyler 2008; Hayward and Yar 2006). They assume that individuals are truly free to choose, when a striking feature of our discussions was how circumscribed parents

were: by economic means, by notions of good parenting and peer pressure, by children's nagging, emotional blackmail and/or devious tactics, by choices made by other people or institutions. Individually, they might oppose pamper parties, Bratz dolls or the phenomenon of final year primary school proms involving adult-style eveningwear, limousine hire, and so on. However, they did not think it necessarily right to refuse gifts of this nature or to exclude their children from social occasions. The mainstreaming of sex means that as one mother remarked, 'I don't have any control over [my daughter's influences] because they're not just me, they come from everywhere' (parent group 1). Negotiating contemporary consumption-oriented childhoods thus seemed to be experienced more as an imperfect balance between giving consent and feeling compelled, which one mother of a 12-year-old daughter formulated as succinctly 'buy[ing] into what might not be my choice' (parent group 8).

The language of choice, and indeed of the sexualization of *childhood* obscures, in particular, issues of gender, the focus on what *girls* buy, do, wear and play with. As one mother commented – expecting and receiving agreement from others - 'Well you don't need to worry about a wee boy dressing to look older and looking tarty or anything' (parent group 7). Boys' potentially sexualized consumption practices were generally viewed with amusement rather than alarm, with considerable hilarity occasioned by the trend for underpants showing above low-slung trousers or their use of hair gels and deodorants ('you smell them before you see them!'). If anything, boys' attention to grooming was viewed as a good thing, which 'encouraged hygiene'.

Meanwhile the process of negotiating sexualized consumption seemed far from benign for girls, involving perpetual self-scrutiny, in order both to align themselves with peers deemed worthy of emulation, and to ensure they maintained a distance from degraded and undesirable others. Class-based connotations in reading potentially sexual products as 'tasteful' or 'slutty' have invidious consequences for working-class girls in particular (Egan and Hawkes 2008; Tyler 2008). For instance, despite a general sense that defining a sexualized product in the abstract was well-nigh impossible, participants were simultaneously convinced that some forms of female attire invited particular male attention or behaviour. Few wanted to name this as sexual assault, although some young people stated outright that some girls were 'asking for it' whilst denying that they personally believed this. Parents' formulations were careful and even tortuous: 'You wonder,'

speculated one mother, 'if some of them [male paedophiles or rapists] see as if though they've kind of been *given permission*, in a sense, if they see girls going around dressed like that' (parent group 5, our emphasis). Another remarked 'I'm not suggesting that they deserve anything if they're dressing like that but I think it does send out the wrong messages' (parent group 3). Such connections implicitly condoned male violence, rationalizing it as a consequence of girls' choices and actions. The tendency to blame both the victim and her mother was expressed poignantly even if not perhaps entirely consciously by one mother who had herself been assaulted as a teenager and who remarked: 'I think as well you would worry if you'd agreed to something, then *it* happened and it was *your fault as well*' (parent group 5, our emphasis).

Concluding discussion

Our intervention in the public debates about sexualization involved some perhaps typical 'academic' manoeuvres that highlighted its complexities. We emphasized how our research participants resisted the 'sexualization narrative', parents by denying that their children were sexualized, young people by asserting they were knowledgeable and in control rather than victims. We pointed to polysemy, the postmodern premise that meaning depends on context and interpretation, to suggest that the difficulties of identifying sexualized products. We stressed contradictions, such as equally valid rationales for taking different stances in relation to consumption, and argued that both the availability of these goods and degree of parental concern might have been overestimated. We contextualised the debate, relating it to 'broader' concerns, assumptions and judgements about the nature of childhood and of children's knowledge and understanding, about good or bad parenting, about sexuality, and about the relations between social class, sexuality and taste. We cautioned against misrepresenting and vilifying other people. We highlighted the genuine difficulty of providing simple 'solutions' at the level of public policy, for instance in the form of regulation; and the inadequacies of arguments based primarily on individual choice, particularly their invidious consequences for women in relation to sexual violence.

When it was presented to the Scottish Parliament Equal Opportunities Committee, consumer-rights advocate Ed Mayo commented that it was 'a wonderful piece of academic research'. Read that again, more carefully, if you think that was praise. He went on to

condemn its failure to 'come off the fence' or be clear about 'where the responsibility lies', whilst a Member of the Scottish Parliament bluntly called it a 'cop-out'. Our argument that the problem is the discourse about sexualization led us to oppose formulating policy on the basis of such a questionable notion. To policy-makers, whose question concerned 'what to do about sexualization', our position was an inadequate non-outcome. Their responses scripted us as intellectuals cushioned from the pressing concerns of the 'real' world; one might offer a counter-narrative in which political demagoguery disrespects academic integrity, but this would be too easy. The following year, for instance, saw the start of the 'Slut Walks' movement, which protests the idea that women's clothing provides an excuse for sexual assault. It offers what we did not, an example of how positive action might begin from resisting the discourse and assumptions of sexualization.

Secondly, another way of framing and understanding public debates about sexualization is in terms of governmentality. This concept, first explored by Foucault (1991), has been used to explore the historical shift from overt rule and prescription by external authorities, to the current tendency of advanced or neo-liberal democracies to regulate the 'conduct of conduct' and foster individual responsibility-taking (see e.g. Rose 1999). In a particularly relevant discussion, Sean Hier (2011) proposes that we should conceptualize moral panic as a 'volatile instance' of these longer-term processes. Reading sexualization in terms of 'responsibilization strategies within and beyond the state' (Hier 2011: 526) directs our attention away from isolated controversies to how the public debates function more broadly as practices of ethical self-formation or work on the self, by the self - in which, moreover, our own research and analysis participate rather than standing wholly apart as we and policy-makers implied. In responding to sexualization, including as research participants, individuals can be seen to constitute themselves as reflexive, responsible subjects who make their motivations and experiences available for public investigation, and who manage risks through particular forms of conduct, such as closely monitoring their own, their children's and/or others' dress, sexual demeanour, consumption, activities and public behaviour. Such practices of self-problematization are increasingly compulsory in contemporary society and occur in relation to other topics too, of course; but the example of sexualization illuminates something of their unrelenting nature and their tendency to obscure gender, class and other social inequalities.

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ⁱ <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/2931327/Primarks-padded-bikini-tops-for-kids-condemned.html> (Published 14/04/10; accessed 04/11/11)

ⁱⁱ The pole-dancing kit was marked for adults, but apparently featured under 'toys and games' on the Tesco Direct website: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-412195/Tesco-condemned-selling-pole-dancing-toy.html> (Published 24/10/06; accessed 04/11/11)