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## Global concerns, local negotiations and moral selves: contemporary parenting and the 'sexualisation of childhood' debate

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## **Global concerns, local negotiations and moral selves: contemporary parenting and the ‘sexualisation of childhood’ debate**

### **Abstract**

Parents are contradictorily positioned within the ‘sexualisation of childhood’ debate. On the one hand, they (‘we’) are assumed to share a universal ‘concern’ about it and are urged to ‘challenge’ it through campaigning, refusing to buy inappropriate products, talking with children about ‘media messages’ and so on. On the other hand, parents – often specifically ‘mothers’ – are also held responsible for sexualisation through their irresponsible consumption. This article draws on qualitative research with parent groups to suggest that sexualisation may be a less pressing issue for parents than is often claimed: because they tend not to perceive their own children as ‘sexualised’, do not accept that goods are inherently sexualized, and subscribe to ideas about child development and ‘good parenting’ that involve letting children make decisions about such goods on their own behalf. Thus, even where parents articulate general concerns about the issue, within their own families they may opt for negotiation, compromise and subterfuge rather than overt challenge. Regardless of this, however, parents are increasingly compelled to respond to the issue, and thereby to engage in practices of ethical self-formation and individual responsibility-taking. Whilst these practices have a longer history than the sexualisation debate itself, they are framed or shaped in particular ways by it. The article indicates some problematic areas that emerged in the course of discussions with parents, such as: (self-)surveillance and critical judgement of ‘other’ girls and mothers; the obscuring of constraints on individual choice in ways that naturalise social inequalities; and the convergence of sexualisation discourse with older discourses that make women responsible for male sexual violence.

**Keywords:** parenting, sexualisation, girls, young people

## **Global concerns, local negotiations and moral selves: contemporary parenting and the 'sexualisation of childhood' debate**

'Jayne's grandma': Don't blame the shops for selling this kind of stuff. If the mothers didn't buy it the shops wouldn't stock it. Blame the moronic mothers.

'Jen48': when we have young women treating jordan as some sort of goddess what do you expect we have become a nation with no morals, no respectable mother would buy such rubbish for there child ,god help this country in 20 years time.

(Online responses, as submitted to the Sun newspaper's campaign about a 'paedo bikini', 13/04/2010)

### **Introduction**

In recent years, the 'sexualisation of childhood' has moved into the centre ground of public policy and debate internationally. The issue has been identified as an object of concern at high-profile and official levels - for instance, in the American Psychological Association's report (APA 2007) and the Australian Senate's (2007) inquiry that followed controversy over the 'Corporate Paedophilia' report (Rush and La Nauze 2006). In Britain, the previous New Labour government commissioned a report on sexualisation undertaken by the celebrity psychologist Linda Papadopoulos (2010), while the present coalition government appointed Reg Bailey, CEO of the Christian charity the Mothers' Union, to deliver a further 'Review of the sexualisation and commercialisation of childhood' (DfE 2011). The issue has been addressed in popular publications, mainly by North American writers (e.g. Durham 2009; Lamb and Brown, 2006; Levin and Kilbourne, 2008; Reist 2009;) and a number of campaigns. These include 'Let Girls be Girls' (echoed in the Bailey review's title 'Letting children be children'), launched in 2010 by the influential parenting website mumsnet and a brief, successful crusade run by the popular tabloid Sun newspaper to remove a so-called 'paedo bikini' from a high-street store in April 2010; whilst in April 2011 the Channel 4 TV

programme The Sex Education Show targeted a number of retail outlets in a campaign called ‘Stop Pimping Our Kids’.

### **Parents and sexualisation**

‘Parents’ are at the heart of this issue, ever-present yet oddly elusive, figuring sometimes as primarily responsible for the sexualisation of childhood, and sometimes as the best or only solution to it. Government action is justified by reference to their concern: a recent government press release announced that ‘Almost nine out of 10 parents think that children are being forced to grow up too quickly’<sup>i</sup>. The role of parent seems a necessary and even sufficient authorisation for commentators: Prime Minister David Cameron mentions his daughter when he writes on the topic<sup>ii</sup>, and it is as a ‘mum’ that mumsnet co-founder Justine Roberts has come to be identified as among the most influential figures on the British political scene<sup>iii</sup>. The books mentioned above hail parents as heroic if embattled saviours, their titles emphasising ‘What You Can Do About It’, ‘What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids’ and so on. The solution to sexualisation, too, is said to lie in ‘proactive parenting’, or ‘letting parents be parents’ - limiting children’s ‘exposure’, saying ‘no’ more often, talking more to them, ‘mak[ing] sexualization visible by discussing media and other cultural messages with girls’ (APA 2007: 37).

If some parents are invited to ‘be concerned’, however, others - typically identified in the third person, as ‘them’, and more often explicitly as mothers - are represented as actively to blame for sexualisation, by ignorantly or irresponsibly indulging their own and their children’s consumer desires: ‘blame the moronic mothers’ as the contributor to the *Sun*’s online forum, quoted above, put it. A media subgenre has emerged in which an ‘unrepentant’ or ‘shameless’ mother justifies pole dancing lessons, fake tans, high heels, beauty pageant competitions and so forth for her daughter(s), and audiences are invited to deliver their own verdict, usually online<sup>iv</sup>.

A body of academic work has highlighted the historical myopia of the ‘sexualisation of childhood’ thesis (Egan and Hawkes 2010; Higonnet 1998; Kincaid 1992), criticised the analytical inadequacies of the terms ‘sexualisation’ or ‘pornification’ for overgeneralising or homogenising, and cautioned against the ‘moral’ register in which the debate is conducted (Attwood 2006; Duits and van Zoonen, 2011; Duschinsky 2010; Egan and Hawkes 2010, 2008; Gill 2011, 2009; Lumby and Albury 2010; Author 2011.) Anti-sexualisation campaigns and policies manufacture parental responses as much as ‘respond’ to them: the ‘Nine out of ten parents think that children are being forced to grow up too quickly’ headline, for instance, derives from the Bailey Review, which was launched amidst publicity stating that Bailey ‘wants to hear from parents and carers about the pressures on their children to grow up too quickly’ (our emphasis). They were invited to complete a survey, the first question of which presented a list of ‘factors said to put pressure on children to grow up too quickly’ and asked respondents to tick which ‘had the most influence on their own children’, and then to provide their own examples. In other words, the consultation was structured to confirm what the review already held to be the case. Similarly, the disapproval that members of the public expressed on the C4 Sex Education Show was cued, for instance, by showing giant photographs of single garments with no indication of their provenance. In a scene where mothers and tween girls were shown ‘inappropriate’ items, the girls’ enthusiasm was unabated whilst their mothers looked distinctly uncomfortable even as they dutifully echoed the presenter’s condemnation. Vacuous sloganeering refuses the problematic task of defining positive terms, instead uniting ‘us’ against an imaginary ‘other’ – a powerful lobby that advocates ‘Pimping Our Kids’ and the eradication of girliness.

Such criticisms may be beside the point, however: without wanting to minimise the genuine differences of perspective, commitment, politics and credibility between the various actors and sources referred to above, they have all contributed to constructing the ‘sexualisation of childhood’ as an issue to which parents are increasingly summoned to

respond. Yet, with some exceptions related primarily to clothing (Pilcher 2010; Rawlins 2006) there has been to date relatively little qualitative research with parents, or analysis of their views, even where they are available (on sites such as the - notoriously unrepresentative - mumsnet or newspaper forums). This article discusses data from focus groups with parents about sexualised goods. Whilst this method does not give direct evidence of actual parenting practices, it does reveal the various discursive resources – for example, in assertions about ‘good parenting’ - on which parents draw in making sense of and renegotiating ‘sexualisation’.

### ***Background to the research***

The research, carried out in 2009, was commissioned by the Scottish Parliament’s Equal Opportunities Committee and focused specifically on ‘sexualised goods’ (clothing, toys, and other branded merchandise such as ‘Playboy’ products) rather than media, although these often proved hard to separate. Although relatively small-scale, the project also involved a review of the literature, a retail survey of products available in high street shops, and a range of qualitative research activities with Scottish children (Authors 2010).

Here we focus primarily on the work with parents, which involved nine focus groups, running over 2-3 hour sessions. These were located in socio-economically and geographically contrasting areas of Scotland and involved 35 women and 8 men; 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. Parents were recruited mainly through the schools in which we worked with young people and our own contacts, although one group involved the owner and customers of a children’s hairdressing salon whose ‘pamper parties’ had figured in Scottish media debates about the ‘death of childhood’.

The groups were facilitated by one or two of three women from the research team. We

attempted to create a non-judgemental atmosphere, employing open-ended, participatory and deliberative approaches as have been increasingly used in researching people's perceptions of public services, and in some social research (e.g. Abelson et al. 2003; McDonald 1999). 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. We anticipated supplying 'alternative' perspectives ourselves; however, we found that there was invariably sufficient diversity amongst participants to prevent a single consensus viewpoint dominating. 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. As a consequence, discussions were complex, nuanced and reflective compared to some instances of media sensationalism or 'moral panic'. However, as Hier has recently argued, moral panics can usefully be viewed in the context of and in relation to longer-term processes of ethical self-formation or 'responsibilization strategies within and beyond the state' (Hier 2011: 526) through which subjects are constituted as responsible for their own conduct and risk-taking. Engaging in the sexualisation debate, whether as research participants, campaigners, contributors to online forums or indeed as researchers, can be seen as a function of such governmental practices, whatever one's exact position on the matter.

### **Global concerns, local negotiations: the elusive nature of 'sexualisation'**

In interpreting our data, we recognised that the context and the social 'performances' it involved may have compelled participants to express greater concern about sexualisation than they would have done in other situations, or with different interlocutors; and in doing so, they might well have sought to present themselves as 'good parents' in the terms defined by much of the public debate. Even so, some participants stated that they had not (or 'not yet') encountered problems in relation to such goods with their own children, for reasons we explore below; and whilst only one mother explicitly argued that 'nothing's changed really',

many parents acknowledged continuities between their own and contemporary childhoods, reminiscing about how they too had wanted to be ‘grown up’, their desires for ‘adult’ goods, and how they had cajoled their own parents into purchases.

### *‘Innocence’, intention and knowledge*

The most common word parents used to describe children was ‘innocent’ (an association that has been analysed by many childhood studies scholars, such as Jenks 2005). A ‘natural’ or ideal childhood was generally presented as involving fun, opportunity, learning, being together, being outdoors, and playing, including dressing-up. In an icebreaker exercise where participants selected an image from a range that we supplied, depictions of children working, a boy soldier, a girl smoking and a beauty queen generally elicited reactions of shock, revulsion, pity and horror: these images were read as signs of victimisation or abuse, of children being ‘robbed of their childhood’.

However, this apparent agreement masked wide divergences when it came to defining what might be the acceptable and appropriate manifestations of children’s innocence. Thus some considered that girls emulating ‘sexy’ dance moves or wearing make-up was disturbing and ‘distasteful’ because such activities reflected a knowledge of the adult world that children should not possess and do not need. For others they were innocuous fun, devoid of ‘adult’ sexual connotations because they had no sexual intent. Both positions are in their own way coherent and logical; we cannot assume that the adults who buy allegedly sexualised goods hold radically different moral views on parenting and childhood, or indeed none whatsoever, as the public debate sometimes implies. The mothers in the group at the children’s hair salon accused of sexualising childhood, for instance, spoke as did all other parents about caring for their daughters’ wellbeing and developing them through educational and other activities: they saw playing with make-up as fun, a ‘treat’, something they remembered from their own childhoods, as did many others:



I've let [my daughter] have false nails on, recently my mum actually bought her little fluorescent pink high heels out of New Look. She loves going to school, she sticks in at her clubs, she doesn't hang about the streets. I wouldn't say that any of that is making her, a sexualisation, I think it's more about fashion and feeling nice about herself (mother of eight year old)

The mother here may make associations between consumption, appearance and 'feeling nice' that others would reject or find problematic; yet she insists that it is only one facet of her daughter's life and calls on a discourse of 'self-esteem' that is widely endorsed. The differences between parents thus seemed to reside less in general principles than in their interpretation, and particularly in how far they were willing to draw on the products of the commercial world to enact what were for the most part shared ideals.

Nonetheless, a perception of children as vulnerable and requiring protection left parents unsure whether, when or how to raise 'adult' ideas like sexualisation with them. Thus in one group, the mother of a five-year-old stated that she did not tell her daughter how much she hated Bratz dolls in order not to 'upset' her; while another mused poignantly on how it was already 'too late' to prevent her 13-year-old daughter wearing make-up: 'I don't actually think I can stop what's already started because it's already going on, you know, the feeling about what she wants to look like, her own sense of her self-image'. Articulating a sense many parents seemed to share, of their children growing up and beyond their reach, almost behind their backs during a few short years, she continued:

I can't really pinpoint a time where she suddenly became not this wee girl that she was and became this kind of mini-adult, which I feel she is now. [...] I think well, at what point? You know, there's not a defining line is there? [...] it's difficult to say when somebody just suddenly grows up because [...] it happens so – imperceptibly.

In relation to Playboy branded goods, whose popularity amongst young people has made them an icon of childhood sexualisation, there were heated debates not only about how far

they were inherently associated with the sex industry, but also about the ethics of explaining this to children. One mother argued cogently that this would itself constitute an infringement on 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'. Like mumsnet and the Bailey Review, she proposes 'letting children be children', but to very different effect: popular sentiment about childhood innocence is no guarantee of support for particular policies or stances on this issue.

### *Contesting the meaning of 'sexualised' goods*

Much of the public debate (and indeed some research) in this area assumes that 'sexualised' products are clearly identifiable, and that campaigns are merely responding to a state of affairs that pre-exists them. A recent newspaper article, for instance, alerted readers to 'Scotland's burgeoning child-beauty industry' offering 'pamper parties' to 'children as young as three' that include 'make-up lessons' and 'post-makeover glasses of "kid's bubbly"'. Yet the language used is highly partial: any of this might appear less sinister described as birthday parties involving face painting and fizzy drinks (which was, in short, how such events were viewed by women at the children's hair salon).

Exchanges in our groups highlighted the multiple meanings of products and of 'sexualisation', and thus the difficulty of agreeing distinctions in relation to any single item (albeit with important exceptions, as we note below). Many participants argued that goods had no inherent sexual connotations: one mother remarked of a make-up set, 'my daughter [aged 10], she might put the glitter on but it would be in a wee girly way, because it wouldn't look nice. So that to me I don't think she's making herself sexualised, she would just be dressing up'. Others argued that for pre-teens especially, 'make-up was 'for themselves, it's not to attract boys', 'it's for the girls, it's for their friends', that is, a focus for play serving a positive function. Such statements highlight the contradictions and ambiguities in the notion

of 'sexualisation' itself, particularly around children's intention or understanding; they also reveal deeply embedded assumptions with respect to gender and sexuality. Nonetheless, stories about children (male and female) returning from nursery wearing nail polish, or receiving make-up as birthday gifts, indicated the extent to which it had become a routine part of the experience of childhood, rather than its antithesis. The continuity with 'childish' activities such as face painting made it difficult to distinguish a clear point at which make-up would become unacceptable, even more so if the mothers wore it themselves: 'you don't want to be a complete spoilsport, because she sees other people doing it', as one mother remarked of her five-year-old's interest in nail varnish.

In one group that came the closest to generating a strong consensus against sexualisation, with some intensely-voiced concerns about contemporary mores, two mothers then contemplated the products gathered for our retail survey and acknowledged that they had already bought many or most of the 'pink' goods (Barbie, Bratz, make-up, etc.) for their daughters. This suggests the sometimes free-floating quality of parents' anxieties, which may derive from general perceptions of social trends and tendencies, but may not be exactly mirrored in everyday consumption practices.

In relation to items of clothing, mothers also tended to argue that their meaning shifted according to context (party or school); how they were used and with what (short skirts or shorts were more 'sexual' if worn with socks, less so if worn with thick leggings or tights); and the identity of the wearer (particularly in relation to their age). As noted above, discussions of the Playboy brand were particularly intense, with parents switching between 'adult-' and 'child-centric' perspectives. Whilst some argue that sexualisation occurs whether or not children grasp the connotations of goods, equally, childhood studies scholars have generally validated children's 'distinctive' understandings (e.g. James 1993): the question of whose viewpoint to prioritise is not easily settled in any context.

Alongside this insistence on the undecideability of meaning, however, there was general agreement that some forms of female attire invited particular male attention or behaviour. Few wanted to name this as sexual assault, although some of the young people who participated in our school focus groups stated outright that certain girls were ‘asking for it’, whilst denying personally believing this. Parents’ formulations in these respects were careful and even tortuous: ‘You wonder,’ speculated one mother, ‘if some of them [men] see as if though they’ve kind of been given permission, in a sense, if they see girls going around dressed like that’ (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’. The expression ‘like that’ in both these statements invokes a referent (‘in/appropriate’ clothing) that is necessarily undefined, since as our group discussions show, being more specific would inevitably prove more controversial, yet works powerfully to hold women and girls to account for male sexual violence.

### ***Sexualisation: Not my child... and nobody’s son***

None of our parents felt their own daughters were becoming ‘too sexual too soon’, as has been suggested is true of girls in general. Daughters were described as ‘sensible’, rarely even desiring potentially ‘inappropriate’ clothing; if they did, this was redefined as harmlessly ‘trying to be older’. A mother who had ‘lost’ a battle over underwear consoled – and defended – herself by claiming ‘it’s not like she’s about to have sex with somebody because she’s wearing thongs, it’s just a look’. Girls’ sexual expression was taken to be inadvertent, and of concern primarily because of how men would interpret it – ‘the attention that you may attract, you don’t know how to handle’ (mother of 11 and 14 year old girls). Rather than ‘compulsory sexual agency’ (Gill 2008), then, girls were generally positioned as passive and in need of protection, precisely as sexualisation discourse proposes according to Egan and Hawkes (2008). Accordingly mothers fretted over their daughters’ overall wellbeing, the pressures

they were under, their ‘obsession’ with their looks and body image, the effort involved in grooming, how current fashions excluded girls who did not fit a ‘pencil-thin’ norm, their failure to wear sufficiently warm clothing, and their unhealthy eating habits – ‘they exist on air!’. Bras were seen simultaneously as inappropriate and as responding to the needs of girls who do mature early; in two groups, mothers described how this had been true both for them and for their daughters, which tended to mute criticism of such items even where it was also pointed out that a ‘30AA’ bra hardly applied to such cases. Mothers admitted buying padded bras to boost confidence and recalling their own adolescent anxieties, even whilst wishing they did not exist. Some mothers were, however, unaware of the dangers of underwiring for breasts that were still developing.

Likewise, parents claimed that their sons did not grasp the sexual meanings of goods or advertisements, and were seeking to connect to brands and to idols rather than impress girls. (This is in itself a gendered interpretation: boys have ‘role models’ like David Beckham, whilst girls are deemed to be ‘obsessed with celebrity culture’, just as girls’ purchases, which tend to be more frequent, but of lower-cost goods, are taken to indicate negative values such as materialism, unlike boys’ more focused investment in high-value items.) In addition, boys were seen as less prone than girls to want to grow up faster. Boys’ potentially ‘sexualised’ 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!’). Parents’ concerns about brands focused on fitness for purpose, cost, exploitation (deodorant as a means to develop early brand loyalty) but not sexualisation per se. Indeed, boys’ attention to grooming was often viewed as a good thing, which ‘encouraged hygiene’. Ultimately, boys’ and girls’ relationships to sexualised goods were seen to be very different; as one mother put it, expecting and meeting with nods of agreement, ‘you don’t need to worry about a wee boy dressing to look older and looking tarty or anything’. These gendered differences

in relation to sexualisation – with all that they imply for the narrower range of options allowed to girls - were simply taken for granted as common sense.

Some mothers expressed concerns about the influence on their sons' attitudes to women of the sexualised images in male popular culture – including in computer games, magazines such as Nuts and Zoo and their pull-out posters (cf. Mooney, 2008). They could not necessarily rely on fathers for support in challenging this, as one recounted in relation to a 'Rock Babes' poster in her son's room:

His comment back to me was 'our dad really liked that one' and I thought 'oh dear, right, ok' and that also, I can understand they're having a joke between each other but I'm also thinking 'I wonder if he said anything else about it'. I suspect not.

(Mother of 12 and 13 year old boys)

On the whole, parents seemed confident that their boys were not the problem. One father argued that sexist attitudes were 'probably more back to how they see their parents and the parent's attitude to members of the opposite sex as well, or probably more so', and a mother insisted that 'I've brought my boys up to respect women regardless of what they're wearing'.

### ***'Democratic' parenting and sexualisation***

In discussing family relationships, most participants held what might be termed broadly 'democratic' ideals, recognising children's rights to be different, make their own decisions, develop their individuality and express themselves – an approach to parenting that has become increasingly predominant, especially among middle-class families (Jacobson 2004). Childhood was viewed through a 'developmental' lens, involving specific but 'natural' stages of growth towards adulthood, some of which might involve (temporarily) rejecting parental values. 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 observed). Nonetheless, these developmental models of childhood suggested that ‘good’ parenting 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. Many parents pointed to the transition from primary to secondary school as a significant milestone, arguing (or at least accepting) that at this stage or by the age of 12 or 13, children should if they wished have the final say on clothes and items of personal care.

Democracy was also enacted by treating children as having particular expertise and interests in the codes of (commercial) youth culture - ‘they can spot a brand from 50 paces!’. Many mothers described trying to keep up with fashions so as not to be pronouncing on issues they did not understand, finding in the process that such trends were less obnoxious than they initially feared. Mothers also described going shopping with their children more than did fathers, which may have meant they were more familiar with what was available, more aware of their children’s desires and possibly under more pressure to fulfil them. It may also have equipped them to play the intermediary role some mothers described, for instance where male partners refused to allow daughters out of the house ‘dressed like that’. Equally, a relative lack of familiarity with contemporary retailing, rather than gender-based differences, might explain some fathers’ negative reactions to store layout and ranges – for instance, being embarrassed to find women’s lingerie displayed next to children’s wear.

Growing up and consumption were also understood through the concept of ‘peer pressure’ (see Author 2011; Croghan et al. 2006; Pugh 2009), which was sometimes construed as greater and more malign than commercial or media influence. Parents recalled its role in their own youth and referred to it as a reason to ‘allow’ purchases of which they otherwise disapproved; as one mother put it, ‘you’ve got to try and let them do some of the

things that the rest are doing so they don't feel like the odd one out'. (For a historical perspective on the development of such ideas, see Matt 2002).

Ideas about 'good parenting', then, suggest contradictory paths of action. On the one hand, parents are exhorted to be proactive about 'saying no' to sexualised 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 inevitable adolescent rebellion or even as a step towards developing crucial decision-making capacities that parents are morally obliged to assist ('making their own mistakes' or 'getting it out of [their] system'). 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 imposing one-sided decisions. 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'.

Participants expressed greater concern about commercialisation and the alleged cynicism and irresponsibility of marketers and retailers. The targeting of ever-younger consumers was seen as having negative consequences for children's moral values, making them obsessed with brands, giving them 'disposable', materialistic and 'get it now' attitudes to life that did not make them happy, and facilitating cruelty to those who did not fit in. It also impacted on parents who felt required to purchase more goods, more often, and across a wider range: more than one parent described kitting out a bedroom on the theme of a popular TV series, only to find that it was out of favour a few months later. However, as marketers know only too well, consumption is loaded for parents too, who seek thereby to express love and care, to please and delight, often identifying not only with the position of 'parent', but simultaneously with their child/ren and their own past selves (cf. Cross, 2004, 2010). This can



also be, tied up with feelings of guilt, anxiety and with concerns about their own and their children's social status (Author 2011). Anti-sexualisation campaigns that position parents as the rational, external regulators of children's consumption underestimate and fail to explore such ambivalent emotions.

### **Sexualisation, moral self-regulation and social distinction**

So far we have suggested reasons why the sexualisation debate has less traction in the views and (reported) behaviour of our sample of Scottish parents, than the amount of media coverage and political attention the issue receives might lead one to expect. However, this does not mean that therefore this debate was without effects, as we will now explore.

Parents in our groups presented themselves as diffident about their childrearing practices, constantly monitoring their actions, critically reflecting on their own upbringing, on the difficulty of accepting their children's increasing maturity, on the cultural relativism and even contradictoriness of their own views, and on the difficulty of finding solutions. A mother of four teenagers described this vividly:

I'm forever questioning myself - am I bringing them up right or am I just going on what happened to me and forcing that on them? And you're constantly [in] a tug of war with yourself, trying ...are you doing the right thing? Or am I not?

Such expressions of self-doubt may to a large extent have been produced by the research context, but they connect to a general perception of parenting being under public scrutiny (Furedi 2008). Some scholars have interpreted this as a manifestation of the 'responsibilisation' of parents by neoliberal policies that hold individuals to account for success and achievement (Gillies 2005, 2008); and of the technologising of parenting into sets of skills that form a duty of citizenship (Jensen 2010; Smeyer 2009).

If contemporary parenting requires self-surveillance, it is equally reliant on monitoring and judging other parents (particularly mothers) in order to locate and justify one's own

practices. Macvarish (2010) describes this as 'parent tribalism' whereby modes of parenting become a site for identity formation and differentiation from degraded 'others'. All our participants believed that 'lines should be drawn' and pointed to those whom they saw as overstepping boundaries in their parenting. Sexualised products were not seen as a problem for themselves personally, but for a 'small minority' of 'irresponsible' other parents and young people (although this was not in itself seen to justify regulation, as is often the case in relation to 'third-person' media effects). Moreover, the closer participants were to the kinds of practices that might be said to involve sexualisation, the more subtle – and more important – became the distinctions between what was and was not acceptable. Thus one mother described how she had carefully studied peer norms in relation to clothing at her daughter's school before approving her requests for particular items. Other mothers made clear that the make-up they allowed did not approach the heavy, adult style in our picture of an American child beauty queen; or that if they permitted shoes with heels, this was only for short periods and/or as long as they were below a certain height, and so on. Yet the likelihood of being judged put many women on the defensive. We saw this in some of our earlier examples, where one mother resisted the imagined accusation that her thong-wearing daughter might become promiscuous, or the mother of an eight-year-old who plays with heels and false nails took pains to stress her academic and extra-curricular achievements. The owner of the children's hair salon adduced the paid employment and married status of her adult offspring as part of her defence against the charges of sexualising childhood levelled at her. These strategies are understandable; however, they are not equally available to all; they operate within narrow and conventional moral boundaries; and they reveal considerable costs primarily for girls and mothers in negotiating 'sexualized' consumption, involving perpetual self-scrutiny to maintain a balance between 'acceptable', peer-group-appropriate and undesirable practices and choices.

### *Other people's taste, other people's daughters*

Some participants did question whether sexualisation debates 'came down to taste', but this is of course no simple matter (Bourdieu 1984). Despite the fragmentation of contemporary 'taste formations' (Frow 1995), in the context of our research a traditionally socially dominant value hierarchy held sway, which made it difficult for some participants to defend what were thereby designated as degraded tastes.

The class connotations of sexualised goods were apparent in how young people described Playboy products as 'neddy', 'chavvy', 'mingin'', 'tarty' and so on – terms which were sometimes cited if not explicitly endorsed by parents. Yet whilst a majority of our parent participants expressed dislike of Playboy products, there were different logics involved in these superficially similar responses that divided, roughly speaking, along class lines. One mother, for instance, strongly objected to what she described as Playboy 'grooming' girls for sex work, but not to her son's poster of Jordan, on the grounds that Jordan was 'doing it for herself', rather than exploiting children; moreover, her animated discussion of Katie Price's marriage troubles suggested that she followed them in the popular press and magazines, and empathised with her as a fellow single mother<sup>vi</sup>. She, and some other working-class mothers in our groups, had some appreciation of the sex industry – defined broadly to include lap dancing nightclubs, 'glamour modelling' and so on - as a potentially viable employment option for girls or for themselves. By contrast, some middle-class parents engaged in ritualistic condemnations of the sex industry as a whole, in part perhaps because it was comfortably remote from their own work or their daughters' future career prospects.

Negative judgements of products extended to those who consumed them; young girls' encoded class difference provoked vehement hostility from a mother (of three teenage sons) in a way that seems to confirm Egan and Hawkes' (2008) argument that the sexualisation debates today are, as in earlier eras, motivated by fear and desire to control the sexuality of working class girls:

Really high heels, tight short skirts, [...] for a 12 year old, I mean I've seen gangs of these girls walking around in Edinburgh in the evening and it's like you're in the red light district [...] From my perspective, I have sons and I think, do I want them to be going out with a girl that looks like that? I prefer that they didn't

In one group two single mothers argued that they had little choice in what they bought because 'the cheap clothes are like that', one asserting that she couldn't afford what she wanted for her daughter 'so she needs to wear things that I don't really [like]'. Whilst material considerations are indeed valid, they may have been justifying (and disavowing) their choices in response to another middle-class mother in the group who had earlier cited her husband's description of the clothes in a downmarket high-street shop as 'everything the child prostitute needs'. These working-class mothers could not (in this context) assert a preference in and of itself for such shops or styles.

Defining sexualised goods as a question of 'taste' and thus as 'up to the individual', a matter of 'personal choice' meant that even if some parents indicated that they would like support in dealing with what they saw as commercial exploitation, they were generally distrustful of actual regulation by what was often referred to as 'the nanny state'. The Bailey Review derives many of its recommendations from such arguments, focusing for example on how businesses might assist parents wishing to register offence, feedback or criticism. However, such individualized strategies are limited in several ways: as we suggested in the introduction, they entail problematic distinctions between responsible 'citizen-consumers' ('us') who navigate choices successfully, and others whose consumption is undisciplined and disordered (Tyler 2008; Hayward and Yar 2006; Willett, 2008). They further assume that individuals are 'free to choose', when parents repeatedly told us how circumscribed they were: by economic means, by conceptions of good parenting or 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’ 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’ (Attwood 2010) 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’. Negotiating contemporary consumption-oriented ‘sexualised’ 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 succinctly as a matter of ‘buy[ing] into what might not be my choice’.

Nonetheless, not only do societal structures and constraints fade from view in discourses of individual choice and responsibility, but when merged with concepts of risk, they become disturbingly receptive to longstanding arguments that make women responsible for male sexual violence. (In this respect, it might be noted that the Papadopoulos report was part of a Home Office initiative designed to address violence against women.) As we suggested in relation to the discussion of clothing, the ‘social problem’ of sexual assault was re-gendered (cf. Meyer 2010), to focus on the victim rather than the aggressor. The tendency to blame both girls and mothers was expressed poignantly, even if not, perhaps, entirely consciously, by a participant who had herself been sexually assaulted as a teenager: ‘I think as well,’ she commented, ‘you would worry if you’d agreed to something, then it happened and it was your fault as well’ (our emphasis).

## **Conclusion**

Our findings point to the genuine difficulty of providing simple ‘solutions’ at the level of public policy, for instance in the form of regulation; but they also indicate the limitations of arguments that are based merely on individual choice. As we have shown, the ‘sexualisation of childhood’ invokes much broader assumptions – for instance, about children’s knowledge and understanding, about what constitutes good or bad parenting, about male and female

sexuality, and about the relations between social class, sexuality and taste. The assumptions we make in these respects have implications for the allocation of responsibility, and indeed of blame, for things that we may perceive to be going wrong in children's lives or in family relationships. In the process, we run the risk of a whole series of misrepresentations, particularly of other people from whom we seek to distance or differentiate ourselves.

Our research suggests that parents' views in relation to sexualisation are more multifaceted than some of the public campaigns that purport to speak on their behalf. Particularly when it came to goods and activities chosen by their own children, parents in our research generally resisted the 'sexualisation narrative' through strategies such as redescribing them as 'fun', 'fashion', 'play' and 'learning', highlighting the importance of contexts of usage in deciding meaning, or emphasising the lack of 'sexual' intent in child users. 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. In addition, as we have shown, notions of 'good' parenting are mediated by consumption in contradictory ways such that both proscribing sexualised goods and leaving decisions to children are each valid moral stances. Parents differ from each other more in the extent to which they view consumer goods as help or hindrance to parenting, than in their values or perceptions of what childhood 'should' be.

We have also shown that discourses of choice, of 'parenting' and indeed of the sexualization of childhood, all obscure the overwhelming focus on – and policing of - what girls buy, do, wear and play with, and by implication their mothers. The sexualisation debate has problematic effects; it incites surveillance and judgement of self and others, denigrates 'working-class' taste formations, and reinforces discourses that place the blame for sexual violence on women themselves. Feminism – and girls - may be better served by resisting sexualisation discourse: the 'Slut Walks' movement that began in 2011 and protests the idea

that women's clothing provides an excuse for sexual assault, perhaps offers a valuable example in these respects.

Nonetheless, reading the sexualisation debates as practices of ethical self-formation points to more intractable issues. In responding to sexualisation, including as research participants or indeed as researchers, individuals 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. These unrelenting and unceasing self-problematisations, as we have suggested, overstate the power and control that individuals have and undermine analysis of gender, class and other social inequalities or even of ambivalent experiences, memories and histories; yet 'sexualisation' did not create them, nor would they disappear when the issue of sexualisation, as we hope it will, fades from public view.

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<sup>i</sup> [www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/healthandwellbeing/a0076619/almost-nine-out-of-ten-parents-think-children-are-being-forced-to-grow-up-too-quickly](http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/healthandwellbeing/a0076619/almost-nine-out-of-ten-parents-think-children-are-being-forced-to-grow-up-too-quickly). Accessed

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<sup>ii</sup> eg: [www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1252156/DAVID-CAMERON-Sexualisation-children-too-young.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1252156/DAVID-CAMERON-Sexualisation-children-too-young.html). Downloaded 28/04/2011

<sup>iii</sup> 'The Mumsnet election - parties use parenting website as battlefield'. Guardian 09/02/10  
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<sup>iv</sup> See for instance: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1286706/Mother-gives-teenage-daughter-Botox-teaches-7-year-old-POLEDANCE.html>;  
<http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/woman/3015804/Sarah-Burge-defiant-over-criticism-for-teaching-daughter-to-pole-dance.html>; <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2032499/Beautician-spray-tans-FOUR-YEAR-OLD-daughter-help-boost-confidence.html>;  
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<sup>v</sup> Scotland on Sunday 13/02/2011

<sup>vi</sup> Katie Price, b. 1978, also known as Jordan (a pseudonym associated particularly with her career as a glamour model), a British celebrity known for her entrepreneurial approach to self-

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marketing. She appeared in the TV reality show *I'm a celebrity get me out of here* (2005 and 2009) and subsequently in series documenting her lifestyle and relationships; she has successfully published several ghostwritten novels and autobiographies, including books for children; developed a number of cosmetic and clothing ranges; had a singing career that included a bid to represent the UK in the Eurovision song contest.