

Human Sexuality – Unit 2 Homework Assignment

This assignment is more or less an opinion piece. Attached are two articles concerning how young girls view themselves in conjunction with a trend in our society emphasizing female sexuality, even among the very young. Your assignment is simply to read the articles and then give me your opinion. Is this as prevalent as claimed? Do you think it's a problem? Is it really that important? Your response need only be about one page. Feel free to cite your own experiences, observations of young children you know such as little sisters and such, even additional related articles if you care to find them.

30% of Girls' Clothing Is Sexualized in Major Sales Trend

by Stephanie Pappas, Live Science Contributor | May 20, 2011 10:36am ET



Clothes marketed to young kids often mix adult elements like padded tops with childlike flourishes like flowers or polka dots, a new study finds. Credit: © Poznyakov | Dreamstime.com

Almost a third of girls' clothing for sale at 15 major retailers has sexualizing characteristics, a new study finds, a trend that psychologists say can encourage girls to view themselves as sex objects at an early age.

The majority of sexualized clothes also had childlike characteristics, such as polka dots, the research found. Nonetheless, adults in the study rated these childish but sexualizing clothes as just as sexy as clothes with only sexualizing features.

"Even though parents might see them as more acceptable [than purely sexy clothes], I'm not sure they're perceived that differently," study researcher Sarah Murnen, a social psychologist at Kenyon College in Ohio, said of the clothes that mixed sexuality and girliness.

The sexy-clothes

Handwringing over the sexualization of young girls is a common theme both in the media and in the mall. In 2007, Wal-Mart pulled a pair of girls' underwear with the words "Who needs credit cards ..." on the front and "when you have Santa" on the back from the shelves after parental outcry. Those extreme cases get people's ire up, said Sharon Lamb, a professor of mental health at the University of Massachusetts in Boston who was not

involved in the research. But the trend is more insidious than single cases make it out to be, Lamb told LiveScience.

"It's not just this most outrageous thing," said Lamb, author of "Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters From Marketer's Schemes" (St. Martin's Press, 2006). "It's a lot of subtle little things, too."

In 2007, Lamb was part of an American Psychological Association Task Force that reviewed the research on the consequences of sexualization for young girls. The task force found that girls who buy into sexualizing media messages are more likely to experience low self-esteem, depression and eating disorders. One 1998 study found that girls made body-conscious by wearing swimsuits while they did a math test in an empty room did worse on the test than girls completing the same test while wearing sweaters. There were no differences in test-taking performance between boys wearing swimsuits and boys wearing sweaters, suggesting a link between self-objectification and shame and anxiety in girls.

In one yet-unpublished study, Murnen and her research team asked volunteers to look at pictures of the same fifth-grader dressed in sexualized, childish-but-sexualized, or non-sexualized clothing. The adult volunteers viewed the sexualized version of the girl as less competent, less intelligent, less moral and less self-respecting.

"And she's a fifth-grade girl!" Murnen said. "The fact that they consider her less moral is really disturbing, as if we do blame her for her clothing choice."

Marketing sexiness

In the newly published study, Murnen and her colleagues went through the [children's](#) offerings of 15 national retailers, from high-end stores such as Neiman Marcus to inexpensive stores such as Kmart and Target. All of the clothes were sized and marketed for toddlers to pre-teen children. The researchers asked independent adult raters to judge 5,666 clothing items for whether they revealed or emphasized a sexualized body part such as the chest or buttocks and whether they had sexy characteristics such as slinky material, leopard print, or sexualized writing. The raters also looked for childlike characteristics such as frills or butterflies.

Of all clothing items, 31 percent had sexualizing features, the researchers found. Most of these, about 86 percent, had childlike characteristics combined with sexy characteristics. Abercrombie Kids was the worst offender, with 72 percent of clothes featuring a sexualizing aspect. [Neiman Marcus](#) boasted about 38 percent sexualized clothing.

Child-only stores like Gymboree tended to do well, though older girls might think of those stores as babyish, Murnen said. Target was one of the better stores, with 80 percent of their girls' clothes falling in the "childlike" category.

"We think that it is bad right now in part of what is happening in the [culture](#) with the [sexualization of women](#) that has been documented," Murnen said. "We think this is trickling down to girls."

It's easy to blame parents for buying sexy clothes for little girls, Lamb said, but that lets marketers off the hook.

"Blaming the parents is exactly what the marketers want you to do," she said. "They spend \$12 billion getting your kids to want the things you don't want them to have, and then they blame you for buying them."

Murnen's study appears online in the journal Sex Roles.

Why 6-Year-Old Girls Want to Be Sexy

by Jennifer Abbasi, LiveScience Contributor | July 16, 2012 06:06am ET



Girls as young as 6 are already feeling the pressure to be sexy. Credit: [Alena Ozerova, Shutterstock](#)

Most girls as young as 6 are already beginning to think of themselves as sex objects, according to a new study of elementary school-age kids in the Midwest.

Researchers have shown in the past that women and teens think of themselves in sexually objectified terms, but the new study is the first to identify [self-sexualization in young girls](#). The study, published online July 6 in the journal *Sex Roles*, also identified factors that protect girls from objectifying themselves.

Psychologists at Knox College in Galesburg, Ill., used paper dolls to assess self-sexualization in 6- to 9-year-old girls. Sixty girls were shown two dolls, one dressed in tight and revealing "sexy" clothes and the other wearing a trendy but covered-up, loose outfit.

Using a different set of dolls for each question, the researchers then asked each girl to choose the doll that: looked like herself, looked how she wanted to look, was the popular girl in school, she wanted to play with.



When shown a set of two dolls, one in revealing clothes and the other in trendy by covered-up clothes, about 70 percent of girls in the study said they looked more like the sexy doll and that the sexy doll was more popular than the non-sexy doll. Credit: Dollz Mania's ChaZie Dollmaker, <http://dollzmania.net/ChaZieMaker.htm>

Across-the-board, girls chose the "sexy" doll most often. The results were significant in two categories: 68 percent of the girls said the doll looked how she wanted to look, and 72 percent said she was more popular than the non-sexy doll.

"It's very possible that girls wanted to look like the sexy doll because they believe [sexiness leads to popularity](#), which comes with many social advantages," explained lead researcher Christy Starr, who was particularly surprised at how many 6- to 7-year-old girls chose the sexualized doll as their ideal self.

Other studies have found that sexiness boosts popularity among girls but not boys. "Although the desire to be popular is not uniquely female, [the pressure to be sexy](#) in order to be popular is."

Important factors

Starr and her [research](#) adviser and co-author, Gail Ferguson, also looked at factors that influenced the girls' responses. Most of the girls were recruited from two public schools, but a smaller subset was recruited from a local dance studio. The girls in this latter group actually chose the non-sexualized doll more often for each of the four questions than did the public-school group. Being involved in dance and other sports has been linked to greater body appreciation and higher body image in teen girls and women, Starr said.

"It's possible that for young girls, dance involvement increased body esteem and created awareness that their bodies can be used for purposes besides looking sexy for others, and thus decreased self-sexualization." (The researchers cautioned, however, that a previous study found that young girls in "aesthetic" sports like dance are more concerned about their weight than others.)

Media consumption alone didn't influence girls to prefer the sexy doll. But girls who watched a lot of TV and movies *and* who had mothers who reported self-objectifying tendencies, such as worrying about their clothes and appearance many times a day, in the study were more likely to say the sexy doll was popular.

The authors suggest that the media or moms who sexualize women may predispose girls toward objectifying themselves; then, the other factor (mom or media) reinforces the messages, amplifying the effect. On the other hand, mothers who reported often using TV and movies as teaching moments about bad behaviors and unrealistic scenarios were much less likely to have daughters who said they looked like the sexy doll. The power of maternal instruction during media viewing may explain why every additional hour of TV- or movie-watching actually decreased the odds by 7 percent that a girl would choose the sexy doll as popular, Starr said. "As maternal TV instruction served as a protective factor for sexualization, it's possible that higher media usage simply allowed for more instruction."

Mothers' religious beliefs also emerged as an important factor in how girls see themselves. Girls who consumed a lot of media but who had religious mothers were protected against self-sexualizing, perhaps because these moms "may be more likely to model higher body-esteem and communicate values such as modesty," the authors wrote, which could mitigate the images portrayed on TV or in the movies.

However, girls who didn't consume a lot of media but who had religious mothers were much more likely to say they wanted to look like the sexy doll. "This pattern of results may reflect a case of ['forbidden fruit'](#) or reactance, whereby young girls who are overprotected from the perceived ills of media by highly religious parents ... begin to idealize the forbidden due to their underexposure," the authors wrote. Another possibility is that mothers of girls who displayed sexualized attitudes and behaviors had responded by restricting the amount of TV and movies their daughters could watch. Regardless, the authors underlined, "low media consumption is not a silver bullet" against early self-sexualization in girls.

What moms can do

Recent books like "The Lolita Effect" (Overlook TP, 2008) and "So Sexy So Soon" (Ballantine Books, 2009) have raised concerns that girls are being sexualized at a young age, and Starr said her study is the first to provide empirical evidence for the trend. In 2007, the American Psychological Association sounded the alarm in a report on the sexualization of girls. It documented consequences of self-objectification and sexualization that have been identified in mainly college-age women, ranging from distractibility during mental tasks and [eating disorders](#) to [reduced condom use](#) and fewer women pursuing careers in math and science. Starr and her colleagues wrote that they expected similar outcomes in younger adolescents and girls.

The APA report, which inspired the new study, cited [widespread sexualization of women](#) in popular culture. "In study after study, findings have indicated that women more often than men are portrayed in a sexual manner ... and are objectified," the APA authors wrote. "These are the models of femininity presented for young girls to study and emulate."

The authors cited examples like "advertisements (e.g. the Sketchers naughty and nice ad that featured Christina Aguilera dressed as a schoolgirl in pigtails, with her shirt unbuttoned, licking a lollipop), dolls (e.g. Bratz dolls dressed in sexualized clothing such as miniskirts, fishnet stockings and feather boas), clothing (e.g. thong underwear sized for 7- to 10-year-olds, some printed with slogans such as 'wink wink'), and television programs (e.g. a televised fashion show in which adult models in lingerie were presented as young girls)." Parents, teachers and peers were also cited as influencing girls' sexualized identities.

Eileen Zurbriggen, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and chairwoman of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, said the buffering effects of religious beliefs and instruction, co-viewing of media and lower levels of maternal self-objectification pinpointed by the new study are exciting, because they "suggest that parents can do a lot to protect girls from the sexualizing culture."

Starr agrees. "Mothers feel so overwhelmed by the sexualizing messages their daughters are receiving from the media that they feel they can do nothing to help," she said. "Our study's findings indicate otherwise — we found that in actuality, mothers are key players in whether or not their daughters sexualize themselves. Moms can help their daughters navigate a sexualizing world by instructing their daughters about their values and by not demonstrating objectified and sexualized behaviors themselves."

Starr studied the influence of mothers because there's more evidence that daughters model themselves after their mothers, but she believes that fathers may also play an important role in how young girls see themselves. She would also like to look at how fathers and the media influence boys' understanding of sexualized messages and views toward women. More research is also needed, she said, on the consequences of sexualization on young girls' health, well-being and identity, and whether young girls who objectify themselves also act out these sexual behaviors.