FINAL REPORT

SEXUALISED GOODS AIMED AT CHILDREN

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OVERVIEW

This project was commissioned in response to concerns raised in the Scottish Parliament's Equal Opportunities Committee about the prevalence of sexualised goods and products marketed to children. In the past few years, this issue has become a key area of public concern, although it is one that often invokes much broader emotions and anxieties, and has been the subject of some sensationalised coverage in the media. The project set out to provide concrete empirical evidence on the marketing of such goods, and to provide some indepth analysis of the perspectives of children and parents, in the interest of promoting a more informed debate.

The study had three main aims. Firstly, it sought to provide a clear framework for understanding the nature and characteristics of 'sexualised' goods (the definition of which is by no means obvious) and supplying some reliable empirical evidence of their prevalence and distribution. Secondly, it attempted to assess the views of children on these issues. This is particularly important as debates in this area rarely include the perspectives of children themselves, or take account of their understanding of the potential sexual connotations of the goods they consume. Finally, it aimed to explore parents' views. Here again, there is a need to move beyond immediate responses, and to gain a more in-depth understanding of how parents negotiate the demands of consumer culture with their children in practice.

The project began with a review of the literature, exploring the nature of the debate on this issue and the available evidence from previous research. This was followed by a survey of the range of products available in high street shops, starting with a broad overview and then analysing particular 'sexualised' goods more closely. We then undertook a range of qualitative research activities designed to access the views of children and parents. In the case of the children in particular, we used innovative methods chosen specifically because of the sensitive nature of the topic and the difficulties of accessing feelings, experiences and understandings on the issue. The study followed published ethical guidelines, specifically those of the British Educational Research Association (2004).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There appears to be growing concern from a variety of perspectives about the sexualisation of children, and particularly about the role of media and marketing in this respect. However, we have found that this is a complex topic, which is not amenable to simple explanations - or indeed simple policy interventions.

People define 'sexualisation' in different ways, and there is considerable diversity in terms of how they perceive the potentially sexual connotations of products. In general, children recognise and understand these issues in different ways from adults.

Both parents and children are making nuanced, contextual decisions about what they consume, in which several criteria are considered. The potential sexual connotations of products are only one dimension of this.

Children are not in any sense simply the dupes of marketers; although neither are they wholly free to make their own choices and decisions. Children construct and develop their identities in part through what they consume; but there are limitations on the kinds of goods that are available in the marketplace.

While it may be difficult to develop effective strategies for regulating the market, it may also be misguided to suggest that the ultimate responsibility for dealing with sexualisation should be down to the individual.

Literature review

Almost all of the previous research in this area focuses on media (including advertising), rather than sexualised goods or products. Much of this debate focuses on girls, leaving aside key questions about the consequences for boys. Sexual content in mainstream media has increased, and become more explicit, in recent years; and sexual imagery has become more widely circulated within society more broadly. However, almost all of the research on the impact of this relates to adults rather than children.

There are significant difficulties here in defining what *counts* as 'sexualised': different people are likely to have very different views about this, and to interpret and respond to sexual imagery in quite different ways. The research often fails to distinguish between material that is 'sexualised' as opposed to 'sexual' in nature. Recent research has found that UK children encounter some very diverse messages about sex in the media (including in advertising); and while they find some of this material valuable and enjoyable, they can also be quite critical of it.

Adults and children – both male and female – in Western societies are prone to be dissatisfied with their physical appearance, although again the evidence on the effects of the media in this respect is limited in scope and validity.

It is obviously likely that both adults and children will be influenced by dominant ideas about physical attractiveness and 'sexiness' (although these are not necessarily seen as the same thing). However, evidence of the effects of this material is mixed and inconclusive; and again, nearly all of it relates to adults rather than children.

The debate on sexualisation has often been conducted in very sensationalised and moralistic terms. This can make it difficult for children in particular to discuss and come to terms with the range of messages they are bound to encounter.

Retail survey

The survey of products covered a total of 32 retail outlets including supermarkets/superstores, department stores, clothing retailers, toy stores, sports stores, gift/gadget stores, stationers and outlets devoted to specific

branded goods.

Retail outlets surveyed were located in shopping malls and 'High Street' locations in city centres in Glasgow, Perth and Inverness as well as shopping malls and shopping centres on the periphery of Glasgow accessible to those living in the Greater Glasgow area.

Retail outlets were differentiated according to the following criteria: stores specifically aimed at children and young people and/or parents shopping for children; stores with a cross-generational target group but with a separate department/section for children; and stores with a cross-generational target group, where no overall explicit distinction is made between adults and children.

Although definitions of 'sexual' or 'sexualised' goods are problematic, examples of goods that came under the following categories were identified: goods that made references to sexual practices and sexual contexts; goods that emphasised body parts and shapes culturally associated with adult sexuality; and goods that duplicated styles currently considered fashionable for adults.

While there are undoubtedly some 'sexualised' 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.

Children use retail outlets and spaces not only for shopping, but also for play and interaction with peers and parents. In addition to looking at goods themselves, it is therefore important to take account of the wider context in which they are displayed and marketed.

Age distinctions are both reinforced and blurred by retail outlets: children may be implicitly encouraged to aspire to appear older than they are (notably in crossgenerational
stores), but distinctions are also clearly marked in many settings
through the labelling, arrangement and display of goods.

On the other hand, gender distinctions generally tend to be more strongly created and reinforced through the design, display, marketing and packaging of goods; and most potentially 'sexualised' products are targeted at girls rather than boys.

Parents' views

Despite the apparent public concern about this issue, our research data does not allow us to state with certainty that 'sexualised goods' in fact represent a major problem for parents, as compared with other matters.

Some parents argued that 'little has changed', that children have always wanted to 'grow up too soon' and to experiment with adult identities. However, parents also felt that there was new and growing pressure from commercialisation. Nevertheless, parents also recognised children's expertise in the codes of contemporary consumer culture - and even that their own comparative incompetence here could undermine the authority of their own views.

Most parents talked about childhood in terms of 'innocence'; but interpretations of this varied. Some saw experimenting with make-up, even imitating 'sexy' dance styles (and similar behaviour) as innocuous, natural, fun, and devoid of adult sexual connotations. For others, innocence meant play untroubled by concerns about the adult world, which made the same activities distasteful.

Parents generally saw children as passing through 'natural' stages of development towards adulthood, which required them gradually to take on increasing responsibilities. In addition, most held broadly 'democratic' ideals of childrearing, recognising children's rights to make their own decisions, develop their individuality and express themselves. As a result, many parents accepted

that by secondary school or around the age of 12/13, children should if they wished have the final say on clothes and items of personal care.

Many parents argued that disagreements over issues such as make-up or clothes did not merit jeopardising or damaging their relationship with their children. They were not only comparatively trivial, but also could be seen as a predictable developmental stage, involving rebellion and experimentation.

The debate about sexualised goods raises different concerns in relation to daughters as compared with sons. Parents were concerned about their daughters' psychological well-being, although none of them felt their *own* daughters were becoming 'too sexual too soon' and they denied that products alone could sexualise them. However, girls were thought to put themselves at risk if they appeared older than they were or dressed in sexualised ways. Boys' consumption and developing sexual identities were generally viewed in a far more relaxed way.

There was no unanimous response to any of the 'sexualised' products we presented to parents, which revealed the difficulty of coming to agreement about the meaning of any single item.

Parents' existing strategies for dealing with sexualised products were generally indirect and non-coercive. The only grounds generally felt to justify a complete product veto were to do with physical health.

Ultimately parents tended to conclude that it was their own responsibility to take action on sexualised products, if they so chose. However, they also revealed how difficult this was in practice due to the availability of the products; peer pressure or general adolescent culture; children's 'nagging' and persuasive tactics; decisions made by other parents or institutions; and economic structures and values limiting choice and shaping tastes.

Young people's views

Young people rejected the idea that they were passive victims of the marketing of sexualised goods; and this claim was to a large extent supported by their extensive knowledge of marketing techniques and the examples they provided of their active choices and careful readings of products.

They recognised that they were influenced to some degree by trends and by their peers; and yet, somewhat contradictorily, they argued that their purchases were also part of their expression of individuality.

Young people's choices in relation to sexualised goods reflected peer group norms, to do with inclusion and exclusion, and with feelings of comfort and confidence. These norms involved complicated value systems relating to taste, and to the perceived meanings of particular objects or products.

It was generally considered normative not to display too much of the body or to draw attention to oneself through hair, make-up and accessories. Apparent 'failures' of taste or style were typically seen to be characteristic of *other* people, who were often referred to in derogatory terms relating to social class (such as 'chav').

Girls are led to scrutinise each other's appearance more closely than are boys, partly as a way of defining and confirming their own taste and identity. Boys also feel pressure to have a particular body shape and to consume particular goods, although current boys' trends are towards loose-fitting clothing that does not accentuate the body.

Young people indicated that their knowledge about how to 'read' products such

as clothing and accessories developed as they grew older, and was informed by peer culture as they entered wider social settings (such as high school). However, they also expected adults to provide 'correct' guidance. Here again, they condemned parents of *other* children and teenagers who were acting irresponsibly by not regulating their children's choices.

Young people are aware of risks of appearing older through the use of sexualised products and generally having personal appearances misread. The perceived risks ranged from paedophilia to general risks about reputation and misjudgements; and these risks relate far more to girls than to boys.

Policy implications

While this study is not intended to provide policy implications, it is worth noting parents' and children's views on the issue, since they were explicitly invited to discuss it. Key points here are as follows:

Parents recognised the considerable complexity of the issues involved. Whilst some felt that this was an old debate and no action was necessary, even those who were angry about particular products and wanted to see 'something done' realised that this did not translate easily into practical recommendations.

The young people were keen to assert that they were competent in understanding and interpreting the sexual connotations of particular products, and in assessing this dimension relative to other concerns. They strongly rejected the idea that regulation was necessary in order to protect them, and argued that they should have the right to make their own decisions (and mistakes).

The only area of general agreement as regards regulation was to do with physical health, for example in relation to high heeled shoes or underwired bras.

Even so, parents felt they needed some support in their efforts to deal with this issue. Some expressed a wish for schools to address the issue of sexualisation with young people – partly because they recognised that doing so themselves could be ineffective, or easily dismissed by their children. Many also commented that they had found our group discussions helpful as well as interesting, suggesting that parents' forums might prove beneficial.

However, parents felt that they often did not have a voice in schools, including on issues such as holding proms or policies on uniform, make-up and so on that had direct and significant consequences in this area.

1. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

1.1 A history of anxiety

In recent years, there has been growing concern about the sexualisation of children, and specifically about the effects of commercial marketing and media in this respect. In the last couple of years alone, there have been several popular books for parents addressing the sexualisation of girls, mostly published in the United States (e.g. Durham, 2008; Lamb and Brown, 2006; Levin and Kilbourne, 2008; Reist, 2009). This issue has also been raised at the level of public policy. The Australian government recently conducted a national enquiry on the topic, seemingly provoked by a controversial report entitled 'Corporate Paedophilia' produced by the Australia Institute, an independent policy 'think tank' (Rush and La Nauze, 2006; and Australian Senate, 2007). In Britain, the Home Office has also commissioned a report in this area, currently being undertaken by the psychologist Dr. Linda Papadopoulos and due to be published in early 2010. Meanwhile, in the United States, the American Psychological Association has established a Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls, whose report offers a comprehensive review of the psychological literature (APA, 2007). While most of this concern focuses specifically on girls, some of it (as in the case of the 'Corporate Paedophilia' report) extends to boys as well.

Such accounts often present the sexualisation of children as a relatively recent development, but it is by no means a new issue. Writers such as James Kincaid (1992, 1998) and Anne Higonnet (1998) have traced a long history of children and young people being represented as objects for erotic contemplation (and commodification) by adults. Higonnet analyses eroticised images of children in Romantic painting, book illustrations of the Victorian era, art photography and early advertising, as well as more contemporary material; while Kincaid (1998) traces a similar history in literature and film, from *Huckleberry Finn* and Lewis Carroll, through *Heidi* and Shirley Temple films, to contemporary Hollywood productions such as *Home Alone*. It is perhaps worth recalling here that the age of consent for heterosexual sex was only raised from 12 to 16 in the late nineteenth century; and that child prostitutes, some as young as eight or nine, were common in mid-nineteenth century London (Kehily and Montgomery, 2002). While the *public visibility* of the issue, and the terms in which it is defined, may have changed, sexualised representations of children cannot be seen merely as a consequence of contemporary consumerism.

Likewise, concerns around this issue also have a long history. In a series of articles, Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes (2007; Hawkes and Egan, 2008) have traced the history of concerns about childhood sexualisation, for example in campaigns around 'child purity' in the late nineteenth century, and in the childrearing manuals of the 1930s and 1940s. They argue that such concerns reflect a strange ambivalence about childhood sexuality: it is both denied (because children are deemed to be innocent) and yet seen as a potentially unstoppable force once it is 'released' by external corrupting influences. Egan and Hawkes argue that there are considerable continuities between these historical campaigns and contemporary concerns – for example, those emerging around the Australia Institute report (Egan and Hawkes, 2008a). 'Sexualisation', they suggest, is seen here in highly deterministic, monolithic terms; and when it comes to the influence of media and marketing, this is regarded as a 'hypodermic' process, in which children are passive victims rather than active meaning-makers. They argue that the consequence of such arguments and campaigns is to deny the sexual agency of girls in particular: girls' sexuality (or

sexual expression) is equated with sexualisation, and cannot be imagined outside the context of exploitative commercial messages. According to these authors, there is also a strong class dimension here: it is the sexuality of *working class* girls that is seen as particularly problematic and in need of discipline and control.

There are two significant problems in addressing this area. The first is that it seems to bring together some rather disparate issues. The broad concern about 'sexualisation' seems to combine anxieties about the effects on children (the apparent corruption of childhood innocence) with fears about the effects on adults (most spectacularly in the case of paedophilia and child abuse). Exposing children to sexual material is believed by some to create a premature or inappropriate interest in sex, and also to promote a range of unsafe sexual practices. The issue of 'body image' overlaps with this: children (particularly girls) are seen to be under pressure to have slender, 'sexy' bodies, invoking concerns about gender stereotyping as well as more specific fears about threats to physical and mental health (as in the case of eating disorders). Some of these concerns relate to physical health and behaviour, some to attitudes, and some to moral values; some are quite specific, while others are much more generalised; some potentially apply to everyone, while others relate to events or conditions that may be relatively rare. While it would seem important to separate out these issues, doing so is by no means straightforward.

The second major difficulty here is the intense emotions that these issues seem to provoke. As Stevi Jackson (1982) and others note, sexuality is a key dimension of the distinction between childhood and adulthood: despite Freud's 'discovery' of infantile sexuality, the image of the sexual (or 'sexualised') child fundamentally threatens our sense of what children should be. Even more disturbingly, it raises the spectre of adults' own unconscious desire for children's bodies: it transgresses the boundaries that define how adults are supposed to look at children. James Kincaid's work on the Victorian sexualisation of children (Kincaid, 1992) is particularly troubling in this respect: it implies that the post-Romantic construction of the innocent child is itself a manifestation of an unspoken (and unspeakable) adult desire. At the same time, there are questions here about how 'sex' itself is defined: what adults perceive as sexual may not be perceived as such (or in the same way) by children. As the work of authors such as Michel Foucault (e.g. 1978) and Jeffrey Weeks (e.g. 1981) has indicated, the domain of the sexual is socially, culturally and historically defined in many different ways – to the extent where any appeal to 'natural' or 'healthy' sexuality must be seen as highly problematic.

1.2 Popular concerns

The book *So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualised Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids* (Levin and Kilbourne, 2008) provides a useful index of some of the more intense concerns that appear to be at stake here. According to these authors, children today are being prematurely induced into inappropriate forms of sexual behaviour, particularly as a result of their exposure to media and commercial marketing. The concern here relates partly to children's viewing of media material designed for an older audience (such as music videos and pornography), and partly to material explicitly targeting them (such as teen/tween magazines, clothing and toys). The primary focus here is on girls, who are seen to be preoccupied with the need to appear sexually attractive at an ever-younger age; although such material is also believed to affect boys' attitudes towards girls, and increasingly boys' own self-image. The authors argue that the

sexualisation of childhood has a range of damaging consequences for children's mental and physical health – leading to depression and suicide, eating disorders, and child abuse – as well as for family relationships.

The account that is offered here is resolutely one-dimensional. The authors' terminology represents children as passive victims of attack by an all-powerful media and consumer culture: children are seen to be assaulted, bombarded, victimized and deeply harmed; while the material they are exposed to is described as obscene, destructive and evil. Children are 'remotely controlled' by media, 'programmed like robots'. Media and marketing are accused of trivialising and objectifying sex, imposing rigid and unchanging gender stereotypes, promoting 'casual' sex, and neglecting the 'healthy', 'human' aspects of relationships: indeed, according to these authors, there is 'never any emphasis on relationships or intimacy' in media representations. These criticisms are by no means confined to 'adult' media: even relatively tame material such as Disney's *High School Musical* is seen to be equally to blame. Drawing on 'deficit models' of child development, the authors represent children as vulnerable, unsophisticated, and as passively 'shaped' by this relentless 'onslaught' of inappropriate messages. Parents appear equally powerless: their authority is comprehensively undermined by the media's appeal to premature adolescent rebellion and their incitement of 'pester power'.

Although the authors are academics, Levin and Kilbourne's book is clearly directed at parents. Nevertheless, more academic texts also reflect many of the same concerns, and in similarly one-dimensional terms. The Australian *Corporate Paedophilia* report (Rush and La Nauze, 2006), for example, presents original research on media images as well as a review of previous work on effects; but its somewhat melodramatic title reflects its fundamental assertion that such advertising and marketing 'is an abuse both of children and of public morality'. The APA report (APA, 2007) is rather more measured in tone, but the basic view of media and marketing, and of children, is equally bleak: there is no indication here that media might contain any positive messages about human relationships, or that children might critically evaluate what they see. (We consider the adequacy of the evidence in these reports below.)

One of the key difficulties here is the notion of 'sexualisation' itself. On one level, the term seems to imply that children are naturally non-sexual, but that they have been somehow *made* sexual through their exposure to media and marketing: sexuality is being inappropriately imposed upon them, rather than chosen by them. Yet there is also an implicit distinction here between 'sexual' and 'sexual*ised*' – even if this is one that is blurred in much of the debate. Sexualisation is typically seen to entail 'objectification'. A person's value, or their attractiveness, is equated with their degree of sexual appeal. In the words of the APA report, sexualisation occurs when a person is 'made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making' (see below). Or, as Levin and Kilbourne put it, 'the real obscenity is the reduction of people to objects' (151). Both publications contrast such 'sexualised' or 'objectifying' representations with those that are deemed to be 'healthy'. According to the APA report, 'healthy sexuality… fosters intimacy, bonding and shared pleasure, and involves mutual respect between consenting partners'; while Levin and Kilbourne refer to healthy sexuality rather vaguely as somehow more 'holistic' or more 'human'.

There are several difficulties here. None of these authors provides any examples that would help to explain what a sexual *but not sexualised* representation would be like; and by default, the two concepts seem to become conflated. One could

argue that all representations necessarily 'objectify'; and some would even suggest that sexual desire necessarily entails some dimension of 'objectification' – although since the characteristics of objectification are not clear, it is genuinely hard to know. Furthermore, there are obviously considerable variations in what people find sexually arousing – or indeed what they define as 'sexual' in the first place; let alone what they perceive as objectifying, or as 'mutual respect'. This is not, we would argue, merely a matter of academic sophistry. If there is a suggestion that either the government or parents should intervene to proscribe certain kinds of material for children, then it is important to have very clear criteria for doing so. In the case of pornography, and indeed in the area of film classification, these criteria already exist; but when such criteria involve such nebulous and ambiguous concepts as these, it is genuinely difficult to see how they might be implemented.

While there is clearly a considerable amount of passionate invective here, it is important to note that these accounts do (to a greater or lesser extent) identify other causes of 'sexualisation', including peers, parents and children themselves.

Furthermore, the strategies they typically propose for dealing with the problem are not simply to do with censorship: Levin and Kilbourne, for example, prefer a more pedagogic approach to parenting to the 'just say no' response, which they argue is likely to be counter-productive. Even so, there is no sense at all in any of these documents that the media or marketing might play a positive role, for example in educational terms: their influence is seen as wholly and unremittingly negative, and indeed as something that has become steadily worse over time. There is perhaps a danger here of importing concerns from quite different cultural contexts to that of the UK. The debate in the United States in particular is dominated by the religious Right – although liberal feminist authors such as Levin and Kilbourne are keen to exempt themselves from charges of 'prudishness', asserting that their concerns are essentially to do with children's 'emotional health' rather than with morality. At the same time, it is worth noting that teenage pregnancy in the US is significantly higher than in the UK: according to Levin and Kilbourne, as many as one third of teenage girls in the US become pregnant. Furthermore, opinion surveys in the UK (such as those conducted by the Broadcasting Standards Council: see Bragg and Buckingham, 2002) tend to suggest that British adults are increasingly permissive in their responses to sexual content, at least on television. It is hard to believe that an incident like Janet Jackson's 'wardrobe malfunction' during the 2004 Superbowl would have attracted anything like the attention in the UK that it did in the US. If we compare the different ways in which these issues are addressed in the broader European context, it becomes clear that the concern about 'sexualisation' is itself quite culturally specific.

1.3 Feminist perspectives
In terms of the public debate, the concern about sexualisation appears to derive from some rather diverse moral and political perspectives. As in the case of concerns about pornography, there is a somewhat awkward alliance here between what might loosely be termed advocates of conservative morality (on the one hand) and feminist critics (on the other). However, it is important to note that there is no singular 'feminist' position on this issue.

For some feminists, the increasing sexualisation of girls is clearly seen as part of an anti-feminist 'backlash'. It represents a response on the part of maledominated media and cultural industries to the growing power and assertiveness

of women, which are evident in a whole range of domains from politics and business to education. Encouraging girls to take an unnecessary or excessive interest in their physical appearance, and to judge themselves primarily in terms of their attractiveness to men, is interpreted as a means of reasserting male oppression. For popular authors such as Naomi Wolf (1990), the 'myth' or 'cult' of physical beauty promoted through the media, advertising and fashion industries is seen to induce shame, guilt, confusion and neurosis: girls and women are perceived here very much as victims of a form of psychological or ideological manipulation.

However, other feminists argue that this approach denies women's agency and autonomy, presenting them merely as dupes of male power; and they also criticise such arguments for colluding with forms of conservative morality or 'decency' that have typically sought to constrain women's expressions of their independent sexuality. Linda Duits and Liesbet van Zoonen (2006) argue that older feminists' criticisms of the sexualisation of girls' fashion are hypocritical in seeking to distinguish between the 'good' political style of 1960s miniskirts and the 'bad' consumerist style of modern girls' fashion. They argue that girls themselves do not necessarily equate nudity (or the revelation of flesh through garments like thongs and 'crop-tops') with sexuality; and that girls who wear such apparently 'sexualised' or 'porno-chic' clothing are doing so as an expression of their own free choice and autonomy, and not as the result of a form of false consciousness (see also Duits and van Zoonen, 2007).

A third – equally 'feminist' - position can be found in Ros Gill's (2007) response to these arguments. Gill argues that this celebration of girls' choice and autonomy represents a dangerous form of 'postfeminism' that is complicit with neoliberal individualism: far from representing free choice, such practices (along with other aspects of contemporary young women's 'beauty regimes' such as waxing, bleaching and cosmetic surgery) are essentially a consequence of consumerism (see also Gill, 2008). In many respects, this debate replays broader discussions within feminism about the political significance of so-called 'girl power' – the commercial marketing of a particular version of assertive, apparently 'sexualised' femininity popularised in the late 1990s by the Spice Girls, and evident across a wide range of cultural phenomena (see Harris, 2004).

These different positions also reflect different understandings of the broader 'sexualisation' of contemporary culture that are apparent in contemporary social theory (Attwood, 2007). There has been a considerable amount of discussion here of the 'mainstreaming', or increasingly widespread circulation and appropriation, of sexual imagery within popular culture and public discourse. Several commentators have pointed to the growing visibility and accessibility of sexual representations, products and services, and to the growing diversity and self-reflexivity of this phenomenon. For some authors (such as McNair (2002) and Weeks (2007)), this represents a 'democratisation of desire', a progressive means through which more diverse sexual identities can be represented. However, others (such as Gill (2008)) suggest that it is merely a renewed form of male oppression, in which women's apparent 'empowerment' has been commodified, and which merely reinforces the need for women to police their own physical appearance. Attwood (2007) argues that there are elements of truth in both accounts: while she challenges the feminist tendency to play down social change – and hence to see new developments as merely a continuation of the 'same old story' of male oppression – she is also wary of the easy celebration of a new sexual democracy. As this implies, the apparent 'sexualisation' of children needs to be seen in the light of broader social and historical changes, not just in

the social position of children or in the general visibility of sexuality within culture, but also in the changing nature of identity or individuality in 'late modern' societies (see, for example, Giddens (1991) and Rose (1999)).

1.4 Evidence from research
In general, there is fairly good evidence from research that sexual content in mainstream media has increased, and become more explicit, in recent years; and that sexual imagery has become more widely circulated within society more broadly, including in advertising and in the design and packaging of goods and services. This is also true of media and products targeted directly at children; and it forms part of the broader climate or environment in which children are currently growing up.
However, almost all of the research on the *impact* of these developments relates to adults rather than children; and, insofar as it addresses children at all, to girls rather than boys. There is very little good evidence that would enable us to assess how far adults' perceptions of what is sexual are shared by children; or indeed how children themselves interpret and deal with what they see and consume, and how they use this in their everyday lives. It is obviously likely that both adults and children will be influenced by dominant ideas about physical attractiveness and 'sexiness' (although these are not necessarily seen as the same thing). But the scope and nature of that influence – and the extent to which is might be seen as broadly positive or negative for children – are far from easy to identify at this point.
The recent reports produced by the Australia Institute (Rush and La Nauze, 2006) and the American Psychological Association (2007) both provide reviews of the literature on sexualisation, and consider the role of the media (and, to a lesser extent, marketing and consumer goods) alongside other influences such as parents and peers. We offer a summary and a critical reading of these reports in the following sections.

1.5 The Australia Institute report
The Australia Institute report presents two main forms of evidence. The first relates to media content, of three main kinds - advertisements for children's clothing, sample editions of teen or tween magazines, and popular television programmes. In the case of the advertisements, the analysis suggests that children (both boys and girls) are increasingly being posed and represented in ways that used to apply to adult models – an approach the authors describe as 'grotesque'. In the case of the teen magazines, the authors seek to quantify the amount of 'sexualising material'; while in the case of television, they point to the 'high degree of sexual innuendo' in music videos and television shows like *Big Brother* and *The O.C.*
While it is hard to deny that sexual imagery has become increasingly visible within society more broadly, there are several significant problems with this account. As Lumby and Albury (2008) point out, the report fails to distinguish sufficiently between material targeting a teen audience and that aimed at younger children; and the sample for analysis is very small and highly selective. They also suggest that the clothing that is shown, for example in the advertisements and teen magazines that are discussed, follows 'a dress code considered acceptable for female children since the mid-20th century'. Furthermore, in terms of our earlier distinction, the report fails to differentiate between 'sexual' and 'sexualised' (or 'objectifying') representations: it would seem that any reference to sex or intimate relationships, and almost any

representation of a human body, is perceived by the authors as 'sexualised'. This results in some readings that can only be described as extremely partial (for example in the case of *The O.C.*, a series that focuses centrally on the emotional dilemmas of the characters and very rarely shows any form of physical or sexual contact between them). Even more disturbingly, the authors seem to read strongly adult connotations into images of children: as Lumby and Albury put it, they imply that 'dressing young girls in crop tops or bikinis carries the same cultural messages as dressing a mature adult woman in identical clothing'.

Of course, the analysis of media content does not in itself tell us anything about how that content is read, or the influence it may have. The second form of evidence presented in the Australia Institute report relates more directly to this issue, and specifically to the question of harm. The authors present a range of evidence from previous research about the apparent increase in 'body dissatisfaction' and eating disorders among children. They argue that inappropriate attention to physical appearance may detract children's attention away from other important 'developmental activities'. They also suggest that the circulation of 'sexualised' material may encourage children to initiate sexual behaviour before they have a full understanding of the consequences, leading to unwanted sexual contact; and that it may also play a role in the 'grooming' of children by paedophiles.

While the studies quoted here do show some indication of the seriousness of these phenomena, they do not generally provide convincing evidence that they have increased in recent years. Young people (in Australia and elsewhere) are physically maturing, and engaging in sexual activity, at an earlier age; but there is no convincing evidence here that media and marketing play a *causal* role in these phenomena. To some extent, the authors of the report are careful to qualify their arguments, repeatedly suggesting that the media 'may' play a role; but the report's extensive focus on sexual risk, and indeed its title, effectively equate the actions of marketers and media producers with those of paedophiles.

(It is worth noting here that there have been debates among feminists in Australia regarding the response to this report, which in some respects replay the debate around 'girl power' discussed above. As we have seen, Lumby and Albury (2008) provide an extensive challenge to the quality of the evidence in the report; and their criticisms are echoed and extended by Egan and Hawkes (2008a and 2008b), among others. However, such critics are in turn accused by Bray (2008) of seeking to dismiss the report as merely a 'moral panic', and of espousing a form of neoliberal 'tolerance' that is effectively complicit with corporate culture.)

1.6 The American Psychological Association report
While the Australia Institute report has attracted considerable criticism, the American Psychological Association report has been more widely cited as an authoritative source.

The report's Executive Summary provides a clear indication of the key findings, which can be reduced further as follows:

☐ *the media are full of sexualised images of women (although few studies have looked at images of girls specifically)*

☐ *the amount of sexualising material, for example in advertising, has increased over time*

☐ *these messages are reinforced by messages from parents, teachers and peers*

☐ *girls also sexualise themselves, for example by choosing to wear particular types of clothing, or thinking of themselves in 'self-objectifying' ways*

☐ *sexualisation has negative effects on girls in a wide range of areas, including:*

o *cognitive functioning and educational achievement – for example,*

experiments show that girls who are thinking about sexual matters are less
likely to be able to concentrate in examinations
o *physical and mental health – sexualisation results in anxiety, shame, selfdisgust,*
eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression
o *attitudes and beliefs – girls exposed to sexualised media are more likely to*
endorse sexual stereotypes
o *sexuality – sexualisation undermines girls' ability to develop 'healthy'*
sexuality, and causes them to develop unrealistic expectations
☐ *sexualisation also has negative effects on others: boys develop sexist attitudes and*
find it hard to develop relationships; while adult women feel pressured to conform to
narrow ideals of attractiveness.

The report concludes with an extensive discussion of educational and other initiatives (including media literacy programmes) that might be used to counteract the effects of sexualisation.

Despite its comprehensive and apparently systematic nature, the APA report is problematic on a number of grounds. These can be briefly summarised as follows:

1. The status of the evidence.
The report does not offer any critique of the many studies it cites, beyond drawing attention to apparent gaps in the field. Rather, it takes them at face value, as 'evidence' that can simply be amassed and then weighed up. Many of the studies cited are not in fact explicitly concerned with 'sexualisation' at all: they cover a broad range of issues from body image and eating disorders, self-esteem and self-concept to sexual harassment, as well as beliefs about sexuality. Depending on how it is defined, sexualisation might be seen to play a part in these areas, but it is not coterminous with them: for example, body dissatisfaction or eating disorders may have multiple causes which may be nothing to do with sexuality. 'Sexualisation' is essentially a *post hoc* construct, which is retrospectively applied to the studies cited; nor is it at all clear that the studies cited would share the APA's definition of sexualisation.

2. Limitations of scope.
As the authors acknowledge, the large majority of the research studies cited relate to adults and not children. They argue that this is nevertheless 'highly relevant' because 'girls (and boys) grow up in a cultural milieu that is saturated with sexualising messages'. Yet this is a tautological argument, which fails to recognise the significant differences between adults and children in respect of sexual knowledge and experience.

The report is explicitly concerned only with girls. There is no discussion of the sexualisation of boys, but only of the effects upon them of the sexualisation of girls and women. This is a recurrent absence in the literature, and in the wider public debate in this area, although it is hard to explain. Does sexualisation somehow not apply to boys because boys are not 'objectified'? Are boys assumed to be somehow already (dangerously) sexual? Are boys somehow not victims in the way that girls are assumed to be? Each of these potential reasons begs further questions about male and female sexuality that are in need of further investigation.

3. The definition of sexualisation.
The report defines sexualisation as follows:
Healthy sexuality is an important component of both physical and mental health,
fosters intimacy, bonding, and shared pleasure, and involves mutual respect

between consenting partners... In contrast, sexualisation occurs when
o *a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics;*
o *a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy;*
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o *a person is sexually objectified — that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or*
o *sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.*
All four conditions need not be present; any one is an indication of sexualisation…
The fourth condition (the inappropriate imposition of sexuality) is especially relevant to children.

This is, clearly, a very broad and undiscriminating definition. On this basis, it would be possible to accuse almost any text featuring a physical image of a person as 'sexualising': anything from pornography through to shampoo advertisements would have to be included (and in fact, this is the approach the report adopts). One could argue that very few advertising or fashion images (for example) ever depict people as having 'the capacity for independent action and decision making' – the people in such images are rarely 'characterised' in this way (any more than they are, for example, in paintings). Further, one could argue that all images 'objectify', and do so in ways that can be read as potentially sexual (or sexualised, in the APA's terms).

Following from this, the definition provides no way of distinguishing between material that is 'sexual' (that is, concerned with sexual matters) and material that is 'sexualised'. To put this another way, it is not clear what a *non-sexualised* image of a human body (or even parts of a human body) would be like, or how we might distinguish between a sexualised and a non-sexualised image. Anything that depicts or refers to a person's physical attractiveness appears to be seen as automatically sexualising. It is hard to see, on this basis, how anything that people might do (or buy) in order to enhance their physical attractiveness would not be seen as sexualising.

This raises some significant methodological issues in relation to the content analyses cited in the first section of the report. In many instances, no distinction is made in the original studies between 'sexual' and 'sexualised' content: most simply code all 'sexual' content. The various studies cited do not adopt the same criteria for defining what counts as 'sexualised' or 'sexually objectifying' content: for example, one study codes 'women dancing sexually', another looks at whether women are 'suggestively dressed', while another looks at whether we see athletes' breasts or their faces. In some instances, it appears that any image of a body part (as opposed to a whole body) is an instance of 'dismembering', and hence of sexualisation – a criterion that might apply to a vast range of images, including many images of men. As such, it is highly problematic to use comparisons between these studies as a basis for assertions about historical change (i.e. that the media now show women in more sexualised ways than they used to do).

A further question here is to do with how the judgment of 'sexual appeal' or 'physical attractiveness' is made, and on what basis. Given the diversity of human sexuality, almost anything and everything can be perceived as sexual or as having sexual connotations. In this regard, it is not clear what terms like 'narrowly defined' or – crucially in respect of children and young people – 'inappropriate' actually mean, or how these things might be identified. There is a clear assumption here that readers of the report will share a view about what is

and is not 'sexual', and what is or is not 'appropriate', as well as what is deemed to be 'healthy'.

4. Research methodology.

The research that is cited in the report is almost exclusively psychological media effects research. There are no references to (for example) sociological, anthropological or historical studies, or to wider debates around the cultural politics of sexual representation of the kind mentioned above. Media effects research has been subject to some well-known methodological criticisms that are not addressed in the report (for a recent summary, see Buckingham et al, 2008). Briefly, laboratory experiments are routinely seen to be lacking in 'ecological validity' – that is, they measure effects in highly artificial conditions – and they focus exclusively on short-term effects, which in the context of an apparently long-term, pervasive phenomenon like sexualisation, is fairly unhelpful. Questionnaire surveys can provide evidence of correlations or associations between specific phenomena (e.g. exposure to specific types of media and aspects of physical or mental health), but they generally do not provide evidence of causal relationships. There are many other criticisms that relate to the kinds of samples used in this work (which are mostly comprised of university students); the measures of media exposure that are used (which tend to rely on global estimates of overall viewing, rather than exposure to specific types of media); and the measurement scales that are applied (for example in relation to psychological constructs such as 'self-esteem'). There is a tendency here, as in many similar reviews, to imply that the limitations of one type of research are cancelled out by the advantages of the other – and that if we combine experiments and surveys, we will arrive at definitive proof.

5. The meanings of sexual representations.

Finally, there is a familiar tendency here (also seen in research on media violence) to assume that the *meaning* of 'sexual' or 'sexualised' images is fixed and can be taken for granted (and hence simply quantified). It seems to be assumed, for example, that when a person is shown in a 'sexualised' manner that this is necessarily presented as a positive attribute of their character, and as something to be emulated. 'Sexualised' images are also compared with a norm of 'healthy' representation that seems indifferent to questions of genre or realism, which results in some strangely inappropriate judgments: for example, music videos are condemned for failing to show 'the concept of a whole person involved in a complex relationship with another whole person' (7), while dolls are condemned for not displaying 'healthy', 'normal' sexuality (14). Likewise, the report moves seamlessly from references to 'an objectifying television program like *Charlie's Angels'* to (in the next sentence) a discussion of pornography, as though there were no significant differences between them (29), and as though the findings from these different studies of different types of material could just be accumulated to prove the effects of 'sexualisation'.

Ultimately, while the APA report represents a fairly comprehensive descriptive summary of a particular field of research, it fails to acknowledge – let alone address – the significant criticisms that have been made of such work. Even in its own terms, the report offers much less than definitive evidence of the 'sexualising' influence of media and consumer culture on children.

1.7 Body image

Research on the issue of 'body image' frequently overlaps with work on

sexualisation, although since this is less immediately relevant to our concerns here, it will be dealt with fairly briefly. There is much greater clarity here about the nature and extent of the phenomenon; although the conclusions of the research itself are also quite ambivalent.

As Grogan (1999) argues, notions of desirable or attractive body image are culturally constructed, and socially and historically variable. In contemporary Western societies, such images tend to emphasise slenderness: women are generally expected to be 'slim and shapely', men to be 'slender and muscular' – although, as she notes, there are significant differences here between different ethnic groups. Research suggests that women are more likely than men to be dissatisfied with their body size and shape: most would like to be thinner than they are. However, it appears that men too are dissatisfied – although while some would like to be thinner, others wish to be heavier. While there is much less research on children, it appears that body dissatisfaction can appear in girls as young as eight or nine; and that young boys may also be concerned about being insufficiently muscular. While male adolescents are generally more satisfied than females, their dissatisfaction increases markedly through the teenage years.

According to Grogan, content analyses generally suggest that media images of both women and men tend to feature those who are young, slim and attractive (although one could possibly argue the same of visual representations in general), and that these images are 'unrealistic' or at least disproportionate when compared with the population as a whole. However, the evidence on the effects of these images is rather more ambivalent. Laboratory experiments typically involve exposing subjects to 'physically attractive' media images, and subsequently asking them how they feel about their own bodies, or to estimate their own body shape and size. Various psychological theories (social comparison theory, self-schema theory, and so on) would predict that such exposure would lead to a decrease in body satisfaction. However, Grogan argues that the results of such studies are inconsistent; and that in any case, they can only measure short-term effects. Surveys find that, when asked about 'body role models', people are likely to nominate 'physically attractive' actors or actresses; but there is also research that shows that people are often critical of such 'role models', and indeed of an undue emphasis on physical attractiveness.

A similar picture emerges from other reviews. Liz Frost (2001) broadly follows the 'beauty myth' perspective expounded by Naomi Wolf, arguing that the media and fashion industries lead young women to feel insecure and consumed with shame and self-loathing: they experience their bodies as alien and worthless, and are therefore induced to spend money on products (cosmetics, fashions and 'beauty treatments') that will alleviate these feelings. Nevertheless, Frost is also sceptical of the view that women are merely passive consumers of media: while she argues that the forms of identity 'for sale' in contemporary media remain narrowly defined, she also suggests that identity formation is a complex and uncertain process, that is characterised by a degree of flexibility. She also questions the notion that the media are responsible for 'sexualising' children, or that media targeted at them (such as 'tween' magazines) are exclusively dominated by narrow stereotypes and a preoccupation with physical attractiveness; and she notes that 'body hatred' or insecurity can be an issue for boys as well as girls.

Perhaps the most comprehensive recent review of research on this issue is by Maggie Wykes and Barrie Gunter (2005). Their review of media content analyses largely confirms those discussed above. Media images of women are comprehensively dominated by thin and attractive stereotypes; they promote the

belief that being thin is the route to happiness and success; and they offer 'an illusory, contradictory and limited model of femininity' (132). However, when it comes to assessing the evidence as regards the influence of these representations, Wykes and Gunter are more equivocal, partly on the grounds of methodology. In general, they are fairly dismissive of correlational surveys and seem to favour laboratory experiments, which (they suggest) prove that exposure to media images of slim actors or models causes people to overestimate their body size, and hence to feel dissatisfied. However, such studies only measure short-term effects; and there is no evidence here that such effects are necessarily lasting or cumulative. Here again, the methods used lack ecological validity: they may tell us about what *can* happen in the artificial context of the psychologist's laboratory (when subjects – who are mostly college students - might perhaps be able to guess the kinds of responses that are expected), but they tell us nothing about what *does* happen in real life. Here again, the vast bulk of the research relates to adults (or university students) rather than children.

1.8 Children's perspectives

As with other controversies about media effects, one general characteristic of this debate is that children's voices are almost entirely absent. Popular authors such as Levin and Kilbourne (2008) tend to privilege the views of 'concerned' parents, who may or may not be representative of parents at large; while the psychological research tends to focus on easily accessible groups of college students (indeed, the effects of the media on white, middle-class students following communication courses at mid-Western American universities must surely be one of the most closely scrutinised of all aspects of contemporary life). This absence is particularly crucial here, since (as we have suggested) what adults perceive to be 'sexual' (or 'sexualised') may not be perceived in the same way by children.

Our own research (Buckingham and Bragg, 2004) was based on extensive interviews with children aged 9-17 about their responses to representations of love, sex and relationships in television, film and print media, as well as a largescale survey. We found that young people did quite frequently encounter sexual material in the media, although relatively little of this could be considered 'explicit'. This material was also quite diverse in terms of the 'messages' it was seen to contain: while sex was sometimes represented as pleasurable and desirable, it was also often surrounded by moral warnings about the dangers it could entail. These young people certainly did not perceive the media to be pressurising them into adopting a merely 'recreational' attitude to sex. In general, our respondents valued the media's role as a source of information about sex and relationships, sometimes rating them more highly than parents or (particularly) teachers: they found it less embarrassing to find out about such matters in this way, and perceived media such as teenage magazines and soap operas as being more attuned to their needs. However, this is not to say that they necessarily trusted what they found: on the contrary, they made complex judgments about the relationships between media representations and reality, engaged with the moral dilemmas of stories and characters they encountered, and were sometimes extremely critical of what they saw. At the same time, the younger children did not necessarily always understand sexual references or 'innuendoes', and often ignored or misinterpreted them: they were far from being the sexual sophisticates imagined by some conservative critics. We also found that the influence of the media depended very much on the settings in which it was used, particularly in the context of family life: parents in particular were

powerful models of adult sexual identity. While this research does confirm that children learn about sexual matters from the media, it suggests that this is very far from the straightforward or inexorable process that is implied by the notion of 'sexualisation'.

Similar findings emerge from other qualitative studies based on interviews or ethnographic fieldwork with children and young people. The work of Brown et al. (1993), Steele (1999) and their colleagues in the United States, and Kehily's (1999) UK-based research on teenage girls' readings of magazines, all suggest that children are far from being duped by the media into a passive acceptance of stereotyped gender roles. While they can see the media as providing valuable 'resources' for learning about sex and relationships, they often read such material critically, comparing it with their own lived experience and their observation of peers and adults around them, and questioning romantic fantasies and idealised body images. While some appear fascinated by media coverage, they are also keen to debate whether it can be seen as accurate or trustworthy. They also have their own complex notions about what is appropriate or 'decent', both for children of their own age, and for those who are younger; and their judgments can be just as moralistic as those of adults who fear for their welfare (see also Kelley et al., 1999).

This research has not looked at very young children (under the age of 8), or at other aspects of marketing and consumer culture; and in these respects, there are still significant gaps in knowledge. However, two recent Nordic studies have offered some interesting insights into how girls understand and debate the wearing of apparently 'sexualised' clothing. Viveka Torrell (2004) studied letters written to a Swedish young people's magazine on this issue, and found a considerable degree of ambivalence. On the one hand, girls argued that they have the right to wear such clothes, and that doing so made them feel good; but there was also considerable disagreement among them about the age at which this was appropriate. Interestingly, similar arguments were rehearsed here in relation to the current fashion for boys to wear low-slung trousers that reveal their underpants: while some saw this as excitingly rebellious, others dismissed it as merely disgusting. In addressing the same topic, Mari Rysst (2010) found in her ethnographic fieldwork in Norway that girls operated a complex and multi-faceted system for classifying clothing, which reflected different values associated with both gender and social class. Significantly, clothes that many adults see as 'sexualised' were not seen as such by children, but rather as merely 'cool' and fashionable. As in our earlier research, there was a sense here in which some children were actively refusing adult perceptions of such clothes as 'sexy' (see also Buckingham and Bragg, 2005).

Taken together, these studies confirm that the media and marketing do play a key role in children's developing understanding of sexuality. However, they suggest that this role can be positive as well as negative. If the media exert 'pressure' on children, this is not simply about imposing inappropriate values: rather, the problem is that children have to find their own way through a diverse range of potentially contradictory or inconsistent messages, deriving both from the media and from other sources. This would imply that they need opportunities to analyse and discuss these issues in a context that is not unduly dominated by moral judgments or by the perspectives of adults.

Of course, it is vital not to take children's testimony at face value. As Gill (2007) argues, there is a danger here of presenting their relationships with media and consumer culture simply as a matter of them exercising 'free choice'. Yet on the other hand, as Duits and van Zoonen (2007) argue, we should be careful not to

deny children's agency in these matters. The research cited here is by no means naïve about this: on the contrary, it typically presents children's discussions of media and consumer culture as an arena for complex forms of 'identity work'. It also helps to move beyond simplistic models of media effects, suggesting that the media do not have an autonomous power either to corrupt children or indeed to 'liberate' them.

1.9 Conclusion

To conclude, there is fairly good evidence that sexual imagery has become more widely available within the culture as a whole, including in material that is targeted at, or frequently consumed by, children. However, the evidence about the *effects* of this – whether positive or negative - is limited and inconclusive. These limitations are partly to do with the *scope* of the research:

☐ Most of the research has focused on adults, rather than children; and there are good reasons for suggesting that there will be significant differences between children's and adults' interpretations of such material.

☐ Most of it has considered effects on girls/women, only looking at indirect effects on boys/men. This in turn begs broader questions about gender differences, which have barely been addressed.

☐ In terms of our specific focus here, most of the research relates to media: although there has been work on advertising, there has been relatively little on marketing more broadly or on 'sexualised' goods or products themselves.

However, there are also limitations to do with theory and methodology, which might be briefly summarised as follows:

☐ There is a lack of consistency and clarity about the meaning of 'sexualisation', and the crucial distinction between 'sexual' and 'sexualised': other related terms (such as 'objectification') remain poorly defined and theorised.

☐ Much of the research suffers from methodological limitations that are characteristic of media effects research more broadly.

☐ Much of the research rests on moral assumptions – for example about 'healthy' sexuality, about 'decency' or about material that is 'inappropriate' for children - that are not adequately explained or justified.

At the same time, it is clear that the debate on these issues is often highly emotional, and quite sensationalised; and this can make it difficult for both
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children and parents to discuss the topic, and to arrive at a balanced estimation of what is really at stake. This is a methodological qualification to bear in mind as we move on (in Sections 3 and 4 of this report) to consider our own sampling of children's and parents' views.

2. SURVEY OF PRODUCTS IN RETAIL OUTLETS
2.1 Introduction
The survey of retail outlets attempted to review the range, type and prevalence of 'sexualised' products aimed at young people under the age of 16 years. It involved a survey of 32 retail outlets including supermarkets/superstores, department stores, clothing retailers, toy stores, sports stores, gift/gadget stores, stationers and outlets devoted to specific branded goods. In many cases, researchers 'visited' both the virtual and physical presence of specific outlets and accessed a total of 18 store websites. The survey also included popular retail outlets such as Littlewoods and Amazon which market and sell goods through a website or catalogue presence rather than through a conventional physical 'High Street' presence. This section of the report outlines the steps taken to access products, discusses the way in which potentially 'sexualised' goods were categorised, highlights the findings of the survey and concludes with a discussion of the findings.

2.2 Methodology
Retail outlets surveyed were located in shopping malls and 'High Street' locations in city centres in Glasgow, Perth and Inverness as well as shopping malls and shopping centres on the periphery of Glasgow accessible to those living in the Greater Glasgow area. Following background interviews with industry contacts, retail outlets were differentiated according to the following criteria that aimed to take account of the context in which goods for children are sold:
i) Stores specifically aimed at children and young people and/or parents shopping for children: for example, Toys 'R' Us, Bear Factory, Claire's (although this shop also includes a small selection of goods aimed at adult females)
ii) Stores with a cross-generational target group but with a separate department/ section for children: e.g. Asda, Tesco, Superdrug, WH Smith, Marks & Spencer, Debenhams, H & M, New Look, M & Co, Peacocks.
iii) Stores with a cross-generational target group, where no overall explicit distinction is made between adults and children apart from perhaps a 'school' clothes display or a children's toy and games section in gift and gadget stores: e.g. Topman, River Island.
In order to inform the design of the survey, members of the team engaged in the following research activities:
☐ Background interviews with industry experts involved in the retail and marketing of products aimed at children and young people
☐ Preparatory fieldwork with industry experts (accompanied visits to popular 'High Street' retailers) and incorporation of the initial literature review in order to assist in the design and pilot of data collection instruments
☐ Accessing websites (detailed in Appendix 1) for initial comparisons with the physical store presence
☐ Scoping 'High Street' retailers through existing data (websites, maps, local knowledge and contacts etc.) as preparation for fieldwork visits.
Following this, during the fieldwork phase of the survey, data collection took place in a variety of shopping locations ensuring that these visits encompassed 'High Street' retailers in shopping malls and outdoor High Streets as well as virtual locations (see Appendix 1). Since the potential meanings of goods can depend very much on how they are displayed and labelled in stores, where they are located (for example in sections of the shop defined by age or gender), and the publicity material that surrounds them, we felt it was particularly important to

include data about the context as well as the goods themselves. During the survey, we acted as 'shoppers' and also purchased a variety of goods. We did not believe it was necessary to obtain permission to conduct a survey of this nature, although this did mean that we were not able to take photos or spend time detailing the exact layout of the stores concerned and so used the available time in each store to concentrate upon the products and their surroundings. During the data collection phase, the team:

☐ Made 38 observational visits to retail outlets

☐ Included a range of products in the survey, including clothes, cosmetics, toys, food, bedding, stationery, electrical items and accessories such as hair products

☐ Undertook limited ethnographic work at a selection of stores to observe the way in which potential customers engaged with products and their surroundings

☐ Made systematic field notes in all locations based upon a previously piloted data collection instrument (for examples, see Appendix 2)

☐ Detailed the field notes ensuring they involved a description of the location of children's products in store, a description of the type and prevalence of products as well as noting other products surrounding the particular collection, and the way in which advertising, décor and music was used to market the products

☐ Collected visual, organisational and marketing data from 'virtual' stores (Appendix 1)

☐ Subjected a selection of products to a more detailed textual analysis.

2.3 Method of Analysis

In order both to conduct the initial survey and to identify a selection of goods for further analysis, it was necessary to devise a coding system that allowed for the selection/non-selection of specific products. However, this aspect of the study was fundamentally problematic, not least because of the subjective and ambiguous nature of the term 'sexualised', and the various ways of defining it (see Literature Review). Further difficulties stemmed from the potential confusion between 'sexual' and 'sexualised'. Should any representation of intimate relationships and/or display of parts of the body currently associated with notions of adult sexuality necessarily be categorised as 'sexualised'? Was any form of adult female sexual expression automatically to be taken as evidence of 'sexualisation'? In this context, attempting to construct a coding system was fraught with difficulty. It also meant deploying a method of analysis that may not have been shared by children and young people - or for that matter, any other adults. However, the fact that the survey was part of a wider project during which young people and parents would be able to share their own readings of a selection of products and so contribute to a more nuanced understanding of them, meant that this aspect of our methodology became less problematic in the context of the work as a whole.

For this reason, we decided to begin with a rather broad and inclusive definition that would subsequently be open to question in later aspects of the study. The following coding system was used to classify goods as having potentially 'sexual' meanings. Items falling into the following five categories were selected for initial analysis:

1. Goods that seem to make references to sexual practices (including body parts) either through images, words, humour (use of ambiguity, e.g. 'blow me' and an image of a fan).

2. Goods that appear to make references to sexual contexts through images, words, colours, styles, or items: that is, where the familiarity with the item stems from culturally sexualised contexts, e.g. stripping (shiny gloves), burlesque (feather boa), 'sexy' lingerie (styles, lace, red, black and purple), stilettos, animal print, glitter (many of these were originally markers of luxury and status).
3. Goods that emphasise body parts and shapes which might be argued to be culturally associated with adult sexuality, e.g. eyes, lips, breasts, cleavage, curves, legs, bottom, skin, groin.
4. Goods that duplicate styles currently considered 'high fashion' for adults. These can also be goods which are marketed in a way that combines items from an adult or potentially sexual context with images, words, or practices (e.g. play) associated with childhood, in such a away as to normalise them as children's goods, e.g. Mini Bourjois make-up which is marketed with the statement 'Cute size, a rainbow of colours and tiny prices'. They may also include 'cute' goods and popular brands associated with childhood such as Hello Kitty 'Sexy Little Mints', sweets that carry potential sexual connotations by virtue of their title and image.
5. Goods that contain a reference to gender stereotypes, for example by overemphasising physical attractiveness, associating females with love and intimacy, or associating men with aggressiveness and dominance, either through words, images, symbols, or activities.
These are clearly many potential overlaps between these categories. It should be emphasised at this point that, while goods that fit these descriptions may be identified as carrying *sexual* meanings, or particular meanings associated with *gender*, this may not in itself necessarily be sufficient to categorise or consider them as *sexualised*. While this system of categorization was deliberately broad and inclusive, it is not our intention to imply the manufacturers or retailers of these goods are 'sexualising' children. It should also be emphasised again that goods that appear to 'fit' into one or more of these categories may not be perceived in the same way by children. However, the examples of particular goods that are described in the following sections fit one or more of the categories (as indicated), and we have been systematic and rigorous in applying the categorization scheme.

2.4 Findings
The following examples from the survey illustrate how we operationalised the categories and contexts listed above in the stores we visited. These examples also give details of the context in which goods were sold and (where possible) detail the marketing surrounding products aimed at children and young people.

2.4.1. Amazon http://amazon.co.uk
Amazon only sells products online and is perhaps the most well known of all online retailers. It is a very complex online shop in terms of the organization of products and seems to be aimed at encouraging specific searches rather than aimless browsing through the store. Therefore, 'shopping' here is a very different experience from shopping in a store with a physical environment.

Context
Images used are of the products themselves, rather than images of any additional marketing materials (although quite often the products themselves are branded goods). The clothing section can be searched by using the term

'children' and the toys and games section by selecting specific ages of children. However, hundreds of items can be retrieved in every category so it is difficult to see whether any items listed within these sections have sexual connotations. Therefore, we decided to undertake a specific search for 'sexy' products using Amazon's own search terms. This search provided some interesting (and occasionally incongruous) results. A large number of 'sexy' items are found in the

Toys and Games section and for some reason Amazon's search criteria also suggests that these 'sexy' items can be further differentiated by children's ages, with the listing indicating the number of products available per age group, as follows: Birth to 12 months (4); 3 to 4 years (9); 5 to 8 years (1); 12 to 16 years (7).

Example of selected goods
Hello Kitty Sexy Little Mints can be found in the 3 - 4 year age group under the 'Toys and Games' section. These sweets might be considered sexual due to the product name, but also because of the image on the front of the tin which features Miss Kitty's face giving a wink indicating that this product fits with categories 2 and 3 of our coding system.These are sweets that appear to be aimed at young females and, given the age category they are listed under, might be seen to be aimed at children. However, this is more likely to be as a result of the Amazon search engine directing the search towards the 'manufacturer's minimum age' criteria rather than as a result of the sweets actually being aimed at 3-4 year old children. Nevertheless, 'Hello Kitty' is both a 'cute' and popular brand amongst girls under the age of 16 years (see discussion of Claire's below) and sweets are traditionally associated with children and childhood.

2.4.2. Littlewoods
Unlike Amazon, Littlewoods is still organized very much like other physical outlets. It has a children's department which is divided and searchable by many subsections. None contain items with sexual connotations and overall the children's department seems to target mostly parents of young children. It does not appear to have a teenage section. Like many popular retailers it does sell a large range of Playboy branded products, although these are not aimed at children.

2.4.3. Topman
Topman is a popular clothes and accessories store that seems to be aimed at younger men. Topshop, a partner store, is aimed at young women and both stores are quite often found housed in the same structure. Like Topshop, Topman has a reputation for producing very trendy, fashionable, and arguably 'cool' clothing. While the store is not actually aimed at children and young people, participant observation indicated that it is very popular with younger teen boys and many items start from size XXS (extra, extra small).

Context
Products are arranged according to clothing category, with tee-shirts, casual wear, jeans, suits and underwear being arranged separately. Staff are young and 'trendy' and wear clothing available in store. Products are used as marketing tools, via mannequins and selected items pulled out for display. There was a limited range of visual images featuring male models posing in selected items.

Types of products available encompassed both ordinary and affordable branded and designer goods ranging from tee-shirts, suits, jeans, underwear and accessories. A range of tee-shirts with 'humorous' images and words were arranged against a back wall. Playboy branded tee-shirts were quite a prominent aspect of this collection.

Examples of selected goods
Playboy tee-shirts. These tee-shirts were part of the Playboy branded range and were available in sizes XXS (81-86cm chest) to XXL at a price of £20. All shirts featured pictures of Playboy images - that is, semi-nude young women - in a variety of provocative poses indicating a fit with categories 1, 2 and 3. While the image on the tee-shirt is clearly of a sexual nature, it could also be argued to be a retro and slightly ironic statement. However, despite the popularity of the store with young male teens, these items of clothing are not actually aimed at children. Instead, our observation in malls supports the notion that, especially for young people, shopping is not always the primary activity. Rather, shopping centres and shopping malls provide a space where young people can hang about with friends. Browsing aimlessly through trendy stores with a group of friends without engaging in the actual purchase of goods is a popular leisure time activity for young people. For the young male teens that we observed, giggling over images from Playboy seemed to be a pleasant way of passing the time.
Monkee Genes. These products are a range of low-rise or low-slung jeans for £50 starting from size 26 inch waist with an extra short leg. The majority of other jeans aimed at men in the store seem to start at a size 28 inch waist, which is still quite small. The availability of size 26 inch waist jeans in the low-rise range seems to support other evidence that suggests low-rise jeans tend to be directed at the teen market (for both boys and girls). The majority of the styles on offer are tight jeans, but others are designed to be baggy. These jeans seem to fit into category 3 as they appear to reveal parts of the male body associated with adult sexuality, such as stomach/midriff, hips or buttocks and buttock cleavage.

2.4.4. M & Co.
Previously known as Mackays, M & Co. is a national department store that sells clothes, accessories and homeware aimed at men, women and children. In marketing itself it promises affordable quality products for all. The store we visited distinguished between children and adults and was spatially divided into separate sections. Adults and children were divided along gender lines but more space was devoted to clothes aimed at women and girls. The clothing section for children and young people was divided into three separate sections according to age: 1½ years to 5 years, 5-10 years and 9-13+ years. However, the 9-13+ years section also now appears to include clothes for 7-8 year olds. While M & Co. differentiate clothes according to age, some items in the children's section, particularly 'party' clothes and evening wear, appeared to be similar to those in the adult female section (see category 4). Clothes for children were also the most prominent section in the store, and were situated immediately facing the front door as well as along a side wall after entering the store.

Context
Displays and décor were very limited. Signs designating age range and pictures of products surrounded the collection. Mannequins wearing party/evening wear from the 9-13+ range were prominently displayed. One of the most heavily featured and marketed goods was the chain's 'Kylie' range. Signs surrounding

the collection indicate that this is aimed at ages 7-13+. This range includes leggings, strappy vest tops, tops with sequins and shiny material, black ra-ra skirts with lace and underwear. Underwear ranged from plain non-padded bras to padded colourful bras with 'Betty Boop' and other popular logos, from standard plain pants and boxers to those with fake leopard skin print from the 'Kylie' range. Other products featured in the 'Kylie' range were quite similar to those products aimed at the 5-10 age range. The 'Kylie' range was the most prominently displayed: it was positioned directly opposite the front door and was very visible from outside the store and seemed to act as both product and marketing tool in terms of addressing potential customers.

Example of selected goods
'*Kylie' leopard skin print boxers*; £2.50, for 9-13 year old girls. These boxers seem to fit into category 2 as they could be argued to make reference to sexual contexts through the use of animal print material.
'*Kylie' sequined boobtube dress*: £20 for 9-13 year old girls. This is marketed online as an aspect of their party wear range as 'Sparkly stuff for princesses'. The dress fits with category 3 of our classification as it appears to emphasise body parts culturally associated with adult sexuality. It is strapless, seems to cling to the chest area and leaves shoulders and arms bare.

2.4.5. New Look
New Look is a clothes and accessories store that targets mostly women. It markets itself as offering 'high fashion' at affordable prices for all. The New Look store which we included in our survey distinguished between adults and children and was spatially divided into four sections: an adult collection located on the ground floor and a mixed section located on the first floor consisting of a collection for children aged 9-15 called 'Generation 915', a section for children called 'Kids', and a shoes and accessories section for a range of age groups. While this New Look store distinguished between adults and children via the labelling and spatial arrangement of its goods, particular aspects of the collection and the ways in which items were arranged and displayed also blurred such distinctions.

Context
A very large image of a young couple is mounted in a centre position behind the tills. The 'Generation 915' collection and items on several stands in the 'Kids'
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section are direct copies of the adult styles sold on the ground floor: e.g. tight jeans and shiny slim belts (from age 4), denim hot pants, mini skirts, animal print items. Apart from some 'tankinis', the swimwear and underwear collection duplicates styles sold in the adult lingerie section, i.e. bikinis, padded bras, lace embroidered briefs. The most prominent stand when coming up on the elevator is the swimwear stand to the right. It stands out through its mix of bright colours and shiny materials. Bikinis are on the top racks, at eye-level for 9-15 year olds. Right next to it is the underwear stand. Both swimwear and underwear are therefore presented as a key feature of fashionable outfits rather than placing emphasis on their functionality. While the 'Kids' section is semi-separated from the other areas in the shop through a wall with racks, clothes on both sides of this wall comprise sizes 4 to 15 years. A distinction between adult women and children is further blurred by the adjacent displays of shoes and accessories for women of an unspecified age. Overall, these contextual aspects could be understood to

suggest that all females aim for the same look and appeal..

Example of selected goods
'Glitter Butterfly Bikini': £10, ages 9-15, second 'most wanted' item in the swimwear section of the New Look online catalogue. The bikini falls into our categories 3, 4a and 5 and arguably also 2. It could be argued to emphasise body parts associated with adult sexuality. The top is padded; the heavier padding at the bottom of the cup and the gathered fabric detail give the impression of a full breast and cleavage. The print combines butterflies and hearts in colours black, purple and gold. The bikini bottom is tied at the sides.

2.4.6. Asda Living
The store comprises the sections of the Asda direct catalogue excluding food and cleaning goods. 'George', its clothes collection, comprises a women's collection (with a lingerie section and a section for younger women called G21), a men's collection, a baby collection, and a 'kids' collection for ages 6 months to 12 years. The store that was visited for the survey distinguished between adults and children and boys and girls through the labelling of sections and spatial arrangements of goods. Children's toys were located on the first floor.

Context
The store décor is generally very functional and there are no displays of outfits on mannequins. Without the use of such reference points, no specific customer is addressed and no specific standard is set with which customers should identify. It should be noted that at the time of observations customers comprised mostly parents with children.
The collection is a mixture of functional and more dressy essential wear which tries to link to current fashion trends, some of which are also continued in the 'kids' section (leggings and mini skirt with animal print, 'rock music' themes). There are many similarities between styles and prints in the adult and children's
36
section (e.g. character prints, Rock theme, Ahoi theme), but the 'kids' collection contains more Disney/TV themes, and more child-like prints and bright colours. In the store we visited, the baby and children's clothes collections were located to the right of the ground floor and separated from the adult clothes sections through a wall followed by the shoe section (for women and men, adults and children). Within the children's section goods were spatially grouped by age and gender, with the older boys (4-12) collection separated from the older girls (4-12) section by the toddler section. This spatial separation of boys and girls reinforces a notion of gender differences which is further played out through contrasting colour schemes and prints.

Example of selected goods
Animal printed skirt and leggings set: £8, 4-12 years, rated number two in the skirts section of the online catalogue. The item could be argued to fall into category 4 and to some extent category 2. It is a mix of a style currently in fashion for young women and the net skirts in fashion at under-18 club nights. A very short, layered skirt (leopard print black and white with white net), black patent belt, black leggings. Black and white colours, animal prints, short net skirt and corset also feature in Lady Gaga's video for her song 'Love Game'. The association with Lady Gaga's video may also link this item to category 1.

2.4.7. Toys 'R' Us
This store targets mostly parents and young children. The collection is broadly divided into the following areas: a mix of mostly small and seasonal toys in the first aisle at the entrance; school accessories; electronic toys (games, computers, musical instruments); educational toys; a large section comprising several aisles on the centre right for boys; a large section comprising several aisles on the centre left for girls; boxed games and traditional brands on the outer aisles; bikes and sports/outdoors (swings, pools, trampolines etc) in the back of the store and next to the tills; and baby accessories targeting parents. Items are mostly brightly coloured plastic, based upon popular television and Disney themed products.

Context
The décor is fairly functional, and displays feature mostly images of Disney and television characters. The aisles for girls and boys are differentiated through pink and blue/black signs with section names in ornamental or bold writing. The majority of goods are explicitly gendered, fitting in with category 5. The boys' section comprises two aisles labelled 'Action Adventure' and one called 'Fast Lane'. They contain cars, planes, action figures, toy weapons, dressing-up clothes (pirates, police, cowboy, knight). A further aisle called 'Universe of Imagination', although containing unisex goods such as play dough and fingerpaints, is also located on the boys' side. Across from this is the girls' section, comprising 'Girlz Boutique' (two aisles), 'You and Me' (two aisles), and 'Girlz'. These contain soft toys, small dress up figures and collectables, baby dolls and accessories, Disney dolls, Barbies, Bratz dolls, one whole aisle with Hannah Montana items, dress-up clothes (princesses, fairies, dream dazzlers). In contrast to the boys, who dress up in specific roles or professions, girls seem to be invited to dress up as women who use goods to look attractive.
The boys' and girls' sections occupy the largest space of the shop and are arranged in aisles opposite each other. In the girls' sections a lower shelf divides two aisles, which therefore creates a wider space and invites the gaze to wander between two aisles. The aisles with goods for boys appear narrower and goods are stacked more closely. While the dressing-up outfits for boys largely sit on a messy shelf, the dressing-up clothes for girls are mounted on a wall. Arguably this arrangement invites boys to action, while it invites 'looking' in the girls section.

Example of selected goods
Glamour Heart Cosmetic Case, £14.99, from 4 years. Located in the centre middle aisle of 'Girlz Boutique', this item falls into categories 3, 4a, and 5. It is surrounded by other cosmetic sets, e.g. a range called 'Pink', another called 'Gorgeous' (bath gels in lipstick, mobile and stiletto shape), and a cosmetics range from 'Totally Me'. The case is in the shape of a large heart, pink with heart prints and 'Love' and 'Pop' written on the cover. It contains lip gloss, lipsticks, lip balm, nail varnish, eye shadow, glitter powder, nail jewels, and dress rings.

2.4.8. Disney Store
Almost all products in this store appeared to be aimed at children (with a few for babies and adults) and all were connected to Disney characters from film, cartoons and television. The collection was broadly divided by character and type of product into toys, soft toys, games and fancy dress costumes, bedroom products including bedding, and homeware (including lights, plates, mugs etc). The collection also featured clothes (including pyjamas, underwear and

swimwear), accessories (including hair products and jewellery), stationery (including pencil cases) bags, lunch boxes, media products (including CDs and DVDs and games), phones, cameras etc.

Context
Various popular Disney character images were used to market the collection and *High School Musical* was being screened in the store. This is a bright, 'fun' store designed to showcase the Disney brand and perhaps all goods should be understood by their relationship to the brand rather than as specific products in their own right. The majority of products were explicitly gendered and this gendering fits with category 5. The most popular items (determined by the amount of space devoted to the products, the variety of stock and the number of customers engaging with the products) tended to be those associated with *Hannah Montana* and *High School Musical*. *Hannah Montana* items were given a prominent position along a back wall that was visible from the entrance when customers walked by outside.

Example of selected goods
Hannah Montana Bikini: £14:99, aimed at 3–13 year old girls. This was a pink halter-neck bikini set (bra and pants rather than 'tankini' style) with lilac edging. Pink and lilac are the *Hannah Montana* colours. The *Hannah Montana* badge at the centre of the bra top pulls the top into a breast shape and draws the bikini top into a 'cleavage' and so can be argued to fit into category 3.

2.4.9. Claire's Accessories
Claire's Accessories is part of a larger international chain known as Claire's Stores and is a major high street retailer in the UK. Claire's Stores describe themselves as 'a store that targets girls and young women with the latest jewellery and accessory styles' (http://www.clairestores.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=68915&p=irol-company) while Claire's Accessories describe themselves as 'offering an assortment of products geared towards teen girls' (http://www.claires.com/). Advertising displays on the windows of the store suggest older teenage girls as reference points. Marketing emphasises the attractiveness of teen girls elaborated with accessories, but spatial arrangements in store and the placing of products suggest a blurring of distinctions between female adult, youth and child markets. There is also the occasional appearance of male children.

Context
Claire's sells an explicitly gendered range of accessories (category 5), including: hats; gloves; tights and leggings; socks; shoes; flip-flops; jewellery; hair accessories and hair products; hair extensions; make-up; nail polish and nail extensions; party bags; body jewellery and fake tattoos. They also market novelty items and costumes aimed at the 'Hen Night' market. These include tiaras, 'devil' headbands and feather boas.
Claire's seems to attempt to differentiate between the teen girl and younger girl market by marketing a range of products aimed at younger girls under the heading of 'Claire's Club'. In addition, assistants within the store approached during this survey stated that products such as 'pirate' tattoos and 'Sponge Bob Square Pants' party bags were aimed at boys and those buying for boys. It also seems that Claire's aims to target the teen girl piercing market with slogans such as 'When you're ready to get your ears pierced', accompanied by a considerable

amount of online and in-store material featuring girls that is devoted to the conduct and after care of piercing. Piercing itself tends to take place in the window of the store and is a good example of the blurring of the distinction between retail product, retail activity and marketing techniques.

The outlet observed as part of this survey, like the majority of Claire's Accessories outlets in the UK, was small and tightly packed with products, allowing little space for additional marketing images. However, mirrors were used to accentuate space and they also provide opportunities for customers to try products in-store. This means that displays surrounding products were collections of other products rather than advertising images (for example, tights and leggings are located next to both the 'Hen Night' and 'Hello Kitty' stand). Overall, the marketing images used to advertise Claire's and the products within the store relied upon generic images of teen girls in *Hannah Montana*-type outfits and poses. However, Claire's appears to have made a conscious marketing decision in relation to differentiating between the teen and younger girl market. This is especially apparent with respect to positioning and marketing of goods in store. For example, under the heading of 'Claire's Club', it is possible to find a range of products such as face painting kits aimed at the pre-teen female market, positioned in their own section on backing shelves.

Example of selected goods

'1 Night Stand' temporary hair colour, 'Raunchy Red'. The product is a small tube of temporary hair colour which seems to be aimed at the older teen market. The images and pictures on the tube are of older teens in various stages of hair colouring with references to the temporary nature of the product. The reference to a 'one night stand' and 'raunchy' indicates that it could fit with category 1 in our categorisation above. In store, this item was placed on shelving next to goods aimed at younger girls containing items such as 'Butterfly Face Painting Kits'. The images of the under 10s and 'child like' face paintings on this latter product seem to indicate its intended audience.

2.5 Concluding discussion
Prevalence of sexualised goods aimed at children

A total of 32 retail outlets was surveyed and a deliberately broad and inclusive (if admittedly problematic and simplistic) definition of potential aspects of 'sexualisation' was deployed in both selecting and analysing a range of products. The overall results do indicate the existence of goods that might be described as 'sexualised', at least some of which appear to be aimed at children. However, they also suggest that the prevalence of such goods is actually rather limited. For example, even within our very inclusive categorisation scheme, many of the stores surveyed contained no examples of such goods (for example, Tesco, Littlewoods, Poundland, Debenhams, JJ Sports, D2 Jeans, Marks and Spencer and a variety of other stores on the list contained very little evidence of such goods). This is not to suggest that sexual imagery in consumer culture is not widespread, or that children do not consume products surrounded by such imagery. What it does indicate is that relatively few 'sexualised' products are specifically aimed at children. Clearly, children are not only subject to the influence of goods aimed specifically at them, but also to the influence of the wider consumer culture. Establishing the extent and nature of such influence is difficult for many reasons; but the wider availability of sexual imagery in mainstream culture could imply that the transition from child to adult status is becoming more ambiguous and more complex than perhaps was the case in

earlier times (Buckingham and Bragg, 2005).

Observations of young customers/potential customers
Retail outlets and shopping malls are not always what they seem. On the surface they might appear to be purely commercial spaces devoted to the pursuit of commercial profit, but observation of the ways in which customers and potential customers engage with a retail space often reveals a slightly different form of interaction. For children and young people, commercial spaces might constitute a space of play, a place to meet friends or to engage in other forms of unspecified creative engagements that are not wholly determined by the purchase of consumer goods. Our observations of children and young people revealed that shopping itself was often a secondary rather than a primary activity. We frequently observed children frequenting outlets that did not specifically aim their products at children and young people as well as stores that did. Such seemingly aimless browsing can perhaps be contrasted with the rather more purposive search for products via online stores in which the opportunity for interaction with friends and peers is more limited. It might also indicate that a concentration upon sexualised goods *specifically aimed at children* tells us very little about the actual prevalence of sexualised goods to which children and young people are exposed. Even if we discount the influence of wider media culture, children and young people's active and varied engagement with consumer artefacts means that they are always exposed to a much wider range of goods than those that are aimed directly at them.

Creating and blurring age distinctions
Evidence from the survey indicated that commercial outlets are able to reinforce or even create age distinctions through the arrangement of products. Spatial arrangements in stores, such as placing products for adults and children on different floors, or arranging products for children in a sequential manner according to age, can work to reinforce age distinctions through applying an almost developmental sequence to the placing of products (Cook, 2003). It should also be noted that clothing that is specifically designed for and targeted at children is exempt from VAT: and in this case, it should be possible to identify unambiguously whether or not products are in fact targeted at children or at adults. However, what is aimed at children is not necessarily consumed by them, and what is aimed at adults is not necessarily only consumed by adults. In reality, there is no hard and fast rule when it comes to age distinction in the retail environment. Thus, spatial arrangements can also blur the distinction between adult, youth and child: for example, 'childlike' products such as fake cartoon tattoos can be placed next to novelty items aimed at the 'Hen Night' market (as in Claire's). Age distinctions are also blurred by the nature of the products themselves: for example, many clothing items aimed specifically at young people are exact copies of fashions aimed at adults, and make-up products for girls are often packaged as toys (as in Toys 'R' Us).

Cross-generational retail outlets as 'aspirational' spaces
A further complication in terms of differentiating goods aimed at children from goods aimed at the adult population is the existence of stores with a crossgenerational target group such as Quiz, River Island, or Topman. These retail outlets can be identified as 'aspirational' spaces for a number of reasons (Cook, 2003; Russell and Tyler, 2005). Such spaces do not explicitly target children or young people, and there are no explicit age markers attached to products, which

means they have the potential to be used for the purpose of constructing a potentially desirable 'adult' identity. However, the potential for creative engagement with products might need to be combined with information from our background interviews with industry contacts, which suggested that young people were 'the target market by default' for such stores: the presence of very small clothes sizes (such as sizes 4-6 for women) might also point to the existence of this target market.

Constructions of gender
While age distinctions seem to be both constructed and blurred here, gender distinctions in the retail world seem to be more apparent and more rigidly enforced. While these distinctions were apparent in the selection of products themselves, gender stereotypes were also constructed by spatial separation (as in Toys 'R' Us for example) and then further reinforced by the use of colours, fabrics, slogans and marketing techniques. Stereotypical images of young people were also used to market products - for example, boys were more likely to be depicted participating in activities or at play, while girls were represented as 'looking' attractive in ways that suggest passive femininity. While this does not mean that girls do not critically engage with such images, it does suggest that they are targeted by marketing in ways that more explicitly emphasise gender as a crucial dimension of identity. In terms of sexualisation, while a few product ranges appeared to be aimed at teen boys (for example, jeans in Topman), the majority of goods found to be emphasising body parts and shapes culturally associated with adult sexuality (category 3) were more likely to be aimed at young females than young males. Indeed, it can be argued that the primary targets of such goods are females. However, goods aimed at the pursuit of a feminine appearance such as cosmetics, hair accessories, purses, handbags and other articles were much more prevalent than overtly sexualised goods.

3. PARENTS' VIEWS

For our focus group work with parents, we sought to adopt a 'deliberative' approach in order to promote a considered and informed debate. We provided images of children and actual examples of the products we had collected in the retail survey as stimuli for discussion, and put forward critical questions or alternative points of view, as well as inviting personal experiences of the issues involved. All these implicitly raised dilemmas about the definition and characteristics of children and sexualised goods, and about how products are consumed and used at home, in schools, and other settings.

In all we conducted nine focus groups, with 43 participants. Women predominated in the sample, with 8 male participants. Four (three women, one man) were from minority ethnic backgrounds. There was a mix of class backgrounds, parent types (including single parents and a lesbian mother), child ages and numbers, and religious affiliations (Christian and Muslim). All participants received £30 in volunteer expenses, and snacks and drinks were provided. Six groups took place in the schools involved in the research with young people, which were in geographically and socioeconomically
contrasting areas (see Section 4 and Appendix 1 for more details), one
in a hairdressing salon for children, and two at Glasgow Caledonian University.
The format of the groups – which lasted at least two hours - consisted of:
□ Explanation of the research, completion of consent forms
□ Icebreaker exercise (choosing one from a selection of images of children)
and providing introductions to self, family, and the chosen image
□ Personal experience of the issue – general discussion
□ Looking at and discussing actual products from our retail survey
□ Discussion of parents' 'key messages to the Scottish Parliament' and what
might be done about the issue.
A more detailed account of the methodology is to be found in Appendix 1. The interviews were transcribed for analysis.

3.1 Values and beliefs about childhood and parenting

Our participants had strong investments in the notion of a 'natural' childhood that involved innocence, play, fun, opportunity, learning, being together and being outdoors – and that often included, for girls, playing with make up and dressing up. In our 'icebreaker' exercise in which 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 and were read as signs of victimisation or abuse, of children being 'robbed of their childhood'.

One paradox here was that despite this near-universal consensus in terms of underlying hopes and beliefs about children's 'natural' innocence, parents could and did differ widely in their interpretations of what might constitute its acceptable and appropriate manifestations. Thus, girls emulating 'sexy' dance moves or wearing make-up could be read as innocuous fun, devoid of 'adult' sexual connotations, whilst for others, to whom innocence meant play untouched by knowledge of the adult world, the same activities were 'distasteful'. And it could be argued that whilst 'innocence' was not a term that young people used to describe themselves, in other respects they endorsed a similar set of values around childhood play, fun and learning – the difference being that they applied these to their involvement with 'sexualised' goods and consumption whilst many

parents did not (see Section 4.3).

It is important to underscore this finding. The debate about 'sexualisation' implies that consumer goods act on children in negative ways; for this unfortunate state of affairs it holds responsible the retailers, manufacturers, or parents who (irresponsibly) buy them. In this research we did not want to talk only to parents who agreed with this position, but actively sought alternative viewpoints – such as the owner and customers of a children's salon that had been accused in the media of promoting the sexualisation of childhood. Yet in doing so, we did not enter a different moral universe. We found mothers who cared about their daughters' wellbeing, about developing them through educational and other activities, for whom playing with make up was fun, a 'treat', something they remembered from their own childhoods, and who drew selectively on the products of the commercial world to help (their) girls do the same. Like all the other parents in this study, they believed that 'lines should be drawn' and pointed to those whom they saw as overstepping boundaries; and whilst their 'lines' differed from those of some parents, they were close to others (and indeed to the young people) in their views. It is not helpful to construe those who do not support the 'sexualisation' thesis as ignorant, thoughtless and/or in need of reeducation. Parents generally saw children as passing through 'natural' stages of development towards adulthood, which required them gradually to take on increasing responsibilities, as a rehearsal for adult life. In addition, most participants held what might be termed broadly 'democratic' ideals of childrearing, recognising children's rights to be different, to make their own decisions, to develop their individuality and express themselves. As a result, many parents accepted that by secondary school or by the age of 12/13, children should if they wished have the final say on clothes and items of personal care. Their perception of the significance of the 'milestone' of high school often mirrored young people's:

Going to secondary school they change really quickly, I think they change in about three weeks of being there, their faces change, their bodies start to change, they get a… 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 (Mother, FG2)

This focus on personal relationships and consumption as the key sphere for the exercise of choice is arguably produced by the absence of other arenas in which young people are permitted any decision-making role. In contrast, one parent pointed out that by the age of 14 she 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 mothers in the group agreed).

Nonetheless, these beliefs and values about 'natural' childhood and development shaped parents' responses to 'sexualised' goods, as we discuss below. It also led many to argue that sexualised goods were not 'worth the battle' – that is, they would not go so far as to risk alienating their children or jeopardizing their relationship with them over issues such as clothes and hairstyles. These could be seen not only as comparatively trivial ('there are worse things they could be doing'), but also as part of the 'natural' rebellion of adolescents against their parents.

Whilst our data do not permit secure generalisations about gender differences here, mothers described going shopping with their children more than did fathers.

They were therefore perhaps more familiar with what was available, more aware of their children's desires, possibly under more pressure to fulfil them, and (at least in our discussions) less judgmental or inclined to be definitive about what was 'right' or 'wrong'. This in turn enabled them to mediate between fathers and children where necessary. (Several mothers described the clichéd scenario where male partners refused to allow daughters to go out of the house 'dressed like that'). 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, or (as reported by a mother) loudly describing clothing in one store as 'everything the child prostitute needs'.

A more relevant difference related to the age and numbers of children. Those with older or grown up children were as a rule noticeably more relaxed than those whose child/ren were still young. Parents explained this variously as because they were 'more experienced' at parenting; because they were 'exhausted' – 'you can't be bothered because you know what's coming'; 'it's too much of a battle… and you know the first battle didn't work out' (mothers, FG5); and because, having seen their first children successfully grow into adulthood, they realised that things that once caused conflict were less important than they had thought at the time.

Compared to the sensationalising of this issue in the media, the overall tone of the group discussions was thoughtful, often hesitant and even inconsistent. If young people constantly monitored the significance of their and others' consumption choices, parents appeared to do the same in relation to their childrearing, 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:

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? (Mother, FG5)

It's like 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. But I don't have any control over them because they're not just me, they come from everywhere (Mother, FG1)

3.2 How far are sexualised goods *a* problem or *the* problem for parents?
Since this was a self-selecting group, it would be reasonable to hypothesise that parents' participation in the research would be motivated by strong pre-existing views about (and probably against) sexualised goods. It is therefore interesting that our recruitment was lower than we had hoped. There could be many reasons for this, such as: our relatively small budget, with attendant difficulties in publicizing our groups and sustaining contacts with potential participants; the extent of schools' support for the research, since letters to parents were distributed through them; different schools' sense of community and relations with parents, which may have made some more welcoming than others as venues. However, one further reason that needs to be considered is whether this really is an issue that parents are as concerned about as the public debates tend to suggest.

In interpreting our data, we also recognised that the context of the groups, and

the social 'performances' they involved, may have made participants feel required to express greater concern about the goods than they would have done in other situations, or with different interlocutors. Even so, some participants stated that they had not (or 'not yet') encountered problems in relation to sexualised goods with their own children. This could be because they had sons (as we will see, the debate about these goods impacts very differently on daughters, whilst boys' consumption practices tend to take place in very different sites); because their children were too young for this to be an issue; or because their children's personalities (or bodily self-consciousness) were such that they were not interested in such goods.

Many parents acknowledged the continuities between their own and contemporary childhoods, reminiscing about how they too had wanted to be 'grown up', their desires for particular goods, and the peer pressure that also acted as a lever to oblige or cajole parents into particular behaviours and purchases – although only one parent explicitly argued that 'nothing's changed really' (mother, FG2). However, in relation to issues of *sex and sexuality*, it was often apparent that concerns other than goods were more significant for many parents. Thus, the merits of schools' approaches to sex education were hotly debated on occasions; they frequently discussed a general 'mainstreaming' of sex ('pornography is far more around us now than when I was growing up' - mother, FG2), the content of media such as television, magazines and films, with music videos - particularly Lady Gaga - being seen as 'shocking', 'quite extreme', 'soft porn' and so on. They commented on what they saw as the failures of regulation in keeping material they thought inappropriate from being screened before the watershed or in 12 certificate films, and on the use of sex or nudity to sell in advertising. They also remarked on the changing form of media – its availability and accessibility, its 24-hour quality, and its potential for repeated viewings.

In relation to *goods*, it was often argued that the key issues were around commercialisation and corporate/consumer culture rather than sexualisation. The targeting of ever-younger consumers was seen as having consequences for the moral values of young people themselves, making them obsessed with brands, with accumulating things through 'buying more, getting more', giving them 'disposable', materialistic and 'get it now' attitudes to life, filling them with a longing for endless choices and wealth that did not make them happy, and facilitating cruelty to peers who didn't fit in. But consumerism was also seen to exercise considerable financial and moral pressure on parents, since the quicker turnover of fashion and growth of media synergy meant that they felt required (in part to protect their children from social exclusion) 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. In contrast to many young people in our research, then, parents voiced explicit anger about what they saw as the cynicism, exploitation and irresponsibility of marketers and retailers – although they may thereby have avoided addressing questions about their own emotional attachments to these forms of consumption. Even whilst many of them acknowledged - and enjoyed - children's 'expertise' in the codes of contemporary consumer youth culture (being able to identify brands of shoes, clothes, bags and so on, even at a distance) and their creativity (in developing new slang - 'tramp stamp' for tattoo - or codes in texting), they also recognised that their own comparative incompetence here potentially undermined the authority of their opinions in their children's eyes.

Overall, discussions often moved far from the topic of sexualised goods, and raised concerns that – whilst significant in themselves – lay beyond the scope of this research. Many of these broader issues have been addressed more thoroughly by the recent DCSF/DCMS report on *The Impact of the Commercial World on Children's Wellbeing*.

However, even discussion of the 'sexualised' products we presented to parents revealed the difficulty of agreeing lines that might be drawn in relation to any single item, as there was no unanimous response to any of them. Indeed, in one group, after some intensely voiced concerns about sexualisation, our product display led two mothers to admit that they had already bought many or most of the 'pink' goods (Barbie, Bratz, make-up, etc.) for their daughters. Such evidence points to the lack of consensus in defining what is sexualised, as we discuss in our literature review and the retail survey. It also indicates the sometimes freefloating quality of parents' anxieties, which may derive from perceptions of social trends and tendencies, yet not be exactly mirrored in everyday consumption practices.

3.3 Sexualised goods: different for girls

Discussion amongst parents, as with young people, demonstrated that the issue of sexualised goods was clearly gendered and raised different concerns in relation to daughters as compared with sons. Even when talking about consumption itself, there may have been a tendency to view girls' purchases (which tend to be more frequent, but of lower-cost goods) as more indicative of negative values such as materialism than boys' more focused investment in highvalue items.

However, no parent felt their *own* daughters were becoming 'too sexual too soon', as is often suggested is true of girls in general. Even though pressures were acknowledged, their relation to behaviour was still speculative:

Everything's "hot" or not and she wants to be "hot" so much. And I think there'll be pressure on her to do something that will make her seem "hot". (mother of 11-year old daughter, FG2)

'Having a boyfriend' was seen as largely a performance for pre-teens; while make-up was 'for themselves, it's not to attract boys', 'it's for the girls, it's for their friends' (mothers, FG2), a focus for play and with a positive function, rather than sexualising (much as the young people also argued):

I allow my daughter… I've let her 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, FG7)

Most parents claimed that their own daughters were 'sensible', rarely even desiring what they defined as 'inappropriate' clothing; if this did happen, it was seen as harmlessly 'trying to be older' – 'it's not like she's about to have sex with somebody because she's wearing thongs, it's just a look' (mother, FG2). Even when they did have concerns about sexualisation, they were unsure when or how to raise them with children. In a telling comparison, one mother explained that she did not share her strong objections to Bratz dolls with her five year old daughter in order not to upset her; while another mused 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'. She eloquently articulated the mysterious way children pass from being young,

vulnerable, in need of shielding from adult ideas, to (all at once) being of an age where they asserted their right to make their own decisions:

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 (mother, FG1)

Parents' concerns were much more for girls' overall well-being than that they were being sexualised. Some worried about how current fashions excluded girls who did not fit a norm:

If you go shopping now 14,15,16, especially girls, it's very difficult for them not to buy clothing that's low, short, tight, revealing, if you're the least bit heavy it's very difficult as a young girl to dress… there's not a lot out there for girls who are not pencil thin at that age (mother FG4)

Others worried about their daughters' general 'obsession' with their looks, their body image, the effort involved in grooming, their failure to wear sufficiently warm clothing and unhealthy eating habits – 'they exist on air'. They wanted to prevent their daughters being bullied or teased about their appearance, rather than thinking they were bullying others. This desire to protect daughters did however have particular inflections when it came to issues of sexual risk, as we discuss below.

A similarly nuanced understanding was brought to bear on the discussion of items from the retail survey. Make-up had no inherent sexual connotations – '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' (mother, FG4). The continuity between 'childish' activities such as face painting and wearing make-up made it difficult to distinguish a clear point at which make-up would become unacceptable – even more so if their mothers wore it. Stories about children (male and female) returning from nursery with nail polish on, or giving make-up sets as birthday gifts, indicated the extent to which playing with make-up had become a routine part of the experience of childhood, rather than its antithesis. As a result parents generally opted to be tolerant:

I'm not crazy about her painting her nails and doing anything like that but then again you don't want to be a complete spoilsport because she sees other people doing it (mother of 5 year old, FG1).

The views expressed in this regard suggest that media condemnation of socalled 'beauty salons' for children are out of step with parenting practices:

certainly the salon we visited (which was primarily for haircutting) aimed to offer a slightly more elaborated version of what children would frequently encounter at home and in other sites.

Parents also argued that goods such as short skirts do not signify sexualisation on their own, but that their import depends on what and how they are worn (shorts and leggings would counter sexual meanings, socks enhance them) – and several mothers recalled rolling up their own, longer, school skirts to change their meaning. Bras were seen both 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 the items even where it was also pointed out that a '30AA' bra was not for girls in this situation). Padded bras could boost confidence, so that mothers bought them recalling their own adolescent anxieties or even whilst wishing they did not exist. A black bikini with a padded diamante top for an 8

year old was more strongly condemned, partly as 'not fit for purpose' - inappropriate for swimming – and partly as too adult in colour and style.

Many parents strongly disliked Playboy products, although they recognised their popularity amongst children. One (divorced) mother described being forced to get one item after her daughter had persuaded her father to buy another. But there were different logics involved in superficially similar responses. Dislike did not necessarily entail condemnation of the sex industry as a whole, for example – one mother objected strongly to what she described as Playboy products 'grooming' girls for sex work, but not to her son's poster of Jordan (because Jordan was 'doing it for herself', not aiming at children – and perhaps also was someone to whom she related as a fellow 'single mother'). Parents debated the Playboy logo: how far could its meanings be seen as inherent and fixed, what were the effects on those who did not know or understand its associations? Was it just a fashion thing or buying into the sex industry? Was a 'brand' or a logo no longer necessarily associated with specific goods? Whose interpretations were more valid? What were the ethics of explaining them to children, how far was this appropriate? As one mother saw it, such explanation in itself could represent an infringement on childhood 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. You don't always want to be the one that's coming in spoiling it and making them think of the bigger issues. There are times they […..] don't need to worry about who they're offending on their T-shirt. They don't need to maybe think about the moral issues of absolutely everything that they do, like what clothes to put on in the morning (mother FG4)

Similarly, calling a wash-out hair colour 'One-Night Stand' was felt by some parents to be to be part of a general sexualisation, but by others to be acceptable because it would mean nothing to children; and one mother argued that it might actually help her discuss the issue with her daughter. It certainly wouldn't make them more interested in sex – 'they wouldn't be the least bit interested even they did know what it meant' (mother, FG2). One mother was initially shocked by the name, but when she realised the nature of the product felt her response was 'illegitimate' because it only reflected her 'adult' knowledge. No parent objected to the product itself, again showing how play with forms of make-up has become unexceptional. Parents switched between an 'adult' and a 'child' reading of goods, unsure whose should take priority – 'if you're looking at that from an adult point of view then the Bratz doll is more overtly sexy but I don't think the kids see it that way…' (mother, FG1).

3.4 'Boys are easier'

Sons, it was generally agreed, are easier. Firstly, they are different from girls, less prone to want to grow up faster:

I think boys are keener to stay boys for longer then girls want to stay girls. I think girls are desperate to be women. I think that boys are actually quite happy kicking about the football and not really looking in the mirror all the time (mother, FG4)

Moreover there are fewer products available for them (as our retail survey also suggests): 'It's only jeans and boxers, it's not as if you're buying lots of designer stuff' (mother, FG 5). Like daughters, sons were seen as not grasping the sexual meanings of goods or advertisements, or not (yet) aiming to impress girls, instead connecting to brands and to idols or role models. (Again, we might note the value judgments built in to responses to consumption: while boys had 'role

models' like Beckham, girls were 'obsessed with celebrity culture', and so on.)
Boys' consumption practices were generally viewed with amusement rather than
alarm, with considerable hilarity occasioned by the trend for pants showing above
low-slung trousers or their use of hair gels and deodorants ('you smell them
before you see them!'). Concerns involved health (for instance whether branded
non-leather trainers were unhealthier than leather), cost, exploitation (deodorant
as an attempt to develop early brand loyalty) but not sexualisation. Indeed, boys'
attention to grooming was often viewed as a good thing:
It's always good to have your girls smelling nice and looking nice [….] So
I've got to have my two boys looking good as well (mother, FG5)
I don't think there is any harm in the body sprays and that. I think it
encourages hygiene (mother, FG7)
In relation to individual products, a Playboy T-shirt was generally met with
derision, only one mother stating that her (Goth) son might wear it and her
daughter a Playgirl version. One group pointed out incredulously that they had
never seen anyone wearing such a thing. Rather than banning it, though, they
seemed to think that peer disapproval would suffice:
- I wouldn't be very impressed with him wearing that.
- And I don't think my daughter would be impressed if she saw a boy
wearing that (mothers, FG2)
Boys (hetero)sexual development was seen as relatively unproblematic, evolving
on the one hand 'naturally', although on the other requiring the assistance of
pornography. ('I had a look at it [a pornographic magazine], then gave it back to
him and said don't bring that in the house again', reported one (Muslim) father
indulgently, FG9). One father wondered whether it was more difficult now for
boys to play with dresses and make-up as he recalled happening in his own
childhood. Whilst two mothers in another group happily described their sons'
refusal of gender conformity ('he started to wear make-up before his sister did!'),
the issue of whether non-normative gender play might be more tightly regulated
remains open to debate.
In answer to the question of how sons were learning to view women, one father
expressed surprise at the question ('you don't need to tell them, they know what
to think about women quickly enough!' FG9), another argued that this was
'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' (FG3). One mother
insisted that 'I've brought my boys up to respect women regardless of what
they're wearing' (FG5). There was some sense here that *their* boys were not the
problem. However, other mothers were more concerned about the influence of
sexualised images of women in boys' popular culture – including in computer
games, magazines such as *Nuts* and *Zoo* and their pull-out posters. Mothers
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 FG 4)

3.5 Through another's eyes: sluts, risk and double standards
Ultimately, boys' relationship to sexualised goods simply did not mean the same
as it would with girls. As one mother put it, 'Well you don't need to worry about a
wee boy dressing to look older and looking tarty or anything' (mother, FG7). By
contrast, certain kinds of dress for girls were seen as undesirable because they

might be looked at in a sexual way and attract attention that they lacked the maturity to deal with:

I don't want her to go to school flashing flesh and attracting people that maybe she couldn't deal with at that age (Mother, FG4)

I think bodies change faster than brains and… as a teenage [girl] you're probably slightly more mature than a boy is, physically you are very mature, but sometimes your brain can't cope with that maturity and how you are perceived by men, and I think that's where the difficulty comes from a girl's point of view because the attention that you may attract, you don't know how to handle because you've got no experience and although you are not a child, you're not an adult, you don't have…you've not been out in the world and had lots of experiences. (Mother, FG 3)

Behind these expressions of the need to protect girls lay the threat of sexual assault. Yet linking what girls wore to male violence implicitly condoned that violence by rendering it comprehensible and justifiable, as in the following mother's comment on her daughter's wearing of a short dress:

I wasn't so much perhaps concerned about her, it was more other people I was concerned with, as in boys and perhaps boys' perspective of her…. I'm not suggesting that they deserve anything if they're dressing like that but I think it does send out the wrong messages. (FG3)

In order to 'protect' their daughters, parents effectively had to look at their daughters through the eyes of another (a potential violator). As the mothers below suggest, particular clothing might implicitly 'give permission' for male behaviour (however much the qualifiers used in constructing the sentence shy away from the implications of this). But not only might girls be at fault as a result, but so would mothers whose reputation was also on the line:

- You wonder 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 [….]
- I think as well you would worry if you'd agreed to something, then it happened and it was *your fault as well* (mothers, FG5, our emphasis)

Not all parents accepted this logic. One father recounted how he had challenged colleagues in the (Catholic) school where he taught, for their readiness to describe female students as 'sluts' if they wore certain clothing. Some mothers challenged their son's use of the word 'slut', one finding out that her son 'didn't have a clue what it meant', and another pointing out to hers the double standard involved. However, other parents joined in the disapproval of 'inappropriate' dress:

Really high heels, tight short skirts, things that 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 or something. It just seems wrong. And so I suppose 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 (mother, FG3)

There's also a risk you look at someone, you see how they're dressed and you come to a conclusion about the type of person they are. …like girls going to school with blouses open to their navel or their skirts up to their bum, you think….From my point of view I'm thinking you're trying to attract my boy and I don't want my boy going out with a girl like you. I don't know what that girl is like. But I don't want my boy bombarded by those images either because he's not ready to be bombarded by those images in the school (mother FG 4)

The harsh gaze turned on these girls (who are also, of course, 'someone's daughter') could be contrasted with a mother's description of her own teenage daughters:

My husband and I smiled at the younger two because they looked like wee girls dressing up. They would have hated to have been told that and we didn't tell them that, but our daughter who was 21 or 22 looked like a woman, and even though they were all wearing the same clothes, you would never have mistaken the other two for being…they looked like wee girls dressed up, they could hardly walk in the heels that they had on. And it just made us smile rather affectionately rather than being worried. Now of course they were with us and we were going out for a meal, we might have felt slightly differently if we were going out to a nightclub… (Mother, FG4)

It is tempting to ask whether girls would be better served if more of this amused tolerance were extended to them, and more energy put into breaking the link between how girls dress and the violence they experience, than by the focus on sexualisation.

3.6 What is to be done? - Strategies in relation to sexualised goods

Whilst, as the previous sections indicate, our participants did have concerns about sexualised goods, the question of what could be done about them proved complicated. Parents discussed a number of strategies or tactics and each of these, we would argue, could be interpreted as holding lessons for policymakers. In some cases, for instance, parents described themselves as raising their child's awareness through discussion. This required them to have sufficient familiarity with a particular cultural form – whether music or fashion - for their views to carry much weight, and to listen non-judgmentally. They also recognised that it might not be a lasting solution:

So far when I talk to him about [music], he listens to my opinion, if I have one, and I can listen to what he has to say about it and just so that he's thinking about it and it's not just going in and not really being processed at all. I guess that's the only thing that I figure is if I can help him to discern and to figure out what his taste is and why he likes it or why he might not like it, if he pays attention to it, then maybe that's the best I can do (mother, FG3)

As children get older into adolescence they listen less and less and less to what their parents say I think and more to what other influences are around them, their friends and the media, and I think she might not really be that interested in what my opinion is of this (mother, FG1)

Some parents translated this into a possible policy outcome when they proposed forums in schools in which deliberation and debate could take place. This seemed to reflect in part their positive response to the focus groups themselves, although perhaps also a desire to see someone other than themselves take on the task:

I think it would be worthwhile taking products in and asking the children this sort of thing and having a discussion during that time that they've got just to maybe highlight, to make them stop and think about the messages that they're getting from products that they might want to buy (mother, FG4)

Some parents argued that encouraging other interests, especially physical hobbies like dance and rock climbing that required focus, good diet and sleep habits, and spending money on equipment rather than consumer items, had had

benefits in distracting children from too great a concern with the self, consumption or sex. This led some to argue that there needed to be 'other things for kids to do', which might include (on a larger scale) a range of meaningful occupations to which working class young people, in particular, might aspire. Parents were also very aware of the importance of 'not making an issue out of it' – 'if you bring the iron curtain down you'll just be creating huge problems for yourself'; 'there's no point in arguing, because she just digs her heels in'. (A parallel here would be parents' awareness of the attraction of the taboo, for example in relation to age restrictions on media: see Buckingham and Bragg, 2004). Instead they preferred more devious tactics – toys that went missing, clothes that shrank in the wash – as well as persuasion, and more invisible forms of 'shaping':

I just always tried to tell her that I think she suits lip gloss better, she looks really nice in that lip gloss rather than actually saying 'no you're not wearing this or that' and I think that went down OK (mother FG5)

There's some things I think you'd allow to happen and other things you would try your best to make sure it didn't happen (father FG3)

Most commonly, parents advocated what might be termed an 'inoculation' approach, also described as 'getting it out of [their] system', or 'letting them go with it a bit and do their thing'. This involved recognizing children's need to follow peer group norms, and choosing their battles selectively:

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 … then the things that you don't let them do you give them a good reason for not letting them do it, they'll accept it more (mother, FG7).

Others pointed to the need for children to 'learn these things for themselves' (mother FG4) rather than being told:

She's just one of these ones that she's going to have to make her own mistakes before she realizes (mother FG5).

Some found economic means of compromising between their values and their child's desires:

I don't want him to be different but I'm not going to endorse him having designer trousers so I give him the money that I would pay for a normal pair and he saves up for the rest. He seems happy with that thankfully [mother, FG2]

The only ground generally felt to justify a complete product veto was health – for example in the case of damage to posture from high heels, or to still-developing breasts from underwired bras. In such cases, parents argued that legislation should support them. However, the idea that sexualised goods could cause mental health problems, as claimed by some psychologists (see our literature review), was seen as unconvincing; and there was less discussion (or awareness) of the indirect risks to health of long term pharmaceutical use in cosmetics.

Such generally indirect approaches, combined with their commitments to democratic parenting and to promoting children's own capacity to make choices, meant that parents were often as wary as were young people about any notion that sexualised goods might be subject to regulation. Although some parents stated that they would like to see action – particularly around general corporate responsibility – they were aware of its potential pitfalls. There was much talk of the 'nanny state' and scepticism about actual implementation:

I'm a great believer in personal choice, so – no, if it's not in my face and it's not something that I'm having a real difficulty with bringing up my

children with, then well actually not. If somebody wants to buy their daughter that, then that's up to them (mother, FG3)

It's very difficult to achieve the balance of rules and regulations to address specific things for a small minority of the community potentially that doesn't then impact on the larger community through the law of unintended consequences (father, FG4)

If you bring a blanket ban on certain products you're going to offend half of society and not the other half. Everybody's got different standards and morals so how can you […] …but there again you can't trust everybody with the same level of responsibility… (mother, FG5)

Everybody's got different worlds, different standards. […] You can't just ban everything because you'd offend an awful lot of people […] . You've just got to try and educate parents to educate their kids to a certain level (mother, FG6)

As can be seen from these statements, 'sexualised' goods were seen as a problem for *other* people, a small minority (probably of 'irresponsible' parents). Moreover, since they were perceived as falling within the sphere of 'morals', and thus as a matter of personal, individual choice, state intervention seemed to lack the legitimacy it still currently has around health, for example. The first speaker (a mother of sons) hints at further issue, which is that since these goods are primarily aimed at girls, any intervention would also impact most heavily on them, and might end up reinforcing the attitudes it was designed to challenge. Ultimately, parents tended to conclude that it was their own responsibility to take action on sexualised products, if they so chose (which arguably means also taking responsibility for their children's decisions and desires). However, if, as we suggest in the following section, young people may suffer from the burden of 'responsibility' for their consumer choices, we could argue much the same of parents. Our data show how parents were simultaneously telling us much about how untenable such responsibility-taking was in practice. Peer pressure or general adolescent culture - not wanting their children to be left out or bullied, because they lacked what their friends had - often meant that parents permitted products that they personally disliked. They were susceptible to children's nagging, emotional blackmail, sheer determination and/or devious tactics (for example, as we mentioned above, persuading one parent to buy what another had forbidden, which was particularly easy where parents were living apart). Once children were old enough to earn some money of their own, they could spend it as they wished.

Further, the language of choice and responsibility assumes that alternatives are available. Yet the parents in our groups frequently discussed how 'sex' had become part of mainstream culture; how corporate strategies meant that both products and meanings were ubiquitous and thus unavoidable; and how even 'respectable' stores like M&S could not be relied on to support parents by not stocking 'mini-adult' goods. Parents also recounted how choices made by other parents or institutions limited their own. They might dislike 'pamper parties', but not want to stop their daughter attending one; resistance to Bratz dolls was undermined when they were received as a present or when other parents too had given in. Some primary schools held final year 'proms', encouraging 'adult' eveningwear, limo hire, and so on, which parents found hard to resist even if they wanted to. Secondary school policies on uniform, make-up and hygiene also shaped parents' abilities to set limits (although whilst some parents expressed satisfaction with uniforms, our evidence in the next section suggests that young people are very well able to subvert the most stringent requirements).

Another significant factor related to economic differences, and their accompanying cultural values. Thus, two single mothers argued that:
- We don't have a choice because the cheap clothes are like that. So unless you want to spend a lot of money, you have to buy what's there, you don't have the choice -
- We don't have the choice and we're not getting enough money -
- What I want my daughter to wear to school for skirts I can't get, so she needs to wear things that I don't really… (mothers, FG5)
Equally, it was apparent that 'alternative' values were fostered by the possession of appropriate material resources – a family holiday in Africa could underpin anticonsumerist
values, for example, or full-time homemaking (backed by an adequate male wage) could enable protectionist attitudes and practices in relation to children. When the Muslim participants in one group expressed confidence in the strength of their community's values to resist sexualisation, they referred to complex global, local and individual histories shaped by economic as well as religious forces. As we shall see in relation to the young people's observations, 'taste' in relation to sexualised goods was seen as an individual matter, yet in practice it was profoundly socially shaped, particularly by rejecting what was 'neddish' or 'chav' (and hence defined in terms of race and social class).

Thus it seemed that negotiating contemporary consumption-oriented 'sexualised' childhoods was in practice experienced more as an imperfect balance between giving consent and feeling compelled – succinctly formulated by one mother as 'I do know that I buy into what might not be my choice'. When parents described themselves as 'lucky' not to have encountered particular problems and wondered if all that could change in the near future, they may have wanted to avoid appearing self-satisfied in the context of a group discussion. But this also hinted at a different understanding of parenting itself as a process subject to 'moral luck' – one in which conscious intention plays only a relatively small part, alongside circumstance, local culture, life course, a host of other factors and influences lying far beyond one's control. All these make outcomes unpredictable, particularly when combined with your child's unique character - as one mother observed, 'If your kids are *the type that climb out the window*, then just being really strict is not ever going to work (mother FG2, our emphasis).

One of our participants suggested that being a grandparent had provided a kind of liberation from some of the anxieties of motherhood. She described how her four-year-old granddaughter would watch her put lipstick on before taking her to nursery and ask if she could have some as well – and how she felt able to agree to this even though she would never have done so with her own daughters. Perhaps a greater recognition of moral luck might similarly alleviate some of the more difficult burdens that the language of 'responsibility' imposes on parents in the debate about sexualised goods. Consumer products – as our grandmother's story shows - certainly come to figure in family narratives of intimacy, agency and desire, but to understand better how and why they do so, we need to make a more clear-sighted differentiation between products, their uses and their consequences.

4. YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS

In seeking to assess young people's views on these issues, we employed a range of open-ended, participatory approaches that have been used successfully by the team members in previous work. The methods were chosen specifically because of the sensitive nature of the topic and the difficulties of accessing feelings, experiences and understandings through more standard methods such as questionnaires or interviews. We felt it was particularly important to adopt an approach that would not be seen by the young people as personally intrusive or morally judgmental.

We worked with fifty-seven 12–14 year olds (39 girls and 18 boys) from a mix of socio-economic backgrounds in three schools across Scotland (referenced here as S1, S2 and S3).[1] All students were white, and a small number of immigrant children from Europe were part of the sample. We devised three small-group activities that were undertaken during English and Media Studies lessons. In each school we observed two activities, collected written materials from the activities and conducted two focus group interviews (with 4 to 6 students per group - 16 girls and 10 boys in total).[2]

In the first activity students were given a simulated brief by a 'client' and asked to brainstorm and then develop a design for a product (a doll to compete with Barbie and Bratz, a line of fashion clothes for children aged 10-15, a cosmetic product for teenagers and an advertisement in a teen magazine to promote a band). One example of a design is shown in Appendix 3. In the second activity students were asked to put together a 'shopping basket' for a 10-year-old. Students were given profiles of a 10-year-old boy and girl which were constructed to situate the 10-year-olds between the stages of 'childhood' and 'adolescence', particularly in preferences for sexualised items. Students chose items from a shopping booklet that contained a range of goods (from 'sexualised' to 'childish'). The most popular choices are shown in Appendix 3. In the third activity students discussed what they think of as 'sexy' or 'sexualised' products and then did a diamond ranking activity, in which they discussed nine statements and arranged them on a diamond-shaped continuum according to how strongly they agreed or disagreed with them. The items most frequently labeled 'sexy' or 'sexualised' and the aggregate opinions on the different statements are shown in Appendix 3.

Looking across the data from these activities as well as the data from the focus group interviews, a number of themes emerge which present a complex picture

[1] According to the HMIE reports in 2005 and 2006, in S1 and S2 (respectively), the percentage of students entitled to free school meals was above the national average and students' attendance was well below the national average. In 2005 in S3, the percentage of students entitled to free school meals was well below the national average and students' attendance was well above the national average.
[2] More information on methodology is provided in Appendix 1.

of young people's views of sexualised products aimed at children and young people. The themes which are discussed in turn here are 1) young people's presentation of themselves as knowledgeable and active consumers; 2) the connection between consumption activities and identity; and 3) the role of sexualised goods in young people's feelings of comfort and confidence. We conclude with a brief indication of the young people's views on the issue of regulating sexualised products.

4.1 Young people as active consumers
Across the data, particularly in the classroom activities, it was apparent that

these young people were keen to present themselves as active and knowledgeable consumers, and to reject statements that implied they were passive or ignorant. This position directly challenges notions of children and young people as passive victims, which (as we suggested in our literature review) tend to dominate the public debate. In the aggregate results of the diamond ranking activity, as a whole the participants *strongly agreed* with the statement: 'Adults make too much fuss about sexy products. Children and teenagers know they're just for fun and shouldn't be taken seriously.' Their strong agreement with this statement indicated that the participants saw themselves as using sexualised products in very particular ways (to have fun), rather than falling prey to risks, as implied in the concerns of adults who 'make too much fuss' about sexualised goods. Further, they *strongly disagreed* with the statement: 'Children should not be allowed to have sexy things, because they don't understand their real meaning (they just like the colours and pictures).' Again, their strong disagreement indicated the participants' objection to the notion that they are putting themselves at risk and that they are passive and ignorant recipients of sexual messages. (Later in this section, we look at the participants' understanding of contentious images, such as the Playboy bunny; and in section 4.3 we consider the role of 'fun' and play with products such as make up, hair gel and particular types of clothes as well as their perceptions of risk.)

Of course, the fact that young people may be keen to present themselves as wise consumers does not in itself mean that they are. However, when discussing their consumer choices, the participants were keen to display their detailed knowledge about marketing and age-specifications related to products. A range of marketing devices was mentioned by the participants in relation to agespecification, including age marking on products, ages of models in adverts, ages of shop assistants, size of mannequins, in-store music, sections of stores designated for different ages, and colours and fonts used in advertising. When discussing why they shopped in particular stores, participants stated:

It's like the writing is like bright green…It's got weird spelling and it's quite cool because when you walk in there the music is kind of for teenagers (boy, S3)

Some posters are of Postman Pat and stuff and you can tell are for younger children. Also they choose colours that are for teenagers. Also adults are in more adult adverts than they are in teenage adverts. (girl, S2)

In the classroom activity, of the 40 students who provided a written response to the question 'How do you know when something is being marketed for your agerange?', answers about age-specification devices (as described above) were common. Half of the participants mentioned colour amongst a range of other characteristics that indicated the target age of a product. Other characteristics included images and details (Winnie-the-Pooh and frills were considered as being for younger children), fabric (textures, patterns, and elements such as glitter were indicative age markers), style ('rebellious' or 'out-going' clothes were considered as being for teenagers), fashion and brands (trends are different for different ages) and the cut or fit of clothes (with teenage girls' clothing described as tighter and more revealing than younger girls' clothing). The following are typical responses:

I know it's for my age-range because it's not too flirty and not too girly. (girl, S3)

For someone younger then the clothes would be more girlier and it would be stuff like fairies and magic and bright colours; for someone a bit older

the clothes would be more adult-like and more rebellious. (girl, S1)
Similar responses were given when students were asked what factors impacted
on their choices when shopping, with colour again listed as one of the most
frequently considered aspects. Style, design and trendiness of products were
also frequently identified here. Less frequently, but also mentioned across the
groups and in the interviews, were factors such as prices and brands. Overall,
the participants indicated that there is no single factor that determines purchases,
as stated in this S3 girl's written response:
While shopping the things that would impact my choices are: threading,
colour/shade, does it go with other clothes which I got or like, patterns,
who's in the shop, who's selling the products.
The focus is on girls' clothing here, and in sections 4.2 and 4.3 we look at the
different ways in which these considerations impact on both girls and boys.
Although some boys' products are also age-specified and boys readily took part
in discussions about marketing techniques, boys also indicated that they often
shop in stores that are less age-specific, such as sports stores - although for both
boys and girls, sports stores were listed as favourite shops. For girls, therefore,
there are a greater number of products that are age-specific (and, as discussed
in sections 4.2 and 4.3, a greater number of ways in which to 'get it wrong').

In line with their view of themselves as active and knowledgeable consumers, the
participants argued strongly that they did not buy things simply because they are
trendy or because stores promote them. However, they did acknowledge that
peers influenced their purchases; and, as noted above, although they recognised
marketing techniques, this did not mean they would not purchase goods that are
marketed to them. Overall, the following statement came out in the middle of the
diamond ranking activity, indicating that the participants both agreed and
disagreed with it: 'Manufacturers and stores are irresponsible. They exploit
young people by making them think that they *need* to buy sexy things to be cool.'
The difficulty of completely agreeing or disagreeing with the statement is
indicative of a broader paradox: the participants are keen to assert that they are
active consumers (and hence not exploited), yet they also recognise they are not
free agents in a consumer market. As discussed in section 4.2, trends and peer
pressure are also strong determinants of the participants' purchases. Yet
importantly the participants indicated that they did not feel that sexualised
products were marketed to them, as this girl from S1 explained:
Researcher: In your opinion manufacturers and stores don't have any
influence about you buying thongs or…?
Participant: No, because they're not really advertised that much. Like
they don't really advertise lots of sexy clothes, like shops mostly just
advertise their trainers and not really underwear and like the tops and
trousers that we saw in the booklet, they don't really advertise stuff like
that, it's more dress like what everybody wears and that will make
people think that's quite a good shop, I think I'll go and look in there.
One of the clearest indications that young people are active consumers is their
propensity to 'read' particular products such as clothing and make-up in relation
to the contexts and ways in which they are worn. Because of the age-relatedness
of particular goods, the participants indicated that meaning shifts if different ages
wear the same product – and therefore, as one girl from S2 stated, 'something
that might be sexy to someone else might not be to others'. Importantly, the
participants said that the meaning of a particular item can change, denoting
'fashionable' at one location or point in time, but 'tarty' or excessively sexual in a

different context. Further, some items of clothing are acceptable in one context (e.g. at a school disco or on a beach) but not acceptable in others. Similarly, an item of clothing can change its meaning depending on how it is worn and what is worn with it (e.g. leggings can be 'tarty' if they are not worn with a long top). As one group (a mix of boys and girls) wrote in an additional 'strongly agree' statement in the diamond ranking activity:

People can buy and wear what they want as long as they wear it correctly.
(The surveillance of clothing and make-up, as implied in this statement, is discussed in section 4.2.)

In one school, a leopard skin pattern (which sometimes denotes 'sexual') was discussed as very trendy and labelled 'the new black', indicating that the fashionability of the pattern over-rode the sexual connotations (although of course it might have become fashionable because of those connotations). Similarly, in every school the Playboy bunny symbol was discussed as a symbol that carried particular sexual meanings, although it was argued that these were not the reasons why it had become fashionable with their age group. Repeatedly we heard that the participants were aware that the symbol was connected with Hugh Hefner, 'lassies in the mansion' and sexual exploits. Many of the participants were embarrassed to tell us about the sexual connotations of Playboy (one boy from S2 said 'there's something behind the Playboy that I'm not going to explain on record'), and many were critical of Playboy (having seen various references on television or in music videos to 'Playboys'). The group of girls in S1 said:

Participant 1: The lassies were flaunting and I think that's totally disrespectful.
Participant 2: They have no self-respect.

However, in line with their assertion that they are knowledgeable and active consumers, the young people insisted that the symbol did not mean those things to their peer group. Rather, the symbol was purely about fashion, 'a cute pink bunny'. As one girl from S1 described:

I don't think it was about what it meant, I think it was just because it was a fashion icon, everybody's getting it so you wanted to get it and all.

As such, the symbol was quickly going out of fashion during the course of our study, and the same girl from S1 said:

I want something more grown up rather than just like Playboy Bunnies. I just thought it was a bit childish.

Interestingly – and perhaps paradoxically – the symbol here is associated not with being too 'adult', but on the contrary with being 'childish'. As the symbol went out of fashion, the meaning of it changed, and at the time of the interviews, many of the participants had rejected the idea that it denoted fashion and redefined it as 'tacky', 'mingin', 'tarty', 'chavvy', and 'neddy' (all of which were derogatory terms). (In two cases, the Playboy bunny was reported as being popular with younger relatives. This was described by the participants as a form of aspirational consumption.)

Overall, then, the participants resisted the notion that they were passive victims of the marketing of sexualised goods; and this claim was to a large extent supported by their extensive knowledge of marketing techniques and the examples they provided of their active choices and careful readings of products.

However, they also acknowledged that they were not making choices freely. As explored in the next section, the participants recognised that they were

influenced to some degree by trends and by their peers; and yet, somewhat contradictorily, they argued that their purchases were also part of their expression of individuality.

4.2 Identities and consumption

The expression of individual identity was stressed as an important aspect of the participants' consumption activities. Participants felt they were already restricted in their choices of products at home and at school, and they objected to further infringements on their right to express themselves through purchases. However, the data also indicate a feeling that guidance is needed in order to learn how to 'read' products and to know how others might be 'reading' their consumer behaviour. Naturally none of the participants said they were making the wrong decisions themselves; however, they all mentioned others (unanimously identified as 'chavs' or 'neds'[3]) who were seen to be acting inappropriately for their age, both through their purchases and their behaviour.

The aggregate results of the diamond ranking activity indicate that the participants *strongly agreed* with the statement: 'Children and teenagers should have opportunities to make their own decisions and try things out, even if the things make them look sexy or older.' And they *disagreed* with the statement: 'It should be up to parents to say what their children are allowed to wear until they finish primary school.' However, the last statement was often qualified by indicating that parents should have a say in primary school aged children's purchases, but that children needed to have a say as well. Both of these statements indicate aspects of age and development in relation to consuming sexualised goods. When asked to write statements they strongly agreed with, the participants typically indicated an age when they wanted less parental intervention:

When you are over 14 you should be able to shop for yourself. (mixed group, S1)

We should be allowed to have our own life at the age of 13. (girls, S2)

Across the interviews, it was frequently asserted that children and teenagers are expected to take more responsibility as they get older, and they need to have

[3] 'Chav' and 'ned' are derogatory slang terms used to describe a stereotype of a particular youth subculture in the UK, associated with specific brands and styles of fashion, music, and attitudes. While some elements of this style derive from American hip-hop culture, the stereotype is often connected with the white working class and is associated with poor education, resistance to authority and racist attitudes

opportunities to make their own decisions as a preparation for taking on more responsibilities. In line with some of the statements made in the parent focus groups, the young people said that learning to make responsible decisions was part of becoming an independent teenager, and parents have a role in this learning. Many of the participants mentioned negotiations they had with their parents around products considered 'inappropriate', both to do with the purchase of products and with how they wear them (not wearing too much make-up or hair gel, moderating clothing by wearing layers or by sewing small stitches to change the cut). For the most part, these negotiations about sexualised clothing and cosmetic-type products concerned girls. The participants indicated that it was important to know the consequences of dressing in sexually provocative ways (perceived risks are discussed in section 4.3). Furthermore, the following discussion with girls in S1 indicates their belief that parents play an important role in developing their taste (knowing what 'looks horrible') and therefore the choices they make when they are older:

Participant 3 We agreed that parents should have a say in primary school

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
Participant 1 Because like we were saying about like neds and stuff like that, we see them and think they look horrible.
(The relation between socio-economic class, consumption and taste is discussed later in this section.)
As a whole the data indicate that although the young people resist restrictions being placed on their purchases and decisions about how to present themselves, they also insist on the importance of having some guidance so they are in a position to take on more responsibilities and develop more independence. These guidelines are seen to be needed for younger age groups rather than themselves (in this case under the age of 12, as the participants were aged 12-14) – a form of displacement onto younger children that is typical of children and young people's responses to questions about media regulation and the understanding of media messages (see Kelley et al., 1999). Thus, their product designs (for the first classroom activity) included target-age signs, and they mentioned that the advertisements for their (fictional) products would feature models of an appropriate target age. Further, one group of girls from S3 added the following statement under the *strongly agree* side of the diamond ranking activity: 'Teenagers should dress their age and have guidelines of age on clothes.' However, this is not to say that a majority of participants felt that age guidelines would necessarily be *effective* in regulating the purchase and wearing of 'sexualised goods' – on the contrary, when we asked if they would follow age guidelines on clothing, participants drew analogies to their consumption of movies and video games in which they largely ignore age-specifications.

As in the comments made by parents, entering high school was mentioned as a key time in young people's lives when they were expected to be more independent and at the same time came into contact with a much wider and older peer group. This became an important time for making decisions about personal appearance, as these girls in S2 discussed:
Participant 1: About 12 you start realising
Participant 2: You start in high school
Participant 3: And you see everyone wearing stuff like that
Participant 4: Like all the older people
Researcher: So you're at a school with older people and they're all wearing it so you start realising what?
Participant 4: That's nice
Participant 3: That's what you should be wearing
Participant 1: …being grown up
As in these girls' discussion, there were many instances when the participants mentioned the pressure from peers to make particular consumer choices in relation to their appearance. One girl in S1 mentioned buying thongs because her friends had them and it was considered both fashionable and a sign of growing older – although she said she actually did not wear thongs because she finds them uncomfortable. As discussed in section 4.3, discomfort can refer both to physical feelings and to emotional feelings of discomfort connected with wearing items that might be considered sexual. However, the participants considered peer pressure to be much greater than pressure from stores or manufacturers or through images of celebrities. The following statement appeared in the middle of the diamond ranking activity, indicating that overall they agreed and disagreed somewhat with these ideas: 'Celebrities, fashion and

the media are to blame for children wanting to buy sexy products and look older.'
This aligns with findings from research reported in Section 1, which suggest that young people are critical readers of media images and question the portrayal of idealised body images (Brown et al. 1993; Buckingham and Bragg, 2004; Kehily, 1999; Steele, 1999).

Participants insisted that it was not peers of the opposite sex whom they were trying to impress: rather, they wanted to look a certain way for their same-sex friends and peers. A girl from S1 described peer pressure in this way:

When I buy something I usually think I like that, but I'll usually think like will [my friend] like that or will my pals like that because if I buy it and then they'll think 'oh my god what is she wearing?', like bitch about me behind my back about what I'm wearing.

Boys also commented on these feelings – for example, these two boys in S1 observed:

Participant 1: It feels like pressure because you might want to kind of do what you want.
Participant 2: But if you do that you get slagged and stuff.

Although boys reported that they did feel pressure, they indicated that for them the choices were less complicated than for girls due to the limited range of possibilities in standard clothing attire (boys generally wear t-shirts and sweatshirts with tracksuit bottoms or jeans, although choice of t-shirts was seen as a key way of expressing individuality). The smaller range of choices for boys was also mentioned by parents and indicated in the retail survey.

Feelings about the surveillance of peers, as described by the participants above, were particularly apparent when they were discussing their choices of products and ways of presenting themselves. Previous research in this area suggests that clothing is a key area for children's 'identity work', through which they seek to conform to social norms and make claims about their own status or personality. The quality and the brand of clothing are key concerns in this respect, even for quite young children; and some parents and children perceive a strong element of 'peer pressure' here. Gender and age differences are particularly significant in this respect. In the UK study conducted by Boden et al. (2004), girls in particular expressed a desire for clothing that would 'age them up', while parents were concerned about dress that they regarded as inappropriately sexual and 'adult'. Although boys were generally less interested in fashion than girls, there was an exception in the case of branded sportswear, which was seen to represent an aspirational form of adult masculinity. Both for boys and girls, having the 'right stuff' – in the form of branded goods, with labels and logos clearly displayed – was critically important in terms of self-image and peer group status. The financial pressure that results from this is obviously likely to be greater for lowincome families (see also Croghan, 2006; Elliott and Leonard, 2004).

In this research, participants considered it risky to 'stand out' within their peer group through clothing, products or behaviour. Even trend-setters, therefore, risk being labelled 'show offs'. Across the interviews, the participants indicated the importance of treading a middle ground: caring about appearance but not wearing too much make-up, hair gel or aftershave and not having too much of a tan (particularly a fake tan); knowing what is trendy but not trying too hard to impress friends through purchases; wearing things that are neither too dull nor that stand out (items mentioned as standing out were white track suits, low-cut tops or short skirts); not buying things at the cheapest stores but not buying highpriced designer clothes either. Much of this middle ground is concerned with

what might be considered sexualised products; and those who get it wrong – those who go too far (wear too much make up, wear skirts too short, wear too much flashy gold jewellery) – are considered 'chavs' or 'neds'. Importantly, girls feel the surveillance of this middle ground more strongly than boys. There are many more ways of getting it 'wrong' for girls, and the surveillance is concerned more with the body (correct display of the figure, face and hair) than for boys (although body shape and hair styles are also scrutinised by boys). Furthermore, in different schools and peer groups, there were varying distinctions and gradations within this middle ground. For example, in one peer group, wearing foundation (make-up) was considered outside the middle ground, while in another it was acceptable as long as it was applied in particular ways. On two occasions in our focus groups, girls started critiquing other girls for their purchases (such large hoop earrings and Playboy bunny products), although when a girl in each group admitted to owning these products the other girls quickly qualified their statements, thus demonstrating their willingness to make local judgments and negotiations about this middle ground. Finally, in one group, a girl with bleached hair, dark eye make up and a facial piercing argued that she was a 'bimbo' but not a 'Barbie', a distinction that might not be immediately apparent or meaningful outside her peer group, but which to her signified a major difference between artificiality (Barbie) and a consciously constructed form of role play (needless to say, she contributed insightful comments to the discussion, and in many ways did not live up to the 'bimbo' stereotype).

In describing what they do in order to conform to their peer group norms in terms of their display of consumer goods, we might hypothesise that the participants are overtly making distinctions based on social class: it is 'chavs' who are buying into the sexualisation of children and young people. However, it is not clear that 'chavs' are simply white working class youth. Many of the participants came from what might be considered working class households (based on the professions of their parents), and it is possible that some participants in the study would have labelled other participants 'chavs' (according to the detailed descriptions they gave us). However, unsurprisingly, none of the participants said they or anyone they knew were chavs. Therefore, although the data indicate that young people see a connection between social class and the consumption of sexualised products, we need further research to understand how the discourse around 'chavs' might be operating to marginalise and segregate groups of young people (see Hayward and Yar, 2006). In particular the different 'readings' of potentially sexual products as 'tasteful' or 'slutty' implies a distinction based on socioeconomic class structures, and positions working class girls in particular as needing more regulation (see Egan and Hawkes, 2008a; Tyler, 2008).

In the discussions about peer pressure and 'chavs', it is clear that group identities are signalled by purchases – and this is about proclaiming membership of a particular group as well as differentiating oneself from others. In addition to 'chavs', Goths, rappers and tomboys were also mentioned as purchasing particular goods as a way of displaying their identities. The participants stressed the importance of being able to express their affiliation to particular groups and their knowledge of popular culture through their purchases (including what they do *not* purchase).

Yet although the participants all indicated pressure to conform and a desire to fit within a group, they also repeatedly mentioned the desire to develop an individual style, as this boy from S1 explained:

I think the shops kind of like stick to what's popular just now and for some

people mainstream stuff isn't what they want, they want something different to be different.

Participants said it was important for them to have a large range of products available for purchase and for them to purchase items independently so as to develop and express a personal style. As one boy in S2 stated: 'we don't want to be the same as everyone else. …You don't want to be another brick in the [wall] like everyone else'. However, they also said that fashion was an important factor in determining their purchases (and fashion was signalled by what their peers wear).

Overall, the important finding here is that young people describe normative behaviour which is both inclusive and exclusive – it is defined by themselves and their peers, and it is defined in relation to 'others' who are outside the norm. Normative behaviour is also connected with taste (what is considered 'tacky' and outside the norm) and knowledge of how to 'read' cultural products. According to our participants, this knowledge develops as children grow older, and is informed by peer culture as they enter wider social settings (such as high school), but it is also informed by adults providing 'correct' guidance. Further, the data indicate that girls are led to scrutinise each other's appearance more closely than are boys, partly as a way of defining and confirming their own taste and identity. Finally, the participants' opinions about sexualised products were expressed in ways that distinguished themselves from others (namely 'chavs') who were seen as less tasteful and more sexually provocative. We need further research to understand how socio-economic structures are working in young people's lives in relation to these practices.

4.3 Comfort, confidence and self-esteem

In the diamond ranking activity, the participants generally *disagreed* with this statement: 'Girls wear sexy clothes because they don't feel good about themselves and they want boys to like them.' There were two aspects of the statement which were discussed in the interviews – one was the idea that wearing particular products was connected with self-confidence, and the other was that girls dressed in particular ways in order to attract boys.

As described in section 4.2, for both boys and girls it was considered risky to wear things or display hair, make-up and accessories that were outside a middle ground (or peer norm). However, there was also a perceived need to develop a personal style, and this development of style requires self-confidence in order to go slightly against the norm (to stand out, but not stand out too much). This is seen as an important development for young people, because feelings of personal comfort are connected with wearing clothes that are 'suited to their personality'. Therefore, if individuals have low self-esteem and lack confidence, they might wear products that fit very closely within the peer norm – wearing products that do not present the risk of standing out in the crowd but also do not express an individual identity.

Thus, some participants reported that some girls might cover up their bodies and wear clothing that did not show their figures due to feelings of insecurity and poor body-image. One boy in S1 stated:

I would say there's two types of people, one would cover themselves up if they feel bad about themselves and one that would show themselves more because they want to get thought of better, in fact just making it worse.

As discussed earlier, this statement indicates a negative stance towards people who 'show themselves more', and interestingly this boy connects potentially

sexualised dress with lack of self-esteem. For girls, there was mention of the pressure to be slender and to show what one girl described as an 'hour-glass' figure. Further, one girl in the interviews reported going through a period of anorexia when she was in primary school. Other girls mentioned not wanting to show their bodies and therefore always wearing clothes that covered them up, although generally this seemed to align with their feelings that wearing revealing clothing was distasteful, rather than feelings of insecurity. Meanwhile, several boys referred to the pressure to have a 'six-pack' (which requires very little body fat and well-developed abdominal muscles). Products such as hair gel, aftershave and deodorant were repeatedly mentioned by boys, indicating a pressure to display themselves and care about their appearance in markedly different ways from girls. Boys also might feel insecure about their bodies and want to cover them up, but trends in boys' clothing generally make this entirely acceptable and highly normative (with the possible exception of the current fashion for low-slung trousers).

Wearing products that are considered 'sexy' (according to peer norms) was defined as uncomfortable in most contexts by the girls we interviewed, because of their desire to not stand out and to not 'show off' their bodies. The participants also said that wearing tight-fitting or revealing clothes was uncomfortable in physical ways, because it means they are not able to move freely and 'muck about', and they are constantly having to adjust clothes to make sure the clothes are covering their bodies. Furthermore, as evidenced in their detailed reading of how products are worn (for example, wearing fashionable items such as leggings, but wearing the correct style of top so that they are not too revealing), it is easy for girls to get it wrong (as indicated in the S1 boy's statement above). For boys, there are few options for accentuating the body through tight-fitting or revealing clothing, partly because sexual connotations are not associated with the image of the body in the same way as for girls, and partly because current trends for boys are almost entirely based around loose-fitting clothes. As one group in S2 stated: 'nothing's too sexy for a boy'. As mentioned above, this is not to say that boys do not feel pressure to present their bodies in particular ways. However, products that clearly signal 'sexy' or 'sexual' for boys are limited (t-shirts with sexual images, for example). Therefore, the participants said that it is behaviour more than products that are read as signals that a boy is interested in sex or that he is presenting himself in a sexual way.

Participants said that products such as clothes, makeup, hair products and aftershave could sometimes boost their self-esteem by making them feel confident about fitting within their peer group or because they feel they are expressing their individual style which is comfortable for them. A group of girls in S2 reported that wearing their own choice of clothes as opposed to school uniforms made them feel more able to be themselves and therefore more comfortable. This example is partly about hierarchical power relations between staff and students connected with mandatory wearing of school uniforms, but it also indicates their desire to express individuality. In line with this reasoning, participants repeatedly mentioned that people should not care what others think and should be confident to present their individual personalities through their clothing, make-up and accessories. This aligns with research with similar aged girls in the UK, where there was a strong rejection of the perceived power of the 'beauty myth', whilst at the same time an acknowledgement that there is pressure to act responsibly and have confidence to make individual choices (Willett, 2008).

As mentioned in section 4.2, participants rejected the notion that they dressed in particular ways in order to impress or attract members of the opposite sex (only

heterosexual attraction was mentioned), and boys in particular resisted the idea that they were impressed by girls who wear 'sexy' clothing or lots of make-up. As discussed, participants described the heavy surveillance that occurs amongst peer groups, and comparison with other members of same-sex peer groups was the most common reason for feeling low self-esteem. According to our participants, only those who have girl/boyfriends might be concerned about dressing for members of the opposite sex (dressing to impress or maintain interest), and for the most part these 12 -14 year olds did not present themselves as sexually active. Again, there appeared to be a strong association in their mind between stigmatised others ('chavs' or 'neds') and sexualised products; and further, particularly for girls, wearing sexualised products signalled the desire for sexual activity, as these girls in S1 described:

Participant 4: Because if people see you're out in that you're like oh I know what she's like.

Participant 1: Yeah and I know what she wants from people. She doesn't exactly want to have someone she can cuddle…

Again, it was *other* girls ('chavs' in particular) who were seen to be placing themselves at risk by dressing in sexualised ways. This aligns with the concerns discussed in Section 1 in research by Egan and Hawkes (2008a), although more research is needed in order to see how discourses around sexualisation are positioning working class girls and their consumption of particular goods. Participants expressed concern about sexualisation and risk particularly around paedophilia. In the diamond ranking activity, they *strongly agreed* with the statement: 'Sexy clothes and makeup put children and teenagers at risk, because sexy goods make them look older'. The main risk the participants mentioned was attracting older men who would either mistake the age of the wearer (and then proceed to make sexual advances) or would groom the wearer in order to have a sexual relationship. Girls in particular felt there was a risk of attracting older men through sexualised products, but they also mentioned feelings of being at risk generally because of their age and gender. Several girls shared stories about being harassed by older boys in sexual ways even though they were not wearing anything they considered remotely 'sexy' and were not acting provocatively in any way. (The girls who shared these incidents felt that they were able to handle these kinds of situations by ignoring the comments and by being 'sensible' about their behaviour, for example, not walking alone at night.) The other risk mentioned in relation to sexualised goods was risk to a person's reputation or the general risk of being misread. As in the data from parents, there was discussion about messages being sent out by certain kinds of dress, and particularly the risk of certain styles of dress being read in a sexual way. The young people across the interviews indicated that wearing certain styles of clothing in particular ways (i.e. styles defined within the peer group as sexually provocative) signalled sexual availability – in the words of several of the participants, 'they're asking for it'. The link between dress and sexual violence and the tendency to blame the victim in these young people's opinions is noticeable, as is the contrast with the idea (which they also expressed) that the meanings of clothes varies according to context. Here again, however, it was always *other* people who were seen to dress provocatively or to act on these readings, as this boy in S1 described:

Yeah, they've dressed up, showing themselves, the guys are maybe drunk or high or something think they are actually asking for it, dressed up like that.

Again, knowing how other people read such signs is seen as particularly

important for these young people, so that peers as well as adults do not misinterpret their interests, personalities and tastes. This is particularly true for girls, as discussed earlier, who have a range of sexualised products that are part of their display of fashionability.

However, as discussed in section 4.2, context is key to 'reading' products, and therefore at times it is considered acceptable to display products that might be considered 'sexual' in other contexts. For example, the participants mentioned wearing more revealing or 'fun' clothing to parties as well as changing their make-up, hair and accessories. They discussed these choices as important as a way to have fun, and they insisted that the point of parties was to enjoy themselves (rather than to meet people with whom they might develop a sexual relationship). Further, in several of the interviews the participants mentioned the role of 'playing at' being older as part of growing up, referring in large part to younger relatives or to themselves at a younger age. Girls playing with make-up or different hair styles and boys wearing hair gel in primary school were discussed as important experimental activities which acted as rehearsals for more public demonstrations as they got older (and entered secondary school). Boys discussed wearing too much hair gel in primary school, because they did not know how to wear it 'properly'; and girls mentioned trying out different makeup and hair styles in the privacy of their home before going out in public. There was a feeling that some of these activities involved the development of a skill and knowledge about 'how much is too much', but there was also a sense of developing comfort and confidence that came with practice. These data indicate that our participants view some kinds of practices as being about developing selfconfidence,

and this suggests that our participants are marking out the display of a healthy kind of sexuality, rather than seeing these as activities as somehow sexualising or objectifying.

Overall, this section has provided evidence that the consumption of sexualised goods is closely connected with feelings of comfort and confidence. On the one hand, participants indicate that particular trends for girls toward tight-fitting or revealing clothing or styles which require slender 'hour-glass' figures can create feelings of insecurity in relation to body shape. However, it was generally considered normative not to display too much of the body or to draw attention to oneself through hair, make-up and accessories, and therefore wearing products considered 'sexual' would be uncomfortable. Importantly, these findings relate to girls, rather than to boys for whom trends are towards loose-fitting clothing (although they also feel pressure to have a particular body shape), and in different schools and peer groups the 'norm' is negotiated differently. A second finding from this section is in relation to social class, with *others* (namely 'chavs' or 'neds') being accused of wearing sexually provocative goods to indicate their desire for sexual activity. Again this relates to girls more than boys; and although we interviewed working class participants, there was no evidence that working class teenagers are in fact displaying themselves in more sexually provocative ways. A third finding is in relation to the risk of appearing older through the use of sexualised products and generally having personal appearances misread. Here the risks ranged from paedophilia to general risks about reputation and misjudgements; and again these risks relate far more to girls than to boys. Finally, the participants discussed their consumption of particular goods when they were younger as a form of practice or rehearsal for their current activities. Here, private practices (trying on clothes and make-up) helped to develop the skills and confidence that would be required to 'get it right' when they entered

secondary school.

4.4. Views on regulation

When it came to discussing the potential regulation of sexualised goods, the young people's views echoed many of the views expressed in the parent focus groups. Young people were perhaps more outspoken about the possibility of having the government intervene in their purchases – suggesting that if the government regulated 'sexualised products' as a result of this research, they would receive hate mail from young people and also there would be an economic impact from the loss of tax revenue on products purchased by young people. The only regulation they considered perhaps necessary was the provision of age guidelines or labels on products; however, the guidelines were seen as necessary for unknowing adults rather than for children and young people (the adults they saw as needing guidance were those who bought 'chavvy' clothing for primary school aged children, and those adults 'over age 40' who bought clothes for themselves which were designed for young people).

Alongside these strongly opinionated stances, the participants demonstrated a more nuanced view of the difficulties of regulation. As discussed in Section 4.2, the young people indicated that the meaning of any product is dependent on a variety of factors, and therefore determining what is 'sexual' is problematic. Further, as with other products and forms of media which are overtly regulated (such as film and video), young people find ways around regulation, and in fact regulation might draw young people's attention to products which they might otherwise not notice, and might even make them appear more attractive because of their taboo status (the 'forbidden fruit' effect). Notably, in discussing the need for regulation, young people drew on ideas about individual responsibilities and choice, targeting parents of 'other' children and teenagers who were acting irresponsibly by not regulating their children's choices. As one girl from S1 explained:

…if a 10 year old is allowed to wear thongs and they want to, if they don't get them out of Asda they're going to get them out of somewhere else. So you can't really stop them if that's what their mom and dad say that they can wear.

Parents, however, are not always to blame. Responsibilities also lie with individuals, as this boy from S1 explained:

It depends what kind of person you are. If you're a responsible person you'll understand what you can have and what you can't have. If you're maybe not as responsible but just they don't want to be wearing stuff that looks terrible, they want what they want and they'll have it, they might go out and buy stuff and then hide it, wear it outside and stuff like that.

The role of parents, therefore, is to develop children's sense of responsibility and also their confidence to resist the pressure to wear styles that might not be suitable, as these girls in S2 described when asked for their recommendations for parents raising daughters:

Participant 1: Make her confident about herself and don't care what other people….

Participant 2: Not like a fighter but make sure she can stick up for herself.

Participant 3: Aye.

Researcher: And give her some other interests as well you're saying...

Generally: Aye.

Participant 1: Just let her be herself and not follow everybody else.

Again, one question which these data raise is how best to support parents and young people. Researchers have highlighted how an emphasis on individual choice can result in problematic distinctions between girls (and we should also add boys) who are seen to navigate choices successfully, as responsible 'citizenconsumers',
and those who are seen to lack the discipline to make good choices
(Harris, 2004; Willett, 2006). Discourses about responsibility and individual choice work to conceal other societal structures, such as social class, and implicitly operate to exclude some people and privilege others; and this is apparent in the tendency here to identify particular groups as being 'the problem' in terms of their purchasing and use of sexualized goods. Such individualizing arguments may also appear to absolve responsibility from other agencies, such as government or business. In our view, we should be wary about 'letting off' government and manufacturers simply because parents and young people see sexualised goods as a matter of individual responsibility and choice.

CONCLUSION

This research project set out to provide an indication of the range of 'sexualised' goods available on the children's market, and of the views of parents and children on this issue. It did not aim to provide definitive evidence, for example about the distribution of particular consumption practices or attitudes among different social groups; nor did it seek to offer any indication of the *effects* of particular goods or marketing practices on children, or on family life. Rather, as a small-scale qualitative study, it aimed to generate some in-depth insights into how people understand the meanings of 'sexualisation', how they interpret and engage with contemporary marketing practices, and how they deal with this issue in their everyday lives.

The key findings of the study are summarised in the Executive Summary, and do not need to be repeated at this point. We believe they have a range of implications for policy, both in terms of the potential regulation of marketing practices, and for the development of educational strategies. As we have implied, the attempt to control the production and distribution of sexualised goods, or at least to control children's access to them, is likely to be fraught with difficulties, not least in terms of how we define what is to be regulated in the first place. This is not to suggest that it should not be attempted, although it is to imply that such a process might well have costs (and counter-productive consequences) as well as benefits. Meanwhile, the broadly 'educational' approach of our fieldwork activities – both with parents and with children – points to some ways in which the discussion of such issues might itself become a valuable activity in schools, for example in the context of 'media literacy' initiatives or of Personal, Social and Health Education. Taking such proposals forward is of course beyond our brief here.

However, one of the more far-reaching questions that remains is to do with how the issue itself is framed and defined. As we have shown, the discussion of sexualised products targeted at children invokes a range of much broader assumptions. These include assumptions about children's knowledge and understanding, both of sexuality and of marketing; assumptions about what constitutes good or bad, effective or ineffective, parenting; assumptions about male and female sexuality, and the formation of gender and sexual identities; and assumptions about social class, and the relations between class, sexuality and taste. The assumptions we make in these respects also 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.

One aspect of this that particularly concerns us is the recurring construction of the problem as one that is focused on *girls and women* (in the latter case, both as mothers and as sexual beings in themselves). As we noted in our literature review, much of the debate in this area – and indeed much of the research – implicitly presents girls as victims of a process that is seen to be undermining their self-esteem and well-being. At the same time, there is kind of 'logic' that was explicitly voiced by some of the parents in our study: that the media and consumer culture are influencing girls to dress or behave in inappropriately sexualised ways, that they are unable to understand or resist this process, and that this in turn results in them becoming the victims of male violence – that they are, as some of our (male and female) respondents suggested, in some way seen to be 'asking for it'. This is a 'logic' that we strongly wish to refute. We do so

partly on the grounds that it overstates the influence of the media and consumer culture, and misconceives the nature of male violence, but also on the grounds that it ultimately appears to *blame the victim* – and behind her, the mother, who is the one primarily perceived as responsible for encouraging or permitting such 'sexualisation'. As with many other debates about media effects, there is a danger here that the framing of the issue may distract attention from other, more fundamental – and perhaps more intractable – social problems.

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