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Sexualising fashion? An introduction to the special theme issue

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Introduction

Children and children's relationship to commodity culture, fashion and media representations has become an area of interest in the humanities and social sciences. Growing focus has been placed on children who are conceptualised as the prototypical victims of the contemporary consumer and media culture. The underlying assumption is that we live in an increasingly commercial, sexual, sexualised and sexualising culture, where sexually explicit representations and themes infiltrate children's lives and where sexually explicit imagery surrounds children 'like wallpaper' (Bailey, 2011). The concerns materialise often in debates shaped by clothing. In them pieces of garments – skirts, shorts, blouses, underwear, you name it – or images of children wearing the above-mentioned garments – are more than simple components of an attire or simply images. Clothes and images become objects that shape and construct conceptions, interpretations, understandings of proper and, more often than not, improper childhood as gendered, sexualised, classed, ethnic etc. Both images and clothes are often the embodiments that trigger concern and carry or give rise to diverse affective reactions, especially in adults. Voicing these concerns and putting blame on images and garments and their entanglements with children's bodies has become an essential, if not expected, part of today's media content (e.g. Vänskä, 2017). At the heart of these debates lies the fear of endangering, corrupting and oversexualising childhood prematurely. Childhood thus seems incredibly fragile. It is constantly on the verge of becoming damaged. The relationship of childhood and sexuality is highly sensitive. When it comes to the intertwinement of clothes, garments and children's bodies, sexuality becomes an issue that easily gets to be recognised as an evil from which children need to be protected. Acts of protection often take the form of control and censorship: those clothes and images that become deemed

'harmful' are either banned or disavowed, or become the subject of debate and horror without any clear-cut results.

The debate about children's 'sexualisation' relates, according to many popular authors and public debaters to children being 'pressured' to grow up too fast. Sexualisation seems a force that has the ability to rip children away from their right to be children. It is a phenomenon that is embodied in so-called 'porno-chic' skimpy and revealing clothing and a pressure that forces the child to become a consumer too early an age (Durham 2009; Levin and Kilbourne 2009; Levine 2003, Orenstein 2011; Quart 2003; Rush and LaNauze 2006 a and b; Schor 2004). It especially manifests itself in embodiments of fashion, in (feminine) clothes and images with sexual overtones that lead to unhealthy body ideals and to the internalisation of a consumer-oriented subjectivity. This development is claimed as unique to the late-modern neo-liberalist culture in this rather oversimplified and even nostalgic view, where children's future as 'normal' and 'healthy' adults is in danger.

In other words, sexuality in the deviant form of 'sexualisation' is *cultured sexuality*, in the face of which even adults are said to be 'helpless'. The idea of children outside culture and developing into healthy adulthood and normal sexuality without being in contact with culture is a romantic and romanticising narrative. It is a paradox that while sexuality is defined as the core and the desired state of being in human existence, and while children are expected to become sexual, they are also expected not to be in touch with sexual cultures. As a result, sexuality is considered to be an inner feature, an essence, which comes forth step by step via developmental stages. The normal – and often normative – process of becoming sexual is built on the idea that childhood is a period with a clear beginning and end, during which the innermost sexuality is revealed. It defines the child as different from an adult; while adults are conceptualised as mature, independent, rational and able, children are incomplete, irrational and dependent. 'Sexualisation' is thus foregrounded by a belief that manifestations produced by (commercial) culture are capable of introducing sexuality to children in an unnatural way and intervene the natural development fundamentally. This special issue, in contrast, argues that the discourse of

‘sexualisation’ is ideologically charged and builds on a notion of childhood as white, heterosexual and middle-class. ‘Sexualisation’ is not an evil and uncontrolled force or a description of a fact, but a classic example of J. L. Austin’s (1990) speech act. ‘Sexualisation’ does not just describe reality, but it is a performative that actively constructs interpretations about the entanglement of childhood-culture-sexuality and related issues of gender, identity, relationships, appearance, social norms – and, eventually, normalcy.

Sexualisation – substantial features

A lot of ink has been spilled over discussing the dangers of the so-called ‘sexualisation’, and how it results from the entanglement of commerce, clothes and the child’s body. The blame is externalised to capitalism, media culture and the fashion industry – in other words, the debate collapses ‘sexualisation’ with ‘commercialism.’ The concept of ‘sexualisation’ has primarily been debated in the mainstream media and government reports in the UK, USA, and Australia. The UK has published two widely read and debated reports, Linda Papadopoulos’s *Sexualisation of Young People Review* (2010) – discussed in this special issue – and Reg Bailey’s *Letting Children be Children. Report of an Independent Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood* (2011). Likewise, Australia has also published two reports, both by Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze: *Corporate paedophilia: sexualisation of children in Australia* (2006a) and *Letting children be children: stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia* (2006b). In these reports the message can be summarised as follows: today’s culture has become more commercial and sexual, and sexualized representations have become an everyday occurrence. Advertisements in which children marked by sexuality are increasingly common; children – girls in particular – are dressed like adult models and children are pressured to adopt a ‘sexualised appearance’ and behaviour models – for example, to have sex before they are ready. The *Bailey Review* also suggests solutions to prevent this: placing magazines with sexual imagery out of children’s reach in shops, censorship of TV programmes, age restrictions on music videos, and easier installation of parental control software. The Australian reports propose, in turn, that the country’s government set up a specific authority for the protection of children, with the mandate to control media content,

with the aim of guaranteeing the opportunity for all children to grow up out of reach of sexualizing content. This kind of control of media content, with undertones of an Orwellian totalitarian state, is based on two assumptions. Firstly, that society used to be more innocent. And secondly, that the progression away from innocence has a self-evidently negative impact on the psyches and 'normal' development of children.

The argumentation in the official reports echoes debates in popular media and popular non-fiction books on the subject. The press loves to report on cases in which children are argued to be sexualised by brands, clothes or images, circulating sensationalist terminology such as 'paedo bikini', 'crop top' and 'child porn' to define the phenomenon at hand – and to arouse affective reactions. Many popular non-fiction books, mainly published in the USA, follow the same path. Peggy Orenstein's *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture* (2011), Gigi Durham's *The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls* (2009) and Diane E., Levin and Jean Kilbourne's *Too Sexy Too Soon? The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect* (2009) all claim that children – girls – are 'sexualised' by clothing that is too explicit or 'porn-chic' (a term coined by McNair 2002) and by (fashion) advertisements that not only position girls as the objects of the adult's sexualizing or even 'paedophilic gaze' (Mohr 2004), but also render them, through dress, make-up and pose as adults. These titles suggest a reduction of advertising containing sexualised imagery, the introduction of age ratings for example to music videos and programs for screening and blocking 'adult material' from the Internet, and forming all-encompassing offices for media regulation. The aim of these manoeuvres is argued to be children's protection.

Even though these titles have gained wide , they offer a narrow and gender-biased account of 'sexualisation.' They especially provide a stereotypical view of fashion and clothing: adult clothes on children, clothes that reveal the contours of the body, skimpy clothes, clothes of certain colours, are unproblematically defined as items that have, when enmeshed with the child's body, the capacity to 'sexualise' the child. In contrast scholars have argued that the discourses of childhood, clothes and sexuality are mutually constitutive and that they are based on a gender-, race-, and class-based

ideology (Egan and Hawkes 2010; Higonnet 1998; Kincaid 1998). Alongside the 'innocent child' is the 'sexualised victim child' who, in many ways, depends on the discourse of the innocent – acceptable – child. 'Sexualisation' turns out to be a value statement rather than a description of a fact. It defines the child in juxtaposition to preferred 'innocence,' as its 'Other.'

Alongside these rather simplistic understanding of sexualisation, there are a few important theoretical discussions of childhood and sexuality. Such contributions include Claudia Castañeda's monograph *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds* (2002) and Danielle R. Egan and Gail Hawkes's *Theorizing the Sexual Child in Modernity* (2010). Both of these have made ground-breaking contributions to understanding the troubled entanglement of childhood and sexuality. Castañeda's title investigates the construction of the child as both a natural and cultural body and analyses its imaginative appeal in the nineteenth-century developmental discourses and contemporary media coverage. Egan and Hawke's book asks, on the other hand, why the sexual child inflames such powerful and affective responses in the contemporary (Anglophone) west. Both of these titles reveal the extent to which the child's significance and value lie in its status as a 'malleable figure', as an incomplete and developing human being which makes it accessible to various uses (and abuses). The 'child' is an effective tool in engendering affective responses, because the protection of children runs through our 'cultural DNA'. In the contemporary commercial media landscape where affective responses are often a means of survival, the figure of the child proves often to be profitable. Focus of attention is guaranteed – which may also lead to financial profit, increase in sales etc. (see Vänskä 2017, 111–132).

Other titles that do not address childhood and sexuality merely as a problem in need of solving include James Kincaid's *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting* (1998), an early contribution suggesting that even the concept of 'innocent child' is an eroticised fetish. Patricia Holland's monograph *Picturing childhood: the myth of the child in popular imagery* (2004), in turn analyses representations of children and innocence in a variety of visual material, while Anne Higonnet's *Pictures of Innocence. The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (1998) offers an art historical analysis of

innocence and describes a shift from depictions of innocence to 'knowing childhood'. Kathryn Bond-Stockton's *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009) is also worth mentioning here: it is one of the only titles that turns an analytical gaze onto the child as always already sexual. Bond-Stockton observes that if a child is sexual from the start, it must be asked, what kind of sexuality are we talking about? This book is thus an important contribution in undoing the heteronormative ideology underlying childhood innocence. Joanne Faulkner's *The importance of being innocent: Why we worry about children* (2011) addresses debates about sexualisation in Australia, while the edited anthology by Emma Renold, Jessica Ringrose and R. Danielle Egan, *Children, Sexuality and Sexualization* (2015) offers a collection of mainly empirical case studies focusing on children's and young people's sexualities from a non-moralising position, bringing much needed nuance to a rather stale discussion.

Sexualising fashion? Contributions of the special issue

This special issue thus seeks to complicate, challenge and nuance the universalising idea of the 'sexualisation' of children and young people. The power of the figure of the child to generate the discourse of sexualisation, along with the political implications it brings, functions as the organising principle of this special issue, which draws together scholars in the fields of fashion studies, sociology and gender studies. Each contribution provides an account of the discourse of 'sexualisation,' and analyses its different usages and interpretations. Through a variety of case studies ranging from contemporary fashion advertising representing the 'Lolita' to medical discourses and media treatments of transgender youth, they show how discourse of 'sexualisation' is mobilised to different ends. This means that depending on the context, 'sexualisation' can either be seen as negative or as a positive – or even desired – state. A common feature is that the concept is always determined by a very narrow and static view of sex, gender, childhood and culture. The contributions go beyond this to open up space for a more multifaceted discourse in which sexuality is conceptualised as a social formation constructed by different textual, visual and material resources. The contributions focus on sexual styles in clothing and fashion advertising, on governmental reports, on social media debates as well as on the intertwining of medical and media discourses.

Though the entanglement of fashion, clothing and sexuality is a widely researched theme within fashion studies (e.g. Cole 2000; Edwards 1997; Entwistle 2000; Geczy and Karaminas 2013; McNeill 2018; Ribeiro 1986; Steele 1985, 1996; Wilson 1985), thus far focus has almost exclusively been on hetero- and homosexual adults and their identities and not on children. There are only a handful of contributions that address fashion and age (Twigg 2013) and fashion, children, and sexuality (Vänskä 2017; Paoletti 2012). In these accounts fashion and clothing is understood as a social technology which produces gendered and sexual positions – for both girls and boys. The fashion system participates in producing, playing out and circulating normative positions of gender and sexuality but it also offers possibilities to challenge norms. In other words, fashion is a field that reflects the cultural ambivalence of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, or ‘innocent’ and ‘sexualised’ childhood.

In his contribution “Living Dolls? The role of clothing and fashion in ‘sexualization,’” Tim Edwards analyses the escalating, and often media driven, concern with ‘sexualisation’ particularly of children’s and young women’s clothing. Edwards points out that although clothing often acts as a visible and affective part in the much wider discussions about ‘sexualisation,’ the meanings of clothes in these debates get lost or severely misunderstood. The article considers what might constitute ‘sexualised’ clothing or fashion – whether it simply means the baring of flesh, or clothing that connotes meanings of being ‘too adult’, or somehow ‘pornographic’. In addition, Edwards pays attention to fashion and dress as these have been defined in feminist debates as the cause of women’s oppression and sexualisation. Many feminists have found themselves caught between seeing fashion as oppressive and male-defined and expressive and empowering. Edwards suggests that what is at stake is the significance of fashion and dress itself as communicating status and personality. Drawing from established feminist and fashion theory, the article unpacks this connection. In addition, it also addresses the long history of fashion as display and how the gender difference that precedes later feminist resistance often goes unacknowledged while it still informs the contemporary debate. Edwards considers how understandings of fashion characterise and disrupt contemporary feminist politics of dress and how

recent attempts to reclaim 'sexualised' clothing and dressing as empowering for young women might also be questioned. Edwards suggests that a more nuanced understanding of fashion and dress is needed to develop a more informed and a more critical apprehension of the processes of 'sexualisation.'

In her article "Rewriting *Lolita* in fashion photography: Candy, consumption, and dying flowers," Morna Laing approaches the theme of 'sexualisation' from the perspective of fashion advertising representing the cultural trope of the 'Lolita', one of the iconic figures of sexual/sexualised femininity. Laing shows how popular imagery has, since Stanley Kubrick's 1962 eponymous film *Lolita*, based on Vladimir Nabokov's novel (1955), circulated a certain appearance that encapsulates the 'Lolita-look': the red lollipop and the heart-shaped sunglasses. These have become powerful symbols of the young and sexually available girl, while simultaneously departing significantly from the way Lolita, as a character, is represented in Nabokov's novel. Laing asks why the trope of Lolita has become so important to the fashion media. She traces the citation of the word 'Lolita' as well as the visual quotations of 'Lolita signifiers' in contemporary fashion photography and advertising. In so doing she problematises the myths that inform Lolita in the novel and its subsequent filmic adaptations, and considers how fashion representation such as Marc Jacobs' banned perfume advertising campaign *Oh, Lola!* from 2011 have appropriated and rewritten this figure. The article analyses fashion images that reference *Lolita* and contextualises these within broader discourses on girlhood and femininity. It also insightfully shows the role played by clothing in policing the boundary that separates girl-childhood from adult-womanhood.

Jessica Clark and Robbie Duschinsky turn a critical eye to the invisibility of boys in the discourse of 'sexualisation' in their article "Young masculinities, purity and danger: Disparities in framings of boys and girls in policy discourses of sexualisation." The authors shed light on reasons underlying the rather surprising absence of boys from academic and popular discourses of sexualisation and propose that the tendency towards a problematisation of girls and the invisibility of boys within policy and media discourses on 'sexualisation' is a systemic effect of contemporary (normative)

constructions of gender and sexual subjectivity. 'Sexualisation' has been positioned and defined by policy and media discourses as putting young girls at sexual and moral risk which also makes them more explicitly sexual than boys whose sexuality remains out of sight. The article also shows how until recently there has been much less debate and research about the entanglement of boys and their clothes. Whereas girls are still placed in the danger zone as victims of possible manipulation and sexualization, the clothing choices of boys are considered as expressions of their freedom of choice which also makes them less vulnerable to so-called 'sexualisation'. This gendering of concerns related to girls has sexual overtones, whereas with boys the concerns are mainly related to crime, drug and alcohol abuse as well as violence. Clark and Duschinsky focus on this double standard which paints girls and women as either pure or impure, natural or unnatural, and ignores boys and men. The authors also analyse one of the rare examples that addresses sexualisation of boys: the *Papadopoulos Review* (2010). Through a close reading of the report the authors show that even though it sets out to discuss the sexualisation of boys, it nevertheless ends up re-emphasising classed and gendered assumptions about 'sexualisation'.

'I am Lenni': Boys, sexualisation, and the dangerous colour pink" by Annamari Vänskä also analyses the discourse of boys and sexualisation. She shows how this discourse is underpinned by (blatant) homophobia. The article takes as its case study an open letter posted by a mother on (Finnish) Facebook in spring 2015. The letter was about her son, Lenni, explaining how adults constantly ridiculed him because of his interest in girly clothes, glitter, and the colour pink. The article asks why it is still a problem that a little boy likes pink and wants to wear a dress and why liking 'girly stuff' is considered detrimental for boys. It contextualises clothing and colours within the history of men's fashion, showing how the 'girly stuff' of skirts, dresses and pink historically derive from the masculine wardrobe. The article then traces the changes through which skirts, dresses and pink became feminised and signs of homosexuality. By addressing the history of fashion and sexuality, skirts and dresses, and the colour pink, the problem is revealed to be underpinned by heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity. This indicates that the discourse of 'sexualisation' is the product of normative views about sexuality and boyhood. It materialises in the entanglement of

bodies, clothes and colours, rendering certain clothing types and colours more 'sexualising' than others. When these stereotypes are associated with the 'wrong' gender and the 'wrong' body, interpretations of deviant sexuality come in handy as some sort of ready-made explanations that require no further thought. Through the case study, the article shows that clothes and colours are a sensitive topic especially to adults who seem to have either an ambivalent or negative attitude towards both. The aim to regulate what kind of clothes children can – or rather, should – wear feeds into and boosts the heteronormativity of childhood. At the same time the case study testifies to the power of social media in advocating a cause, in this case, defending a four-year old who only wanted to dress in pink and frilly dresses.

In the final contribution, "Theorizing the clothed body: U.S. transgirl fashion, transnormativity, and the medicine-media nexus in neoliberal times" Claudia Castañeda sheds light on figures that have up until now been invisible and marginalised: young transgender bodies and their regulation. In her insightful analysis, Castañeda documents the inclusion of transgender bodies in mainstream (media) culture as child and adult fashion models, actors, and other celebrities. She also makes links between media and the medical treatment of transgender bodies, showing how these discourses feed each other and build on developmental ideology. The article especially focuses on the concept of 'transnormativity;' i.e. on the alluring narratives of transition that highlight the role of medicine and fashion in configuring the embodied existence of transgender persons. Medical discourse is shown to be a powerful form of fashioning. The tools are not pins and needles – or surgical procedures – but the administration of hormone blockers in pre-adolescent children to postpone puberty. They provide children with the possibility of figuring out their desired gender identity and having the option of transitioning to their desired gender without having to undo the effects of puberty – menstruation, breast development, hair growth, changes in voice and body shape, etc. By excavating the narrative of transition underpinned by medical and fashion discourse through a case study of the American transgender celebrity Jazz Jennings, Castañeda explains how the narrative of transition legitimises transgender when the person conforms to the dominant narrative of white middle-class femininity. The same narrative delegitimises

transgender when the person presents gender variance or is otherwise a nonconforming trans person. Transnormativity is thus revealed to be a double-edged sword: while it promises inclusion, it does so at the price of conformity. Castañeda also pays close attention to the role of clothing in theorizing and manifesting transgender. By tracing Jazz Jennings' narrative of transition in the reality-TV series "*I am Jazz*", she explains how her transgender femininity follows the sequential forms of a 'developmental transnormativity' established by paediatric transgender medicine. Castañeda rightly points out that since Jennings is a celebrity, this interpretation of transgender is presented as an object of desire. 'Fashionable transgenering' establishes Jennings as a 'neoliberal success' which, in accordance with transnormativity, offers a very limited materialisation of what a young transgender person can look and be like.

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