

Children's sexualization on the Internet: kids' perceptions of digital images

*Sexualización infantil en Internet:
percepciones de las menores sobre imágenes digitales*

*A sexualização infantil na Internet:
A percepção das crianças sobre as imagens digitais*

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Abstract

Childhood are increasingly present in certain digital media, where commercial messages directly appeal to children's participation, enabling them to express their identity and establishing relations with their peers, who become opinion leaders. The aim of this exploratory qualitative research is to analyse a child's perception towards sexualized girls depicted in fashion advertising in a digital environment. The investigation conducts a qualitative methodology among Spanish girls between 8 and 11 years old corresponding to the target audience of fashion brands advertising that has been categorized in different levels as sexualizing. The results point out that girls generally reject the images of their peers and models whenever they are portrayed more sexualized because the style does not correspond to real life and does not seem chosen by the girls depicted. Furthermore, girls associate the combination of sexualizing contexts, postures and gestures with personality traits negatively considered -self-centred, defiant, rebel, sad, alone- and are afraid of the normalization among children of make-up and certain behaviours not keeping with their age. In light of the results, the study recommends an ethical reflection by advertisers that use an adult style transgressive and the study of images that depict boys.

Keywords: *Childhood; Advertising; Sexualization; Perception; Internet; Spain*

Resumen

Los niños están presentes cada vez más en determinados medios digitales, donde los mensajes comerciales apelan directamente a su participación, facilitando expresar su identidad y establecer relaciones con sus iguales, que se convierten en líderes de opinión. El objetivo de este estudio exploratorio inicial y pionero en el formato digital en España es conocer la percepción que tienen las niñas sobre otras niñas sexualizadas en la publicidad de moda y en Internet, y los valores que asocian a ellas. La metodología empleada ha sido un estudio exploratorio cualitativo a una muestra de niñas españolas entre 8 y 11 años que corresponde al público objetivo de marcas de moda cuya publicidad ha sido categorizada en distintos grados como sexualizante. Los resultados señalan que las niñas rechazan aquellas imágenes de las modelos cuando son representadas de una forma más sexualizada porque no se corresponde con la vida real y no parece un estilo elegido sino impuesto. Además, las

entrevistadas asocian la combinación de escenarios, posturas y gestos sexualizantes con rasgos de la personalidad que entienden como negativos –egoísta, desafiante, rebelde, aislada, triste-y, exponen el temor de que se normalice el uso de un tipo de ropa, maquillaje y comportamientos no acordes con su edad. A la luz de los resultados, se recomienda la reflexión ética de publicitarios que usan el estilo transgresor adulto en moda infantil y el estudio de imágenes de niños.

Palabras clave: *Infancia; Publicidad; Sexualización; Percepción; Internet; España*

Resumo

As crianças estão presentes cada vez mais em algum meios digitais, onde as mensagens comerciais apelam diretamente à sua participação, permitindo-lhes expressar a sua identidade e estabelecer relações com os seus pares, que se tornam líderes de opinião. O objetivo deste estudo exploratório inicial, pioneiro no formato digital em Espanha, é analisar a percepção que as raparigas têm de outras raparigas sexualizadas na publicidade de moda e na Internet, e os valores que lhes associam. A metodologia utilizada foi um estudo exploratório qualitativo de uma amostra de raparigas espanholas entre os 8 e os 11 anos de idade, correspondente ao público-alvo das marcas de moda cuja publicidade foi classificada, em diferentes graus, como sexualizada. Os resultados indicam que as raparigas rejeitam essas imagens de modelos quando são retratadas de uma forma mais sexualizada porque não corresponde à vida real e não parece ser um estilo escolhido, mas sim um estilo imposto. Além disso, associam a combinação de cenários, posturas e gestos sexuais a traços de personalidade que entendem como negativos - egoístas, desafiadores, rebeldes, isolados, tristes - e, expõem o medo da normalização do uso de um tipo de roupa, maquilhagem e comportamentos não condizentes com a sua idade. À luz dos resultados, recomenda-se a reflexão ética dos anunciantes que utilizam o estilo adulto transgressivo na moda infantil e o estudo das imagens das crianças.

Palavras chave: *Infância; Publicidad; Sexualização; Perceçã;, Internet; Espanha*

Translation by **Tridiom**

1. Introduction

This article begins by discussing the concept of child sexualisation, as well as children's internet consumption, before presenting a qualitative study carried out among girls under the age of 12, with the aim of finding out their perception of a range of images in which other girls show sexualising attributes based on accepted child sexualisation scales. It finishes with an analysis of the results obtained, taking into account the literature reviewed.

The presence of some children online through specific channels on social media has raised interest in the natural relationship that children seem to have with the digital world and the social responsibility of the media and advertisers that attract their attention as readers and consumers (Feijoo-Fernández, 2014).

Since the Internet became commonplace at the beginning of the 21st century, the role of children as cultural producers and identity builders has been highlighted, whether due to the opportunity to showcase their unique creative and self-representational potential in the public sphere, or due to an increasing awareness of their vulnerability (Livingstone, 2017).

An important fact to give this study some context is the amount of time that young people spend on the Internet. In the United States, children between the ages of eight and eighteen "spend approximately eleven hours a day using social media", including using multiple social networks at once (Daniels and Zurbriggen, 2016, p. 3). In Spain, although television "continues to be the most popular type of media, digital media is also part of the everyday lives of children aged between seven and ten years old and pre-adolescents aged between eleven and twelve years old, as they regularly use them to view their favourite content" (Contreras-Espinoza et al., 2015, p. 145). Specifically, their main interests are "TV series, films and entertainment programmes" (García-Jiménez et al., 2018) and the main activities they do are talking to family and friends, listening to music, watching video clips and playing online games (Garmendia et al., 2019).

More recently, the results of the EU Kids online survey (Smahel et al., 2020) show that the time dedicated to mobile phones has doubled in Spain. Children aged 12-16 spend on average 1 to 3 hours a day on the Internet and 80% do so daily. In terms of social networks, 38% use them daily and 66% weekly. This study reveals that Spanish children access the digital world with little knowledge of information and browsing online, which results in inappropriate interactions, as evidenced by the significant increase in those who feel they have been abused online and who do not know how to react to unwanted attention (29% of 9-12 year olds), in addition to finding it impossible to meet friendly people online (44% of them have never done so, compared to 21% in the European country with the next highest rate in this respect, Germany, and 2% in the country with the lowest rate). More boys than girls always or often find positive relationships in the 12-16 age range. In fact, in this older age range, 39% say they feel happy when they access sexual messages and up to 80% are happy to meet with people they met online. Half of them, mostly boys, even find it easier to express themselves and talk about things online instead of face-to-face most of the time. And most importantly, half also admit that their parents never or rarely talk to them or ask them what they do online. More girls than boys learn how to use the Internet safely from their teachers.

Children who receive advertising on new media could suffer from bad behaviour, health problems, conflicts with their parents and materialism (Kunkel and Castonguay, 2012). These phenomena are especially significant when pre-adolescent girls "have access to mobile phones and tablets without parental control" (Contreras-Espinosa et al., 2015, p. 155), bearing in mind that "information is impossible to control and privacy is dead at the expense of individuals' rights" (Hasinoff, 2015, p. 131).

The phenomenon of sexualisation has been criticised by some authors (Buckingham, 2011; Buckingham et al., 2014; Wagg and Pilcher, 2014; Tsaliki, 2016; Méndiz, 2018) who believe that sexualisation is not a children's concept - girls do not relate nudity to sexuality - and that more work is needed that focusses on identity rather than consumption, although this derives from and is connected to it. This perspective sees sexualisation as a social construct created by educational institutions as a result of anxiety, moral panic and a fear of popular culture. For

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these authors, the consequences of imposing the idea of sexuality on children, of gender stereotypes where men dominate and oppress women, and the impact on emotional and physical health, will impose subjective values (e.g. Modesty) adult categories (e.g. status) and would lead to the victimisation of children. Other authors who share this viewpoint suggest that sexual representations of children do not have a sexual connotation and claim that these representations could be more related to pleasure, glamour, aesthetic content and a source of individual satisfaction and could even have a therapeutic effect.

However, another viewpoint has concluded that "social media in general is perhaps one of the most interesting sexualizing forms of media due to its interactive and identity building potential" (Starr, 2015, p. 86). A study of the top 100 videos in the United States concludes that adolescents' lack of perception of hyper-sexualised women limits the development of their identity (Götz and Eckhardt, 2017). Sexualisation is particularly relevant in their case because "when children are imbued with adult sexuality, it is often imposed upon them rather than chosen by them" (APA, 2007). A study by Llovet, et al. (2018, p. 232) concludes that, although the factors and consequences of sexualisation are similar for women and girls, the effects on girls are more harmful because "they are at an early stage of emotional development, they have a strong need to adapt and integrate socially at that age and they find it difficult to adequately decode the messages and images they are exposed to uncontrollably".

Another study of 11-year-old girls from public state and private international schools on commercial and personal attributes in the virtual world concludes that a narrative that girls aspire to, is socially accepted, negotiated by consumer-oriented practices and mediated through technology is the self-projection of being sexy or acting with an adult femininity expressed by wearing short dresses, low-cut necklines, tank tops, black clothes, tight-fitting clothes and make-up (Tsaliki, 2016).

Children's influence on their parents' purchasing decisions is often a result of their use of social media. "One of the main roles of communication technologies is to bring traditional media content into the lives of young people" (Wright et al.,

2012, p. 276). At the same time, online activities provide visibility to traditional media and turn children into opinion leaders among their peers" (Marôpo et al., 2017, p. 70).

In Spain, digitalisation has also opened up new communication channels adapted to the language used by children on children's Internet radio stations between 2011 and 2016, which have helped with social integration, developing cognitive skills, defending their interests as child listeners and training them to be critical of media aspects and content. They also incorporate a section for parents as intermediary agents in this media literacy process (Barbeito and Perona, 2018).

In this context, we have not found any research in Spain on sexualisation that directly involves girls and there are very few globally (Bragg and Pilcher, 2014; Jongenelis et al., 2016; and Pacilli et al., 2016). Therefore, this study aims to investigate the way in which young Spanish girls perceive this phenomenon with respect to other sexualised girls and celebrities in fashion adverts online and on social media.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Objective and methodology

The overall aim of this study is to explore how pre-adolescent girls perceive the children's fashion and lifestyle images featuring sexualised girls and celebrities that are shared on the Internet. It is a pioneering digital research study in Spain.

The research design is based on a qualitative methodology (as recommended by Gould in 1994 for a study on sexualisation in advertising) carried out through four focus groups and five one-to-one interviews with a total of 21 girls aged between eight and eleven. Both the focus groups and the one-to-one interviews were conducted in the research subjects' homes, without the presence of their parents, other family members or acquaintances or other children who were not involved in the research.

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The decision to use a sample of girls for the study was based, on the one hand, on the fact that the phenomenon of child sexualisation occurs mainly with girls (APA, 2007) and, on the other hand, on the very nature of the images analysed, whose protagonists are all girls. This age group was chosen for the study because that is when girls are most aware of the effects of advertising due to their own characteristics and experience (Kunkel and Castonguay, 2012).

All the girls studied came from families with at least two children, who are middle or upper-middle class and who have a more traditional lifestyle. We ensured that the sample included girls from different types of schools (public schools, non-religious and religious private schools, non-religious and religious state-subsidised private schools). We also confirmed that the girls' parents control the digital content they consume. This family profile was chosen based on how easy it was to access the girls in the sample and on the belief that girls from this type of family would offer a more natural and spontaneous opinion of the images studied as they are less exposed to this type of content because they belong to families who control children's access to them.

In order to carry out this study, we obtained the express permission of the parents of each of the girls interviewed, who also reviewed all the images shown prior to the study. The guide used was adapted from that of Jongenelis et al. (2016) in their study on perceptions of sexualised girls in Australia. The sample was closed once it started to become saturated, i.e. when we detected that the same results were being obtained from new girls selected for the research.

2.2. Images analysed

The images were selected on the basis of four criteria: the first was that they should all be found on the Internet so that they can be categorised as images from the digital environment. The second was their relationship with the world of fashion and children's fashion brands. The third was for the selection to include two groups of images: (1) those linked to fashion and shared by girls on their

social media profiles (images 5 and 6) and, (2) those created by children's fashion brands and shared directly on their websites (images 1, 2, 3, 7, 8 and 9) or indirectly on social media profiles that specialise in children's fashion (image 4).

The fourth and final criterion was to select images that illustrate different degrees of sexualisation of the girls shown in them. To do so, the number of sexualising attributes in each image was taken into account, as well as the sexualising power and nature of these attributes based on the scales and studies of Hatton and Trautner (2011), Graff et al., (2013), Smolak et al., (2014) and Narros et al., (2018).

The 9 images selected for the qualitative study are shown below (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Images selected for the study. Source: own creation

To select the images for group (1) (linked to fashion and shared by girls on their social media profiles), Kristina Pimenova's Instagram profile was chosen (Table 1). Firstly, because Instagram is the best known, most highly-rated, most preferred and most used social network for sharing photographs among its users (IAB, 2016). Secondly, because Pimenova is a "commodified celebrity" with a public profile (Turner, 2014, p. 37) that is accessible to other children (Llovet et al., 2017) who rarely see images of child models in fashion magazines.

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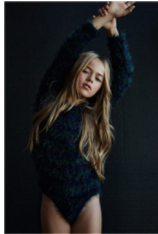

Sexualising attributes	 Image 5	 Image 6
Degree of sexualisation	High	Low
Sexy pose	Yes	No
Adult clothing	Yes	No
Adult accessory	No	Yes
Adult jewellery	No	Yes
Sexy expression	Yes	No
Make-up	Yes	Yes
Adult hairstyle	Yes	No
Hair with highlights	No	Yes
Tight-fitting clothes that enhance and show off the body	Yes	No
Clothes made of fabrics commonly used for adult clothing	Yes	No

Table 1: List of sexualising attributes in Pimenova's images selected from her Instagram profile. Source: Own creation.

To select the images for group (2) (shared by children's fashion brands on the Internet), we began by deciding which brands sexualise girls the most in their online adverts. Secondly, several images were chosen from these children's fashion brands that were shared via multiple types of Internet media and contained different sexualising attributes, taking into account the scales created by Hatton and Trautner (2011), Graff et al. (2013), Smolak et al. (2014), and Narros et al. (2018) (see Table 2).

Sexualising Attribute	 Image 1	 Image 2	 Image 3	 Image 4	 Image 7	 Image 8	 Image 9
Degree of sexualisation	Medium	Low	Medium High	Medium Low	Medium High	High	High
Sexy pose	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Sexy expression	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Adult clothing	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Visible underwear	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No
Shows off skin	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No
Adult accessory	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Adult fashion accessory	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Adult jewellery	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Face piercing	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Tattoo	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Adult tights	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Heels	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Leather jacket	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Adult expression	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Serious expression	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Staged expression	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No
Make-up	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Adult hairstyle	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hair with highlights	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Lingerie-style clothing	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Summer and winter clothing	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Punk style	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes

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Sexualising Attribute							
	Image 1	Image 2	Image 3	Image 4	Image 7	Image 8	Image 9
Degree of sexualisation	Medium	Low	Medium High	Medium Low	Medium High	High	High
Inappropriate setting	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 2: List of sexualising attributes in the rest of the images studied. Source: Own creation.

Finally, we should point out that the order in which the images were shown in all interviews and to all groups is illustrated in Figure 1. With this order, we aimed to prevent the first image from desensitising the interviewees to less sexualised images of girls.

3. Results

In general, regardless of the clothes and accessories shown in the photographs, that sometimes divides opinions (some like them a lot and others not at all, e.g. they have opposite opinions of the leather jacket in image 2), there are two sexualising attributes that stand out above the rest and that condition the girls' thoughts in every focus group and interview: 1) the serious or staged pose and expression and 2) the setting or context of the image the girl appears in.

With respect to the first attribute (pose and expression), all the girls agree in associating a serious expression or look and staged pose with different types of negative connotations linked to the character and personality of the model in the photograph. Although when the girls interviewed first see the images they focus on describing the physical appearance of the girls and models photographed (who they describe as "pretty or very pretty" - they like their hair, face, eyes, hairstyle and even the light or discrete make-up they are wearing), when they look at the expression and pose of the girl in the photograph (adult, serious, sexy or staged), their views change and drift towards a subjective description of elements that they associate with other qualities linked to the type of personality or way of living they think the girl in the image may have.

Consequently, in some cases (images 1, 3, 5 and 7) they link the girl's expression and pose to adjectives describing her as having a dominant and egocentric personality, using adjectives that describe her as "cocky", "stuck-up", "bitter", "bossy", "the popular kid", "the most famous", etc. They also often relate these attributes to behaviours such as "treating others badly", as they perceive the girl to be superior to the rest and able to act however she wants ("she is the queen and the others are her slaves"). In this sense, the girls interviewed believe that the girls or models shown are "posing", something that they see as very different from the more natural expressions and poses that boys tend to have at that age (they see posing as synonymous with cockiness). Furthermore, they associate the fact that the child and model shown is posing with "being forced to do something she doesn't want to do", in other words, perhaps someone is forcing her to adopt that pose or expression but she doesn't really want to do it.

In some cases, they associate these girls and models with being less intelligent ("they're usually stupid" or "they are more interested in themselves than their studies"). In all cases, the girls interviewed do not identify with the image of the model, nor would they "like to be like her or friends with her".

- "She is the popular girl in class and thinks she is the cool girl and tells everyone in school that she is a model and famous" (11-year-old)
- "I think she has a lot of friends who follow her because she is popular, but then she is nasty to them and treats them badly" (10-year-old girl)
- "The prettiest girls are the ones who have the most friends because they are popular..., but in the end they are silly and more worried about what they look like than others" (11-year-old).
- "When the teachers are watching she is nice... but when they are not watching she is nasty to people" (8-year-old).
- "She thinks she's better because they're taking photos of her and that's why she looks cocky and poses like that" (9-year-old).
- "Cocky girls are the worst, they pick on others and think they are prettier and smarter than everyone else" (9-year-old).
- "She probably thinks she is the queen and the one in charge" (11-year-old).

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On other occasions (such as images 2, 8 and 9), they link the sexualising expression and pose to a more rebellious and transgressive personality, leading them to refer to qualities or use adjectives like "pretentious", "evil", "naughty", "rude", "unfriendly", which on many occasions makes them think that she may be "lonely and must not have many friends".

In this case as well, the girls interviewed associate the abovementioned attributes with bad behaviour, although this time they are not linked to their impact on other people but on improper or socially inappropriate actions (to be specific, some of the respondents say that: "she looks like she is going to pull out a knife", "steal", "smoke", "spray graffiti", "meet up and get drunk outside"). In this case, none of the girls interviewed identify with the model in the image or would like to be like her or friends with her.

- "She looks like the devil, like she's angry. She's scary" (9-year-old).
- "She's bad, naughty. If she had brothers and sisters she would do something wrong and then blame them for it" (9-year-old).
- "Her face looks like something has gone wrong and she's going to do something very bad" (8-year-old).
- "I'm sure she's very messy and gets bad marks at school (10-year-old).
- "She gives me a bad feeling, she seems a bit evil... I don't like the way she looks" (9-year-old).

Finally, in images such as 4 and 6 with barely any sexualising attributes linked to serious expressions or staged poses (i.e. where the girls look less like adults), all the girls interviewed associate the model with a more natural personality that they identify with much more and that make them empathise with her more. Consequently, they use more positive adjectives to describe her, like "friendly", "nice", "likeable", "smart", "good", "quiet" or "normal". They also link these less sexualised girls and models to better social skills and intelligence ("she is probably a good student", "she probably gets very good grades", "she has lots of friends").

- "I would like to be like her" (8-year-old).
- "I think she is a good student and gets good marks" (9-year-old).
- "She seems nice, I'm sure she has lots of friends" (9-year-old).

With respect to the second sexualising attribute, the opinions of the girls interviewed are strongly influenced by the setting or the context of the photograph, meaning the negative qualities they identified previously are particularly reinforced.

Therefore, in the three images from the Dsquared2Kids advertising campaign (images 7, 8 and 9), context was a deciding factor in the opinions of the girls interviewed. Regardless of having pointed out other attributes more associated with style (such as the clothes, heels, adult tights, etc.) or the physical aspects of the model in the photograph (such as her hairstyle, make-up, nail varnish, etc.), the setting she is in causes them to completely reject the image and use new adjectives that are closely linked to the personality and character of the model, such as: "she is sad", "she is by herself" or "she is alone", "she has no family or friends".

In the abovementioned images, the girls do not understand why this context is used which they consider to be "inappropriate for a child" - they think that only girls over the age of 14 can go into a changing room by themselves and the context that the model appears in is more appropriate for the adult world). Some of the interviewees even specifically mention that they are worried about using these types of environments that they believe are dangerous and inhospitable for children (some of them described them as a prison, a dark alley, a dump where you throw things out, etc.).

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- “She must be the daughter of a thief” (8-year-old).
- “She is in a very bad neighbourhood and is probably going to do bad things” (9-year-old).
- “It looks like a prison, a prison for children... I expect no one wants to be her friend” (9-year-old).
- “Poor girl, her dad probably makes her go out like that but she doesn’t want to and she feels sad” (10-year-old).
- “She looks lonely, like she is an outsider who hates other people, doesn’t talk to anyone, is alone and has no friends” (11-year-old).
- “It looks like she is in an abandoned house or dark alley where people meet to do bad things” (8-year-old).
- “She’s in a dump, a dirty place where everything is abandoned and thrown away... why would anyone want to go there?” (9-year-old).
- “This girl has no friends and feels like an outsider” (8-year-old girl).

In the images with a more natural setting (such as images 1 and 4, which, even though a beach is not clearly visible, all the girls link the model to that context), the model and sexualising attributes are perceived less and they are described in a less negative or more accepted way by the interviewee (all the girls like the photo and the setting in which the model appears).

It is also interesting to note that, despite the fact that the two sexualising attributes mentioned above are the ones that are most relevant in the interviewees’ opinions (expression and context), generally speaking, in the images with a higher number of sexualising attributes, the girls perceive that the girls and models in the photograph are older than them. Therefore, they identify with them less as they consider them to be older and more adult and they are more critical of the styles as they do not consider them appropriate for their age:

- "Those clothes are ok for older children but not for children that age" (9-year-old).
- "She has put on her mum's heels" (10-year-old).
- "When I grow up I would dress like that but not now" (8-year-old).

Finally, it is worth highlighting that some of the girls interviewed show some concern about the objectification of the girls in the photographs (they see girls as objects with a passive attitude). One of the interviewees in particular refers explicitly to the sexist manipulation of certain images that place the model in a position of inferiority and subjugation compared to other children and adults.

In this sense, many of the girls interviewed indicate that they would like to see children's adverts in which the models have friendlier expressions (e.g. smiling) and in situations and contexts that are more normal for children (e.g. children playing with other children in familiar environments such as the park or at school), instead of appearing alone and isolated, like they are posing in more dangerous or unfamiliar settings.

4. Discussion

This pioneering study presents girls' perceptions of the type of images that show sexualised children advertising fashion trends on the Internet. Their comments highlight the need for children to play an active role in digital marketing.

With regard to the interviewees' interpretation of these images, instead of seeing the models as showing passive behaviour, it is clear that they perceive a behaviour that does not benefit them or children in general and that places them in the category of a vulnerable group.

Girls in Spain have a negative perception of the sexualisation of other girls, as was also found in the case of the adults studied by Díaz-Bustamante and Llovet

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(2017), as they rejected images that contain more sexualising attributes based on accepted scales (setting, pose and expression). Although the interviewees do not directly mention anything about the sexual attractiveness of the girls photographed with these attributes, they do indirectly reject it. Firstly, they express their lack of identification with the images containing these attributes. Secondly, the participants often associate negative personality traits with these images. This study shows, for the first time, that girls perceive images with more sexualising attributes more negatively and this can be linked to the work of Hatton and Trautner (2011) in that sexualisation, as perceived by adults, is linked to a combination of sexualising attributes.

In addition, girls believe that the settings in which models appear in digital fashion adverts and social media images are not appropriate for their age. These findings are consistent with the work of Buckingham (2011, p. 33) in that they highlight that “girls think they put themselves at risk if they appear older than they are”.

However, the girls in this study differentiate the use of sexualising elements in the context of digital fashion advertising from the use of them in real life. They continuously reference how much better it would be if adverts were different in relation to the poses and expressions made by the children in the ones they were shown. In particular, they say that in real life, girls do not go to the gym by themselves until they are 14 and that they prefer a more natural look to wearing make-up. These findings are in line with Walkerdine's (1997) proposal that sexualised femininity in popular culture would allow girls from lower social classes to escape from a difficult reality and help them on a psychological level. Unlike the girls observed by the author in the 1990s, in today's context of socialising online, and given that the girls observed here belong to a middle or upper-middle class family, this escapism could be due to other psychological motives, such as the need to be recognised by their peers.

Furthermore, the girls associate the sexualising attributes of the models in the images with negative personality traits such as: “stuck-up, bossy, domineering, self-centred, cool, rebellious, insolent, defiant, less intelligent”. These results are

in line with the findings of the study by Marôpo et al. (2017, p. 71) on the identity of Youtube girls, that was defined as "not spontaneous, narcissistic and with the sole aim of achieving public recognition and admiration". In this case, rather than expressing their personalities through videos and promotional activities on the Internet, girls create new identities and self-images based on consumer culture.

The participants identified the possibility that the sexualising appearance of the images shown would lead to a tendency to normalise the use of make-up as a way to attract boys. As images of peers may influence young people's body image more than the media (Trekels et al., 2018), there is a need to study whether the lack of perceived sexualisation (as a result of its normalisation), could limit their development. That is demonstrated by Götz (2017) in relation to a group of teenagers accessing music videos of sexualised women.

In this study, the girls also identified what they do not want for themselves (e.g. having to adopt a serious pose, be in a sordid and isolated setting, appear inferior to boys) concurring with APA's (2007) assertion that sexualisation is "often imposed upon them [children] rather than chosen by them".

The lack of identification with the images reported by the interviewees coincides with the findings of Daniels and Zurbruggen (2016, p. 2) that "using a sexualized profile photo on Facebook comes with relational costs for girls". The participants' opinions on the intentions of sexualised girls are similar to those of Gould (1997, p. 77), who asks whether "sex appeal is merely a marketing tool interchangeable with others such as humour or fear, or whether it is used with a more serious intention such as the idea of casual sex between young people".

In view of the results obtained, we second the recommendation of Jongenelis et al. (2017, p. 292) for a future line of research in schools with larger and more varied samples. In addition, cross-cultural comparisons of children's perceptions could benefit society. To this end, a methodology should be used that allows researchers to capture and analyse the gestures, expressions and emotions of children between 8 and 11 years of age. We agree on the "crucial importance of the extremely difficult task of deciding on the best methodologies to listen to and rep-

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resent children's voices" (Spotswood y Nairn, 2016, p. 220). Future lines of study should also include an analysis of images of sexualised children that have already been identified on social media pages for children's fashion.

In terms of recommendations for industry professionals, we find that some children's fashion brands such as Dsquared2Kids and Diesel, closely related to a transgressive adult style, are clearly rejected by the participants. Consequently, we would start from Gould's (1994, p. 78) call for "in-depth qualitative studies with marketing designers, account executives, and advertisers to explore their attitudes toward ethical beliefs" and confirm the need to reflect on the social responsibility of using this type of image. In this sense, the contribution of Barneito and Perona (2018) is interesting with regard to the positive experience of incorporating experts on children when configuring multimedia content suitable for a young audience.

Finally, it should be noted that the conclusions drawn from the results of this study are based on the research group chosen: girls from families with at least two children, who are middle or upper-middle class, who have a more traditional lifestyle and whose parents have control over their access to digital content shared online. We believe, without a doubt, that this work should be the starting point for further research into the perceptions of girls belonging to other types of families with respect to the phenomenon studied.

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Consent was obtained from the parents and children who were interviewed and participated in the focus groups.

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