

'Girl Power' doesn't empower: why it's time for an honest debate about the sexualisation of children in Ireland

Dr. Debbie Ging©, June 2007

This week's news about the break-up of an international paedophile ring revealed some facts that are literally too horrific to think about. Men videoing themselves raping their own children, some as young as five. Naturally enough, most people want to see these people put behind bars for life; others advocate more severe punishments, from chemical castration to public hanging.

The sense of anger and outrage that people feel is justified, and there is no doubt that tracking down and imprisoning the perpetrators will save many children from a fate arguably worse than death. It is not, however, going to solve the problem. Because sexualised images of children are not just the stuff of covert internet porn rings. They are all around us, and we have failed to be shocked by them.

High-heeled shoes and boots are available in Irish shoe shops for children aged 5 and upwards. T-shirts with 'porn star' written across the chest are widely available for the same age group. Major chain-stores sell g-string and bra sets for girls ranging from 5 – 10 years of age. Bratz dolls, now far exceeding sales of Barbie, combine pre-pubescent, wide-eyed innocence with the clothing and make-up of the prostitute or dominatrix. Bratz Babies, which wear make-up and earrings yet carry babies' milk bottles, represent an even more perturbing mix of adult sexuality and infancy.

Irish parents, however, would appear to have put up little resistance against the tide of gender-stereotyped and highly sexualised products and images that have recently flooded the children's media, toy and clothing industries. Little girls wearing bra tops, shaking their bootie and singing

suggestive lyrics doesn't seem to concern us, at least not sufficiently to call for a ban on advertising during children's programming or to reject the alleged inevitability of these developments. Increasingly, we are hearing reports of eight-year-old girls making their Holy Communion availing of highlights and fake tanning. Parents roll their eyes and say, "Girls will be girls".

Clothing for toddlers and children bearing the slogans 'Does my bum look big in this?' and - inspired by the Pussycat Dolls - 'Don't ya wish your Mommy was hot like mine?'



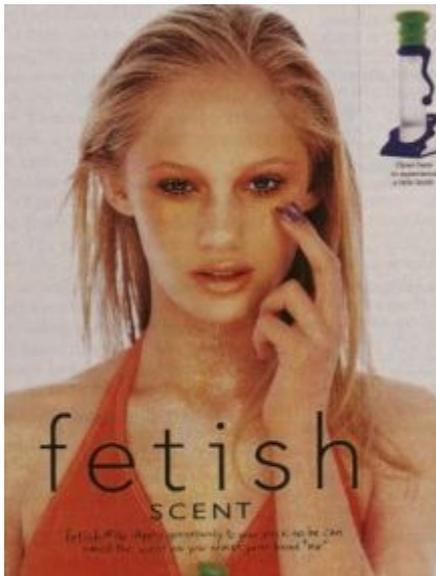
In media studies, one of the key debates revolves around the extent to which audiences are influenced by or resistant to media messages. This is especially prevalent when it comes to representations of gender, where we have witnessed a return to polarized and highly stereotypical images of men and women in mainstream media in the past ten years. At one end of the spectrum we have the revamped macho men of *Grand Theft Auto* and, at the other, MTV's endless bevy of pouting 'babes' in hotpants. Many argue that the new repackaged images of male machismo and female submissiveness are performative or ironic, and that nobody takes them seriously. Notwithstanding the complexities of this debate, its terms of reference simply do not make sense if we are talking about children, who are not familiar with the 'backstories' of feminism, postfeminism or lad

culture, and who surely cannot decode such complex manifestations of irony.

What Ariel Levy refers to as 'raunch culture' may be empowering and fun for some but to impose a miniature version of this on children raises serious questions about sexual rights and responsibilities. It sends out deeply contradictory messages to society generally but, most importantly, to children themselves. There is a confounding double-speak at work, whereby viewing paedophile images is a serious crime but using a paedophile aesthetic to sell make-up to children is not. Of course, there is an important distinction to be made between the production of images that involves the physical or emotional harming of children and that which does not. Nonetheless, research conducted in Canada (Steed, 1994) shows that as adult sex offenders "got older, they found their predilections reinforced by mainstream culture, movies and rock videos that glorify violent males who dominate younger, weaker sex objects". My point here, however, is not to argue for a direct causal link between the media's sexualisation of children and the incidence of paedophilia, since 1) there is - to date - inconclusive evidence to support this and 2) children have been sexually abused throughout history irrespective of how they were dressed.

Nevertheless, the media's normalization of preadolescent and teenage girls as sexually available cannot be helpful in terms of how people think about girls and how girls think about themselves. Thanks to the advances made by second-wave feminism and the efforts of various activists and children's rights groups, we are now finally beginning to see children develop a discourse with which to articulate their rights, to understand when sexual boundaries have been transgressed and to report and talk about abuse. It therefore seems more inappropriate than ever that the media should continue to treat and represent girls as passive, sexual objects. According to Debra Merskin (2004), "what is being procured, offered, and sold is a

point of view that supports an ideology that sexualizes girls and infantilizes women to control them and to legitimize that control." In other words, the more girls perceive themselves to be objects rather than subjects, whose role is to attract and please boys and men, the less empowered they will be to resist various forms of abuse and to feel that society (parents, the legal system, educators, the media) valorises and supports their resistance.



A Fetish perfume advertisement, printed in teen magazines in the late 1990s, carried the tagline 'Apply generously to your neck so he can smell the scent as you shake your head 'no'.



The Playboy range of stationery, which the company insists was not marketed at children, in spite of the fact that it was prominently displayed in Easons and Roches Stores in the back-to-school section.

Dolls from the Bratz range. The Baby Bratz wear bikini tops and lipstick, yet carry babies' bottles of milk.



For all its rhetoric about a society of free choice that engenders liberal, open debate, post Celtic Tiger Ireland has not yet succeeded in having an honest public discussion about this topic. The Irish news media has routinely constructed paedophiles as antisocial 'outsiders' or strangers, (homo)sexually-repressed priests or disturbed celebrities, while playing down or ignoring the fact that most child abuse takes place within the family. Statistics from the Rape Crisis Centre in Dublin show that in 2005, 19.6% of reported child sexual abuse cases were perpetrated by fathers, 16.2% by brothers, 26.8% by another male relative and 30.2% by another known person. Only 3.4% of cases were perpetrated by strangers.

That we know so little about what motivates adult men to abuse children, including their own, and that the relationship between media imagery and paedophile behaviour remains so unclear and under-researched is surely an indication of our unwillingness to confront this issue head on. The current proliferation of pornography generally would seem to indicate high levels of psychosexual under-development in our society. Although pornography is frequently associated with liberalism and liberation from a sexually-

repressed past, it seems more plausible that contemporary society's obsessive fetishization, commodification and trivialisation of sex is the flip-side or symptom of prudishness and sexual immaturity rather than the expression of developed, open and mature sexualities.

If the problem is ever to be tackled successfully, it is crucial to develop an understanding of why apparently 'normal' people abuse children, including their own children. It is important to stop pushing the problem beyond society and beyond comprehension by acknowledging that paedophilia is not restricted to small circles of antisocial sex monsters. It is imperative to acknowledge that raunch culture for the under-12s has become acceptable in the current mediascape and to start asking questions about how that is affecting general perceptions of childhood, how it is affecting paedophiles' perception of children and, perhaps most importantly, how it is affecting children's perceptions of their own identities, rights and sense of empowerment.

References

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