

CI 721 A McKee

**Submission to the National Classification Scheme
Review**

**Sexualisation of children: what the research
shows**

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Table of contents

Executive Summary	3
Recommendations.....	5
Introduction	7
Forms of evidence.....	7
Healthy sexual development	8
Issues raised with regard to sexualisation of children	11
The creation of child pornography.....	11
<i>i) literal child pornography.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>ii) metaphorical child pornography</i>	<i>14</i>
The harms to children from seeing sexualised materials.....	16
<i>i) children seeing pornography</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>ii) children seeing non-explicit sexualised material</i>	<i>17</i>
a) the effects of stereotyped images.....	17
b) eating disorders	18
c) depression.....	18
d) lowering the age of first sexual encounter.....	18
e) children and young people will dress more sluttily and this will encourage sexual abuse and rape.....	20
f) children are learning to value sexual achievement over academic achievement	21
The harms to children from adults seeing adult pornography	23
a) damage to young adults from seeing pornography	23
b) adults watching adult pornography leads to sexual abuse of children.....	25
c) worries that the consumption of adult pornography by adults leads to negative attitudes towards women.....	26
Conclusion: the importance of comprehensive age-appropriate sexuality education	27
References.....	29

Executive Summary

- In recent years much debate about censorship and classification in Australia has occurred under the rubric of 'sexualisation of children'.
- Children need comprehensive, age-appropriate information about sex at all ages as part of healthy sexual development.
- Anecdotal accounts from psychologists, youth workers, parents and so on are valuable but do not have the same status as methodologically rigorous academic research.
- No-one in public debates supports the production of child pornography and Australia already has in place a comprehensive nationwide legislative framework rendering such material illegal.
- Commercial child abuse materials are produced in developing countries and are facilitated by the failure of some governments to protect their children from abuse.
- Although we have seen attempts to extend the concept of 'sexualised images of children' to include adverts and similar images, community research shows the majority of Australians do not consider these to be sexualised representations.
- It is illegal in Australia to 'intentionally expose a child under the age of 16 years to an indecent object or film'
- Psychologists have identified a 'stereotype threat' whereby exposure to stereotyped images has a negative effect on certain abilities. However it is difficult to see how legislation could render all stereotypes illegal.
- Although it has been suggested that sexualised media can lead to eating disorders for young people, research on the etiology of anorexia nervosa confirms this is not the case.
- Although it has been suggested that sexualised media can lead to depression for young people, research on the etiology of depression confirms this is not the case.
- Although it has been suggested that sexualised media have lead to a lowering of the age of first sexual encounter research shows that, to the contrary, young people who are well-informed about sexuality are likely to delay the age of first intercourse.

- Although it has been suggested that if young people are more sexually aware this will encourage paedophiles, research shows that in fact paedophiles are more attracted to children who know little about sex.
- Although there are concerns that young people are learning to value physical appearance over academic achievement such concerns miss the fact that young people are exposed to a wide variety of role models in different areas, including parents, teachers, politicians, writers and sportspeople as well as celebrities.
- Although it has been suggested that viewing pornography leads young adults to take part in 'marginal' sexual practices the research cited for this claim shows correlation rather than causality; and this research tends to be heteronormative, favouring heterosexual monogamous sex as the ideal against which all young people should be judged.
- Although it has been claimed that the viewing of adult pornography by adults leads to the sexual abuse of children no research supports this claim.
- Although it has been shown in laboratory experiments that consuming pornography can lead to negative attitudes towards women, in real world studies it has been shown that this is not the case. However other demographic factors are correlated with negative attitudes towards women, including being older, being religious, completing a lower level of formal education and living outside of urban areas.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

That an evidence-based approach be taken to the relationship between classification and censorship systems in Australia and the inappropriate sexualisation of children, drawing on peer-reviewed academic research in the area.

Recommendation 2

That the national classification system must achieve the right balance between protecting children from inappropriate material on the one hand, while ensuring that they have access to comprehensive, age-appropriate information about sexuality on the other.

Recommendation 3

That it be recommended to ACARA that comprehensive age appropriate sexuality education addressing all fifteen domains of healthy sexual development (including 'Competence in mediated sexuality') be included in the National Curriculum.

Recommendation 4

That the Federal Government support an education campaign conducted to ensure that members of the public are aware that legislation exists which prevents the production or distribution of images of children in a sexual pose, or in a manner that is likely to cause offence to a reasonable adult, and informing them as to the processes by which to make a complaint should they see such material.

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Recommendation 5

That the Federal Government establish a 'one-stop shop' to which members of the public can make complaints about material which they find offensive in any medium; that body then to take responsibility for ensuring that complaints are passed on to the relevant authority.

Recommendation 6

That all bodies currently responsible for dealing with complaints about mediated material should undertake regular (at least biennial) community research to ensure that their decisions are in line with broad community attitudes.

Recommendation 7

That the Australian government reaffirm its commitment to protecting the rights of young people who identify as belonging to sexual minority groups and state that it rejects heteronormative approaches to policy.

Introduction

1.1 The Australian Law Reform Commission has been asked to review censorship and classification systems in Australia.

1.2 In recent years much debate around these topics in Australia and overseas has been conducted under the rubric of 'sexualisation of children' (see for example Bailey 2011; Legal and Constitutional Affairs Reference Committee 2011). Although this is not the only - or necessarily the most useful - way to conceptualise such matters (McKee 2010), nevertheless it has become the dominant public discourse on this matter.

1.3 I have considerable expertise on the issue of sexualised media and healthy sexual development, and have published extensively in these areas over many years (see for example McKee 2005, 2007a, 2007b; McKee, Albury and Lumby 2008). This submission specifically addresses the issue of sexualisation of children with regard to mediated culture.

Forms of evidence

2.1 In debates about sexualisation of children much of the evidence presented has taken the form of anecdotal accounts from clinical psychologists, youth workers, and so on, stating they personally have seen a greater increase in a variety of complaints among young people (depression, anorexia, etc). Although such stories are emotionally powerful they must be balanced with other forms of evidence before they become convincing as accounts of social change. By themselves such accounts suffer from:

sample bias: those young people who are involved with clinical psychologists or youth workers are by definition those who have problems

assumptions about causality: in particular, the mental health of young people has become much more visible as a public health issue in the last ten years. Issues that were previously swept under the carpet are now likely to be acknowledged and addressed (including eating disorders, depression and bullying). The fact that psychological services are now

billable under Medicare has massively increased the number of people seeking such services. Also, psychologists and youth workers, like everyone else, have access to a limited number of discourses to provide explanations for behaviours (Foucault 1989). The emergence of the 'child sexualisation' discourse in recent years has made this available to be drawn upon by psychologists, youth workers and others. We are now more aware of mental health problems in young populations. But we cannot assume that this means that there are more mental health problems. Nor can we assume that if there is an increase then the media are causing them.

2.2 With this in mind it is important to draw information from a number of sources including research that has been peer-reviewed by academic experts. This leads to a very different view of the issues debated under the rhetoric of 'child sexualisation'.

Recommendation 1

That an evidence-based approach be taken to the relationship between classification and censorship systems in Australia and the inappropriate sexualisation of children, drawing on peer-reviewed academic research in the area.

Healthy sexual development

3.1 Children need comprehensive, age-appropriate information about sex at all ages as part of healthy sexual development (Walsh 2011, 2). In order to address the issue of sexualisation of children it is important to draw a distinction between inappropriate sexualisation of children on the one hand and healthy sexual development on the other. Young people who are well-informed about sex and relationships are:

- more likely to delay the onset of sexual activity until they feel ready (Senderowitz and Kirby 2006)
- more likely to have safe sex (Goldman 2010)
- less likely to be sexually abused (Finkelhor 2007)

3.2 There are fifteen key domains of healthy sexual development – requirements, knowledge and skills that young people must develop in order to be able to engage in healthy sexual relationships as adults:

- i. Freedom from unwanted activity
- ii. An understanding of consent, and ethical conduct more generally
- iii. Education about biological aspects of sexual practice
- iv. An understanding of safety
- v. Relationship skills
- vi. Agency
- vii. Lifelong learning
- viii. Resilience
- ix. Open communication
- x. Sexual development should not be ‘aggressive, coercive or joyless’
- xi. Self-acceptance
- xii. Awareness and acceptance that sex can be pleasurable
- xiii. Understanding of parental and societal values
- xiv. Awareness of public/private boundaries
- xv. Competence in mediated sexuality (McKee et al. 2010)

3.3 Healthy sexual development requires that parents, schools and wider culture work together in order to provide young people with these capacities and information. Unfortunately much public debate in this area has confused childhood ‘innocence’ with childhood ‘ignorance’. This is not the same thing. Childhood innocence should be understood as ‘freedom from responsibilities’ rather than ‘freedom from information’ (McKee in press). Young people may indeed want various kinds of information at different points in their development – including information about their bodies, relationships, procreation and sexual matters. This is not a problem (Walsh 2011, 6). It does not destroy their childhood but is in fact a natural and healthy part of it. But they should not be required to take on responsibility for managing their own lives

and welfare until they choose to do so. Attempts to keep young people ignorant about their sexual development ‘profoundly endanger children’ (Goldman 2010, 421), leaving them more open to sexual abuse, and less able to be assertive in their sexual interactions (including in the use of contraception) (Finkelhor 2007; Goldman 2010).

3.4 A classification system must achieve the right balance between protecting children from inappropriate material and ensuring that they have access to comprehensive, age-appropriate information about sexuality. This is the task facing the Australian Law Reform Commission.

Recommendation 2

That the national classification system must achieve the right balance between protecting children from inappropriate material on the one hand, while ensuring that they have access to comprehensive, age-appropriate information about sexuality on the other.

3.5 A key element of this process is outside the remit of this review, but nevertheless is worth emphasizing: children must receive information about sexuality from a range of sources including their parents and formal schooling as well as the media. In order to properly engage with the information about sexuality in the media it is vital that young people have comprehensive age-appropriate sexuality education. Although this is not within the remit of the ALRC it is an important part of the process of consuming media and has implications for the audiences of classified materials.

Recommendation 3

That it be recommended to ACARA that comprehensive age appropriate sexuality education addressing all fifteen domains of healthy sexual development (including ‘Competence in mediated sexuality’) be included in the National Curriculum.

Issues raised with regard to sexualisation of children

4.1 There exists substantial confusion in public debate about the current status of research into the effects on children from exposure to information about sex. It is sometimes claimed that research has proved various harmful effects for young people from exposure to mediated information about sexuality (see for example Legal and Constitutional Affairs Reference Committee 2011). Unfortunately the situation is not quite so simple. Although there do exist some pieces of research which make such claims, there exists more research which contradicts this position, and points us towards other causes of harm in young people. This is discussed in detail below.

4.2 Claims of harm are made under three broad categories (although there is confusion between these areas in public debates – which sometimes appears deliberate in order to gain maximum emotional reaction):

- the creation of sexual images of children
- the harms to children from seeing sexualised materials
- the harms to children from adults seeing adult pornography

The evidence in relation to all three of these categories is presented below.

The creation of child pornography

5.1 The first broad category of issues brought under the rubric of ‘sexualisation of children’ is the production of child pornography.

5.2 The image of child pornography is often used to shut down arguments about censorship. For example, in their submission to the Senate’s Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee Review of the National Classification Scheme, Melinda Tankard Reist’s Collective Shout wrote that:

Those who oppose filtering [of the Internet] on the grounds of free speech, civil liberties or an alleged right of adults to see anything they want are best described as sexual assault or child porn libertarians rather than ‘civil’ libertarians (quoted in Legal and Constitutional Affairs Reference Committee 2011, 108)

5.3 In such rhetoric the implication is that there is a close relationship between child abuse materials (the preferred term used by Australian police) and other areas of sexualised culture. This is not the case. In no report, submission or public debate about sexualised culture have I seen anyone defend child abuse images. Neither have I seen any evidence that there is a link between the production of child pornography and, for example, adverts for jeans, music videos, or even mainstream adult pornography (to pick some of the areas that have been collapsed into child pornography in public debates).

i) literal child pornography

5.4 There is agreement by every contributor to public debate in Australia that child abuse materials are unconscionable and must be stopped. There exists a comprehensive, nationwide legislative framework which renders illegal the production and circulation of child abuse images.

5.5 Under the Federal Criminal Code Act 1995, it is illegal to use a carriage service (including the Internet) to distribute or access (s474.19):

material that depicts a person, or a representation of a person, who is, or appears to be, under 18 years of age, and who ... is engaged in, or appears to be engaged in, a sexual pose, or sexual activity (s472.1).

5.6 Under the Victorian Crimes Act 1958, it is illegal to produce (s68) or possess (s70):

a film, photograph, publication or computer game that describes or depicts a person who is, or appears to be, a minor engaging in sexual activity or depicted in an indecent sexual manner or context (s67A).

5.7 Under the New South Wales Crimes Act 1900, it is illegal to:

produce material that depicts or describes, in a manner that would in all the circumstances cause offence to reasonable [persons](#), a [person](#) under (or apparently under) the age of 16 years ... engaged in sexual activity, or ... in a sexual context (s91H).

5.8 Under the Western Australian Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Enforcement Act 1996, it is illegal to produce, distribute or possess (s60):

an article that describes or depicts, in a manner that is likely to cause offence to a reasonable adult, a person who is, or who looks like, a child under 16 years of age (whether the person is engaged in sexual activity or not) (s3).

5.9 Under the Queensland Classification of Publications Act 1991, it is illegal to possess (s13), produce (s17) or distribute in any way (s12, 15, 16) any:

photograph or any other image or material (however produced or reproduced) that ... depicts or describes in pictorial or other form a person who is, or who looks like, a child under 16 years (whether the person is engaged in sexual activity or not) in a way that is likely to cause offence to a reasonable adult person (s3).

5.10 Under the South Australian Criminal Law Consolidation Act (1935), it is illegal to produce, disseminate (s63) or possess (s63A): 'Material ... that ... describes or depicts a child engaging in sexual activity' (s62).

5.11 Under the Tasmanian Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Enforcement Act 1995, it is illegal to produce (s72), distribute (s73A) or possess (s74):

material that describes or depicts, in a way that a reasonable person would regard as being, in all the circumstances, offensive, a person who is or who appears to be under the age of 18 years ... engaged in sexual activity ... or in a sexual context (s71).

5.12 Under the Australian Capital Territory Crimes Act 1900 it is illegal to produce images of a child 'engaged in an activity of a sexual nature' (s64).

5.13 Under the Northern Territory Criminal Code Act it is illegal to produce:

material that depicts, describes or represents, in a manner that is likely to cause offence to a reasonable adult, a person who is a child or who appears

to be a child... engaging in sexual activity ... or in a sexual, offensive or demeaning context (s125A).

5.14 Most child abuse materials are produced in developing countries. According to John Rouse, the former head of Taskforce Argos (a Queensland state policy body charged with investigating sexual crimes against children), in Australia 'there is no evidence of commercial production to date' (McKee, Albury and Lumby 2008, 151). Child abuse materials are not generally available on websites: they are 'exceedingly difficult to find' (Jenkins, quoted in McKee, Albury and Lumby 2008, 153). They tend to be traded on 'entirely different Internet technolog[ies]' such as Usenet newsgroups, peer-to-peer hosted chatrooms and filesharing networks (Graham 2009, 38). The Internet has actually made it easier to catch distributors and consumers of child pornography (Crooks 2004).

5.15 In Australia child abuse materials tend to be produced within family or care networks for distribution within private communities (McKee, Albury and Lumby 2008). Special task forces have been established by the Australian police to deal with these cases, with ongoing success (Ralston and Howden 2011).

5.16 With regard to the commercial production of child abuse materials in developing countries, according to Detective Superintendent Kim McKay, the real problem is 'the failure of some governments in developing and poorer countries to protect children from abuse' (McKee, Albury and Lumby 2008, 153). The best approaches are diplomatic and economic, working with those governments to encourage respect for human rights, and to put in places policies to encourage economic growth.

5.17 The existing legislative framework in Australia already makes clear that child abuse materials are unacceptable and illegal.

ii) metaphorical child pornography

5.18 Public debates in this area have also seen a rhetorical move which attempts to broaden the concept of 'child pornography' to include non-sexual images of children which, it is claimed, are still 'sexualised'. The most visible example of this tendency is the Australia Institute Report *Corporate Paedophilia:*

sexualisation of children in Australia (Rush and La Nauze 2006). This report examined a number of images of children in adverts from sources including Myer catalogues and *Total Girl* magazine. The authors claimed to see sexual content in these images: but their arguments were undermined by their paradigm, which saw any piece of clothing which resembled anything that might be worn as an adult as automatically sexualizing, including:

... bolero cross-over tops and low necklines, both designed to emphasise the breasts of adult women; 'crop tops' which draw attention to the waist and navel area; dangling jewellery from necks, ears or wrists, dangling belts from the hips or waist, and rings on the fingers, again designed to attract attention to sexually differentiated features of adult women, and some styles of dress or skirt, most particularly very short skirts, and dresses held up by thin straps. For boys, examples include suit jackets designed to emphasise the shoulders of adult men ... (Rush and La Nauze 2006, 7)

5.19 An argument claiming that any young man wearing a suit or any girl wearing a belt is sexualised tends to run well ahead of general community concerns in Australia.

5.20 Similarly, complaints have been made to the Advertising Standards Bureau about an Oreos advert that shows two eight year old boys talking about having a girlfriend as being 'sexualised' (Bruce 2010, 4). Once again, this is well ahead of general community concerns. Community research for the Advertising Standards Bureau has showed that the decisions of the Advertising Standard's Board are in line with general community views (Bruce 2010). The majority of respondents agreed with Advertising Standards Board decisions about adverts in thirteen of fifteen cases. In one case where a complaint was dismissed 55% of people thought it should have been upheld; and in one case where a complaint was upheld 55% of people thought it should have been dismissed (Bruce 2010, 4). There is no systematic disconnect between current advertising standards and community standards in the area of the sexualisation of children.

5.21 Given that Australia's child pornography laws cover not only explicitly sexual material, but also the production or circulation of any images of children

in a 'sexual pose', or 'in a manner that is likely to cause offence to a reasonable adult ... (whether the person is engaged in sexual activity or not)', it seems reasonable to point out that the point at which representations of children breach community standards and become offensive is also the point at which they break the law and become open to prosecution. Once again, the current system of legislation is adequate.

5.22 The main harm that has been proposed from such images is that they will encourage paedophiles to molest children, as they will feel that society believes that it is acceptable to do so. This argument is discussed below. There is also a separate issue about whether these images present stereotyped gender roles. This is discussed below.

Recommendation 4

That the Federal Government support an education campaign conducted to ensure that members of the public are aware that legislation exists which prevents the production or distribution of images of children in a sexual pose, or in a manner that is likely to cause offence to a reasonable adult, and informing them as to the processes by which to make a complaint should they see such material.

The harms to children from seeing sexualised materials

6.1 Debates about child sexualisation have also raised the possibility of a number of harms that might emerge from children or young people seeing sexualised materials. These fall into two broad categories: children or young people seeing pornography, and children or young people encountering non-explicit sexualised material.

i) children seeing pornography

6.2 It is illegal in Australia under the Criminal Code to 'intentionally expose a child under the age of 16 years to an indecent object or film, video or audio tape or photograph or book' (Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection

of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse 2007, 200). This provision should remain in place.

ii) children seeing non-explicit sexualised material

6.3 A number of different concerns are raised about young people seeing non-explicit sexualised material such as advertising, music videos, men's magazines and girls' magazines. Much of the research which is cited in relation to these concerns is that which was gathered in the *Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls* (Zurbriggen et al. 2010). The quality of this evidence in relation to a variety of different concerns varied, and the usefulness of the psychological research in relation to each of the discrete areas of concern is discussed below.

a) the effects of stereotyped images

6.4 Concerns have been raised that young people in Australia are growing up surrounded by gendered stereotypes. This is indeed the case: it is common to see television adverts for cleaning products where women are depicted as happy housewife-mothers whose only happiness comes from impressing the neighbours with how clean their toilet is; or adverts which stereotype men as being in love with their sheds and powertools. Psychologists have identified the existence of a phenomenon known as 'stereotype threat' – whereby exposure to stereotypes can have negative impacts on young people's test scores (it is not clear whether this is a short term effect) (Croizet et al. 2001).

6.5 In this context it is possible to imagine a legislative regime that made gender stereotypes illegal - although the multivalent meanings of the term would make this challenging in the extreme. A 'stereotype' can refer to a '*negative image*' (usually judged in terms of middle-class norms of 'good' behavior), to a '*familiar image*' (one which has been common in the history of representations), or to a '*two-dimensional image*' (judged aesthetically). All three meanings can be used independently, or in interrelated ways (McKee 2001). Thus any attempt to render stereotypes illegal would have to define carefully what meanings of the word were being used, and by what criteria they could be judged.

6.6 It is worth noting that a legislative approach that attempted to ban some stereotypes (those which are sexual) while leaving others untouched (traditional roles in housework, for example) would be fundamentally flawed.

b) eating disorders

6.7 The concern has been raised that when the media presents images of thin people as attractive this can lead to eating disorders among young populations. However this is not the case. Research suggests a number of predictors for eating disorders including a family history of eating disorders (Lilenfeld et al. 1998), mothers suffering from psychopathologies such as depression (Ammaniti et al. 2010), having a strongly rule-bound personality (Strauch and Erez 2009) and parents who demonstrate less love (Swanson et al. 2010). Nowhere in the research into the causes of eating disorders has anyone suggested that media images are part of the etiology. Indeed, people suffering with eating disorders are not aiming to create a traditionally attractive body. They often have little interest in how other people see them (Sproch 2010).

c) depression

6.8 Scientific accounts of the etiology of childhood depression suggest a genetic component (Thapar, Harold and McGuffin 1998) combined with environmental factors – primarily ‘stressful life events’ (Goldberg 2006, 1341). There is no suggestion in the literature that exposure to information about sexuality raises incidences of childhood depression.

d) lowering the age of first sexual encounter

6.9 Young people in the twenty first century are having sex younger than earlier generations – although the difference is smaller than is commonly thought:

Of the people aged now in their fifties .., half the men and less than half the women had vaginal intercourse at age eighteen or earlier ... Of the generation now in their twenties, about half had their first intercourse before their seventeenth birthday (Richters and Rissel 2005, 1)

Although this drop has caused some concern it is worth noting that

the steepest drop in age [of first intercourse] actually occurred during the 1950s and 60s and the trend of increasing proportions of adolescents aged 15 to 19 engaging in sex had stabilised by the late 1980s (Powell 2010, 14)

It is also the case that young people nowadays are more sexually responsible. 'Young people today are also more likely to have used a condom or other form of contraception at their first experience of heterosexual intercourse' (Powell 2010, 14): and '[f]ewer women are having children in their teens today than forty years ago' (Richters and Rissel 2005, 72).

6.10 Various explanations for the lowered age of first sexual encounter have been proposed. Among the most convincing are biological differences: due to better nutrition and better health young people in Western countries are now reaching puberty earlier than was the case for previous generations (Rubin et al. 2009). We would also expect that the greater equality between men and women in age of first consent could be explained at least in part through gains made by feminism in challenging sexual double standards whereby it is acceptable for young men to have sex, but young women who do so are perceived to be 'sluts' (Albury 2002). Richters and Rissel, who ran the first representative survey of sexual behavior in Australia, suggest that: '[t]he fall in the age at first intercourse has been greater for women than for men. (Or perhaps women have become more ready to admit to early sex)' (Richters and Rissel 2005, 117).

6.11 Although it has been claimed that an increase in information about sexuality in the public sphere is to blame for young people's earlier age of first sexual encounters this is not convincing. In countries such as Holland, where the public sphere is more liberal than Australia with regard to representations and discussions of sexuality, the age of first sexual encounters is higher than in Australia (Brugman, Cohen and Rademakers 2010). It has also been convincingly demonstrated on many occasions that 'sexuality knowledge is much more likely to lead to ... delayed sexual intercourse' (Goldman 2010, 421).

6.12 There exists a tradition of psychological work that demonstrates a correlation between the consumption of sexual media content and a personal interest in sexual practices by young people. Some writers have claimed a causality whereby the media consumption drives the sexual practice (Escobar-

Chaves et al. 2008). However, no evidence has been presented to suggest that causality moves in this direction; more valid, in the sense of matching observed everyday behavior, is the 'Media Practice' model (Steele 1999). This model suggests that:

Not unlike adults at social functions, teens look for people or situations 'like them' in the media. When they find people or story lines that resonate with their lives, they pay attention (Steele 1999, 335)

6.13 Those adolescents who are exposed to sexually explicit media tend to be those who are seeking it out for themselves in order to help them make sense of their developing sexuality (Brown 2000, 35), and:

some researchers have recognized the equally possible scenario that young people who have initiated their sex lives may be attracted to sexual content in media because it resonates with their experience (Rich 2005, 330)

6.14 Buckingham and Bragg have demonstrated through detailed interviews with young people that when they encounter media material that is too sexually advanced for them, they typically do not understand it, become bored with it, and stop consuming it (Buckingham and Bragg 2004, 119, 143).

e) children and young people will dress more sluttily and this will encourage sexual abuse and rape

6.15 There is a concern that children and young people will be encouraged by media, and by the availability of sexy clothes, to dress in a sexually provocative and slutty way. Aside from taste issues – which can be dismissed as not suitable for legislative intervention – the key issue here is that this will encourage paedophiles and rapists to sexually abuse children and adolescents.

6.16 The fear that paedophiles will be more likely to sexually abuse children if they are knowledgeable about sex is not backed up by research. To the contrary, research suggests that it is precisely the 'innocence' of children that paedophiles fetishise - the less they know about sex, the more attractive they are to abusers:

children who know about 'good touching', 'bad touching' and 'questionable touching' are more informed and defensively armed than those who do not know. Similarly, children who know the names of different parts of their

genitalia appear to be less desirable to child sex offenders. Such children are less vulnerable to sex offenders (Krafchick and Biringen 2002, 59; see also Sanderson 2004, 55).

6.17 As to the concern that young adults who dress in a more sexually provocative way are likely to get raped: feminism has been arguing for four decades that we must move away from the desire to 'blame the victim' and insist that it is always the fault of the rapist, no matter what a rape victim is wearing (Masser, Lee and McKimmie 2010). To attempt to return to the idea that young people who are wearing sexually provocative clothing are in some way to blame for their rape is simply unacceptable.

f) children are learning to value sexual achievement over academic achievement

6.18 Concerns have been expressed that children are learning to prefer 'physical appearance' over 'academic' achievement as 'the best path to power and acceptance' and that this is due to the media images they are exposed to (Legal and Constitutional Affairs Reference Committee 2011, 161).

6.19 There are two key issues in relation to this claim. The first is whether it is in fact true for the population as a whole. In the case of young women in Australia, for example, they are exposed regularly to images not only of Britney Spears and Kim Kardashian (neither of whom, it could be argued, is famous simply for being sexual but also for their abilities as performers), but also to Julia Gillard, JK Rowling, Hillary Clinton, Bronwyn Bishop, Tina Fey, Jelena Dokic, their mothers, teachers at their schools and so on. It is simply not true that they are exposed only to images of women succeeding through sex. They are exposed to a wide range of images of women succeeding for a range of achievements – including intelligence, humour, rich families, ability to perform, and for the use of their sexuality. No generation of young women in history has been exposed to such a variety of role models of powerful women across a range of sectors.

6.20 The second point is whether we as a society agree that achievement for academic reasons is better than achievement for reasons of physical attractiveness. This is a moral case and not one, it seems, where a legal system of classification and censorship should involve itself. We should also ask - what

about those children who are not academically gifted? Given that one putative concern about sexualised culture is that it leads to ‘depression’ in young people who do not live up to ideal standards, it would seem that commentators who express such concerns would realise that simply changing the criteria so that everyone instead is judged on academic ideals seems unfair.

6.21 The implications of these debates for the censorship and classification system Australia are complex. It is appropriate that the classification system maintains an X18+ classification. At the same time children and young people must have access to comprehensive age-appropriate information about sexuality in order to facilitate their healthy sexual development. This must be managed through non-explicit media. Current examples of co-regulation (of advertising and television) are working well. Community research by bodies such as the Advertising Standards Bureau shows that their decisions are in line with the attitudes of the majority of the community. In order to ensure that such a system continues to work well it is useful to maximize communication between community members and these bodies.

Recommendation 5

That the Federal Government establish a ‘one-stop shop’ to which members of the public can make complaints about material which they find offensive in any medium; that body then to take responsibility for ensuring that complaints are passed on to the relevant authority.

Recommendation 6

That all bodies currently responsible for dealing with complaints about mediated material should undertake regular (at least biennial) community research to ensure that their decisions are in line with broad community attitudes.

The harms to children from adults seeing adult pornography

7.1 A separate set of issues have been raised with regard to the damage to children from adults seeing sexually explicit materials.

a) damage to young adults from seeing pornography

7.2 A series of worries have recently been raised with regard to the impact of pornography on 'young people' over the age of eighteen who are legally old enough to see such material, but are still (it is claimed) vulnerable to negative messages. Technically this concern is separate from issues of the sexualisation of children, but arguments around this area tend to be fuzzy, and refuse to draw such subtle distinctions.

7.3 It has been claimed that exposure to pornography leads young adults to take up 'marginal' sexual practices such as anal sex and kinky sex. There does indeed exist a tradition of research making such claims – see for example the work of Dolf Zillmann (2000). However there are two key problems with such work. The first is a confusion around causality. The two variables are the consumption of pornography and greater sexual adventurousness. The work of Zillmann claims (without any proof) that the causality runs from seeing sexual images to becoming more sexually adventurous. However, as noted above, an increasing number of researchers find the media practice model more convincing, and suggest that causality may run in the opposite direction, or may be mutually reinforcing:

some researchers have recognized the equally possible scenario that young people who have initiated their sex lives may be attracted to sexual content in media because it resonates with their experience (Rich 2005, 330)

7.4 Of more concern is the implicit bigotry of such research. It begins with the assumption that sexual adventurousness is a bad thing and must be discouraged. It assumes that the only good form of sexual contact is heterosexual, monogamous, vaginal penetration within a committed relationship, ideally married, vanilla (ie, not kinky), 'side by side, no one on top or bottom, altogether pretty sex' (Tong, quoted in Harma and Stolpe 2010, 122). For example when Zillmann lists the putative harms from exposure to pornography, he includes an

increased tolerance for 'sodomy', 'group sex' and 'sodomasochistic practices' (Zillmann 2000, 41-42).

7.5 It is common to find such assumptions about what constitutes good sex in social science research (McKee 2009, 639-642). Nevertheless at the very least we can point out that there is no universal consensus in Australia that sodomy, group sex or sadomasochism are wrong. We can note that the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* does not list any of these practices as unhealthy. In stronger terms we can point out that minority sexual groups (gay men, swingers and BDSM practitioners) have been campaigning for decades to escape such pathologising discourses and that the work of researchers such as Zillmann is destructive of the efforts of minority sexual groups in their fights for recognition and equality. Michael Warner has coined the term 'heteronormativity' to describe approaches that start with the assumption that only a certain kind of middle class sexuality is acceptable practice:

Much of the work of feminist social theory has consisted of showing that basic conceptualizations - ways of opposing home and economy, political and personal, or system and lifeworld- presuppose and reinforce a paradigmatically male position. Queer theory is beginning to be in position to make similar criticisms, sometimes with reference to the same oppositions (political and personal, intimate and public, market and lifeworld) but also with others - ways of distinguishing group members from nonmembers, the sexual from the nonsexual, ways of opposing the given and the chosen, or identifying the intimate with the familial (Warner 1991, 15)

The research that claims that pornography damages young people is clearly heteronormative in its assumptions.

7.6 It is also worth mentioning that Zillmann claims another negative effect for young adults exposed to pornography is an increase in 'cynical attitudes' towards 'love' and 'marriage' (Zillmann 2000, 42). Modern feminism has been campaigning for five decades in its attempt to break down idealized versions of love and marriage (see for example Firestone 2009). In the desire to return to

such idealized models Zillmann's research is anti-feminist as well as being heteronormative.

Recommendation 7

That the Australian government reaffirm its commitment to protecting the rights of young people who identify as belonging to sexual minority groups and state that it rejects heteronormative approaches to policy.

b) adults watching adult pornography leads to sexual abuse of children

7.7 The Senate's Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee Review of the National Classification Scheme notes the existence of 'numerous studies linking exposure to pornographic material contained in X18+ films to the sexual abuse of children' (Legal and Constitutional Affairs Reference Committee 2011, 174).

7.8 I have never come across any such studies, and none are referenced in this report. There exist anecdotal accounts of adults who have used adult pornography as part of their sexual abuse of children (see for example Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse 2007, 65). However there is no suggestion of causality in any research - that viewing adult pornography leads adults to commit sexual abuse against children.

7.9 Rates of child sexual abuse in Australia are falling (Dunne et al. 2003), but it remains a real problem. Up to 10% of girls and up to 5% of boys in 'high income countries' (Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA) experience penetrative sexual abuse during their childhood (Gilbert et al. 2009, 68).

7.10 Research has identified a number of clear predictors for child sexual abuse. Girls are abused more than boys. Children with disabilities are abused much more than children without disabilities. Children in institutional care have a massively increased chance of being abused (Gilbert et al. 2009, 69, 70). A cluster of problems for parents are related to abusive behaviour, including

'poverty, mental-health problems, low educational achievement, alcohol and drug misuse, and exposure to maltreatment as a child' (Gilbert et al. 2009, 72).

7.11 Researchers in the area of child maltreatment prevention have not identified the existence of sexually explicit materials as a cause of child sexual abuse.

7.12 It is also worth noting that sex offender studies have suggested that rapists tend to use less pornography than control groups, and that, on average, they come from more sexually repressed backgrounds and are exposed to pornography at a later age (Gebardt et al. 1965).

7.13 It is also important to bear in mind the bigger picture of consumption of X-rated materials in Australia. The Australian Study of Health and Relationships was a nationally representative survey of the sexual behavior of 19,307 Australian adults conducted in 2002 (Smith et al. 2003). The study found that in the previous year 'about a quarter of all respondents had watched an X-rated film (37% men, 16% women)' (Richters et al. 2003, 180). The majority of consumers of pornography report their experiences as positive: in an Australian survey in 2004 57% of consumers reported that pornography had a positive effect on their attitudes towards sexuality and only 7% felt it was negative (McKee, Albury and Lumby 2008, 83). The positive effects included making them more 'comfortable and relaxed about sex', more 'open-minded', and more 'tolerant', providing 'sexual arousal and pleasure', educating them and helping them to 'maintai[n] a sex life in a long-term relationship' (McKee, Albury and Lumby 2008, 85).

c) worries that the consumption of adult pornography by adults leads to negative attitudes towards women

7.14 Although this is not technically a part of the debate around sexualisation of children it is sometimes drawn in – another testament to the fuzziness of debate in this area.

7.15 Some laboratory experiments claim to have found negative effects from the consumption of pornography, including negative attitudes towards women.

7.16 Two caveats should be raised at this point. Firstly, naturalistic studies of pornography use (that is, studies of use in the real world rather than the laboratory) have consistently shown no such correlation. It has been hypothesized that the most convincing explanation for this disjuncture is the long list of differences between consumption of pornography in laboratory settings compared with the real world. In laboratory experiments the subjects do not know beforehand that they are going to see pornography, and many of them would not choose to view it for personal pleasure. They have no choice over the kind of material they watch. They view it for extended periods of up to an hour. They are surrounded by strangers and authority figures while they watch. And they are not able to masturbate or have an orgasm while they view it. By contrast, in the real world, people overwhelmingly view pornography out of choice. They choose the kind of material they want to see. They choose the people with whom they want to watch. They commonly masturbate or have sex to the point of orgasm while engaging, and then stop viewing. Given these differences it is not surprising that laboratory experiments don't produce the same results as the consumption of pornography in the real world (McKee, Albury and Lumby 2008, 79).

7.17 Secondly it is worth noting that a survey of a number of demographic factors and how they affect attitudes towards women found a number of statistically significant relationships between negative attitudes towards women and demographic factors: older people have more negative attitudes towards women, as do Australians who profess a religious belief, those who completed lower levels of formal education, those who live outside urban areas and those who vote for right wing political parties (McKee 2007a). There was no correlation between the amount of pornography consumed and attitudes towards women.

Conclusion: the importance of comprehensive age-appropriate sexuality education

8.1 Debates about censorship and classification in Australia in recent years have focused on the sexualisation of children. However research suggests that

this emphasis is wrong. In order to prevent inappropriate sexualisation it is vital to begin by distinguishing between inappropriate sexualisation and healthy sexual development. Healthy sexual development requires that as they develop children and young people be given comprehensive age-appropriate sexuality education at every stage of their development. Possessing such information allows them to reject inappropriate advances and information. It is only in this way that we can protect the innocence of children – defined as ‘freedom from responsibilities’ rather than ‘freedom from information’.

8.2 By contrast, approaches that misunderstand innocence as ignorance and call for children to be kept ignorant about sex damage their healthy sexual development and, perversely, leave them more open to inappropriate sexualisation. Children who know little about sex are more likely to be sexually abused, to have unsafe sex, and to feel that they have to go it alone in working out their sexuality rather than being able to draw on their parents and other sources of support as they develop sexually.

8.3 The implications for the censorship and classification system of Australia are complex. It is appropriate that the classification system maintains an X18+ classification. At the same time children and young people must have access to comprehensive age-appropriate information about sexuality in order to facilitate their healthy sexual development. This must be managed through non-explicit media. Current examples of co-regulation (of advertising and television) are working well. Community research by bodies such as the Advertising Standards Bureau shows that their decisions are in line with the attitudes of the majority of the community. In order to ensure that such a system continues to work well it is useful to maximize communication between community members and these bodies.

8.4 A classification system must achieve the right balance between protecting children from inappropriate material and ensuring that they have access to comprehensive, age-appropriate information about sexuality. This is the task facing the Australian Law Reform Commission.

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