

# Objecting to sex?

Sexualization, objectification and media in preteens' identity work.

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## **Introduction**

### **Media sexualization in the picture**

Sexuality. For a topic that is commonly construed as belonging to the adult, private sphere, thinly veiled references to it are surprisingly omnipresent in popular culture. From sexual innuendo in primetime sit-coms and alluring advertisements prominently featuring Wonderbra-boasted cleavage, to music videos that make use of genre conventions popularized by the pornographic industry: sexuality appears ‘everywhere’. This mainstreaming of sex in contemporary Western society has been commonly referred to as a clear indication of cultural ‘sexualization’ (Attwood, 2009), which has become a prominent topic of popular and academic debate. However, the term is not always used in a carefully defined way. Current research on sexualization is highly influenced by the American Psychological Association (hereafter APA) report on the Sexualization of Girls (Lerum and Dworkin, 2009). This report has helped to bring sexualization out of conceptual ambiguity. Seeking to tie the concept of sexualization to actual observations rather than purely theoretical contemplation, the APA report focuses on sexualization through media. This is defined as the process by which people are socialized into what the APA considers an unhealthy form of sexuality by a media environment that normalizes situations where:

‘a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; a person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.’ (APA, 2007, p. 1)

The doctoral dissertation builds on this definition of sexualization, and the concept will be explored in further detail in the theoretical framework of chapter two.

While the distinction the APA makes between healthy versus unhealthy types of sexuality could be contested as a social construct, there is a clear reason why the report problematizes sexualization. When discussing the omnipresence of sexuality as an indication of sexualization, we must take into account that the sexuality that dominates popular culture - including visuals and audio, verbal and non-verbal cues, overt as well as more

implicit references to sexual behavior - is generally of a narrow, strictly circumscribed nature. Specifically, dominant sexuality in the public sphere disproportionately focuses on women who conform to the heterosexual male gaze (cf. Mulvey, 1975), contributing to sexist patterns that link women's personal worth to their sexuality. The APA report argues that sexualization differs from 'healthy' sexuality because it encompasses a person (involuntarily) being forced into an (exclusively) sexual role. This emphasized association of women with their sexual appeal is arguably the most visibly problematic component of what scholars have termed the 'sexualization' of women (and girls). Despite girls resisting and negotiating sexualization (Duits, 2008; Jackson and Westrupp, 2010; Renold and Ringrose, 2011), growing up in a sexualizing culture has been linked to low self-esteem and depression (Beal, 1994), and to increased self-surveillance (Jackson and Westrupp, 2010) in girls when they approach adolescence and become sexualized in the eyes of society (Thorne, 1993). The prevalence of this specific version of sexuality in popular media and its relationship to persistent societal sexism is the first justification for choosing sexualization as the focus for this dissertation.

### **Today's youth: growing up 'too fast'?**

Given the potential role of media in spreading cultural knowledge as well as instigating moral reflection on topics such as sexuality and gender (Krijnen and Verboord, 2011), scholars have raised concerns about the prevalence and consequences of sexualizing media content. The debate becomes especially heated when it considers the role of sexualizing media in the lives of young people. Apart from concerns that sexualizing media socialize young viewers into unhealthy sexuality, discussions on media sexualization can be linked to adult fears about contemporary youth losing their innocence while growing up 'too fast' because of exposure to problematic media content (Cook and Kaiser, 2004). This is said in reference to, for instance, the supposedly bad example set by sexual performances of (pre)teen idols such as Miley Cyrus. As such, the sexualization debates are highly value laden, led by a concern for the loss of childhood and the intent to shield children from subjects they may not yet be equipped to deal with (Levin and Kilbourne, 2009; Renold and Ringrose, 2011; Gunter, 2014).

In popular debate as well as academia, the discussion seems to fall into two camps based on contrasting moral repertoires. First, there is a more ethically conservative camp

that sees sexualization as a problem because it may lead to an increase in casual sex, implying that sexuality should ideally be experienced in a steady monogamous relationship among adults (f.e. Gunter, 2014). Second, there are those who question the way in which childhood and asexuality are used as an inseparable cultural pair, stating that an interest in sexuality is normal and a part of healthy development, and that conservative attitudes rob young people of their sexual agency (Egan and Hawkes, 2009). However, both camps agree on one thing: if sexualization is indeed such a common occurrence in popular culture, it would come as no surprise that it is nigh impossible to shield young people from exposure, meaning that children remain a part of sexualization's audience. Research has shown that children themselves often feel torn, trying to reconcile the cultural expectation of child innocence with the lived reality of being confronted with (and having an interest in) sexual imagery (Buckingham and Bragg, 2005; Vares, Jackson and Gill, 2011).

While this complicated position of young audiences certainly is worrisome, scholars must make sure that this concern for children's wellbeing does not cause them to jump to conclusions. One prominent challenge of sexualization research is that it often equates consumption of sexual content (sexualized or not) to audience sexualization, seemingly skipping some steps in the process of consuming media texts. This is problematic for two reasons: it ignores the diversity of sexual media content, and it bypasses audience activity (Lerum and Dworkin, 2009). With regards to media, the notion of child sexualization has often been illustrated by making reference to extreme examples: thongs being marketed to 8-12 year-old girls, children imitating gyrating dance moves of pop stars, or the popularity of child beauty pageants (e.g. Durham, 2008; Levin and Kilbourne, 2009; Gunter, 2014). Such characterization of sexualization has raised the question whether sexualization actually exists beyond the extreme examples it tends to be defined by, and whether it is in fact a returning and pervasive phenomenon in child media. This is why this dissertation investigates how common sexualization actually is in the media diet of young people, based on a media use survey and subsequent content analysis.

In addition, not every kind of sexual media content counts as an example of sexualization, but this distinction is not always made adequately by researchers (Lerum and Dworkin, 2009). There is a need for stricter conceptualization and operationalization of the concept, and this is one of the main issues I will address in this dissertation, mainly in empirical chapters two and three. Finally, media contain a rich variety of meanings. For

instance, a narrative can contain sexualization, but this does not mean that it promotes it. A text can feature sexualization in a way that condemns it, or in a more morally ambiguous frame. I will explore this issue by analyzing the ways in which popular media narratives feature types of sexualization.

### **The audience: object or subject?**

With regards to audience activity, findings in sexualization research are largely defined by the research tradition that is being followed. The research roughly falls apart in two paradigms: the behaviorist, media psychology based effects tradition; and the critical constructivist, verstehen based humanities tradition. To put it crudely: while researchers of the former group focus on what media do with people, the latter scholars look at the same data from a perspective that places the spotlight on what audiences do with media. While my PhD is mainly rooted in the constructivist paradigm, I often felt frustrated when reading literature on sexualization from different perspectives, seeing how rarely this resulted in a mutually beneficial dialogue. Sexualization is a theme that has been studied extensively within both research traditions, and while the link between the two perspectives seems evident, incorporating insights, arguments and methods from the other side is often met with confusion within academic circles (see also Bryman, 2006a). This was most apparent when trying to find the adequate academic outlet for chapter two of this PhD, which builds on theory from both perspectives and was written in collaboration with media effects researchers. Still, I believe that incorporating insights from different traditions strengthens research because it creates a more holistically informed picture. This is why, throughout the writing of this dissertation, efforts were made to scale the wall that seems to stand between these theoretical and methodological frameworks, drawing upon knowledge from both traditions.

Another issue this dissertation will address is how research is often primarily concerned with empowering children by teaching them to ‘see through the illusion’ created by mass media. In comparison, little attention is given to how children actually interact with media, what part media play in their lives and how children link their identities to their relationship with sexual media content. This qualification is especially important with regards to young, female audiences. In feminist debates on sexualization, one of the most central issues is how to theorize the sexualized audience’s position in relation to

objectification versus empowerment (see Duits and Van Zoonen, 2006; Gill, 2007b). While structure informs and limits audience activity, a perspective that purely focuses on the risks of objectification would ignore girls' agency in meaning making through sexual self-expression. This dissertation will balance these two views by incorporating an awareness of age and gender-related structure, and observations of audience agency in the face of that structure. Children have been shown to have their own, specific media cultures for example, with media fulfilling a social function in families and peer groups, and a personal function in a child's identity work (Duits, 2008; Bragg and Buckingham, 2008; Jackson and Westrupp, 2010). Although most countries dedicate research to how many hours of television a child watches, research on what significance this has in the (social) life of children is rare (Livingstone and Drotner, 2011). This underlines the need for more research that takes a nuanced look at how exactly young people interact with sexualizing media, and how this is linked to our media culture. This PhD will try to tackle this fundamental issue by conducting an ethnographic study of the media use of children, looking for the different ways young people interact with sexualizing media. This is why this doctoral dissertation incorporates a research set-up that allows the child voice to be heard and to lead the scope of the research. Specifically, the aim was to create an open environment for children to talk to me about the role of sexualization and sexual media in their lives.

### **The significance of preteens**

Finally, the age group of preteens has largely been overlooked in sexualization research, despite this life stage being crucial to the development of gender-related schemata and sex roles (Money, 1999; Berk, 2006). Preteens are generally described as 9-13 year olds, occupying the position between late childhood and early adolescence (Cook and Kaiser, 2004). Children at this age are curious about sexuality and (romantic) social interaction, which leads them to be especially interested in media content pertaining to these subjects (Durham, 1999; Larson, 2001; de Graaf, Neeleman and de Haas, 2009). In addition, the preteen life stage takes on a special function as the limbo between childhood, which, in a Western context, is socially constructed as asexual, and adolescence, when it becomes more socially accepted to experiment with sexual identities (Fass, 2013). Therefore, this age group is the primary target of this PhD. In addition, as the examples mentioned above illustrate, popular and academic debates alike have focused mainly on girls as a (vulnerable) group of

interest. Historically, the sexual awakening of girls has been the subject of recurrent moral panics, while boys generally have been trusted to find their own footing during their (pre)teen years (Fass, 2013), reaffirming the sexual double standard and resulting in a lack of awareness of the problems boys face before and during their sexual coming of age. While research indicates that sexualization more often impacts the lives of women and girls, this semi-exclusive focus on the female experience also has its downsides. Boys and girls are socialized differently, including with regards to their sexuality, but this socialization also overlaps and interacts (Gunter, 2014). Most of sexualization's dynamics are strongly linked to heterosexuality and dichotomous gender identity, making boys and men as important to the topic as women and girls. We must also take into account that recent research indicates that sexualization is increasingly relevant to men and boys (Martins, Tiggemann and Kirkbride, 2007; McCabe and Ricciardelli, 2010). Additionally, we make an effort to overcome this issue by addressing the media habits of girls as well as boys.

All of this has led to the central research question of this doctoral dissertation:

**How do sexualizing and objectifying media figure into the gendered identity work of preteen boys and girls?**

I will address different dimensions of this research question through five empirical studies, summarized in the following section.

## Chapters

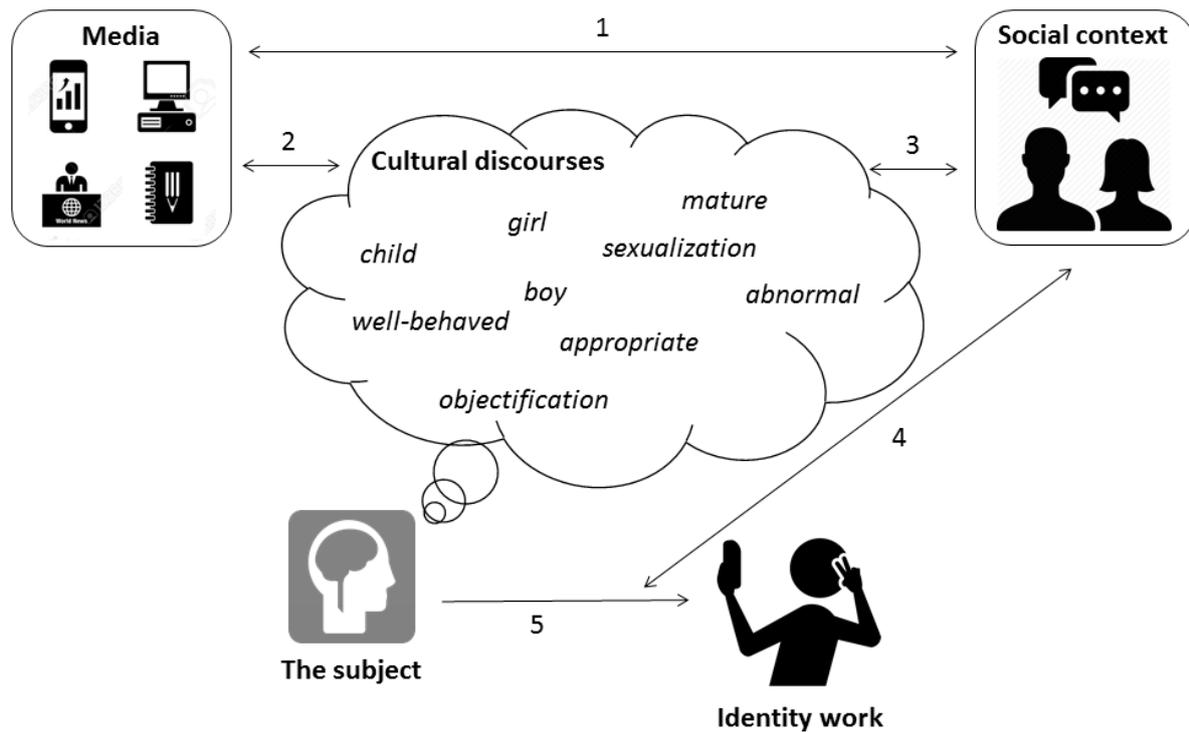


Figure 1.1: Sexualization contextualized

This PhD project is part of a collaborative effort of the UA and the KULeuven that explores preteen media sexualization from different angles, using a range of different methodologies. Since the central research question on sexualization and its relevance to preteens as a cultural phenomenon can only be fully addressed by exploring the subject from different viewpoints, this PhD investigates the interaction between cultural discourses, media content and social context, and the impact of these sources of meaning on the preteen subject as a social actor. The dissertation starts off with a chapter on the circulation and construction of cultural discourses within media and among audience members (arrows one, two and three in figure 1.1), through a framing analysis of how gossip media and audiences discuss celebrity coming of age. This first chapter sheds light on how childhood and adulthood are socially constructed within popular culture, and how age, gender and social class inform the normative frames used by audiences discussing youth and appropriate behavior.

Then, the PhD delves into the topic of sexualization. The second and third chapters of this dissertation zone in on the media side of figure 1.1 by investigating the prevalence of sexualization within the actual media use of preteens. This is done by means of a

quantitative and qualitative content analysis of their favorite television programs. Based on the results of a preteen media use survey, the quantitative analysis featured in chapter two investigates the prevalence and contextualization of sexualization and objectification in the most popular television shows among Flemish preteens. The qualitative analysis dives a bit deeper into the relationship between media content and cultural discourses, symbolized by arrow two featured in figure 1.1. This chapter explores the concept of (sexual) objectification and its social significance, as presented in these preteen-popular narratives. The two content analyses work in tandem and have two goals: one, to create an understanding of what sexualization means in this PhD, as this morally loaded concept loses its scientific value if defined ambiguously. Two, to establish which forms of sexualization and objectification typically occur in preteen media use, as much of the popular and academic debate on sexualization is fueled by extreme examples that do not reflect the daily media lives of preteens.

After this investigation of media texts, we turn our attention to the components of figure 1.1 that have more to do with reception of sexualization. In the final two chapters of the PhD, I will explore how a small sample of 9-11 year olds interact with the sexualizing media content in their media diets, and what part sexualization plays in their everyday life and identity work. The findings presented in these two final papers were gathered through five months of participatory observation of preteens in after-school-care, and additional in-depth interviews conducted among friendship pairs amongst these preteens. The first of these studies researches the diversity of ways in which preteens attribute meaning to media sexualization. This chapter features observations of children interacting with depictions of sexuality, and their own quotes about the presence of sexuality in media content. Referring to figure 1.1, chapter four hence focuses on the dynamics symbolized by arrows one, three and four. Special attention is paid to how sexual media content has different social values in different contexts for these preteens. The second ethnographic study takes a step back, placing a media diet featuring sexualizing content in the context of the particular micro-culture shaped by these preteens, and their gendered identity work. In doing so, this chapter focuses on arrows four and five of figure 1.1, shedding a light on the subject as a social actor in preteen subculture. This study hones in on power struggles between preteen girls and boys, revealing the duplicity of sexualization.

In the next section, I will shed light on some specific conceptualizations used throughout the empirical chapters, and explain the positioning of this PhD with regards to the different scientific domains it draws on. Subsequently, the methodological considerations underpinning my research are discussed and motivated. This is followed by my own research, presented in the shape of five empirical chapters, after which I summarize my findings and link these back to the research question.



## **Conceptual framework**

### **Identity work**

Throughout this dissertation, I make repeated use of the phrase 'identity work'. This is a conscious choice to signify the contextual, social and constructed aspects of the concept of identity, and to set this PhD apart from studies that focus on its constant, individual and innate components (Burke et al., 2004). Identity work as I use it can be considered similar to Hall's application of identification (2011), happening both internally and externally through interaction with others, often in relation to social categories such as gender, age, ethnicity and social class. Since identifications are relational, they are embedded in a power hierarchy where certain types of identity work can lead to social status (Warnke, 2007, Hall, 2011). I have chosen to focus on the explicitly visible types of identity work, since this dissertation investigates the embedment of the individual within preteen subcultures, and the shared social significance sexualization has within this specific context. Hence, I was not interested in analyzing core identities, since these were not especially relevant to the central research question. Identity work is also conceptually similar to Butler's (1990) work on performativity: showcasing the behavior and the outward characteristics that evoke a social category in interaction with others. One of these types of identity work or performativity is gender performance, and the gender performances associated with social status in contemporary Western culture are hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity.

### **Gender performance: hegemonic femininity, hyperfemininity and emphasized femininity**

When referring to gender performativity, another conscious conceptual choice was the use of hegemonic femininity when referring to the mainstream, socially rewarded form of feminine identification. While hegemonic masculinity and femininity were initially theorized in tandem, the latter was quickly reformulated within feminist literature as emphasized femininity, or in other cases as hyperfemininity. This choice of words connotes the asymmetrical power relationship between masculinity and femininity, where masculinity is hegemonic and femininity the 'other', and hence a compliance to patriarchy (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). In this conceptualization, hyperfemininity would refer to the excesses of hegemonic femininity, the instances where the subject takes femininity 'too far', falling out of the precarious balancing act typical of performing femininity (Schippers, 2007). Emphasized femininity, on the other hand, evokes a softer, 'good girl' identification that

stays neatly within the limits of hegemonic femininity, but is also decidedly passive and conservative (Francis et al., 2016). However, within this dissertation I formulate power as a conversation in which women and girls are active discussion partners, even though they cannot always lay claim to equal speaking rights. In addition, hegemonic femininity is an ever-evolving social role that is constructed by masculine as well as feminine subjects, and its subservience to hegemonic masculinity is neither absolute nor universal. This is why I have chosen to refer to hegemonic femininity rather than emphasized femininity or hyperfemininity.

### **Sexual bullying**

In the empirical chapters that feature results from the conducted ethnography, there are frequent references to sexual bullying as a common behavior among preteens. Since bullying has been thoroughly explored within academia but is also often used as a layman's term, the use of the concept within this dissertation needs to be carefully defined. Rigby (2004, p. 288) sums up the academic consensus on bullying as referring to aggressive behavior of varying intensity (physical or psychological), occurring deliberately and repeatedly between parties of unequal power/status, where the powerful dominates the powerless. Sexual bullying is explored by Duncan (1999, p. 127) as a prevalent subtype of bullying within mixed gender groups. Echoing the definition given by Rigby, he adds a number of frequently occurring examples of sexual bullying such as sexualized name-calling, belittling others' sexual prowess, insulting physical appearance, criticizing sexual behavior, gossip about appearance or sexuality, sexual threats as well as unwanted touching and assault. Analyzing the sexist undercurrent beneath sexual bullying, Duncan asserts that sexual bullying is a way for boys to punish girls that are not sufficiently subservient, for example when a girl denies a request; a boy punishes her with sexual name-calling. This way, female autonomy is chastised and linked to sexual domination (Duncan, 1999, p.128). Sexual bullying is used similarly towards boys who do not conform to hegemonic masculinity. These are the lines followed by this dissertation when referring to sexual bullying.

### **Sexualization, objectification and sexual objectification**

Apart from offering an exploration of the relevance of sexualization in the lives of preteens in Flanders, the work done throughout this dissertation keeps coming back to issues of conceptualization and operationalization surrounding the central subjects of sexualization,

objectification and sexual objectification. Rather than exploring these themes in this conceptual framework, I have opted to allow the reader to follow my own train of thought throughout the development of this PhD. In every empirical chapter, there are elements that contribute to a fuller understanding of these concepts, and how they relate to and differ from each other. Chapter two features most of the theoretical work done on separating sexualization from objectification, chapter three explores the spectrum of sexual versus non sexual objectification, and the ethnography behind chapters four and five tests the applicability of these content based conceptualizations in the field. My own theorization came to fruit gradually, rather than being a framework that already existed before embarking on the empirical part of this PhD, and I consider this to be an overarching, integral part of the empirical chapters. Hence, I have chosen to sum up my conceptual work in the conclusion of the dissertation rather than address it at the start.

### **Alignment to research traditions**

This PhD decidedly is situated within the Cultural Studies research tradition, as it critically investigates the cultural phenomenon of (media) sexualization through a lens of power, related to sexuality, gender, age and social class. However, and equally true to cultural studies research, this dissertation combines multiple academic fields, methods and disciplines to find the most appropriate, insightful inroad into the analysis of the different dimensions that relate to the main research question (Nelson, Treichler and Grossberg, 2010). The specific contribution of each academic field and the links between the disciplines are discussed below.

#### **Cultural Studies**

As mentioned above, the cultural studies research tradition is in the DNA of this doctoral dissertation for a number of reasons. First, the research question revolves around popular (preteen) media. At its emergence in the early 1960s, cultural studies scholars set themselves apart from other research traditions by approaching the common, characteristic patterns of the human experience within a (sub)culture with the same critical eye as literature or art (Hall, 1980a; Kellner, 2011). This is especially relevant to my research question considering that media preferred by preteens suffer from being seen as 'less than' in two important ways: youth media are considered as a banal form of entertainment, and

young audiences are seen as less discerning, less critical than adult media users (Banet-Weiser, 2007). This entails that an analysis of child preferred media often focuses on protecting young people from risk and danger rather than on truly trying to understand the meaning and significance of these media in their lives (Livingstone and Drotner, 2011).

### ***Power and discourse***

Following on from this train of thought, cultural studies can be seen as distinct from many other research traditions because of its focus on power, making any cultural studies analysis a deep reading of how the power structures, struggles and movements in a society relate to its cultural artefacts (Nelson, Treichler and Grossberg, 2010). Building on Foucault (1982; 1988), power in this dissertation is seen as a dialogue: a balance that flows between actors in every social interaction, depending on their contextualized position within an unequal society. We subject individuals to our power through the use of discourse, while simultaneously being objects within the power play of others. In addition, we are made into subjects by the discourses within which we define ourselves, the discourses that we refer to when forming our identities. In this context, discourse is defined as a type of (meta)narrative: a culturally contingent consensus on what is true, what is knowledge, and what can be said, by whom. Sexualization is one such discourse to which subjects appeal within social interaction. For example, a teacher forbidding girls to wear makeup because he/she sees it as a sign that they might be growing up too fast, uses the discourse on sexualization to legitimize subjecting these students to their power. While Foucauldian power can be interpreted and used in a restrictive way, I follow authors like McNay (1992), who emphasize the potentially positive, productive force within Foucault's theories on power: through power, against power and within power, we create our cultural artefacts and ourselves. Foucault (1988) described this dynamic as 'the technologies of the self'.

With regards to my research question, power flows through the analysis in intersecting ways. First, the way young people are being seen as vulnerable and in need of protection places them under someone else's care (Wyness, 2006), making age one thread in the web of power. Another power line revolves around gender: as much as we would like to think that sexism is a thing of the past in contemporary Western culture, gender is still one of the most important segregating variables through which we understand ourselves and our world (Warnke, 2007). This is accompanied by a media culture that often empowers

boys and men to the disadvantage of girls and women (Lemish, 2014). With the current rise of neo-sexism, as evidenced by the controversial 2016 US presidential election (Wilz, 2016), studying gender as a dimension of power remains important. Media sexualization generally follows heteronormative patterns, casting women in the role of object and men as those who gaze (cf. Mulvey, 1975; APA, 2007; Lemish, 2014) – although this gaze seems to have become more and more internalized, casting women as object as well as self (and other)-policing subject (Evans, Riley and Shankar, 2010). Still, gendered power relations are of primordial importance when studying sexualization. This is further explored in the section on feminist studies below. My research, as most cultural studies research, has an implicit political aim, trying to evaluate modern society to provide the tools for cultural change related to these power dynamics (Nelson, Treichler and Grossberg, 2010).

### ***Culture in flux***

Cultural studies research views culture not as fixed, but as the subject of hegemonic struggle (cf. Gramsci, 1971) over an evolving set of practices and views (Nelson, Treichler and Grossberg, 2010). In this research tradition, media are seen as carrying huge (albeit rarely realized) potential for articulating, resisting and debating social and political change (Carragee and Roefs, 2004) and audiences as active creators of meaning (Hall, 1980b), who use the tools provided to them by media to negotiate their own position in the social order (Fiske, 1987). With regards to the subject of this dissertation, I approach sexualization, gender and age not as static facts but as social constructs that are continuously evolving through interaction. However, this does not mean that sexualization, gender and age do not have real life consequences. Rather, these social constructs are systems of meaning on which individual subjects build their identities by incorporating them in their thoughts and behaviors through a process of interpellation (De Lauretis, 1987). In this radical interactionist view (cf. Hall, 1980a), the interrelatedness between sexualization, media and audiences is not based on causality. Instead, the meaning of sexuality and sexualization to preteens is always in the process of being constructed through their interaction with peers, adults and media, and this happens in tandem with the construction of their identity as preteen boy or girl.

The hegemonic struggle over sexualization can be easily demonstrated by referring to the fact that societal unrest about child sexualization builds upon the expectation of

asexuality that Western culture holds towards children. From this point of view, sexualization is predominantly seen as a danger to young audiences because it challenges hegemonic asexuality (Egan and Hawkes 2013; Fass 2013). To further specify my approach to cultural studies, throughout my work, I approach cultural meanings from a poststructuralist viewpoint. Following thinkers like Foucault, I will analyze sexualization from the understanding that its meaning is unstable and intertextual and that 'what counts as' sexualization is just a temporary stabilization of meaning. Relatedly, poststructuralists see the subject as fractured, constantly doing identity work through the taking up of partial subject positions that are constructed for us within discourses. In particular with regards to sexualization, I follow Emma Renold and Jessica Ringrose's (2011) theorization of 'schizoid subjectivities' of young audiences as always in movement, negotiating their identity in relationship to conflicting discourses on sexualization and compulsory asexuality. As convincingly argued by De Lauretis (1987), Douglas (1995) and Kearney (2015), experimenting with sexist discourses such as sexualization does not have to lead to internalization. Instead, it can contribute to the development of a type of double vision: an awareness of the performative, contingent nature of gender norms. This is why my dissertation is concerned with understanding the meanings sexualization has to preteen audiences in contemporary culture, how these meanings are both dispersed by and challenged through media, and how preteens experience their (lack of) agency as young audience members in their interaction with media sexualization. These questions are further explored in the fourth and fifth chapters of my empirical analysis.

### ***Methodological eclecticism***

Finally, this dissertation is anchored in cultural studies by how its chapters combine different methods to adequately explore the research topic from different angles. Cultural studies research does not follow one mandatory methodological approach. Instead, its research is a type of bricolage: a 'pragmatic, strategic and self-reflective' use of methods from a wide range of research traditions (Nelson, Treichler and Grossberg, 2010: 2). This means that the research set-up is primarily inspired by the questions asked and the context of the subject that is being studied, rather than by an epistemological concern. Specifically, I set out to explore the issue of sexualization from a more holistic perspective, looking at media content as well as audience reception and social context. This was established using a combination of

complementary research methods, including those that are not often associated with cultural studies, such as framing analysis and quantitative content analysis. This will be further illustrated in the methodological chapter of this dissertation.

### **Feminist studies**

The second research tradition that heavily informed this dissertation is feminist studies. According to Lentin (1993: 119), feminist research follows these basic principles:

‘the commitment to making visible women’s lived experiences, to gender and gender relations as socially constructed and historically specific, to reflexivity and the inclusion of the researcher and the research process as researchable topics, and to the emancipation of women’

As explained, this PhD incorporates social constructionism and a political aim to better the position of its research subjects. Reflexivity concerning the research process will be addressed in the methodological section. With regards to the focus on women’s lived experiences, however, I chose to include male perspectives on sexualization. Because women’s (and girls’) lived experiences are partly defined by their interaction with men and boys, and because male gender roles are similarly socially constructed and prescriptive (Allen, 2003; Buckingham and Bragg, 2004; Rey, 2013; Vogel et al., 2014; Sedgwick, 2016), this PhD does not limit itself to a focus on the female experience alone. One might even argue that the lived experience of men and boys regarding sexualization is underrepresented in research, making their perspective a salient topic from a feminist point of view. This is especially true since there seems to be indication that boys and men are becoming increasingly sexualized (Rohlinger, 2002; Slater and Tiggemann, 2010; Hatton and Trautner, 2011). Gender roles are forever shifting (Hatton and Trautner, 2011; Summers and Miller, 2014), and our understanding of those shifts will be more complete if we analyze hegemonic femininity next to (and in dialogue with) hegemonic masculinity.

### ***(Post)feminism and the agency debates***

Still, the lasting relevance of the debate on sexualization is best understood when linked to the female experience, from a feminist perspective. Despite the evolution of gender roles, hegemonic femininity still revolves around sexual availability, with personal worth being tied to ornamental value (Bartky, 1990; Duke and Kreshel, 1998; Braun, Tricklebank and Clarke,

2013). In a way, sexualization has become almost a symbol of the position of girls and women today, who are caught somewhere between feminism and postfeminism. Sexualization's position is equally contested. (Post)feminist studies on sexualization often come back to one central issue: how to theorize individual participation in sexualized culture with regards to the agency 'pendulum' (in the words of Gill, 2007a), meaning the debate between (post)feminists who prioritize agency/empowerment angles, versus those that focus on structure/objectification. This debate was clearly exemplified by the exchange between Duits and van Zoonen (2006) and Gill (2007b). Duits and van Zoonen argued that the diversity of the ways in which girls interact with sexuality and sexualization demonstrated individual agency, and demanded for sexy fashion choices to be analyzed as speech acts. Gill, however, countered that structural sexualization shows its dominance over personal empowerment in how similarly girls express their sexuality. According to Gill, Duits and van Zoonen's neoliberal concept of self-expression is not truly free, because it is always limited by (or in interaction with) patriarchal ideology, which promotes a narrow form of sexuality. Gill agrees with Duits and van Zoonen that girl behavior is too often problematized from a moral (judgmental) point of view rather than a political (feminist) one, but she expresses concern that scholars might lose sight of the sexist cultural anchoring of the subject, when they stress agency too much.

Indeed, the neoliberal, postfeminist discourse of empowerment through sexuality/sexualization seems to provide a desirable subject position to many girls and women (Kearney, 2015), raising the question whether sexual objectification has evolved into sexual subjectification (Gill, 2003), which replaces the male gaze with a female self-policing gaze rather than eliminating it. Today's hegemonic femininity is not primarily about meekness and marriage, but about girl power: embracing feminine consumption and sexual self-discovery (Vares, Jackson and Gill, 2011; Evans and Riley, 2014; Kearney, 2015). Referring back to Foucault (1988), these elements of new femininity have become potential components in our 'technologies of the self, which permit individuals a (...) way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness' (p. 18). However, research has also shown that certain girls, at certain times, prefer distancing themselves from sexualization. They explore the discursive room created by hegemonic expectations of asexuality during childhood (Rysst, 2010), call upon freedom of religion (Duits, 2008), or even use slutshaming and the 'good girl' (Walkerdine, 1998) subject position to free

themselves of sexual connotations (Jackson and Vares, 2015). The fact that the sexualizing discourse is just one of many discourses that young people can draw upon when doing identity work, exposes its contingency and instability. This creates room for contradiction, exploration and, indeed, agency, calling for a way of thinking that moves beyond the agency versus objectification binary.

### ***Empowerment versus structure: new ways of thinking***

Evans, Riley and Shankar (2010) suggest a way to explore this space between empowerment and oppression through the idea of 'technologies of sexiness'. Building on Foucault's (1988) aforementioned technologies of the self, Evans et al. describe contemporary female sexual subjectivities as 'technologically mediated consumer-oriented subjectivities' (p. 118), underlining how feminism and consumer culture have become interlinked in neoliberal postfeminism. Sexualized technologies can be an instrument to women who use certain cultural artefacts, traditionally associated with patriarchy and objectification, to produce new meanings by performing liberation and empowerment (Evans, Riley and Shankar, 2010). They illustrate this with the example of pole-dancing: a performance that is highly sexualized and loaded with patriarchal, male gaze affirming meanings. However, pole-dancing has become imbued with different connotations, thanks to its popularity as an alternative type of workout. Women enjoy the all-female atmosphere and the creative exercise it provides. In addition, reclaiming their agency over their body and sex appeal in a context that is totally free from male spectatorship, for them makes pole-dancing classes an expression of empowerment. This example illustrates how resistance and agency builds on cultural signifiers of oppression, often in dialogue with these signifiers, but it is only through its cultural and historical contextualization as objectifying that pole-dancing can become an act of resistance and happiness for the female subject. Finally, Evans et al. refer to Butler's (1990) conceptualization of performativity and destabilization to argue how performing sexualization might actually contribute to our understanding of the contingent, culturally constructed nature of female sexualization. As such, taking up pole-dancing as a sexy, postfeminist type of empowerment may lead to a destabilization of its objectifying meaning.

Renold and Ringrose (2011) have suggested another, similar conceptualization of the agency/objectification binary which is specifically relevant to a younger audience. Building on Deleuze, their notion of the relationship between the (young) female subject and

sexualization is one of anti-linear 'becomings, assemblages and schizoid subjectivities' (p. 389). According to Renold and Ringrose, girls who are coming of age move within the regulatory context of sexualization, performing different types of femininity. Girls expose and use contradictions within their discursive positioning as sexual yet innocent, making their identity a work of assemblage that is always contextually bound and permanently shifting. This allows preteen girls to move between (and at times combine) child and adult subjectivities, going back and forth depending on which cultural pushes and pulls are most salient in a given context. However, this movement is not free of aged, classed, heteronormative regulations, nor are all subject positions freely available to every young girl. This is what Renold and Ringrose define as the molar and the molecular, following Deleuze and Guatarri (1987). The molar, here, represent the macro structures or meta-narratives that constrain the subject, structures that are rarely challenged. The molecular symbolizes the small, everyday rebellions (Steinem, 1984) that challenge the molar, possibly exposing its culturally constructed (and thus malleable) nature.

These two new ways of feminist thinking about the movements and spaces between freedom and structure influenced my own conceptualization of the relationship between (media) sexualization and its preteen audience. This is most apparent in chapters four and five, where I investigate the identity work (or technologies of the self) of fifteen preteen boys and girls in interaction with structural restrictions based on age, gender and sexuality.

### **Sociological Childhood Studies**

In keeping with the social constructionist paradigm, I approach the category of 'child' or 'preteen' as socially constructed, just like the concept 'girl' or 'boy'. This positions my PhD within the sociological strand of Childhood Studies, which sees children as active agents, and childhood as a historically and culturally specific feature of social structure (James and Prout, 2015: p.iix). Of course, the social construct of childhood does not exist outside of biology – childhood can generally be distinguished from adulthood based on developmental characteristics. However, the cultural and temporal specificity of the meaning of childhood exposes that biology is only one factor (Wyness, 2006; Fass, 2013; Corsaro, 1997). The socially constructed nature of childhood can easily be exposed by taking a look at what 'child' and 'adult' as concepts and roles mean in a society. For example, in Western countries like France, the UK, Germany or the U.S., one legally becomes an accountable adult with the

right to vote at 18, but this threshold has been subject to profound change throughout history (James 1960), without a steadfast link to shifts in developmental characteristics. In other cultures, like those where physical labor is still the main source of a livelihood, children can make the transition to maturity from the moment they are physically able to work.

Young people, such as the preteens that are the focus of this PhD, occupy a special position in contemporary Western society, especially when discussed in relation to sexual subjects such as sexualization. Children are often positioned discursively as a symbol of innocence and purity (Duchinsky, 2013; Egan and Hawkes, 2013; Fass, 2013). Sexuality is arguably the most fraught differentiation point that separates childhood from adulthood, and one that is clearly loaded with morality rather than developmental considerations. For example, legally one can have heterosexual intercourse from the age of 16 in the UK, but one has to be 18 to have legal homosexual intercourse (Wyness 2006). In addition, the specific intersections of variables such as gender, ethnicity and social class further differentiate the way childhood and sexualization are experienced by the subject. For example, sexualization is generally conceptualized as a threat to white, middle class femininity (Duchinsky, 2013), while boys are often encouraged to display sexual behavior as a proof of their heteronormative masculinity (Dennis, 2002). On the other hand, girls who are 'other' in some way (working class, early developing, or non-Caucasian) are sometimes seen as possible contaminants of 'good kids', painting the girls as lost causes that are inherently sexualized (Duits, 2008). One could argue that the recurring debate on the disappearance of 'true childhood', whatever that may mean, has significant overlaps with a fear of sexualization as exposing children to too much, too soon (see also: Fass, 2013; Cook, 2002; Kaiser and Huun, 2002; Jenks, 1997). This makes sociological childhood studies an invaluable framework when studying sexualization in relation to preteens. This theoretical position requires a type of research that allows children's voices to be heard about their own experiences and feelings of (dis)empowerment (Wyness, 2006; Cook, 2002), which is something I incorporated in my research.

### **Communication studies vs. Media studies**

Finally, the work done in this PhD is best understood by considering how it builds on complementary insights and methodologies from both the communication studies domain, as well as the media studies domain. While this dissertation's firm basis in cultural studies

aligns it more strongly with the theoretically driven, small-scale, qualitative research tradition of media studies, certain aspects of the central research question were deemed better suited to a large-scale, systematic, statistical approach typical of communication studies (McQuail, 2005). In addition, since the feminist structure versus agency debate mentioned earlier is so central to the framework of this dissertation, there was a need to balance of questions on “what media do with people” (dominant in communication studies) and “what people do with media” (typical to media studies). While these two traditions have often been juxtaposed, contemporary studies of media and audiences sees researchers from both schools find common ground more often, resulting in valuable mixed methods research (Bryman, 2006a). With the Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model (Valkenburg and Peter, 2013), communication studies have found ways to incorporate an awareness of how the type and extent of media effects on any particular individual can be mediated and/or moderated by the specific personal characteristics and cultural positioning of that individual. An example here is the research done by this research project’s partner team at KULeuven, focusing on how early maturation and (lack of) cross-sex interactions may influence the effect of sexualizing media on preteens (Rousseau and Eggermont, 2017). Likewise, media studies has steadily moved beyond the concept of open texts carrying a seemingly endless range of polysemic messages to be read by active audiences, instead constructing meaning as a product of the “specific and located interaction between text and reader” (Livingstone, 1993, p.8). This demands a thorough contextualization of the audience in relation to the constraining workings of social structure and dominant stylistic genres.

The two theoretical schools both offer their unique assets within this dissertation. First, child sexualization has often been illustrated with seemingly extreme examples, such as sexual videogame content aimed at adults but consumed by young players (Gunter, 2014), flirty thong underwear marketed at young consumers (Merskin, 2004), or teen girls offering sexual favors in exchange for alcopop drinks (Duits and de Bruyckere, 2013). This has underlined the need for more research that investigates how prevalent sexualization really is, and how it typically occurs in everyday life beyond these controversial illustrations. This issue demanded a large-scale, quantitative approach. However, since sexualization is such an intricate concept that derives much of its significance from social context, studying it only from a quantitative standpoint would pose the risk of having certain issues and

ambiguous meanings related to sexualization slip through the cracks between variables. Qualitative approaches are better suited to analyze signification processes (McQuail, 2005). Facets of both approaches come to the forefront at different stages throughout the PhD. In chapter one, I have conducted a framing analysis. This methodology is typically associated with communication studies fields such as political communication (de Vreese, 2005), but I have applied it to a topic more easily understood within media studies: discourses associated with celebrity coming of age. In contrast, chapters 4 and 5 can be fully situated within media studies. The benefit of combining the two approaches within one PhD is illustrated further by comparing how chapters two and three study the same sample of data from different perspectives, investigating sexualizing and objectifying narratives in preteen popular television narratives. While chapter two does this in a quantitative way, testing hypotheses partly based in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2002); chapter three features a deep reading of the same sample, to explore how (sexual) objectification is given meaning within popular narratives, in relation to gender roles. Both studies use the same operationalization of the core concepts, built on literature from both traditions, creating a joint perspective on how sexualization and objectification occur in popular media content. This allows for the combination of insights from both traditions, bringing the two roads together instead of continuing on a parallel journey.



## **Methodological set-up**

Revisiting the central focus of this dissertation, the five empirical chapters set out to answer one main research question: **How do sexualizing and objectifying media figure into the gendered identity work of preteen boys and girls?** Wanting to approach the subject from a variety of complementary angles, a range of different methods was used. The specific methodological steps undertaken for each study will be discussed in detail in the relating chapters, but in this section I will explain what each method added to the overarching aim of the PhD.

### **Textual analysis**

The first three chapters of this PhD concern textual analyses. While the first focuses on meaning creation by media and audiences, chapters two and three focus exclusively on media content.

### **Quantitative content analysis**

As mentioned earlier, discussion on (media) sexualization often focuses on extreme examples, creating the impression that academic and popular debate is far removed from the real mediated context of young audiences. This is why I chose to conduct an objective, systematic, rigorous investigation of the prevalence of different types of sexual, sexualizing and objectifying media content within the most popular media consumed by preteens. In addition, I wanted to establish whether the sexualization of young people (and girls) in particular was as apparent within popular media as some voices (e.g. Durham, 2008) may suggest. These aims resulted in the second chapter of this PhD, which was a collaborative effort alongside the KULeuven research team. As Krippendorff (2013) writes, content analysis is an ‘empirically grounded method, exploratory in process’, ideally suited to establish the prevalence of sexualization in preteen popular media content. Quantitative content analysis in particular offers important benefits such as the possibility to make reliable and valid statistical inferences about prevalence of a certain issue in the population and to draw correlational links between variables (Bryman, 2001; Krippendorff, 2013; Riffe, Lacy and Fico, 2005) such as gender, young age and sexualization.

However, in our combination of insights from both (behaviorist media psychology and cultural studies) research teams, we also made an effort to overcome common limits of

quantitative content analyses of media sexualization, such as the fact that many researchers simply count occurrences of sexualization (e.g. Herbozo et al., 2004; APA, 2007; Aubrey and Frisby, 2011; Goodin, Van Denburg, Murnen and Smolak, 2011). However, popular media especially are saturated with rich, often conflicting meanings (Fiske, 1987), leading to one specific scene being open to multiple readings (Hall, 1980b). Bringing these concerns into the research setup was not a straightforward undertaking, considering the fact that quantitative content analysis demands explicit, clearly specified research questions and coding books (Bryman, 2001). However, by adding narrative contextualization to the codebook, it became possible to assess whether sexualization was being shown as having consequences – be it negative, positive or a mix of the two. Anticipating audience interpretation of the portrayal of sexualization, and building on Bandura’s social learning theory (2002), it was thought likely that simply showing sexualization within a narrative would not have the same meaning or impact as showing sexualization being rewarded. In addition, we coded for conflicting messages such as a character being sexually objectified by another character, while also clearly objecting to that treatment. As such, the quantitative content analysis became more closely related to a deep reading of the material, insofar that was possible while still adhering to the basic methodological principles of quantitative research.

### **Qualitative content analysis**

The literature review on sexualization, done in preparation for the quantitative codebook, made it apparent that sexualization is too broad a concept, and that it functions better when broken up in different components (namely sexual content, sexualization and sexual objectification). In addition, the analysis raised the question of why sexual forms of objectification are so often the focus of scientific attention, while non-sexual objectification is generally looked over. To further explore and contrast the narrative meanings of sexual vs. non-sexual objectification raised in the quantitative content analysis, these concepts were investigated in chapter three through a qualitative, deep reading of the same data set used in chapter two. This also allowed for further exploration of the ways in which narratives can handle morally loaded issues such as objectification in many different ways, be it normalizing, promoting or condemning (Daalmans et al., 2014). Qualitative content analysis is especially suited to aims of ‘*verstehen*’ (McQuail, 2005) such as delving into the social and cultural meaning of a theme such as sexualization within popular narratives. Contextualizing

sexualization and objectification within narratives also stresses the importance of seeing sexualization not as a state of being, but as a discourse that texts (and audiences) can call upon to create meanings (and build identities). Again referring to Ang (1996), a common pitfall of qualitative research in media studies is its failure to be systematic. I anticipated on this issue by basing the qualitative coding guideline on the same extensive, explicit codebook operationalization used in chapter two. This also allowed for a type of triangulation by using the same measuring instrument on the same data set, but through a different methodological approach (Bryman, 2006b).

Finally, qualitative content analysis contributed a political layer to the textual readings featured in this PhD; The way the qualitative content analysis was conducted had some things in common with discourse analysis perspectives as defined by Gill (2000: p. 173) which manifests: 'a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge'; an understanding of our world as 'historically and culturally specific'; a view of knowledge as 'defined by social processes'; and 'a commitment to exploring the ways that knowledges (...) are linked to actions/practices'. This was especially relevant where chapter three considered questions of how gender, power and identity relate to sexualization and objectification. Media texts are a product of the cultural framework in which they are encoded, and thus relate to the power structures within that culture. This critical, political angle was not as easily incorporated in the quantitative content analysis, making the two methodologies complementary in this regard.

### **Framing analysis**

Finally, I used a specific subtype of qualitative content analysis to investigate how childhood, adulthood and coming of age are given meaning by media and audiences in contemporary Western culture. The analysis featured in chapter one focuses on celebrity news websites, because celebrities provide a forum for society to discuss social and ethical themes (Dyer, 1986; Butler Breese, 2010), and interactive comment sections today allow audiences to become active creators of meaning, bolstering or possibly challenging hegemonic discourses (Couldry, 2009). Putting the meaning making processes within and through media at the forefront allowed me to establish how media factor into discussions of 'appropriate' childhood, adulthood and coming of age, and how media and audiences discuss instances where those boundaries of appropriateness are crossed. Starting out with an exploration of

the socially constructed nature of childhood and age-related life stage transitions also functioned as a good starting point for the rest of this PhD, by putting the focal point on the contingency of age related moral boundaries. In addition, the paper investigated differences between how young audiences (and their media) constructed childhood, adulthood and coming of age; versus how adult audiences (and their media) did so. This revealed how these categories have different meanings to different age groups. To address the lack of systematic analysis that troubles much of qualitative research (Ang, 1996), and facilitate a large scale reading of celebrity news and comments on childhood, adulthood and coming of age, framing analysis was chosen as the appropriate methodological approach.

Framing analysis is a method that has been generally associated with analyses of political communication (de Vreese, 2005) rather than typical humanities subjects such as celebrities (Claessens, 2013). However, research has shown that it can also be a valuable approach for research on celebrity news, especially when it concerns morally loaded topics (Van den Bulck and Claessens, 2012) such as coming of age (McCallum, 1999). Entman (1993, p. 52) defines framing as selecting 'some aspects of a perceived reality' and making 'them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' for a particular issue. This allows the researcher to reveal 'structurally unified meaning within a larger message' (Fields, 1988, p. 1984). Frames are meta-communicative messages that are manifested through framing devices such as metaphors, symbols, stereotypes, or choices in word or image (Pan and Kosicki, 1993), and dominant frames shed light widely held norms and beliefs. According to Entman (1993), frames generally include four reasoning devices: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. When different texts or communications use the same sets of reasoning devices, this indicates the existing of a shared frame. The framing analysis was especially suited to uncover widely held meta-narratives with regards to (coming of) age, and to establish how gender, sexuality and agency factored into the debate.

After this set of textual analyses, attention turned to how sexualization is received by audiences.

## **Reception: critical ethnography**

Making the jump from textual readings to reception analysis, there were some main concerns that influenced the selection of methodology. The questions that needed to be answered here were manifold: how relevant is sexualization in preteen girls' and boys' lives? What meaning does (media) sexualization have to these children? How does it factor into their social world, and what function does it have with regards to empowerment or disempowerment? If sexualization plays a role in these children's identity work, how so? In addition, the sensitive topic and the possible vulnerability of the participants posed some issues: how to study sexualization without asking the children about it explicitly and thus biasing results? Would my positioning as an adult woman make the children apprehensive towards me, or less likely to open up? How could I get to the 'real' prominence and prevalence of sexualization in the lived experiences of these children while influencing the situation as little as possible through my presence? Since the research would concern children, a frequently disempowered group, it also seemed of primordial importance that the research would incorporate an awareness of (struggles over) power and power imbalances – between adults and children, as well as between the children. After careful consideration, I decided on a combination of three complementary methodological approaches to underpin (in case of the media use survey) and supplement (in case of the observations and interviews) the textual analyses. These all functioned as components in a critical ethnography: an ethnography that 'begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular *lived* domain' (Madison, 2012: p.5).

### **Media use survey**

Before moving on to the investigation of the prevalence and use of sexualization within the media content consumed by among preteens, it was necessary to first establish what types of media content were actually most popular among the studied audience group. Text analyses concerned with sexualization in youth media diets have focused on genres such as age specific programming (Aubrey and Harrison, 2004), music videos (Aubrey and Frisby, 2011) or advertisements (Rohlinger, 2002; Gill, 2009), but barring exceptions (e.g. Herbozo et al, 2004), scholars have rarely first established the actual media habits of the studied audience. However, just because a text exists, does not mean that a particular audience group consumes it or attributes high values to its messages. To address this issue, a

questionnaire featuring an extensive list of popular TV-shows, movies, music groups, videogames, magazines, books and apps/websites was compiled. The data were gathered by means of a two-step sampling method. During the first stage, systematic sampling was done by choosing every n'th element from a previously compiled list containing Flemish secondary schools. Principals, teachers and pupils were thoroughly informed on the research process, and the rights and privacy of the respondents.

By the end of this stage, the sampling frame consisted of 10 schools from different educational and geographical backgrounds. During the ultimate survey, all willing students who had obtained parental consent were asked to fill in a pencil and paper questionnaire. Participants were informed on the confidentiality of their answers before they started completing the survey. This approach resulted in total sample of 401 questionnaires. The children were asked to tick the boxes of the media they consumed, and write down how often they did so, how much they enjoyed these media, and to add any favorites that were not included. Since the researcher was present and available for questions while the students filled in the questionnaires, the used procedure has some similarities to the structured interview in that the respondents were not completely left to their own devices, and the researcher could clarify sections that confused the children. However, the anonymity that is offered by a self-administered questionnaire is preferable to a structured interview because this eliminates interviewer effects such as anxiety over providing the wrong answer, or the respondent answering in a socially desirable fashion (Bryman, 2001). Another advantage offered by the self-administered survey is that it allowed the respondents to work at their own pace, for example going back and forth between the answers if, at a later time, they remembered a favorite media text they had forgotten to mention.

After compiling the results, it became apparent that for these preteens, television was the medium that was most prominent in their lives, and the one they were most invested in. This survey formed the basis for the content analyses featured in chapters two and three.

### **Participatory Observation**

The main issue that needed to be explored with regards to reception, was how preteens interact with contrasting discourses of compulsory asexuality versus the pressures of

sexualization, meaning that sexualization would be placed in the context of conflicting cultural pushes and pulls. However, I anticipated one major issue that needed to be circumvented. Research on sexuality poses the risk of circular reasoning: rather than first establishing whether sexuality actually is prominent in the behaviors and social lives of individual children, research often simply assumes so a priori, based on the literature on sexualization. Convinced of the necessity of an unbiased perspective on the preteen experience, I made efforts to let the participants lead the research process instead of asking them to focus on sexuality. Participatory observation offered the perfect methodological set-up because I, as the researcher, would immerse myself in the social world of the preteens rather than inviting them into the artificial context of scientific research (Bryman, 2001). Since the subject of sexuality is often felt to be taboo, observation offered the unique benefit of being able to witness 'deviant activities (Bryman, 2001: p. 328) such as foul language, sexual play and sexual bullying, which the children often kept hidden from teachers and parents. Another asset of participatory observation is that it challenges the hierarchical relationship between researcher and subject, as it positions the researcher as part of the group rather than its leader (Kesby 2000; Clark et al, 2009), which seemed ideally suited to try and overcome power laden boundaries between the preteen research subjects and me as an adult researcher.

Since I wanted to step into the world of the children, finding the appropriate setting for the observations was key. After-school care offered the unique benefit of being a type of liminal space between the constant monitoring by teachers at school and the carefully defined role the child has at home (Mayal, 1994), allowing the children discursive space to negotiate social norms and do identity work outside of the more familiar contexts (Beech, 2010). Carefully considering my own position as a researcher, I made efforts to avoid the authoritative role associated with grown-ups, dressing trendy and casual, and adopting the 'grown-up girl' image (Duits 2008, p.65). This subject position embodies a liminality that is also found in the preteen life stage: like preteens occupy the discursive space between childhood and adolescence, the 'grown-up girl' is adult in age, but exhibits behaviors that still make her relatable to preteen respondents. My approach was effective, as the children mentioned multiple times that I seemed much younger than I was, even once discussing whether I qualified as a 'girl' or a 'woman'.

Wanting to stress the agency of the children rather than talk over them by going straight to parents or teachers, the respondents themselves were addressed when setting up the research, instructed on the project, and asked whether they were interested in collaborating. Making the effort not to bias results towards (or away from) sexualization but still adequately inform the children that they were participants in a study, the children were simply informed that I would be observing their interactions and that I was interested in their media use. The boys and girls who returned a consent form, signed by themselves and a parent, were accepted as participants. The research set-up, information leaflet and consent forms were ethically approved by the EAHSW committee for ethical research at the University of Antwerp. The studied group comprised 15 children, which was a small sample but offered the benefit that I was able to build mindful rapport (Madison, 2012: p. 39) with each of the children. This friendly relationship built on comfort and trust was necessary considering how I hoped the children would disclose their thoughts and feelings on sensitive subjects to me. I spent five months with the children, which is the time needed before I felt I had reached theoretical saturation (Bryman, 2001: p. 303). I met the children three times a week, setting up alternately in the teacher's lounge (which had a computer with internet), the school gym, and the playground. The children preferred the school gym because they had room and equipment to play freely after sitting still at their desks all day, and I usually let them decide what we would be doing. I took abbreviated notes during these sessions of participatory observation whenever the children were occupied amongst themselves (making my observation of them overt (Bryman, 2001: p.292), but would also often be included in the interactions which meant that I jotted down memory aids to help me write out the full interaction at the earliest convenience. Following Bryman's (2001: p.299) definition of the four possible roles of the ethnographer, my position placed me somewhere between 'participant-as-observer' and 'observer-as-participant'. My position as adult made it impossible for me to fully become a participant among the preteens, but I was closer to them than the observer-as-participant role seems to indicate. However, being part of the action posed one issue: I was rarely able to quote the children at verbatim in my field notes, while letting the preteens' voices be heard was a primary aim. This was remedied by the second method I used: recorded, unstructured interviews.

## **Qualitative interviews**

In order to be able to use the exact wordings of the preteens in the write-up of the results, interviews were set up towards the end of the observations. Conducting the interviews at a later point offered the added benefit of basing the interview themes and questions firmly in the observations, enabling me to work inductively (Bryman, 2001: p. 504) and further explore those observations that appeared meaningful instead of starting from strictly theoretical considerations. While I did not address sexual topics on my own initiative during the observations (so as not to bias research results) after some months with them I felt confident enough in my knowledge of the interests and behaviors of the children to specifically address these topics of interest during the interviews, without imposing a discourse of sexualization. In addition, the interviews functioned as a form of data triangulation to bolster the research by being able to contrast the participants' reported behaviors with my own observations of those behaviors. Another added benefit of interviewing compared to observation, is that some children felt more comfortable with one method over the other. A few of the younger boys mostly kept to themselves during the observations because they felt intimidated by the older boys, and annoyed by the girls, and both of those groups stayed close to me most of the time. In the interviews however, those younger boys felt more free to express themselves now that they had my full attention.

The interviews followed a list of topics summed up in an interview guide, but conversation flowed freely and often strayed beyond the limits set by the questions. This positioned the interview process somewhere towards the more flexible end of semi-structured interviewing (Bryman, 2001). Qualitative interviews have long been the preferential method in feminist research, because compared to the classic structured interview, it is more of a dialogue than a one-way-street. This helps overcome the power differential between research subject and interviewer (Bryman, 2001). Indeed, children often wanted to hear my opinion on the matters I addressed as well as giving their own piece of mind, and I answered their questions as straightforwardly as possible.

The children reacted in diverse ways to being recorded: some were excited because the vignette of the recorded interview reminded them of television and celebrities, prompting them to play around a bit with the recorder before settling down. Other children were more suspicious of the recorder and my interview guide and joked that I should put these away because it made them feel nervous. However, after a short, casual conversation,

all children fell into their normal interaction patterns with me and felt comfortable enough to simply talk, despite the initial reaction to the more contrived setting compared to the participatory observations. Again, this underlined the complementary value of both approaches, and how doing the observations beforehand contributed to the study in general in introducing me to the social patterns of the children, and helping the participants develop a rapport with me.

As mentioned, the interviews were recorded and transcribed as soon as possible, generally within 48 hours after the session, ensuring that non-verbal elements of the interaction were still fresh in my mind and could be included in the transcripts. Since the preteens were quite physical with each other (and me), and sometimes had difficulty expressing their opinions; making silly faces or fidgeting on the chair created an extra layer of meaning that was important to include.

## **Aims of the PhD**

Before moving on to the empirical chapters of this PhD, there are three specific ways in which this dissertation wants to prove its value for the field of sexualization research.

First of all, because of its focus on preteens as a group of interest. Compared to older teens and adults, preteens have not been adequately studied with regards to sexualization, despite this group's salience to the topic. During the preteen years, children start striving for autonomy from their parents, increasing the importance of classmates as points of reference. The significance of peers brings a fear of rejection, increasing self-awareness, with preteens being careful not to step out of line, for example by behaving in a way that transgresses gender norms. One coping strategy that young people adopt is intensified gender learning: a preoccupation with picking up characteristics that set apart girls from boys. Many of these characteristics have a sexual undercurrent, like girls being positioned as attractive (sexual) objects and boys as aggressive pursuers. As such, pre-adolescence is a developmental period crucial to the formation of gender roles and gendered sexual scripts, creating a need for information and knowledge about gender, sexuality and interactions between men and women. As this information is often insufficiently supplied by parents, preteens rely on other sources for sexual information. Preteens are major media consumers, and mass media are an easily available source of sexual information. This makes the content of preteens' media diet with regards to sexuality and gender an important subject of study.

Second, this dissertation aims to contribute to conceptual clarity with regards to sexualization. As it stands today, sexualization research suffers from generalizations, with the concept being used to categorize a wide range of sexual behaviors and content types, often making the use of the term an expression of moral distress rather than of scientific rigor. Sexualization being used interchangeably with sexual objectification is another issue that troubles scientific progress, as the two do not always overlap. It also seems likely that sexualization holds a different cultural meaning than sexual objectification, underlining the importance of separating the two wherever possible. Additionally, while sexual objectification is an established subject of scientific interest, to our knowledge no content analysis has looked into the prevalence of explicitly non-sexual objectification in media content. Studying the types and prevalence of non-sexual objectification can help to understand how and why objectification theory is not applicable to men as it is to women.

Sexual objectification is generally linked to female gender roles, while certain types of non-sexual objectification, such as violence in sports, are more strongly linked to male gender roles, and studying non-sexual objectification might lead to a more complete understanding of objectifying media content. By addressing these complex, often highly theoretical concepts within and throughout the empirical chapters, the dissertation will develop these themes embedded in the context of preteen media and social dynamics, hopefully facilitating real life application and operationalization in future research.

Finally, the PhD's multifaceted nature is its strongest point. It will offer a combination of textual analyses and reception studies, and of perspectives of both boys and girls. More fundamentally, the specific mix of different theoretical paradigms and methodological set-ups will provide grounds for triangulation and make this dissertation an attempt at bridging the gaps between quantitative and qualitative research on sexualization. When studying media reception, the research roughly falls apart in two paradigms: one that focuses on what media do to people (the behaviorist, media psychology tradition) and the other that investigates what people do with media (the critical constructivist humanities tradition). While both traditions have done important work on the subject of sexualization, theoretical contributions from either side rarely acknowledge work done by the other faction. As a researcher, it remains difficult to bridge this gap, bring together theories, arguments, methodologies and concepts from both paradigms, and find an outlet for publishing. This means that literature that combines insights from these two schools of thought is few and far between, resulting in a fragmented body of work on sexualization. This dissertation is pragmatic rather than dogmatic in its approach, picking and combining those theoretical frameworks and methodologies best suited to answering every part of the central research question. For example, child sexualization has often been illustrated with seemingly extreme examples. This underlines the need for quantitative approaches that establish how prevalent sexualization actually is in child media, as well as qualitative approaches that assess what types of sexualization typically occur, how these are framed within media, and how audiences assign meaning to sexualization as a part of their lived experiences. By incorporating facets of all relevant methodologies and theoretical frameworks, this dissertation values pragmatics and eclecticism over paradigmatic purity, creating a holistic understanding of the relevance of sexualization in preteen lives.

# **Chapter 1. Blossoming Beauty or Unhinged Teen? Media and audiences discussing celebrity coming of age.**

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## **Summary**

This first empirical chapter investigates the culturally constructed meanings of childhood, adulthood and coming of age, by exploring some of the contemporary discourses on these topics, as featured by Western audiences and media. This functions as a basis for the following chapters by providing insight in the ways in which variables such as age, gender and social class intersect and influence how we perceive other people’s identities, and how (un)free we are in our own identity construction. News about young celebrities and audience comments on these stories were subjected to a framing analysis, a method classically associated with studies of political communication. This approach is especially suited to systematically analyze larger samples of data, providing methodological rigor to a topic that is rarely researched in this structural way.

## **Abstract**

Seeking to understand how celebrity behavior is used by media and audiences to negotiate age-appropriateness and (un)successful age transitions, this paper analyses coming of age in celebrity culture as discussed on age-specific celebrity gossip websites. This study builds on insights from celebrity studies, social constructionism and intersectional feminism regarding age and gender as power structures. One constructed week of articles (N = 668) and comments (N = 5302) on celebrity gossip website JustJared and its teen spin-off JustJaredjr. is subjected to a quantitative and qualitative framing analysis. Results show that 16-20 year old celebrities hold a special position, framed as having increasing agency, but also subjected to strong scrutiny. Additionally, JustJaredjr. uses more positive frames with regards to young celebrities, while JustJared’s concern with protecting young children strips them of their agency. Finally, the framing of female coming of age is proven to be more strongly tied to sexuality.

## **Introduction**

This chapter empirically analyses treatment of celebrity coming of age stories in online celebrity gossip and audience reactions to these stories and takes into account the target audiences of these media by comparing adult and children oriented gossip websites. Coming of age involves the crossing of culturally determined and contested boundaries. In the case of celebrities, coming of age happens under the watchful eye of media and audiences that comment extensively on this transition. To give but one example of a comment referring to the outfits of young, female celebrities: 'Lets [sic] go to a teen choice awards and wear clothes like a \*\*\*\*, tramp. [...] No wonder why many kids now are all messed up'. The example suggests that celebrity coming of age stories are fraught with cultural meaning. They revolve around (un)successful personal growth or maturation, around shifting relationships with others, society and the outside world (McCallum 1999, p. 3), and thus allow audiences to discuss which transitional behaviour is considered appropriate or transgressive. Analysing news items and online reactions on celebrity gossip website JustJared and its teen spin-off JustJaredjr, we aim to create a better understanding of how media and audiences use celebrity behaviour to negotiate childhood and maturity, age-appropriateness, transgressions and '(un)successful' age transitions. In addition, discussion of young audiences often revolves around whether or not they are passive media consumers or active readers, but little attention is paid to how exactly young people interact with narratives that attribute meaning to their identity as child, adolescent or emerging adult. We address this issue by investigating how coming of age stories are received and interpreted by young audiences of celebrity gossip media, compared to adult audiences.

## **Appropriateness and transgression in celebrity coming of age**

### **A multitude of childhoods**

The contemporary Western construct of childhood contains a multitude of, often contradictory, meanings and discourses (Alanen 1988, Corsaro 1997, Cook 2002, Fass 2013). These range from, at one extreme, children as innocent, as inherently good and in need of protection from corrupting influences such as violent videogames, sexuality or the downfall of traditional family values, to, at the other extreme, children as little savages in need of control and discipline, for example in media coverage of juvenile delinquency or truancy. In

any case, the contemporary Western construct of childhood revolves strongly, in a positive sense, around innocence and freedom of responsibilities, or, in a negative sense, around children's powerlessness and inability to shape their own interpretation of being a child (Wyness 2006). 'Appropriate' childhood behaviour, i.e. a child acting according to the set of expectations that lead to social acceptance, is a social construct determined by adults and wider society. Cultural narratives about childhood, about how children (should) behave and about how they are (to be) treated by adults and society, are further determined by intersecting variables like gender, social class, ethnicity or age (Kwon 1994). They establish what it means, not just to be a child, but to be a boy or a girl, a black a white child, a poor or a rich kid, and they affect the meaning of innocence and of (in)appropriate child behaviour (e.g. Robinson and Davies 2008). As a result, even within one cultural and temporal setting, there are many different childhoods or, as Wyness (2006, p. 20) notes: 'if childhood has to be situated within specific discourses, then different discourses generate different childhoods'.

### **Coming of age: transition and transgression**

If childhood is about innocence and lack of agency, coming of age or adolescence, is about transitioning into a subject, i.e. into 'an individual's sense of personal identity as a subject – in the sense of being subject to some measure of external coercion - and as an agent – that is, being capable of conscious and deliberate thought and action (McCallum 1999, p. 4). This is a complex process as it involves not just individual development but the crossing of culturally determined and contested boundaries, thus touching upon and potentially disrupting the balance of the cultural make-up of a society. Being an adolescent thus becomes an exercise in balancing the social expectations that came with child identity with those that arise from (young) adult identity. This exercise can result in what others and society at large consider as either appropriate or transgressive, disruptive coming of age behaviour. While appropriateness refers to the set of expectations that lead to social acceptance and is equated with 'morally good' (O'Connor 2008, p. 79), transgression and disruption involves behaviour that results in a person identifying with or being identified as 'other' or 'outsider' in relationship to cultural expectations or social structures (McCallum 1999, p. 100) and is considered morally bad. Rules of appropriateness outline the boundaries of social identities, represent the obligations one has to fulfil when trying to attain or retain group membership and 'are followed because they are seen as natural, rightful, expected

and legitimate' (March and Olsen 2004, p.3), Transgressions, conversely, contest social codes about appropriate behaviour and, according to McCallum (1999, p. 121), can result in society reasserting its social codes but also in the modification of cultural boundaries.

### **Celebrity gossip and coming of age**

If coming of age is a complex period of transition and negotiation in a person's life, celebrity adolescents have to go through this under the keen scrutiny of media and audiences. This is part of a wider cultural practice whereby mediated communication about celebrities' ideas and behaviour provides a forum for media and audiences to discuss social and ethical themes, evaluating celebrities as positive or negative role models (Dyer 1986, Rojek 2001, Turner 2004, Butler Breese 2010, Van den Bulck and Claessens 2013a). Celebrity gossip often features young celebrities or celebrity off-spring such as Suri Cruise or Miley Cyrus and celebrity gossip websites focus specifically on young celebrities (JustJared 2008). As such, celebrity gossip provides fertile ground to analyse mediated discussion about childhood, growing up and coming of age. What is more, interactive and social media today allow audiences to become active creators of meaning (Couldry 2009), prompted by media messages but forming their own, socially negotiated interpretations that do not necessarily overlap with media producers' intended meaning. In short, media offer various possibilities for audiences to discuss what is considered age-appropriate behaviour and what childhood means in our society, articulating, questioning and helping to set norms and expectations in this regard. As O'Connor's (2008) analysis of the mediated construction of the child star illustrates, the dominant media discourse surrounding celebrity childhood is that of an exceptional life in which fame and fortune, often the result of meddling (bad) parents, makes for an 'abnormal' childhood, which 'inevitably' leads to disaster in adult life (O'Connor 2008: 67-71). While O'Connor does not go into coming of age, her analysis suggests a moral condemnation by media, audiences and society of what is bound to be a transgressive, disruptive rather than appropriate coming of age of celebrity children.

In this chapter, we empirically analyses treatment of celebrity coming of age stories in online celebrity gossip and audience reactions to these stories. In doing so, we want to take into account the age of the media's target audience. The study of children's media is often solely motivated by concerns regarding inappropriate content corrupting children (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 2003). We wish to rectify this as we consider children's

media to be just as layered, stimulating and thought-provoking as adult media (McCallum 1999) and children, like adults, to be not just passive media consumers but creators of culture and meaning (Roche 1999: 478-9). Therefore, the analysis includes articles and audience reactions collected both from a website targeting adult audiences (JustJared) and a website targeting younger audiences (JustJaredjr.).

### **Selecting a corpus for analysis: What age adolescence?**

JustJared is in Yahoo's top ten Bloggers Roll, with a monthly reach of 3.3 million unique visitors, surpassing other prominent celebrity gossip websites such as PerezHilton and Jezebel (Heyman 2011). Its jr. counterpart is aimed explicitly at adolescents ([www.twitter.com/justjaredjr](http://www.twitter.com/justjaredjr)). JustJared consciously avoids negativity and scandal, opting for a more positive, youth-appropriate style ([www.justjared.com/about/](http://www.justjared.com/about/)) which is rather rare for celebrity news (Van den Bulck and Claessens 2013b). JustJared and JustJaredjr. are updated regularly with about 60 new articles per day each. The websites offer possibilities for readers to post reactions.

During one constructed week in August 2013, all articles posted on JustJared and JustJaredjr, were collected, along with the first fifty comments in response to these articles. Each article and comment mentioning a young celebrity was selected and submitted to further analysis (see below), resulting in a corpus of 353 articles (143 JustJared, 210 JustJaredjr.) and 1459 comments (1060 JustJared, 399 JustJaredjr.). The cut-off age for young celebrity was set at 25. Generally, in Western cultures, a 25 year-old is no longer considered a child. However, there are several reasons for this high age limit. First, higher education has extended childhood and adolescence, keeping young people from fully being accepted into the 'adult' world (Thorne 1993). Theorists like Arnett (2000) state that cultural changes have made the late teens-early twenties life stage not merely a period of transition towards adulthood but a 'distinct period of the life course, characterized by [...] exploration' (p. 469) which he labels emerging adulthood. Second, teenagers in important teen franchises are often played by actors that are slightly older than the characters they play as a result of child labour laws and real life aging that is not replicated by on screen characters. For example, 29 year-old US actress Troian Bellisario plays the part of a 17-year-old high school student in ABC Family's hit series *Pretty Little Liars*. Finally, setting the age limit at 25 allows for an analysis of transitions from childhood to fully accepted adulthood through all the stages of

coming of age, including those last years when a person may be considered an adult officially, but the construct of youthfulness still influences their image.

### **Looking for latent norms and frames**

Analysing articles and comments dealing with young celebrities, we looked for explicit and implicit structures of meaning and focused specifically on the issues of appropriateness and transgression. These concepts were used as a compound term to encompass any type of reference to and evaluation of norms, expectations and boundaries that guide the behaviour of young celebrities, and references to how these celebrities adhere to them (or not). An example of a comment analysed as making an explicit statement on what behaviour is considered normal, is: 'This is a good girl, young people fall in love is very normal. There is nothing to fuss' (reaction to JustJaredjr 2013a, about UK actress Bonnie Wright, 22). An example of a more implicit reference to social codes is: 'Glad to see he isn't taking any fashion advice from the,"Bieber want to be" Cyrus'. (reaction to JustJared 2013a, about Australian actor Liam Hemsworth, 23). Here, the normative dimension is exposed by placing it in context: 'Cyrus' refers to Hemsworth's then fiancée Miley Cyrus, whose sense of style was frequently criticized throughout the sample for being 'tacky' and inappropriately sexualized or masculine (cf. infra). If an article or comment contained a statement on how a young celebrity ought (not) to be(have), we selected and analysed the entire thread so that no contextual meaning was lost in the process of analysis.

To overcome the lack of systematic analysis of much qualitative research (Ang 1996), to have a tool that reveals 'a structurally unified meaning within a larger message' (Fields 1988, p. 184), and to ensure an analysis that discusses content in a wider sociocultural context, articles and comments were subjected to framing analysis. According to Entman (1993, p. 52):

*To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.*

A frame serves as a meta-communicative message that displays itself in a text through various framing devices, including word or image choice, metaphors, symbols and

stereotypes (Pan and Kosicki 1993) and recurring frames refer to wider held norms and beliefs in society. Frames have four functions or reasoning devices: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation (Entman 1993). Comments or articles showing the same set of reasoning devices indicate the use of an overarching frame. After the frames were constructed, they were given a recognisable name, evocative of the cultural attitude, trope, myth or belief they expressed. The name of each frame was actively deliberated by the three researchers to ensure that for people sharing the same cultural framework, each name evokes the exact meaning and the values it represents without them necessarily having to know all the examples the frame is based on. Finally, the resulting frames were compared and interpreted using relevant literature on socially constructed childhood.

**Framing coming of age**

Analysing all articles and comments regarding celebrity coming of age stories, a total of seven prominent frames were found (see Table 1); two frames unique to JustJared, and four frames found on both websites. All frames appeared in reference to celebrities in their late teens and early twenties and were based on audience reactions as the articles on JustJared and JustJaredjr. were decidedly formulaic (cf. supra) and rarely expressed anything beyond the neutral-to-positively presented factual celebrity news.

<b>JustJared frames</b>	<b>JustJared and JustJaredjr. shared frames</b>
The Trashy Bad Seed	Married When (S)he Should Be Having Fun
Counter-Frame: Young, Wild and Free	Counter-Frame: Leave Those Kids Alone
	The Art of Growing Up Successfully
	Thank You Mother Nature

Table 1.1: Overview frames in comments on JustJared, JustJaredJr. or both.

**The Trashy Bad Seed vs. The Young, Wild and Free**

The most dominant frame in our analysis was *The Trashy Bad Seed*, which appeared exclusively on JustJared and referred only to female adolescent celebrities. These were

presented as bad examples, negatively influencing the innocence of young children, predominantly by displaying a lack of self-control. Comments generally used the word 'trashy', linking it to scanty dress and immodest (sexual) behaviour, but the word also connotes lower social class (see Tyler and Bennett 2010), as one comment made explicit: 'No pants no hair and no class' (reaction to JustJared 2013b, about Miley Cyrus). The social class dimension is the most apparent in the regular occurrence of this frame in reference to Miley Cyrus, as Cyrus' Tennessee, country roots are often referenced in her oeuvre, for example when she used trailer park iconography in her 2009 Teen Choice Awards performance (Lamb, Graling and Wheeler, 2013). Overall, the frame has an extremely negative, sometimes even violent tone, underlining the sensitivity of the topic of childhood and sexuality in contemporary Western culture (Fass 2013).

*She looks and act (sic) like trash [...] She is the reason why certain men think all women are like that and then go and rape and kill, innocent little girls and women!! (reaction to JustJared 2013c, about Rihanna)*

Often, this frame constructs, implicitly or explicitly, a dichotomy between sexuality and appearance versus talent and career, as audience comments implied a lack of talent as the reason female celebrities show too much skin.

*I get that she's trying to get away from Hannah Montana [...] She's got talent, with music and she's not a bad actress either I just don't get why she's showing that much skin and acting up because she doesn't need to. The trashy Miley is getting a little lame at this point. (reaction to JustJared 2013d, about Miley Cyrus)*

Commenters seemed to want these celebrities to 'outgrow' their lower class background and immature coming of age behaviour by covering up and focusing on their career. We found this frame exclusively in reference to female celebrities. This exposes enduring sexual double standards, by which women exhibiting free sexual views or behaviour are seen as a threat to society, while men are not subject to such scrutiny (Crawford and Popp 2003).

While the *Trashy, Bad Seed* narrative was dominant, certain audience members, all on JustJared, reacted to such comments by used reasoning devices that analysed to construct and identify a *The Young, Wild and Free* counter-frame. Here celebrities are considered entitled to enjoy their youth during their coming of age, which includes skirting and even

pushing the boundaries of decency norms. For example, an article on Rihanna attending a carnival wearing a revealing outfit divided the audience into a dominant group of detractors fitting the *Trashy Bad Seed* frame by calling her a promiscuous, bad role model, and a smaller group of proponents stating Rihanna was free to enjoy her youth: 'Yes girl live your life. Ri is hot, young, fund (sic) and has an amazing body' (reaction to JustJared 2013c, about Rihanna, age 25). The frame evokes commonly held notions regarding adolescence as a transitional life stage that combines play and exploration with a level of subjectivity (Wyness 2006), and thus allows, in this case Rihanna, to explore herself and her options: a way of life that presumably makes her even more relatable to her adolescent fans.

### **Married [With a Kid] When (S)he Should Be Having Fun vs. Leave Those Kids Alone**

The second most common frame, found in comments on JustJared and JustJaredjr. and used in reference to both male and female celebrities, is *Married [With a Kid] When (S)he Should Be Having Fun*. This frame presents childhood and maturity as the result of nature rather than culture, as strongly bound to numerical age, and as clearly defined and separate stages with their own sets of appropriate behaviours. As such it appears to ignore the transitional aspect of coming of age. The frame occurs mainly with regards to the sample's high profile case of One Direction's (then) band member Zayn Malik's (age 20) engagement, which explains the strong link to young marriage. 'This really isn't going to last. Seriously engaged at 20, married by 21? [...] I doubt they are really grown up to make big decisions like this' (reaction to JustJared 2013e). This frame is negative in tone, clearly expressing a view of adolescents as mentally immature, denying them their right to self-determination and subjectivity by imposing if and when he/she is ready for adult (married) life. While there is sociological support for the idea of young marriage not being a good choice, with research linking it to poverty, among other negative outcomes (Dahl 2010), comments that fit this frame were more concerned with guarding the boundaries between what is appropriate for a young person versus what is appropriate for an adult: '20 is too young to be married' (reaction to JustJared 2013e). Commenters make no explicit statements about at what point an individual is believed to be capable of making big decisions like getting married, but this does not keep them from asserting the idea of clear age-related boundaries that should be respected.

This frame was countered by comments expressing reasoning devices that we constructed into the *Leave Those Kids Alone* frame, again found on JustJared and JustJaredjr. and referring to male and female celebrities. It mainly appeared in comments aimed at countering others' complaints about young celebrities' inappropriate behaviour, using various strategies to prove the others wrong, for example by calling them out on their hypocrisy: 'Honestly, why do people complain when people settle down at a young age, but they also complain when people like George Clooney and Leo Dicaprio does [sic] not settle down' (reaction to JustJared, 2013e, about Zayn Malik). Another strategy used in the same thread was to accuse the other commenter of being a bad fan. 'TO EVERY HATER: if you are REALLY a Directioner, you would be happy for Zayn'. At first sight, this frame seems to question adult and child categories as clearly delineated and to recognise age-appropriateness and transgressions as social constructs. However, the emphasis is on defending the celebrity under attack. The frame is clearly fan-driven, as the fluid dimensions of age and age-appropriateness are only used to defend the admired celebrity. Implicitly, this frame supports a more rigid notion of childhood, as the fans see the young celebrities as vulnerable and in need of protecting due to their age.

### **Thank You Mother Nature vs The Art of Growing Up Successfully**

Two less prevalent frames recognise coming of age as a transitory period but do so from two contrasting viewpoints: nature versus nurture. Analysing the reasoning devices in the comments, a *Thank You Mother Nature* frame could be constructed, presenting coming of age as a story of a former child star blossoming into a beautiful young (wo)man due to purely biological mechanisms. The tone is complimentary, if at times strongly objectifying, and the frame equates adulthood with having a mature body: 'She's really grown a nice rack. - Indeed, Little Miss Sunshine is all grow-up now 😊' (reactions to JustJaredjr. 2013b, about US actress Abigail Breslin, 17). Thorne (1993) writes about the tendency to see the maturing female body as an indication of female coming of age, even though the development of secondary sexual characteristics does not necessarily indicate psychological or social and cultural maturity. As such, the frame reduces maturity to an embodied meaning, using the body as a metaphor to simplify complex social (and psychological) processes (Gregg 2004). This can have considerable implications as such a frame is often found in media reports on

sexual violence against young girls - such as the Roman Polanski statutory rape case - where part of the perpetrator's defence is that the victim looked older than her years (Cieply 2009).

Traditionally, a focus on the physical as an indication of overall maturity has been linked to female coming of age (Thorne 1993). In our analysis the frame was mostly used in reference to female celebrities, but was also applied to male celebrities:

*At first, when she was singing I didn't notice that the drummer was Nick, and I was saying 'the drummer is so cute and sexy' so when she reveal (sic) that was him, I was so shocked, he has changed so much, I was one of the girls who thought that Joe was more attractive that (sic) Nick, but through the years Nick become more sexiast (sic) and hotter than Joe (reaction to JustJared 2013f, about US singer Nick Jonas, 20)*

This seems to support contemporary academic claims that male celebrities and male fictional characters too are increasingly sexually objectified (e.g. Rohlinger 2002).

Analysis further revealed a counter-frame to *Thankyou Mother Nature*, that we reconstructed and identified as *The Art of Growing Up Successfully*. Comments fitting this frame considered coming of age not to be the result of a maturing body but of socialization, especially of appropriate, mature, responsible and level-headed behaviour. This frame has a positive tone and, in our sample, refers mostly (but not exclusively) to male celebrities:

*I do believe that [transitioning] from child star to adult has to include many factors but the main one has to be screen presence. [...] Zac has that and he [...] growing in each role he takes. He is not [...] "phoning it in" riding on his looks alone (reaction to JustJaredjr. 2013c, about US actor Zac Efron, 25)*

The frame defines maturity as something a celebrity 'does' and, as such, be(com)ing an adult is portrayed as a performance and the adolescent as an agent developing his subjectivity. The frame echoes views on maturity as an act that constitutes identity as a discursive practice (Butler 1990, p. 33). It recognises the differences between childhood and adulthood as well as the transitionally period of adolescence, but transition is not tied to age or physical maturation but to performance. Commenters, however, clearly outline what they see as appropriate adult behaviour that celebrity must show in order to claim an adult identity. This is often done through comparison, contrasting the mature celebrity with a celebrity that is believed to have failed to act maturely: 'This beautiful girl is a lot smarter than the other

teeny boppers on this site, and certainly not ditzy or superficial' (reaction to JustJared 2013g, about US actress Kirsten Stewart, 23). Interestingly, appropriate adult behaviour for commenters revolves around two things: professionalism (see supra) and family values. The latter is illustrated by a comment referring to US actress Hilary Duff (then 25) who abandoned her career to focus on motherhood: 'I'll be darned ... a child star who turned out to be normal' (reaction to JustJared 2013h). Parenthood and having a successful career are both indications of responsibility - as opposed to freedom of responsibilities typical of childhood - and therefore of a successful completion of the transition from childhood to adulthood.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of the various meanings which JustJared and JustJaredjr. and their audiences bring to celebrity coming of age stories reveals that, especially amongst commenters, young celebrities' behaviour was strongly debated and evaluated against ideas of appropriate and transgressive behaviour, and that this differed according to gender, social class and age. Looking across the different frames we identified, it was clear that female young celebrities were under heightened scrutiny, especially with regards to their bodies and what they do with it. First, celebrity girls experimenting with sexual identities by expressing themselves in an overtly sexual manner were controversial, while discussions regarding the coming of age of celebrity boys focused mainly on responsibility: to take their career seriously and make the right life decisions at the right time. The comment sections were dominated by so-called slut-shaming that echoes a persisting cultural double standard based on a notion of female sexuality as something dirty that must be contained lest it becomes a source of pollution (Attwood 2007). While in postfeminist popular culture words like 'slut' are increasingly being reclaimed by sex-positive young women, our analysis shows that this is met with a cultural resistance that requires these young girls to balance sexiness with innocence to avoid social stigma (Ringrose 2011). Learning how to reconcile these contrasting expectations seems central to female coming of age, leading young women to develop 'schizoid subjectivities' (Renold and Ringrose 2011, p. 392), oscillating between different (a)sexual identities. This pressure seems even stronger for young women in showbusiness, who, like Miley Cyrus (Jackson and Vares 2015), need to develop a sexual image to progress professionally, making the transition from child star to full celebrity.

Second, evaluations of young celebrities, especially with regards to sexuality, often had a social class dimension. Some frames equated growing up with leaving behind childish, 'trashy' lower class behaviour. This was related to the above-mentioned prevalence in the corpus of slut-shaming: the word 'slut' originated as a derogatory name for working class women, and our analysis of especially audience reactions to self-proclaimed 'redneck' Miley Cyrus (Strecker 2014) suggests a continued presence of a relationship between social class and sexual double standards (Attwood 2007). The ideal female celebrity coming of age was presented as revolving around modesty and middle class values, while the class dimension was mostly absent from male celebrities' stories and comments. This indicates that explicit sexual behaviour is considered as typically male behaviour and only becomes 'trashy' when it is performed by (young) female celebrities, furthering the sexual double standard which describes female sexuality as ideally passive and male sexuality as ideally active. Female celebrities trespassing this gender role by expressing their sexuality in an active way, received negative feedback with a strong class subtext from audiences.

Third, analysis revealed that many legally adult celebrities in their early to mid-twenties – Arnett's (2000) emerging adults - were still discussed from a coming of age perspective. This can be explained by the fact that they often have a t(we)en following and therefore are judged for being appropriate t(w)een role models, but it also suggests that early twenties are not always fully accepted as part of adulthood in contemporary society. In fact, the latter is often used in the marketing of celebrities like 25-year-old Rihanna, whose public image is actively build on meanings associated with youth, such as freedom of responsibilities, playfulness and experimenting with sexuality and drugs, to keep her relevant to young audiences. This is problematic in two ways. First, from a celebrity perspective, because stars like Rihanna are chastised by media and audiences as if they were teenage girls dressing and behaving too provocatively, and second, from a t(ween) audience perspective, because young fans are presented with confusing role models.

These overarching observations suggest that much coming of age behaviour was considered as transgressive and was criticised for it, with commenters trying to reassert social norms and codes by identifying such transgressive behaviour as morally bad. We did find certain counter-frames that defended celebrities' coming of age behaviour. However, audiences did not challenge social norms outright, for instance by defending celebrity girls' right to experience their sexuality freely. Instead, the main argument was the celebrities'

reduced culpability, due to youthfulness. While this acknowledged coming of age as a transitional stage, defined by learning experiences, it did not suggest a real challenge of cultural normative boundaries.

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## **Chapter 2. The objectified subject: sexualization and (sexual) objectification in Flemish preteens' popular television programs.**

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### **Summary**

The second chapter focuses on quantitative textual analysis and has three important functions within this PhD. First, it provides a thorough discussion and differentiation of the concepts of sexualization and (sexual) objectification, which has been lacking in sexualization research. Second, the content analysis establishes how prevalent sexualization and the two types of objectification actually are within the most popular media consumed by preteens. This is a necessary first step before moving on to investigate the reception of sexualizing media among audiences because it clarifies what types of sexualization preteens generally encounter, and how often. Finally, this chapter is an exercise in combining insights from different theoretical paradigms, which becomes especially informative when contrasted against chapter three, which studies the same sample from a qualitative perspective.

### **Abstract**

Media effects research has confirmed that consumption of sexualizing media can have negative consequences for preteens' body image and sexual development. However, scholars have insufficiently taken into account the subtleties involved in sexualizing media. To what extent do sexual content, sexual objectification, and non-sexual objectification differ? Additionally, how prevalent are these issues in preteen popular media content? Seeking to address these questions, this article reports on a quantitative content analysis of 24 episodes from five TV-shows popular among Flemish preteens. Drawing on a sample of 465 scenes, results demonstrated that one in five scenes contained sexual behavior, and one in ten contained sexual objectification. Male characters were sexually objectified as often as female characters. Women were more often judged for their appearance, but were also more often shown treating others as objects in a non-sexual way. Results are discussed in light of objectification and social cognitive theory.

## **Introduction**

Assessing the prevalence of sexualization and objectification in preteen popular television programs, this paper strives for much needed conceptual clarity by exploring the differences between sexualization, sexual objectification and non-sexual objectification. Over the last decades, scholars have called attention to the increasing prominence of media sexualization, or the process by which people are socialized by a media environment that normalizes situations where:

“a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; a person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.” (American Psychological Association [APA], 2007, p. 1)

Most of the research (for a review, see APA, 2007 and Ward, 2016) provides consistent evidence that exposure to sexualizing media content is associated with negative body image perceptions and poor sexual health outcomes across the life span (e.g., partner-objectification in adults [Zurbriggen, Ramsey, & Jaworsky, 2007]), acceptance of traditional gendered sexual roles in adolescents [Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2014]), and decreased body esteem in preadolescents [Slater & Tiggemann, 2016]). Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) was developed as a means of explaining how individuals’, and especially women’s, daily exposure to sexually objectifying practices can result in these negative psychological outcomes. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argued that the self is a social construct, and that the way society treats individuals will be reflected in the way individuals treat and view themselves. As such, they proposed that the pervasiveness of sexual objectification in society socializes women to introject an observer’s perspective on their bodies, known as self-objectification. Self-objectification manifests as habitual monitoring of the body’s outward appearance, and has been linked to negative behavioral and experiential consequences, such as negative body image perceptions and poor sexual health outcomes (Rousseau, Beyens, Eggermont, & Vandenbosch, 2016).

Although a solid research base has explored and identified the effects of being exposed to a sexualizing media environment, scholars have not consistently taken into account the subtleties involved in sexualizing media content. As Ward (2016) states, sexualization research is troubled by conceptual ambiguity. Sexualization often appears to be conflated with objectification, while research indicates that (self-)objectification is merely one component of sexualization. In addition, Lerum and Dworkin (2009) and Holland and Haslam (2013) have questioned why objectification research has semi-exclusively focused on sexual objectification, claiming there is no clear reason why only sexual types of objectification would be problematic. We argue that conceptual clarity is a priority, especially for research on media sexualization: While the negative impact of sexually objectifying content has been established (Ward, 2016), inconsistent conceptualization poses the risk of painting sexual media content –content related to sexual roles, attitudes, fantasies, desires, values, behaviors, practices, and relationships –with too broad a brush. As Collins (2011) notes, exposure to sexual or appearance-related content should not necessarily lead to problematic body image, reduce self-esteem, or hinder the development of a healthy sexuality among preteen viewers. But it is theoretically (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Bandura, 2002) likely to have such effects if the body types portrayed are idealized, if nudity and sexiness are disproportionately characteristic of women, and if appearance-and/or sexual content suggests that women’s personal worth depends on their bodies and sex-appeal (APA, 2007).

The current content analysis aims to address these issues by explicitly distinguishing between different types of sexual media content, and between sexual and non-sexual objectification. These concepts are then empirically tested by means of a content analysis of the most popular television shows among Flemish preteens. The preteen audience segment was chosen based on the consideration that preteens are especially invested in developing schemata of (romantic) social interaction (Berk, 2006; Money, 1999). While there is certainly a link between sexualizing content and adverse outcomes such as self-objectification and body dissatisfaction (Ward, 2016), an interest in sexual media content is a normal part of healthy sexual development. This makes the variety in preteens’ sexual media diet of special interest to sexualization and objectification research.

## **Conceptual challenges of sexualization and objectification theory**

The concept of sexualization appears to have been used inconsistently in previous research. In some instances, sexualization simply refers to the amount of sexual content present in a media text (e.g., Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Jamieson, More, Lee, Busse, & Romer, 2008), even though the APA report recommends focusing specifically on sexualization rather than sexual content in general. For instance, comparing African American and White music videos, Turner (2011) concludes that African American music videos are the most sexualizing because they display sexual acts (e.g., kiss, affectionate touch, implicit intercourse) the most frequently. In other cases, sexualization refers to the increased prevalence of appearance- or body-focused content in media. For instance, in their content analysis of female self-sexualization in MySpace.com, Hall and colleagues (Hall, West, & McIntyre, 2012) refer to body display (e.g., wearing mini-skirts or short shorts) as a form of self-sexualizing behavior.

The APA report argues that sexualization differs from 'healthy' sexuality because it encompasses a person (involuntarily) being forced into an (exclusively) sexual role, thus virtually eliminating the possibility of agency and empowerment. However, as it stands today, sexualization research suffers from generalizations, with the concept being used to categorize appearance-related content as well as depictions of both explicitly problematic and seemingly innocuous instances of sexual behavior (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Gill, 2009a; Lerum & Dworkin, 2009). This creates the risk of equating possibly empowering content, such as media content that troubles the established male gaze (e.g., Mulvey, 1975) or media that feature respectful sexuality between equal partners, to obviously objectifying content that reduces a person's worth to their sexuality. This debate on the possible discursive space between objectification and empowerment remains central to feminist debate on sexualization (Duits & Van Zoonen, 2006; Gill, 2009b), underlining the importance of clear conceptualization and operationalization, respecting the variety that exists in sexual content.

We follow Collins (2011), who underlines that scholars should distinguish between neutral sexual content (content that does not promote a negative view on the body, sexuality, and sexual interactions), and sexualizing content. For example, it is hard to argue that media narratives featuring respectful sexuality between equal partners would have the same impact on viewers as repeated depictions of women only being valued for their appearance.

In addition, some researchers have used sexualization and (sexual) objectification interchangeably (Daniel & Wartena, 2011; Lindner, 2004), building their conceptualization of sexualization on Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) objectification theory. However, as mentioned earlier the APA report on the sexualization of girls (2007) states that sexual objectification is only one possible form of sexualization. Additionally, while sexual objectification is an established subject of scientific interest, to our knowledge no content analysis has looked into the prevalence of explicitly non-sexual objectification in media content. Objectification and sexual objectification are often used interchangeably (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Roberts & Gettman, 2004; Rohlinger, 2002), however, objectification originally was not a sexual concept (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008), it became one after it was adopted by second wave feminists like Bartky (1982). Scholars such as Nussbaum (1995) and Lerum and Dworkin (2009) have since questioned the continued emphasis on sexual objectification, while non-sexual objectification is such a prevalent part of our (mediated) culture. For example, many popular sporting events are characterized by controlled aggression, justified by non-sexual objectification through dehumanizing the opponent (Haslam, 2006). Studying non-sexual objectification can contribute to our understanding of how and why objectification theory seems to not be equally applicable to men as it is to women (Daniel & Bridges, 2010). Sexual objectification is generally linked to female gender roles (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011), while certain types of non-sexual objectification, such as the aforementioned violence in sports, are more strongly linked to male gender roles (Forbes, Adams-Curtis, Pakalka, & White, 2006; Robertson, 2003), and studying non-sexual objectification might lead to a more complete understanding of objectifying media content.

In sum, this contribution proposes a distinction between sexualization, sexual objectification and non-sexual objectification as a necessary next step in both sexualization and (sexual) objectification research.

### **Preteens and sexual media**

Preteens are commonly defined as children in the late stages of childhood, roughly 9-12 years of age (Cook & Kaiser, 2004). From a developmental perspective, preteens may be particularly vulnerable to the sexualizing messages conveyed by media, because at this age they are in the process of establishing a gender identity, and they begin to reengage in cross-

sex interactions (Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2006; Gondoli et al., 2011). These developmental processes make issues of attractiveness and gender conformity quite salient to preteens (Ricciardelli & Yager, 2016). Sexual scripts and gender roles can be communicated through the sexual roles displayed by parents and peers, as well as through media depictions of how people act and react in sexuality-related content (e.g., Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Ward, Vandebosch, & Eggermont, 2015). Given that sexuality related information is often insufficiently supplied by parents (de Graaf, Neeleman, & de Haas, 2009), and preteens are major media consumers (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010), mass media are an easily available source of sexual information (Strasburger, Jordan, & Donnerstein, 2012). However, very little is known regarding the presence of sexualizing content in media popular among preteens.

Focusing on media content that is popular with preteens, this paper targets television content. In spite of the rising significance of various new media, television has retained its popularity, with Belgians spending more than half of their daily free time watching television: 2.5 hours per day on average (Glorieux & Minnen, 2008). Television remains especially popular among younger age groups in the U.S. (Livingstone, 2009) and in Belgium (VRT Studiedienst, personal communication, February 24, 2015).

### **Conceptual framework**

We aim to conduct a multi-dimensional analysis of sexual, sexually objectifying and non-sexually objectifying content in the favorite television programs of preteens. In the remainder of this article, the term neutral sexual content will be used as an umbrella term to refer both to non-objectifying sexual acts, and to non-objectifying appearance messages.

First, we propose that sexualization in media content is best studied in tandem with more neutral forms of sexual content, such as scenes containing French kissing or scenes portraying a character as (sexually) attractive. This way, a more complete impression is developed of how media portray sexuality. Additionally, when combined with coding of character gender, this will shed light on whether preteen popular television narratives may sexualize female characters in more subcutaneous ways. For example, a character being complimented on their appearance might not qualify as a type of sexualization according to the APA (2007) checklist, if this does not narratively reduce the character to merely ornamental value. However, if women are more often judged on their appearance, this

sexist pattern may still be linked to sexualization because it prioritizes the relevance of beauty for women. Research has shown that female athletes (Kane & Jefferson Lenskyj, 2003) and female video game characters (Burgess, Stermer, & Burgess, 2007) are more often featured in sexual ways than male ones. A range of sexually charged behaviors is included in the coding scheme, from flirting to actual sexual intercourse, as well as acts that emphasizes a character's physical and/or sexual attractiveness. This will be discussed in further detail in the methodological section.

For the conceptualization of the appearance based component of neutral sexual content, we relied on the two components of the APA's (2007) definition of sexualization that most closely relate to issues of appearance; "a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics, and a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy" (APA, 2007, p. 1). Subsequently, for each of these two types of sexualization, we extracted those elements that referred to a person's sexiness and or attractiveness, without reducing that person to a sexual object lacking agency and subjectivity. The more 'harmful' elements, such as a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal, were used for our conceptualization of sexual objectification. In doing so we deconstructed the original definition into neutral sexual content, or content that does not necessarily promote a negative view on the body and sexuality, and sexualizing content that depicts sexually objectifying images and/or messages. Finally, non-sexual objectification occurs when, quite literally, a person is treated as an object. This does not necessarily have a sexual dimension. Nussbaum (1995) defines objectification as having seven components which may or may not occur at the same time: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, denial of subjectivity, fungibility, violability, ownership and inertness. Again, these will be more explicitly operationalized in the methodological section.

This results in the first research question:

RQ. To what extent do (1) neutral sexual content, (2) sexual objectification and (3) objectification occur in television programs most popular among preteens?

Next, we formulated a set of hypotheses pertaining to how neutral sexual content, sexual objectification, and objectification are related to gender roles in preteen popular television programs. As mentioned earlier, being portrayed in a sexual light and being

sexually objectified are associated more strongly with female gender roles, as women are more often sexualized (Vandenbosch, Vervloessem, & Eggermont, 2013), while men are portrayed more often sexualizing others (Kim et al., 2007). In contrast, types of non-sexual objectification such as violence are linked more clearly to male gender roles, both as victims and as perpetrators (Goldstein, 2004). The relationship between gender and sexualization/objectification is a relevant object of study, as Bandura (2002) argues when people notice similarities between themselves and a character in terms of personal characteristics such as gender, they are more likely to adopt the character's behavior (Bandura, 2002). Research confirmed that children seek out role models from TV who are similar in gender, and adopt gender roles based on these models (Coyne, Linder, Rasmussen, Nelson, & Birkbeck, 2016). Thus the (sexualized) characterization of same-sex role models may affect preteens' own developing sense of self. Following the literature on gender roles and sexualization/objectification, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H1: female characters are more often presented in a sexual light than male characters.

H2: female characters are more often sexually objectified than male characters.

H3: male characters more often behave (verbally and non-verbally) in a sexually objectifying way towards others than female characters do.

H4: male characters are more often non-sexually objectified than female characters.

H5: male characters more often act in a non-sexually objectifying way towards others than female characters do.

## **Method**

This study uses quantitative content analysis to assess the presence and forms of neutral sexual content, sexual objectification, and non-sexual objectification in media content most popular among Flemish 10-13 year-olds. To this end, a preliminary survey was conducted enquiring into the target group's preferred media content. The survey accounted for demographic data (gender, age, nationality) as well as media habits and preferences. The preteens were invited to share when and how often they used television, (comic) books, magazines, videogames, movies and the internet, and which specific content they preferred.

The data were gathered by means of a two-step sampling method. First, using a database of the Flemish Department of Education, geographically dispersed schools from different educational levels were randomly selected and requested to participate; 6 elementary schools and 4 secondary schools agreed upon participation. During the second stage, research assistants visited the consenting schools and administered the survey by asking all enrolled students to complete a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. Participants were informed on the confidentiality of their answers before they started completing the survey.

This approach resulted in a total sample of 401 questionnaires, of which 57% completed by males and 43% by females. Among the participants, there were 138 5th graders (10-11 year olds), 116 6th graders (11-12 year olds), and 147 7th graders (first year of high school, 12-13 year olds). The majority of the sample was born in Belgium (91%). The survey showed television to be the most popular medium, with more than nine in ten children watching television every day, at an average daily usage of 183 minutes. Because of this prominence of television in the media use of preteens, we opted to analyze preteens' preferred television shows. Following the example of McDade-Montez et al. (2016), a top five of most popular programs was selected for analysis<sup>1</sup>. There proved to be considerable overlap between the most preferred television programs of boys and girls, with four of the selected shows being part of the top five for both genders. Eighty-three percent of the preteens named one of these five shows as their absolute favorite, and 65.7% said that one of these shows was in their top two. Together, this provided sufficient ground to analyze the following five shows.

The family-oriented soaps, *Thuis* and *Familie*, revolve around personal relationships, which is typical for the genre (Fiske 1987). The sitcom *F.C. De Kampioenen* features the (mis)adventures of a fictional local football team. Its cast mainly consists of middle aged

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<sup>1</sup> Using an electronic television guide database listing current and upcoming television programs on the channels most popular among Flemish viewers (CIM, 2011), we selected 174 television shows that were broadcast during the three weeks prior to data collection. For each show that was listed in the questionnaire, we asked the respondents to report how frequently they watched the show, as well as how much they liked the show. Based on the participants' reported popularity ratings (e.g., how much do you like this television program on a scale from 0 [not at all] to 10 [very much]) and exposure frequencies (e.g., how often do you watch this television program on a scale ranging from 1 [almost never] through 5 [almost every week]), a top five of most popular, and frequently watched programs was selected for analysis.

friends and relatives, who are often portrayed in a gender-stereotypical manner. The teen adventure series *Galaxy Park* follows six teens and one adult who work in a sci-fi themed amusement park that is besieged by aliens. Finally, the Argentinian telenovela *Violetta* revolves around a talented teenager who wants to become a singer. Its main focus is on interpersonal relationships, romance, and trials and tribulations of growing up. *Familie*, *Thuis*, and *F.C. De Kampioenen* have a broad, family target audience, while *Galaxy Park* and *Violetta* are explicitly geared at the preteen segment.

A constructed week of episodes was selected for *Galaxy Park*, *Thuis*, *Familie* and *Violetta*, which were aired daily, and a constructed month for weekly aired *FC De Kampioenen*. This resulted in a total of 24 episodes being analyzed – five for *Thuis*, *Familie*, *FC De Kampioenen* and *Violetta*, and four for *Galaxy Park*, which was aired Monday to Thursday. Although there is no gold standard in terms of an acceptable number of episodes to sample from a television program, previous research suggests that a sample of 3 to 7 episodes should be examined to provide a reasonable assessment of the overall sexual content of the program (Manganello, Franzini, & Jordan, 2008).

### **Levels of analysis**

The episodes were analyzed at two (intersecting) levels: scenes and characters. A scene was defined as an interaction between a number of characters that takes place in one location, during a certain time (Van Mierlo, 2008). For every scene, all of the variables were coded for every featured character that played a prominent part in the coded scenes, which covered characters that had a speaking part (Ortiz & Brooks, 2014). This resulted in 465 scenes being analyzed for 130 characters, making a total of 1691 entries. Given that preadolescence is crucial to the formation of interpersonal sexual scripts (Zosuls, Miller, Ruble, Martin, & Fabes, 2011), we choose to code interpersonal (sexual) objectification, meaning that we focused on how characters (sexually) objectified one another, rather than on how characters objectified themselves, or were featured as (sexual) objects by the program.

### **Intercoder reliability and measurement validity**

The first two authors conducted the coding and analysis, dividing the sample between them. To minimize coder subjectivity, rigorous attention was paid to the clarity of the coding instrument (e.g., checklist including well defined operationalization of all coding items) as well as to extensive testing of the codebook as a form of training for the coders (Neuendorf,

2011; Vokey, Tefft, & Tysiaczny, 2013). Training sessions (approximately 7-8 hours) involved watching and coding episodes not included in the sample. This involved group coding, individual coding, and in-depth discussions of the coding scheme and categories. During group sessions, the coders practiced on several issues so that they could identify and resolve problems with the codebook. After the codebook was modified on the basis of these group sessions, approximately 10% of the sample was selected randomly and coded independently by the two main authors (e.g., Flynn, Park, Morin, & Stana, 2015). To check reliability, a third coder, blind to the research hypotheses, coded 20 % of the scenes (randomly selected). The third coder was an undergraduate student, pursuing a graduate-level degree in communication science, who had completed advanced coursework in content analytic research and was trained by one of the first authors. Using Hayes SPSS macros (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007), Krippendorff's alphas were calculated to measure inter-rater agreement for each coding category. Since lower criteria can be used for indices known to be more conservative, like Krippendorff's alpha, and since the variables revolve around complex theoretical concepts, 0.66 was selected as minimum level of reliability (Lombard, Synder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002). All variables except fungibility were sufficiently reliable (ranging from 0.66 to 1.00). Fungibility only occurred twice in the test sample, which meant that one disagreement between the coders resulted in a reliability score of 0.0. Due to this lack of reliability, this variable was not used in the analysis. As stated by Neuendorf (2011), intercoder reliability is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the assessment of measurement validity. In order to establish a more formal assessment of validity, we performed discriminant validity analyses and tested if sexual objectification, neutral sexual content and appearance-related content are distinct and discriminable constructs. As shown in Table 1, the square root of AVE exceeded the construct's correlation with every other construct, indicating that the constructs included in the codebook differ from each other (e.g. Teo & Noyes, 2011). The measures used in this study thus established sufficient discriminant validity.

Table 2.1. Results of discriminant validity testing.

Construct	Appearance-related	Sexual acts	Non-sexual Objectification	Sexual objectification
Appearance-related	<b>0,687</b>			
Sexual acts	0,177	<b>0,574</b>		
Non-sexual objectification	0,209	0,092	<b>0,436</b>	
Sexual objectification	0,303	0,518	0,281	<b>0,602</b>

*Note.* Diagonal elements (bold) are the square root of average variance extracted (AVE) between the constructs and their measures. Off-diagonal elements are correlations between constructs. For discriminant validity, diagonal elements should be larger than off-diagonal elements

### Content measures

#### ***Neutral sexual content at scene level (sexual acts)***

Each scene was coded for occurrence of a sexual reference or sexual activity, and if so, what type (Ortiz & Brooks, 2014). To be coded as containing sexual content, scenes had to convey a sense of potential or actual sexual intimacy (Eyal, Kunkel, Biely, & Finnerty, 2007). Sexual content encompassed physical sexual behavior as well as sexually loaded statements. Sexual talk ( $\alpha = .88$ ) included innuendo. Physical sexual behavior was measured using five categories, ranked from least (*physical flirting* [ $\alpha = .74$ ]) to most (*sexual intercourse* [ $\alpha = 1.0$ ]) sexually explicit. Other variables for physical sexual behavior were *implied sex* ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ) (scene portrays the body just before or immediately after an act of intercourse), *individual arousal* ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ) (scene contains masturbation or watching others act sexually and becoming sexually aroused), and *light sexual behavior* ( $\alpha = .85$ ) (scene contains any sexual touching, such as passionate kissing, cuddling, light touching, holding hands, rubbing and petting).

#### ***Neutral sexual content at character level (appearance-related content)***

Characters were coded within each scene for active (a character addressing someone else in a sexual way) and passive (a character being addressed sexually) sexual content. The following variables were included to measure the occurrence of neutral sexual acts; (1) *explicit mention or treatment of a character as attractive* ( $\alpha = .75$ ;  $\alpha = .86$ ), (2) *explicit mention or treatment of a character as unattractive* ( $\alpha = .80$ ;  $\alpha = 1.0$ ), (3) *evaluation of a*

*character as sexy, due to his or her physical appearance* ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ;  $\alpha = 1.0$ ), and (4) *non-verbal evaluation of character's physical appearance* ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ;  $\alpha = .67$ ). For instance, a scene where two characters are having dinner and one praises the other for looking sexy and being such a good parent, does not fit APA's original definition (i.e. a person's value is determined only or primarily by sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics). This scene not necessarily conveys the message that a character is primarily valued for sex appeal and is therefore coded as a sexualizing activity without an objectifying undertone.

### ***Sexual objectification***

This dimension of sexualization was analyzed separately, based on the third component of sexualization featured in by the APA report on the sexualization of girls: if someone is "made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making" (2007, p.1). Expanding and operationalizing this component, we defined sexual objectification as a situation where (1) *a character implied that another character was of mostly ornamental value* ( $\alpha = .75$ ;  $\alpha = 1.0$ ), (2) *a character treated another character as an instrument of sexual pleasure* ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ;  $\alpha = 1.0$ ), (3) *a character sexually violated another character* ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ;  $\alpha = 1.0$ ). For instance, a dance teacher selecting participants for an upcoming dance concourses solely based on the participants' physical appearance would be coded as a sexually objectifying act (i.e., a character implied that another character was of mostly ornamental value). In contrast to the example we gave for neutral sexual content, this scene may convey a message of attractiveness being valued over other (more relevant) qualities.

### ***Objectification***

For objectification, indicators were derived from Nussbaum's (1995) seven dimensions of objectification: (1) *denial of autonomy*, (e.g. when a character prohibited another character from doing what they wanted to do) ( $\alpha = .70$ ;  $\alpha = .66$ ); (2) *denial of subjectivity* (e.g. when a character's thoughts and feelings were ignored or dismissed as unimportant)  $\alpha = .70$ ;  $\alpha = .73$ ); (3) *inertness*, (e.g. when someone told a character what to do, as if they were unable to take initiative) ( $\alpha = .77$ ;  $\alpha = .71$ ); (4) *violability*, (e.g. when someone used violence against a character) ( $\alpha = .82$ ;  $\alpha = .72$ ); (5) *ownership*, (e.g. when a character was treated as property, such as by being bought, sold or given as a present) ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ;  $\alpha = .86$ ); (6) *instrumentality*, (e.g. when a character was duped into doing another character's dirty work) ( $\alpha = .84$ ;  $\alpha =$

.75); and (7) *fungibility*, (e.g. when a character is treated as if they were interchangeable, such as when a romantic partner is dumped for a more attractive prospect) ( $\alpha = 0.0$ ;  $\alpha = 0.0$ ). Fungibility was the only variable that did not achieve reliability, and was therefore discarded from further analysis in this study.

### ***Data analysis***

The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS 21.0. Descriptive statistics were collected to measure the amount of neutral sexual content (RQ1a), sexual objectification (RQ1b) and objectification (RQ1c). For each specific type of expression, frequencies as well as percentages (frequencies divided by total amount of scenes) were calculated.

### **Results**

To provide context for our results, we assessed the demographics of the characters. Male characters (57.7%,  $n = 75$ ) were more frequent than female characters (42.3%,  $n = 55$ ) in the sample. The sample consisted of 79.2% ( $n = 103$ ) White=Caucasian characters, 20.0% ( $n = 26$ ) Hispanic=Latino characters, and one Black= African American character. The majority of the sample (69.2%,  $n = 90$ ) was coded adult (> 25 years); 12.3% ( $n = 16$ ) were coded as emerging adults (18-25 years), 15.4% ( $n = 20$ ) were coded as adolescents (12-18 years), and the final 3.1% ( $n = 4$ ) were coded as children. Also, because our results examined gender and, to a lesser extent, program differences, we compared portrayals of neutral sexual content, sexual objectification, and non-sexual objectification across characters' gender and programs. With respect to gender differences, results indicated that the analyzed sample included more acts in which female character were depicted as a sexual objects ( $n = 11$ ), compared to male characters ( $n = 6$ ). Similarly, female characters were more often portrayed in an appearance-related acts ( $n = 35$ ) than male characters ( $n = 14$ ). With respect to program differences, the results showed that the tween-gearred programs (Violetta and Galaxy Park) contained fewer instances of sexual objectification, and portrayed less appearance-related acts than the family-oriented programs (F.C. De Kampioenen and Thuis).

Table 2.2. Descriptive statistics.

Program title	# of episodes	# of scenes	Length of episodes (min)	# of character occurrences		# of sexually objectifying acts (active / passive)		# of appearance-related acts (active / passive)		# of non-sexual objectifying acts (active / passive)	
				Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
FC De Kampioenen	5	82	192	138	211	(3 / 8)	(29 / 0)	(8 / 20)	(38 / 6)	(530 / 36)	(82 / 80)
Familie	5	125	152.78	151	145	(0 / 0)	(0 / 0)	(1 / 1)	(2 / 2)	(43 / 26)	(24 / 36)
Galaxy Park	4	36	46.63	62	63	(0 / 0)	(0 / 0)	(3 / 0)	(3 / 1)	(4 / 6)	(3 / 4)
Thuis	5	86	115.37	155	163	(8 / 1)	(3 / 6)	(14 / 12)	(12 / 8)	(37 / 47)	(22 / 39)
Violetta	5	135	199.07	223	310	(0 / 2)	(2 / 0)	(0 / 2)	(2 / 0)	(26 / 32)	(32 / 24)

### Frequency of sexual behavior

RQ1 examines the frequency of sexual activities. Our results showed that one in five scenes contained sexual references or activities. The most common types of sexual expression were sexual talk and light sexual behavior, occurring in 8.8% and 8.6%, respectively, of all scenes. Overt acts of sexual intercourse were not present in the selected sample. Youth-oriented programs showed fewer instances of sexual behavior than the family shows ( $t[1620] = 9.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with *Galaxy Park* (zero sexual references) and *Violetta* (14.8%) containing less sexual references compared to all other programs (*Thuis* = 23.26%; *Familie* = 18.40%; *F.C. De Kampioenen* = 36.59%).

### Frequency of appearance-related messages at character level

Explicit mention or treatment of a character as attractive was the most common act (6.7%), closely followed by non-verbal evaluation of a character's physical appearance (6.3%). With respect to a character being addressed sexually by other characters, being gazed at was most prevalent (4.7%), followed by being treated as (un)attractive (3.2% versus 3.4%). Scenes portraying the evaluation of a character as sexy due to his or her physical appearance were rather rare (0.5%).

### Frequency of Sexually objectifying messages at character level

RQ2 addresses the prevalence of sexual objectification. Prevalence rates of characters enacting (active) as well as experiencing (passive) sexually objectifying acts are shown in Table 3. About one in ten scenes portrayed a character performing a sexually objectifying act (9.7%).

Table 2.3. Amount of sexually objectifying acts by character gender.

		Sexual objectification					
		All characters		Male characters		Female characters	
		Active	Passive	Active	Passive	Active	Passive
Ornamental	Count (count/scenes (%))	22 (4.7)	4 (0.9)	19 (4.1) <sub>a</sub>	0 (0.0) <sub>b</sub>	3 (0.6) <sub>a'</sub>	4 (0.9) <sub>b'</sub>
Instrumental	Count (count/scenes (%))	17 (3.7)	8 (1.7)	10 (2.2) <sub>a</sub>	5 (1.1) <sub>b</sub>	7 (1.5) <sub>a</sub>	3 (0.6) <sub>b</sub>
Violence	Count (count/scenes (%))	6 (1.3)	5 (1.1)	5 (1.1) <sub>a</sub>	1 (0.2) <sub>b</sub>	1 (0.2) <sub>a</sub>	4 (0.9) <sub>b</sub>
Total	Count (count/scenes (%))	45 (9.7)	17 (3.7)	34 (7.3)	6 (1.3)	11 (2.4)	11 (2.4)

*Note.* For each type of sexual objectification, differences between male and female characters, differing at  $p < .05$ , were given a different subscripts in the same row.

### **Frequency of non-sexually objectifying messages at character level**

RQ3 pertains to the prevalence of the different types of non-sexual objectification. The rates of occurrence for each type of objectification are listed in Table 4. We identified 333 acts of active objectification, denial of subjectivity – ignoring or downplaying other’s thoughts or feelings - being most common (20.5%), followed by instrumentality - using others as a means to attain personal goals (17.7%) and denying other’s autonomy (15.9%). A similar pattern could be observed for passive objectification, with denial of subjectivity (18.1%), instrumentality (17.2%) and denial of autonomy (15.7%) as the most frequently experienced forms of objectification. Additionally, a dependent samples t-test was performed to test for significant differences in the occurrence of sexually objectifying and non-sexually objectifying acts. On average, non-sexually objectifying acts (active:  $M = .03$ ,  $SE = .10$ ; passive:  $M = .03$ ,  $SE = .09$ ), were significantly more depicted than sexually objectifying acts (active:  $M = .01$ ,  $SE = .07$ ; passive:  $M = .002$ ,  $SE = .04$ ),  $t_{active}(1603) = 9.03$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $t_{passive}(1490) = 11.99$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Table 2.4. Amount of non-sexual objectifying acts by character gender.

			Non-sexual objectification					
			All characters		Male		Female	
			Active	Passive	Active	Passive	Active	Passive
Denial of autonomy	Count (count/scenes (%))	74 (15.9)	73 (15.7)	33 (7.1) <sub>a</sub>	39 (8.4) <sub>b</sub>	41 (8.8) <sub>a</sub>	34 (7.3) <sub>b</sub>	
Inertness	Count (count/scenes (%))	40 (8.6)	57 (12.3)	19 (4.1) <sub>a</sub>	32 (6.9) <sub>b</sub>	21 (4.5) <sub>a</sub>	25 (5.4) <sub>b</sub>	
Denial of subjectivity	Count (count/scenes (%))	95 (20.5)	84 (18.1)	42 (9.1) <sub>a</sub>	41 (8.8) <sub>b</sub>	53 (11.4) <sub>a'</sub>	43 (9.2) <sub>b</sub>	
Violability	Count (count/scenes (%))	24 (5.2)	22 (4.7)	15 (3.2) <sub>a</sub>	15 (3.2) <sub>b</sub>	9 (1.9) <sub>a</sub>	7 (1.5) <sub>b</sub>	
Ownership	Count (count/scenes (%))	18 (3.9)	14 (3.0)	10 (2.2) <sub>a</sub>	10 (2.2) <sub>b</sub>	8 (1.7) <sub>a</sub>	4 (0.9) <sub>b</sub>	
Instrument	Count (count/scenes (%))	82 (17.7)	80 (18.9)	44 (9.5) <sub>a</sub>	46 (9.9) <sub>b</sub>	38 (8.2) <sub>a</sub>	34 (7.3) <sub>b</sub>	
Total	Count (count/scenes (%))	333 (71.8)	330 (71.0)	163 (35.1)	183 (39.35)	170 (36.6)	147 (31.6)	

*Note.* For each type of objectification, differences between male and female characters, differing at  $p < .05$ , were given a different subscripts in the same row.

### Gender differences in neutral sexual content and (sexual) objectification

Hypotheses one to five focused on gender differences in the portrayal of neutral sexual content (H1), sexual objectification (H2,3) and non-sexual objectification (H4,5). Using Pillai's trace, a MANOVA showed a significant effect of gender on our set of dependent variables

considered as a group ( $V = .009$ ,  $F(6, 1481) = 2.27$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta p^2 = .009$ ). Separate univariate ANOVAs on the outcome variables showed no significant gender difference for sexual objectification (passive and active), passive non-sexual objectification and active neutral sexuality. This means that no support was shown for the hypotheses that women are more often sexually objectified (H2), that men more often sexually objectify others (H3), and that men are more often non-sexually objectified (H4).

Our data did reveal a statistically significant relationship between gender and active non-sexual objectification ( $F [1,486] = 4.49$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta p^2 = .004$ ). Pairwise comparisons showed men's mean scores to be significantly lower than women's mean scores, rejecting the hypothesis that men are more often depicted as acting in a non-sexually objectifying way towards others (H5). There was also a marginally significant main effect of gender on passive neutral sexuality ( $F [1,486] = 3.01$ ,  $p < .08$ ,  $\eta p^2 = .002$ ), with women more often than men depicted in a sexual way. These results are in line with our hypothesis (H1) that female characters would be more often presented in a sexual light than male characters.

Additionally, each specific type of appearance-related, sexually objectifying and non-sexually objectifying content was tested for gender differences with a series of chi-square tests. Except for women being treated somewhat more as ornamental ( $\chi^2 [1, N = 1613] = 4.90$ ,  $p < .05$ ) (see Table 3), male and female characters were equally likely to be the target of sexually objectifying acts. A similar trend occurred for active sexual objectification. Here, men were more likely to be portrayed treating another character as primarily ornamental ( $\chi^2 [1, N = 1613] = 8.87$ ,  $p < .01$ ) (see Table 3). With respect to appearance-related acts, only the treatment of a character as attractive seemed to be related to gender ( $\chi^2 [1, N = 1613] = 4.71$ ,  $p < .05$ ), with men more often judging the attractiveness of other characters, and women more often explicitly depicted as being attractive to other characters ( $\chi^2 [1, N = 1613] = 11.79$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

## **Discussion**

This study set out to measure the prevalence of sexualization and objectification in the top five television shows most popular among preteens. We argued for a distinction between neutral sexual content, sexual objectification and non-sexual objectification. This distinction proved to be useful, as reflected in the following main findings. First, while women were

more often judged for their physical appearance than men (for example by receiving remarks on their perceived [un]attractiveness), they were not more likely to be subjected to outright sexual objectification. In addition, the significantly higher number of women non-sexually objectifying others means that women were also portrayed as more socially dominant than men, indicating that within the same narrative, neutral sexuality, sexual objectification and non-sexual objectification can convey competing messages with regards to appearance, objectification and gender roles. For example, while the analyzed narratives regularly showed men commenting on women's appearances, female characters were often shown to be socially assertive or even aggressive, for example by dominating decision processes or imposing their point of view on a discussion partner. Second, non-sexually objectifying acts (such as physical violence or types of verbal bullying) were significantly more prevalent than sexually objectifying acts. Although a large body of research has investigated the link between sexually objectifying content and viewers' attitudes and behavior (Zurbriggen & Roberts, 2013), to our knowledge no previous research has made the effort to investigate the extent to which non-sexually objectifying content may impact the viewer. Since non-sexual objectification was more prevalent throughout the sample than sexual objectification, this seems to be a necessary direction for future research.

### **Sexual objectification**

In the present study one in ten scenes featured sexually objectifying acts, meaning acts that reduced a character to their sexual value, for example by unwanted sexual touching or disparaging remarks about a person based on their lack of sexual appeal. Although this might not seem like a high ratio, we have reason to believe that this is still relevant to preteens' gender-role values. First, approximately one quarter of the preteens in our sample reported watching all of the analyzed shows on a daily basis. Given that, for each of the selected shows, a random episode contained on average 20 scenes, this means that the number of sexually objectifying instances of exposure for the average preteen is likely quite higher than our results suggest. Additionally, preteens in our sample consumed more media than just popular television shows, such as magazines (Graff, Murnen, & Krause, 2013) and music television (Vandenbosch et al., 2013), which are known for being saturated with sexual objectification. The impact of this repeated exposure likely contributes to preteens' cumulative normalization and acceptance of sexual objectification toward girls and boys, as prior research has shown that even one single exposure to gender stereotypical or

objectifying content can result in more stereotypical views about gender and relationships (Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005), and prime self-objectification (Aubrey, Henson, Hopper, & Smith, 2009) among its viewers.

Second, since most preteens have few dating experiences, they lack the ability to assimilate sexuality-related media information into existing sexual schema. As a consequence, they experience less schema-incongruence and are less prone to generating counter-arguments when consuming sexually objectifying content (Lee & Schumann, 2004). Thus, over time, repeated exposure to sexually objectifying content might prime preteens' recognition that individuals' value is strongly connected to their bodies (Aubrey & Gerding, 2015), and might lead to the application of an objectified dating script – prescribing that individuals should use their body and (sexual) attractiveness to attract a romantic/sexual partner (Huesmann, 1988; Wright, 2011).

### **Gender differences**

Our findings also shed light on the gendered nature of neutral sexual and (sexually) objectifying portrayals we found. We did not find women to be explicitly treated as sexual objects more often than men. However, our results did show that female characters were far more likely than male characters to be portrayed as (un)attractive (see also Aubrey & Harrison, 2004; Murnen, Greenfield, Younger, & Boyd, 2016), for example through remarks of other characters, or by preening in front of a mirror. This consistent association of femininity with being judged for appearance strongly links a person's worth as a girl or woman to their beauty, which is sexualizing to women as a group (Collins, 2011; APA, 2007). Following SCT (Bandura 2002), the consistent focus on beauty and attractiveness for female characters potentially stimulates girls' self-objectification, as self-perceptions are most affected by exposure to same-sex characters. Thus, the implicit sexualization of women might socialize preteen girls to internalize an observer's perspective of themselves, and encourage them to evaluate and control their bodies more in terms of attractiveness to others than in terms of competence (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In addition, we speculate that the emphasis placed on (female) beauty might also induce an appearance-centered personal focus in boys. This reasoning aligns with other study results (Aubrey & Taylor, 2009; Dens, De Pelsmacker, & Janssens, 2009) indicating that exposure to sexually objectified women influences men's own body consciousness through priming romantic concerns such as expectations and evaluations of appearance by (potential) romantic partners.

Although appearance-oriented messages were more often linked to female characters, no gender differences emerged for sexual objectification. However, the fact that female characters were not sexually objectified more often than male characters does not necessarily indicate that the sexual objectification of women in media is decreasing. Scholars have raised concerns about male sexual objectification being on the rise (Flynn et al., 2015), which might mean that sexual objectification is becoming an issue that both women and men face.

### **Limitations and future directions**

Some limitations of the study need to be addressed. First, this study reports on a sample of five television shows most popular among Flemish preteens. We selected shows based on their popularity and frequency ratings, which indicates that Flemish preteens are regularly exposed to these shows and presumably influenced by their content. However, due to this selective sampling, our findings cannot be generalized to other television shows or other media outlets, such as magazines and social network sites. Future studies could examine a wider range of media outlets, and look for differences in media sexualization between specific media genres and/or media outlets.

Second, this quantitative content analysis focused on counting instances of neutral sexual content, sexual objectification, and objectification. However, media content is saturated with rich, often conflicting meanings (Fiske, 1987), leading to one specific scene being open to multiple readings (Hall, 1980b). For example, the narrative of a specific television program or storyline can either reward or punish sexual objectification, thus creating different messages for viewers. Additionally, subjectification must be taken into account: a sequence where a character is (sexually) objectified may conclude with the victim clearly expressing psychological discomfort, which again affects the actual message of the scene. This underlines that, while characters' actions may be (sexually) objectifying, the tone of the overarching plotline can contradict this by emphasizing that the objectified character is also a subject: a person with feelings, agency, purposes and competencies (Tolman, 2000). In other words: sexualization and objectification can exist on the level of the characters, as well as on the level of the text, and these two levels can contradict or emphasize each other. Future studies should take this into account by looking into the specific ways sexualization and (sexual) objectification are contextualized and treated within a media text. For instance, qualitative content analyses could contribute to our understanding of how narrative

contextualization impacts whether sexual objectification is framed as problematic and hurtful or as a form of flattery (e.g., Barrett & Levin, 2014; Smith, 2012). The second approach could possibly normalize sexually objectifying behavior, while the first may demonstrate that this is not acceptable behavior (e.g., Bandura, 2002). In addition, future research should further investigate how media content reconciles the two seemingly contradictory portrayals of female characters: assertive and socially dominant, yet also objectified through the continued focus on female beauty (e.g. Barrett & Levin, 2014; England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011).

Third, this study only evaluated the prevalence of neutral sexual content, sexual objectification, and objectification in preteen-popular programming, and did not assess how this content is processed by preteen audiences. Therefore, closely related to our second limitation, media effects research should investigate how preteens process contradictory portrayals of female characters. Preteens are in the process of developing the cognitive ability to understand that a single individual may fall within two or more categories simultaneously, referred to as multiple classification, which could lead to the formation of counter gender stereotypes (Liben, 2014). As such, preteen television's coverage of women as assertive and socially dominant, yet also defined by their appearance, might help to combat stereotypes of attractive girls as passive objects, solely concerned about their appearance and how they are being evaluated by others. Hence, follow-up research would benefit from discourse analysis (e.g., Vares, Jackson, & Gill, 2011) to assess ways in which preteens negotiate these complex portrayals of female characters.

Lastly, research has indicated that teen-gearred networks, such as Disney and Nickelodeon are trusted by parents, because parents believe they produce content specifically for a less mature viewing audience (Rideout, 2007). As a consequence, parents may be less likely to actively monitor their children's viewing of teen-gearred programs. However, the results here show that even these seemingly innocuous programs contain problematic messages. Although the teen-gearred shows portrayed few explicit sexual acts, they did contain implicit instances of sexualization (e.g., Malacane & Martins, 2017). Discussing the subtle sexism exhibited by popular characters in these programs may be particularly helpful for parents, as these characters and storylines can be informational as well as aspirational for their children (Bandura, 2002; Mares, Braun, & Hernandez, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

While the significance of portrayals of neutral sexual content and non-sexual objectification remains a point for future research, we conclude that television programs most popular among Flemish preteens contain a number of problematic messages concerning (romantic) interaction between women and men. Television exposure remains an influential source of sexual knowledge, especially for preteen viewers who lack sexual experiences and thus less elaborate sexual self-schema. Through the observation of media models, preteen girls and boys may learn which sexual roles are appropriate and inappropriate. However, despite narrative richness reflected in the data, the current content analysis shows that preteens' popular television content still support sexually objectifying schemata regarding the romantic and sexual interaction between men and women. According to the most popular television programs among Flemish preteens, men more often treat others as ornamental, and women are more often judged for whether or not they qualify as attractive.

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## **Chapter 3. Objectification as an Issue of Preteen Television Content**

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(Submitted to Continuum)

### **Summary**

This third chapter delves deeper into the sample analyzed in chapter two to further explore those issues that the quantitative methodology was unsuited for, by conducting a qualitative, deep reading of narratives featuring sexual and non-sexual objectification. In doing so, the paper explores whether different types of objectification have different significances to female gender roles than to male ones. This ties into chapters four and five, which revolve around the (gendered) identity work of boys and girls through the use of sexuality and objectification. The analysis also explores how simply showing objectification does not necessarily normalize or promote this type of behavior, underlining the relevance of assessing contextualization when studying sexualization and objectification. Chapters two and three combine to create an impression of the unique benefits of combining quantitative and qualitative approaches within the same dissertation.

### **Abstract**

Analyzing objectifying narratives of a number of prime time television shows popular with preteens, this paper redresses the reduction of objectification to sexual objectification, typical of objectification research, by exploring how sexual and non-sexual objectification are used in media narratives to address gendered power imbalances. Results show that rather than existing in a binary, many objectifying acts fall somewhere on a continuum between the sexual and the non-sexual. Opening up the research perspective to include non-sexual objectification creates room for the interpretation of more subtle, socially condoned forms of objectification with a gendered undercurrent. Finally, results show that context is key in studying objectification in media content. Narratives can either maintain gendered power imbalances through the continued, banal use of male-on-female objectification as a plot device, or deconstruct them by explicitly contextualizing objectification as a problem, leaving very different impressions for the viewer to consider.

## Introduction

Analyzing the ways objectifying narratives support or deconstruct gendered power imbalances in a number of prime-time television shows popular with preteens, this paper problematizes how objectification research so far has focused seemingly exclusively on sexual forms of objectification. This study provides a fresh perspective on objectification as a concept, applying clearly differentiated definitions of sexual and non-sexual objectification.

Objectification theory argues that women are socialized to internalize the idea that their body is an object to be used and judged by others, fixating them in a subservient, sexualized position. Objectification has been theorized as having implications both in real life (Bartky 1982) and in narrative media (Mulvey 1975). Since media content is an important part of our cultural framework regarding gender and romance (Gauntlett 2009), researchers have shown a particular interest in objectifying content in the media diet of children, propelled by concerns that popular media engender sexist attitudes.

We identify three gaps in objectification research that demand more attention. First, most studies on objectification focus on one subtype, namely sexual objectification, specifically in relationship to female gender roles (Götz and Lemish 2012). In contrast, the concept of non-sexual objectification is virtually unexplored. This obscures insight into the possibility that non-sexual objectification has relevance to male gender roles in ways similar to how sexual objectification relates to female gender roles, indicated by the relevance of non-sexual objectification in struggles for dominance among boys (Beal 1994). Second, content analyses of (sexual) objectification often fail to account for moral messages embedded in narrative contextualization. For example, the influential APA Task Force report on the sexualization of girls (APA 2007) attempts to demonstrate the normalization of sexual objectification by mentioning how often objectification occurs in media content. However, a narrative can handle objectification in many different ways, and not all of these have a normalizing function. Third, while scholars have done much work exploring objectification in the lives of teenagers, research tends to bypass preteens, despite indications that objectification does not appear out of nowhere when a child enters adolescence (Holland and Haslam 2016).

To address these shortcomings, this paper uses systematic qualitative content analysis to analyze how Flemish preteens' favorite television shows use sexual and non-

sexual objectification as a narrative device, reflecting on how these fictional acts of sexual and non-sexual objectification relate to gender roles and gender based power relations in society.

## **Theoretical Framework: understanding (non-sexual) Objectification in Narratives**

### **Objectification Redux**

Conceptually, objectification originated in the work of thinkers like Marx (1964) and Kant (1963). While Marx defined objectification free from sexual connotation, Kant thought the sexual dimension to be especially salient and discussed how women are reduced to things by heterosexual sex without monogamy. Over time, the concept has been adopted by feminist thinkers like Bartky (1982) and Mackinnon (1987), making objectification a central concept in feminist terminology and tying it strongly to sexuality.

The emphasis on the sexual part of objectification has opened our eyes to the ubiquity of gendered power imbalances, but it also has its downsides. It oversimplifies the academic definition of objectification, thus closing off certain research angles (Nussbaum 1995; Lerum and Dworkin 2009). Scholars studying sexual objectification have pointed out a number of problematic tendencies in sexually objectifying popular culture, including promotion of self-objectification/subjectification as a form of post-feminist faux-liberation (Gill 2003), dominance of narrow, unrealistic beauty ideals (Götz and Lemish, 2012), pressure on young girls to embody adult sex appeal (Rush and La Nauze 2006), and reinforcement of sexual stereotypes (Wallis 2011). Non-sexual objectification has not been studied to the same extent, leading to objectification and sexual objectification frequently being used as interchangeable terms (e.g. Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Rohlinger 2002; Roberts and Gettman 2004).

However, Nussbaum's (1995) analysis suggests objectification does not always have a sexual dimension. She identifies seven components of objectification that may or may not be sexually motivated: instrumentality (treating someone as a means to an end), denial of autonomy (limiting someone's freedom to act), denial of subjectivity (discarding someone's feelings and thoughts), fungibility (treating someone as something that can be traded for something of similar value), violability (handling someone as something that you can hurt without consequences), ownership (treating someone as something that can be owned,

bought or sold), and inertness (treating someone as if they have no agency and need someone else to act for them).

We follow Lerum and Dworkin's (2009) contention that the concept of objectification can only be fully understood when all of its forms are addressed. There are indications that sexual and non-sexual objectification have different meanings in media content. For example, we know that patriarchal cultures associate being the victim of sexual objectification with female gender roles, while non-sexual objectification seems to be linked strongly to male gender roles (Lerum and Dworkin 2009). For example, aggressive sports, hazardous professions like firefighting, and less-accepted realities like violent crime are associated with male gender performance (Robertson 2003; Goldstein 2004; Forbes et al. 2006). This is a reality mirrored in popular culture (Craig 1992).

The examples indicate that sexual and non-sexual objectification have varying, gender-related cultural significances, warranting further exploration. To this end, the boundaries and forms of sexual objectification versus non-sexual objectification must be defined. For this purpose, we revert to Nussbaum's (1995) operationalization of objectification, which explicitly opens up the theoretical framework to include non-sexual objectification.

Additionally, we argue for the necessity of investigating the ways in which objectification derives moral meaning from the context in which it occurs, to better understand the messages media send regarding objectification. Many studies, like that of the APA (2007), claim that the prevalence of objectification in media normalizes its occurrence. However, we argue that to understand whether media normalize objectification or not, we must take (narrative) contextualization into account. This is addressed in the next section.

### **Narrating objectification**

Media texts are a product of the cultural framework in which they are encoded, and thus relate to the power structures within that culture. However, this does not mean that texts consistently reproduce their cultural framework: for example, a media text can simply reflect gendered power imbalances or critically dissect the structures behind inequality. Studying narratives featured in popular media can inform us about how aware a society is about gendered power conflicts: whether these are rejected, openly debated, or reproduced as 'the way things are'.

This analysis focuses on one type of media texts: TV-shows. Although new media such as the web and videogames have become important sources of entertainment, television remains a key part of Western audiences' media diet, e.g. taking up over half of Flemish people's free time (Glorieux and Minnen 2008), which means on average about 2.9 hours daily ([Keeppeek.com](http://Keeppeek.com)). Television programs provide fertile ground for analysis because their narrative structure functions as a context that gives meaning to social acts like objectification. Narrative contextualization affects the meaning of objectification. For example, narratives portraying objectification as consistently resulting in punishment, create a very different view of society than media narratives that sometimes reward and sometimes penalize objectification (Daalmans et al. 2014). The way a narrative contextualizes certain acts can be black and white (good guy versus bad guy) or morally complex. In short: there is not one discourse or one media narrative on objectification. This contribution analyzes objectification narratives as they occur in media content preferred by preteens.

### **Importance of Preteens**

Preteens (9-13 year olds) occupy a position between late childhood and early adolescence (Cook and Kaiser 2004). When children approach adolescence and start to prepare for romantic and sexual experiences, their gender learning refines and intensifies (Ward et al. 2005). This makes the preteen life stage crucial to the development of gender-related schemata and sex roles (Money 1999; Berk 2006). Since preteens are heavy media consumers (Rideout, Foehr and Roberts 2010), mass media are an easily available source of sexual information when the taboo on sexuality keeps children from talking to parents or peers (Durham 1999). The preteen years have been linked to fears about contemporary youth growing up 'too fast', often rhetorically connected to concerns about the negative impact of media content on this young audience (Cook and Kaiser 2004). However, objectifying content in the media diet of this age group has not been sufficiently researched.

The considerations expressed in this theoretical framework lead to the following research questions: (1) What kinds of objectification narratives typically occur in the favorite television shows of Flemish preteens, (2) what do the narratives of these shows tell us about the significance of (sexual) objectification to gendered power imbalances, and (3) how are different types of sexual objectification and non-sexual objectification narratively contextualized?

## **Methodological Set-Up and Considerations**

### **Constructing the sample**

The focal point of this study is the way objectification is handled in media content preferred by preteens. To assess Flemish preteens' television content preferences, a survey was conducted among 401 10-13 year olds (57% boys), spread among 10 schools at the beginning of 2014. The schools and children were not selected randomly but by convenience sampling. Sample diversity was ensured by contacting schools with different geographical (urban as well as rural) and educational backgrounds. The five most popular TV-shows were *Familie*, *Thuis*, *F.C. De Kampioenen*, *Galaxy Park*, and *Violetta*. The first three are geared towards a family audience and have some of the highest audience ratings in Flanders, making analysis of objectifying narratives in these shows relevant beyond the preteen focus. The latter two shows have lower audience ratings and are aimed specifically at preteens. *Familie* and *Thuis* are soap operas revolving around middle class families and personal relationships. *F.C. De Kampioenen* is a sitcom about a group of (mainly) working class, middle-aged male and female friends involved in an amateur football club. *Galaxy Park* is an action-comedy series with a teen cast set in a sci-fi themed amusement park besieged by aliens. *Violetta* is a musical telenovela revolving around upper class teenage girl Violetta's coming of age. *F.C. De Kampioenen* and *Galaxy Park* maintained a light, humorous tone throughout most of the scenes, *Familie* and *Thuis* were more serious and *Violetta* combines humor and drama. Constructed weeks (and, in the case of *F.C. De Kampioenen*, one constructed month as it airs once a week) were compiled from the episodes broadcast during the final months of 2013 and the first of 2014, resulting in a total sample of 705 minutes or 24 episodes.

### **Building the Coding Guideline**

A common pitfall of qualitative research in media studies is its failure to be systematic (Ang, 1996). We addressed this issue by designing a coding guideline focusing on the two main concepts of sexual and non-sexual objectification. The operationalization of sexual objectification was based on Bartky's (1982) definition which states that sexual objectification happens when a person's sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments (...) capable of representing her' (p.130). For our operationalization of non-sexual objectification, we rely on Nussbaum's (1995) above-defined identification of elements of non-sexual objectification:

instrumentality, denial of subjectivity, fungibility, violability, and/or inertness. These components were used as coding categories.

### **Process of Analysis**

According to De Saussure's semiology (1983), meaning is constructed syntagmatically (building on what happened before, simultaneously, and after), and paradigmatically (deriving the significance of what is present from that which is not present). Syntagmatic interpretation of the narrative was mostly based on the chronological flow of the plot. Paradigmatically, an act of (sexual) objectification was analyzed in several ways: first, the 'why' behind the act was assessed: a narrative could show an act being based in wrong, right or no motivations, for example wanting to hurt versus helping someone. Second, the 'result' was analyzed, as a narrative could show an act having negative, positive or no consequences. Additionally, the 'who' was analyzed: an act could simply be construed as negative/positive-by-association, for example when an antagonist exhibited behavior against a character who was encoded as sympathetic, this framed the objectifying act in a negative way. On the other hand, when a protagonist showed the same behavior aimed at an unsympathetic character, the framing was more forgiving. Beyond this, genre – through textual expectations - adds another layer of meaning that audiences use to interpret objectifying narratives, for example as tongue in cheek (Gillespie, 2005). To account for genre related modality differences between the sampled shows and to facilitate reader interpretation, the (dramatic, neutral or humorous) tone of the narratives will be included in the discussion of the results.

## The Diversity of Objectification

Type of objectification	Number of occurrences	
Sexual objectification	39	9.3%
Treated as instrumental	40	9.5%
Treated as inert	49	11.6%
Denial of autonomy	100	23.8%
Denial of subjectivity	140	33.3%
Treated as fungible	11	2.6%
Treated as violable	34	8%
Treated as owned	8	1.9%
Total	421	100%

Table 3.1: prevalence of different types of objectification in the sample

Before delving into the qualitative analysis of the samples programs, we provide a general quantitative overview of prevalence to establish the extent to which various forms of objectification occur in programs preferred by preteens. Of all 465 analyzed scenes, 138 or 33.9% contained objectification, amounting to a total of 421 objectifying acts or utterances. The most prevalent forms of non-sexual objectification were denial of autonomy, i.e. inhibiting someone's freedom of acting, and denial of subjectivity, i.e. not caring about someone's thoughts or feelings. A typical example of the latter was someone expressing emotions and another person not caring or telling them to stop overreacting. This occurred often in *Violetta*, where the housekeeper, Olga, is presented as a humorous archetype, constructed as loud, emotional and overbearing, often resulting in one of the other characters telling (or threatening) her to calm down. Denial of autonomy generally took the form of a parent telling a child what (not) to do or a wife demanding to know her husband's

plans for the evening. This occurred frequently in all series, for example in the soap *Familie*, many of the analyzed episodes contained dramatic scenes where career woman June got into fights with her step daughter Louise over homework. These are not extreme forms of objectification, resulting in physical or psychological damage, but rather subtle ways of asserting social dominance that are frowned upon when taken advantage of, yet are recurring parts of everyday interaction.

Sexual objectification, i.e. someone being used as a means to a sexual end, was less prevalent yet occurred regularly. Jokes with strong sexual innuendo were a typical example. This happened most often in the sitcom *F.C. De Kampioenen*, as in every episode the male characters cracked several sexually objectifying jokes. For example, *Ronaldinho*, youngest member of football club *F.C. De Kampioenen*, bragged to his friends about marketing himself as a dance teacher so he could touch women's bodies. Similarly, preteen action series *Galaxy Park* featured a recurring humorous storyline of Mel, the blonde 'bimbo' of the group, jokingly being encouraged to go on dates with a 'nerdy' webmaster because her friends needed a favor of the latter. Less innocuous forms of sexualization such as sexual harassment or assault also occurred, especially in the comedy shows. This might not come as a surprise as research shows that comedy tends to contain instances of extreme violence, but that audiences perceive violence in conjunction with humor to be less upsetting or shocking than violence contextualized in a more serious way (Potter and Warren 1998).

### **(Sexual) Ownership?**

The core of our study pertains to differences and similarities between how sexual and non-sexual objectification are used in narratives. Analysis reveals a continuum ranging from sexual to non-sexual objectification rather than a dichotomous relationship. This became most clear when we analyzed objectification by ownership, i.e. a character being treated as property. Ownership was a version of non-sexual objectification that occurred quite rarely, but when it did, it was always in conjunction with someone laying a claim on someone else's (generally a woman's) sexuality or romantic availability. As such, ownership seems to be a subtype of non-sexual objectification that is strongly linked to sexual objectification, even though the specific instances of ownership encountered in the sample might have flown under the radar if the researcher had been looking for explicit sexual objectification. For example, a humorous scene in *Violetta* showed the eponymous main character being accosted by her domineering father, Herman, to stay away from romantic relationships

(referring specifically and heteronormatively to 'boys'), because they would only cause trouble and worry. This lighthearted interaction was contextualized by more serious, dramatic moments throughout the series of Herman not trusting his daughter to make the right decisions and struggling for control over her academic and romantic life, often physically moving her from one place to another, to which Violetta reacted by fighting for freedom and autonomy. Such scenes underlined how much of *Violetta's* narrative builds on patriarchal notions of women being the property of men and men feeling threatened by other men who might possibly take away 'their' woman.

### **Sexual Objectification and male Gender Roles**

Sexual and non-sexual objectification further were presented differently in the narrative with regard to the gender of perpetrator and victim. Non-sexual objectification was distributed relatively equally along gender lines, while sexual objectification generally followed a pattern of a male perpetrator with a female victim: the man as the objectifying subject and the woman as the acted upon object. This was an obvious source of gender stereotypical humor in *F.C. De Kampioenen*, where every male character sexually objectified at least one woman during the analyzed plotlines, strongly tying the notion of sexual objectification to male gender identity. However, this differed between the analyzed shows: *F.C. De Kampioenen* contained much more explicit sexual objectification than any of the other sampled programs which showed a diverse range of male characters, some of which made sexually objectifying jokes, while others were caring and polite. For example, *Galaxy Park's* main cast featured three teenage boys: Stef, Os and Diederik. While Os was presented as a macho ladies' man, Diederik was geeky, showing little interest in girls, and Stef was very respectful to female characters. Both Os and Diederik's rapport with women was a source of humor, while Stef's position was never played out as a joke. Genre clearly is important here: considered as a low brow situation comedy, *F.C. De Kampioenen* is known for its crude sense of humor based on easily recognizable stereotypes (Claessens 2009).

Sexual objectification was narratively framed as a typically male source of humor by the comical shows. Sexually objectifying jokes told by men were generally met with negative social reactions from the opposite sex, and the joker would make use of a tone of voice that expressed a certain self-awareness regarding the controversial nature of the joke he was about to tell. The edginess of the joke gave the objectifier a rebellious, hyper-masculine image. This seemed to amplify the appeal of telling sexually objectifying jokes as a way to

present oneself as strong and bold. Fiske (1987) similarly writes about *The A-Team* as a show popular among boys and men for its depiction of recklessly brave masculinity manifesting itself regardless of social pressures to adopt a more mature, controlled and civilized code of conduct. As Huuki et al. (2010) have written about violent humor functioning as a tool in the construction of hierarchy and male identity among young boys, this narrative reflects real life mechanisms. The use of sexually objectifying jokes by male characters was most common in *F.C. De Kampioenen*. In the non-comedy shows, sexual objectification was more equally distributed along gender lines, strongly linking the ubiquity of sexist stereotypes in *F.C. De Kampioenen* to the sitcom genre.

### **Female Gender Roles and Pushing Back**

The aforementioned negative reaction of the opposite sex when confronted with sexually objectifying jokes required further analysis. By portraying sexually objectifying jokes as something that, typically, men partake in and women roll their eyes at, programs like *F.C. De Kampioenen* explicitly frame sexual objectification as an arena of struggle for the battle between the sexes. This reifies an 'us versus them' view on gender relations, but also opens up the practice of telling sexually objectifying jokes to multiple reader positions, showing both sides to the story (Fiske 1987) and, as such, subjectifying the object. *F.C. De Kampioenen* showed objectified women pushing back, clearly voicing their frustration at being confronted with sexist attitudes, not allowing themselves to be reduced to an object. In other words, while some of the programs in our sample naturalized sexual objectification as male gender role performance, rarely this was shown to go without any (female) response or backlash. In fact, women generally had the last word in these struggles, although it may appear like a small victory considering each new episode brought a repetition of the conflict regarding sexist jokes. Interestingly, this pattern of female social aptitude was found throughout the sample, sometimes even showing female (social) dominance. For example, whenever there was physical violence without a sexual connotation (i.e. violability), men far outnumbered women as victims. *F.C. De Kampioenen* featured the relationship between married couple Carmen, an assertive woman, and Xavier, a timid man who gets bossed around by his wife and his friends. On numerous occasions, Carmen verbally and physically intimidated Xavier for comic relief. Overt male-on-female violence was never framed as humorous in the sample. Women were presented as socially dominant or equal to their male counterparts in most non-sexual interactions, but this pattern reversed when the tone

became sexual, with men taking the lead and women mostly setting (or trying to set) limits. While sexual objectification and sexually objectifying jokes seemed to be used to constitute male gender identity, pushing back and setting limits to this sexism fulfilled a similar function for female gender identity, reifying the battle between the sexes and underlining feminism and anti-sexism as a concern for women, not men.

### **Importance of Subjectivity**

*Violetta*, the melodramatic telenovela, and *F.C. De Kampioenen*, the sitcom, regularly featured female protagonists struggling with objectification but handled the issue in very different ways. *Violetta* is the protagonist of the series, and the narrative thrives on exploring how she feels about her father limiting her freedom. In *F.C. De Kampioenen*, several episodes contained men physically fighting for the romantic attention of women. However, the series' narratives largely ignored how women felt about these rivalries. As a result, unlike in *Violetta*, *FC De Kampioenen's* narrative portrayal of (romantic) ownership did not question whether this type of objectification is acceptable or not. In addition, *F.C. De Kampioenen* used objectification mainly as a source of humor, and its plot did not conclude with any moral message to indicate objectification is problematic. In contrast, the finale of *Violetta's* first season (included in the sample) concluded with Herman realizing that he was hurting his daughter by limiting her freedom, and deciding to allow *Violetta* to realize her dream of participating in a big, celebratory musical production with her friends. One could infer that the overarching message of *Violetta's* narrative actually questioned patriarchal notions, and made a statement against objectification.

### **Contextualized Objectification**

Contextualization was imperative to fully grasp the various meanings of objectification in the sample. As evidenced in the previous section, objectification could be narratively naturalized ('the way things are'), or politicized ('the way things are now'). In addition, the narrative contextualization of one subtype of objectification differed from one scene to the next, emphasizing the complexity and grey morality of human interaction. A number of narrative components had a particularly clear effect on the contextualization of an act of objectification. The first was social standing. A character that objectified someone with a higher social standing was much more likely to be portrayed in an unsympathetic light or to experience negative consequences. In comparison, almost every program in the sample

showed socially powerful, popular characters exhibiting objectifying behavior towards characters with lower social standing, without experiencing negative results or being portrayed as a bad person. For example, most shows had characters functioning as the proverbial whipping boy. Mostly, this was a male character with fewer social skills than his cast mates, who was consistently featured as a laughing stock and victim of socially condoned bullying (non-sexual objectification). The only show not using this plot instrument, was *Violetta*. *Violetta* was the most black-and-white moralistic program in the sample, as bad deeds rarely went unpunished. *Galaxy Park*, the other show with a preteen target audience, was morally more grey, with protagonists displaying objectifying behavior towards a few of their less popular friends.

A second factor was in/out-group membership. Every program in the sample had a main cast of protagonists. When someone within that group was the victim of objectification, the objectifier was much more likely to be penalized than when someone from the in-group exhibited objectifying behavior towards an outsider. Two *F.C. De Kampioenen* plotlines exemplify this: when middle-aged macho Boma tried to win back his ex-girlfriend, headstrong Goedele, he forced two of his employees to fake a robbery so he could 'rescue' Goedele. The scheme goes wrong, and Boma is portrayed as a pathetic bully. Goedele is part of the central cast and treating her as an object whose romantic feelings can be manipulated, is explicitly framed as morally wrong. However, in another episode the male cast bring in a group of Playboy Bunnies for a bachelor party. Boma explicitly calls the women 'prime quality meat' and two central cast members grab a playboy bunny by the arm to take her somewhere private without addressing her. When the female cast members find out, they are angry. However, this negative outcome is tied to the men partying too hard rather than the objectification of the bunny – an outsider - which is not narratively framed as problematic per se but as cheeky. Once again, this ties sexual objectification to performing a macho-masculine identity.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

We set out to find what types of sexual and non-sexual objectification Flemish preteens typically encounter in their favorite television shows, whether the narrative portrayal of sexual objectification differs from that of non-sexual objectification, and what the narratives

of these shows tell us about the significance of (sexual) objectification to male and female gender roles.

While most of the literature has focused on sexual objectification, non-sexual objectification was found to be much more common in the analyzed narratives. Limiting the other's freedom to think and act, i.e. denial of subjectivity and denial of autonomy, occurred most often and were rarely framed in an overtly negative way, presenting many forms of objectification as a normalized part of social interaction. This shows the importance of extending the spotlight from sexual objectification to include non-sexual objectification, to understand objectification in all its manifestations. While there is academic consensus that sexually objectifying content can support societal sexism, the higher prevalence of non-sexually objectifying narratives warrants academic attention to uncover how the normalization of non-sexual objectification may shape our social reality.

Indeed, we found that objectification often defies easy classification as wrong or right, or as sexual or non-sexual. Our results indicate that Nussbaum's (1995) ownership often has a sexual undercurrent, despite seeming non-sexual at first glance. This demonstrates that broadening the research scope to include non-sexual objectification creates a new perspective on what objectification means to (gendered) power relations in society. Violetta's father telling her to stay away from boys would fly under the radar when looking for explicit instances of sexual objectification. However, contextualizing this scene within the coming of age narrative of Violetta fighting for romantic autonomy and her father's dominance when it comes to Violetta's love life, reveals the sexual undercurrent of this power struggle between father and daughter. This indicates that future research on sexual objectification (and sexualization) should not focus semi-exclusively on the issue of being reduced to sexual function (e.g. APA 2007).

Comparing occurrences of non-sexual objectification with those of sexual objectification further revealed why sexual objectification remains an important field of study, in spite of Lerum and Dworkin's (2009) convincing argument about the growing variety in male and female media representations. While non-sexual objectification occurred more frequently, it was also more equally distributed along gender lines, as men and women alike gave as good as they got. However, sexual objectification was largely done by men to women. This explains why, despite the growing prevalence of assertive female characters, media portrayals of power dynamics in sexual interaction still require scrutiny.

However, Lerum and Dworkin's (2009) plea for more nuance when discussing the ubiquity of media objectification is shown to be correct: the large variety of different narrative uses of objectification indicate that analyzing objectification is about more than counting its occurrences. Qualitative, context-aware analyses are necessary to understand the complex and nuanced ways in which media cover objectification. Specifically, we found two distinctly different ways objectification was used to showcase power dynamics in societies. On the one hand, recurrent objectifying plotlines worked to reify the power struggle, presenting it as 'the way things are and always will be'. For example, even though *F.C. De Kampioenen* showed women not enjoying objectification, even fighting back, the recurring narrative of men making sexually objectifying jokes underlined the sexual power position of male characters. Indeed, a joke's initiator generally holds a power position both in sitcoms (Scharrer 2001) and in real life (Huuki et al. 2010).

On the other hand, *Violetta* is framed as a protagonist struggling for romantic autonomy, misunderstood by a domineering parent. *Violetta's* plotlines use objectification to show a typical power imbalance in society between parents/fathers and children/daughters but does so from the perspective of the objectified party, putting *Violetta* at the forefront as a thinking, feeling, acting subject. This narrative use of objectification frames it as a problem that needs to be dealt with rather than as 'normal' behavior. This illustrates how media can use objectification as a plotline without the content being objectifying per se, and this is more likely to empower the viewer rather than teaching them to self-objectify. The sample shows that Flemish preteens enjoy a variety of genres, providing a range of narratives concerning objectification and gender roles. Some of these, like the sitcom *F.C. De Kampioenen* and preteen action series *Galaxy Park*, produce quite stereotypical plotlines and characters, often as a source of humor. As an example of a somewhat archaic comedy genre, *F.C. De Kampioenen's* reliance on traditional gender stereotypes echo the slapstick and innuendo of comedy classics like *The Benny Hill Show*. *Violetta* and the two soaps, *Familie* and *Thuis*, were less stereotypical, probably because telenovelas and soaps share a tendency to show male characters being more in tune with their emotions (Brown, 1994). It would be too simplistic to argue that preteens do not understand these genre conventions. For instance, research among *F.C. De Kampioenen* fans shows people enjoy the show because of the conflict between the men and the women, with the women pushing back, indicating audiences interpret the show as being self-aware

and tongue in cheek (Quinten 2005). Preteens watching the show may well sympathize with the women, especially as they may recognize the position of lesser power that comes with being female and, indeed, with being young (Wyness 2011).

However, continued association of sexual objectification with male gender roles, even if this is in humorous settings, is likely to send the message that sexual objectification is a handy tool for those who aspire to a hyper-masculine identity, especially in a culture where the male is valued more highly than the female and where masculinity connotes dominance over others. This is notably relevant during stages of intensified gender learning such as the preteen years, when young people are preoccupied with developing gender schemata to bolster (and understand) their position in the social order (Berk 2006). The relationship between objectification and female gender roles paints a more optimistic picture: women are shown resisting objectification throughout the sample, including in humorous narratives. However, the discrepancy between the function of objectification narratives for male versus female gender roles seems to support the familiar 'battle of the sexes' scenario where men and women continue to butt heads over instances of sexual objectification that seem like harmless, 'boys will be boys' type fun to men, while women feel misunderstood when they are perceived as humorless nags for questioning this dynamic. This way, normalized objectification complicates the development of respectful, equal hetero-social relationships, a common frustration among young people (Buckingham and Bragg 2004).

Considering that objectification narratives feature different scenarios for men and women, creating a wide range of different (gendered) reader positions, audience research is needed to further explore how these varying and sometimes even opposing narrative uses of objectification are interpreted by (preteen) viewers, and how this may inform audiences' views on inter-gender social relations.

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## **Chapter 4. Unofficial-knowing: Sexualization in media and preteens as contextualized audience.**

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### **Summary**

This fourth chapter is where reception enters the picture. The observations and interviews featured in this study explore how a group of preteen boys and girls position themselves with regards to conflicting cultural pushes and pulls of sexualization versus compulsory asexuality. I also investigate how these two conflicting discourses have different relevance to boys and girls, and to younger children versus older children. This underlines how children use their agency to move through the discursive space created between different discourses, and determine their contextual identity by expressing themselves through (a)sexuality. The study also sheds light on how gender and age expectations guide or limit children in their freedom to explore sexual interests at their own pace.

### **Abstract**

By means of an ethnography of a small sample of nine-to-eleven-year old boys and girls, this contribution explores the ways in which preteens interact with sexualizing media content depending on social context, and what part discourses on sexuality, compulsory asexuality and sexualization play in their identity work. Results show that, while all children hide interest in sexuality from adult authority figures, sexual content has different value to the social position of girls and boys among peers. While boys tend to use sexual content to create a 'tough boy' persona, girls claim the 'good girl' role by disavowing sexual media. In addition, children are frustrated at unwanted exposure to explicit sexual content. Media literacy helps children assess how much sexual content to expect from a genre or channel, allowing them to make informed choices based on personal interest.

## **Introduction**

By means of an ethnography of a small sample of nine-to-eleven-year old boys and girls, this contribution explores the ways in which preteens interact with sexualizing media content and what part mediated discourses on sexuality, compulsory asexuality and sexualization play in their everyday life and identity work.

The relationship between media content and sexual behaviors of audiences has been a recurring theme in public debate, focusing on its potentially problematic nature, especially in relationship to young people that grow up in today's sexualized media culture (Wartella and Jennings, 2000). Concern is raised about how sexuality, foregrounded in popular media entertainment, affects children's social interaction and identity work (Negra and Tasker, 2007). Media fulfil a social function in families and peer groups, and a personal function in a child's identity work with children having their own, specific media cultures (Duits, 2008; Bragg and Buckingham, 2008; Jackson and Westrupp, 2010). However, little is known about how children, and especially preteens, interact with sexualized media content: what part it plays in their everyday lives, and how children see their identity in relationship to sexualized media content.

To investigate this issue, we start with a theoretical discussion of the position of sexualization as opposed to innocence in the lives of preteens, exploring how sexualization is laden with cultural meanings and how media are considered to play a potentially negative yet varied part in the identity work of youngsters. Furthermore, we explore the specifics of young people's identity work, in particular the role of gender. The theoretical framework subsequently guides the analysis and discussion of the ethnographic data, based on observation and interviews with a small sample of 15 preteen boys and girls, focusing on how these children use sexualized media content and media talk in their gendered identity work.

## **Sexualization and preteens: goodbye innocence?**

### **The issue of sexualized media content**

The past decade or so has witnessed controversy regarding popular media becoming more saturated with explicit and implicit portrayals of sexuality (Buckingham and Bragg, 2004), considered as visible proof of the 'sexualization of our culture'. Feminist scholars relate this to a postfeminist discourse that links sexual expression to empowerment (Gill, 2009a), contributing to a cultural framework that allows women to be sexually assertive – albeit

under certain heteronormative conventions - but also pushing sexuality to the foreground of popular media entertainment, making it a mandatory component of social interaction and identity work (Negra and Tasker, 2007).

The issue seems to take on increased relevance in relationship to young audiences. Popular and academic debate revolves around concerns that, today, children grow up 'too fast' because popular media expose them to topics they are not yet ready to deal with (Cook and Kaiser, 2004). In this context, scholars have examined the supposedly bad example set by overtly sexual pop stars like Miley Cyrus (Lamb, Graling and Wheeler, 2013), (pre)teen-oriented television-series with sexual content like *Gossip Girl* (Toffoletti, 2008) or popular dance styles featured in music videos (Jackson and Goddard, 2015).

However, this provides a simplistic and one-sided evaluation of the relationship between young audiences and sexualized media content. For instance, while the prominence of sex in popular media may signal to young people (and especially to girls) that sexuality is a simple path to success and social status (Douglas, 1994; Zhang et al. 2010), such a view ignores that children are generally expected to be innocent and asexual (Fass, 2013). One of the main distinctions between the social constructs of childhood and adulthood is the absence or presence of sexual knowledge. This is why the idea of young people as audiences of sexual media content is so disconcerting to many (Kelley et al, 1999). With regards to sexuality, children are thus caught between conflicting discourses that affect them in different ways, at different times. This raises the question how children actually interact with (sexualized) media content, what part this media content plays in their lives and how children link their identities to their relationship with sexual media content. In other words: how does media sexualization play a role in children's identity work?

### **Active identity work**

Behind the above-mentioned concerns lingers a notion of young people as cultural dupes (cf. Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944): sponges that indiscriminately soak up mass media messages (Banet-Weiser, 2007). However, research shows children to be active audience members who, just like adults, question and oppose media messages (Buckingham and Bragg 2004; Duits, 2008; Jackson and Vares, 2015). In addition, children have their own, specific media cultures, with media fulfilling a social function in families and peer groups (Nayak and Kehily, 2008; Messenger Davies, 2010;). Examples of the ways in which children actively use their position as audience members to construct their identity and social reality are legion:

children negotiate with parents to stay up late to watch a popular television show, using the pleasure of family viewing to bypass everyday routines (Briggs, 2010). Duits (2008) observes a friend group of preteen Muslim girls that dressed conservatively, yet prepared a highly-sexualized dance-routine to the Pussycat Dolls' song Buttons, in order to get closer to the choreographer: the most popular girl in class. Baker (2010), furthermore, demonstrates how preteens in after-school-care use musical taste and cultural capital to set themselves apart from peers, constructing a cultural identity built on fandom.

With regards to adult (sexual) content, research shows that children actively search for indications as to whether a text is appropriate for them or not, for example by making a distinction between pre- and post-watershed television programming (Kelley et al, 1999). The age-related taboo on sexuality is a cultural construct, so young people do not always find it easy to figure out why exactly sexual content is forbidden to them. At the same time, the taboo status makes the topic a salient source for identity work. For example, by boasting about knowledge of adult content, children can claim a more mature identity for themselves among peers (Kelley et al, 1999; Bragg and Buckingham, 2008). These observations result in our aim to take a nuanced look at how young people interact with increasingly sexualizing media in a culture that also values child innocence, and how they strive for empowerment through (and against) discourses of sexualization and asexuality in their social worlds. In doing so, we take into account that the salience of sexualization versus asexuality discourses, and their relevance in young people's identity work, varies according to the personal context and background of each child.

### **What it feels like for a boy and a girl**

These debates focus on sexualized media in relationship to girls, as the sexual awakening of girls is the subject of recurrent moral panics. There is certainly reason for this. For one thing, girls today experience at its sharpest the conflict between, on the one hand, the promises of empowerment and agency through sexual self-actualization proclaimed by post-feminism (Douglas, 1994; Gill, 2009a) and, on the other hand, the sexual double standard that punishes women who exhibit overt sexual behavior (Crawford and Popp, 2003). Girls feel this acutely, struggling to reconcile their need for positive role models with the slut-shaming discourse they have internalized (Renold and Ringrose, 2011).

Boys are much less a subject of such studies and, generally, have been trusted to find their own footing during their (pre)teen years (Fass, 2013). This reaffirms the sexual double

standard and results in a lack of awareness of the problems that boys face before and during their sexual coming of age. The focus on female experiences has further downsides. Boys and girls are socialized differently, including with regards to their sexuality, but this socialization also overlaps and interacts (Gunter, 2014). Most of sexualization's dynamics are strongly linked to heterosexuality and dichotomous gender identity, making boys and men as important to the topic as women and girls. Furthermore, research indicates that sexualization is increasingly relevant to men and boys (Martins, Tiggemann and Kirkbride, 2007; McCabe and Ricciardelli, 2010). As a result, this study looks at the ways in which preteen boys and girls differ in the use of media talk in identity work.

### **The relevance of the preteen years**

Different from most research into issues of sexualized media content in relationship to adolescents or adults, this paper focuses on preteens, i.e. children from the age of nine to thirteen (Cook and Kaiser, 2004). At this age, children become curious about sexuality and romantic relationships, and, thus, interested in media content that involves these subjects (Durham 1999; Larson 2001; de Graaf, Neeleman and de Haas 2009). Moreover, the age group occupies a complex position in relationship to (a)sexuality: defined by the last stages of childhood innocence and a-sexuality, yet taking their first steps towards adolescence, a life stage fraught with sexual tension (Moore and Rosenthal, 2006). This comes at a time when boys and girls start valuing their autonomy and independence from the adults in their lives as a way to distance themselves from the dependent child identity (Beal, 1994). This means that preteens are often on their own when navigating important issues like sexuality and gender roles, making media a convenient source of cultural knowledge. This explains why popular and academic debates often turn to the role of media to explain those parts of (youth) culture that are seen as problematic. (Buckingham and Bragg, 2004; Brown, Halpern and L'Engle, 2005; De Backer et al., 2007). In a culture saturated by media messages (Jenkins, 2006), it seems evident that identity work is related to how we construct ourselves as audience members. While popular media are often seen as simply reinforcing the status quo, the rich diversity of audience experiences indicates otherwise (Douglas, 1995). Therefore, this paper focuses on preteen boys and girls to explore how media help negotiate their (social) identity in interaction with sexualization and compulsory asexuality discourses.

## **Observing and talking to preteens**

Following the example set out by cultural studies researchers such as Renold and Ringrose (2011) and Jackson and Vares (2015), we study this issue by means of an ethnographic approach, combining repeated observations and subsequent interviews as the preferred inroad into this group and into a complex understanding of the issue. Both were executed by the first author of this study.

Participatory observation offers the possibility to first develop an impression of typical issues and social patterns among participants, after which unstructured interviews delve deeper into meanings and thought processes. In addition to strongly grounding findings in the lived experiences of the respondents, participatory observation helps to reduce the authoritarian gap between the adult researcher and the children (Kesby, 2000; Clark et al, 2009). To further ensure this, the 28-year-old researcher took care to dress casual and trendy, and to behave in an approachable, egalitarian way. She aimed to align herself with the identity of a 'grown-up girl' (Duits, 2008, p.65) rather than an adult, trying to limit self-censoring behavior of the young participants.

The study received clearance from the University of Antwerp ethical advisory committee for the social sciences and humanities as part of a larger research project on children and media sexualization. To obtain insight into the social worlds and media use of preteens in a context as close to real life as possible, the observation and interviews were conducted during after-school care sessions of a group of children who knew each other from that context. One school that collaborated in earlier stages of the project agreed to function as host. The children were provided with information leaflets telling them the study would focus on their social worlds and media habits. All participating children were eager to take part and signed the consent forms, along with their parents. Seven boys and eight girls took part, providing the researcher with the opportunity to get to know each of them closely. Sexuality is a sensitive subject for preteens that requires a special type of rapport between respondent and researcher, therefore a smaller group was preferred. Similar ethnographic studies often start with a larger group of participants while the analysis is based on a few key individuals (see Baker, 2004; Kuik, 2013), so the small sample was not considered as a disadvantage. The participants' age range was distributed evenly and included five nine-year-olds, five ten-year-olds and four eleven-year-olds. The sample was largely middle class.

The first author went to the school three times weekly over a five-month period, to monitor the after-school care sessions and to get to know the participants. During these sessions, the researcher made short field notes that were transcribed in detail within the next 24 hours. After four months of observations, the researcher went through the field notes by means of NVIVO to compile a list of relevant interview topics. This allowed for further exploration of issues that emerged as salient from the observations. Subsequent interviews provided a form of data triangulation of the researcher's analysis of the children's behaviors with their own explanations. The interviews were conducted over lunch in an empty classroom, and the children could choose between being interviewed on their own or with one or two friends. All children preferred the presence of a same-sex friend. Interviews took up an hour on average, and were recorded and transcribed.

Fieldnotes and transcripts were coded and grouped around themes in order to find the most typical experiences and frustrations of the children regarding (a) sexuality, popular media and their experiences as audience members. Comparison of observations and interviews made it possible to point out discrepancies between actual behavior and children's self-reporting. These discrepancies provided insights in their own right.

### **Preteens and Unofficial Knowing**

Supporting findings of Buckingham and Bragg (2005), a discussion with 5<sup>th</sup> grader Mona foregrounded a common experience described by preteens: not knowing how to carry oneself when exposed to sexualized media content when adults are nearby.

Researcher (hereafter R): some people worry about the amount of nudity or sex on TV, have your parents ever commented on that?

Mona: I once saw something on Umesh Pop-up-Teevee [a comedy sketch show], about the thing of the man, how long it is, and I asked my mother what they were talking about and she said 'the length of the penis'. That's strange, because we don't really know anything about that. Well we do know of course, but in school you have to be in 6<sup>th</sup> grade for it, so.

R: for sexual education?

Mona: yeah, we don't really know anything.

R: really?

Mona: well we do, but you know what I mean. It also happens in FC De Kampioenen [a sitcom], and then I start fidgeting, looking at my nails, or I go to the bathroom. I don't want to watch it because it's strange. I don't know how to handle it. (...)

R: and if you walk away during a sexual joke on FC De Kampioenen, is it because of your parents?

Mona: with my brother and sister I don't mind, we know about that stuff. But with my parents I don't know how to react.

(interview transcripts)

Enzo quickly forwards a YouTube video because the bit that was playing was 'really dirty', according to Anne. After a bit of talk, Enzo shows me the sequence he was trying to hide. It was from a misheard lyric type of video, and the misheard lyric contained the word 'penis'. I am surprised because it is not more suggestive or raunchy than some other things the children have watched or said themselves, but Enzo says he fast forwarded the video because he did not want me to write '11-year-old boys are sexists [meaning obsessed with sex]'.

(field notes)

R: why do you think your mom won't let you watch it?

Jenny: because we're too young. I can see it when I'm eleven. I once watched it with my mom to see if it was OK, and then I was like 'shit my mom is seeing this!' [laughs]

(interview transcripts)

From these scenes, it became clear that while the children have sexual knowledge and an interest in certain types of sexual content, they perform an intricate balancing act of **unofficial knowing** to keep up the compulsory asexual identity they feel most comfortable with when adults are present. For Mona, the threshold to admit to sexual knowledge seems to be 6<sup>th</sup> grade, as that is the grade when these children will be receiving sexual education and thus are granted the right to know by the institute of their particular elementary school. In the case of Enzo, self-censorship seems motivated by sexist stereotypes that build on hegemonic masculinity to describe (pre)teen boys as (overly) preoccupied with sex (Kay, Nagle and Gould, 2000; Renold, 2005), an identity he does not wish to claim.

While our data thus confirm the complex work involved in preteens' negotiation of sexualized media content and sexual knowing in relationship to adults, the ethnographic approach of observing the children interact with each other allowed for comparison of the relationship between children and authority figures to how the children respond to sexual content among peers.

### **Sexualized media as a source of identity work among peers**

Observing the children interact amongst each other revealed the intricacies of how the cultural pushes and pulls of compulsory asexuality versus sexualization differ in salience depending on the context. While compulsory asexuality seemed dominant in the vicinity of adults, the situation shifted when children were interacting with a group of boys and girls their own age, i.e. with peers.

### **Hiding pleasure**

During the first author's time with the children, barely a session went by without media coming into play somehow: one of the children would demand to use the researcher's smartphone to watch a vlog or a music video, or they would cluster around the computer in the teacher's lounge. Even when media were out of reach, talk regularly turned to popular artists, movies, vloggers, videogames or TV-shows. It was clear that these children never really stopped being audience members. While sexually-loaded content was only a subset of the general type of the children's media talk, they discussed sexual media content in a rich variety of ways.

The extent to which children were comfortable when it came to sexual media content consumption among peers, was clearly age and gender related. When sexual media content was discussed, the younger children were obviously more embarrassed than the older and bolder boys and girls. In addition, although most girls talked about romance and sexuality often, they were also more likely than the boys to distance themselves explicitly from sexual media. This is an example of the 'schizoid subjectivities' described by Renold and Ringrose (2011), with girls trying to negotiate their identity while walking the tightrope between 'good girl' and 'in the know'. For example, the children would often play popular YouTube videos with sexual content, such as Justin Bieber's 'What Do You Mean' music video, which has a scene where Bieber and a female actress roll around on a bed in their underwear, kissing. Before the video even started, 4<sup>th</sup> graders Ariana and Anne turned to the

boys saying this was an 'impolite' video, seemingly judging them for watching it. However, the girls' *a priori* knowledge of the content signaled they had already seen it. What is more, the girls did not walk away but watched the video along with the researcher and the boys, intrigued by what was happening on screen. It was almost as if they had to set themselves apart from the boys, adding a disclaimer that they were good girls, before satisfying their curiosity by allowing themselves to watch the video. The same became apparent from the interviews, where several girls explained that they did not like to watch certain types of more mature (sexual) media content, only to contradict themselves a few minutes later when they happily discussed those plotlines with their interview partner.

Jenny (9): there's this show, for older children, it's for 10 year olds or something and I sometimes watch it but I'm not really allowed by my mom

Ariana (9): 'De 5er', it's a bit naughtier

R: do you like those stories?

Ariana: [laughs and shakes head]

R: Then why do you watch it?

Ariana: sometimes it's exciting. Like when Amber had two boyfriends and she had to choose one, and Wout, one of her boyfriends, saw on her cellphone that she was texting the other guy that she was going to break up with Wout, and then they got mad... but that was only sort of OK, I didn't really like it. (...) they say stuff like 'bitch' or 'fuck you' [whispering]. It's about life in high school and love and stuff [laughs].

R: what stuff?

Ariana: you knooooow.... Like kissing and you know [laughs].

(interview transcripts)

It is possible that they themselves did not experience their position as contradictory. Quite likely, the sexual double standard made the girls feel conflicted when watching sexual content, turning their experience as an audience member into a guilty pleasure at best. In contrast, discussing that experience with friends, sharing the awkwardness and feelings of mortification, proved to be very pleasurable.

### **Hiding shame**

The boys rarely made explicit judgements about content as being 'impolite', yet they, too, showed conflicting attitudes in talks with the researcher. Enzo exhibited the biggest change

from public moments to private discussions. Enzo was the oldest and most dominant boy in the group, often exhibiting verbally and physically abusive behavior towards other children. He also talked at length about how his big, strong father was an example to him. Enzo was obviously invested in hegemonic masculinity (see Davies, 2003), even using it to put down other types of masculinities and femininities (Connell, 2000) through homophobic and misogynist comments. Enzo constantly made sexualized remarks and did not judge the other children for watching sexual YouTube content. In the friendship group interviews, however, he expressed quite different opinions.

R: people sometimes worry about the amount of nudity and sex on TV, have you noticed?

Enzo: I once opened a vlog by Enzo Knol and I got this notification 'you can't watch this video' and I could half see something... Now I have this email, my mom says I need it for high school, and for that account I am 19. And sometimes there's a video and you accidentally click it and they let you in there even though you don't want to be there.

R: What do you mean?

Enzo: I don't know, I don't really watch it but you see titles like 'first time sex' and like men that are virgins who say stuff like 'ooh fucking whores'

David: I never had that on TV. Except about the Zika virus, that it's sexually transmittable. Or FC De Kampioenen, that's not really a show for us.

(interview transcripts)

One interpretation of these interview data is that Enzo felt the need to express the adult voice of reason, embodying compulsory asexuality in his interview with the (adult) researcher, based on what he might think she wanted to hear. The interview setting was somewhat more formal than the observations, underlining her role as a researcher and adult authority figure. However, since Enzo exhibited provocative and even objectifying, misogynist behavior towards the researcher during the observations, it is unlikely that this provides the full explanation. Instead, it appears Enzo felt that publicly distancing himself from sexualized content might dent his image as tough guy in front of the girls and the

younger children, even if, at times, he felt uncomfortable with more explicit sexual talk or media content.

This interpretation is supported by instances during the observations when the researcher was not nearby and the boys were startled by sudden sexual content in videos they were watching with friends, and physically distanced themselves from the screen. This gave credit to Enzo, David and Jens' accounts and indicated that their negativity towards sexual content was not just awkwardness towards adults witnessing their sexuality.

The children are watching a compilation of funny videos on YouTube. A close up of a breast appears, and a hand grabs it and squeezes it. The older boys do not really react, but 5<sup>th</sup> grader Harry is startled and grabs his friend Henri's head, trying to turn it away from the screen, as if the images are not appropriate for them to watch. Then the camera zooms out and it becomes obvious that this is a man's breast. Marnik exclaims 'it's okey, it's just a man's breast, they are allowed to show that'.

(field notes)

Interestingly, and different from the girls mentioned above, Marnik and Harry do not judge the sexual content explicitly, nor do they distance themselves from the images. Instead, they use a friend nearby as a proxy. Harry grabs his friend's head to turn it away from the screen, and Marnik puts up his lunchbox to shield the younger children from watching. Possibly, the boys act like this as an excuse, diverting their own attention without sacrificing status in front of the other boys.

This indicates that hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity play a part in the identity work of these preteens, pushing the children in different ways. For girls invested in hegemonic femininity, the sexual double standard that shames women for their sexuality makes it difficult to explore their sexual curiosity. For boys who aspire to hegemonic masculinity, it becomes difficult to avoid sexual content or sexualized talk for fear of losing status. However, both boys and girls are quite skillful in negotiating the contradictory expectations in their identity work, picking and choosing from both sexualization and compulsory asexuality discourses depending on which they assume to fit their current social context (see also Davies, 2003).

## **Diversity in dealing with sexualized media**

Finally, a wide variety of ways in which children talked about and reacted to sexualized media was observed. The more time spent with the children, the more it became clear that their interaction with sexualized media is much more nuanced than the compulsory asexuality versus sexualization debate suggests.

For example, children mentioned media as a source of **cultural knowledge and sexual scripts**, or as a means to back up their own claims. This became apparent in the aforementioned relationship between news coverage on sexual violence and the preteens' impression of female sexuality as a source of danger.

Marnik: you generally see more women than men in sexy situations on tv

R: why do you think that is?

Enzo: because women are more beautiful

R: do you think women agree with that idea?

Enzo: no, but... I've never seen a movie where a women turns her head to check out a boy's ass (...) in my mind, I follow that line that it's always going to be that way and not the other way around.

(interview transcripts)

In this instance, Enzo acknowledges that his views are biased when it comes to women being more suitable for objectification than men. However, media content that contains and supports these gender stereotypes give him the justification not to challenge his beliefs that men pursue women, and not the other way around. This heterosexual script is prevalent in preteen geared media like teen magazines (see Garner, Sterk and Adams, 1998; Jackson and Westrupp, 2010; Enck-Wanzer and Murray, 2011), primetime television (Kim et al., 2007), and wider contemporary western culture (Gill, 2009b).

Children further used sexualized media as a social resource to comment or reflect on content while negotiating a **moral position**, constructing an ideal of the type of adult they plan to become.

Jens: (...) Usually with violent films, like James Bond, he has sex every night and then he breaks up with them and leaves. That's strange, you don't just get a woman for the night and then leave to go on a mission or something.

(interview transcripts)

Here, Jens takes a moral position condemning casual sex, implicitly stating that, when it comes to romantic relationships, he wants to become a different type of adult than James Bond. Interestingly, Jens' quote suggests he looks up to certain aspects of the Bond persona: the guns, violence and cars speak strongly to Jens. However, he does not agree with Bond's womanizing, indicating he is capable of selecting certain characteristics of a famous role model as attractive, while rejecting other elements.

At other times, the preteens openly criticized types of sexualized media content for being **too prevalent and too explicit**, drawing upon the 'child as innocent' discourse to explain their feelings of unease.

R: but you'd rather not watch a series like Temptation Island?

Enzo: there's some things that just go too far. I don't want to see that [explicit sexual scenes].

David: we're just kids. I was watching funny videos on Facebook with my mom ones, and a woman with large breasts was doing the ice bucket challenge and her bikini fell off, and my mom said 'this is too much for your age'.

R: but you guys often joke about sex? How is that different than Temptation Island?

Enzo: but you don't REALLY think about it.

David: everyone in school jokes about it sometimes.

Enzo: in Temptation Island, you see an image, and if you just think of the word 'sex' you don't see an image.

David: not at our age.

(interview transcripts)

Jens: I once saw an advertisement [billboard] of a woman in her bra and her panties and it said 'once a month is enough'.

R: that's for a magazine, right?

Jens: well it makes me think of something else. Why should you think of something else, you should watch the street, not look at that and think of that [sex]?

(interview transcripts)

However, the extended amount of time the researcher spent with these children provided a more modified picture. While Enzo and David's incessant sexual comments were different from sexual television content because jokes are not visuals, this is not the end of the story. Enzo, David and Jens watched sexualized YouTube videos during the after-school care sessions in the teacher's lounge, and Henri explained that, during a playdate, Jens had been eager to check out a YouTube video that had the word 'porn' in the title, indicating that they actively sought out sexual content. The main issue, according to the children, is *unwanted* exposure to *explicit* sexual content. The children had a rich repertoire to assess how much sexual content they would be exposed to when consuming a particular type of media, based on issues like genre, channel, censorship and age ratings. They based their media consumption decisions on this media expertise, monitoring their own exposure. However, sometimes sexual content would crop up unexpectedly, or the content would be more explicit than expected. This bothered the boys.

The boys and a few girls are watching the Justin Bieber's 'What do you mean' video. Marnik ostentatiously puts up his lunchbox in front of the screen when Bieber and his love interest start undressing and kissing, as if to signal that he thinks this content is inappropriate for the younger preteens. Marnik remarks 'but it isn't that bad, YouTube won't show that [sex]'.

(field notes)

David wants to use the computer to go on Facebook. Marnik tells him he cannot because he's not yet 13: according to Marnik, Facebook is prohibited to children under 13, and under 16 you're only allowed if your parents give their consent.

(field notes)

In these examples, 6<sup>th</sup> grader Marnik makes use of his (media) expertise, in the first instance, to take the sting out of sexual content and, in the second instance, to moderate who can use the computer in what way. Marnik reinforces boundaries of who is allowed to watch what, but also reassures the children with his media expertise regarding the typical level of sexual explicitness of YouTube content. This way, Marnik prepares himself and his peers for the type of content they are about to watch, bolstering themselves with the knowledge that YouTube would not let things get to the point where it becomes too much for them to

handle. A similar dynamic occurred when the children watched content that was 'intense' in any other way, such as violent or scary moments.

Harry puts on Michael Jackson's Thriller music video on YouTube. He turns to the other boys and says that the video is kind of scary when you watch it in the dark. The boys discuss the storyline of the video, they clearly all know it by heart. Henri says 'this is the bit where he changes into a werewolf under the full moon'.

(field notes)

This seems to indicate that children experience sexual content as potentially risky, much like scary movies can give you nightmares, and that older children such as Marnik take it upon themselves to use their expertise to shield younger (or more vulnerable) children from unwanted or inappropriate exposure.

## **Conclusion**

This paper studied the audience experiences of 15 preteen boys and girls with regards to sexualized media content, and the role this plays in their identity work. First, we found that sexualized media content has a range of meanings to preteens. While observations and interviews with these preteens showed that children experience shame, embarrassment and see unwanted exposure to explicit content as problematic, they also expressed pleasure when discussing risqué content with a friend, and bonded with their peers through media talk about content they enjoyed. In addition, children showed interest in sexual media content at an age where they had not yet received sexual education in class, implying that this was a source of easily available knowledge and entertainment. Children made their own assessment with regards to how much sexual content they could expect in a specific genre or through a specific channel, using their media expertise to make informed decisions that suit their needs. They were most frustrated by sexual content when this appeared unexpectedly, or when it was more explicit than anticipated. This suggests that media-literacy could play an important part in empowering children to make their own informed choices with regards to sexual media consumption.

Another important finding was the relevance of contextualization to these preteens' audience experience. Supporting findings of Buckingham and Bragg (2005), some of the preteens exhibited a certain unease and self-awareness when discussing sexuality or

consuming sexual media, especially in the presence of adults. Trying to resolve the conflict between their own sexual knowledge and interests, and adult expectations for children to be innocent and asexual, many children confided that they occupied a position of 'unofficial knowing'. Children hid their sexual knowledge and interests from adults until they reached a certain threshold, after which it would become acceptable to start expressing themselves sexually. For some of the children, this threshold was 6<sup>th</sup> grade, when their school organized sexual education classes.

Among peers, this pattern shifted considerably, highly influenced by gender performance. This appears typical of the preteen life-stage, when children start to strive for autonomy from parents, which increases the relevance of classmates as points of reference (Beal, 1994). The increased importance of peers entails a fear of rejection (Kuik, 2013), and one coping behavior of preteens is intensified gender learning, where children take refuge in hegemonic masculinity and femininity (Beal, 1994). We observed two gendered motifs of interacting with sexuality and sexual content: *hiding pleasure*, and *hiding shame*.

Most of the girls demonstrated the first type of behavior, meaning that they explicitly distanced themselves from sexual content in a public context. Yet, in private interviews with a close female friend and the researcher, the same girls expressed delight and excitement over sexual storylines in their favorite soaps. This implied that the girls felt like they had to perform hegemonic femininity in public, while they were able to let go in private, where they felt that their interest in sexuality would be accepted. In contrast, many boys fit the second category, performing hegemonic masculinity by boasting sexual knowledge and a preference for sexual media content to bolster their socially dominant position in public situations. In private interviews, however, these boys expressed that sexual media content confused them at times, and that they were exposed to certain images against their will. The ways in which both of these groups interacted with sexual topics and sexual media content was, in other words, heavily informed by their gender performance, with girls invoking the 'good girl' role, while boys played tough. The importance of intensified gender learning to the audience experience of participants underlines the unique position of preteens.

Finally, this paper's important contribution is how it provides an ethnographic look into the function of sexualized media within preteen social cultures as a unique context. The methodological setup allowed for triangulation by comparing self-reported behavior to actual behavior, and revealing discrepancies between how the children acted in public

versus in private. This revealed the contextual nature of how sexualized media are received by preteen audiences, and the variety of meanings beyond shame, risk and corrupted innocence.

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## **Chapter 5: “The Girl Is in Pain and the Boys Don’t Know”: An Ethnography of Preteens’ Sexual Identity Work in After School Care.**

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(Submitted to Girlhood Studies)

### **Summary**

In this final chapter, the ethnography moves beyond media reception and its link to sexuality and sexualization, instead providing a sketch of the sexuality-related social bonds and power struggles between the boys and girls participating in the project. This works to put sexualization in a broader context of enduring sexism among primary school children, which seems to be a strongly felt structural impediment to these preteens’ freedom and happiness. The fifth chapter explores how sexualization is used by the children as a tool for empowerment as well as oppression, and how personal characteristics of the children limited them in how they felt they were able use sexuality in their identity work.

### **Abstract**

Sexualization is a hot topic in feminist scholarship, especially when it concerns growing up in an objectifying culture. Describing social interactions of 15 preteens in after school care, this paper explores the functions of sexuality-related discourses in these girls’ and boys’ daily struggles for empowerment. Special attention is given to the social value of aggressive sexual behavior, and how this intersects with the gendered power struggles of the preteens. The observations reveal how co-existence of compulsory asexuality and sexualization makes sexuality a taboo yet attractive subject for preteen power play. However, the embedment of these children in a sexist primary school playground culture leaves girls as easy victims of sexualized bullying. It is recommended that sexualization research puts more effort into exploring the subtle ways sexism flows through our primary schools as it does through society at large, addressing the root of the problem rather than its sexualizing symptoms.

### **Introduction**

Focusing on the social interactions of 15 preteens (9-12 year olds) in after school care in a middle-sized town in the Northern, Flemish speaking part of Belgium, this paper explores the meanings and functions of sexuality-related discourses in these girls’ and boys’ daily struggles for autonomy, agency and empowerment. Special attention is given to the social

value of aggressive sexual behavior and talk, and how this intersects with the identity work and gendered power struggles of the preteens.

Since the turn of the millennium, popular and academic debate on the increasing prevalence of sexuality in the social world of children has intensified (Gunter 2014). Concerns mainly revolve around children picking up sexual preoccupations “too early”. These concerns are often bolstered by examples pulled from popular culture (Lamb, Graling and Wheeler 2013; Smith 2013; Oppliger 2008) which are thought to articulate a sexualizing discourse that has a significant pull on young people. A key problem of this debate on sexualizing pressures is that it is too one-sided, ignoring another cultural pressure on children: the expectation that they are innocent and asexual. These competing social norms create a difficult position for young people, especially girls as they are caught in the middle because of their young age and the sexual double standard tied to their gender (Renold 2005).

From an optimist perspective, being able to draw upon two different discourses opens up room for identity work. Indeed, children hardly sit around passively, waiting to be socialized. Not only do they actively resist social norms (Davies, Buckingham and Kelley 1999), children co-create social norms (Mayall 1994) and form their own subcultures in places where adult supervision is less dominant. These subcultures become spaces of self-exploration and boundary testing, where sexual discourses provide a salient cultural resource (Baker 2004) and a way to position oneself in relation to peers (Beal 1994).

In this paper, I aim to explore the meaning and relevance of sexual discourses in the social world of preteens by means of an ethnography of preteens in after-school care, analyzing the insights gained during five months of participatory observation.

### **Sexualization versus Asexuality: a Catch-22?**

Sexuality, especially young people’s, is a morally loaded issue that is subject to competing ideological struggles. On the one hand, there is an (increasing) prominence of overt sexuality in the public sphere, for example in music videos (Armstrong 2001), at parties (Males 2010) and in fashion (Oppliger 2008). This sexual “mainstreaming” is often referred to as the sexualization of Western culture (Attwood 2009). This discourse can put pressure on young people to participate in sexualized practices in order to “keep up” with savvy peers (Carey, Donaghue and Broderick 2011; Bragg et al.2011). Sexualization is said to blur the lines

between sexual agency and self-objectification, possibly resulting in low self-esteem rather than personal empowerment (Gill 2007). Other scholars argue that the moral panic regarding childhood sexualization derives its relevancy mainly from another, more dominant discourse: compulsory asexuality, which constructs children as innocent, pure and, above all, in need of shielding from all things sexual (Egan and Hawkes 2013; Fass 2013). This ideological framework is most dominant towards girls, as boys can claim a hegemonic masculine, heterosexual identity (Dennis 2002). Despite the impact of feminism on Western society, the double standard that penalizes girls for being sexual is still firmly in place, as the prevalence of slut-shaming shows (Gong and Hoffman 2012; Armstrong et al 2014). In fact, much of the sexualization debate appears to boil down to a fear of sexuality as “a contaminant of young femininity” (Duchinsky 2013, p.255), similar to discussions regarding the disappearance of “true childhood” (Jenks 1997; Cook 2002, Kaiser and Huun 2002). Feminist scholars seek to create awareness of how the construct of (female) sexual purity is harming girls, arguing that society is robbing girls of agency and confidence by being overprotective (Duits and van Zoonen 2011), and that overvaluing sexual innocence suggests to girls that they lose something important when they become sexually active (Fass 2013).

### **Discursive Space between Asexuality and Sexualization**

Sexualization versus asexuality constitute a lose-lose situation where both rejecting and embracing sexuality makes the child subject to criticism. Yet, this sexual duality also creates room for agency. In fact, studies show that children actively negotiate and reject both sexualization (Duits 2008; Renold and Ringrose 2011) and compulsory asexuality (Baker 2004; Kuik 2013). Both can empower the individual or take power away. For example, a girl may feel empowered when she manages all the moves of a sexualized music video choreography because it makes her feel mature and attractive, yet lose that feeling of empowerment when peers draw upon asexuality discourses to slutshame her. Conversely, a late-blooming boy may feel disempowered by peers’ emphasis on sexual success as a source of masculinity, while he can empower himself by referencing the compulsory asexuality discourse to argue that boys his age should not be bothered by romantic pursuits. This study will contribute to the sexualization debate by not treating sexualization as a fixed situation or a problem to solve, but as a dynamic cultural resource that can limit or expand children’s identity work in different social contexts.

### **Primary School and Preteen Age as Specific Context**

As mentioned, the debate on sexuality and childhood has a strong focus on risk and loss of innocence, seemingly negating the existence of child sexuality. When child sexuality is finally acknowledged as a fact of young lives, it is only discussed in terms of experimentation/preparation. This conceptualization of child sexuality as “becoming” instead of “being”, does not adequately acknowledge that children live in the now: just like adults do not live their lives in preparation of old age, children are not just preparing for adolescence or adulthood (Renold 2005). Sexuality thus may have its own meanings and social functions in the specific social context of childhood. This calls for more research that, from an open-minded perspective, studies how young people perform sexual identity work and strive for empowerment through (and against) discourses of sexualisation and compulsory asexuality.

Negotiating a position in relation to these powerful discourses becomes especially salient during the preteen years, which span from age nine to thirteen (Cook and Kaiser 2004). At this age, children start striving for autonomy from their parents, increasing the importance of classmates as points of reference (Beal 1994). The significance of peers brings a fear of rejection (Kuik 2013). This balancing act demands self-awareness, with preteens being careful not to step out of line, for example by behaving in a way that transgresses gender norms (Kuik 2013). One coping strategy that young people adopt is intensified gender learning: a preoccupation with picking up characteristics that set apart girls from boys (Beal 1994). Many of these characteristics have a sexual undercurrent (Thorne 1993), like girls being positioned as attractive (sexual) objects and boys as aggressive pursuers (Buckingham and Bragg 2004). This makes preteens an especially salient age group to study power negotiations among peers in light of sexualization versus compulsory asexuality.

Following the example set by Renold and Ringrose (2011) and Jackson and Vares (2015), I report on an ethnography I conducted among 15 preteen boys and girls attending after-school care. Through exploration of how these young individuals negotiate their (social) identity in interaction with gender roles and sexuality discourses, I address the current research gap of how preteens figure out their sexual identity, caught between compulsory asexuality and sexualisation.

## **An Authentic Look into Preteen Life**

My main objective is to understand the ways preteens interact with discourses of compulsory asexuality and sexualisation. However, research on sexuality poses the risk of circular reasoning: rather than first establishing whether sexuality actually is prominent in the behaviours of individual children, research often assumes so based on the literature. To approach participants with an open mind, allowing them to lead the conversation instead of asking them to focus exclusively on sexuality, I decided on participatory observation. Another asset of participatory observation is that it challenges the hierarchical relationship between researcher and subject as it positions the researcher as part of the group rather than its leader (Kesby 2000; Clark et al, 2009), which seemed ideally suited to try and overcome power laden age boundaries.

To observe children interact naturally with peers, finding the appropriate setting was key. After-school care seemed suitable, being a type of liminal space between the constant monitoring by teachers at school and the carefully defined role the child has at home (Mayal, 1994). This liminality, a place between identities (Van Gennep 1960), would further allow the children space to negotiate social norms and to do identity work outside of the familiar (Beech, 2010). I contributed to this openness by dressing casual but trendy (wearing sneakers, skinny jeans and a loose-fitting shirt), avoiding authority, fulfilling the role of “grown-up girl” (Duits 2008, p.65). This appeared effective, as the children mentioned multiple times that I seemed much younger than I was, even once discussing whether I qualified as a “girl” or a “woman”.

### **The Ethnographic Process**

The participating school was selected for its proximity to my home, making me approachable for questions to the children and parents, and facilitating frequent trips to the school grounds. I came by during one of the after-school care sessions to hand out consent and information leaflets to children interested in my project. The boys and girls who returned a consent form, signed by themselves and a parent, were accepted as participants. The research set-up, information leaflet and consent forms were ethically approved by the EAHSW committee for ethical research at the University of Antwerp.

To thoroughly get to know and interact with all participants, I kept their number small. Seven boys and eight girls ended up participating, which was as much as I could

handle to get close to all children in a relatively short period of time. The group was largely middle class and had an even age distribution, with five nine-year olds, five ten-year-olds and four eleven-year-olds.

I spent 5 months with the children, observing them three hours a week.. To conclude the project, I visited the children at school for interviews on topics deemed important based on the observations. This functioned as a form of data triangulation to bolster the research. I used Nvivo, going through field notes and transcripts to code sections of texts that stood out: either because they were particularly relevant to the research subject, or because they transpired as a prominent, recurring part of the children's lives. Finally, I compiled those observations that best told the story of the children's daily negotiations of sexuality and gender.

### **Preteens Pushing Sexual Boundaries**

Originally, I was apprehensive about the success of the chosen method: although I wanted to study the role of sexuality in their lives, I had decided not to bring up the topic myself but to wait for them to do so. However, my worries proved unfounded as almost all children opened up to me and provided me with a look into their thought processes. It struck me how often sexuality was a topic in talk or play for both boys and girls.

Harry starts talking about the "sexing game" Peter invented. Henri, Peter and Harry take turns explaining the game: Peter has a coat with a hood that zips up all the way to cover up the face. Someone puts on this coat with the zipped-up hood and walks around blindly until he/she walks into another (unwitting) child, who they then have to "sex". The boys try to work their way around using the word "sex" by saying things like "you know..." and "THAT thing", and from their demonstration, it is clear that by "sexing" they mean gyrating hip movements while immobilizing the victim.

(field notes)

Peter: I have this winter coat that zips up all the way, and I have this game under the awning, they always tell me to start it, and I zip up the coat, the hood as well, and then I have to grab someone and do “that thing” and then they have to take over the coat. But Caleb once sexed up Jane and they were on the ground [Peter mimics moaning].

(interview transcripts)

The children broached sexual topics on almost all of my visits, without instigation on my part. The humorous tone of the conversation and the unease of ten-year-olds Henri, Peter and Harry towards using explicit language revealed how they kept their sexual identity work open ended. This particular scene appeared to be provoked by my ambiguous position as adult-yet-not-authoritative: the three 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys drew upon both sexualization and compulsory asexuality to construct a narrative that positioned them as sexually daring, trying to push me into clarifying my position towards them, expecting me to be shocked or reprimand them for transgressing (unspoken) school rules about compulsory asexuality.

However, this connotation of sexuality as taboo also had an unwanted side-effect: pushing the envelope (and other people’s boundaries) seemed to reward the actor with social status, even if their behavior moved towards sexual aggression. Some of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade children tried to set themselves apart from the bashful younger preteens, openly rejecting this taboo by talking about sex loudly and explicitly, often in a confrontational, demeaning way.

6<sup>th</sup> grader Enzo and the girls are talking about dating and relationships. 4<sup>th</sup> grader Emma tells me she has three boyfriends in a matter of fact way, like it’s no big deal. Enzo remarks “you whore”. Emma ignores him, Enzo doesn’t follow up either, none of the children seem shocked.

(field notes)

The girls have hidden away behind the gym equipment. Enzo starts shouting “they’re having sex! Give them condoms and dildos and everything to fuck!”

(field notes)

The casualness of Enzo's sexualized verbal abuse and the lack of response or shock of the other preteens signaled that this was a common occurrence in their peer culture, or that the children had come to expect this type of behavior from Enzo and did not bother to push back. This use of provocative language and behavior had social currency among boys and girls, for example, 6<sup>th</sup> grader Charlotte delighted in using explicit (sexual) terminology to provoke shock in her audience.

Charlotte: [talking about girl band K3] "but that stupid Marthe is dating the manager's son. That tells you what kind of person she is, that bitch. She just wants attention."

(interview transcripts)

Enzo is bouncing up and down on a bouncing ball, talking to me and some other children. Charlotte walks over and remarks "looks like he's fucking that ball".

(Field notes)

Compared to the 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys from the sexing game example, Charlotte's humor, like Enzo's, is defiant, but without the self-effacing undercurrent. This might be because, like Enzo, she is a year older than Harry and Peter (and taller than the other children), giving her a dominant position based on her age; or because she (over)compensates for the bigger gender-norm hurdle she has to overcome, almost daring the others to try and put her in her place. I noticed gender-asymmetry: while most of the girls acted tough at times, looking for the limit where I would assume my authority role and step in, only Charlotte dared to use sexualized language the same way the tough-talking boys did. For boys, rough (sexual) language and posturing fits neatly into hegemonic masculinity, but verbally abrasiveness contrasts with hegemonic femininity (Davies, 2003; Renold, 2005). Additionally, sexualized insults by Charlotte or by one of the boys were generally aimed at girls.

### **The Heterosexual Script in Action**

The prevalence of verbal sexual abuse towards the girls was not the only indication of the negative connotation sexuality carried for them. The girls often expressed ambivalence towards sexuality, seemingly unwilling to align themselves with the subject. The latter seemed to open them up to gendered violence and taunts by socially dominant boys (and

Charlotte). For the children, this pattern seemed to be linked to their views on adult sexuality, as they almost unanimously discussed sex as something pleasurable only to men, while women deal with pain and physical discomfort.

Mona: I think boys underestimate [life for] women.

Louise: yeah, like pregnancy. The girl is in pain and the boys don't know.

Charlotte: women have to get pregnant, men don't. Men enjoy it [sex] but women have to bear the consequences.

(interview transcripts)

AB: would you like to be a girl?

David: yes and no. Because when you hear the news, you hear about women being raped or being inferior in other countries. It's different here, but still... And that's not true for men.

Enzo: I've heard about this murder-couple luring women to them with an ad on Ebay for a car or something, and when they come to buy they grab them and kill them and cut them in pieces, have you heard?

David: it's easier to protect yourself as a boy. (...) And women menstruate, men don't.

(interview transcripts)

David and Enzo's quotes are particularly informative, as they were the only ones to explicitly state where they obtained these ideas about female sexuality being fraught with danger and pain: social discourse and news stories that sensationalize sexism and violence against women. I was struck by how familiar this was, as I remembered growing up in the era of Dutroux, a prominent Belgian serial killer and child rapist active in the mid-1990s., when I was repeatedly reminded that life as a girl or woman is dangerous, and that the danger was linked to our sexuality. This omnipresent, age-old message of sexual violence as an almost unavoidable fact of female life has been called rape culture (Buchwald, Fletcher and Ross 1993). Its impact on real life can be seen in the heterosexual script that gives women the responsibility to set sexual limits, seemingly equating masculinity with sexual aggression (Kim et al. 2007; Tolman and Szalacha 1999). Strikingly, although David and Enzo were constantly verbally and physically abusive towards the girls, both of them showed amazing awareness of how unpleasant life can be for women.

The children seemed to deal with these fears surrounding adult female sexuality together, exploring them through play. One particular afternoon, all the girls worked together to monopolize the school gym as a pretend-hospital, taking turns to play a highly pregnant woman ready to give birth. The boys were relegated to secondary characters or audience while the girls took center stage. Most of the pretend babies turned out to be premature or disabled according to the scenarios played out by the girls, underlining their negative associations with sexuality and motherhood. Considering that the available space was generally dominated by boys violently kicking footballs around and imposing their codes of conduct onto the shared space (cf. Beal 1994; Renold 2005), the girls uniting in a playful, carnivalesque (cf. Bakhtin, 1984) exploration of their fears of adult sexuality showed that collective resistance (cf. Renold 2005) empowered them to prioritize their experience over that of the boys.

### **Questioning the Heterosexual Script and Gender Hegemony**

#### ***Sexualized violence***

There were also moments when the preteens openly questioned constricting sexual/gender norms. One of the girls stood out: while most girls participated in contemplations on sexiness, often expressing a profound ambivalence based on the sexual double standard, Mona went further, linking this to sexism. This early developing 9-year-old girl had skipped a grade and often talked about her concerns about her weight and trying to fit in, and was notably uneasy with being called sexy.

Mona: My dad once complimented me, saying “wow you look sexy” when I was wearing a crop top with shorts on a beach holiday. (...) And I was like “... ok”. It was so weird, I can’t just say “thank you”.

AB: how do you feel about that?

Mona: I know he means well but I don’t know what to reply. If someone says “cool shorts!” I’ll be happy and say thanks, but if someone says “sexy”... But my dad is old, if a girl my age would call me sexy I wouldn’t mind, girls amongst each other, that’s normal. But if a boy from class would say that, I’d never wear it again. I can deal with guys having a crush on me, but not if they express it that way. Like James, he’s “in love” with a new girl every five minutes and he’s always talking about that topic [meaning sex]...

Louise: But James is never really in love, he just does it to get attention.

Mona: Yeah

(interview transcripts)

The excerpt is interesting for two reasons. Mona had a difficult relationship with her father. One afternoon I had to console her while she cried and talked about her father putting her on a diet, and about feeling like she would never be good (skinny) enough to live up to his norms. This likely made his other comments on her appearance loaded with tension, especially since early developing girls like Mona often struggle with objectification by adults and peers (Thorne 1993). In addition, James was mentioned regularly by the children as somewhat of a nuisance. In one of the interviews I got to the bottom of this: apparently, James had a habit of pinching the girls' bums and pulling their bra straps which was experienced not as fun and playful but as sexualized bullying. Mona's linking of the concept of "sexy" to James' behavior indicates a negative, heterosexually violent connotation for her when uttered by a man or a boy. Her struggle to embody narrow beauty ideals while rejecting the idea of "sexy", may have increased Mona's awareness of how sexism and toxic masculinity can make interactions between girls and boys objectifying. I would call her a young feminist, as evidenced by this monologue:

Mona: a week ago, some boys from my old class were playing a game and one of them asked me if I can twerk. (...) boys put each other up to that sort of stuff (...). If someone hurts themselves all the girls come check on them, but the boys only come if the girl who fell is pretty (...). And boys always have to be right. Like with emperors or kings or bosses of countries. A woman is never king. (...) Sometimes I feel like standing up and saying "listen boys"... I dream about defending people, I don't know why. It's so stupid that you can't change things even though you want to.

AB: you have to keep trying!

Mona: we've tried, like when the boys cheat with handball, only letting the boys score but not the girls. [whispers:] But it's easier said than done.

(interview transcripts)

### ***Preteens speaking up about objectification***

Mona was not the only preteen who problematized objectification during the interviews. This was surprising, as during the participatory observations, Enzo repeatedly made

objectifying comments towards the girls in the group (and me) but none of the children gave him a hard time for it. However, the private interviews indicated that this did not mean the children accepted sexualized bullying. For example, as I mentioned above, James' behavior came up in a number of different conversations, indicating that the children took issue with his objectifying acts. Yet, they seemed to have their own ways of dealing with this, preferably without the help of an adult, unless the aggressor did not respond to peer pressure.

AB: do you think boys and girls are treated differently in class?

Henri: James... (...) he does things to girls and my mom thinks it's unacceptable

Harry: he pinches their butt and also their front [meaning breasts]

Henri: yeah and Tom and I have told Amber that she shouldn't let him intimidate her, and James, well...

Harry: he doesn't do it anymore, I told him Amber doesn't like it and he said "I don't do it that often, what's wrong with it"

(...)

AB: it's good that you say something when you see that sort of thing, often boys just laugh and it just isn't funny.

Harry: I'm not a jerk like that

Henri: Tom once got really angry about it because it really isn't funny

(interview transcripts)

The children who talked about this type of sexualized bullying rarely mentioned going to an authority figure to help them out, instead they seemed convinced they had to deal with it themselves. Perhaps this was because turning to an adult would underline their inability to fend for themselves (see Davies 2003), or because they valued their independence. This may explain why I witnessed little pushback against sexualized bullying: my involvement was not wanted.

Ariana [sounding ashamed]: two boys started slapping everyone's bottom a couple of weeks ago.

AB: did they slap boys and girls?

Ariana: just the girls

AB: how do you feel about that?

Ariana: it's annoying. You're just walking around and suddenly they slap you

AB: didn't the teacher intervene?

Ariana: no, we don't tell her.

AB: why?

Ariana: usually they just stop after a while, and if they don't we go tell the teacher but we think they should stop on their own first before we tell the teacher. We think we have to solve it ourselves, and if they don't listen we tell the teacher.

Jenny: yeah but if I have a row with my friends I don't tell the teacher either, we don't like it (...) we just try to fix it ourselves and it usually works out.

(interview transcripts)

### ***Boys don't cry?***

Among the boys, bullying was not as overwhelmingly sexualized. Homophobic slurs were used occasionally, but usually in a lighthearted way between friends, and sexuality was a popular source of humor rather than a loaded subject that led to insecurity and internal conflict as it was for the girls. When boys expressed identity crises, this was mostly prompted by their struggle to reconcile their soft side with the macho posturing and social dominance expected of those aspiring to hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2000). Enzo was a particularly clear example of this issue.

Enzo asks for a hug, he's sad and teary eyed. He tries to explain but trips over his words. He tells me a teacher reprimanded him while he had not done anything wrong. Mona asks him if he's sure he did not do anything wrong, but Enzo denies it and asks Mona if she thinks he's scum. A bit later, he explains to me how he cannot tell his mother about his recurring feelings of depression because it just makes her sad.

(Field notes)

Marnik: I can watch whatever but I usually don't. If I watch the news I have this pillow and if it's like that [news about war or terrorism] I put it in front of my eyes. I still hear it though.

AB: Would you rather not hear it?

Marnik: Some things yes

David: what kind of pillow? Cars? [mocking, referring to the children's Disney movie]

Marnik: usually I do watch, I can handle it

Enzo: I can't handle it. I'm the type of person, you probably think I'm not scared often

David: me too

Enzo: I think too much

Marnik: you start questioning things, you can't sleep, lying awake

Enzo: I start panicking, thinking, obsessing, and then... I go crazy.

(interview transcripts)

As indicated in previous examples, Enzo demonstrated high investment in hegemonic masculinity (see Davies 2003), even using it to put down other types of masculinities and femininities through homophobic and misogynist comments or through physical violence. This strong, masculine ideal seemed to keep him from sharing his emotions with his parents, especially his mother. However, he also struggled with this masculinity ideal most openly, expressing frustration at being categorized by as "too hard" (meaning badly behaved, cf. Renold 2005). In the interview I conducted with him and two of his 6<sup>th</sup> grade friends, he is the one who pushes through after Marnik shuts down when David mocks his vulnerability, opening up a discursive space for the other boys to share their softer side. Enzo's position as the most dominant, tallest, oldest boy in the group gave him the power to transgress gender norms, and when he decided to do so, to allow boys in his friend group to do the same.

### **Reflecting on Sexualization: Cause or Symptom?**

By means of this ethnography of 15 preteen boys and girls, I aimed to contribute to our understanding of sexualization by comparing its relevance in the lives of preteens to the pressure put upon children to be innocent and asexual. As it turns out, the children I studied did not experience a simple either/or situation where they aligned themselves with compulsory asexuality or sexualization depending on the context. In fact, it is exactly the co-

existence of compulsory asexuality and sexualization, embedded in a sexist primary school playground culture, that seemed to define interactions. These two conflicting cultural pulls made sexuality a taboo yet attractive subject, providing the boys (and one older girl) with the resources to position themselves as rebellious and socially dominant over others. However, where there is dominance, there is subordination. Building on sexist cultural mechanisms like the heterosexual script and the sexual double standard, the subordinate role seemed to be forced upon the girls, whose personal limits were often transgressed by sexualized bullying and objectifying behavior, leaving them in a marginalized position.

In contrast to sexualization research's enduring focus on whether girls emulate sexy role models in popular culture to gain social status, this was not the way sexualization prevailed in the lives of the preteen girls I studied. Self-sexualization was too heavily burdened by the sexual double standard to be a reliable resource for identity work among the girls. The boys (and atypical girl Charlotte) did occasionally self-sexualize to enhance their social status, but always by casting themselves in the role of sexual aggressor, never as sexual object. The role of sexual object was unwanted by both the girls and the boys, but the girls were pushed into this role by the social patterns I witnessed. This denied them the opportunity to construct themselves free from sexual connotations, underlining Renold's (2005) point about how the debate on sexualization often ignores the gendered reality of being a girl. She argues that the sexualization of girls is the baseline, rather than a risk we have to shield them from: girls are already associated with and defined by sexuality from the moment they are born into a sexist society, and they generally spend their childhood trying to distance themselves from that association while making the effort to develop a sexual identity that is truly their own. Furthermore, it seems that, for preteen girls, the sexual double standard virtually eliminates sexualized humor as a tool for social status, nor do they find solace in the emulation of confident, sexualized role models. Compulsory asexuality does not offer shelter either, as girls are inextricably associated with sexuality by virtue of their gender. The ubiquity of sexism leaves all but the most assertive girls handicapped in primary school power games.

The prevalence of sexualized bullying against girls does not mean that this behavior was simply accepted by the children. The preteens negotiated their own moral codes as to what type of behavior was acceptable, and tried to develop ways to enforce these codes. The main issue here seemed to be that there was no consensus on where edgy humor ends

and sexualized bullying begins, and that the most vulnerable group (the girls) did not have the social status to weigh heavily on the discussion, leaving it to the dominant children (mostly boys) to decide what was acceptable and what was not. As Mona understood, it is not easy to create awareness of how even so-called micro aggressions can have a big impact, when working within a system that devalues your experience. Still, on many occasions the preteens managed to find ways to trouble hegemonic gender roles and sexism. There was Charlotte adopting typically boyish, sexually aggressive humor, Mona openly challenging power imbalances between men and women, Enzo creating discursive space for him and his friends to show a more vulnerable side, or all the children coming together to explore their fear of female sexuality and pregnancy through play.

In sum, it is clear that these preteens in many ways struggle with the same issues of sexism as adults. However, I would like to propose that future initiatives taking issue with child sexualization, scientifically or otherwise, reevaluate their focus: it appears preteen girls in my study were more troubled by the enduring negative association placed on female sexuality than by a pressure to be increasingly sexual. The sexual double standard, rape culture and slut shaming are all examples of how girls are denied the option of owning their sexuality, for example by using it as a source of power the way men and boys do, without opening themselves up to marginalization or violence. Efforts against sexualization often simply reaffirm that sexuality has a negative value for girls and women, and the emphasis on protecting innocence through compulsory asexuality gives girls no tools to empower themselves. In my observations, sexism was the foundation that allowed sexualization to be used as a weapon to undermine preteen girls' social position. As such, we should put more effort into creating awareness of the subtle ways sexism flows through our primary schools as it does through society at large, fighting the root of the problem rather than its symptoms.

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## Concluding the PhD

### Addressing the research question

In this final, concluding section, I will return to the research question and sum up the answers provided by the different empirical chapters.

#### Conceptual breakdown

The question this PhD set out to answer was ‘How do sexualizing and objectifying media figure into the gendered identity work of preteen boys and girls?’. First, the literature review featured in empirical chapters two and three addressed how sexualization and objectification are often insufficiently differentiated, muddling the debate. An important contribution of the PhD is its effort to create conceptual clarity with regards to the definition and operationalization of sexualization and objectification. In chapters two and three, these concepts were deconstructed and tested empirically for their applicability to media content. Considering the media content studied showed portrayals of everyday social interaction, this indicates that the operationalization would also be applicable to real life contexts.

Figure 6.1: Sexualization conceptualized and juxtaposed

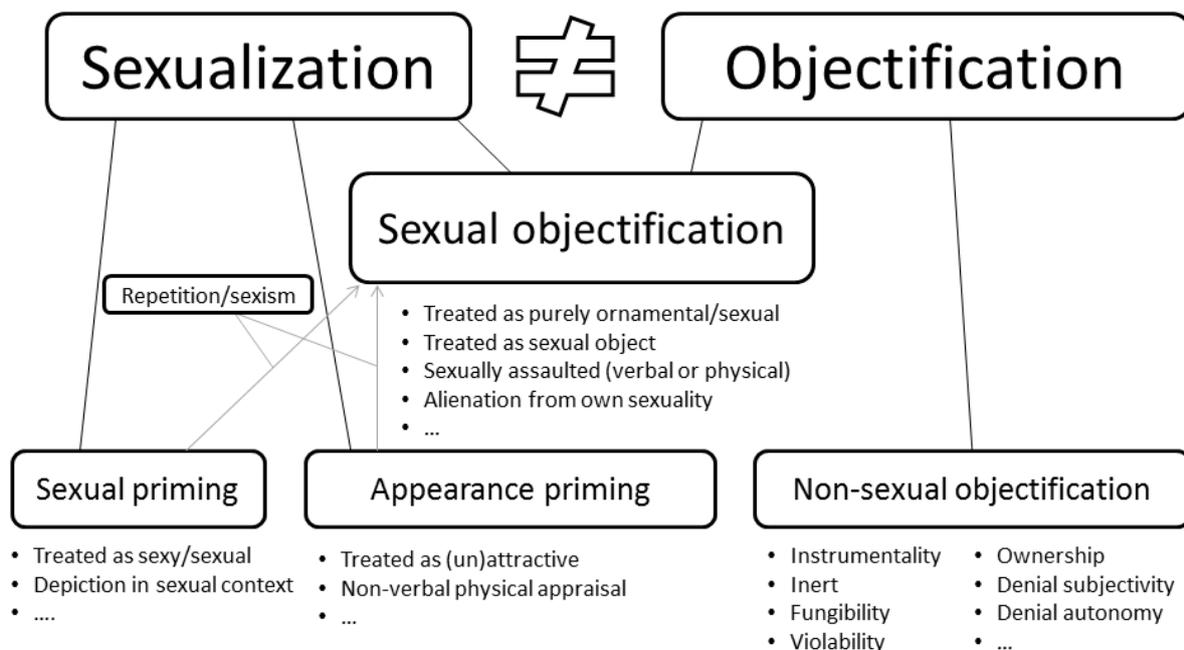


Figure 6.1 sums up the theoretical work done in empirical chapter two, supplemented with insights from the ethnographical chapters. Specifically, this dissertation suggests that

sexualization should be carefully distinguished from objectification in future work: all types of sexual objectification qualify as sexualization, but not all types of sexualization qualify as sexual objectification, nor are all types of objectification sexual. Throughout this PhD, sexualization has been defined as a broad term that encompasses all the different ways in which an individual can become increasingly defined by and associated with their (un)attractiveness and (lack of) sexuality. This can occur in several ways. One of these is sexual priming, a catch-all term that refers to instances where an individual is repeatedly treated as sexy/sexual or depicted in a sexual context. Appearance priming is similar in that it refers to how a person can become defined by their appearance through recurrent (latent or overt, verbal or non-verbal) physical appraisal. While complimenting someone on their physical appearance is not in and of itself a sexualizing act, it can become sexualizing if it happens so often that a person (or a gender) becomes determined by their (un)attractiveness. These two subtypes of sexualization can veer into sexual objectification when the focus on sexuality and attractiveness eclipses other individual characteristics, or when this sexual or appearance priming is imposed upon them against their will (Collins, 2011; APA, 2007). Sexual objectification is the most obviously problematic subtype of sexualization, referring to situations where a person is either reduced to their sexual or ornamental worth, unwillingly approached or treated with sexual intent, or alienated from their own sexuality in any way, meaning that the person does not “own” or “decide” over their sexuality. Additionally, chapter three explored how sexual objectification was not synonymous with objectification, since objectification can be sexual, non-sexual, or a subtype that falls somewhere in between depending on the context, like “ownership”. These different types of sexualization and objectification had important ties to gender roles (further explored below), underlining the relevance of differentiating between the different concepts.

### **Sexualization, objectification and gender**

Building on the conceptualization summarized above, the next section will address the prevalence of sexualization and objectification in the lives of preteens. A common thread running throughout the chapters is a continued association of femininity with being judged for appearance as well as sexual behavior. The emphasis placed on girls and women’s (lack of) beauty as an indicator of their personal worth is sexualizing to women as a group, and

the scrutiny aimed towards their sexual behavior is a pervasive type of sexual objectification (Collins, 2011; APA, 2007) because it denies women the right to freely explore their own sexuality, alienating them from their bodies and desires (Bartky, 1982). Chapter one, a framing analysis of celebrity news, showed how these forms of sexualization and sexual objectification remain a prominent discourse on (young) femininity in contemporary Western society. Female young celebrities coming of age were heavily criticized by audiences, especially with regards to their body and what they did with it. Discussions of the coming of age of celebrity girls generally revolved around their appearance and sexuality, while discussions regarding the coming of age of celebrity boys focused mainly on responsibility: to take their career seriously and make the right life decisions at the right time. The comment sections were dominated by so-called slut-shaming that echoes a persisting cultural double standard based on a notion of female sexuality as something dirty that must be contained lest it becomes a source of pollution (Attwood 2007). At the same time, when young female celebrities failed to adhere to mainstream beauty ideals, this was also heavily criticized, suggesting that a certain level of sexual attractiveness was expected of them.

This sexist societal undercurrent returned in the textual analyses of the media content, as well as in the reception studies.

### **Media content**

Chapter two was a quantitative content analysis of the most popular television programs according to a sample of 401 preteens. This chapter showed that on average, one in ten scenes contained sexual objectification, and that all types of edgy content (sexual as well as objectifying) were less prevalent in the formats that were explicitly geared at a preteen target audience, compared to the family-viewing shows. In addition, male and female characters were sexually objectified roughly equally as often, lending support to recent findings regarding male sexual objectification being on the rise (Rohlinger, 2002; Martins, Tiggemann and Kirkbride, 2007). However, there were some relevant differences as well. Female characters were more often portrayed and treated with a focus on their attractiveness, and men were more often depicted as judging other characters on their appearance. Despite the decades that have passed since Mulvey's writings were first

published, in some ways these texts still put forward a heteronormative, sexualizing script that conforms to the male gaze theory (Mulvey, 1975).

### ***Value of mixed methods***

In chapter three, a qualitative content analysis of the same sample revealed some more details about the links between sexualization, objectification and gender roles. While the quantitative content analysis showed men and women being sexually objectified roughly equally as often, the qualitative content analysis was able to account for more subtle, often overlooked types of (sexual) objectification that defied quantitative operationalization. For example, results indicated that Nussbaum's (1995) ownership often has a sexual undercurrent, despite seeming non-sexual at first glance. A clear illustration of this is the typical narrative of a father scaring off potential suitors of his daughter: an action that does not come across as outright sexual objectification, but it is a sexually loaded type of objectification nonetheless. The most relevant finding here is that the gender equity found in the quantitative analysis disappeared in the qualitative analysis, since these more understated types of objectification occurred more often to women, underlining their (sexually) subservient role in contemporary society. This demonstrated that using mixed methods, and broadening the research scope to include non-sexual objectification, creates a new perspective on the more insidious types of sexualization, and how omnipresent (and socially condoned!) these are. Combining insights from chapters two and three, it seems likely that chapter two's quantitative findings that sexual objectification in preteen popular media occurs in one out of ten scenes is an underestimation of the real amount; since chapter three revealed how many types of sexual objectification are not readily quantified.

Another important contribution of assessing non-sexual objectification next to sexual objectification (and sexualization), is that it reveals some gendered patterns that explain why sexual objectification remains an important field of study. When assessing non-sexual objectification, it was apparent that this did indeed occur more often than sexual objectification. However, non-sexual objectification was also more equally distributed along gender lines, as male and female characters gave as good as they got, while sexual objectification was largely done by men to women. In spite of Lerum and Dworkin's (2009) convincing argument about the growing variety in male and female media representations, it became clear that some traditional, sexist scripts persist. This explains why, despite the

growing prevalence of well-rounded, assertive female characters, media portrayals of power dynamics in sexual interaction still require scrutiny.

### ***Sexism and humor: content***

Still, Lerum and Dworkin's (2009) plea for more nuance when discussing the ubiquity of media objectification is shown to be correct: objectification was contextualized within the narratives in a wide variety of ways. Qualitative, context-aware analyses are necessary to understand the complex and nuanced ways in which media cover objectification, since these encode diverse meanings for the viewer. Specifically, in chapter three I found two distinctly different ways objectification was used to showcase power dynamics in societies through lighthearted, humorous narratives. On the one hand, the popular sitcom *FC De Kampioenen* showcased recurrent objectifying plotlines that worked to reify the gendered power struggle with men using sexually objectifying humor to put down women, and women pushing back, presenting this dynamic as 'the way things are and always will be'. On the other hand, preteen musical dramedy 'Violetta' frames its eponymous protagonist as struggling for romantic and professional autonomy, and being misunderstood by a domineering parent. *Violetta's* plotlines use objectification to show a typical power imbalance in society between parents/fathers and children/daughters but does so from the perspective of the objectified party, putting Violetta at the forefront as a thinking, feeling, acting subject. This illustrates how media can use objectification as a plotline without the content being objectifying per se, and this is more likely to empower the viewer rather than teaching them to self-objectify. Seeing objectification happen to a character one is meant to identify with can greatly contribute to developing double vision (cf. De Lauretis, 1987; Douglas, 1995; Kearney, 2015) in that it exposes the harmful nature of objectification, through the narrative use of that very same objectification.

On the other hand, continued association of sexual objectification with male gender roles and masculine humor is likely to communicate that sexual objectification can be a handy tool for those who want to assert their hyper-masculine dominance. Considering that preteens are preoccupied with developing gender schemata to bolster (and understand) their position in the social order (Berk 2006), this example provided by their favorite media is salient and problematic. In addition, the analyzed plotlines provided a conflicting (complementary?) example of female gender roles, as the main female characters

consistently resisted sexual objectification throughout the sample. However, the discrepancy between these narratives in how they relate objectification to male versus female gender roles raises some issues with regards to reception. Most importantly, these narratives invoke the classic ‘battle of the sexes’ discourse, entailing that men and women will continue to have conflict over (mediated) instances of sexual objectification, maintained by the fact that sexual objectification has very different meanings to both groups. To boys and men, it may seem as if girls and women just do not understand their ‘boys will be boys’ style of humor. On the flipside, girls and women may feel ignored and undervalued when their frustration at being the butt of the (sexually objectifying) joke is shrugged off. This way, these narratives featuring men and women butting heads over sexually objectifying humor can impede the development of respectful, equal hetero-social relationships, a common frustration among young people (Buckingham and Bragg 2004). In fact, this was shown to be true in the reception part of this PhD.

### **Reception**

In chapters four and five, I studied the experiences of 15 preteen boys and girls with regards to sexism, sexualization, objectification and media. The framework here was how children experience a similar type of conflict as experienced by women. While the sexual double standard pushes women to be attractive, but not too assertively sexual, children experience conflicting cultural pulls from sexualization versus expectations of childhood asexuality. Supporting findings of Buckingham and Bragg (2005), some of the preteen participants exhibited a certain amount of unease and self-awareness when discussing sexuality or consuming sexual media, especially in the presence of adults. Trying to resolve the conflict between their own sexual knowledge and interests, and adult expectations for children to be innocent and asexual, many children confided in me that they occupied a position of “unofficial knowing”. This entailed that the children hid their sexual knowledge and interests from adults until they reached a certain threshold, after which it would become acceptable for them to start expressing themselves sexually. For a few of the children, this threshold was 6<sup>th</sup> grade, because this was when the children would be getting sexual education classes.

### ***Hiding pleasure, hiding shame***

However, gender further differentiated this pattern, as the unease in the face of sexual content was not equally exhibited by all preteens. I observed two gendered motifs of interacting with sexuality and sexual content: *hiding pleasure*, and *hiding shame*. Most of the girls fit the first category, meaning that they would explicitly distance themselves from sexual content in a public context. Yet, in private interviews with a close friend and me, those same girls would express delight and excitement over sexual storylines in their favorite soaps. In contrast, many boys fit the second category, boasting sexual knowledge and a preference for sexual media content to bolster their socially dominant position in public situations. In private interviews, however, these boys would express that sexual media content confused them at times, and that they had been exposed to certain images against their will. The ways in which both of these groups interacted with sexual topics and sexual media content was, in other words, heavily informed by their gender performance, with girls invoking the “good girl” role while boys played tough.

### ***Sexualization and preteen power games***

In addition, the children I studied did not always experience a simple either/or situation where they aligned themselves with compulsory asexuality or sexualization depending on the context. In many situations, it was exactly the co-existence of compulsory asexuality and sexualization, embedded in a sexist primary school playground culture, that seemed to define interactions. These two conflicting cultural pulls made sexuality a taboo yet attractive subject, providing the boys (and one older girl) with the resources to position themselves as rebellious and socially dominant over others. However, where there is dominance, there is subordination. Building on sexist cultural mechanisms like the heterosexual script and the sexual double standard, the subordinate role seemed to be forced upon the girls, whose personal limits were often transgressed by sexualized bullying and objectifying behavior, leaving them in a marginalized position.

In contrast to sexualization research’s enduring focus on whether girls emulate sexy role models in popular culture to gain social status, this was not the way sexualization prevailed in the lives of the preteen girls I studied. Self-sexualization was too heavily burdened by the sexual double standard to be a reliable resource for identity work among the girls. The boys (and the one dominant, atypical girl) did occasionally self-sexualize to

enhance their social status, but always by casting themselves in the role of sexual aggressor, never as sexual object. The role of sexual object was unwanted by both the girls and the boys, but the girls were pushed into this role by the social patterns I witnessed. This denied them the opportunity to construct themselves free from sexual connotations, underlining Renold's (2005) point about how the debate on sexualization often ignores the gendered reality of being a girl. She argues that the sexualization of girls is the baseline, rather than a risk we have to shield them from: girls are already associated with and defined by sexuality from the moment they are born into a sexist society, and they generally spend their childhood trying to distance themselves from that association while making the effort to develop a sexual identity that is truly their own. Furthermore, it seems that, for preteen girls, the sexual double standard virtually eliminates sexualized humor as a tool for social status. However, they cannot find solace in the emulation of confident, sexualized role models either. While in postfeminist popular culture words like 'slut' are increasingly being reclaimed by sex-positive young women, the framing analysis showed that this is more often than not met with a cultural resistance that requires these young girls to balance appealing sexiness with innocence to avoid social stigma (Ringrose 2011). Nor does compulsory asexuality offer shelter, as girls are inextricably associated with sexuality by virtue of their gender. The ubiquity of sexism leaves all but the most assertive, confident girls handicapped in primary school power games.

### ***Sexism and humor: reception***

The previous section touched upon one issue that merits further discussion. With regards to the social interactions amongst the children, some interesting parallels arose compared to the use of sexually objectifying humor in their favorite television shows. Just as in *FC De Kampioenen*, these jokes proved to be a convenient way for preteen boys to boost their social status and perform hegemonic masculinity by sexually objectifying girls. The girls also mirrored the dynamic showcased in the sitcom by pushing back and objecting to this treatment. Indeed, this "battle of the sexes" scenario was defining to the boy-girl group interactions I witnessed, with the preteens almost invariably dividing themselves in a girl group versus a boy group whenever there was a conflict or a power struggle. While it would be too simplistic to suggest that these children's interactions were shaped by the media they

consumed, it seems reasonable to conclude that the analyzed narratives had special relevance to the preteens because of the equivalence to their own experiences.

Heterosexual bullying is often accepted as a mutual type of flirtation, where boys tease girls and girls tease back. However, adults do not always fully understand how frustrating this dynamic is for girls, mainly because girls do not have an equal position of power in this context. The main issue here was, referring again to Foucault, whose opinions and experiences counted as “truth”: who set the limits. The prevalence of sexualized bullying against girls does not mean that the children did not have moral codes as to what type of behavior was acceptable, they did, and they had their own ways to enforce these codes. The problem is that there seemed to be no consensus on where edgy humor ends and sexualized bullying begins, and the most vulnerable group (the girls) did not have the social status to weigh heavily on the discussion, leaving it to the dominant children (mostly boys) to decide what was acceptable or even cool behavior, and what was not. In fact, disruptive behavior by the boys was often even welcomed by the girls, as long as they were not the butt of the joke for once. This added another layer of sexual objectification to the dynamic, as the girls’ unwilling sexualization was supported by a hegemony that rewarded boy dominance and sexual bullying of girls.

### ***Resistance?***

In a culture where girl voices are not heard as loudly as boy voices, it is difficult to question sexist social patterns. As Mona understood, it is not easy to create awareness of how even so-called micro aggressions can have a big impact, when working within a system that devalues your experience. Still, on many occasions the preteens managed to find ways to trouble hegemonic gender roles and sexism. There was Charlotte adopting typically boyish, sexually aggressive humor, Mona openly challenging societal power imbalances between men and women, Enzo creating discursive space for him and his friends to show a more vulnerable side, or all the children coming together to explore their fear of female sexuality and pregnancy through play. However, I hesitate to use the term resistance here. Not just because there was little evidence of explicit resistance among the preteens I observed, but also because of the term itself. Resistance connotes taking a firm, consistent stand against a perceived negative influence. The preteens in my study were all primarily occupied with figuring out gender norms with regards to sexuality, and how they themselves did and did

not fit into these hegemonic gender expectations. As such, the behavior I witnessed seemed more like a necessary prelude to possible resistance: feeling out the roles society is trying to cast you into, and sensing where those boundaries impinge on your personal development and freedom. Before resistance comes insight and frustration, and the children were still developing that insight. A term that feels much truer to the interactions I observed, is strategic negotiation. Rather than taking a position of resistance against gender norms, the children were all preoccupied with trying to optimize their status and social bonds with peers and adults by citing those roles and discourses that benefited them in a specific context. By using the liminal space they occupied between childhood innocence and sexual precociousness, child and adolescent, good girl and rebel, the children scraped together as much relative freedom as they could get, without questioning existing roles per se.

### **Contributions of the PhD**

Summing up, this dissertation contributes to theory building within research on sexualization in four ways. First, with regards to its focus on the relevance of sexualization to the understudied age group of preteens. While research often investigates sexualization from adolescence onwards, the empirical chapters indicate that this subject is already salient within preteen lives, and within preteen-popular media. Relatedly, many types of structural sexism linked to sexualization are central to the social world of preteens. However, contrary to concerns about preteen girls self-sexualizing and self-objectifying at increasingly low ages, the girls featured in this PhD actually exhibited great efforts to remove themselves from unwanted sexual connotations that were thrust upon them through heteronormative sexual scripts and gender roles among peers. Some of the more hegemonically masculine boys did self-sexualize, as it helped them establish their position in the pecking order. This confirms that age is an important factor when establishing the role of sexualization in the lives of young people: while research has indicated that adolescent girls are often expected to incorporate some aspects (but not too much) of self-sexualization in their identity work, the white, middle-class preteen girls in this study were still more strongly tied to discourses of childhood innocence. Framed optimistically, this freed the girls from the pressures of sexualization to a certain extent. The drawback, however, is that the girls were ashamed of their natural level of sexual curiosity, fearing that expressing this interest in sexual subjects

would open them up to the slutshaming, danger and gaze of others that is so strongly associated with adolescent and adult female sexuality.

This central finding of the PhD also underlines the importance of focusing more sexualization research on boys, since a large part of the identity work required to attain social status among the boys was associated with sexual humor and victimizing others. This was a second contribution of the PhD. Since sexualization goes hand in hand with sexism and negatively loaded heterosocial interactions, consistently focusing sexualization research on girls and women cultivates a blind spot regarding boys and men. I witnessed the ways in which much of the unwanted sexualization experienced by the preteen girls in my study was pushed upon them by the preteen boys, which effectively eliminated sexual humor as a social tool for girls. In addition to the focus on preteens, studying boys and girls in tandem is one of the most important contributions of this dissertation.

A third contribution of this dissertation is its insistence on distinguishing between sexualization, sexual objectification and non-sexual objectification. While these terms are often used as synonyms, alongside each other, or simply forgotten in the case of non-sexual objectification, the empirical chapters revealed how clearly separating these terms allowed for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms behind them. For example, a focus on the importance of appearance is a common type of seemingly innocuous sexualization featured in popular media. However, this increased salience placed on appearance becomes sexually objectifying if the focus on (un)attractiveness becomes structurally linked to one group of people. This way, a social category of individuals can become associated with their appearance to such an extent that it eclipses other characteristics, even in situations when these characteristics might be more relevant. An obvious example of this is the pattern of sexism that equates a woman's personal worth to her sexual attractiveness. Additionally, the study proved that non-sexual objectification of others - in the form of asserting social dominance through bossy behavior or bullying - is a useful social tool to preteen boys as well as girls. Non-sexual objectification occurred as a type of anti-social behavior, but if framed humorously, similar to the sitcoms so popular among the respondents, these acts would allow the preteens to assert social dominance over others without losing popularity. Sexual objectification functioned in a similar way, but only for the boys. Hegemonic masculinity allowed the boys to use sexual name-calling, suggestive gestures and innuendo as a way to position themselves as daring, mature and precocious. Hegemonic femininity however

largely precluded the girls from doing the same, because it would ruin their image as nice, well-behaved girls who performed their maturity through manners rather than sexual knowledge. This was mirrored in the preteens' media diet, where women used non-sexual objectification as often as men to express their social assertiveness, while sexual objectification was more often done to women by men. Sexual and non-sexual objectification are thus linked to gender roles in different ways. The explicit conceptualization and operationalization suggested in this PhD with regards to sexualization, juxtaposed against and linked to the two types of objectification, provides a possible benchmark for future research.

Finally, by studying preteen media use alongside preteen social culture among peers, this dissertation was able to expand on the dichotomous agency versus structure debate that runs through feminist research and audience studies alike. Instead of focusing on audience activity and/or media effects, the empirical chapters showed the profound synchronicity that existed between the preferred television shows of preteens, and their social context. Without trying to make any causal inferences, much of the humorous, sexualized dynamics featured in the preteen favorite TV-show *FC De Kampioenen* were directly mirrored within the gendered identity work of the participants, underlining the resonance of these plotlines to these young people's lives and suggesting the responsibility held by popular media to adequately address their (young) audiences.

### **Limitations and issues for future research**

This next section will address some of the main limitations of this PhD. With regards to chapter one, it would have been informative to be able to verify the demographic characteristics of the individuals behind the audience reactions. Knowing whether JustJared jr. actually had younger commenters on average than JustJared would have made the conclusions more solid, and the link between gender, age and used frames was also something I would have liked to look into. It seems likely that age and gender would inform the frames used by the audience to judge celebrity coming of age, depending on whether they could relate to what the celebrity was going through or not. Despite reaching out to the websites' management multiple times, I did not receive an answer and thus could not include specific demographics in the analysis beyond the target audience of both websites. As such, future research should look into whether young audiences actually discuss celebrity

coming of age differently than adult audiences, and if so, in what ways. In addition, it would be relevant to establish whether the slut-shaming geared at female celebrities on the road to adulthood is informed by the gender of the audience members – is this a norm enforced more harshly by men or women, and who challenges this hegemony?

Further, a limitation of the PhD is that it only focused on a top five of popular television shows. While the analyzed programs do not seem out of the ordinary compared to popular television in general, indicating that they were fairly representative of mainstream television outside of this top five, preteens do not just consume television. Music videos, videogames such as Minecraft and, most importantly, YouTube vlogs and social network sites all proved to be very popular types of media content among the participants in the ethnography, and focusing on television significantly narrowed the scope of the research. This is especially relevant since these alternatives all differ quite considerably from narrative television, making it likely that sexualization and objectification have a different meaning in these contexts. While music videos have received significant academic attention in the past with regards to the occurrence of sexualization and objectification (Aubrey and Frisby, 2011; Wallis, 2011), the latter three media require more attention for the important reason that these are part of the Web 2.0 wave (Chang and Kannan, 2008; Lastowska, 2013), facilitating a prosumer position where the audience actually contributes to the content. World-building videogames such as Minecraft offer the unique possibility for players to create the content they interact with, with seemingly unlimited possibilities. Research has looked into potential educational value of the videogame (Schifter and Cipollone, 2013), but it may also investigate how young players explore this freedom, and how they promote, resist or negotiate sexualization and/or objectification within this context. The same goes for vlogging and social network sites: while one should be careful not to overstate the level of activity and resistance of audience members in a Web 2.0 environment, the popular, young vloggers and internet celebrities that these children looked up to created content that was clearly different from mainstream media and seemed to relate more closely to the social world of the preteens. It would be very informative to investigate whether vlogs reproduce or subvert mainstream media genre conventions, and in what ways exactly.

Another limitation or recommendation for future research, is the incorporation of subjectivity in content analyses of objectification. For example, a sequence where a

character is (sexually) objectified may conclude with the victim clearly expressing psychological discomfort, which affects the actual message of the scene. This underlines that, while characters' actions may be (sexually) objectifying, the tone of the overarching plotline can contradict this by emphasizing that the objectified character is also a subject: a person with feelings, agency, purposes and competencies (Tolman, 2000). In other words: sexualization and objectification can exist on the level of the characters, as well as on the level of the text, and these two levels can contradict or emphasize each other. While this PhD project did incorporate subjectivity in the codebook used for the content analysis featured in chapter two, the results associated with this variable could not be included in the final article because its scope had become too extensive. Once again, the mixed paradigm approach, resulting from the inclusion of a variable more typical to qualitative cultural studies in a quantitative communication studies paper, made it more challenging to get the resulting article published.

With regards to the ethnographic portion of the research, the findings would have been richer if I had been able to spend more time with each of the children, in more different contexts. As it is now, this dissertation is a specific case study of children in after-school-care, but it would have been informative to be able to contrast these findings with how the children reacted to objectification and sexualization in class, at home, or when practicing hobbies like soccer, dance classes or horseback riding. These four are all clearly different contexts (Mayal, 1994) that call upon different components of the preteens' identities. In addition, being able to compare a mixed-gender social group with an all-boys and an all-girls group would have shed light on how sharing a space with the other gender shaped these children's behavior. These are all issues that could be addressed by future research, preferably by following one group of participants through different contexts.

Another limitation of the ethnography, was the relative homogeneity of the group of participants. The group was dominated by white, middle-class children from a small town who identified as cisgender and heterosexual, while the two children of color and the one working-class boy largely blended in with the rest of the group, rather than asserting their individuality or standing out as 'other'. While this is not a limitation per se, as this specific context has its own merits for research, it did largely preclude the possibility to make the research more intersectionally aware. Previous research has indicated that intersectionality is decisive to the meanings sexuality carries for youngsters. For example, slut shaming has

been proven to be even more of a threat to the social status of working-class girls (Ringrose, 2008), Muslim girls make intricate negotiations between their interest in sexual pop culture and their religious investment in modesty (Duits, 2008), and working-class boys are more likely to commit to heteronormative, homophobic identity work than middle-class boys (Buckingham and Bragg, 2004). Similarly, the content analyses did not offer much opportunity for more intersectional reflection, since the most popular television shows all focused on cisgender, heterosexual, white characters and their storylines. As such, this is an important limitation of this research project.

It is clear that preteens, in many ways, struggle with the same issues of sexism as adults. However, I would like to propose that future initiatives taking issue with child sexualization, scientifically or otherwise, reevaluate their focus: it appears preteen girls in my study were more troubled by the enduring negative association placed on female sexuality than by a pressure to be increasingly sexual. The sexual double standard, rape culture and slut shaming are all examples of how girls are denied the option of owning their sexuality, for example by using it as a source of power the way men and boys do, without opening themselves up to marginalization or violence. Efforts against sexualization often simply reaffirm that sexuality has a negative value for girls and women, and the emphasis on protecting innocence through compulsory asexuality gives girls no tools to empower themselves. In my observations, sexism was the foundation that allowed sexualization to be used as a weapon to undermine preteen girls' social position. As such, we should put more effort into creating awareness of the subtle ways sexism flows through our primary schools as it does through society at large, fighting the root of the problem rather than its symptoms.

Another issue I want to stress is the relevance of a broad understanding and conceptualization of sexualization and objectification to future research. A teen soap featuring a father telling his daughter to stay away from boys would fly under the radar when looking for explicit instances of sexual objectification. However, contextualizing this scene within the coming of age narrative of the girl protagonist fighting for romantic autonomy and her father's dominance when it comes to her love life, reveals the sexual undercurrent of this power struggle between father and daughter. This indicates that future research on sexual objectification (and sexualization) should not focus semi-exclusively on the issue of being reduced to sexual function.

## **Ethical reflection**

In a research project that focuses on minors and the role of sexuality in their lives, ethical considerations invariably pop up at every turn. As was already touched upon in the methodological section of this dissertation, every stage of this project that dealt with minors was carefully mapped out, and the research set-up, information leaflets and consent forms were all ethically approved by the EAHSW committee for ethical research at the University of Antwerp. Getting the approval of the children as well as their parents was important to me for two reasons. First, because one could wonder whether a nine year-old can consent to a research project with full awareness of what this would entail. Second, because I wanted to explicitly respect the agency of the children rather than going through their parents.

Still, some ethical questions cannot be dealt with beforehand but must be addressed ad hoc. For example, what to do when one of the nine year-old girls talked to me about her father pressuring her to go on a diet – take this up with her parents and share information with them that she had confided in me, or keep my silence? Another recurring issue was how to react to the instances of (sexual) bullying I witnessed. Was I to intervene, step into the role of authority figure and monitor the children's social interactions, or should I remain an observant and let the children fend for themselves as they would among peers? In both of these examples, I was presented with a dilemma. When confronted with a situation like this, I chose to feel out the social cues offered to me by the children to decide whether I should intervene. After all, I had set up the research process to be as child-led as possible. In practice, this meant that I only intervened when the children sent me verbal or non-verbal cues that my intervention was wanted, or in case the behavior I witnessed was getting out of hand, meaning that the children were entering a heightened emotional state of anger or distress. This followed the classroom pattern described by Ariana in empirical chapter 5, where the children only wanted the teacher to intervene in case they could not sort out an altercation by themselves.

It also happened quite often that I was asked to serve as a type of arbiter in discussions or fights, but unless there was a clear power disparity between the parties, I would refrain from choosing a side. One such conflict was about the use of the school gym: while the boys wanted to play football, meaning that they could kick the ball around as hard as they could, this greatly frustrated the girls. The boys needed a lot of space for their game, and even sitting in the corner the girls were not safe from being hit in the head by stray balls.

Although I tried to manage this conflict, there was no way to appease both parties and I felt like this was something they children should figure out amongst themselves. In the end, Charlotte, the oldest girl, stepped up and brought everyone together in a group discussion where she suggested that on some specific days of the week, the boys could decide what to do with the gym, and on other days, they girls would have final say. By letting the children sort out the conflict on their own, I maintained my position as liked by both the girls and the boys, not allowing them to use me as a tool for their power play. In addition, by staying out of it I had created space for Charlotte to have an important learning experience in managing conflict and taking initiative.

Finally, there was the issue of figuring out how much knowledge the children had about sexual topics and being careful to stay within those lines. Still, sometimes one of the children would bring up a topic or a word that another child was not familiar with, and in those cases I was often asked to provide an explanation. For example, the children once asked me at what age it becomes legal to have sexual intercourse. In those cases, I would provide the information asked as honestly and to the point as possible. I did not want to censor the children's interest, and this felt like the most respectful approach towards these boys and girls who trusted me and saw me as a relatable peek into adult life. The only line I drew was when the preteens asked questions that became too invasive with regards to my private life, for example when one of the boys tried to rattle me by asking me about my sexual habits. I deflected these questions with jokes, or by confronting the boys with their behavior, for example by asking them whether they felt like their remarks were appropriate or respectful. These interactions were more concerned with testing my limits and questioning my authority, rather than a child asking an honest question, so in these cases I felt like keeping my professional distance was the first priority.

## **Implications**

An important aim of feminist research is to link its findings to real life implications outside of academia. In this section, I would like to make some suggestions as to how the results presented in this PhD might be interpreted by different groups important to sexualization as a cultural context of preteens.

In contemporary Western society at large, it seems that hegemonic masculinity is still heavily associated with objectifying and dominating others. It is only through this clear link

to masculinity as a source of status that objectification and domination become such attractive tools for identity work to preteen boys. Complementary, hegemonic femininity is still defined by an emphasis on appearance and a monitoring of “correct” expression of sexuality. If we were to succeed in diversifying hegemonic masculinity and femininity through different role models, counter-stereotypical portrayals and an overall growth of awareness (see, for example, the HeForShe campaign), this could diminish the adverse impact of sexualization and objectification.

While the impact of media is not straightforwardly causal, media can (and do) play an important part in contributing to structural change to societal discourses. Popular media reach huge audiences, providing young boys and girls with cultural frameworks, possible life narratives, role models (positive and negative) and social knowledge. In a world where boys play Superman while girls mirror themselves to Sleeping Beauty, something as simple as a successful Wonderwoman movie can show an alternative, be the start of a new trend that challenges the equilibrium that still draws boys as active and girls as passive (Götz and Lemish, 2012). As became evident from the content analyses featured in this dissertation, as well as earlier research, popular media are already featuring socially assertive female characters (Lerum and Dworkin, 2009). However, female characters are still relatively underrepresented, and women are given less varied roles than men (seejane.org). This situation is equivalent to the behavior of the preteen girls I observed. These girls were not meek, passive or subservient, but in general they still took up less space than the boys, verbally as well as physically. The equal representation of women in roles that are as diverse, rich and varied as those of men is a first priority for media professionals.

In addition, sexism, slut shaming and the double standard are still prevalent in popular media as well as in these children’s lives, pushing preteen boys and girls into an interactional pattern that promotes sexuality as a weapon for men and boys to use against women and girls. As it stands now, mainstream media often promote a type of humor that is based in the same dynamics as bullying behavior: one group of powerful people consistently, intentionally dragging down the less powerful other. This behavior was a prevalent source of humor among the preteens I observed, and this bullying pattern often continues into adolescence, occurring offline as well as online (Vandebosch and Cleemput, 2009). If media were to want to make a difference with regards to the prevalence of bullying, they might do so by tapping into other sources of humor, without consistently belittling vulnerable groups.

Addressing parents who are trying to find the right way to monitor their child's media use, the findings of this dissertation underline the importance of seeing exposure to sexual content as only one component in a varied media landscape that might challenge (or help shape) a child's moral compass. While outright nudity and sex were almost absent from the studied sample of popular television shows, and sexual objectification only occurred in one out of ten scenes, narratives that primed the importance of appearance to women were common, as were more subtle, socially condoned types of objectification, and sexist humor. These types of content might not stand out to parents as problematic. Still, if children are constantly exposed to persistent, small nudges of sexism, this may send the message that sexism is normal or acceptable. My research showed that children have a range of different reactions to this exposure to sexism, in media content as well as in the classroom, and that preteen boys and girls prefer setting their own limits with regards to what content they want to be exposed to. However, even those that choose a route of negotiation or resistance will be often left frustrated and/or confused by their confrontations with sexism. Sexism, just like racism or homophobia, is just as hard to talk about as sexuality, and as I noticed during my observations, children have a lot of thoughts and questions on these subjects. Opening up the conversation, for example by discussing plotlines in the media content you watch together but also by sharing own experiences, can help parents understand what their child is struggling with, if they are struggling with anything.

With regards to schools, this dissertation suggests that sexism is a significant issue in teasing/bullying behavior. I suggest two priorities here. First, teachers might make efforts to create awareness on sexism, allowing the children a platform to think and talk about frustrations related to sexism (for example by following the example set by the Challenge Day or Procrustes). The conversation can focus on sexism featured in popular media, as this will undoubtedly spark discussion among the children, but it should also cross over to situations witnessed in class. This should lead to a deeper insight in how gender structures our interactions, for the teachers as well as the pupils. Second, teachers should be more hands-on and consistent in their punishment of sexualized/gendered bullying. Sexualized bullying is often perceived as a grey zone, between anti-social behavior and a type of play and experimentation. However, boys pinching girls' behinds or snapping bra-straps are not experienced as fun flirtation by these girls, but as shameful sexual harassment, and we must

set the right example by teaching children that personal boundaries are to be respected, and that ignoring a “no” is not a punchline.

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## Nederlandse samenvatting

Seksualiteit lijkt steeds prominenter te worden in de hedendaagse, Westerse publieke sfeer. Dit fenomeen noemt men 'seksualisering', en deze evolutie is het onderwerp van hevig maatschappelijk en academisch debat. Omdat populaire media een belangrijke rol kunnen spelen in het verspreiden van culturele kennis en morele waarden, stelt men zich vragen bij de prevalentie van seksueel getinte media inhoud. Wanneer het debat focust op de blootstelling van jonge mensen aan deze seksuele content, raakt de discussie extra beladen – wat met jeugdige onschuld? Welke invloed heeft de alomtegenwoordigheid van naakt op de seksuele volwassenwording van jongeren? Welk beeld van seksualiteit krijgen jongeren op basis van de media die zij gebruiken? De vragen verschillen, maar de bezorgdheid is een constante.

Onderzoek naar seksualisering kent tot op heden een aantal belangrijke lacunes. Ten eerste is er het feit dat de leeftijdsgroep van *preteens* (9-12 jarigen) amper wetenschappelijke aandacht heeft gekregen, alhoewel jongeren op deze leeftijd een sterke interesse ontwikkelen voor seksuele en romantische thema's in media. Ten tweede is er conceptuele verwarring met betrekking tot de definitie en operationalisering van seksualisering: zo wordt de term vaak gebruikt als synoniem van seksuele objectivering, terwijl de American Psychological Association (2007) seksuele objectivering vernoemt als één subtype van seksualisering. Ten derde wordt seksualisering vaak gestaafd aan de hand van extreme voorbeelden zoals kleding met seksuele opschriften (Levin en Kilbourne, 2009), zonder dat het reële mediagebruik van jongeren in acht wordt genomen. Dit doctoraat draagt bij tot het onderzoeksveld door op deze punten in te pikken.

Het doctoraat onderzoekt de rol van seksualisering in het identiteitswerk van *preteens*. Specifiek behandelt dit werk de ruimte tussen enerzijds seksualisering, en anderzijds de asexualiteit die men van kinderen verwacht. Er wordt aandacht besteed aan de plaats die jongens en meisjes tussen deze twee discoursen innemen. De vijf empirische hoofdstukken behandelen elk een verschillend aspect van de (wederkerige) relaties tussen culturele discoursen met betrekking tot gender en jeugd, de prevalentie van seksualisering in het mediadiet van Vlaamse *preteens*, de specifieke cultuur die heerst op de speelplaats in de lagere school, en het identiteitswerk van deze jongeren in interactie met leeftijdsgenoten en volwassenen.

In het eerste hoofdstuk wordt aan de hand van een *framing* analyse nagegaan hoe jeugd, volwassenwording en volwassenheid gekaderd worden in *celebrity* nieuwsmedia en publieksreacties. Er wordt in dit hoofdstuk gefocust op de grenzen die het publiek legt aan wat acceptabel gedrag is voor beroemdheden van een bepaalde leeftijd, en hoe deze grenzen aangeven welke sociale rollen men verwacht van jonge mannen en vrouwen. Uit de resultaten blijkt dat volwassen worden iets anders betekent voor bekende vrouwen dan voor bekende mannen: waar het publiek bij jonge vrouwen de nadruk legt op hun seksualiteit, en of die aan de norm beantwoordt (sexy maar niet té), verwacht van jonge mannen eerder verantwoordelijk, professioneel gedrag als blijk van geslaagde volwassenwording.

Het tweede hoofdstuk werd voorafgegaan door een mediagebruikssurvey, ingevuld door 401 jongens en meisjes. De vijf populairste televisieprogramma's (Thuis, Familie, F.C. De Kampioenen, Galaxy Park en Violetta) werden vervolgens aan de hand van een codeboek geanalyseerd op de prevalentie van verschillende vormen van seksualisering, seksuele objectivering en niet-seksuele objectivering. Uit deze analyse bleek dat één op de tien scènes een vorm van seksuele objectivering liet zien. Alhoewel mannen even vaak als vrouwen te maken kregen met seksuele objectivering, werden vrouwen toch vaker gereduceerd tot hun uiterlijk.

Hoofdstuk drie ging dieper in op dezelfde sample van populaire televisieprogramma's, met een kwalitatieve analyse van de verhaallijnen. Hieruit bleek dat subtielere vormen van objectivering, zoals het behandelen van andermans lichaam/seksualiteit als eigendom, vaker gebeurden met vrouwelijke personages. Er werd ook bewijs gevonden dat een populaire vorm van humor, die men terugvindt in programma's zoals F.C. De Kampioenen, seksisme-bevestigend werkt. Zo werd mannelijkheid geassocieerd met seksueel agressief gedrag tegen vrouwen, terwijl vrouwelijkheid gelinkt werd aan het stellen van grenzen aan mannelijke opdringerigheid. Ten slotte toonde deze studie hoe seksualisering of seksuele objectivering in narratieven op verschillende manieren gebruikt kan worden: zo kan een verhaallijn seksualisering problematiseren of deconstrueren, dan wel simpelweg gebruiken als lichtvoetige grap. Dit benadrukt het belang van nuance in het bespreken van de prevalentie van seksualiteit en seksualisering in populaire media.

In de laatste twee hoofdstukken werd vervolgens de stap gemaakt van inhoudsanalyses naar de relevantie van seksualisering en seksuele media content voor *preteens*. Hoofdstuk vier en vijf werden beiden gebaseerd op een etnografische studie, waarbij vijftien meisjes en jongens tussen de negen en de twaalf jaar, vijf maanden lang geobserveerd werden in de naschoolse opvang.

Hoofdstuk vier legde bloot hoe jongens en meisjes interageren met seksualiserende media inhoud, afhankelijk van de sociale context waarin ze zich op een bepaald moment bevinden. De resultaten lieten zien hoe zowel jongens als meisjes hun interesse in seksualiteit verbergen voor volwassenen, om geen afbreuk te doen aan de verwachtingen van kinderlijke onschuld. Onder leeftijdsgenoten is de situatie anders: daar waren jongens meer geneigd om hun interesse in seksualiteit te benadrukken, om hun sociale status te versterken door “stoer” over te komen. Meisjes verborgen hun kennis van en nieuwsgierigheid naar seksualiteit dan weer, zodat ze hun positie als “braaf meisje” niet in gevaar brachten. Zowel jongens als meisjes vertelden over hun frustratie over ongewenste blootstelling aan seksuele beelden, waarmee ze aangaven dat seksualisering voor hen ook een probleem is. De kinderen gebruikten hun mediageletterdheid om op basis van medium, kanaal en genre te bepalen welk niveau van naakt en seksualiteit ze konden verwachten, en maakten op basis van hun eigen inschatting keuzes in verband met mediagebruik.

In hoofdstuk vijf werd ten slotte gefocust op hoe de jongeren zelf gebruik maken van seksualiteit en seksualisering in hun identiteitswerk onderling. Uit de analyse bleek dat het precies is doordat seksualisering interageert met het idee van kinderlijke onschuld, dat seksualiteit een spannend taboe wordt. Jongens die dit taboe durfden doorbreken, kregen hierdoor sociale status. Meisjes werden door seksisme en de seksuele dubbele standaard verhinderd van de mogelijkheid om hier op dezelfde manier gebruik van te maken. Jongens maakten gebruik van seksueel getinte humor om zichzelf te positioneren als macho-mannelijk, meestal ten koste van meisjes, die in de rol van object werden geduwd. In tegenstelling tot wat er vaak in maatschappelijk debat wordt gesuggereerd, deden de meisjes dus niet aan zelf-seksualisering maar waren zij juist gepreoccupeerd met het ontwijken van seksuele connotaties omdat dit voor hen teveel sociale risico's inhield. Jongens deden wel aan zelf-seksualisering, en dit leverde hen sociale status op.