State of the issue of child sexualisation in the digital environment and media literacy proposals

Estado de la cuestión sobre la sexualización infantil en el entorno digital y propuestas de alfabetización mediática

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Abstract:

Social networks offer both positive responses as well as situations of risk for children's empowerment. The social phenomenon of child sexualization, already rejected by women due to discriminatory connotations, the passive role, and tolerance to violence, has become widespread on the Internet with apparent impunity for brands and the media who reproduce these images due to the low level of awareness among girls and parents who publish them on social networks. Faced with a call from legislators, parents and researchers to protect children's rights, the objective of this research is to gain greater knowledge regarding the state of the issue of child sexualisation in the digital environment, and to gather some proposals for media literacy. The methodology used was a review of the literature on sexualisation, digital advertising, childhood commercialization, as well as children and fashion in the databases of academic journals and university libraries. The conclusions demonstrate the contributions necessary from opinion prescribers the media, parents, educators and advertisers in order to avoid reducing sexuality to sexualisation, and in raising awareness of the impact of commercial images that are capable of generating risky behaviour.

Keywords:

Sexualisation of girls; stereotypes; Internet; media literacy.

Resumen:

Las redes sociales plantean para los menores tanto situaciones de riesgo como respuestas positivas hacia su empoderamiento. El fenómeno social de la sexualización infantil, ya rechazado para las mujeres –por las connotaciones de discriminación, rol pasivo y tolerancia a la violencia–, se ha generalizado en Internet con aparente impunidad por parte de las marcas y medios que reproducen esas imágenes y débil concienciación entre las niñas y los padres que las publican en redes sociales. Ante la llamada de reguladores, padres e investigadores para proteger los derechos de la infancia, los objetivos de esta investigación son conocer el estado de la cuestión sobre la sexualización de la infancia en el entorno digital y recoger algunas propuestas de alfabetización mediática. La metodología utilizada ha sido la revisión de la literatura sobre sexualización, publicidad digital, comercialización de la infancia e infancia y moda en las bases de datos de revistas académicas y bibliotecas universitarias. Las conclusiones arrojan la necesaria contribución de prescriptores de opinión, medios, padres, educadores y anunciantes para evitar reducir la sexualidad a la sexualización y tomar conciencia del impacto de las imágenes comerciales que pueden generar conductas de riesgo.

Palabras clave:

Sexualización de las niñas; estereotipos; Internet; alfabetización mediática.

1. Introduction and objectives

A recent revealing article in a national newspaper warned about the prototype of women who achieve great success on social networks such as Instagram. This profile is of a virtual assistant for technology and videogame companies whose features are stereotyped and make women appear as objects. Experts interviewed by the journalist called for responsibility from the media, universities and society as a whole to put an end to "the sexualisation of robots that only human beings perceive" (Biosca, 2018: 33). This phenomenon is widespread in the cyber culture of leading industries such as those in Japan and the United States. Virtual reality portrays women in a hyper-realistic way, changes our way of looking at them, and reinforces the tendency to commodify the female body to the value of a sex object, encouraging an increase of sexual violence and pornography on the Internet (Inguscio, 2017).

This call for social responsibility regarding the sexualisation of girls is also being voiced by regulators, parents and researchers (Moloney and Peleach, 2014). Studies of this type regarding images on the Internet have found that a person's value is reduced to his or her physical attractiveness, thereby imposing a role of sexual attraction that is especially harmful to minors (Jongenelis, Pettigrew, Byrne and Biagioni, 2016; Daniels and Zurbriggen, 2016; Llovet, Díaz-Bustamante and

Karan, 2017; Trekels, Karsay, Eggermont and Vandenbosch, 2018). The European model of child protection emphasises education as the fundamental backbone of legislation and policies oriented toward the holistic development of online security based on the concept that cyberspace is "something radically ethical" (García-Gutiérrez, 2015: 134).

Portraying girls as sex objects is a common practice that can be influenced by different factors: the fashion industry (Ghigi and Sassatelli, 2018), the media (Graff, Murnen and Krause, 2013; Ward, Seabrook, Manago and Reed, 2016; Wright, Malamuth and Donnerstein, 2012), beauty contests (Cartwright, 2012; Barzoki, Mohtasham, Shashidi and Tavakol, 2017), the increasing practice of sexting (caused by children themselves or without their knowledge or consent), grooming (Catalina, López de Ayala and García Jiménez, 2014; Lorang, McNiel and Binder, 2016; Villacampa and Gómez Adillón, 2016), the normalisation of pornography among minors (Johnson and Berdahl, 2016; Olmos, 2016) and toward minors[1] (Taylor, Holland and Quayle, 2001), the way children and adolescent idols dress and act (Llovet *et al.,* 2017; Marôpo, Vitorino and de Miranda, 2017), and the fact that parents are misinformed or unconcerned about images of sexualized minors (Lo, 2017).

Child sexualisation negatively affects children, resulting in stereotyped gender roles (Barker and Duschinsky, 2012; Sanabria, 2014) as well as crimes of sexual assault and violence (Blake, Bastian and Denson, 2016). It is also associated with psychological problems and connected to social relationship problems such as low self-esteem, depression, the early onset of sexual activity, eating disorders, and anxiety problems (Vaes, Loughnan, and Puvia, 2014; Ramsey, Marotta, and Hoyt, 2016).

Thirty-four percent of children under the age of 12 have been abused, according to a report by the New Herald on American Children (Olmos, 2016). Faced with the phenomenon of child sexualisation (more widespread among girls) in the images of commercial communications with apparent impunity on the part of the brands and media that reproduce these images, we also find a positive response in citizen initiatives to combat this problem (Llovet, Díaz-Bustamante and Patiño, 2016), as issues concerning children and sexuality are priorities in the area of children's rights (Moore and Reynolds, 2018). As a consequence, faced with sexualisation as a social phenomenon already rejected by women because of the connotations of self-objectification, the passive role, and tolerance of violence, especially sexual violence (Ramsey *et al.,* 2016), the objectives of this research are to carry out a bibliographic review of the sexualisation of girls in the digital environment and to identify some proposals for media literacy.

2. Methodology

A review was carried out of the academic literature related to the phenomenon of female sexualisation that originates and is disseminated through communications made for commercial purposes, delving deeper into those communications linked to the child audience, and especially those developed in the digital media. In this context, we have addressed the critical analysis of the factors that sexualise children, the stereotypes that are generated, and the consequences to minors of both child sexualisation itself and the aforementioned stereotypes.

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1   The authors have identified a type of image linked to paedophilia, distributed mainly on Internet, in which children appear dressed or partially-dressed, and in which sexual enticement is determined mainly by the child's gesture or pose.

The bibliographic search has been carried out continuously since 2015. Databases of academic journals such as Web of Science, Scopus, ProQuest and EBSCOhost have been accessed. Searches have also been conducted on Google (academic and generalist), as well as university libraries in Spain, China and the United States. The main search terms were the following: sexualisation and advertising, sexualising agents, childhood and communication, child stereotypes, the commercialization of childhood, perceptions of sexualised girls, social networks and childhood, female objectification, digital advertising and childhood, fashion and childhood, as well as English translations of these expressions. Selections of the works analysed (books and articles) was made by taking into account their relevance (starting from the indexing of the source that published them in reference databases, their position in such databases, the number of international contributions in the publication, the number of citations received both by the publication and by the work itself, and/or their disseminative impact in the generalist media), its timelessness, and the appropriateness of its content to the sexualisation phenomenon studied. In this regard, all of the results of searches carried out in relation to the sexual identity of individuals, their sexual orientation, and/or pathologies and clinical treatments linked to sexuality have been excluded from the study. We have also excluded all works in the medical field of health sciences from the study.

In a later phase, once the most relevant authors in this line of research had been identified (who are those cited repeatedly in the books and articles analysed in the first phase), specific searches were carried out on the scientific production of these authors (based on their names and surnames), again through databases of academic journals, social networks of scientific publications (ResearchGate and Academia), Google, and university libraries. The results of those searches have excluded works not directly or indirectly related to the sexualisation of individuals.

3. Child Sexualisation Factors: marketing on the Internet

Innovations in the type of marketing that promotes children's products through the electronic media have been called "Childhood marketing" (Kunkel and Castonguay, 2012: 403). Marketing children "is not compatible with genuine family welfare" because it has proven to be "non-spontaneous and narcissistic, with the aim of gaining benefits and using a type of standardized language and gestures" (Marôpo *et al.,* 2017: 73-74).

3.1. Adult Marketing

Fashion brands demonstrate their seriousness in competing in the children's fashion segment (0-12 years) by launching their own children's lines. This helps them to increase their sales, since "branded" children's clothing provides a style status in which the brand is paramount. However, it should be noted that this phenomenon is not new, as promotions directed at children began in 1950 and accelerated in 1980 (Cook, 2017).

Specifically, marketing oriented toward female minors has repeatedly presented a hypersexualized image of girls that leads to a certain idea: they expect to look sexy, but this reduces their sexuality to a single aspect, according to Peggy Orenstein (Kingston, 2016).

As a consequence of the demographic downturn, the lower number of siblings has increased expenditures on children. This is the reason why marketing is oriented toward children rather than to their parents, and explains their profile as

"sophisticated consumers who are demanding and difficult to please" (Méndiz, 2018: 128). This reinforces the position of authority of the minor and develops peer-to-peer marketing, thereby turning the child into an opinion leader and brand ambassador.

Wearing a particular style of clothes (tight, short), a type of underwear (such as push-ups), and stiletto heels, T-shirts with necklines, as well as prominent make-up and dyed hairstyles, is part of "a process of transformation into a sexy look", according to the women interviewed by Smolak, Murnen and Myers (2014: 382). Research also shows that some fashion garments such as jeans are "deeply sexualizing, the sexiest thing, especially for women" (Ghigi and Sassatelli, 2018: 299). Let's look at the connotation that this implies for girls and boys:

– A girl is considered too sexy when she dresses, poses, talks, or behaves in a way that seeks to attract sexual attention, according to Johnson and Berdahl (2016). The criteria set by scientific standards for measuring the sexualisation of girls (Graff *et al.,* 2013) are the following: types of clothing that emphasize sexual attributes, such as transparencies and blouses that show the upper part of the chest, belly or lower back, shorts that expose the thighs and part of the buttocks, clothing that prevents the ability to play without exposing parts of the body (Olmos, 2016); the use of heels, make-up, expressions, settings, accessories and gestures not related to childhood; "clothing with suggestive slogans or the use of fabrics and designs with connotations of adult sexuality, such as leopard prints and ribbons" (Barker and Duschinsky, 2012: 305).

– For boys, sexualisation implies having pronounced abdominal muscles, and they believe that being muscular is the most important aspect of all, in addition to talking about women only in a physical sense, and being disrespectful or derogatory toward them (Johnson and Berdahl, 2016).

In shops, adult styles for children encourage them to act as if they were older than they are. Diaz-Bustamante, Llovet and Patiño (2016) analyse the phenomenon of becoming adults through adult-style attributes (e.g. accessories, complements, and the use of fabrics and colours typical of adults). Their research measured the perception of girls' images in digital advertising and fashion magazine publishing. They concluded that adult postures and gestures are those most frequently used by them. Based on the same criteria, Speno and Aubrey (2017) found that the process of making girls look like adults exceeds that of boys in popular magazines, and that the process of making girls appear like adults is even greater than their sexualisation.

Events such as fashion shows are also a major cause of girls' sexualisation, as was the case with the children's catwalk in a Chinese shopping centre in the style of the Victoria Secret lingerie brand. The use of makeup, hairdressing, bikinis, and accessories such as feathers and jewellery caused rejection by Web users, who accused organizers of portraying a sexual image that misinterpreted the meaning of childhood (Lo, 2017).

If the media that disseminate material related to lifestyles are among those analysed that contain more subliminal sexual content preferred by young people (Wright *et al.,* 2012), what are the risks of showing content that are more related to adults than to children, and even more so with accessible and attractive content as that found on Internet?

3.2. Internet: influencers y celebrities

From the time that Internet became a regular means of communication for the majority of the population, the role of children as pioneers in the digital age has been well-known, as well as concern for their vulnerability (Livingstone and Third, 2017).

However, the growing presence of children in advertising campaigns and their consistent online presence is changing the meaning of childhood. Childhood has traditionally been linked in advertisements to the concept of innocence –simplicity, tenderness, protection of the family– but now it is being introduced with an "artificial sensuality" (Méndiz, 2018: 126) within a marketing strategy aimed at adults that is inappropriate for their age. The consistent online presence of children through publicity, whereby brands save money on advertising (Cook, 2017), produces the same effect.

Online media and social networks have increasingly allowed children to play an active role as cultural producers in "participatory and collaborative contexts" (Eleá and Miklos, 2017: 10). This in itself is positive, but it becomes negative when girls in particular are involved in behaviour aimed at altering their appearance (Trekels *et al.*, 2018), resulting from the idea that women can show their femininity through fashion and beauty products, or when children use the networks in a context of "content marketing" (Marôpo *et al.,* 2017: 74) in which activities to promote beauty products and other adult-oriented goods are directed by sponsors and might be considered child labour. When they become popular influencers of their peers, children are hired by brands to upload images of their products on social networks: "comments on children's products, opening gift-wrapped products or toys, challenges among peers, and adult series on TV or on the web" (Marôpo *et al.,* 2017: 65).

The research by Trekels *et al..* (2018) on the appearance of self-sexualisation among adolescents in Belgium, Austria and South Korea concludes that digital media lead to higher levels of self-objectification than traditional media. In particular, social networks are used meaningfully and directly to self-sexualise the appearance of both boys and girls.

Celebrities such as the Kardashians have asked top designers to create items for their children that they subsequently photograph and send to their 100 million followers. This real-life situation is the result of the generation of millennial parents using their children as an extension of their aesthetic choices. This is also happening in Asia where millennials accounted for 45% of total luxury spending in 2015, and their culture is that of limited editions (Cook, 2017).

"The prevalence and availability of sexual material on the Internet definitely implies that some young people access and learn modes of sexual socialization from online sources" (Wright *et al..* 2012: 291). One important function of the Internet, and specifically social networks, is "to establish new friendships, even in the romantic realm" (Catalina, López de Ayala and García Jiménez, 2014: 473). If these modes of socialization occur with adolescents, it is logical to think that they also affect children, who are even more vulnerable.

4. Stereotypes of sexualized girls

Sexual objectification in the media was associated with a sexist representation of women from 1970-1990. In this regard, a recent study in Spain has analysed the advertising of toy brands from 1990 to 2017, concluding that "the most traditional

and classic roles and stereotypes in both genders have decreased, such as the professions or the values expressed by the characters in advertisements", although women continue to be associated with beauty (González-Anleo, Cortés del Rosario and Garcelán Vargas, 2018: 95).

From the end of the twentieth century, sexual reification has been related to a concept of the objectified body (the woman's experience of her body as an object and the beliefs that support this experience) and the theory of objectification is the framework for understanding the consequences of being a woman in a culture that sexually objectifies the woman's body (Vaes *et al.,* 2014). Not only in advertising, but also in music videos of the 21st century, which are the main objects of consumption on the Internet, women are sexualized. Whether she is the centrepiece of the video (when they submit themselves as objects) or in a supporting role ("close-fitting, low-cut, with very short skirts, shorts, or only in underwear"), both in the image and in the lyrics of the singers such as Lady Gaga, Rihanna, Alexa Dixon or Jennifer López as examples, the role of "sexist and openly vulgar" is recreated (Guarinos, 2012: 312).

The stereotype that is generated of sexualized girls among their peers places them in a position of inferiority, in both intellectual competence and social relations (Egan and Hawkes, 2008; Ward *et al.,* 2016; Díaz-Bustamante and Llovet, 2017). Furthermore, a collection of empirical investigations on the effects of sexualisation throughout two decades[2] concludes that regular exposure to this type of content is associated with high levels of bodily dissatisfaction, self-sexualisation, strong sexist ideas, and extensive tolerance to sexual violence (Ward *et al.,* 2016). Feminist critics of sexualisation in advertising argue that "an atmosphere of disrespect and commodification of women is being fostered" (Gould, 1994: 75). If harmful consequences of exposure to these images have been established in adults, how will they affect children?

4.1. Self-objectification, the consumer culture strategy, and the decrease in feminity

A woman's sexual objectification occurs when "her body or parts of it, or sexual functions, are separated from her person by reducing her status to a mere instrument, as if those features represent who she is (Vaes *et al.,* 2014: 189-190)". The reasons that would explain the "dehumanization" of these body parts are radically opposed: it could be that these bodily parts are considered a "subcategory from which they want to distance themselves", or because "the physical appearance of their own bodies is highly valued" (Vaes *et al.,* 2014: 195). These extremes lead to "competing with others and reducing a sexy woman to a bodily object. Most importantly in social terms, this competition leads to objectification of the others to the status of a body as well, and the process is associated with dehumanizing perceptions" (Vaes *et al.,* 2014: 200).

Self-objectification has been mainly influenced by social factors, and an example of this can be found in magazine models. European women appear more sexualized than American women, whereas the American models are more sexualized than those of Asian journals (Trekels *et al.,* 2018). In a context in which the media is a source of learning about ideal images, women's magazines and the rewards involved are factors of self-sexualisation among all girls (*op. cit.*). Moreover, we also find "images of women in provocative poses" in magazines aimed at adolescent men (Wright *et al.,* 2012: 276).

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2   The review has been conducted by the authors among English peer-reviewed academic journals, a total of 109 publications and 135 studies.

The main goal of sexual objectification in the media is to increase consumption (Barzoki *et al.*, 2017: 435). The self-sexualisation of women implies an observation of one's own body in relation to the standards of the media and others. As a consequence, it generates a fragile and vulnerable situation of self-esteem that is highly dependent on others; finally, it also involves the tendency toward compulsive consumption to mitigate the situation (Barzoki *et al.,* 2017).

The image presented in the media reduces culturally the view of femininity to simply one of a sexual dimension. Sexualisation is not measured only in "the presence or absence of isolated sexualizing attributes" –clothing, gestures or accessories– but "in the image as a whole" (Hatton and Trautner, 2011: 260).The results of the analysis of publications, activist writings and media coverage in Australia, Great Britain and the United States conclude that girls are portrayed passively, and their sexuality has been reduced to sexualisation (Egan and Hawkes, 2008).

Girls who participate in sexualized images exercise a self-objectification that lowers their self-esteem and makes them vulnerable to dependency or sexual abuse (Barzoki *et al.*, 2017). Even though some researchers oppose use of the term "sexual objectification" to categorize sexualized images of women because the expression equates sexual activity and desirability with women, this does not seem to be the best representation for minors, according to studies by Hatton and Trautner (2011), even those who enjoy sexualisation tend to feel more objectified by their partner, resulting in less satisfaction in the relationship (Ramsey *et al.*, 2016).

The idea that women participate in their own sexualisation has also been studied in girls (Jongenelis *et al.,* 2016). In Australia, girls aged 6 to 11 classified their peers by finding attributes that were different in sexualized compared to non-sexualized images of such female peers, thus showing the development of stereotypes. The authors of the study warn that frequent exposure to such portrayals leads girls to accept such depictions and to suffer self-objectification related to body image and eating disorders.

A multicultural study on the use of media (videos, films, magazines, TV and social networks) for adolescents from 12-16 years of age in Spain, Belgium, Austria and South Korea emphasizes a general trend toward increasing self-sexualisation through the use of social networks and magazine consumption in all countries (Trekels *et al.*, 2018). Although the research is related to adolescents, it emphasizes that individuals such as girls or pre-adolescents are more vulnerable to this process than other groups such as boys or adolescents. In fact, it has been proven that spreading the idea of pursuing an ideal of physical attractiveness is rewarded by the number of followers on the Internet and it is related to self-sexualisation behaviour. The interactivity of this media channel would explain the rise in the trend, according to Starr (2015).

4.2. Sexual violence and exhibition

Blake, Bastian and Denson (2016) have studied Western culture's hyper sexualisation of women, and have found a relationship between self-sexualisation and sexual aggression. Some argue that these sexualized styles are inappropriate because "sexual predators often believe that the children they abuse want to be with them" (Olmos, 2016). There are also those who maintain that clothing or other elements sexualize girls against their will. The way others look at them and the tendency to teach girls that the way to be a woman is by exhibiting their bodies in public, is precisely what sexualizes them and ultimately leads to sexual assault (Herbst, 2014).

Research in objectification has shown that women who like sexualisation are more likely to have partners who objectify them, with negative consequences for the relationship, and in particular for women (Ramsey *et al.,* 2016). Another example of harm provided by the research of Kunkel and Castonguay (2012) states that exposure to unwanted sexual material causes aggressive offline requests and requests for photos of undressed people. "The role and relationships of sexual victimization" (p. 293) is shown as a new phenomenon among children, the authors continue.

In this regard, the results of a study based on questionnaires from the Crimes Against Children Research Centre, with 489 secondary school students in Catalonia, Spain, indicate that there is no such relationship between the use of new technologies and the increase in the victimisation rate of minors for behaviour such as sexual solicitation by adults -online grooming- despite the hardening of criminal laws in the United States and Europe in recent years (Villacampa and Gómez Adillón, 2016). However, the authors have identified a number of interesting data such as literacy trends:

– Girls consistently appear to be more frequently victimised than boys, with percentages above 60%, whereas boys do not reach the 40% mark (p. 10).
– There has been an increase in the number of victimized children whose parents have only primary schooling (p. 11).
– The most frequently victimised children are those who are most connected to the Internet (…) every day for more than two hours (p. 12).
– The victimisation rate is higher among peers than by an unknown adult who contacts a child online (p. 23).
– There is only slight emotional distress when such requests are received (p. 23).
– The path of prevention of these victimization processes should be resolutely addressed (…) by means of the education of minors (p. 24).

Along these lines, there are prevention and education campaigns in schools to explain what sexting is and how to report it. The aim is to make children understand that when people send photos of sexually explicit images through digital cameras, this can lead to child pornography, and may result in imprisonment, fines and even registration as a sex offender (Lorang *et al.,* 2016).

5. Findings, recommendations, constraints, and future lines of research

5.1. Findings and recommendations

Some authors (Barker & Duschinsky, 2012) have pointed out that the feminist movement should also make strategic use of the problem of sexualisation through a platform to fight against sexism in today's society, especially that which is occurring on Internet, as this is resulting in an increase in violence against women.

The bibliographical review carried out shows that the phenomenon of sexualisation and objectification of adult and adolescent women is being replicated in the sphere of childhood, and is especially affecting girls. The factors that are causing this phenomenon and its consequences are similar for both women and girls, although one might believe that the effects caused by this anomaly are even more adverse in the case of girls due to their greater vulnerability involving the following factors:

– Being in an early stage of emotional development.
– The strong need for social acceptance and integration that is characteristic of this age.
– The difficulty of properly decoding the profusion of images and messages to which they are exposed in an unmanageable way.
– The need for personal and social reaffirmation required by the nature of the social networks in which they participate on a daily basis.

It has also been demonstrated through academic literature that certain commercial communications generate stereotypes of childhood that harm the children themselves. In fact, commercial communications (whether through conventional or unconventional means) project images that society integrates into its collective imagination, normalizing these until they become stereotypes. If those communications refer to childhood and show a sexualized image of it, the resulting stereotype will be that of a "normally" sexualized childhood.

By turning girls into adults as a result of their sexualisation, the thesis of Sanabria (2014) is confirmed, as this researcher concludes that advertising often shows models far removed from reality and infringes human rights. The research of this investigator proposes a sustainable way of representing bodies that opposes simply reducing them to the category of objects, which has been influenced by the culture of consumption. Only the most responsible consumer will be capable of promoting the integration of human rights into advertising campaigns, and the image of women will be more dignified as a result.

Along with this initiative, there are other areas that require considerable work in the sphere of media literacy on the sexualisation of girls:

1. Celebrities and opinion prescribers. - We agree with González and García (2007) on the difference between social position and the definition of economic wealth in the symbolic consumption of fashion. There is vicarious consumption by mothers who dress their children in the latest adult fashions, just like in the past when the ostentatious display of luxury implied a husband buying fashionable clothes for his wife. However, as González (2003) also states, in recent decades fashion communication has sold appearance rather than identity, projecting a "unitary and superficially attractive" personality. Is this the kind of personality that we want to develop in girls? Sexuality is reduced to the perception of an image –to speak of girls only in their sexual aspect– instead of deeper dimensions that can only be studied through monitoring: intellectual competencies, etc.

   An example of literacy in this field is the documentary Cover Girl Culture and the workshops led by Elite's international model, Nicole Clark (2008). This documentary explores solutions to the sexualisation of girls by the media and celebrities-centred culture through interviews with girls and fashion publishers, leading magazines, agents, designers, models and publicists.

2. Social networks. The constant association between the use of social networks and self-sexualisation demonstrates the unique character of this media, where information is produced by peers. Adolescents, parents and educators need to be aware of the unreal nature of the content therein and the exclusive focus on images (Trekels *et al.*, 2018). The network generates stereotypes that trivialise displays of the body. Laws protect minors "against all impediments to their physical,

mental and moral well-being, including sexual abuse and exploitation on the Internet and other forms of cybercrime", and in particular, "they have the right to an education that protects them from such threats" (Berrocal Lanzarot, 2016: 21). However, do minors identify sexualisation as risky content, and do they have information about the harmful effects of sexualisation to their physical, mental or moral development?

An example of literacy would be to teach how to differentiate between what can be shared and what is sold on a social network. As Serrano (2017) points out, there is a need to place value on the personal as opposed to the public sphere, with the latter implying a presence in the digital ecosystem. There are also steps that need to be taken in order to lessen the dangers to which minors are exposed on Internet, as "adolescents are already suffering greatly since they have more difficulty than adults in identifying risky behaviour" (Villacampa and Gómez Adillón, 2016).

3. Parents and educators of minors. - Parents of girls who participate in children's beauty pageants suffer from "success achieved by distortion" - a term used and referred to by Cartwright (2012) - which is the need to feel successful through the appearance and behaviour of their daughters at a time of overwhelming influence by the media.

An example of literacy would be to ask the child what he or she thinks about how a sexualized woman or girl is dressed compared to the way boys dress and act, and the opinion of how boys treat such a woman or girl, as explained by Johnson and Berdahl (2016), on the first steps in dealing with the subject at home (Olmos, 2016). Educating children about advertising also involves helping them to identify hidden advertising strategies through "an automatic mechanism that makes them more aware and critical" (Hudders, De Pauw, Cauberghe, Panic, Zarouali and Rozendaal, 2017: 347).

Revuelta-Domínguez and Guerra-Antequera (2014) propose educational intervention in childhood regarding patterns of hypersexualized female images in video games. The authors place the responsibility on the consumer to demand more realistic characters who do not wear provocative, sensual or non-existent clothing, and who do not have passive roles. In the case of children, they suggest exercises in transversal subjects of ethics or citizenship where they participate in critical debates about current or proposed images.

4. Media and advertisers. The main TV channels are intermediaries, gatekeepers, censors and regulators in determining what type of advertising they will accept or reject (Gould, 1994). As pointed out by González-Anleo *et al.* (2018), the process by which the media and advertising influence the childhood years creates a process of message assimilation that is more accentuated than in adults – "ideas that influence their perception of the world and lead them to adopt certain roles and stereotypes according to gender, which is also related to the society and the culture of each time period" (p. 81).

Likewise, daily consumption practices –as in the case of media and fashion– have an impact on the structuring of personal identity (Torregrosa, 2018). Advertising professionals are the ones who create the messages and images that sexualize minors. As pointed out by Gould (1994), advertisers believe that sex appeal makes ads more effective, but what happens when the main idea is not the message or the brand, but sexuality itself?

5. Students of Faculties of Education and Communication. According to López and Aguaded (2015) and Narros, Díaz-Bustamante and Llovet (2018), a line of work is being opened among future advertising creators and communicators, professors, and pedagogues, in order to make students of these degrees aware of the impact of their work on society.

A current proposal included in a report from Rey Juan Carlos University, together with The Family Watch observatory (2018), is to teach minors how to manage sexual content and eliminate those that induce sexism or violence.

5.2. Constraints and future lines of research

While the arguments that have been found for the defence of girls against sexualisation on the Internet are based on the negative consequences of stereotypes that women have traditionally suffered in advertising, the adoption of women's awareness initiatives that could serve as a reference for the protection of minors on the Internet has its limitations.

On one hand, Internet as a media channel has some peculiar characteristics that do not allow it to be compared to advertising, or to other media such as TV. For example, Fernandez Perez (2016) points out that "the global dimension of Internet makes it difficult to apply state laws, as they are only applicable territorially, while those responsible for illicit conduct are in other countries" (p. 394). The author reminds us that Internet providers are the ones who guide themselves according to codes of conduct in removing illegal content, thereby protecting minors.

In this regard, the framework suggested by Directive 2018/ of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 November 2018, should be examined. It shows new viewing habits of audiovisual content among younger generations and the growing importance of new types of content. This is the case with programs and videos developed by users, which are present on video exchange platforms and social media. Although their purpose is not intended for economic activity, but rather to inform, entertain and educate, they do in fact compete for the same audience as audiovisual media services and have an influence on shaping the opinions of other users. In the absence of editorial responsibility for harmful content in these cases, and specifically for the purpose of protecting minors, the directive proposes the application of the provisions of another, which is directive 2010/13, "given that they meet the definition of a platform video exchange service" (p. 2).

On the other hand, although the sexualisation of both women and girls is harmful, as it implies a reduction in sexuality in both cases, some characteristics of adult sexuality (the type of clothing, the use of make-up or accessories, heels, etc.) that are imposed on a girl to sexualize her could not be applied in the same way as to an adult.

Likewise, we have observed that advertising is undoubtedly the most heavily studied factor of influence in sexualisation, although it is not possible to apply some methodologies due to the nature of the audiences. For example, there are no studies on the perception of children from 5-7 years of age for two reasons, according to Kunkel and Castonguay (2012): firstly, the "low awareness of the concept of an advertisement" (p. 404) by children at this age, and secondly, "the difficulty in differentiating the commercial content from programmes or entertainment" (*op. cit.*), even though the children may identify them as advertisements.

For future lines of research, we are considering whether social networks could be effective in fighting child sexualisation and raising awareness of factors that can lead to risky situations.

For example, the idea is to inform and raise awareness on the Internet regarding procedures for making complaints about brands in online platforms. These proposals for greater responsibility find agreement with García-Gutiérrez (2015) in "building a global and inclusive approach, where the perspective of children's rights is enriched by a pedagogical

approximation to technology, so it can be optimized for the purpose of achieving the full development of the personality" (p. 134).

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