

# The dangers of the hypersexualisation of young girls: a stolen childhood

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## Abstract

*The hypersexualisation of young girls is omnipresent in today's society. Whether through social networks, television or fashion, it contributes to an undeniable eroticization of childhood, forcing children and especially girls to become adults before their time. What does this phenomenon consist of? Why cannot the law counter it? How is it expressed? Why is it intimately linked to sexism and the dictates of beauty that are invading our society and enslaving women? What consequences can it have? Finally, how can it be discouraged?*

## TRIGGER WARNING

This article discusses sensitive topics, including child pornography, sexual violence and eating disorders. TWs mentioning sensitive subjects will be present at the beginning of each part if necessary.



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**“Hypersexualisation values the appearance at the expense of the being ; the possessions rather than knowledge.”**

**- Francine Descarries, Professor, Department of Sociology, Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)**

## What is the hypersexualisation of young girls?

Last August, the film *Mignonnes* directed by Maïmouna Doucouré caused controversy because of its alleged sexualization of pre-adolescent girls, particularly because of the American promotional poster broadcasted by Netflix. However, this is precisely what the film team wanted to denounce. The poster, which was taken from a deliberately embarrassing and sexualized scene, was misinterpreted by people who had not seen the film. A petition was even launched claiming that it promoted child pornography, and the director was so harassed on Twitter that she ended up leaving the social network.

In reality, the film brilliantly denounces the hypersexualisation of girls and teenage girls in our modern societies but also denounces the *male gaze*, through which this hypersexualisation occurs. The film analyses the causes leading to hypersexualisation, whether it be fashion, magazines, the search for popularity or, more generally, the desire to emancipate oneself and be perceived as an adult.

So, what is the hypersexualisation of young girls? How is it problematic and dangerous? How are young girls sexualised by a society that paradoxically wants to protect minors? To what extent does hypersexualisation resemble a form of violence against children? How are children increasingly pushed to become adults before their time?

### **The difficulty of defining hypersexualisation**

The French dictionary *Larousse* defines hypersexualisation as “in society, the fact of giving an increasingly important place to sexuality, by multiplying references to it in the public space (media, advertising)”<sup>1</sup>, the hypersexualisation of young girls would then be tantamount to attributing sexual characteristics and behaviour to teenage girls, or even young girls. In 2012, former French Senator Chantal Jouanno explained in her report on this theme for the former French Minister of Solidarity Roselyne Bachelot the difficulties of defining what the hypersexualisation of young girls is. This term is indeed debated because, for many, it is often confused with the fact of having an active sexual life. However, for Chantal Jouanno, the hypersexualisation of girls “refers to the sexualisation of their expressions, postures or dress codes, which are considered too precocious”<sup>2</sup>. This would therefore consist of attitudes that children adopt, or are made to adopt, which are not in keeping with their age.

Despite the still small number of studies conducted on the subject, the birth of hypersexualisation of women can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s. It appeared as an unwanted offspring of the liberation of morals and the demand for sexual equality. Sylvie Richard-Bessette, a specialist in feminism and sexuality, proposes a definition of the hypersexualisation of women with specific criteria. Chantal

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<sup>1</sup> Definition proposed by *Larousse* dictionary. Available at: <https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/hypersexualisation/188139>.

<sup>2</sup> JOUANNO, C. (2012). Contre l’hypersexualisation, un nouveau combat pour l’égalité. *Vie-publique.fr*. [online] 5 Mar. Available at: <https://www.vie-publique.fr/sites/default/files/rapport/pdf/124000122.pdf> [Accessed: 29 Oct. 2020].

Jouanno then takes up this definition in her report: it is an “excessive use of body-oriented strategies in order to seduce”. According to the author, “the hypersexualisation of the body is manifested by:

- Clothes that highlight parts of the body (décolleté, low-cut trousers, tight pullover, etc.).
- Accessories and products that significantly accentuate certain features and hide so-called flaws (make-up, jewellery, high heels, acrylic nails, hair colouring, padded cup bras, etc.).
- Body alterations that aim to highlight sexual characteristics or signals (removal of the body and genital hair, significant arm and buttock muscles, etc.).
- Surgical interventions that transform the body into an “artificial object”: silicone breasts, lips swollen with collagen.
- Exaggerated body postures that send the signal of sexual availability: bulging breasts, opening the mouth, wiggling the hips, etc.
- Sexual behaviours that focus on genitality and the pleasure of the other.”

In this case, the hypersexualisation of young girls would be a more or less conscious application and appropriation of these criteria by adolescent girls and, increasingly, by young girls. In this article, we will therefore focus on the analysis of this worrying phenomenon in Western societies, affecting mainly young girls between the ages of 8 and 15 ever since around the 1970s.

### **What does the law say? (TW: sexual violence)**

The hypersexualisation of young girls calls into question certain rights enshrined in the 1989 International Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which has been ratified by all 193 member states of the United Nations (UN), except for the United States. The United States has only signed it because in some American states it is perfectly legal to sentence a child to death, so ratification has not taken place. In this case, the CRC aims at eradicating all forms of violence, abuse and exploitation against children. Thus, Article 19-1 of the CRC<sup>3</sup> affirms the right of every child to protection against physical or mental violence, and Article 34<sup>4</sup> against exploitation and sexual abuse. However, hypersexualisation can be a form of mental violence towards these children who are subjected to conditioning, a way of life that goes against what is favourable to their good development. In the most extreme cases, this can even lead to sexual violence against them. Chantal Jouanno underlines it in her report on hypersexualisation. She uses the law, and in particular, the CRC, which came into force in France on September 2nd, 1990, to show that the hypersexualisation of children is problematic in our modern society. In particular, it puts forward the arguments of the best interests of the individual child and the dignity of the human person.

Concerning the principle of respect for the best interests of the individual child, Article 3-1 of the CRC states that: “In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the individual child shall be a primary consideration.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the notion of the best interests of the individual child can be understood as preventing manipulation of minors by adults and to ensure their

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF, International Convention on the Rights of the Child, November 20th in 1989, Article 19-1: “States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.”. Available at: <https://www.unicef.fr/sites/default/files/convention-des-droits-de-lenfant.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Article 34 : “States Parties undertake to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. To this end, States shall in particular take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent: a - the inducement or coercion of children to engage in any unlawful sexual activity; b - the exploitative use of children in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practices; c - the exploitative use of children in pornographic performances or materials.”

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

proper personal development: “This ensures that a child is not used as an instrument of adults' dreams and wishes and that the construction of the child's personality and the environment in which he or she evolves are respected in an age-appropriate manner by promoting the love that he or she needs to develop.”<sup>6</sup> Finally, in France, since 2007, Article L.112-4 of the Social Action and Family Code has required that the interests of the child be taken into account in all decisions concerning them. It is therefore possible for legal professionals to use these texts, which come from different levels (national and international), to intervene and legislate on issues of hypersexualization of young girls, in order to protect them and enforce the principle of respect for their best interests.

It is also possible to enforce the principle of respect for the human dignity of every human being to oppose oneself to the hypersexualisation of girls. According to the Jouanno report, the commonly accepted legal definition of human dignity is as follows: “a principle which prohibits subjecting a human being to any form of subjection and degradation, to consider them as an object in total dependence on the power of others.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the right to human dignity is the recognition of the existence of an individual and what enables them to benefit from rights. In France, the famous decision of the Council of State of October 27th of 1995 in Morsang sur Orge<sup>8</sup> goes further: in this decision, respect for the right to a dignified life can justify the prohibition of humiliating entertainment, even if the participants consent. This principle also aims at protecting children, as there is a desire not to show scenes in which the human condition is degraded to minors who might assimilate these practices to normality. In this case, it is possible to apply this principle regarding minors to combat their hypersexualisation, a treatment that is degrading for the individual in question.

Indeed, after 2012, the law on beauty contests known as “mini-miss” in France has been revised. These events, originally from the United States, consist of a competition of girls based on physical criteria. They parade in different outfits in front of a jury which, in the end, must elect its favourite. However, according to the Jouanno report, these events run counter to the best interests of children and respect for their human dignity. Indeed, in the name of the Morsang sur Orge EC 1995 judgment, entertainment that degrades the image of human beings cannot be tolerated. In fact, when the organisers of these competitions were asked about the possibility of extending this competition to little boys from a gender perspective, they responded that boys did not have to “stoop down”<sup>9</sup> to this. This is why, in 2014, the National Assembly voted in favour of banning “mini-miss” competitions for children under the age of 13. For competitions open to 13-16 year-olds, prior authorisation must be sought to organise the event following certain rules, such as the ban on parades in swimming costumes. If this procedure is not

<sup>6</sup> JOUANNO, C. (2012). Contre l'hypersexualisation, un nouveau combat pour l'égalité. *Vie-publique.fr*. [online] 5 Mar. Available at: <https://www.vie-publique.fr/sites/default/files/rapport/pdf/124000122.pdf> [Accessed: 29 Oct. 2020].

<sup>7</sup> JOUANNO, C. (2012). Contre l'hypersexualisation, un nouveau combat pour l'égalité. *Vie-publique.fr*. [online] 5 Mar. Available at: <https://www.vie-publique.fr/sites/default/files/rapport/pdf/124000122.pdf> [Accessed: 29 Oct. 2020].

<sup>8</sup> Decision of the Council of State of October 27th in 1995, Commune of Morsang-sur-Orge and City of Aix en Provence : “The Council of State has ruled that respect for the dignity of the human person is a component of public order. Consequently, the authority vested with the power of municipal police may prohibit an attraction that is detrimental to it, even in the absence of specific local circumstances, by using its general police power.”. Available at: <https://www.conseil-etat.fr/ressources/decisions-contentieuses/les-grandes-decisions-du-conseil-d-etat/conseil-d-etat-27-octobre-1995-commune-de-morsang-sur-orge-et-ville-d-aix-en-provence>.

<sup>9</sup> PELISSIER, P. (2012). L'élection des Mini-Miss pas très à cheval sur sa charte éthique. *Lemonde.fr*. [online] May 25. Available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2012/05/25/l-election-des-mini-miss-pas-tres-a-cheval-sur-sa-charte-ethique\\_1707549\\_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2012/05/25/l-election-des-mini-miss-pas-tres-a-cheval-sur-sa-charte-ethique_1707549_3224.html) [Accessed 15 Oct. 2020].

respected, the organisers expose themselves to a fine of €1,500 and, in the event of a repeat offence, €3,000.

The image of children, especially in advertising, is increasingly regulated, notably by the French law of July 12th, 1990<sup>10</sup> on child models. First of all, it is written in the Labour Code that children are obliged to go to school until they are at least 16 years old. It is also forbidden to hire a child under the age of 16 in the world of cinema, show business, modelling or television without prior parental consent (Article L.7124-1 of the Labour Code<sup>11</sup>). Some European States go further in their regulations. In Denmark, for example, since 1997, the law has prohibited the use of children under 14 in television advertising, unless their presence is indispensable or the product directly concerns them. This is also the case in Spain. In the United Kingdom, children can only be used in advertising if they are offering products or services which they might be interested in buying. Similarly, in France, more and more professionals are fighting to tighten legislation on the representation of children in advertising. In 2011, following the *Vogue* media scandal (detailed below), more than 150 doctors, children's specialists, associations, parents, teachers, etc. gathered together in the Petition against the eroticization of images of children in all forms of advertising, having collected around 12,000 signatures. Dr Elisabeth Pino emphasizes about this petition “that it is not a question of wanting to moralize all advertising. It is a reminder that the child cannot be a model like any other, because of their subjection to adults”.<sup>12</sup> As a result of this petition, the Charter for the Protection of Children in the Media was adopted in February 2012 to set clear limits to the hypersexualisation of children in advertising:

*“Article 7: Not to broadcast, including in advertising spaces, hypersexualised images of children, girls and boys alike: - in an erotic setting, - or wearing clothing, accessories or make-up with strong erotic connotations.*

*Article 8: Not to disseminate violent or sexist behavioural stereotypes.*

*Article 9: Not to present the manifestations of hypersexualisation in a complacent manner.”*<sup>13</sup>

To protect the child from hypersexualisation, the regulation of the use of their image (in advertising, in beauty contests) is therefore becoming increasingly strict. Nevertheless, legislation on the subject often proves to be complex and there are still many obstacles, in particular the difficulties of ruling on what happens in the family setting. Indeed, it is often mothers who push their daughter(s) to take part in these activities based on physical appearance. However, if parental consent is given, it is difficult for the state

<sup>10</sup> Interministerial Circular N°2007/ 19 DGT/DPM/ of December 20th of 2007 relating to the application of Articles L.763-1 (L.7123-1 ) and following of the Labour Code relating to the employment of models and model agencies : “Law n°90-603 of July 12th of 1990 relating to model agencies and the protection of children and adults working as models, and decree n°92-962 of September 9th of 1992 as amended relating to model agencies and the protection of children and adults exercising the activity of model are intended to regulate the profession of model agency (employer of the model) as well as the working conditions of child and adult models through the introduction of prior administrative control (licence and approval) and to create protective provisions, in particular with regard to children.” Available at: <http://www.wk-rh.fr/actualites/upload/circulairedgtdpm200719du201207.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Labour Code, Article L. 7123-1 : “A child under the age of sixteen years may not, without prior individual authorisation, granted by the administrative authority, be employed or produced in any capacity whatsoever : 1° In an entertainment company, whether sedentary or itinerant ; 2° In a film, radio, television or sound recording company ; 3° With a view to exercising a modeling activity within the meaning of article L. 7123-2.”. Available at: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/id/LEGIARTI000042442669/2021-04-20/>.

<sup>12</sup> Petition against the eroticization of images of children in all forms of advertising, *petitionpublique.fr*. Available at: <http://petitionpublique.fr/Default.aspx?pi=P2011N6214>.

<sup>13</sup> Conseil Supérieur de l'audiovisuel. (2012). Charter for the protection of children in the media. [online] Feb. 2012. Available at: <https://www.csa.fr/Reguler/Espace-juridique/Les-relations-du-CSA-avec-les-editeurs/Chartes/Charte-Protection-de-l-enfant-dans-les-medias-Fevrier-2012>.

to interfere in the private lives of individuals. Moreover, these child protection rules in advertising and art often come into confrontation with the freedom to create. In 2007 Christine Reichenbach, Director of the Advertisers' Union, explained: “*There are only a very small number of court decisions concerning offences against decency or propriety in advertising, due to the courts' great tolerance of artistic creation and the difficulty for the judge to rule on this type of case.*”<sup>14</sup> Thus, despite some progress, it is still too little given the extent of the place that the hypersexualisation of children already occupies in our society.

## How does hypersexualisation be developed and maintained in our society?

### A gendered socialisation

The hypersexualisation of children particularly affects girls and adolescent girls. It cannot be separated from the sexism of our society. The sexualisation of children is above all a social phenomenon. Socialization is the process by which members of a society integrate the social norms, specific skills and behaviours necessary for them to function in society within the group of which they are a part of. However, our socialization is sexist. Differentiated education for girls and boys creates contradictory expectations and behaviours. Children do not internalise the same things because they are born a girl or a boy. This conditioning according to predetermined patterns begins at birth with the family, the first instance of socialisation, and then with the media, fashion, advertising, music, etc. which reflect society's expectations.

Gender and sexist socialisation lead, for example, little girls to see themselves only as aesthetic objects and to dream of becoming models, singers or actresses. One can think, for example, of online game sites “for girls” where the various games consist of hairdressing, dressing or putting make-up on models. These games focus on presenting oneself and how one looks. We learn to put ourselves on stage, to please, to be just an object of beauty. We know that girls' aesthetic prowess is much more valued by those around them than their intellectual prowess. Parents are also more likely to protect and help girls while allowing boys to be active and independent. Girls are constantly brought back into parent-controlled spaces and their toys promote physical closeness and verbal interaction, while boys' toys keep them away from parents and encourage physical activity and motor activity. Finally, anger management is different for a little boy, for whom it is more tolerated than for a little girl who is brought back into order and for whom more emotional control is expected. These differentiated behaviours lock each sex into sectarian expectations and create behavioural traits that are not biological. The latter directly reinforce the sexualisation of girls and women, since they contribute to locking them into a subordinate and passive role. Gendered socialisation only values women for their appearance, thereby destroying their self-esteem and thus sometimes their ambition at an age when they are expected to make educational and career choices.

The sexualisation of children is also rooted in gendered marketing, which reinforces a gendered identity from an early age. In 2011, the famous French brand *Petit Bateau* caused a scandal when it marketed pink baby bodies with the words “pretty, stubborn, funny, soft, elegant, beautiful” and blue “courageous, strong, proud, valiant, robust, cunning, determined, mischievous, cool”. Yet this obsession with generationalising babies from birth according to a binary and archaic (as well as heteronormative)

<sup>14</sup> JOUANNO, C. (2012). Contre l'hypersexualisation, un nouveau combat pour l'égalité. *Vie-publique.fr*. [online] 5 Mar. Available at: <https://www.vie-publique.fr/sites/default/files/rapport/pdf/124000122.pdf> [Accessed: 29 Oct. 2020].

male/female vision is omnipresent in fashion and the toy market. It is also significant that the association of *pink* for girls and *blue* for boys only dates back to the explosion of gendered marketing in the West in the 1980s, whereas it was rather the opposite before. Insisting on so-called male/female differences allows the consumer society to sell according to characteristics that are not biological but are constructed from scratch by socialisation.

In the same way, in children's toy catalogues or even on shop shelves, this differentiation is visible. In the majority of cases, we find toys “for girls” related to cooking, beauty, housework, animals, and therefore part of the family context, private space and care (of oneself or others). On the contrary, toys “for boys” are related to transport, sports, superheroes or DIY, i.e. areas outside the family space. When you know that the two sentences pronounced by the first Barbie doll were “*Maths is difficult*” and “*I love shopping !*” we cannot ignore the sexist dimension of this gendered marketing.

In magazines for teenagers but also adults, women are photographed as objects, staged for the gaze of others, a gaze that is often masculine. In *Ways of seeing*<sup>15</sup> (1972), the British writer John Berger decrees “*Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at*”, which means, men look, they are subjects, while women are looked at, they are the objects of male desires and fantasies. This observation was taken up by the British film critic and feminist Laura Mulvey who, in 1975, theorised the *male gaze*<sup>16</sup>. This concept refers to the imbalance of power at work in cultural productions, where the dominant gaze is that of the heterosexual man. It can also be applied to magazines. The viewer or observer is forced to adopt the hegemonic male point of view, presented as neutral. This androcentrism is found in the cinema but also in the entirety of our society, where representations of women are only representations of male pleasure. This pattern is already present during childhood, where girls are taught to define themselves according to validation and in the eyes of the other, i.e. the boys. The images presented to girls do not represent their diversity, always based on the same stereotyped models.

### **Hypersexualisation as a sexist phenomenon**

In a 2009 report for CALACS (Centre d'Aide et de Lutte contre les Agressions à Caractère Sexuel), Quebec researchers Lucie Poitier and Joane Garon stated that: “*Hypersexualisation is fundamentally sexist (...) It can have important consequences, particularly on our ways of thinking and acting, on our sexuality and male-female relations.*”<sup>17</sup> The hypersexualisation of women and girls is indeed linked to the sexism of the patriarchal society. It is both a consequence and a cause since it keeps women in a subordinate role and accentuates gender inequalities. Further on, they add: “*Hypersexualisation is a worrying phenomenon that contributes to sexual assault and violence against women. Indeed, a growing number of magazines, videos, calendars, toys, music stars, pornographic websites and advertisements of all kinds are daily emphasizing the message that girls' and women's bodies can be used, exploited, sold and assaulted.*”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> BERGÉ, J. & DIBB, M. (1972). *Ways of seeing*. Londres. Éd. BBC Enterprises.

<sup>16</sup> MULVEY, L. (1975). Plaisir visuel et cinéma narratif. *Screen*, vol. 16, n° 3. CinémAction.

<sup>17</sup> POIRIER, L. & GARON, J. (2009) *Hypersexualisation ? Guide pratique d'information et d'action*. CALACS de Rimouski. Available at : [http://www.rqcalacs.qc.ca/publicfiles/volume\\_final.pdf](http://www.rqcalacs.qc.ca/publicfiles/volume_final.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

As girls are future women, they are already affected by sexism and their hypersexualisation. Added to this is the oppression and sexualisation of women in society at large, as well as beauty dictates increasingly associated with thinness, youth and sexuality. The feminine ideal is becoming more and more similar to the body of a child, shapeless and hairless, as evidenced by the diktat of integral hair removal. Marketing pushes women to fear ageing and gaining weight, and these concerns are echoed from an early age. To be beautiful, you have to be young: wrinkles are erased, white hair is dyed, breasts are straightened. This ageism (age discrimination) affects men and women very differently. While women must appear eternally young and unchanged, men's old age is often presented as synonymous with maturity, or even valued aesthetically (salt and pepper hair, wrinkles). There is every reason to believe that with age, women become uglier while men improve and mature. As Mona Chollet, a Swiss essayist, notes in *Sorcières*, 'men don't age better than women; they only have the right to age'<sup>19</sup>.

The double phenomenon of objectification and sexualisation of women is particularly visible in advertising, where women are frequently presented as trophies to be seduced, whose bodies are used to sell a product whether it is shampoo, deodorant, perfume, but also yoghurt, chocolate, toilet paper, mineral water, handbag, car, beer, etc.

From school onwards, this constant control of girls' bodies is already visible, notably through dress codes and other school regulations which are giving a differentiated treatment according to the gender of the pupils. A movement was born last September in France to protest against these sexist injunctions, carried by the #14September and #Balancetonbahut on social networks. Among these restrictions are the banning of crop tops, cleavage or even skirts or dresses considered too short. These rules, which are all the more absurd in hot weather, show to what extent girls and teenagers are seen as sexual objects. Their justification is classic: these outfits would be "provocative" or "distracting" boys. In addition to its reinforcement of heteronormativity, this semblance of justification fits perfectly in a society marked by a culture of rape, where women are blamed for their behaviour, particularly when they are victims of sexual assault, instead of educating or questioning the behaviour of men.

The government's reaction to this event also made the headlines. The French Minister of National Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, declared on RTL radio that pupils only had to dress in a "republican way" with "normal dress" as if the dress codes were all aimed at pupils in an egalitarian way. This is tantamount to denying that these restrictions mainly affect girls, but also disadvantaged and/or racialized people, both girls and boys, who are stigmatised because of jogging, caps or hoods considered to be attributes of young people "from the street". By "republican dress", the government thus means neutral dress, i.e. modelled on a white male socially privileged subject and conforming to gender norms.

In reality, these regulations are based above all on the hypersexualisation of children and adolescents, crop tops or skirts not being sexual clothing in themselves, but only made to look like that by adults. This also sends the message to boys that they are unable to control their impulses, and that girls must therefore adapt to them. These regulations do nothing to create a work environment, especially in hot weather; preventing girls from dressing according to the season on the pretext of not wanting to distract boys proves that male comfort is valued more than female comfort.

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<sup>19</sup> CHOLLET, M. (2018). *Sorcières. La puissance invaincue des femmes*. Paris. Éd. Zones.

## **An eroticization of childhood**

The hypersexualisation of children is taking place in a society where the boundaries between generations are becoming increasingly blurred, particularly between children and adolescents. Pre-adolescent girls are the most affected by this phenomenon, under constant pressure to appear as under-age adolescents and then under-age adults. For example, girls' fashion is increasingly modelled on teenage fashion, and marketing as a whole seeks to break the age barrier to encourage girls to behave like teenagers.

*Vogue* caused a scandal in December of 2010 by having little girls dressed and made up like “femme fatale” (high heels, seductive attitude, suggestive poses...). However, this eroticization of children is omnipresent in society. Bratz dolls are a good example. These dolls are very strongly sexualized, even though they are intended for girls and are supposed to represent young teenagers: excessive make-up, ‘sexy’ clothes (heeled boots, leather tops, mini skirts...), faces that seem to have been redone and measurements that are even more unrealistic than those of the Barbie dolls. There are even “baby Bratz”, supposed to be babies but with the same pulpy lips, the same make-up, the same skeletal body and the same crop tops or other miniskirts.

Although they are relatively small and limited in Europe, mini-miss contests are frequent and are real entertainment in some English-speaking countries, with the United States leading the way. Far from being innocent “princess contests”, this type of contest is shocking because of the youthfulness of the participants and their undeniable hypersexualisation. Make-up, evening gowns, long hair, heels, fake nails, suggestive poses, sometimes even in swimming costumes, etc. Very often, far from being the child's wish, it is the mothers who push their daughters, sometimes as young as two years old, to take part in these contests. But what are the values conveyed by this kind of competition? That you have to be beautiful to succeed? That you have to crush your opponent to reach the top of the podium? That you have to conform to the prevailing norms to be famous and rich (these competitions are sometimes rewarded with thousands of dollars)?

At the same time, this phenomenon is accompanied by a rejuvenation of the models. Sometimes from the age of 10 or 12, these young girls are asked to take “sexy” poses, to play out their sexuality, even though they are barely pubescent!

To further reduce the barrier between children and teenage girls, brands have ended up inventing a new category for pre-adolescent girls: “tweens”. This, in fact, makes it possible to sell “transitional” products aimed at teenage girls to children. However, it is doubtful whether these products are useful at their age, such as make-up or bras, but also sometimes g-strings, mini skirts or even children's heeled shoes. What's the point of having shoes with heels in size 25 or padded bras in size 65A?

Girls are starting to wear bras earlier and earlier, even before their breasts appear at puberty. In supermarkets, sales often start at 70A, which would be the equivalent of the size of an eight-year-old girl. Some bras for girls are even padded. In 2011, several major brands such as *La Redoute*, *Les 3Suisses* and *Abercrombie* had caused controversy by selling push-up bras and swimwear for 8-14-year-olds. The same applies with the first hair removal, taking place earlier and earlier, sometimes before puberty.

Some institutes have been offering “mini-spas” for little girls for several years now. They are very frequent in the United States but also present in France. For example, the Mini Kid Spa in Paris offers facial care, hairdressing, make-up or even nail polish for girls aged between 6 and 15 years old. In the

same way, some mothers encourage their daughters to apply anti-wrinkle cream from an early age. Walmart has thus launched in 2011 a range of make-up and antioxidant and anti-wrinkle care for 8-12-year-olds! Little girls are therefore taught that getting older means getting ugly, that they need to preserve themselves, that they need to “take care of themselves” as early as possible. This lowers their self-esteem and pushes them to give too much time to their image, and thus neglect other activities that allow them to develop creatively, intellectually, etc.

In *The Beauty Myth*<sup>20</sup>, Naomi Wolf writes that girls born after the 1980s have no childhood. She states that “for a seven-year-old American girl, getting on the scales and screaming in horror is a ritual of femininity, inseparable from a promise of sexual gratification”. By this, she means that the childhood of these little girls and the recklessness that goes with it have been stolen, as it were, by pushing them to become “mini-adults” too early, both physically and emotionally. Concerns and pressures to get a boyfriend, to please boys, to get their first kiss and even to have sex are thus becoming increasingly precocious. Based on hetero-normative standards (presumption that all children will be heterosexual) and patriarchal norms (a woman only exists in her relation to a man), these pressures invade the space of childhood to propel young people into an ultra-sexualised and eroticised world. In the United Kingdom, a dance school made a name for itself in 2011 by offering courses in pole-dance, a dance known for its sensual and even sexual gestures, from the age of 7, then by posting photos of the course on Facebook.

All these phenomena convey a clear message: to be popular, to be successful, but also quite simply to grow, you have to build yourself up as an object of desire. Whereas in the past girls were expected to be beautiful and nice, now they have to be beautiful and sexy. They are taught that their value only depends on their appearance.

Children are bombarded with sexual images in music videos, commercials, movies, but also simply around them. They want to have friends, to be popular, to integrate into the group and then into society, and this requires conformity to the dominant models presented to them, through a phenomenon of mimicry. To be popular in the 21st century for a girl or a woman is equivalent to giving off something sexual, to please, to seduce by her physique, whatever her age.

### **Hypersexualisation through media and social networks**

Since the emergence of Facebook in the 2000s, we have witnessed a proliferation of social networks. Of course, some of them are coming out of the woodwork and Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat are now the big leaders on the market. While these applications have exploded among young adults, they have also exploded among teenagers and even pre-teens. For example, according to a French survey by Statista conducted in 2018, 76% of respondents aged between 12 and 17 said they were on at least one social network<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, in another Statista survey, dating from 2017, among the young girls surveyed, aged between 11 and 14, nearly 70% declared being registered on one or more social networks<sup>22</sup>. However, this monopolisation of social networks by the youngest members is not the same

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<sup>20</sup> WOLF, N. (1991). *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women*. Londres. Éd. Vintage.

<sup>21</sup> Survey carried out by Statista, in metropolitan France, in June 2018, on a representative sample of 2,214 respondents. Available at: <https://fr.statista.com/statistiques/480837/utilisation-reseaux-sociaux-france-age>.

<sup>22</sup> Survey also carried out by Statista, in metropolitan France, between January 3rd and 31st in 2017, on a representative sample of 8,362 individuals. Available at: <https://fr.statista.com/statistiques/511400/part-des-jeunes-a-etre-inscrits-sur-un-ou-plusieurs-reseaux-sociaux-france/>

everywhere. Indeed, in January 2019, there were around 6% of those registered on Facebook who were between 13 and 17 years old<sup>23</sup> (it should be noted that these figures are hardly representative of reality as many of them lie when they register). Also in France, nearly 40% of children aged 11-14 are TikTok users, despite an age limit of 13<sup>24</sup>. However, this new presence of the youngest children on the networks is not without danger for them.

Indeed, through these social networks, young girls, even little girls try to reproduce their behaviour and post evocative photos in their turn by trying to look more and more like adults, their role models. The little boys, for their part, internalise canons of beauty that they will later apply in their personal lives. In 2019, it was estimated that “95 million photos and videos are posted daily on Instagram, the majority of which are sexy photos of boys in swimming costumes, bellies and backs.”<sup>25</sup> This type of publication is also very present on celebrity accounts, very popular with young people who take them as models. Thus, if we take the five female personalities with the most subscribers on Instagram (Ariana Grande, Kylie Jenner, Selena Gomez, Kim Kardashian and Beyoncé), we find at least one undressed photo among their last ten publications. Young girls, often in a period of an identity crisis, then normalise the fact of showing themselves on the Internet despite their young age and align themselves with these criteria of beauty which flood them every day. By valuing these norms and disseminating them in society, these young girls also seek to reproduce them in order to please at all costs. We can take for example the development of filters, on Instagram or Snapchat, which reinforce the idea of modifying one's appearance to conform to the beauty criteria in force in our society. However, by adopting behaviour and positions out of step with their young age, sometimes with the aim of pleasing boys, they reflect a disturbing image that runs counter to the idea of innocence that is usually attributed to children.

The phenomenon of child influencers, which is exploding, is problematic and contributes to the reinforcement of their hypersexualisation. An influencer is a person who is very popular on social networks and who can modify and influence the consumption, opinions and behaviours of the people who follow them, which they call their community. Although the majority of these Internet personalities are young adults, there are more and more very young influencers. For example, Everleigh Soutas, a 7-year-old dancer, youtube artist and TikTok star has been rocked by this social networking culture, as her mother started posting photos and videos of her as early as the age of 3. Followed by more than 4 million subscribers, her publications resemble those of older celebrities looking to please: subjective poses in swimming costumes, very short shorts, deep necklines, etc.

In addition, the young American girl Brianna Buchanan, aged 13, has decided to stop school with her mother's consent to focus on her TikTok profile and her fan community. Pink-coloured hair, make-up, crop tops and suggestive dances like the twerk, she is easily given 17 or 18 years old. She explains in a report made by the French TV channel M6, in January 2019, that “*make-up takes me an hour every day*”<sup>26</sup>. Her mother, who encourages her in this company, declares herself to be her manager: she writes

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<sup>23</sup> Figures proposed by Verticaly. Available at: <https://www.verticaly.fr/blog/ages-movens-medias-sociaux/>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> GAUER, P. (2019). The dangerous hypersexualisation of young people online - Dossier. *Premierepluie.com*. [online] 1 Apr. Available at: <https://premierepluie.com/2019/04/01/dossiers/>. [Accessed: 3 Oct. 2020].

<sup>26</sup> PIAT, M. (2019). TikTok : this 13-year-old American girl dropped out of school to make the application her profession. *Purebreak.com*. [online] 21 Jan. Available at:

the publications and posts the videos for her. However, the dangers of the Internet for children, often underestimated by children but also by parents, are very real. In another interview, Brianna admits that “*she sometimes receives sexual pictures or messages from older men on Instagram and Snapchat*”<sup>27</sup>. Unfortunately, it is very common for young women and girls to receive non-consensual sexual pictures (including the famous “dick pic”) on social networks<sup>28</sup>. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) recently issued a statement on the issue of child safety online. According to data collected by the UN body specialised in the well-being and healthy development of children, a survey reveals that “the children who are most at risk of being manipulated and abused are pre-adolescents”<sup>29</sup>. According to UNICEF, children are increasingly present on the Internet, but they are a vulnerable group, easily manipulated because they are in the midst of their search for themselves, often subject to an identity crisis, and to a recomposition of their models.

### **The role of the film industry in disseminating role models**

Sexualised images are increasingly present and banal in films, series, advertisements, music videos and online videos. Girls and teenagers are particularly victims of this phenomenon of media and film hypersexualisation, such as the actress Millie Bobby Brown, who was named one of the sexiest personalities on television by *W magazine* in 2017 when she was only 13 years old.

This phenomenon of hypersexualisation on television also coincides with an almost systematic use of actors who are older than the people they represent. It is very common for young adults to play highly sexualized minor characters. For example, in the series *Euphoria* (HBO), the characters are supposed to be in their last year of secondary school (approximately 17 years old). However, the actors are between 22 and 25 years old. This would not be so problematic if the characters were not so sexualised, not only by the script but also by the camera. Here we find the *male gaze*, the director being a man, which represents an exacerbated, violent and even perverse adolescent sexuality, taking up the codes of pornography (camera in counter-dive, following the bodies of the female characters...). It should also be noted that the character of Kate can be considered as a sex worker when she is a minor, which could be considered child pornography and not a “cool” phenomenon as presented in the series.

The characters in *Euphoria* are all extremely sexually mature, which is not very credible for their age. Indeed, the average age of first intercourse in France is 17.4 years old for boys and 17.6 years old for

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<https://www.purebreak.com/news/tiktok-cette-americaine-de-13-ans-a-arrete-l-ecole-pour-faire-de-l-appli-son-metier/16866>. [Accessed: 3 Nov. 2020].

<sup>27</sup> GAUER, P. (2019). The dangerous hypersexualisation of young people online - Dossier. *Premierepluie.com*. [online] 1 Apr. Available at: <https://premierepluie.com/2019/04/01/dossiers/>. [Accessed: 3 Oct. 2020].

<sup>28</sup> In France, sending unsolicited photos of a sexual nature is punishable by law. A single sending is considered a sexist insult (art. 621-1 of the Penal Code) and carries a fine of up to €750. On the other hand, if the victim is a minor under the age of 15 (art. 621-1 of the Penal Code), the fine can be as high as €1,500. If the sending is done repeatedly, this is tantamount to sexual harassment (art. 222-33 of the Penal Code) and is then punishable by 3 years in prison and a fine of €45,000. Available at: <https://www.centre-hubertine-auclert.fr/sites/default/files/fichiers/fiche-cybersexisme-web.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> GAUER, P. (2019). The dangerous hypersexualisation of young people online - Dossier. *Premierepluie.com*. [online] 1 Apr. Available at: <https://premierepluie.com/2019/04/01/dossiers/>. [Accessed 3 Oct. 2020].

girls<sup>30</sup>! In the United States, where the series and the actors come from, the average is similar. Those figures have not decreased since the 1980s and 1990s, even though representations of adolescent sexuality have only increased. This hypersexualisation is therefore not credible and does not reflect what adolescents experience. Having sexuality at the age of 15 or 16 like many characters in the series is the exception and not the norm. Why represent adolescent sexuality so frequently and explicitly, when it does not reflect the statistical realities of adolescents' experiences?

This phenomenon is intrinsically linked to female beauty criteria and the stigma of old age among women. The fetishisation of women's youth by men is indeed commonplace. This is reminiscent of the very explicit statement made by the French writer Yann Moix in the programme *Terriens du Samedi* in January 2019, who said he was “*incapable of loving a woman of 50 years old*” and admitted that he could only be attracted to women much younger than him. “*I just prefer the bodies of young women, that's all. A 25-year-old woman's body is extraordinary. The body of a 50-year-old woman is not extraordinary at all.*” he said. However, Yann Moix is currently 50 years old himself. To this ignoble statement was added a fetish for Asian people, as he later confessed that he only dates Asian women.

It is indeed extremely common for heterosexual celebrity couples to be made up of a man and a woman who are less than twenty years his age. Examples include Tina Kunakey and Vincent Cassel (28 years apart), Richard Gere and Alejandra Silva (34 years apart), Donald Trump and Melania Trump (24 years apart), Johnny Depp and Amber Heard (23 years apart), Johnny Hallyday and Laeticia Hallyday (32 years apart) and even 60 years apart with Hugh Hefner (88 years old) and Crystal Harris (28 years old)! It is also interesting to note how these relationships are perceived differently in the rarer case where the man is the youngest, as in the case of Emmanuel and Brigitte Macron. Whereas relationships are romanticized and normalized when the man is the oldest, the opposite shocks, disturbs and is questioned, even mocked. The term “cougar” is often used to denigrate women dating younger men, while there is no equivalent word for men dating younger women as this is considered legitimate. According to a study conducted by the American dating application OkCupid<sup>31</sup>, while women are attracted to men from their age up to their forties, men remain attracted to women in their twenties for most of their lives.

It should also be pointed out that the film industry is not the only one affected by this hypersexualisation. We can of course mention the textile industry, which profits and grows wealthy thanks to this phenomenon. No generation has been spared, since toddlers' clothing already bears inscriptions referring to sex.

### **The role of pornography in the hypersexualisation of young girls (TW: paedo-criminality)**

In *Sexualisation précoce et pornographie*, Sociology Professor Richard Poulin studies the hypersexualisation of young girls through the prism of pornography and its corollary links. Since the development of the Internet, the pornography industry has exploded. It has become very easy to access online pornography. In 2012, there were more than four million pornographic sites with no less than 400

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<sup>30</sup> RAY, M-C. (2017). What is the age of the first sexual intercourse in France? *Futura-sciences.com*. [online] 10 Dec. Available at: <https://www.futura-sciences.com/sante/questions-reponses/sexualite-age-premier-rapport-sexuel-france-8100/> [Accessed: 10 Oct. 2020].

<sup>31</sup> RUDDER, C. (2014) *Dataclism: Who We Are (When We Think No One's Looking)*.

million pages, for which there are still very few controls on entry<sup>32</sup>. Pornography is thus increasingly being consumed, even by the youngest members of society. The average age at which an individual consumes pornography for the first time is 11 years old and it is estimated that 90% of children between the ages of 8 and 16 have already accessed pornography on the Internet<sup>33</sup>.

This absorption of pornographic images by the youngest children has many perverse effects, particularly on their perception of the other person's body, their own body, but also on their future sexual practices. As sex education is still too little taught in many western countries, which consider that sexuality has no place in school, pornography often pales in comparison. For many people, the first sexual experience is through pornography. For some, this is even the first view of the opposite sex and genitals that they have ever had. Porn can then be considered as a real actor in the socialisation of individuals, by becoming the reference point for a large number of people, leads to the creation of norms and values in sexual relations. It thus participates in the development of standards of sexuality, particularly among adolescents.

Thus, pornography leads to the creation of certain fantasies and desires, such as that of the woman-child, who, in order to be beautiful must be young. This ideal manifests itself, for example, in the complete removal of hair from the bikini line, made commonplace by pornography and now more and more widespread in society. In Ottawa, 87% of female students are adept at it<sup>34</sup>.

And that's not all. Through the images conveyed of bodies in pornography, many compare and complicate each other by developing a fear of not pleasing, of not living up to the expectations of others. Thus, some women resort to nymphoplasties, also known as labiaplasties, which are surgeries aiming at reducing the size of the vaginal lips. An increasing number of French surgeons are performing this operation, at a cost of between €2,500 and €3,000. This represents today nearly 10% of cosmetic surgery operations in Canada<sup>35</sup>. In other words, everything is done to conform to the standards conveyed by pornography, but which are very far from showing a true image of the body.

Moreover, this fetishisation of the young woman, or even the teenage girl, in pornography leads us to reflect on the question of the trivialisation of pedophilia in our society. Indeed, the hypersexualised student, dressed in a uniform and with braided hair, remains one of the most famous clichés in pornography. In fact, many pornographic sites have a “Teen” category, which is one of the most visited categories in the world<sup>36</sup>. In this category, young girls as young as freshly 18 years old have sex with men who are often much older.

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<sup>32</sup> HUSTON, N. (2012). Reflets dans un œil d'homme. *Actes Sud*. May. pp. 185-194.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> PELISSIER, P. (2012). The hypersexualisation of young girls “as a result of the influence of porn”. *Lemonde.fr*. [online] Available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2012/03/05/l-hypersexualisation-des-jeunes-filles-resultat-de-l-influence-du-porno\\_1652120\\_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2012/03/05/l-hypersexualisation-des-jeunes-filles-resultat-de-l-influence-du-porno_1652120_3224.html) [Accessed: 18 Oct. 2020].

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> According to statistics published by *Pornhub*, in 2018 the “Teen” category was the fifth most sought-after and eleventh most watched category worldwide. Available at: <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2018-year-in-review#searches>.

It is therefore interesting to question this almost mystical value attributed to the number 18. If the existence of pornos in which young women of 18 years of age having sex with older men is not particularly shocking and is completely legal, this would not have been the case, for example, six months earlier, when the actress was only 17 and a half, or even on the eve of her 18th birthday. In fact, everyone would then have considered this activity as sexual abuse or misappropriation of a minor. However, it would seem that in mentalities, turning 18 allows a person to reach full emotional and psychological maturity, and by the same token, their consent, almost as if by magic. This is of course false, all this cannot be done in just 24 hours, those that separate a young girl from her majority.

Moreover, in the continuity of these unhealthy practices, more and more Internet users are creating pages on which it is very easy to find countdowns of the days separating a young celebrity from her majority, as was the case for Billie Eilish (born in 2001), implying that from that moment on, one would no longer break the law by fantasising freely about her. Thus, sexualising girls and young women through pornography by valuing their youth contributes to the creation of a normalisation of men's sexual attraction to women (much) younger than them. It is therefore a way of reinforcing the hypersexualisation suffered by young girls.

In addition, it is also worth mentioning the specificities that young racialised girls face. Indeed, they face a fetishisation that begins at an early age. By fetishisation, we mean the fact of being sexually aroused by a practice, an object, a body part, or in this situation to focus on a specific community, i.e. Black, North African, Asian, Latino people, etc. This unhealthy sexualisation, which could be described as exotisation, is very often found in pornography. For example, in 2016, according to official figures published by *Pornhub*, the most viewed pornographic category in the southern states of the United States (Missouri and Georgia) was “Black people”<sup>37</sup>. The young American activist @Tylorjean1 on Twitter explains that men, mainly white and older, often make remarks to young girls, whether black, Latina, North African or Native American, because their bodies appear to be more developed, more formed, and earlier than white women. She also adds that these men justify their attraction to young racialized women by the fact that these young girls look much more adult or mature. Sometimes they even go so far as to say that it is racialized women who have tempted them with their so-called “adult bodies”<sup>38</sup>. Often, pornographic videos sexualizing girls of colour also use racist stereotypes. This is often the case for the Asian community. Pornographic videos, with an underlying pedophile spirit, such as “Cute Little Asians” are widespread and feature young Asian women dressed as little girls, in uniform, with their hair tied up, doing jump rope, homework, etc. The videos are often made by young women who are not in the sex trade.

As a result of this growing demand for content with women being younger and younger in pornographic videos, more and more children are being used in pornography, in a completely illegal but trivialized way.

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<sup>37</sup> Statistics published by *Pornhub* in its 2016 report, focusing on the United States. Available at: <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/united-states-top-searches>.

<sup>38</sup> Informative *Thread* written by young American activist @Tylorjean1 on Twitter. Available at: <https://twitter.com/Tylorjean1/status/1318286616184737796>.

## What are the consequences of the hypersexualisation of young girls?

### Diet culture and prepubescent anorexia (TW: EDs)

The hypersexualisation of girls and teenagers contributes, without being the unique cause, to the development of risky behaviours, particularly by destroying girls' self-image. According to the report of the *American Psychologist Association "Report of the APA Task Force of the Sexualisation of Girls"*<sup>39</sup>, the more girls consume objectified images, the more likely they are to suffer from low self-esteem, depression and eating disorders (EDs). The sexualized image of girls thus promotes a premature sexuality, the consumption of alcohol and drugs. This can also encourage the development of EDs, including prepubescent and teenage anorexia. The development of those is also inseparable from diet culture and the pressures on girls and women regarding their appearance and, in particular, their weight.

Diet culture as defined by the anti-diet nutritionist Christy Harrison is a system of belief: advocating thinness and associating it with health, happiness and moral virtue, promoting weight loss, glorifying an unattainable ideal of beauty, demonizing and shaming certain eating habits and certain bodies, and finally, oppressing and discriminating individuals that do not fit into the tyranny of thinness<sup>40</sup>. This diet culture, and the resulting fatphobia, are especially present in the medical field, where unconventional bodies are stigmatized and humiliated. However, diets are the first cause of weight gain, with a failure rate going from 95% to 98% and the well-known "yo-yo effect" following the diet.

Diet culture also provides a path towards the development of EDs, by promoting dangerous and unrealistic body ideals. It disproportionately impacts women and girls (nine out of ten people suffering from anorexia are women), earlier and earlier, as illustrated by the boom in prepubescent anorexia in the last few years.

From their birth on, girls are immersed in a society centered on appearance and the tyranny of thinness. They are therefore more and more concerned about their appearance, especially their weight. From their earliest age, they are facing beauty ideals that are not, in any way, representing the diversity of bodies and morphologies. As an example, this is illustrated by Barbie dolls with unrealistic measurements. According to the Centre canadien d'éducation aux médias et de littératie numérique (Canadian center of education to media and numerical literature)<sup>41</sup>, "more than three quarters of women's magazine covers have, at least, a headline on the best way to change its appearance, either with a diet, sports program, or cosmetic surgery". The images conveyed by the media, social networks, magazines, or even popular culture contribute to the development of physical complexes in girls and teenagers, valuing thin, white and young bodies, often retouched or even changed by surgery. This so-called perfect body is constructed as the model of beauty and femininity *par excellence*. Young women that do not fit this model lose confidence, at an age when they construct their identity and when their self-esteem tumbles down.

<sup>39</sup> American Psychological Association. (2007). Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls. *Apa.org*. [online] Available at: <https://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-summary.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> HARRISON, C. (2018). What Is Diet Culture? *Christyharrison.com*. [online] Available at: <https://christyharrison.com/blog/what-is-diet-culture>

<sup>41</sup> Cité dans RQASF, *Et alors, y a-t-il du mal à vendre du rêve ? La face cachée de la marchandisation du corps des femmes*. [online] Available at: <http://rqasf.qc.ca/blogue/vendre-du-reve>.

Young girls rapidly internalize those dominant models, but also the association from beauty to thinness. Hence, they complex on their body, sometimes even before puberty. They repeat the behaviors of their elders, whose eating behaviours can sometimes be close to orthorexia<sup>42</sup>, and reproduce the model of their mother or of the women surrounding them, who are on a diet, complain about their weight, are counting calories, speak about their complexes, etc.

The pressure of their relatives, but also of media and society in general, send a clear message to teenagers and young girls: to be successful, to conform to the norm, to be loved, they have to be sexy, sexually available, and most importantly, thin. They are inclined to believe that their value lies primarily in their appearance, in the way they look, notably judged through the eyes of others, and especially through the eyes of men.

Hence, sometimes as early as 8 or 9 years old, many girls go on diets (either willingly or forced by their relatives), which can seriously endanger their physical health (growth, pubertal development...) but also mental health (well-being, self-esteem...), and can lead them to develop an unhealthy relationship with food and their own body. The latter can lead to EDs, either immediately or during their teenage years. Sometimes already from middle school, some little girls have complexes and are preoccupied by their weight. Very soon, they start to refrain themselves from eating certain foods, and become obsessed with their appearance, in an insatiable search for perfection according to hegemonic beauty criteria.

The diet industry, which is already making billions of dollars by capitalising on girls' and women' insecurities, does not hesitate to seize without mercy these increasingly earkey weight concerns. For example, Weight Watchers, known for its point-based diet system, was in the center of a polemic with the release of its application Kurbo, designed for weight loss in children aged 8 to 17. As an example, the concept of the app have outraged the influencer Louise Aubery, better known under the name of *My Better Self*: "Because of this app, we will tell children which food is "good" or "bad" - only to make sure that they label food in the right way, which is a major trigger for the development of eating disorders". Eating should be a pleasure for children (and even for adults), and not a source of guilt.

Nevertheless, it is important to be careful not to reduce anorexia, a mental illness, to a mere social phenomenon. Even if diet culture and the tyranny of thinness can encourage the development of EDs, the latter are caused by multiple factors and are, before anything else, psychological (trauma, aggression, mourning, etc.). Nonetheless, we cannot turn a blind eye to the increase of children anorexia and its undeniable link with our social norms.

### **Child-grooming, a cyber-instrument of paedocriminals (TW: pedo-pornography, sexual violences).**

Child-grooming is the act of an adult, to establish an emotional bond of trust with a child, sometimes even with their family, with the aim of manipulating or sexually abusing them. Child-grooming reinvented itself with the golden age of the Internet. It is now easier for paedophiles to attain their target. Paedophiles are individuals, adults, suffering from a mental disorder characterized by a sexual attraction towards children. We can usually find a similar profile among pedophiles' victims: they are mainly young girls between 13 and 17 years old, almost 50% have between 13 and 14 years old, and are often lacking

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<sup>42</sup> Orthorexia is an eating disorder characterised by an obsession with so-called healthy food and the demonisation of so-called unhealthy food (e.g. junk food).

attention. Victims are also equipped with a phone that they regularly use. Thus, pedophiles mobilize children's weaknesses, sometimes willingly talked about by the latter, in order to seduce and abuse them.

To reach their goals, adults doing child-grooming are using diverse methods. Nevertheless, the English agency National Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) demonstrated that more than 70% of the child-grooming tentatives rest upon social media. The exchanges between malevolent adults and children usually happen through Instagram. The NSPCC hence showed that, between 2017 and 2018, the use of Instagram for child-grooming has seen a rise of 200%; it tallied more than 5100 cases of sexual discussions between adults and children.

Child-grooming can also have the ambition to attract children into various illicit organizations such as child trafficking, child prostitution, or even pedo-pornographic production.

### **The boom of child pornography enabled by the complicity of porn sites (TW: sexual violences, child pornography, rape)**

As pornography increased tremendously over the last few years, it simultaneously generated the development of child pornography and child trafficking networks. Child pornography is the act of involving children in recorded or photographed sexual relations, and diffusing it on the Internet. Those practices are absolutely unlawful and internationally condemned by the The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), but also nationally in the majority of States. Being more and more active on social media, children are becoming easier targets for sexual predators.

It is also possible to link this growing clandestine industry and the hypersexualisation of girls. Indeed, the hypersexualisation of young girls contributes to the increase of pedopornography in the world. More precisely, it is the idea to display underaged girls under sexual angles, in explicit positions, that would normally be attributed to women, that sends contradictory signals and blurs the line between what is legal and what is not.

In 2014, Najat Maalla M'jid, investigator at the UN on the sexual exploitation of children, declares that "pornography involving children is more and more available on the Internet. Victims of sexual exploitation are online at a younger age and the images are more and more horrifying"<sup>43</sup>. According to the Internet Watch Foundation, between 2012 and 2015, pedopornographic services offered by the Dark Web have increased by more than 300%<sup>44</sup>.

This increase would especially happen with the complicity of famous pornographic websites, such as *Pornhub*. Hence, the testimonies of young underaged women that have been abused and whose videos have been uploaded on *Pornhub* and other websites, are numerous and all more horrifying than the others. It is notably the case of Rose, who relates in a BBC article that she was sexually assaulted in 2009 at the age of 14 years old, and that the videos of the latter have been uploaded on *Pornhub*. She explains that she had sent multiple emails to the website, explicitly asking for the removal of the video of her rape, specifying that she was underage, without even getting an answer. It is only when she wrote a fake email, pretending to be a lawyer and threatening to sue *Pornhub*, that the video was deleted in less than 48

<sup>43</sup> WALLON, V. (2016). La pédophilie sur Internet se développe rapidement. *Radio-canada.ca*. [online] 11 Aug. Available at: <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/797139/pedophilie-internet-en-hausse> [Accessed: 8 Nov. 2020].

<sup>44</sup> WALLON, V. (2016). La pédophilie sur Internet se développe rapidement. *Radio-canada.ca*. [online] 11 Aug. Available at: <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/797139/pedophilie-internet-en-hausse> [Accessed: 8 Nov. 2020].

hours. Similarly, a fifteen years old girl in Florida, who went missing in October 2019, has been found through regularly posted videos of her on Pornhub and other websites according to an article in *The Guardian*<sup>45</sup>. Similar testimonies keep on getting released (interviews, personal blogs, tweets, etc.).

But how is it possible? Is there no control over the videos uploaded by the platform's moderators? Pornhub proclaims the opposite. Yet, testimonies are here. The founder of *Exodus Cry*, an American association against sexual trafficking, Laila Mickelwait, accuses the pornographic industry of generating billions of dollars per year, and yet, still being unable to carry out effective controls.

We have to bear in mind that, on *Pornhub*, every user is free to post their own content as an "amateur". The only verification for creating an account is to fill a correct email address, and to certify itself with a picture and a piece of paper on which the username is written. In a similar way, if controls were as efficient as *Pornhub* says, how can we explain the presence on the platform of videos such as "*Teen abused while sleeping*", "*Drunk teen abused sleeping*", or even "*Extreme teen abuse*"? As an answer to this, Pornhub claims to authorize every form of sexual expression that agrees with their terms of use. Although some people could find those "fantasies" inappropriate, they are evocative for many people in the world and are protected by different discourses of freedom of expression<sup>46</sup>.

This leads to different questions: are the persons filmed in those videos, in which consent is clearly absent, aware that they are circulating on pornographic websites? How many of them find themselves now exposed in pornographic videos without even knowing it? To follow up on those more-than-problematic points on pornography, a scandal was recently revealed. Multiple videos from the app TikTok were uploaded on *Pornhub*, without the consent of their sometimes very young users. Hence, we can easily find compilations of young girls, underaged for the most part, on *Pornhub*, executing the "WAP challenge" (a trending choreography with suggesting moves inspired by the song "WAP" by Cardi B) under titles like "*CRAZY THICK White Girl Does WAP Dance*" and "*A New TikTok Slut Is Born*".

But then, how to stop this phenomenon? Although some plans already exist to block cyber-child pornography, such as Interpol, this is not enough. According to Najat Maalla M'jid, this fight against cyberpedophilia will only be efficient through the "strengthening of the international cooperation and the adoption of a common legal framework, as well as the active participation of the private sector"<sup>47</sup>. The civil society is for that matter manifesting through the American association *Exodus Cry*, which launched in 2020 an online petition for the shut down of *Pornhub* if the website did not further limit the publication of videos of sexual aggression and *revenge porn*. This petition already gathered more than 350 000 signatures. However, establishing rules remains hard on the Internet. Even if the cyberpolice is

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<sup>45</sup> GRANT, H. (2020). World's biggest porn site under fire over rape and abuse videos. *Theguardian.com*. [online] 9 Mar. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/mar/09/worlds-biggest-porn-site-under-fire-over-videos-pornhub> [Accessed: 19 Oct. 2020].

<sup>46</sup> GRANT, H. (2020). World's biggest porn site under fire over rape and abuse videos. *Theguardian.com*. [online] 9 Mar. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/mar/09/worlds-biggest-porn-site-under-fire-over-videos-pornhub> [Accessed: 19 Oct. 2020]. Réponse de *Pornhub* accordée au magazine britannique *The Guardian*, traduite de l'anglais par les autrices de cet article.

<sup>47</sup> WALLON, V. (2016). La pédophilie sur Internet se développe rapidement. *Radio-canada.ca*. [online] 11 Aug. Available at: <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/797139/pedophilie-internet-en-hausse> [Accessed: 8 Nov. 2020].

developing itself, it stays inefficient against the development, increasingly ambitious, of cyber-criminals and their anonymity.

## Conclusion and possible solutions

Thus, we have seen that the hypersexualisation of girls is a recent social phenomenon, but one that has intensified very quickly in Western countries, particularly through social networks, the film industry and pornography. The sexism of these practices is also undeniable. The law often remains powerless against this phenomenon, which particularly affects the new generations. Series, films, reality shows, advertisements, clothes, magazines, music, toys, etc., are gendered and above all excessively sexualised, which causes an increasingly early sexualisation among young people and is increasingly present in society. This can have dramatic consequences in terms of the reinforcement of child pornography, but also in psychological terms (self-esteem of young girls, development of eating disorders, etc.)

The hypersexualisation of girls is a form of violence against children: a physical violence of course, but also a symbolic (objectification of women's bodies), an economic (exploitation, transformation into a sexual object) and even a political (lack of government intervention to limit these excesses of capitalism and regulate industries sexualising children) one.

So, how can we act in the face of this phenomenon? Education and awareness-raising programs from school could be a good solution, as could be the more general fight against sexual and sexist stereotypes, which are the basis for the hypersexualisation of young girls. The development of critical thinking skills in relation to advertising, media and social networks among young girls and boys should also be encouraged. Sex education is also very important as long as it is a good sex education!

The media, advertising and public authorities have a responsibility but so do parents. Girls and teenage girls should be valued, with an emphasis not only on their physical appearance, but also on their intellectual, creative and emotional qualities. Legislative interventions could also help to regulate industries, such as a ban on the sexualization of children in advertising, as well as a total ban on mini-miss contests.

Finally, we would like to remind that criticising the hypersexualisation of girls should not be an excuse to blame women for what they wear. What needs to be changed are above all mentalities. For example, a crop top is not a sexual garment in itself: it is the way people, often adults, look at it that sexualises it. What is problematic and should actually be blamed is not so much the clothes but the people who sexualise the wearers. It is generally adults, especially men, who project their sexualising gaze on minors. Thus, we believe that the solution does not lie in injunctions against girls (they should "get dressed", "respect themselves", "be careful", etc.) but in the education of boys and men, and in the more general change of mentalities. We must not make girls feel guilty for following the only models they are presented with, nor should we fall into the culture of rape through these injunctions. It is not up to girls to change but to society to do as so. We therefore want to avoid adopting a puritanical anti-sex or anti-prostitution discourse: we must respect the right of people to eroticize their bodies as they think best, but not the ones of children. The sexualisation of one's own body, through sex work for example, can be a form of freedom and re-appropriation of the body, following the famous feminist saying "*my body, my choice*". But the

situation is different in the case of minors, for whom it is not a question of *empowerment* but a form of violence, and even child pornography.

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