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Authors	Kiely, Elizabeth;Ging, Debbie;Kitching, Karl;Leane, Máire
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"A Source of Anxiety Like Never Before": Unpacking the Irish Print Media Sexualisation of Children Discourse.

Elizabeth Kiely, University College Cork; Debbie Ging, Dublin City University; Karl Kitching, University of Birmingham; Máire Leane, University College Cork

Abstract

Drawing on a corpus of 21 articles pertaining to the "sexualisation" of children in national Irish newspapers (2012-2014) and using tools provided by critical discourse analysis, culturally-specific discourses are "unpacked" (Egan & Hawkes, 2008) with the aim of identifying peculiarities in an Irish context but also similarities with the sexualisation of children discourses produced in other country contexts. The framing of sexualisation and its construction as a child protection problem are explored, as are its presumed negative effects on children and the required solutions. The gendered assumptions explicit and implicit in the discourses are discussed. The paper concludes with a discussion on how "sexualised childhood" and its binary opposite "innocent childhood", were mobilised in the Irish print media in the service of agendas which celebrated and obviated features of Irish societal culture, past and present.

Keywords: *Sexualisation, Media, Children, Discourse.*

1. Introduction

This article takes as its starting point a recognition that despite a proliferation of discourse about the "sexualisation" of children in a variety of country contexts, as a concept and discourse it has remained relatively general and undifferentiated (Gill, 2009; Attenborough, 2013). One explanation for this is that the specificities of the discourse in individual local and national contexts have been given less attention (Baird, 2013; Thompson, 2018; Voléry, 2016). This article contributes to a relatively small but growing literature showing that the discourse on the sexualisation of children via popular culture, and the print media in particular, carries meanings about national identity and national virtue that are worthy of exploration (Baird, 2013; Thompson, 2018). Firstly, the relevant literature is reviewed and then the data and mode of analysis

are elaborated. The questions posited in the methods section are used to structure the analysis presented and this is followed by the concluding discussion.

2. Sexualisation Discourses: Review of the Relevant Literature

Sexualisation as defined by Gill (2007, p. 150) refers to "the extraordinary proliferation of discourses about sex and sexuality across all media forms ... as well as increasingly frequent erotic presentation of girls', women's and to a lesser extent men's bodies in public spaces." Sexualisation as a concept is much debated (Coy & Garner, 2012). Gill (2007) and others (Attwood, 2006; Egan & Hawkes, 2008; Albury & Lumby, 2010) have argued that the term *sexualisation* is of little benefit operationally and analytically because it is opaque and elastic (Albury & Lumby, 2010) as it is used to refer to too many diverse phenomena. Scholars have also questioned why *sexism*, *sexual harassment* and *gender inequity* slipped out of everyday discussion while the public imagination became increasingly preoccupied with *sexualisation* but more particularly the sexualisation of children (Coy and Garner, 2012; Duschinsky, 2013; Egan, 2013). Duschinsky (2013) suggested that sexualisation positioned the speaker more amenably in the role of protecting children from harm while the other phenomena situate the speaker in the more challenging feminist activist position of fighting sexism. Indeed, Gill and Orgad (2018) welcomed the proliferation of the MeToo movement[1] for shifting concern away from sexualisation and what girls were wearing, to focus on effecting wider societal social change. Bragg (2012) critiqued the enablement of processes of gendered and classed stigmatisation through sexualisation discourse, while others (Egan, 2013; Ringrose, 2013) noted that sexualisation was only ever viewed as a threat to white middle class heterosexual girlhood. Egan (2013a) as well as Bragg & Buckingham (2013) for instance, have argued that in pathologising girls' dress and conduct, as discourses of sexualisation did, their moral focus was on girls, moving them dangerously close to holding girls to account for whatever they might experience in the form of unwelcome male attention.

There is also a body of literature which has demonstrated the meaningfulness of media sexualisation in relation to discourses of nation. With specific reference to Australia, Baird (2013) called for sexualisation discourses to be read as a form of reparation for

[1] Tarana Burke, African-American activist, started the MeToo Movement in 2006 in the United States for women of colour, who suffered sexual harassment and abuse to know that they were not alone. It gained global attention in 2017 when actress Alyssa Milano used it as a Twitter hashtag in response to allegations of sexual assault by Hollywood producer, Harvey Weinstein (Mendes et. al., 2018).

Australia, in its culpability as a nation for past sexual abuse and ill-treatment of children perpetrated by white middle class adults. She located the discourse in Australia's 20th century history and specifically highlighted the significance of the *Bringing them Home* report in 1997, which inquired into the generations of Indigenous children removed from their families throughout the 20th century as a result of the Government's assimilation policies. Building on the work of Baird (2013), Thompson (2018) teased out the similarities between 21st century anti-sexualisation discourses and the 19th century lost child discourses in Australia. Thompson (2018) noted that what was common to each of these discourses was a childhood innocence fantasy and a white nation one. The white child is in a hostile and dangerous environment; however, in the 21st century sexualisation discourse, the Australian bush is replaced by a "globalised mediatised culture" (Thompson, 2018, p. 288). Common to each discourse was the anxiety that no future exists for the child, who vanishes in unforgiving bush lands or who falls prey to a sexualised culture. In the same vein as Baird (2013) and Thompson (2018), Carden (2018), exploring the controversy generated by Safe Schools, a school-based programme promoting understanding of LGBTI in Australian schools, found that the controversy was not so much about the actual programme itself; rather it spoke to the struggle at the heart of competing conceptions of national identity. For instance, conservative opposition to the programme constructed it as a Marxist inspired project threatening normative family values and indoctrinating heterosexual children into becoming LGBTI (Carden, 2018).

Attending to how the problem of sexualisation related to discourses of nation in France, Voléry (2016) took note of the differentiation of two types of childhood in parliamentary reports between 2000 and 2013. One was the majority childhood in need of protection from the disorders caused by global market forces and the other was the minority childhood located on the margins of "correct" sexuality and acceptable ways of growing up. As shown by Voléry (2016), the discourse surrounding the sexualisation of children in Muslim families in disadvantaged urban communities as sexually oppressed young females and sexually violent young males, designated the "foreigners from within" and reinforced an ethnocultural conception of the French nation.

Taking as her focus the binary opposite of the sexualisation of childhood, i.e. childhood innocence, Bernstein (2011) is one of several scholars (Giroux, 1998, 2016; Garlen, 2019), who have identified childhood innocence as a defining feature of contemporary

American childhood. She traced the fusion of childhood with innocence to the mid-19th century and, in so doing, laid bare its disturbing racial history. She took account of the inevitability of the anti-racist struggle for the recognition of children of colour as innocent, a status which was only afforded to white children. Bernstein (2011, 2017) pointed out that the subsequent recognition of children of colour as innocent could not redeem a concept so deeply embedded in white supremacist history. This has prompted her to call for a language of childhood, which could displace innocence in favour of justice as a human right afforded to all children (Bernstein, 2017).

At the core of sexualisation discourses in many contexts has been a concern for protection of the Western, white middle class, heterosexual, innocent (predominantly girl) child, so that the non-Western, raced, classed, non-heterosexual, boy child, if present at all, occupies the margins. This has prompted research projects to make explicit the normative subject at the heart of the discourse and to trouble the orientalist, sexist, classist, ablest and heteronormative gazing that the sexualisation discourse makes evident (see for example, Garner, 2012; Egan, 2013; Randazzo et al., 2015; Mulholland, 2017; Clark & Duschinsky, 2018).

In the context of these prior studies on sexualisation discourses, our aim in this paper is to unpack the Irish print media sexualisation discourse to trouble its assumptions, its constructions of children and its gendered gaze. We also seek to uncover what the Irish sexualisation discourse reveals about how the risks of sexualisation were mobilised in the service of such agendas as disciplining girls, responsibilising parents and reinvigorating the concept of childhood innocence in a national context defined by historic abuses of children.

3. Methodology

The research involved an analysis of the Irish print media discourse as part of a larger project on the commercialisation and sexualisation of children in Ireland funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and supported by the Irish Research Council (Kiely, Ging, Kitching & Leane, 2015). The scope of the study, which was commissioned to ascertain parents' views on the issues of sexualisation and commercialisation as they related to their children, did not permit an extensive analysis of Irish print and television media. However, at the time of data collection (2013), the "problem" of the "sexualisation" of children was prominent in the Irish print, television, radio and online media, and had been for some years. The research we conducted with

parents confirmed for us the influence the media exerted on parents' conceptions of the problem of sexualisation in particular, as reflected for instance in their frequent tendency to refer to events or issues they knew or found out about through the media rather than what they experienced directly. Therefore, we conducted an analysis of Irish media coverage over the period and on sexualisation and commercialisation flashpoints that happened during this time. This provides a wider reference point for the more specific analysis conducted for this paper.

3.1. Childhood as a Social Construction

We ascribe to a social constructionist view of childhood (Scott et al., 1998). This means that we believe that it is primarily through the discourse of psychology and its related professions that childhood is discursively constituted and that ideas about "proper" and "improper" childhood take shape in society and in the media. For example, it is through discourses that a conception of childhood as a "natural" state is communicated, but one that is constantly at risk from social pressures relating to premature maturity, sexual knowing and dangerous consumption (Scott et al., 1998). Heightened concern about risks threatening the "natural" state of childhood, as for example in the media, provide the rationale for demands put on parents for their increased vigilance and intervention to protect and preserve childhood for children. While sociological work has been very influential in challenging the dominance of adult centred approaches to understanding childhood (James & Prout, 1990), their dominance is still pervasive.

3.2. The Data Corpus

Using the Nexis database, the search terms *sexualisation and Ireland* were employed and the period of the search was two years extending from the 1st January 2012 until the 31st December 2014. After omitting 5 articles that were in newspapers in a different jurisdiction and 2 that were not relevant, this generated a final corpus of 21 articles on this topic in that time period in the Republic of Ireland (see Table 1).

	Date	**Reporter /Writer**	**Article Title**	**Publication Title**
1.	29 March 2014	Lorraine Courtney	When Sunday evening TV offers us pop singers as porn stars, enough is enough.	Irish Independent

2.	20 Jan 2014		Sex ed. study focuses on younger children.	Irish Examiner
3.	12 Jan 2014		Anomalies abound in Ireland's age of sexual consent.	The Sunday Business Post
4.	28 Dec 2013	Niall O' Connor	Shops sign up to new ban on sexy clothing for children.	Irish Independent
5.	20 Oct 2013	Joanna Fortune	The warping of our teens' view of sex.	Sunday Independent
6.	6 Oct 2013	Cathal O' Mahony	Off message.	The Sunday Business Post
7.	19 Sept 2013	Kim Bielenberg	Why our very own Little Miss Sunshine is shrouded in mystery.	Irish Independent
8.	19 Sept 2013	Nick Bramhill	France bans contest for little girls in lipstick and heels.	Irish Daily Mail
9.	11 Sept 2013	Colette Browne	Child pageants are for parents not for little girls.	Irish Independent
10.	22 Aug 2013	Celine Naughton	Take this opportunity to have a frank discussion around the dinner table.	Irish Independent
11.	11 April 2013	John Meagher	Making television for kids is not child's play.	Irish Independent
12.	27 March 2013		Threesomes are sleazy but let's not get our knickers in a twist.	Irish Examiner
13.	24 March 2013	A Concerned Mother	"The beast is out of the pen": Bullying and premature sexualisation are among the problems posed to our children by Facebook.	Irish Independent
14.	9 February 2013	John Meagher	The saddest Irish sexual revolution.	Irish Independent
15.	23 Jan 2013		Sexualisation of children "fuels juvenile sex crime rise".	Irish Examiner
16.	16 Jan 2013	Jennifer O' Connell	I'm no Rihanna fan but it is time to stop agonising about oversexualised girls.	The Irish Times
17.	17 Sept 2012	Chloe Thomas	Should you dress little girls in leopard skin bikinis Liz?	Irish Daily Mail
18.	12 Sept 2012		Fury over singer, who dressed her baby in a bikini.	Irish Daily Mail
19.	20 Sept 2012.	Barbara Davies & Paul Bentley	So what does her mother have to say for herself?	Irish Daily Mail
20.	12 July 2012	Adeline Campos	Fury at toddler pageant show in Ireland. TDs call for beauty boycott.	Daily Mirror

21.	7 Feb 2012	"Anita" pseudonym for parent	I caught my teen watching internet.	Irish Independent

Table 1 Media Sexualisation Discourse Reviewed (1 January 2012 - 31 December 2014).

3.3. Critical Discourse Analysis

The articles were subjected to an analysis informed by the principles and conceptual tools provided predominantly by Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. This type of analysis was chosen for a few different reasons. Firstly, discourse as understood in CDA, "refers to the different ways of structuring knowledge and social practice" (Fairclough 1992, p. 3) so that discourse does not simply represent social entities or relations, it is understood as constructing and constituting them (Fairclough, 1992). CDA thus enables a "politically inflected form of analysis" (Mills, 2004, p. 141). CDA focuses on texts produced in public life and that are bound up with social practices. In this context, the media and particularly the press have been central to CDA work (see Fairclough, 1995). CDA encourages critical exploration of how a "problem" (e.g. sexualisation) is discursively constituted, who gets to define the "problem" and to identify the solutions to the problem. It permits attention to be given to the different dimensions of the discourse (grammatical and lexical choices) but as important, is an exploration of the relationship between discourses (e.g. national and international) and between discourses and wider society (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1993). For Fairclough (1992) it is intertextual analysis that mediates the connection between language and social context. This refers to the presence of other discourses in a discourse, giving the discourse a hybrid intertextual quality. Fairclough's (1995, p. 133) model involves three levels of interdependent analysis, moving from description to discourse practice / interpretation and to social practice (explanation) or how the discourse relates to the wider social context. Furthermore, Fairclough (1995) identified CDA as a mode of analysis suitable for those whose disciplinary backgrounds (social sciences) reside outside language studies. Drawn from Fairclough (1995a) the following comprised the approach used: the representations of sexualisation selected in the discourse over other available representations; attention to the actors in the discourse and attention to whose agency was elided; the use made of experts and expert knowledge and their mediation to readers. Furthermore, the target audience of the

discourse, the *us* and *them* categorisations in the discourse and the actions / solutions proposed (to sexualisation) were explored. Finally, features of the discourse (e.g. narrative / story telling; exhortation; scientific discourse; conversationalisation) were noted which showed the wider selection of genres drawn upon in the media sexualisation discourse designed to enhance its appeal. Additionally, limited quantitative analysis was employed and then only to note the high frequency of some terms used within the data when it was pertinent to the analysis.

3.4 Questions Guiding the Analysis

In this study, we employ the selected critical discourse analysis approach to address six key questions:

1. What are the key features of sexualisation in the Irish print media discourse?
2. How are children represented in it?
3. What evidence is used and whose voices are privileged and used in support of views and positions adopted on the "problem" of sexualisation?
4. What gender assumptions are explicit and implicit in the media sexualisation discourse?
5. What solutions to the problem of sexualisation are advanced?
6. What are the generalities as well as the specificities of the Irish media discourse on sexualisation and what, if any, anxieties and double standards about Irish national and cultural identity does it expose?

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1 What are the Key Features of Sexualisation in the Irish Media Discourse?

In the corpus reviewed, key features of *sexualisation* were that it was used to refer to diverse phenomena, but it was commonly constructed as a child protection problem (due to its capacity to progressively corrupt childhood) requiring action predominantly on the part of parents. The frequent placement of the prefix *hyper* before *sexualisation* as in "hyper-sexualisation" / "hyper-sexualised" in many articles enabled this construction. There was only one significant deviation from this dominant construction in the two-year period. This was a feature written by O'Connell (Table 1, #16) in *The Irish Times*, in which she characterised the public debate on sexualisation as having "begun to echo with more than a faint ring of hysteria" because "women's lives, choices

and bodies have become a source of anxiety like never before". She called for no more "public agonising about girls" and a shift of attention to boys, only quickly to change her mind on the basis that boys are targeted with such conflicting notions about their masculinity that it must be "positively bewildering" for them too.

The capacity of the discourse on sexualisation to be elastic (Albury & Lumby, 2010), allowing it to expand and to speak to quite diverse phenomena and to hone in on a variety of social anxieties pertaining to children and young people, was evident in four flashpoints identifiable in the media discourse of sexualisation reviewed, which all occurred in 2013. These were the *Slane Girl* incident (which involved the posting of photographs and videos online of a teenage girl giving oral sex to a young male at an Eminem concern in Slane Castle); the first American child beauty pageant held in Ireland; Miley Cyrus's twerking performance and an article by Spunout (an Irish youth information website), perceived by some as constituting a *how to* guide to threesomes, for teenagers.

Sexualisation, in the Irish media examined, was predominantly framed as a child protection issue, which rested on an assumption of heterosexuality. While implicit in many articles, it was explicit in a few. For instance, in an article in the *Irish Daily Mail* (Table 1, #17) on the topic of a new bikini range for children, the pieces, designed by a famous model, were identified as being too adult and their promotion was criticised for not considering "the child protection concerns that have been well-aired" about the "sexualisation of young girls". Sexualisation is usually understood in public discourse with reference to children, as if to suggest adults are impervious to sexualisation. This narrower framing meant that any expression of sexual subjectivity or desire on the part of a child could be rendered pathological, a deviation from their "natural" state of sexual innocence and evidence of sexualisation's bad effects.

Constructing the sexualisation "problem" as a child protection issue is significant (Duschinsky, 2013). It means that the Irish sexual cultural landscape does not have to be held up for scrutiny in terms of what is good or bad about it and for whom, rather the overwhelming concern then is the point at which it was right for children to engage with this landscape. A psychotherapist (Majella Ryan) with the CARI Foundation (a service provided to persons affected by sexual abuse) gave her view in the *Irish Independent* that the effect of sexualisation is that "children are being forced to grow up so much quicker. Their childhoods are being snatched away from them and that's evident in the

wide gamut of sexual activity we're seeing in children and young teens" (cited in Table 1, #14). Fortune constructed sexualisation as the gradual degeneration of children or rather girls that may start with something "as seemingly innocuous as having a toddler's ears pierced" (cited in Table 1, #14). Duschinsky & Barker (2013) have highlighted how relatively bland cultural products (e.g. earrings) can, in sexualisation discourse, be imbued with enough sexual signification to kick start a process of corruption of the child's sense of self, a process that is then set to continue on into tween (9-12 years) and teenage years. For Joanna Fortune, a clinical psychotherapist (who wrote in the media and was cited by journalists as an expert), ordinary everyday home based gendered child play in hair and beauty work did not present a problem. However, when such activity became more commercial, the process of degradation was initiated and the limit as to what was permissible for good girlhood was transgressed. She warned in the *Irish Independent* that "there's nothing wrong with a little girl playing with hair and make-up, but bringing them for so called pamper packages, where they have soft drink "champagne" cocktails and manicures, is inadvertently pushing a sexual message on them too early" (Fortune cited in Table 1, #14). While Fortune constructed this as a sexual message being pushed on the child, it could be read as a gender message as the child or the girl in this instance, is consuming and performing gender rather than sexuality. Fortune's contribution (Table 1, #14) also reveals the sexualisation discourse's capacity to leave a wider culture of gender socialisation and stereotyping unchecked in favour of honing in on aspects of that culture, which provide the most effective and troubling reminders as to how gendered our culture is. Furthermore, while aspects of consumer culture such as pamper packages above or the commodification of sex / gender in particular ways were targeted for critique in the Irish media, as in other country contexts, capitalism exerted only a "spectral presence" (Thompson, 2018a). Aspects of capitalism which targeted children were problematised, but as an economic system with its relations of production and consumption, it was never the central focus or was never interrogated in any significant way. This is possibly because, as we see in the following section, responsibility was predominantly put on parents to protect their children from the forces of sexualisation in society.

4.2 How were Children Represented in the Media Sexualisation Discourse?

In the media discourse, children were rendered passive but also a potential danger to themselves and others. Frequent references to "our children" (18 mentions) capture the

extent to which gatekeeping adults took ownership and control of the discourse in articles. The use of verbs like "snatched" ("childhoods being snatched away", Table 1, #14) constructed children as passive victims of the negative actions of sexualising others. In articles on the child beauty pageant, children, in marked contrast to their parents, were very frequently constructed as having things done to them rather than being doers. For example, the pageant was described in two different newspapers (the *Irish Daily Mail* and the *Irish Independent)* as an event at which we would see " young girls heavily made up and dressed up" (Table 1, #9) and "… children doused in fake tan, slathered in make-up and paraded for adult's amusement in age-inappropriate costumes" (Table 1, #8). The parents, or rather, the mothers of pageant participants were the target of opprobrium, as they were constructed in the discourse as active but failing in their duties to protect their children from the worst excess of a sexual culture. O'Mahony in the *Sunday Business Post* (Table 1, #6) reported that "pageant moms" don't see the problem with "decking their children out in the fake-tan-and-false-eyelashes-with-bra-tops-topped-with-rhinestones ensembles that are de rigeur in their world." Browne (Table 1, #9), advancing an explanation in the *Irish Independent* as to why mothers enter their daughters in pageants, suggested it was "because they are selfishly using their children to vicariously live out their own thwarted dreams and ambitions". The focus on *pageant moms* was such that the children participating in pageants were ascribed no individual agency. In one article in the *Irish Daily Mail* (Table 1, #19), the claim by a mother of a child pageant participant, that her daughter was active in choosing this kind of childhood experience, was treated with scepticism as evidenced in the statement: "Perhaps most bizarrely of all, she [mother] insists that it is Ocean [daughter] herself who is orchestrating this pink and glittery childhood." The linguistic construction of the term *sexualisation* (the nominalisation of the verb) conveys something being done to the child (Duschinsky, 2013). Sexualisation discourses in other country contexts such as Australia, North America and the United Kingdom, have also been challenged for ascribing too limited agency to children and for their lack of attention to children's voices (Clark, 2013). Sexualisation's effects on girls, and pornography's effects on boys, were assumed to be inevitable. This was because the Irish media discourse of sexualisation left no room for a construction of children as social actors, who just like adults have active, complex and diverse relations with their everyday sexual cultures.

The lack of agency attributed to children was underlined by the agency ascribed to parents in the discourse. Indeed, the cumulative effect of many features in the articles were such that the target audience were parents (as evidenced by references to "your child" or "your daughter"), who were constructed as learners with capacity to act. Some of these features included the conversational pedagogical style (Fairclough,1995, p. 138) adopted; ("instead of making your daughter a princess for a day … why not teach her that", Table 1, #9); the mediation of experts and expert knowledge to the parents as the audience ("the prefrontal cortex of the area of the teenage brain is not fully developed" Table 1, #4) and the frequent information giving ("Research links sexualisation with three of the most common mental health problems diagnosed in girls and women" Table 1, #1).

4.3 What Evidence was Used and Whose Voices were Privileged and Used to Support Views and Positions Adopted on the "Problem" of Sexualisation?

The media articles reviewed relied overwhelmingly on the psychological effects of sexualisation literature to give legitimacy to the claims made. In the Irish media discourse on sexualisation, space was made for politicians, child welfare NGOs and parent representatives, but most often for psychotherapists / psychologists, to be the authoritative voices who could best define the contours of the problem and propose solutions. This is not specific to the Irish media, as in other contexts the proliferation of media "moral entrepreneurs" has been a recognised feature (Jeffery, 2018, p. 368). The "experts" were predominantly drawn from quite narrow fields of expertise or practice (child abuse treatment services / psychotherapy / psychiatry) and they generalised from this experience to the broad population of children and young people in Ireland. The implications of a narrow psychological frame drawn on in sexualisation discourses in other country contexts has been noted and critiqued for simplifying the female subject and for homogenizing subjects' diverse relationships with sexual culture (Egan, 2013a; Gill, 2009).

Contributions made by authoritative agents were bolstered by parental testimony. This allowed the problem of sexualisation as it related to children, to be defined by adults, to be actively constructed in particular ways and not others and for particular modes of intervention to gain legitimacy to counteract the presumed bad effects. To serve the strategy of legitimation, the evidence of the bad effects was drawn from psychological studies or from children's rights organisations and other NGOs, who referred to the

same psychological evidence. For instance, readers were told in the *Irish Independent* that the American Psychological Association "links sexualisation with three of the most common mental health problems diagnosed in girls and women: eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression" (Table 1, #1). Statistics, claims derived from neuroscience, expert voices, conversational features and stories were frequently integrated in an intertextual weave and mediated by journalists in articles, thus enhancing the discourse's persuasive appeal.

Participation in child beauty pageants, viewed as sexualisation at its worst, was linked with problems with confidence and peer integration in early years and eating disorders in teenage years. Browne (Table 1, #9) in the *Irish Independent* reported, "psychologists have warned that pageants have long-lasting harmful effects". She also cited a French Senator, who claimed that "…the sexualisation of young girls causes psychological damage that is irreversible in 80pc of cases" (Table 1, #9) and that it manifests in "eating disorders and low self-esteem caused by an unhealthy obsession with body image" (Table 1, #9). It was reported in the *Irish Examiner* that the sexualisation of children in Ireland was fuelling a "juvenile sex crime rise" (Data corpus, #2). In an article in the *Sunday Independent*, Joanna Fortune (Table 1, #5) explored "… the problems of the internet generation" in "an increasingly sexualised world". Drawing on a neuroscientific discourse, she argued, "young people's natural development pathway through their gradual emerging sexuality is short circuited" and that "they are catapulted way ahead of where they should be developmentally and they cannot process it" (Table 1, #5). It could be argued that media discourse on sexualisation is important because it potentially brings serious issues to public attention. However, drawing on psychological "evidence", diverse issues (eating disorders; low self-esteem: the wearing of earrings, porn poses) were all problematised and conflated as evidence of sexualisation doing its worst to children. It could have been more helpful if, as Duschinsky & Barker (2013) recommended, there was more precise and careful assessment as to what harms and suffering were being caused by what specific aspects of interaction with our sexual culture and to whom in Irish society.

4.4 What Gender Assumptions were Explicit or Implicit in the Discourse?

Common to two of the disruptive moments (Slane Girl and Mylie Cyrus) in the sexualisation discourse was a framing of young women as victims of their inappropriate public agentic sexual expression and constructions of them as poor role models for other

young women. An opinion piece in the *Irish Independent* (Table 1, #10) on the topic of *Slane Girl* suggested that "the story of the schoolgirl, whose sexual antics captured on camera made her an internet sensation provides the perfect opportunity for frank discussion around the dinner table".. The article continued "Let it be a salutary tale for other teenage girls, who think they know how to party but have not yet got the emotional maturity to back it up …. And, yes, I put the emphasis on teenage girls. Note that while the outpouring of abuse was hurled at this poor girl, the man involved received no such vitriol. Some things never change." The fatalism evident in "some things never change" served an ideological function such that the possibility of advocating for intervention to change sexual double standards in our society was ruled out in favour of putting "the emphasis on teenage girls" and identifying them as the targets for disciplinary intervention in the form of "frank discussion". The implication that girls should be policed and should discipline themselves pervaded the problematisation of girls' dress, activities and conduct. In fact, *girls* or *girl* quickly became the default term used in reporting. There were 22 mentions of "boys", 38 of "boy" in comparison to 101 mentions of "girls" and 129 of "girl" in the discourse analysed.

In the Irish media discourse reviewed, boys were notable by their absence as they only featured when access to and consumption of pornography was the focus. One such article (Table 1, #21) featured a story from a parent, Anita, who found after checking her teenage son's internet history that he had been "looking at porn for months". The consumer of pornography was presumed to be male and pornography was problematised for impacting boys' attitudes and behaviours towards girls, which in turn caused girls to respond by developing problematic pornographic subjectivities or behaviours expected of them as the objects of boys' fantasies. A Professor of Psychiatry, Patricia Casey was cited as saying that "the danger of looking at porn" was that it would give males "a distorted image of women as sexual objects" (Table 1, #21).

The lack of public concern for sexualisation's bad effects on boys was not unique to Ireland. Common to the sexualisation discourse in many contexts is boys' presumed "natural" heterosexuality and associated heterosexual entitlement, which leaves them on the margins of public concern in the sexualisation discourse (Clark & Duschinsky, 2018). Their dress and behaviours are thus much less scrutinised than girls' for signs of sexualisation's bad effects (Egan, 2013; Bragg & Buckingham, 2013). Indeed, *Sexualisation of Young People Review* by Papadopoulos in the UK in 2010 was the first

official report to engage with the sexualisation of boys and then it only did in a way which did not interrogate the gender and class assumptions underpinning the discourse (Clark & Duschinsky, 2018). In the Irish media, only when boys consumed pornography were they deemed to be at risk and then the risk was conceived as one of them becoming hyper-masculine (Clark & Duschinsky, 2018) and aggressive toward girls and women, who inevitably became the "objects" of their desires.

It is also notable in the sexualisation discourse analysed that there was slippage in the discourse from *parents* to "mothers" / "mum(s)" (37 mentions) in comparison to 5 mentions of "father(s)2 / "dad" and "daddy". The parental responsibility called for in the media quickly became mothers' responsibility to limit their daughters' exposure to sexualisation and their sons' to pornography.

4.5 What Solutions to the "Problem" of Sexualisation were Advanced?

Connections made between different phenomena facilitated particular constructions of the social problem of sexualisation to take hold, and indeed particular solutions. For example, connections made between sexualisation and sexual violence promoted girls' safekeeping as an effective response to sexual violence. The responsibility for sexual assault was located with victims, who thus continue to be implicated in their victimisation by their sexualised dress, demeanour or behaviour (Egan, 2013; Fanghanel, 2013). The best illustration of this was in the article in the *Irish Independent* by Naughton, (Table 1, #10) when, in empathising with the "distraught" girl who became known as *Slane Girl*, opened up the opportunity to challenge societal gendered double standards only to close it down ("some things never change"). Rather, the blame was directed at the girl in question, for the lack of maturity she demonstrated and other girls were exhorted to make "more careful choices" (Table 1, #10).

In the articles reviewed, retailers, social network sites, government, for example, were called on to take action to address the sexualisation problem, but more than any other stakeholders, parents, who were blamed for contributing to the problem of sexualisation were, paradoxically, most often targeted as holding the solution to the problem. Parents were called on to better fulfil their roles in 8 articles, while the government was called on to take legislative action to ban beauty pageants, to regulate technological companies or to take other measures on 6 occasions. A spokesperson from the National Parents' Council (NPC) argued in the *Irish Independent* that "time-poor" parents were giving their children more freedom than they could cope with (Table 1, #14). In the same

article, she called for a return to "old-fashioned" parenting so that parents would return to raising their children rather than befriending them (Table 1, #14). Readers were informed that "regaining parental control" was the approach recommended by Australian psychologist, author of *Raising Girls* and commentator on sexualisation, Stephen Biddulph. Use of the verb [*to*] *parent* was deployed (Table 1, #5; Table 1, #14) in the responsibilising of parents to access the support they might need to help their children navigate a more complicated cultural landscape. Exhortations in the form of "Parents have to" or "Parents must" or "Parents need to" were plentiful in the articles. On occasion the personal pronoun "we" and the possessive pronoun "our" (e.g. "How we are equipping our children" Table 1, #5) were employed to create a shared peer learning opportunity but one in which the journalist or psychologist was the voice of authority:

> Modern parenting is totally different than ever before and it's important than parents feel supported in this journey. *Parents have to* [emphasis added]become familiar with a whole new and ever-evolving technological world while keeping lines of communication open from the youngest ages *to ensure that* [emphasis added]theirs is the message that teenagers default to when it comes to making choices and taking risks (Table 1, #5) .

This amplification of parenting correlates with a neo-liberal shift in governance from the state towards greater self-governability and an expert led responsibilisation of parents (Gillies, 2005; Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2014). This is not particular to the Irish media discourse, as it has also been noted in the media sexualisation discourses in other country contexts (Bragg & Buckingham, 2013; Gill, 2012).

4.6 What are the Generalities and Specificities in the Irish Media Sexualisation Discourse?

The conceptualisation of sexualisation as the "wallpaper surrounding children" (Table 1, #9), is not specific to media discourses in Ireland as it was used in an independent review of commercialisation and sexualisation in England (Bailey, 2011). It captures the extent to which sexualisation was portrayed as integral to mass culture and all pervasive. This undermined the frequent calls to parents and children to resist, because in effect, what they were being called on to resist was a dominant culture (the "wallpaper", Table 1, #10) and one in which the sexualisation discourses told children that they were victims rather than agents. Furthermore, there was an impression given

that there was some idealised destination outside of culture where an entirely natural course of growing up was possible. Conveniently overlooking Ireland's long history of child sexual abuse in institutions and in families, this destination was often located in the past, a time which was nostalgically constructed in the media discourse as better, because children were permitted to live lives less complicated by negative societal and cultural influences:

> Remember that growing up in today's society is more difficult than the one we grew up in and the pressures / choices and risks teens take can be even more dangerous, stressful, and worrying than the ones we took a generation ago (Table 1, #5).

However, just as the viability of innocence as an account of the state of childhood in Australia's history was compromised (Baird, 2013), so it was too in Ireland. Any idealisation of a past childhood as one in which children's "innocence" was venerated and safeguarded by strict adult child boundaries in public and private spaces could only ring hollow in the context of what many children in Ireland suffered over the course of many decades. Widespread and systematic abuse of children, including their sexual abuse in institutions, schools and families was a strong feature of 20th century Irish history as were inquiries into state failures to protect the most vulnerable children in society. The *Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse* in 2009 in Ireland totalled 2500 pages and it followed a ten-year inquiry. In the foreword to the implementation plan, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs wrote:

> The publication of the Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (commonly known as the Ryan Report) on 20th May 2009 was a painful event in the history of modern Ireland. The litany of terrible wrongs inflicted on our children, who were placed by the State in residential institutions run by religious orders, was collated by the Commission and presented for Ireland and the world to read (Office for the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2009, p. xiii).

For a state being held to account for its shameful history, condemning a child beauty pageant or introducing *Responsible Retailing of Childrenswear Guidelines* as it did in 2013 provided it with opportunities to rehabilitate itself and to virtue signal by reasserting its commitment to children's flourishing and wellbeing. This opportunity

did not escape the attention of a Labour Party political representative Aodhán Ó Ríordáin. In one media article in the *Daily Mirror* he was quoted as saying: "the concept of a beauty pageant for children is perverse, grotesque, exploitative and cannot be allowed to take place in a country *that is only recently coming to terms with its responsibilities to children and to child welfare*" [emphasis added] (cited in Table 1, #20) . Calling on the Irish state, as the media sexualisation discourse did, to be one of the rightful authorities to take action to keep children safe, could seem somewhat ironic in the context of the country's "shameful legacy of neglect and child abuse that … cast a dark shadow over Ireland for decades" as acknowledged by Ireland's Taoiseach [Prime Minister], Enda Kenny, in 2014 (cited in O'Connor, 2014).

It is also important to note that in 2013, when the Irish media discourse on sexualisation was at its most active, the Irish state had been imposing austerity since 2008. Children and young people in particular, were severely impacted by the austerity-imposed cuts to family welfare, education and health. The rate of child poverty more than doubled in Ireland between 2008 and 2014, from 6.2% to 12.7% (Department of Children & Youth Affairs, 2017, p. 14). Children in families seeking asylum were living in unacceptable conditions and there was no action being taken to improve the lives of Traveller children in Ireland (Children's Right Alliance, 2014). Applicable to Ireland, is Giroux's observation that the language of childhood innocence, propagated by the sexualisation discourse, presumes a concern for all children but actually "ignores or disparages the conditions in which many of them are forced to live, especially children marginalized by class or race, who in effect are generally excluded from the privileging and protective invocation of innocence" (Giroux, 1998, p.32).

Considering that childhood and more specifically childhood innocence operates as "a motif for the state of the nation as a whole" (Clark, 2014, p. 174), in the media discourse, Irish children's location on the innocence continuum was at times compared with children in other similar country contexts. In an article in the *Irish Independent* in which the RTÉ head of children's programming at the time was interviewed, she expressed the opinion that the sexualisation of teens in Ireland was possibly greatly exaggerated, because she believed "Irish teens have managed to retain more of their innocence than their UK counterparts" (de Courcy cited in Table 1, #11). This comparison extended to a call for action to address sexualisation by adopting the actions of nations perceived to be surpassing Ireland in their concern for children. For example, it was well reported in

the Irish media that France had instituted a child beauty pageant ban and there were calls in the media for the Irish government to do the same (Table 1, #8; Table 1, #6). The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in Ireland, unwilling to introduce a ban, assuaged concerns by confirming that the Irish Government would be consistent in its condemnation of the staging of US style child beauty pageants in Ireland. Child beauty pageants were depicted as a culturally alien phenomenon in the Irish media. This was exemplified for instance in the comparison made between "a parent inserting a flipper [prosthetic tooth] into a small child's mouth" to "something filmed by David Attenborough". Reference was made in the same article to the "parallel world of child beauty pageants" (Table 1, #6). Any moral grandstanding that there was no place for child beauty pageants in the Irish cultural landscape, or that a ban should be introduced, was challenged by the staging of Irish dancing competitions for children. These served as a marker of Irish identity in colonial and postcolonial times and were a key signifier of Irish culture. Indeed, Irish dancing as a cultural practice had undergone global dissemination by 2013, helped along by the global commercial success of the Riverdance phenomenon in the mid 1990s, a product of Celtic Tiger Ireland (Farrell-Wortman, 2013; Mollenhauer, 2015). Similarities between Irish dancing and child beauty pageantry did not go unnoticed or unchallenged by Annette Hill, the Universal Royal Beauty Pageants Founder and Irish pageant organiser. She was cited in the media (Table 1, #20) as saying: "I've seen videos of Irish dancing with children, who've had their hair and eyelashes done and wearing fake tan. If you put Irish dancing and a beauty pageant together, you couldn't tell which is which". While the prospect of staging such a US style event in Ireland made media commentators and journalists feel very uneasy about such a cultural imposition, for others the parallels with Irish dancing competitions were unavoidable. It had to be acknowledged (as for example in the *Sunday Business Post*) that Irish dancing competitions possibly went a step further than pageants due to competitors' wig wearing, yet it was also offered as consolation that children in dancing competitions were competing on the basis of their talent for dancing and not on their physical appearance (Table 1, #6). Clearly discomfiting for commentators in the media were spectacles like child beauty pageants held in Ireland or Irish dancing competitions, because they challenged in a very direct way the Irish idealised cultural landscape, prompting questions about their wider sexual culture and their failings at keeping bounded space between children and adults.

5. Conclusion

There are commonalities and continuities in the media sexualisation discourse in many countries (e.g. France, USA, Australia, UK and Ireland) but there are also interesting specificities and complexities in individual country contexts that merit attention. Similar to Australia "the viability of innocence as an account of the state of childhood and of the nation and its historical past" (Baird, 2013, p. 658) was considerably compromised in Ireland when the "problem" of sexualisation was receiving public attention. Concern about the "problem" conveniently permitted a reinvestment in childhood innocence by many interests and a concern for children that served Irish society well, given its long history of abuse and neglect of vulnerable children and the impact of austerity policy on children. It provided a safe shared platform for professional practitioners, anti-corporatists, children's rights advocates and service providers, professionals, politicians on the Left and Right as well as the media to join in their opposition to a phenomenon that they claimed was robbing childhood from children.

Children, predominantly girls, were spoken for (not with) in the Irish media sexualisation discourse and were located somewhere between adults' idealised expectations of them and their concerns for some of them as targets for discipline. Boys' dress and conduct escaped such scrutiny because their (hetero)sexualities were accepted and they were rarely conflated with or reduced to sexualisation, unless pornography was the focus. As in other contexts, the discourse of sexualisation with its reliance on childhood innocence coded sexist concerns in the guise of concern for the status of childhood generally (Egan, 2013; Clark & Duschinsky, 2018). Due to slippage in the discourse from *parents* to "mothers", the sexism was extended to mothers, who were constructed as both the problem and the solution and the advice hovered between urging them to return to old fashioned authoritarian parenting and requiring them to become more adept in their doing of parenting in a more complex media-saturated world.

At times, media discourse invited readers to bask in Irish cultural superiority by locating child sexualising practices in cultural outsiders (US pageants, celebrity pop stars etc.) and by celebrating the innocence and wellbeing presumed to be still more of a characteristic of a distinctly Irish childhood. For example, the US styled child beauty pageant in particular was accorded considerable powers of distortion and viewed as a very disturbing manifestation of corporate hypersexualisation migrating out of "the other America" (Giroux, 2016, p. 55). However, Irish cultural superiority was difficult

to sustain in the context of home-grown world Irish dancing championships, sites perceived to equal pageants in their emphasis on child beauty work and their successful production and consumption of a global market cultural gender identity.

As public attention was directed at the problem of sexualisation as the most serious threat to the wellbeing of children in Irish society, economic recession followed by austerity policies were doing considerable damage to the most impoverished and disadvantaged children in Irish society. As panic about sexualisation dissipated in the media and in the political sphere after 2013 (Ging, Kiely, Kitching & Leane, 2019), the disproportionate impact of state austerity policies on children and young people were still being felt.

This paper highlights the value of taking a culturally specific critical approach to analysing the media sexualisation discourse. Such an approach enables a more concentrated evaluation of the ways in which innocent and sexualised childhood were mobilised in Irish society in similar and diverse ways in the service of some agendas and not others. It also shows how sexualisation discourse serves as a barometer to assess the wellbeing of children in Irish society relative to other country contexts and how it provided an opportunity for reassertion of the nation as one that cares for children.

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