

Beyond the Discourse of Sexualization

An Inquiry into the Adultification of Tween Girls' Dressing in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

In order to explore the adultification of tween girls in Singapore through the way they dress, I begin this article by taking stock of the arguments in the discourse of sexualization. In further elucidating the cultural specificities of girlhood, I point out how tween girls' fashioning of themselves after adults in Singapore presents some challenges to the ways that the adultification of tween girls' dressing has been commonly theorized. I show that although the adultification of tween girls' dressing forms a large part of the debate in the discourse of sexualization, tween girls' fashioning of themselves after adults should not be assumed to be an exclusive outcome and process of improper and premature sexualization in culturally-specific contexts like Singapore. This article, therefore, explores a different way of thinking about tween girls who are dressing up in more adult-like ways, and suggests the need to be careful about extrapolating from arguments made in the (Western) discourse of sexualisation about this phenomenon.

KEYWORDS

children, culture, clothes, consumption, fashion, sexualization, South-East Asia



Introduction

While tween girls' mode of dress is presented as a growing issue of concern and is extensively examined in academic scholarship in the West, no study has been done, as far as I know, as part of an attempt to understand the reasons and implications of the adultification of tween girls' dressing in Singapore. This is despite the fact that Singapore is one of the most westernised countries in the region, and despite an increasing number of reports in local mainstream media that highlight that clothes for young girls in Singapore are essentially scaled down versions of adult clothing (Ong 1994; 1995). Besides Lim's point about parents who are spending large amounts of money on buying clothes for their children who want to look "trendy" (2000: 25),



Yap points out that retailers in Singapore have been selling sexy clothes “which resemble adult outfits worn by stars such as Britney Spears” (2013: 6) since the mid-2000s.

Acknowledging that there are many definitions of the term tween, I follow Vares, Jackson, and Gill (2011) for whom the term tween functions predominantly as an age band, circumscribing preadolescent girls aged from 8 to 12. I also refrain from using adultification and sexualization synonymously in this article. I note that there are complexities to tween girls' fashioning of themselves after adults which does not necessarily mean that they are being sexualized, and conversely, that tween girls do not need to fashion themselves sexily in order to fashion themselves after adults.

Because scholarship on adultification and on tween girls in Singapore remains scarce, I begin by surveying extant literature on the discourse of sexualization. Authors like Taylor (2010) and Duschinsky (2013) have stressed the need to interrogate this discourse because the sexualisation-of-girls argument is gaining “hegemonic status” (Taylor 2010: 545) in the way that the adultification of tween girls' dressing is being understood. As a main stock of knowledge from the West that interested scholars would have to rely on wholly, if not partially, when they seek to study the adultification of tween girls' dressing, the first part of this article unpacks the main arguments in the discourse of sexualization and lays the groundwork for how the adultification of tween girls' dressing is often taken for granted as part of this discourse.

Following this, I outline some of the specificities of girlhood in Singapore. This section will more clearly elucidate how the discourse of sexualization, as part of the stock of knowledge from the West, is not completely relevant in understanding, acting on, and interpreting the adultification of tween girls' dressing. It is the point of this article to articulate how and why scholars interested in the sexual landscapes of girls' lives need to be extremely careful about conveniently assuming arguments from the discourse of sexualization, and need to keep in mind how arguments from this discourse can be over-simplistic interpretations of girlhood, especially in non-Western contexts like Singapore.

Theorising the Adultification of Tween Girls

In this section, I examine some of the ways in which the adultification of girls' dressing has been taken for granted as being part of the discourse of

sexualization. In addition to academic literature from the West, I note that three formal inquiries, one each from America, Britain, and Australia, have played a prominent part in this discourse. The American Psychological Association (APA) Task Force (US), the Bailey Review (UK), and the report on Corporate Paedophilia (Australia) have shaped the mainstream understanding of tween girls fashioning themselves after adults. Egan and Hawkes (2008) note how the report on Corporate Paedophilia sparked much public discourse in Australia about the media's sexualization of tween girls, and generated anxiety over tween girls' dressing when it was first released. All three inquiries have also formed an early authoritative source for many academic articles,¹ and other formal inquiries² into the sexualization of young girls.

I acknowledge that arguments contributing to the discourse of sexualization often stem from different ideological currents with their distinct purposes and contributions to this discourse. Barker and Duschinsky (2012), for instance, argued that the Bailey Review should be considered a political tool as a result of its tactical use of the term sexualization. According to them, the way in which it chastises young girls who might exude any form of sexuality (through their way of dressing or otherwise), without acknowledging any social or cultural nuances, is indicative of a conservative, "right-wing narrative" (Barker and Duschinsky 2012: 304). Nonetheless, I observed that studies within the discourse of sexualization all adhere to a common view that suggests that tween girls who are fashioning themselves after adults present a problem of premature and precocious sexualization—an issue that should be of paramount concern in late modern societies.

The Discourse of Sexualization

Western Popular Culture

One of the prominent ways in which the discourse of sexualization has sought to understand how and why young girls are influenced to fashion themselves after adults is through analyses of Western popular culture. Steinberg and Kincheloe claim that "kinderculture" (2011: 27) today has always been inextricably linked to popular culture and media (and, hence, tween girls' fashion trends) with information saturation through TV shows, movies, magazines, and music depicting the new experience of childhood in post-modern societies. From another perspective, Jackson and Vares (2013) relate how current public and academic interest in girls' engagement with popular culture mainly converges in the direction of a focus on the sexualization of girls. The APA Task Force is a prime example in its critically locating the main source of the adultification of young girls in the content found in pop-

ular culture and media. Its authors, Zurbriggen et al. (2010), claim that television, music videos, lyrics, movies, magazines, and advertising via these platforms have been inundating young girls today with the wrong messages, teaching young girls that it is normal for women to be objectified.

Notably, Durham points out that the Lolita figure has become a pivotal part of Western popular culture. Where mainstream media consistently emphasize and replay images of the “sexy little girl” (2008: 24), she is most concerned about the “Lolita Effect.” The Lolita Effect takes place where there are widespread misrepresentations about what constitutes female sexuality, with adult-like images on Western popular media possibly displacing and interfering with young girls’ preconceptions. Durham contends that rather than offering girls and the rest of their audiences “thoughtful, open-minded, progress and ethical understandings about sexuality,” Western popular culture’s sexualized and adultified representations will cultivate a group of “prosti-tots” (27)—preadolescent girls who are inclined to fashion themselves after sexy adults.

Tween Commercialization and Consumption

Without discounting the role of popular culture and media, scholars such as Cook and Kaiser (2004) make the argument that tween girls’ adultification should be studied more closely alongside processes of commercialization and consumption. They argue that this is because girls can no longer be understood apart from their consumption activities or their role as consumers. I highlight the role of commercialization and consumption in an attempt to understand the adultification of tween girls because I found that consumption takes on significantly different meanings for girls in Singapore. I discuss this in more detail later in this article.

Given the growing recognition of girls as consumers, there has been debate over the term tween that more accurately represents a “consumer-media label” (MacDonald 2014: 44), rather than an age-delineated designation. MacDonald explains that the term tween was in fact made popular because it was “widely used by the producers, advertisers, marketers and retailers of the consumer-media, as well as social commentators and policy makers who define this age group of girls through their consumption activities” (45). By tracing the emergence of tween as a consumer label, Cook and Kaiser highlight that it was in the 1990s that clothing makers and entrepreneurs began capitalizing on this demographic of children, expounding on preadolescent “sartorial and bodily practices” (2004: 206), as well as demanding and defining a space in the market for preteen-aged products.

This leads authors like Harris to articulate how “tweenie” as a site of “feminine child-ness” and “girl-ness” is highly led by consumption practices today; and girl-ness or femininity to many preteen girls is something to be achieved, “(and to some extent ought to) be acquired through the purchase of the right products” (2005: 212). It is not surprising, then, that Kline notes how many profit-motivated advertisers and retailers today see tween girls as “an influential market with growing power to influence parental choices” and “a market segment ... with increasing disposable income and power to purchase particular goods” (1995: 115).

It is to these points on girls’ consumption that the Bailey Review makes a supporting argument that another prominent source of sexualization stems from the commercial and profit-motivated world of marketers and retailers, an extension from the sexualized content found on popular media as highlighted by the APA Task Force. Similarly, Durham (2008) explains that while it is the celebrities like Paris Hilton and the Pussy Cat Dolls in Western pop culture who entice young girls to fashion themselves after sexy adults, it is ultimately the marketers and retailers who produce and promote thong underwear for seven- to ten-year-old girls, with suggestive slogans such as Wink, Wink and Eye Candy printed on them (Huff 2011).

Perils to the Unknowing Tween

The adultification of tween girls is framed as precarious because tween girls’ fashioning of themselves after adults is taken to be both a process and an outcome of “improper sexualization” which consequently exposes the young girl subject—an unknowing victim—to the various risks of sexualization (Egan and Hawkes 2008: 198). Based largely on theories of developmental psychology, the adultification of tween girls is considered to be harmful because girls of this age are perceived still to be negotiating their sense of self (Zurbriggen et al. 2010; Gruber and Grube 2000). Many authors also highlight the notion that adultification is detrimental because tween girls do not have the ability to comprehend or anticipate a whole range of physical, psychological, and sexual issues when they fashion themselves like adults (see Zurbriggen et al. 2010).

Furthermore, where the adultification of tween girls’ dressing can be perceived as having been brought about when tween girls learn to equate appearances and physical attractiveness with social success, certain authors project anxiety about how this premature adultification or sexualization can lead girls away from developing other facets of their lives, such as making use of opportunities for sports or academic development (see Tankard-Reist

2009). The concern here is that when girls learn to prioritize certain rewards (such as the attention they might receive when they fashion themselves after adults) over other rewards (such as academic accomplishment), they may inadvertently and unknowingly short-change themselves in terms of their future life chances.

Protection

As a response to the notion of the unknowing tween-aged girl, many scholars in the discourse of sexualization thus make the argument that the onus is on what they see as responsible adults to implement some form of objective protection (see Hawkes and Egan 2008). Hawkes and Egan argue that, almost universally, the sexualization of tween girls is taken to be a damaging and “unwanted consequence of the ‘modern world’” that cannot be avoided, and the protection of the child, by adults, is “the only recourse” (2008: 193).

The notion of the vulnerable, unknowing child therefore leads to a “discourse of protection” (Egan and Hawkes 2009: 389); scholars broadly clustered as protectionist make the argument that there is a need for boundaries for young girls against the sources of sexualization. Authors of the APA Task Force recommend several “counteractive measures” (Zurbriggen et al. 2010: 35) that assist adults and/or institutions to neutralize the pervasive power of popular media that may be (prematurely) sexualizing tween girls. Such measures include media education and literacy through schools; increased participation in sports; and support groups that help girls to “challenge the narrow prescriptions for girls in this culture” (36). As a similarly protectionist response, the Bailey Review also made 14 recommendations that were targeted at curbing messages from advertisers and marketers, which, it claimed, were encouraging children to consume age-inappropriate products. To list just a few examples, the Bailey Review (2011) recommended that magazines and newspapers with sexualized images on their covers should not be in easy sight of children; that the amount of on-street advertising containing sexualized imagery in locations where children are likely to see it should be reduced; and that a new age rating for music videos should be introduced.

Nonetheless, the Bailey Review (2011) recognizes that the (inevitable) growth of children as consumers poses multiple problems for parents who want to be seen as good providers. The Review reveals that many parents succumb to “pester power” (2011: 56) from their children, and this occurs regardless of whether parents feel that products are too sexualized or adultified for their children. Parents were found to be afraid that if they do not purchase such products they would be creating opportunities for their chil-

dren to be bullied or teased at school. The Review mentions that there is an existing paradox for parents who wish their children to have the same things and opportunities as their peers, and who have found it increasingly difficult to say no to age-inappropriate purchases because marketers and advertisers are consistently pushing the wrong kind of messages, imagery, and consumables. Furthermore, Seagall states that given the dual-income families of today, most parents cannot find “the time and energy it requires to [consistently] fight the ubiquitous and overwhelming influence” (2003 cited in Rush and La Nauze 2006: 46) that sexualized products and imagery have on their children’s everyday lives.

Towards a Focus on Singapore

Thus far, I have exemplified how the adultification of tween girls’ dressing is often implicitly woven into the discourse of sexualization. The discussion above also shows that it is often taken for granted that the role of the responsible and caring adult is to educate unknowing tween girls about how they should be dressing, and that preteen girls require some sort of protection from sources that encourage them to fashion themselves after adults. Critically, the discussion above most clearly illuminates the many ways in which the adultification of tween girls’ dressing has become a topic of discussion as a result of increasing adult concerns in the West. It is because of this (over)emphasis that I point to a need to think about the adultification of tween girls’ dressing outside the Anglophone West, with a specific focus on Singapore.

Given the current state of knowledge production, which can be characterized as Western and adult-centered, I point out that there is not only an absence of Singaporean tween girls’ voices in local scholarship, but there is also a prominent void in research that focuses on the adultification of tween girls’ dressing outside the Anglophone West. Most clearly, a non-Western-centric context has also been left out of the discourse of sexualization, and this is despite the discourse being one of the hegemonic ways of conceptualizing and comprehending the adultification of tween girls (Taylor 2010; Duschinsky 2013). In the following section, I outline several cultural specificities of girlhood in Singapore in an attempt to point out why a debate on, and a discussion of, the adultification of tween girls’ dressing in Singapore demands more attention, and in what ways there are limitations to the application of the Western discourse of sexualization within this context.

The Socio-cultural Terrain of Girlhood in Singapore

Given the gaps in scholarship that I have identified, in this section I will attend to the socio-cultural landscape in which the adultification of tween girls' dressing takes place in Singapore. I will elucidate how the discourse of sexualization, as part of the stock of knowledge from the West, is not completely relevant in understanding, acting on, and interpreting the adultification of tween girls in Singapore—a group of social actors who encompass a unique set of experiences and circumstances that pose some challenges to the Western discourse of sexualization.

In acknowledging Appadurai's (1990) ideas about “ethnoscapes” and “mediascapes” along with “technoscapes” and “ideoscapes” (6–7), and his theories about the growing interconnectedness of cultures and images that are being circulated, I want to make it clear that I am not dismissing the traces of tween girls fashioning themselves after adults in Singapore which may coincide with what is happening in the West. This is especially the case if we take into consideration Chua's (2004) influential argument about popular culture in Singapore, and about its consumption being made up predominantly of Western imports. It is the point of this section to emphasize the need to be careful about generalizing arguments from the discourse of sexualization, and to present those aspects of a culturally-specific approach that would be more suitable.

Consumption as a Transition into Modernity

I mentioned earlier that there is a growing number of studies that claim that tween girls can no longer be understood apart from their consumption activities or their role as consumers. While the development of a (hyper)consumer culture in the discourse of sexualization is considered inevitable most of the time and detrimental to unknowing young girls, I argue in this section that the consumption of adult-like clothing and the way girls negotiate their desires for this are not that straightforward in the case of Singapore. One of the main reasons, as the work of Chua (2003), a notable scholar of consumption, makes clear, is that the growth of a consumer culture is considered to be a hallmark of Singapore's modernity.

Chua notes that as some sort of compensation for the “material deprivations” (2003: 3) that Singapore faced during its colonial days, it has always been the strong pursuit of the government to improve and extensively expand the material well-being of Singaporeans. He argues that as a result of this, Singaporeans make the most meaning of the concept of national

economic growth when they are able to buy new things continually since this is translated directly into an improvement in their material lives. As a starting point, these ideas provide a glimpse into how the acquisition and wearing of adult-like clothing can take on different meanings for tween girls in Singapore.

Given that shopping has been declared to be a “national pastime” (The Straits Times, 18 August 1996 cited in Chua 2003: 41) for many Singaporeans, it is not too difficult to see how this socio-economic climate encourages profit-motivated retailers to continue to import clothing for tween girls that may be considered problematic in the discourse of sexualization. As an outcome of Singapore’s having been primed for economic growth and continual improvements in material life (Chua 2003), it is not surprising that a pivotal part of Singaporean tween-aged girls’ urban lives is also organized around the activity of shopping. In addition to window-shopping being ranked as one of Singaporeans’ main activities outside the home (Ho and Chua 1995), Abdoolcarim notes that companies increasingly acknowledge that “kids and cash go together,” and are therefore constantly keeping up with “young fads” (1994: 22) in order to draw in younger crowds. This often includes tween girls’ fashion, regardless of whether this apparel for girls is considered too adult-like or sexualized. For instance, apparel from the Abercrombie & Fitch Kids line, popular in Singapore, has been a topic of controversy in North America since 2011. The label has been criticized by many mothers for selling push-up and padded bra bathing suits to tween girls (Huff 2011).

The physical landscape in Singapore is also likely to be embellished by global advertising campaigns that portray tween girls living grown-up lifestyles. Where advertisements³ of this kind have been banned or have incited some form of controversy elsewhere, the Media Development Authority (MDA) of Singapore has yet to develop a set of codes prohibiting advertising that portrays children living out adult-like lifestyles.⁴

Ideological and Moral Discourses between East and West

While a climate of (hyper)consumerism has been taken to reflect positive national economic growth and the increasing economic capital of Singaporeans, the expansion of a consumer culture simultaneously invoked feelings of cultural imperialism among certain groups of Singaporeans. Chua reveals that feelings of cultural imperialism are greatly facilitated by the Sin-

gapore government in its consistently articulating some form of concern over (negative) Western values of “excessive materialism” and “decadence” that comes with “excessive consumption” (Chua 2003: 21). This rhetoric against Westernization consequently instils some anxiety about its trickle-down effects on Singaporean youth.

Chua points out that, afraid of consumerism being “a [harbinger]” of “Western ‘liberal’ values,” the Singapore government, through its emphasis on the importance of Asian values, sought to create some sense of Otherness, and hence a space for a discourse on differences between Singapore (East) and the West. In this discourse of difference, Western liberal values such as “individual rights” and freedom found in consumerism are frowned upon, with the government discursively articulating how notions of individualism and “self-interest” could potentially displace local traditional values, and threaten the cohesion and harmony of the Singaporean society if these values were to make inroads into the cultural sphere. According to Chua, this anti-Western value debate that came with the rise of consumerism in Singapore is not thus only a “discourse of value difference, but of value conflict” (23).

These signs are indicative of how the adultification of tween girls' clothing in Singapore can be understood more appropriately as part of the tensions arising from the dichotomy between Eastern and Western values, rather than the detrimental effects outlined in the discourse of sexualization. While many might question the relevance of an ideological or moral discourse between the East and the West—given the contemporary processes and flows of globalization—Chua highlights that the tensions between Western vis-à-vis local traditional values still maintain a “low-grade rumble” (2003: 6) in Singapore. Support for this discourse stems mainly from members of the older generation of Singaporeans who have experienced conditions of economic underdevelopment as part of Singapore's history. As Chua makes clear, their concern is often about the young people who are brought up in an environment of relative prosperity, and hence more likely to internalize Western values through their consumption patterns.

Where studies (see Bailey 2011; Zurbriggen et al. 2010) in the discourse of sexualization frame the role of parents in the consumption of adult-like clothing as a complicated or difficult matter, this culturally unique line of understanding illuminates how the older generation of Singaporeans can be seen to be taking a unified stance in rejecting Western and adult-like clothing on the pretext of wanting to keep intact the differences between Eastern and Western values. Where the act of purchasing products for their children allows some parents in the West to identify with their child selves as they

reminisce about how at a certain time in their childhoods they, too, had wanted to be grown up and had desires for adult goods, clothing choices of the youth in Singapore are often at the receiving end of criticism by parents or other adults for being too Western and spendthrift (Chua 2003). Where sources such as the Bailey Review also recognize that the (inevitable) growth of children as consumers poses some difficult problems for parents who want to be seen as good providers, the discussion earlier shows how the definition of good parents in Singapore might differ in referring to parents who are able to inculcate in their children distinctively Asian values. Unlike the reasons outlined in the discourse of sexualisation, clothing choices of young people are a point of concern amongst the older generation of Singaporeans when they are being perceived as part of subscribing to Western consumerist values. The clothing choices of youth were found to be reprehensible mostly for being too spendthrift (Chua 2003), rather than being too sexualised.

Youth Consumption

According to Chua, youth consumption in Singapore must also be viewed as “a window for unlimited consumption for and on the self, [yet] constrained by one’s own financial circumstances.” Unlike adults, and unable to afford big ticket items such as cars, homes or holidays, the young person becomes, through her or his body, a “primary locus of consumption.” For Chua, items of fashion and, hence, adult-like clothing are thus often appropriated because “body adornment” (2003: 25) is the cheapest, and most prominent way for the young to express and (re)assert their own identity.

However, as I mentioned earlier, young people’s frequent and inevitable consumption of Western, imported clothing makes them the target of criticism by parents or the older generation of Singaporeans. This is especially so when the consumption of imported and, perhaps, adult-like clothing is taken to reflect their aspirations to adopt Western/American consumer lifestyles. The Singapore government similarly echoes some concern over these aspirations, claiming that they are symptomatic of a loss of, or confusion over, young Singaporeans’ rightful cultural identity as Asian (Chua 2003).

In the same vein, Chua (2003) reveals that adults have been “puzzled” as to why the youth in Singapore, in the process of emphasizing their identity through fashion, often dress to shock their elders. This may range from how some teenagers don American street fashion, to fashioning themselves

after what they might see in Western popular culture that may include clothing that is more adult-like or sexualized than what is culturally accepted in Singapore. Chua's empirical work reveals that parents often question their children's clothing choices as their "claim to individuality," stating that they are all adhering to a certain trend that is popular at one point of time, and are "thus conforming to a code rather than breaking out with individualising styles" (2003: 26).

The contentions over youth clothing in Singapore contradict what has been further reflected in the discourse of sexualization in studies that describe how adultified clothes, accessories, and consumables may have already formed the backdrop to tween-aged girls' lives, with parents and children no longer registering such consumption consciously (see Bailey 2011). Singaporean youth and parents show that they still engage critically in the proliferation and consumption of adult-like clothing, especially when, as Chua (2003) notes, the youth in Singapore strategically employ the element of shock through their dressing to differentiate themselves from the older generation and (re)emphasize their status. Parents and members of the older generation of Singaporeans can similarly be said to use ideological/moral discourses of the East/West as a form of resistance to young people's fashion choices.

Hedonic Consumption and Social Class in Singapore

The acquisition and adornment of adult-like clothing for tween girls is made more complex by Singaporeans having been characterized also as hedonic consumers highly concerned with the symbolic value of items. Chua (2003) and Yao (1996) illustrate how the ability to consume in Singapore is often tied to social mobility, with other authors like Coclanis mentioning that not only do Singaporeans "hit the malls hard" (2009: 2), they particularly tend to favour high-end boutiques as a marker of a certain class to which they belong.

Coclanis observes how many Singaporeans, as part of their materialistic pursuits, "avidly desire" (2009: 2) and consistently strive to attain what are colloquially known as the 5Cs: Cash, Credit card, Country club, Car, and Condo. Yao offers a more sociological explanation of these material aspirations, stating how, with the presence of an expanding middle class, it is only normal that components like these come to make up a "middle class lifestyle" (1996: 343). She explains that such expensive items may now well be the

“necessary badges that signify middle class credentials” (345). Individuals and families who wish to be considered part of this class have a duty to acquire these goods, in order to live up to peer evaluations.

Yao also adds that personal meanings may be attributed to the consumption of luxury goods in Singapore such as being a reward for “virtuous behaviour” (1996: 344), especially for adults working hard at their jobs. This viewpoint mirrors what Chua (2003) says about Singaporeans making most meaning of national economic growth (and social class/mobility in this case) when they are able to consume. Yao explains that the consumption and ownership of expensive items has become “a natural outcome of ‘good behaviour’” in Singapore, “crystallised in the very position and achievements of the middle class” (1996: 344).

Hedonic consumption intertwined with ideas of social class has several implications for understanding the adultification of tween girls in Singapore. It invites the consideration of tween girls who may be dressing up after adults not as an outcome of their own, autonomous decisions, but as a result of the social domain in which they grow up. Where fashion labels in Singapore have been known to reap profits of S\$90,000 to S\$130,000 monthly, because parents no longer prefer kiddy clothes (Lim 2000), I suggest that we need to think about how adult-like clothing on and for children can come to make up the group of consumables that denotes affluence and upward social mobility in Singapore. This is especially relevant in relation to the growth of luxury, international designer labels for children such as Burberry, Polo Ralph Lauren, and Armani Junior. These brands have been known to retail expensive, scaled-down versions of clothing for young girls. Locally, one of the pioneers of expensive children’s clothing, Kids21, was built in 1997. The label is still going strong today, with the company importing over 80 international designer labels and lifestyle brands, catering to modern and chic children and girls whom they now believe represent the market.

Adult-like clothing as a part of hedonic consumption in Singapore contradicts what has been previously suggested in studies in the West in which tween girls’ practice of fashioning themselves after adults is seen to be an issue of poor taste, and a problem of the working class (Bragg and Buckingham 2012). Since material aspirations are a defining characteristic of middle-class individuals and households in Singapore, I invite us to think about how expensive, adult-like tween girls’ clothing can form a part of the pursuit of social mobility. This is especially the case when other wealthy or middle class parents, both local and foreign, have been indulging in similar practices.

A popular topic covered by many fashion and lifestyle media these days is how celebrities have been starting their children's "style education early" (Hutching 2014: n.p.). Hutching notes that Suri Cruise has been reported to have a collection of heels more expensive than those of most adults, and Harper Beckham has been photographed at the front row of many haute couture fashion shows. These domains once belonged solely to adults.

Expensive items taken to be a "natural outcome" or reward for "good behaviour" (Yao 1996: 344) for the burgeoning middle class in Singapore can also be extended to tween girls who might request designer, adult-like clothing as a reward for what they have achieved at school or elsewhere. Tween girls' desires for adult-like clothing as something prized or to be earned adds a layer of complexity to how the adultification of tween girls' dressing has been conceptualized. Likewise, where the adultification of tween girls' dressing has been speculatively thought to have been brought about or catalyzed when preteen girls equate appearances and physical attractiveness with social success and where there has been growing worry over how young girls might, in turn, be drawn away from developing other potentially empowering opportunities, I point out that, on the contrary, it may be because of educational attainment, good grades or some other accolades that tween girls can request and gain rightful access to adult-like clothing in Singapore.

Conclusion

In mapping the terrain in which the adultification of tween girls takes place, this article highlights some of the latent paradigms that have yet to be examined that would help untangle the complexity of issues surrounding tween girls in Singapore who wish to fashion themselves after adults. Correspondingly, this article underscores the need to be astute towards the arguments in the discourse of sexualization, and recognize that non-Western contexts and processes, on many levels, pose challenges to the way Western-centric studies have traditionally theorized the adultification of tween girls. While useful, conceptions of adultification, especially through the discourse of sexualization, offer over-simplistic interpretations of girlhood.

In this article I have shown some contradictions to the universal claim that adultification is a problem for all young girls and I have suggested that the issue of tween girls fashioning themselves after adults in Singapore demands a more culturally-specific approach. Furthermore, this article

points out that there is significant knowledge to be gained when the adultification of tween girls' dressing in Singapore is investigated as a unique set of processes and practices that takes place outside the Anglophone West. This discussion of tween girls in Singapore suggests that there are some key questions within extant literature which are yet to be answered, and I have pointed out the ways in which perspectives beyond the West can contribute to a better understanding of how and why these tween girls are likely to fashion themselves after adults. In addition to the caution about framing the adultification of tween girls dressing as an exclusive process and outcome of sexualization, this article identifies some of the conceptual gaps in the stock of knowledge from the West, and encourages scholars to look beyond the (Western) discourse of sexualization as a conceptual framework to study the adultification of tween girls' dressing in Singapore, or in the wider context of Asia for that matter.



BERNICE LOH is a final year doctoral candidate at Monash University, Australia. Born and bred in Singapore, her current research focuses on Singaporean tween girls (aged 8 to 12), who are fashioning themselves after adults. Besides working on issues pertaining to girls, she has also published articles on local music in Singapore. In her free time, she reads avidly and attempts to master snowboarding. Currently based in Melbourne, she looks forward to any collaborative opportunities and plans to continue doing academic research on girls in the near future.



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Notes

1. See, for instance, Barker and Duschinsky (2012), Faulkner (2010) and Renold and Ringrose (2013)
2. An example here is the SPARK ('Sexualisation Protest: Action, Resistance, Knowledge') Movement in America and the Commissioner for Children and Young People's inquiry into the sexualisation of children in Western Australia.

3. See Marc Jacob's Lola perfume ad campaign (<https://www.google.ca/#q=Marc+Jacob%E2%80%99s+Lola+perfume+ad+campaign>), Zara Girls A/W 2012 campaign (<http://www.fashionsquad.com/zara-aw-2012-video/>), and, most recently, Miley Cyrus in the cosmetic brand MAC's Viva Glam collection (<https://www.google.ca/?ion=1&espv=2#q=Miley+Cyrus+in+the+cosmetic+brand+MAC%E2%80%99s+Viva+Glam+collection>).
4. See http://www.mda.gov.sg/RegulationsAndLicensing/ContentStandardsAndClassification/Documents/TV%20and%20Radio/PoliciesandContentGuidelines_TV_TVAd-Code.pdf

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