

Chapter 2

Sources and beneficiaries of premature sexualisation of children in the media

2.1 Term of reference (a) requires the committee to:

...examine the sources and beneficiaries of premature sexualisation of children in the media...

2.2 Term of reference (a) is premised on the assumption that sexualisation of children is occurring through exposure to certain content in modern media. However, this assumption was vigorously challenged by advertising and media representatives and proponents, who pointed to the paucity of evidence around the issue and the operation of the systems that are in place to regulate standards.¹

2.3 The committee treated these claims with a degree of scepticism. While it may be acknowledged that the research into this area has not established clear causal relationships between particular types of advertising, media or products and earlier sexualisation of children, the cumulative affect of this material seems to be beyond dispute.

2.4 The suggestion that any person or party is deliberately benefiting from the sexualisation of children is clearly one with implications of the utmost seriousness. Issues that raise questions of child welfare understandably give rise to vigorous debate, where both sides often claim to have the best interests of children at heart. However, the committee believes that the question of who or what are the 'beneficiaries of sexualisation' must start with the recognition that sexualisation of children is essentially an aspect of the increasingly pervasive and targeted forces of commercialism in modern Australian and, indeed, Western society.

2.5 Children and their needs and wants together are a distinct and valuable market that is able to be legitimately targeted and commercially exploited by players acting by the rules and otherwise lawfully in the free market. The targeting of children by commercial interests has expanded greatly in terms of both the number of products and services and the sophistication and aggression of marketing. However, no submissions were received, for example, arguing that children should be entirely quarantined from commercial interests; nor was there any suggestion that influences beyond the normal commercial imperatives were at work.

2.6 Analysis of the codes in place to govern children's advertising and content reveal that there is recognition that the welfare and protection of children, as well as the authority and rights of parents in relation to their children, warrant the imposition

1 These and related issues are considered in chapters 3, 4 and 5.

of special rules to constrain the commercialisation of children and childhood. An aspect of this is specific regulation to ensure that children's advertising and programming is free of inappropriately sexual themes and content. In practice, however, such regulation of children's advertising and content is often profoundly undermined by the realities and imperatives of commercial practices more broadly.

2.7 An example of this may be seen in the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) Code for Advertising, Marketing and Communications to Children (the Children's Code). The Children's Code requires that advertising to children must not 'undermine the authority, responsibility or judgement of parents or carers' and 'must not contain an appeal to children to urge their parents or carers to buy a product for them'.² However, the extent to which such aims are met and are achievable is highly doubtful. Children's advertising frequently exploits and imparts values that do undermine parental authority and judgement.

2.8 The requirement to avoid any explicit appeal to parents to purchase a product would also seem to deny the logic of advertising and the realities of family life. If a product is successfully promoted to children as desirable, and their parents control the means to acquire that product, then there is an implicit or de facto appeal to children to urge parents to buy a product or service for them.

2.9 On this issue, Ms Barbara Biggins, Honorary Chief Executive Officer, Australian Council on Children and the Media, submitted:

Our members, and others in the community, we perceive, are increasingly concerned about the growing pressures of marketing aimed at the young, the pressures for children to be consumers at a very young age. These pressures are causing children to be in conflict with their parents over purchases and also in conflict with their parents' values.³

2.10 Regulation of children's advertising is also undermined by the strongly sexual character of all-pervasive adult advertising and media. Much of the evidence put to the inquiry confirms this analysis. Submitters and witnesses continually expressed concern about children's exposure to sexual and objectifying images in the media and society more broadly.

2.11 The heavy use of sexual imagery and concepts in advertising might suggest a level of community and commercial indifference to potential harms that might be done to children and adults, but it does not represent the deliberate sexualisation of any group in society. Rather, it reflects the reality of what types of advertising are likely to be successful in the market and to generate profits and returns for business

2 AANA, *Submission 68*, Attachment 1, p. 3.

3 *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2008, p. 92.

owners, shareholders and society more generally. Dr Sally Cockburn, who appeared before the committee in a private capacity,⁴ observed:

I do not believe anyone is maliciously setting out to prematurely sexualise young people, but they are realising, ‘If we...[employ sexual imagery and concepts], this [product] is selling.’⁵

2.12 It also reflects an increasing willingness on the part of adult society to openly acknowledge the range of services and products that they may wish to purchase. Advertising for pornography, a range of sexual services and sex-related medical treatments, for example, are now ubiquitous.

2.13 As was observed in Chapter 1, the committee does not consider that the terms of reference of the inquiry were intended to encompass a commentary or the passing of judgement on what constitutes acceptable taste in advertising or content, particularly in relation to adult markets. It must be recognised that, within the bounds of regulation and the law, individual and parental choice, expressed through consumer decisions, are ultimately the factors that dictate corporate behaviour and commercial standards:

One of the commercial realities of magazines, television and radio in the commercial sphere is that they rely on ratings to sell advertising. If people do not watch it, they will not keep that programming on. Voting with the remote is the best way to change commercial programming.⁶

2.14 With reference to merchandise and products produced for and directed at children, the committee observes that the role of parents is even more definitive, and increasingly so as the age and ability of children to make purchasing decisions for themselves decreases. On the issue of merchandise such as padded bras for girls well under the age of 10, Ms Amelia Edwards, who appeared before the committee in a private capacity, noted:

If parents do not buy sexualised material, if they do not buy inappropriate material for their children, then the companies are not going to produce it because it is not going to return a profit for them.⁷

2.15 The committee notes that children 12 years of age and younger rarely have the means to make purchases of goods and services independently of parental supervision, if not approval, of those purchases. Dr Cockburn observed that, as children do not in reality represent an autonomous market or purchasers, a case can be made for avoiding, where possible, exposing children to any advertising whatsoever:

4 The committee notes that Dr Cockburn writes for *Girlfriend* magazine, which is considered in chapters 2 and 4.

5 Ibid p. 62.

6 Dr Sally Cockburn, *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2008, p. 62.

7 Ibid p. 63.

I am in favour of all children's television programming having no advertisements whatsoever. I do not think children should be encouraged to purchase anything, because they do not have that much pocket money anyway.⁸

2.16 Based on the recognition that parents have a pivotal role to play, a number of recommendations in this report seek to improve parents' ability to make and effect meaningful choices about the material that their children are exposed to, based on their own assessment of what is or is not suitable and appropriate. These include the possibility of changes to children's viewing time zones, changes to children's content requirements for broadcasters, classification codes for children's magazines and the development of a children's television channels. The committee believes that if parents are able to make and effect decisions about the material that their children 'consume' then commercial interests that adequately reflect prevailing community standards and tastes will be the deserving beneficiaries.

2.17 In addition, the committee acknowledges that commercial interests commonly seek to test the boundaries of regulations and standards in order to seek advantage in the market. For this reason, recommendations made in later chapters seek to improve regulatory complaints systems to ensure that parents and other individuals are able to contribute to the setting and application of the prevailing community standards by which media standards are judged.

2.18 Finally, the committee has made recommendations going to implementation of comprehensive sexual health and relationships education programs for children, but which acknowledge, promote and facilitate the central role that parents have to play in their children's physical, emotional and social sexual development, and which address media uses and representations of sexual imagery and themes. Whilst recommendations for more or better education can at times appear trite and formless, they are fully worthwhile and to the point in the context of the conclusions drawn above.

2.19 Improving the ability of children and parents alike to assess, contextualise and discuss potentially sexualising imagery in the media is likely to lead to better decision making and the ability to counteract the commercial and profit imperatives that largely shape advertising and media content.

2.20 The committee observes that children are certainly more visibly sexualised in terms of the media to which they are exposed. This basic assumption was not challenged by any evidence received, and is based on recognition of the increasing targeting of products to child-related markets and the greater exposure of children to information via the many available media forms, and particularly the internet. However it would be a mistake to equate these influences with actual harm.

8 Ibid p. 62.

2.21 It is important not to fall into the trap of assuming a golden age of childhood at some unspecified time in history. As society comes to terms with the extent of child abuse in churches, schools and some social welfare services in the past, for example, it can be argued that children are in fact much safer than they have ever been. Similarly it would be a mistake to assume that ignorance, in the sense of not being exposed to sexual imagery or information, can be equated with innocence.

Children's magazines

2.22 While all media target children both in their content and through advertising, children's magazines, particularly those published for girls between the ages of 12 and 16, were identified in submissions as a particular source of sexualisation of children.

2.23 One aspect of this was the inclusion of sealed sections in these magazines, which often include question-and-answer columns on sexual matters. Ms Julie Gale, Director, Kids Free 2B Kids, identified this material as inappropriate due to the possibility of such material being viewed by children below or at the bottom of a magazine's intended reading-age range:

Take magazines for young girls. I have some examples...of what I do not see as very appropriate to be in magazines that do not let parents know the age group that they are appropriate for...There are 10-year-olds and nine-year-olds reading this magazine. Is there anything there that says who is benefiting from this anal sex?⁹

2.24 Children were also thought to be influenced by the amount of sex-related content throughout such magazines—such as in articles on boys or celebrities and advertisements for clothes and mobile-phone screensavers—as well as the stereotypical images of girls and young women in advertising and content. This material is considered further in Chapter 4, which considers the regulation of print media.

2.25 However, in response to such claims, publishers of children's magazines claimed that they are overwhelmingly positive in terms of the messages and influences they have on their young readers. The publishers of *Girlfriend* magazine described the magazine as containing carefully selected age-appropriate material that sought to interest, inform and empower young girls.¹⁰ Mrs Nicole Sheffield, Publisher, Pacific Magazines, observed:

...we understand the role that the information and entertainment we provide...[children] with has. We take that role seriously. In no way do we support the sexualisation of children and never have done.¹¹

9 *Committee Hansard*, 29 April 2008, pp 17-18.

10 The committee has used *Girlfriend* as an example of the issues raised because the publishers provided a submission and appeared before the committee. The committee would not wish to give the impression that *Girlfriend* is being singled out for particular criticism.

11 *Committee Hansard*, 30 April 2008, p. 48.

2.26 Mrs Sheffield advised that *Girlfriend* magazine employs a number of campaigns and editorial strategies that promote healthy body image and self respect. For example, it had run a self respect campaign, an anti-bullying campaign and a national compliments day; and the magazine runs regular advice columns on mental and physical health as well as regular 'reality check' notices, which are notes that draw attention to such things as the practice of airbrushing or touching-up photos.¹² Mrs Sheffield concluded:

Ultimately, a large part of our magazine is about empowering girls to make a difference, to be involved, to have self-respect and to think about environmental causes. *Girlfriend* was the first glossy magazine in this country to be printed on recycled paper. For the teen market to be part of that felt very worthwhile. For us it is about getting them involved.¹³

2.27 On the particular issue of the portrayal of girls and women in *Girlfriend* magazine, Mrs Sheffield stated that, although the magazine does reflect popular and celebrity culture:¹⁴

We have age-appropriate models in *Girlfriend* magazine. A lot of them are models, particularly if you are referring to the fashion pages, because they are modelling those clothes. But we promote healthy lifestyle, healthy eating and healthy body image. In the magazine and the editorial that we write, the role models are not about getting this figure or getting this weight. We never run diets.¹⁵

2.28 The committee accepts that the editorial content of *Girlfriend* magazine undoubtedly offers positive messages to young readers about body image, self respect and personal relations, which have been considered as issues relevant to sexualisation under the terms of this inquiry. That is to be welcomed.

2.29 However, the committee observes that, on the basis of a fair examination of a number of issues of *Girlfriend*, it does not present a range of body image types. Images of models and readers throughout the magazine in both the advertising and the content sections conform to a narrow range of body types and appearances that are directly comparable to the presentation of women in women's magazines. It is perhaps unsurprising that, considering the commercial thrust of the magazine, it employs very similar styles and imagery to the women's magazines that its readers might progress to as they age and mature.

12 Ibid pp 49-50.

13 Ibid p. 53.

14 Ibid p. 62.

15 Ibid p. 53.