

Are Girls Sexualized on Social Networking Sites?

An Analysis of Comments on Instagram of Kristina Pimenova

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Scholarly literature has focused on sexualization of girls through fashion and advertising that has resulted in stereotypes, low self-esteem, poor body image and vulnerability. New Media and social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat among others have become a platform for girls to post their photographs and call for comments on their beauty, clothes and presentation. This article through a content analysis discusses people's comments on a few Instagram pictures of a young 10-year-old model Kristina Pimenova, described as the most beautiful girl in the world. Results over a period of one year found that most of the remarks emphasize a sexual meaning, physical attractiveness, love and intimacy. Besides, the highly commented categories raise low self-esteem and jealousy among kids and confirm the negative effects of sexualization of children. A few also mention the dangers of the exposure to these social networking sites, such as intrusion of privacy and pedophiles.

Women's exposure to sexualized gender stereotypes and childlike images in consumer culture starts early and leads to normalization of such images (American Psychological Association [APA], 2007; Bae, 2012; Gunter, 2014; Kenway & Bullen, 2008; Lemish, 2010; Livingstone, 2008; Nussbaum, 2007; Velding, 2014). Fashion advertising in lifestyle magazines like *Girl's life* (U.S.), *Vogue kids* (Spain), *Telva kids* (Spain) and *Hola kids* (Spain) have portrayed young girls as models, positioning them in sexualized poses and scenarios to sell products (Merskin, 2004; Llovet, Díaz-Bustamante & Patiño, 2016; Velding, 2014). As "magazines can be studied as canvases upon which local lifestyles and values are printed" (Frith & Karan, 2014, p. 151), one of the main complaints in the public imagery of sexualized young girls is the premature sexuality, abuse and vulnerability that come when "boundaries between childhood and adulthood are breaking down" (Livingstone, 2008, p. 38). This chapter aims to explore the representation of Kristina Pimenova, a 10 year-old Russian girl through her pictures posted on Instagram. The

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girl baptized by media as the world's most beautiful girl has more than one and a half million followers on Instagram. Pimenova is now a top model and is being sourced out by modeling agencies like LA models and NY models. Her profile on Instagram is run by her mother. Some of the Instagram pictures belong to campaigns for luxury fashion brands - such as Armani, Fendi and Cavalli and their catalogues, while others are personal pictures taken by Pimenova's mother who defends her actions from critics for posting Pimenova's photographs wearing little clothing and posing as an adult by saying that the poses are natural and that those who see sex in the pictures are pedophiles (Turner, 2014).

Children on social media: Trends and concerns about sexualization

Oppliger (2008, p. 7) explains that "fashion trends are one of the major ways where females express their sexuality" and this is being done particularly through SNS. *Snapchat, FaceTime, Vine, Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter* and *You Tube*, all of which have become easier platforms for young girls to attract attention. Although the 1998 law in U.S. called Child Online Privacy Protection Act requires users to be 13-year-olds to open an account (Consumers reports, 2014), "5.6 million children under the age of 13 use Facebook." Other data shows that 83 per cent of the 11 to 15-year-olds whose internet usage was monitored on a social media site had registered with a false age (Sweney, 2013). Exposure to sexualized imagery of girls within this context could create misinformation on gender roles and impact the children's self-image and self-esteem, which may remain with them throughout adulthood (Llovet, Díaz-Bustamante & Patiño, 2016; Merskin, 2004).

According to the study from Pew Research Center, 92 per cent of teens in the U.S. report going online daily and 24 per cent "almost constantly" (Lenhart, 2015) and 8 to 10-year-olds are exposed to five and a half hours of media use each day" (Jones, 2014, p. 21). The excessive use of SNSs implicates what some have called an addiction to the new technologies that may be particularly problematic to young people and difficult to treat with total abstinence, but rather through controlled use of the applications, educational interventions and parental mediation (Griffiths, 2013, Xie and Karan, 2016). Besides, to navigate and experiment with SNS may perhaps lead to sleep deprivation, cyber bullying, privacy issues or sexting (O'Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson, & Counsel on communications and media, 2011).

From the nineteenth century, the history of fashion shows that women have been required to show off some of their features - extensive cleavage, slender waist, curves, curls, heels, and tight dresses to be considered feminine, and feminine fashions were related to vulnerability of self-perception. The context for sexualization has remained in the late 20th century and has been described as "a sexualized way in which women and girls were treated by the media and by consumer commodity markets" (Gunter, 2014, p. 13). Today the girls relate to the suggestion, "show off your body" with being sexy instead of being feminine or being feminine in a very limited way (Velding, 2014).

Moreover, television programs as *Mini-me: Kid who have it all* showed “little girls who long for adult fashions” (Livingstone, 2008, p. 49).

Our interest in this model Pimenova was founded on the influence that celebrities have on the trends that children follow. Jones (2014, p. 4) stated that SNS of many celebrities induce kids the possibility to socialize with their private networks, and get the reward of “instant gratification” with the likes, comments, followers, friends and others for the videos, provocative poses and pictures posted. “For many tweens, socializing means watching and being watched, judging and being judged” (Jones, 2014, p. 24). Bissonnette (2007) concludes that these constant images in the media show how the public space has been sexualized, which has made girls think that it is normal, natural, and even necessary.

We examined how SNS are raising concerns about the sexualization of young people, who are now heavy users of these networks. We conducted an exploratory content analysis of 840 commentaries expressed by people on 24 of her images on her Instagram profile in 2015, the year before she became a professional model. Second, we explored the extent to which the children’s commentaries confirm the effects of such images on health, and well-being of the society as described by the *Task force on sexualization of children* (APA, 2007, pp. 18-34).

Research objectives

Given, this background the current study posited several research questions to inform this research.

1. To what extent are the comments on Pimenova’s Instagram images focused on sexualization, physical attractiveness and beauty as identified in the literature?
2. Do the images of Pimenova project and reinforce the more adult-like appearance?
3. Do the comments suggest the effects of sexualization on low self-esteem of girls described by APA (2007)?
4. What are the additional possible negative effects of the high exposure to physical attractiveness and beauty?

Method

A content analysis of the comments was carried out on the Instagram pictures and the related comments in English and Spanish of Pimenova’s profile during the year 2015. The coding was done by two of the three researchers. A sample of comments were taken and the two researchers worked together to establish an inter coder reliability for the

coding. Later, two researchers familiar with both languages coded the entire sample. Efforts were made to try to code each comment under one category, but if there was a possibility of the same comment being in two or more categories, they were also classified in the other categories. The months selected were January, April, August and November. The six most commented images for each month were selected after a review of twelve images and 383 comments. Comments were provided in various languages and some were expressed through visual icons e.g. 'like', 'love' or 'smile.'

The most commented English and Spanish language comments were selected given the bilingual nature of the researchers. From the review, we found that 25-35 was the average number of posts on each image. A limit was set on 35 most commented posts for each image after an analysis of twelve images and the average usable comments ranged from 30-40. A total of 24 images were selected with 840 comments.

Categories and operational definitions

The review of the first 383 comments (corresponding to 12 images) helped us to create eight categories to analyze the 840 comments on Pimenova's profile. The selection of the categories is also based on the literature review as well as the following reasons. First, we wanted to research how the types of posts on SNS lead girls to being sought by companies for modeling, film careers or other purposes. The second reason was to study the comments related to sexualization and the possible consequences of sexualization of children. For example, the seductive poses that Pimenova creates showing herself may promote her own exploitation. Third, we considered that her profile could possibly send out wrong signals to children and parents who would follow girls like her, giving much importance to the physical looks and relating them to the real success. The fourth reason relates to finding out if the comments related to expressions of inferiority complex, poor self-esteem and self-image of children are because of such exposure. Finally, we have considered the deep concern of SNS as a platform where privacy is compromised for such exposure.

The following eight categories guided the analysis.

1. Sexual appearance or behavior: References made to female body parts and shapes culturally associated with adult sexuality. For example, a mention of eyes, lips, breasts, curves, legs, bottom (Bragg, Buckingham, Russell, & Willet, 2011), suggestive clothes, heavy make-up, adult hairstyle, sexual poses.
2. Absence of a child's perspective: This refers to the natural look or behavior that would be more related to the child's age (Kenway & Bullen, p.179). The emphasis was on a surprising and unbelievable appearance of her young age, clothes typical for adults. Dark colors, poses, behaviors that look like an adult, lack of the naturalness and spontaneity typical of children.

3. Physical attractiveness: a) Love/admiration: comments on how beautiful she is, how much they love her, etc. b) Envy/jealously/ low self-esteem/low self-image: comments on how much her images led to comparison with others. For example; prettier than me, I feel like a potato, why is she so pretty, I wish I were you. c) Extreme behavior: I hate her/myself looking at her. For example; I feel like dying, I can't stand; I want a daughter like her. d) Dislike: For example, I don't think she is beautiful; I like others more than her.
4. Comparison to a celebrity: Famous, similarity to popular actresses in her looks and figure.
5. Stimulus to danger: Comments expressing lost childhood, (shock, creepy), and exposure leading to attracting older boys, and the use of images for pedophilia and pornography, child abuse, parents making money (exploiting) or pleasure from the child.
6. Similarity with dolls and angels: Comments comparing to unusual persons, goddesses, angels, princesses, flawless complexion, fake eyes (contacts) or fake hair (dyed), retouched by Photoshop. For example, her look is similar to a Barbie, looks like an angel.
7. Success: Focus on the number of likes & followers, boys that want to date her, comments that predict a lucky future. For example, the prettiest in the world, she is lucky to have everything, the best.
8. Others: This category included those comments less frequent that could not be in other seven categories already described. They included interesting and unusual comments that can be very significant to the data.

Results

Among the comments, the highest percentage (67 per cent) was for the comments on physical attractiveness - love, envy and extreme behavior followed by absence of child's perspective (22 per cent) where people commented on her unbelievable appearance wearing clothes and poses typical for an adult. This was followed by references to dolls and perfect appearance (12 per cent), and the other categories that were less than 10 percent included; 7 per cent on sexual appeal or behavior and 7 per cent on commenting on her success. Some of the comments that related to sexual appeal were: "You are very hot," "cool ass <3," "If she was older I would have a crush on her," "Sensuality....," "hunk," "Does she even need makeup?"; "I love your eyes and your hair," "How are you so fit, like you look so pretty and sexy," "Perfect girl.. :) *.* but how perfect in bed? *.*".(see Table 1)

Table 1. Comments' categories

Categories	%
Physical Attraction- love, envy/rejection/extreme behavior	67
Absence of a child's perspective	22
Doll/Barbie/perfection/Fake	12
Sexual attractiveness	7
Success	7
Comparison to celebrities	6
Stimulus to danger	3

Note: Multiple categories possible

The category Physical attractiveness and love was subdivided into different comments, from love, to envy, extreme reactions and dislike (see Table 2). Hence, among the 562 comments (67 per cent) the most frequent remarks are those that reflected love and admiration (36 per cent) and these included: "I have never seen a girl prettier than u," "She is the meaning of beauty," "Such a nice face," "You are really pretty and an awesome model," "Oh my baby you are so much," "What a sweet girl." The 133 comments (16 per cent) that related to envy or low self-esteem included: "This -is nuts, a ten-year-old is 1000000X more gorgeous than me," "I'm here looking like a potato," "This is so unfair," "she's like 10 and she makes me feel insecure," "I am done," "You are very pretty I want to be like you."

Table 2. Comments on physical attraction

Category Love/Rejection	%
Love, attractiveness	36
Envy and low self esteem	16
Extreme reactions	8
Dislike	7
NA	33

For the third category, classified as "extreme reactions" (8 per cent), some of the examples include: "If I had her alone," "I'm crying, my self-esteem level dropped so much," "I hate this girl," "I fucking hate both this girl and that dumb ass bitch Maddie Ziegler" and "Lets walk to hell." In relation to the comments that related to dislike (7 per cent), "You look ugly," "she is not pretty," "no, she's not, she's the most beautiful girl in the world!!!!," "really, she's the ugly one," "My goodness! Rental of advertising space on this forehead!" "Creepy," "Disgusting," "Her smiling and showing her teeth will look way better than a straight face."

There was also a significant result (22 per cent), in the category "absence of a child's perspective" and included comments like: "She is just 10 and she dyed her hair," "she

doesn't have to act mature at her age, she needs a normal life, she is still a child." I will get over it when I want to, I am saying she is trying to act like a teenager when she is only 9", "Those aren't appropriate clothes for a 9 year old," "she is ten!!," "You are just a child wtf?," "And she's only nine," "A little girl with iPhone 6... Omg that generation," "She is just 10 years old. I guess I need plastic surgery: P"

The other categories gathered fewer comments although the type of statements do not reflect the number and content like the previous ones. The category "doll like" and "fake unreal looks" (12 per cent) was represented by a variety of remarks that were collected from references to dolls to opinions about the fake photographs. Some of the comments were: "Are you even real???", "she looks like a Barbie," "Is she real? Too much," "she's unreal," "It's weird, her hair looks brown in some photos and blonde in some," "Beautiful Barbie, angelic," "straight alien," "ooo dolly face," "Living doll...", "she is so flawless," "She has natural big blue eyes but in most of her pictures they edited with Photoshop to make them look better." The category of comments on Pimenova's success (7 per cent), included statements like; "She could get so many guys," "Lucky omg! Cool." "Good luck to your one million followers," "This girl has everything in life," "the most beautiful girl," "you're beautiful and when you're an adult, one lucky handsome man is lucky to have you as his wife," "she's a model and makes money so she worked for that (buy an Iphone 6)."

Finally, the category of stimulus to danger had 26 comments (2per cent) and included comments like "Omg! And why are u stalking an account 31 weeks ago," "have you guys seen her? I swear if only she's 18, I would have serious gay crush on her but I can wait," "I just can't look at her as a little girl, with all that make up and grown up hair is just uugh, if I was her mum, I just can't, I am sorry I don't like little girls modeling I think it is dangerous for all crazy predators in the world," "Poor kids! So much pressure at such a young age!" "I'm obsessed," "She is 9, she should wear longer shorts," "If you'd like I could say who I got the photos from and tag you. I would just love to use your photos for my account," and "why are kids skipping the awkward ugly stages? Do your time."

The other comments mentioned focused on aspects such as her being self-centered, her origin as Russian, rich; blessings, comparison and wishes they had a daughter like her, humor in the comparison with her beauty with remarks, that included: "white woman," "black woman," "I'm pretty sure I am gay because of her," "that's just stupid loving a 10-year-old when you are older."

Discussion

Sexualization of children in the media has drawn much literature in feminist, advertising, visual and psychological studies. The literature and documentaries produced on this topic demonstrate the impact of such exposure on children's self-image, self-esteem and health among other problems (Bissonnette, 2007; Massie, 2001; Macmillan, 2007; Palmer, Hogan & Legerrier, 2012; Roberts, 2014). In addition, while some authors con-

sider that these images will make self-centered and narcissistic people, others think that it helps them to deal with adolescence. The more recent report *One in three: Internet Governance and Children's rights* (Livingstone, Carr, & Byrne, 2015, p. 3) points out that one of the risks for children online is that "they can be particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse, which includes not only violent behavior, but also any sexual activity with children below the age of sexual consent." In expanding the use of new media, we extended our study into the visual context of SNS that have become the focus of media attention as used by young and old alike. We studied the possible risks of visual exposure through pictures posted and the comments of a famous child celebrity, Kristina Pimenova. Though the role of SNS in the context of visual media like Instagram is still emerging as explicated in this exploratory study, it is important to measure the social development of this sex-saturated exposure and instant-gratification of kids in the age of social media.

Here, we can affirm that in the 21st century the new media technologies of internet and SNS are providing a scenario for sexual self-promotion of girls. It was evident from the results of this study on the comments posted on the pictures of 10-year-old Russian girl, Pimenova. It correlates with Merskin's (2004) concern about the acceptability of the Lolita role in fashion advertising, where she expressed that these sexualized portrayals of girls with the ideology to fetishize innocence and vulnerability are leading to physical and emotional violence. Merskin concludes that the inappropriate sexual context of these representations of pre-pubescent postures, make up, clothing and look communicates availability and willingness. This context also "has the potential to contribute to the ongoing and increasing problem of child sexual abuse" (Merskin, 2004, p.127) and internet facilitates the circulation of pornography. "Even looking at a picture of a child has become, at times, a suspect activity" (Livingstone, 2008, p. 38).

The most prominent cluster in this study - 'love or attractiveness' based on Pimenova's physical appearance also tends to imply a sexual meaning as a way of objectification of women. The majority of comments were in praise of her beauty; their obsession with beauty, love and admiration, the feelings that show contrasts with how people idealize her or are envious of her beauty. The portrayal of some styles for adults like physical attractiveness, love and intimacy could correspond with most of the characteristics attributed to the beauty myth (Bragg et al., 2011) and "the desired female look as mostly young, thin and attractive" (Lemish, 2010, p. 55). Velding (2014) researching the role of tween girls' femininity in the fashion magazine, *Girls' Life*, also found that sometimes their appearance and feminine beauty ideals make them look older than their age.

The comments also highlight the absence of a child's perspective where Pimenova was portrayed in adult roles. A more "adult-like appearance" and the "grown-up behaviors" are exposed as a social problem (Gunter, 2014, p. 13). Regarding the type of clothing in making tweens look sexually mature, we agree with the explanation of Bragg et al. (2011, pp. 280-282), "the role of commercial market and sexual imagery is also complex as the transition from child to adult is becoming more ambiguous." As an example, they

mention, “many clothing items aimed at young people are exact copies of fashion aimed at adults” (Bragg et al. 2011, p. 283). This posits a question.. Should a kid look like an adult, or can an adult wear a childlike look?

Finally, in relation to the APA (2007) effects of sexualization of children, a significant sample of comments expressed low self-esteem, dislike or even criticize Pimenova’s images as inappropriate for her age. These remarks are voluntary expressions, true sentiments, and yield a real picture of people’s feelings, attitudes and self-disclosures. Most of these include their sense of openness in comparing themselves, lack of motivation to compete, self-denial and self-pity. This study only looked at the images of one young very beautiful girl, it would be interesting to research and compare the comments on images of other young girls to assess the differences in the comments.

This exploratory study despite its limitations of a small sample examined the impact of sexualization of young girls through the images and the responses of people on the images. The spontaneous and natural responses to the beautiful pictures of Pimenova posted on Instagram, brought in interesting comments. The responses clearly advocate the mixed responses to aspects of physical attractions including admiration, envy and low self-esteem, along with anger on the pictures showing the ten-year-old in adult clothes, hair and looks thereby depriving the kids of their childhood. Therefore, children’s and adults statements on these SNS platforms frequently reveal stress, low self-esteem and competitiveness, which are to be noted, and alert young girls, as there is no limit to the access to information particularly on the SNS, that have become avenues for circulating the good, the bad and the ugly.

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