“It’s the time you got to wear whatever you wanted”: Pre-teen girls negotiating gender, sexuality and age through fashion

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Worries about the marketing of fashion to pre-teen girls and the power of fashionable clothes to sexualize these girls, have been on-going for some time. However, there is little research with this age of girls that explicitly explores the ways in which fashionable clothes are understood and worn by the girls themselves and the impact on their sense of identity. Yet girls are increasingly considered in childhood sociology to be competent social actors able to articulate something of their own interactions and understanding of their social worlds. This study uses focus groups, participant photography and interviews with 32 predominately white, middle-class girls from the South of England, to examine pre-teen girls’ fashion practices to address this gap in knowledge. This article argues that young girls are active and thoughtful in their consumption of dress, aware of the construction of gender norms in responding to aged sexual expectations as they decide what to wear. In considering the context of their constructions of aged, gendered and (a)sexualized identity, girls code-switched between identity forms, actively constituting their subjectivity through clothing.

Keywords: fashion; pre-teen; femininity; sexuality; age; code-switching;

# Introduction

“Marks & Spencer attacked for selling padded bras to girls as young as nine” (Crisp 2018), states an article in the UK-based newspaper the *Daily Telegraph*, reporting on public disquiet around clothes thought inappropriate for young girls. These bras are considered part of the “sexualisation” of children (Crisp 2018). Crisp’s (2018) piece is emblematic of the popular debate about the links between twenty-first century consumer culture and the potential premature sexualization of pre-teen girls in Britain. Adults are clearly worried about the notion that certain garments will have a sexualizing effect on girls, however there is often no explicit discussion of what this sexualizing involves (Barker and Duschinsky 2012), nor is there much research with girls drawn on, to support the claims of a negative impact on the growing up process. As Edwards (2020, 711) points out “sexualisation and children’s fashion then is all about the product and its production and not its consumption, which at almost every level remains a silent mystery.” Given that this sexualization is considered in the popular debate as a gendered concept, this paper focusses on this consumption of fashion by pre-teen girls. The main aim is to consider girls’ everyday practices of dressing in relation to gender and sexuality, offering some clues to begin to unravel the mystery that Edwards (2020) highlights.

## Sexualized contemporary childhood

Contemporary Western capitalist society is discussed as being highly sexualized (McNair 2002; Attwood 2009) and girls are surrounded by a consumer and popular culture that is declared by many government reviews (such as the Bailey Review [2011]), popular psychology and parenting texts, and cultural commentators, to sexualize girls (for further discussion see Blanchard-Emmerson [2017]; Vänskä [2020]). In relation to dress, this sexualization potentially includes the wearing of clothes, fabrics and cosmetics associated with adult women, such as dress that is figure-hugging, skimpy, padded on the breast area, or involves slogans and symbols associated with the sex industry, like the Playboy bunny. The adult critics of these ‘sexy’ clothes on young girls, express concern around the likelihood of negative body image, early sexual activity, assault from pedophiles and mental health issues (see Blanchard-Emmerson [2017] for further discussion).

Children are physically and cognitively immature and dependent on adults for some or all their needs, yet the ways in which children are treated and immaturity is understood, is not simply explained by biological development and dependency (Jenks 1996). Childhood is perceived as a stable period when children are passive, vulnerable and incompetent, and therefore particularly at risk from harm. The construction of childhood has come to symbolize all that is natural and traditional (Jenks 1996), so the constant concern about childhood being at an end reflects wider fears about change in contemporary life. As Prout (2000) explains, in a world increasingly seen as shifting and uncertain, children, because they are regarded as unfinished, are considered a good target for attempts to control the future. To protect children is to invest in the future (Jenks 1996; Prout 2000) and the envisaged ills of society should be solved for the sake of children but ultimately for futurity. Consequently there have been panics about children “at risk” from predatory pedophiles, violent video games and television, and sexually explicit girls’ magazines (MacDonald 2003). [[1]](#footnote-1) Invoking the figure of the child can sometimes be considered as part of the “politics of substitution” (Jenkins cited in Thompson [1998: 21] and Buckingham [2012: 17]), whereby using fears about children gains public support, so campaigns against homosexuality have sometimes been redefined as campaigns against pedophiles (Buckingham 2012: 17). Not that these are false concerns; in fact, the campaigns are so potent because they build on pre-existing fears, for example about the power of the media, advances in technology or women’s active sexuality. Therefore, whilst there is concern about actual children, some of the popular apprehension expressed is implicitly about wider social, cultural, and technological change within contemporary society (Prout 2000).

Critics of the emotive language and unsubstantiated claims used in contemporary debates about the commercialization and sexualization of childhood, such as Bragg et al.(2011),Smith and Attwood (2011), Barker and Duschinksy (2012) and Edwards (2020) indicate that the apprehension about young girls is linked to wider anxiety about what is considered an increasingly consumerist and sexually explicit Western culture. In this particular concern a whole range of social issues are conflated (Smith and Attwood 2011), for example gender stereotyping is subsumed under the umbrella of sexualization but seen by the Bailey Review (2011) as less problematic (Barker and Duschinsky 2012). Whereas Barker and Duschinsky (2012, 307) argue that academics need to think critically about current social norms that encourage people to adhere to rigid gender roles and regard sexuality in relation to children as inherently problematic. Bragg et al (2011) assert that the government reports ignore the social and cultural contexts of sexuality, how sexual meanings are established and negotiated and how children interpret or use sexual content. Gender stereotyping and the backdrop of popular concern about girls’ sexual display shapes the way girls are treated and learn to think of themselves as gendered, (a)sexualized people. There is a gap in academia around girls’ consumption of fashion in relation to gender norms, sexual meanings of fashion and how their own sexuality is negotiated through dress.

Next, this article reviews scholarly work to consider what is already known about young girls, and the relationship between fashion, gender, and sexuality, to develop the research questions. The paper then considers which methods are appropriate to address those questions, detailing ethical considerations, data-gathering and analysis. The findings are discussed in relation to three main themes uncovered: girls’ understandings of gender and sexuality, the engagement with these social factors as context specific, and finally that context-related performances of gender and sexuality also intersect with expectations about age. The article ends with a discussion weighing up the findings against what has previously been discovered, suggesting the knowingness of girls’ carefully considered negotiations of aged, gender and hetero-sexualized performances. Yet, simultaneously highlighting the limits of participants’ agency to rebel against social expectations and the need for further research.

# Literature review

Whilst popular accounts about pre-teen’s sexualization through fashion concentrate on adult voices, contemporary sociology of childhood marks a shift to considering children as actors, able to reflect on and express opinions about their own social worlds (James et al. 2005). From this perspective, children are not seen as merely passive recipients imprinted upon by society but as agents constructing and maintaining their social and cultural worlds (Renold 2005), doing and re-doing their identities (Renold 2005; Russell and Tyler 2002). Although the new paradigm in childhood studies researches children as agents, few who take up this paradigm examine children’s consumer lives (see Cook [2008] and Edwards [2020] for critiques of this absence).

There has begun to be consideration of the place that consumer goods, such as cosmetics, plays in pre-teen girls’ lives and some discussion about the negotiation of gender and age (Russell and Tyler 2002), but fashion and the interplay between gender and sexuality in young girls’ lives has received less empirical attention. Yet fashion has long been noted as important in relation to cultural norms and social roles (Simmel 1905/1997) and can be argued to give material form to our constitution of identity, through which we become people (Entwistle 2015; Jenss and Hofmann 2020; Woodward and Fisher 2014). These dressed identities are always shaped by expectations of class, gender, age, ethnicity, and sexuality (Entwistle and Wilson 2001); the apprehension about girls and dress is at once specifically about their age and yet can also be situated within a long-standing historical concern about women, sexuality, and dress, in which women’s relationship to dress is viewed as a moral problem (Wilson, 2005; Edwards, 2020). Tseëlon (1995: 34) suggests that there is a complex connection between sex, gender and sexuality, and the female body, femininity and sexuality are frequently conflated; the female body to be socially acceptable must be appropriately feminine, which involves moderated sexual display (Bordo 2003; Tseëlon 1995; Wilson 1985/2005). Skeggs (1997; 2004) contends that the Western European ideal of femininity is white, asexual, hetero-feminine and middle-class; resulting in women and girls conveying their aversion to excessive displays of sexuality and projecting it onto others.

Yet current popular culture shows girls that becoming hyper-feminine, wearing revealing clothes and cosmetics, brings success, as Jackson et al. (2013) argue. Francis et al (2017) explain hyper-femininity as constructing a heterosexually attractive appearance and wanting to attract the male gaze. Research with primary school-aged girls demonstrates that girls are aware of this stereotypical feminine behavior and aesthetic but refer to it is as becoming a “girlie-girl” (Paechter 2006; Renold 2005). The discourse of childhood innocence further emphasizes the need for girls to negotiate girlie-girl subjectivity carefully and construct what is considered age-appropriate femininity and avoid castigation as unacceptably sexual (Jackson et al. 2013; Renold 2005). The identity that is often posited by girls as in opposition to that of girlie-girl is tomboy, which involves dressing and behaving in ways associated with boys (Reay 2001; Paechter 2010). Whilst this transgressive subject position offers an alternative identity construction, it simultaneously reinforces the gender binary by denigrating femininity and suggesting that masculinity is superior (Reay 2001).

It is important to consider the ways in which girls negotiate these competing discourses of hyper-feminine sexual display and childhood innocence, and subjectivities of girlie-girl and tomboy. Paechter (2010) suggests that young girls realize that subject positions are not fixed and, for example, that it is possible to be a “bit tomboy” (Paechter 2010). Code-switching is a concept referring to changes in use of language or dialect by bi-lingual speakers, relating to their gendered and raced performances, in response to audience and context (Holland 2012; Gonsalves 2014). Code-switching can also be applied to the use of other forms of cultural capital such as clothing styles (Holland 2012). This article suggests that code-switching can be usefully applied to consider girls’ identity constructions through dress, both in terms of their gendered performances but also their awareness of the social expectations of dress and behavior relating to different occasions, places, and activities (Craik 1993).

The fashionable items of dress referred to in the popular concern have shifting relational meanings, depending on the body which they are (un)covering, when and where they are worn and who is doing the looking (Blanchard-Emmerson 2017; Edwards 2020; Jackson et al. 2013). What is lacking in the existent research is the ways in which the discourses of gender, sexuality and age-appropriate dressing are negotiated by pre-teen girls on their bodies, and the materiality of dress in pre-teen girls’ everyday experiences of dressing. Fashion is not only discursive, but also material, embodied, and an everyday practice that is lived in and acts on individual bodies (Entwistle 2015; Jenss and Hofmann 2020; Woodward and Fisher 2014). The resultant research questions are: how do white, middle-class girls of 8 to 9 and 10 to 11-years old understand the discourses of fashion and of childhood, and the material garments they choose to wear on their bodies? What part does fashion play in their understanding of personhood in relation to social expectations about their gender, age and their (a)sexuality? How do pre-teen girls create and negotiate contemporary young feminine identities through dress? Next, this article addresses what methods were used to tackle these research questions.

# Methodology

To explore what 8 to 11-year-old girls’ consumption of dress tell us about the creation and negotiation of contemporary young feminine identities, this article draws on research conducted with a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research enables an in-depth drawing out of girls’ experiences and practices in relation to fashion consumption (Woodward 2007). Participants aged 8 to 11-years-old were sought, as these ages are within the pre-teen group that the popular concern, discussed earlier, focusses on. At these ages, girls are also still within primary school, rather than secondary education, and therefore subject to a specific set of aged expectations. This social and sexual generationing implies that children in primary schooling are particularly innocent and passive (Renold 2005), an idea this research aims to explore. To provide comparison between age classes, the groups were segregated by school year: Year 4, which is children 8 to 9-years-old and Year 6, which is children 10 to 11-years-old. By choosing age groups that were two school years apart, the aim was to examine similarities and differences in terms of knowledge and agency.

In order not to have to attend to too many variables such as ethnicity and class, in addition to age, and to concentrate instead on the complexities and intricacies of girls’ engagement with the discourses of fashion, the materiality of dress and their construction of identity, this study focuses on white, middle-class girls. Accordingly, schools were sought in the predominantly white, middle-class, small city of Bridworth[[2]](#footnote-2) in the South of England. Seeking to avoid further entrenching of colour- and class-blindness, in a debate that is anything but, it is important to acknowledge that white, middle-classness is an embodied construction and to consider how different aged girls constitute it (Francombe-Webb and Silk 2015).

All research with human participants carried out by researchers from University of Southampton undergoes a rigorous ethics procedure, with ethical approval needed before research can be carried out. Documents referred to below, including letter to schools, information sheets, consent forms, lists of questions to be asked of participants and a Risk Assessment form were logged and filed within the Research Governance Office. In sociological considerations of ethics, the importance of informed consent is central (British Sociological Association 2002; Wiles et al.2007) and is much discussed in literature about research with children (James et al. 2005; Cocks 2006). Informed consent is about explaining what the research is about, why it is being carried out and how it will be used, so that the participants can make an enlightened decision as to whether to take part. In research with children however, access is often gained to participants through the agreement of adult gate-keepers such as parents and teachers. So, for ease of acquiring access, and to ensure appropriate institutional ethical requirements were met, both head teachers and parents were consulted with reference to the research.

A letter was sent to the Head-teacher of the primary schools in the first instance, to ask if research could be conducted in their school. This letter assured the schools that the researcher had an enhanced disclosure from the Criminal Records Bureau (a CRB check, now known as a DBS check). The researcher then met with the Head-teacher at one school and the Student Research Co-ordinator at the other, to talk through the research and discuss matters such as anonymity, confidentiality, and consent, to minimise difficulties with issues such as pressure to take part and the ethical duty not to feedback to teachers. The Head-teacher at the first school talked to all the schools’ form groups about the study, at the second school a letter was sent home to all girls in the relevant years; those interested had information sheets and consent forms sent to them and their parents.

Whilst parental consent was sought, in keeping with the methodological perspective of treating children as social actors, the research was explained to the girls themselves through an information sheet and their informed consent sought. Many researchers are confident that information can be provided in an appropriate way as to gain good, informed consent with children (Wiles et al. 2007). There was also a gap of at least a week between giving the information, and the consent forms needing to be returned, which enabled the potential informants time to think about what they were being asked to do, before assenting to the research. Signed forms were received from the girls (and their parents) who still wanted to participate. Before carrying out the study participants were reminded about anonymity and how pseudonyms would be used (British Sociological Association 2002), and many groups then talked about how authors sometimes did the same, or talked about what their pseudonyms could be, thereby signaling their understanding.

Multiple qualitative methods were used to create breadth, complexity, and richness in the data (Brannen 2005; Mason 2006); three methods were chosen to produce a multi-faceted picture of the experience of fashion for pre-teen girls. Firstly, focus groups were carried out with 32 girls aged 8 to 9-years old and 10 to 11-years-old to investigate the negotiation of fashionability, gender and sexuality, and to gain a collective understanding, as fashion is a social phenomenon (Zaslow 2009). All bar the last focus group took place on days where instead of their usual school uniform, girls were wearing their own clothes. Secondly, the participants were then asked to take photographs (Pink 2021; Knowles and Sweetman 2004) of their favorite outfits (the clothes, but not the girls wearing them). These photographs allowed girls to make their own choices about which clothes are important to them; they also captured some of the visual and material aspects of fashion that are intrinsic to why certain clothes are worn. Some girls did not bring back their cameras for processing. Despite issuing more cameras, and extending the deadline, there were eleven girls who did not bring back their cameras overall, suggesting that some may have been exerting their right to drop out of the research.

Finally, interviews were conducted individually with each of the 21 girls who took photographs, to draw out meanings in relation to those photographs (Pink 2021). Guest et al. (2006) argue that data theme saturation occurs after twelve interviews, with main themes present after six. However, given the effort that the participants had gone to do their photography, all who had taken photographs were interviewed. Girls set the agenda for the interview in their choice of what they photographed, and which photographs they showed the researcher. The intention was to access some of the personal relationship that participants have with worn and lived material garments through their narration of the image. All focus groups and interviews took place during the school day, with the first two focus groups and five interviews conducted between December 2010 and January 2011. The subsequent four focus groups and sixteen interviews were carried out in June 2013.

Despite the age of the data, the context of the dichotomy between the notion of the successful hyper-feminine girl, and the discourse of childhood innocence fueling fears around girls’ sexual display through dress, remains. In 2013, Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE) was the means through which primary school-aged children might learn about matters such as relationships, self-esteem and body image at school (OFSTED 2013). However, PSHE was not a legal requirement, and the lack of provision was criticized by the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (OFSTED) as failing children, leaving them ‘vulnerable to inappropriate sexual behaviours and sexual exploitation’ (OFSTED 2013: 10). Despite Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) now being statutory, Newby and Mathieu-Chartier (2018) argue that it is still far from high-quality, and programs to develop primary school-aged girls understanding of their bodies, gender and sexuality are in their infancy. Therefore, the data discussed here can still offer valid insights about how girls negotiated their gendered, sexualized identities through dress.

The data was analyzed through thematic analysis (Nowell et al 2017), the first stage was becoming acquainted with the data, transcribing recordings, noting speech, gestures, and facial expressions to capture girls’ constitution of themselves as embodied subjects (Jewitt 2009). Listening to and watching recordings repeatedly promoted familiarity with the data (Bezemer 2014) and allowed for concepts to arise inductively from the data itself, which were coded and classified. Thematic analysis of the focus groups and interviews of both age classes uncovered three major themes in relation to gender, sexuality, and fashion. The first theme was the recognition of the social construction of gender and heterosexualized appearance, the second was gendered, heterosexualized performances as context specific and finally gendered, heterosexualized performance as also aged, dependent on context. As the themes arose similarly in both focus groups and interviews, excerpts are chosen from whichever best exemplified the theme.

# Findings:

In response to the aims of considering how these pre-teen girls understand gender stereotypes and negotiate their gender and sexuality through their consumption of fashion, the first set of findings are about the participants’ understandings of gender and gendering through dress in terms of the hyper-feminine girlie-girl and the masculine tomboy. The second set of findings indicate the participants’ recognition of various contexts where social norms dictate differing forms of femininity and overt sexuality are expected to be constructed through dress. The final set of findings explored relate to the respondents’ knowledge about the notion that these various forms of femininity were also specifically aged, responding to current concerns about pre-teen girls’ sexual display. Fitting with the research aims exemplified by the multi-method qualitative approach, this article draws on both the collective understanding gathered from the focus groups and, in fleshing out the experiences of girl’s embodied relationships with the material items of dress, on individual participant’s clothing practices and their relationship with a specific piece of clothing.

## Fashion, the social construction of gender and heterosexualized performance

This section explores girls’ engagement with gendering through dress and their understanding of the relationship between hyperfeminininty and heterosexuality, but also their awareness of the social-constructedness of gendered positions such as girlie-girl and tomboy. Next, findings about the ways in which adults reinforce gender binaries are discussed, which is countered with a discussion of participants still maintaining some flexibility in terms of their gendered subjectivity.

Participants explicitly discussed, and engaged with, the stereotypical hyper-feminine subject position of girlie-girl (Reay 2001; Renold 2005), with conversations about liking the highly gendered color, pink (Koller 2008), wearing fashion, particularly short skirts and shorts, skinny jeans and crop-tops, cosmetics and perfume, and the importance of cleanliness (Klepp 2007; Blanchard-Emmerson 2017). Girlie behavior involved the pressure to keep up appearances (as Skeggs [1997] found with adult women), such as changing outfits multiple times a day and worrying about dirtying their clothes. Most of the participants were interested in fashion, and understood its relation to becoming heterosexually attractive, just as previous research has shown (Renold 2005; Blanchard-Emmerson 2017; Blanchard-Emmerson 2021).

Yet Focus Group 1 recognized that the enactment of stereotypical girlie behavior, and ways of dressing, were socially constructed. For example, that there was not an automatic correlation between becoming girlie and liking pink. Amy, a self-identified girlie-girl, starts: Focus Group 1 (Aged 8-9)

Amy: I don’t wear pink

Emily: ((getting up and pointing at Shannon, the self-identified tomboy)) And you have to wear blue! Ha ha!

Shannon: No you don’t, I like brown

Amy: ((looking at Shannon)) She’s wearing pink

Emily: ((in sing song voice)) You’re wearing pink!

Shannon: I don’t really like it but

Amy: My favorite color’s blue

Emily: My favorite color’s pinky

Shannon: My favorite color’s brown as poo!

Amy explained that just because she was girlie does not mean that she wore pink, and instead her favorite color was blue, which is identified with boys (Entwistle 2015; Martin 2010). It was also inferred to be the supposed color that a tomboy would wear, as in Shannon’s interview and other focus groups, tomboys’ behavior and dress is linked to that of boys, such as wearing trousers, playing sport with boys, and not minding getting dirty (as Paechter [2010] also discusses). However, in this focus group, tomboy Shannon was wearing pink, her favorite color was brown, and she argued that she did not have to wear blue. Girls demonstrate here that your personal choices may be in direct opposition to the prescribed aesthetic for the gendered identity you were enacting, thereby acknowledging that gendered expectations are socially constructed and need not be followed.

On the other hand, by not conforming to gendered expectations, misidentifications can occur; a couple of the girlie-girls in Focus Group 2 recounted being previously mistaken by members of their family as tomboys. They understood that this misinterpretation was because they weren’t wearing fashionable clothing at the time, as Lauren described how “everyone in my family thinks I’m a tomboy because they haven’t seen me wear fashionable stuff”. The norm of the fashionable, feminine girl was so hegemonic that adults associated any dress practice that did not involve fashionable clothes with something Other to the norm, that of the tomboy identity. These girls acknowledged that identities created were always unstable and must be constantly reiterated (Butler 1990) or the ‘wrong’ identity may be attached to you. Adults could be seen to be part of the structuring forces shaping girls’ understanding, that to be considered appropriately feminine girls they must always keep up their fashionable identity, or risk misinterpretation of their identity construction.

There were girls within the research who described themselves as a little bit tomboy. In Paechter’s (2010) work, being a bit tomboy, or doing tomboy periodically, was something that girls grew out of to become girlie-girls as they aged towards the last year of primary school (aged 10-11-years old). However, in Focus Group 5 (ages 10 and 11-years old) there was talk of still being a tomboy and Poppy, for example, said “I’m kind of into fashion, I’m kind of not. Sometimes I’m really tomboy and I wear like dungarees and stuff like that”. Here Poppy maintains the flexibility to move between subjectivities, through alternating between girlie fashion and masculinized dungarees. When and where transitions between different gendered identities take place is explored next.

## Gender and heterosexualized performances as context specific

Even when not explicitly engaging with girlie or tomboy subjectivities, girls in the study showed an understanding of the differing expectations of gendered performance depending on various social contexts, and demonstrated fluidity of their gendered identities. Woodward (2007), in her study of adult women, describes an everyday performance of self through dress as about constructing a safe, habitual, routine identity. For Emma (aged 10), her habitual persona was performed through outfits like the one photographed in Figure 1, discussed in her interview:



Figure Emma’s “raggedy” trousers and “normal” t-shirt

Sometimes I can be quite outdoorsy, so when we go on a walk or stuff, I’ll normally wear those trousers because like they’re quite raggedy they’ve already got a few holes on, so I don’t really mind getting them mucky and stuff. And then I just wear a normal t-shirt that I don’t really mind getting grubby

This “normal” clothing was well-worn and fine to get dirty; and through which, depending on time and activity, Emma could become “outdoorsy”. Woodward (2007) explains that one of the defining features of habitual clothing is that women are comfortable wearing it and the items have been lived in to such an extent that they soften to the body. Clearly there are garments, such Emma’s worn, torn, “raggedy” trousers, that girls also have this embodied and material relationship with. As seen earlier, wearing trousers, and not caring about getting muddy are ascribed to the masculinized tomboy identity. However, Emma does not identify as a tomboy, instead her construction of “outdoorsy” identity is actively constituted in particular ways through clothing, depending on circumstances (as Tseëlon [1995] noted with adult women).

A less regular occurrence was the special occasion, and special clothes were saved only for the most infrequent of events, therefore were non-habitual clothes (Woodward 2007, 140). In Woodward’s (2007) study with adult women, non-habitual items provided a contrast to women’s ordinary selves that they create through dress and allowed them to try out a new identity through clothing. Particular items of clothing were discussed as being appropriate to wear for these special events, such as skirts (Lauren), dresses (Anna; Alice; Bethany; Emma; Lucie; Sara) and high heels (Amy; Anna; Lauren; Lucie; Melissa; Millie) and wearing make-up was also acceptable for these occasions (Ella; Lauren; Melissa; Focus Group 3; Focus Group 4). All these ways of presenting the body for these distinctive, celebratory circumstances involved highly feminized, hetero-sexualized forms of adornment, as Entwistle states, in “formal situations one also finds conventional codes of gender more rigidly enforced than in informal settings” (Entwistle 2015, 38). Emma explained that although she was “outdoorsy” and did not like wearing dresses, “when I think I need to wear one, I’ll wear one” (see Figure 2).



Figure Emma’s special occasion dress

Therefore, the awareness of social codes and *when* there is a “need” to wear a dress, Emma conforms to the expectations of an event and was able to create a different type of identity, an aspect of the self that was not present normally (Woodward 2007, 141). Social expectations for girls at these events meant presenting themselves in ways usually associated with adult femininity. However, their dressed performance also challenges popular preconceptions about sexualized body presentation, in that the girls were aware that it was only at these events that they are allowed to perform this type of femininity. It was these dress codes that allow the girls to try out a more explicit form of feminine identity (Woodward 2007, 140).

Emma was amongst many of the girls, in the focus groups and interviews, who referred to adjusting their performances of femininity depending on time and place, moving between identities, sometimes exploring routine selves and at others, non-habitual more feminine versions of themselves. This spatially-located movement between multiple subjectivities could be seen as form of code-switching (Gonsalves 2014, 518). In this study, girls were able to perform this kind of code-switching, in terms of dressing and becoming various gendered forms of themselves, in response to their lived milieu.

## Aged gender and (hetero)sexualized performances as context specific

Not only do girls code-switch between different gendered forms of themselves, they also directly referred to experimenting temporarily with older, more sexualized, gendered identities too. Edwards (2020) suggests it is often claimed that children are not worrying about sexualization or about being rushed through childhood. Yet, in this research every focus group discussed age-appropriate ideas of what to wear or how to behave at different ages, and in all bar one group (Focus Group 1, aged 8-9) there was outright criticism of those who dress in ways thought too old for their age. In fact, girls actively engaged with the discourses of childhood (Pilcher 2013) as they referred to the popular belief that children were currently “growing up too fast” or were “missing childhood”.

For example, in Focus Group 5 the wearing of high heels was associated with the idea of sexy dressing that was too old for their age and related explicitly to the “growing up too fast” discourse.

Focus Group 5: Aged 10-11

Caitlin: I just don’t think it’s right for our age to wear high heels, first thing

Erin: It’s just wrong

Anya: People can grow up too fast, like get depressed. And, I mean, like they’re obviously trying to seem cool but like most people just think they’re tacky and they’re too young, they’re not cool at all

Wearing sexualized dress, such as high heels, and therefore trying to look too old, was discussed as tacky and “not cool at all”. Girls are aware of sexual generationing (Renold 2005) and the positioning of children as too young to be sexual. The opposition between tacky and cool was also a classification of taste (see Bourdieu [2010] for discussion about class and taste). Cool first developed as a term that was used to mark out what was hip and opposed to mainstream values (Nancarrow and Nancarrow 2012); today it is widely used as popular terminology to denote something or someone stylish or any other positive attribute (Runyan et al*.* 2013). The difficulty for pre-teen girls with trying to look specifically “cool” but not sexy is explored further in Rysst’s (2010) work.

However, as with the gender code-switching above, participants also expressed the ability to switch between differently aged, gendered performances. For instance, in a discussion about the school disco the following exchange took place:

Focus Group 3: Aged 8-9

Abigail: It's the time where like you're with everyone in school, where teachers don't care what happens

Ellen: It's the time you got to wear whatever you wanted

Mia: and you could kiss if you wanted

Ellen: and my mum wouldn’t really care what I wore then, but she would say like ‘You're allowed to wear this, you're allowed to wear this, but you're not allowed to wear this, on days like this’. But on the school disco you're allowed to wear what you want, even if it's like inappropriate, too grown up for you

This extract demonstrates that at the school disco highly hetero-sexualized behavior and dress are accepted; the girls could wear clothes perceived as normally too old for them such as short strapless dresses and high-heels, and wear make-up, aiming to attract boys and even kiss them. The girls recognize that this type of dressing and performance of hetero-sexualized femininity was only condoned in the regulated school environment of the disco, outside of usual school time and at which, “cosmetic culture, flirty-fashion and dirty-dancing were implicitly sanctioned (and almost expected) by staff” (Renold 2005, 48).

There was an element of Bakhtin’s (1984) concept of the carnival here, a time of celebration outside of usual daily life and everyday expectations of behavior and dress, as he describes, “during carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom” (Bakhtin 1984, 7). During carnival exaggerated fancy dress was part of an experimentation with identities outside of people’s usual experience and the thronging of the crowd allowed for sensual physical contact. Similarly at the school disco girls can put on visible make-up, wear sexualized clothing, dance with and kiss boys; allowed in this circumstance to experiment with, what is perceived as, an older sexual identity not usually condoned. This mixing of the official and unofficial school, an intermingling at the boundaries, was “a rather licensed affair, a permissible rupture of hegemony…a contained release may just be a form of social control” (Tseëlon 2001, 28). School staff allow pupils to act and dress in certain ways outside of formal school time in the hope of discouraging this sexualized clothing and behavior during the official school day. Experimenting with an older gendered, overtly sexualized identity only at this licensed occasion was understood by the girls in this study, who used dress and make-up to code-switch between different forms of femininity depending on the context of their performance.

## Discussion

This study took as its starting point that there is little knowledge about pre-teen girls’ own understandings of fashionable clothes, their fashion consumption practices and how they negotiate the relationship between gender, sexuality and fashion. Academics such as Renold (2005) and Paechter (2006) have explored girls’ engagement with the hyper-feminine, heterosexually attractive subjectivity of girlie-girl and how girls navigate it carefully, showing the body, but not too much. The data presented here suggests girls of both age classes are aware that these gendered expectations are socially constructed, that they can occupy a gendered subject position without necessarily conforming to all its associated stereotypical attributes. However, the participants did not go as far to critique the fact that these gendered stereotypes exist.

Sociologist Pilcher (2010; 2013) demonstrates that children are cognizant of social expectations to follow dress codes according to the context and occasion; this research shows that participants of both age classes recognized that these dress codes related to constituting gender in different forms for distinct occasions. Applying the concept of code-switching from sociolinguistics, this paper shows how girls constructed multiple identities through their clothing and could code-switch between gendered subjectivities, such as from a bit tomboy to becoming a girlie-girl, from outdoorsy to sometimes needing to wear a dress, habitual to non-habitual depending on the context. Renold (2005) discusses the school disco as a context during which girls knowingly explore a more sexualized identity. Data presented here confirms that at certain adult-driven events, participants of both age classes knew that adults expected, and even encouraged, hyper-feminine displays. This study adds to this discussion by determining that the participants defy adult expectations around their engagement with the discourse of childhood innocence that Edwards (2020) cites. Instead, the girls in this research critiqued perceived age-inappropriate sexual displays, through language of being over the top, showing too much and growing up too soon. However, the participants explored these older, hyper-feminine, sexualized identities on adult-sanctioned, special occasions. Pre-teen girls are growing up and learning about their sexuality against a social and cultural background in which adults both fear and deny, and then periodically permit and encourage, their overt sexuality and sexual display.

This study concentrated predominately on white, able-bodied, middle-class girls therefore further research with girls of various social classes, racialized minorities and forms of disability would highlight the ways gender, age, sexuality, social class, race, and (dis)ability intersect in girls’ performances of selfhood and are navigated through dress. As Loh (2020) argues, girls’ fashion practices in Asian contexts could also add to the predominately Western-focused studies. Additionally, given that public concern only addresses the potential sexualization of girls, the assumption is that boys’ sexuality is unproblematic. Therefore, future research is required into boys’ relationship to fashion, and how their identity construction through dress negotiates age, class, race, gender, and sexuality. Loh (2020) contends that studies about girls’ dressing in the Western context are increasing, but many works cited are about older girls, or are not specifically about fashion, and the data gathered of a similar age to that used here. This dearth of research suggests that, just as Edwards (2020) indicates, there is still research with young girls and fashion to be done in the UK context. Primary schools are getting to grips with the 2020 enforcement of statutory teaching of RSE, dealing with gender identity diversity and attempting to support trans children (Neary 2021). Consequently, change is coming in how gender and sexuality are discussed with pre-teen children. The girls in this article critiqued gender but did not outright rebel against it, revolted against aged expectations but only at socially sanctioned events. Potential research could investigate whether new RSE programs are enabling girls to consider the issues around their gendered, sexualized displays through dress, and empowering them to disrupt gendered expectations in the future.

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1. A particularly extensive example of predatory paedophiles, that was proven to be based on a great deal of fact, began in 2012 with the Jimmy Savile scandal that started a police investigation into, predominantly child, sexual abuse allegations (Greer and McLaughlin 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All names of people and places are pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)