

Too sexy to go to school: A discourse analysis of the recurring public debate on girls' dress

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**Too Sexy to go to School:
A discourse analysis of the recurring public debate
on girls' dress**

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Abstract :

In recent years, the eroticization and hypersexualization of girls in the media has gained public attention and fuelled public debate, if not controversy. In North America, a couple of books have been published, identifying a social problem that should be publicly addressed. Concerns about the detrimental effects of the phenomenon have been raised in newspaper articles and readers' letters, as well as in magazines, radio and television reports. The problem, more often associated with girls' dress and sexuality, is taken so seriously that schools have adopted concrete initiatives for containment. However, these measures have often translated into an increased control toward girls. That is, once the dress code reform was found unsuccessful in solving the so-called problem of « g-strings » and « navel rings », many public and private schools pointed to uniforms as a legitimized and final solution. More recently, in the province of Quebec, the youth wing of the Liberal Party suggested that a law should prohibit g-strings at schools. Although it was rejected, the motion itself says a lot about the general assumption that girls' dress and behaviour are social problems that must be addressed through institutional and public policies. The purpose of this presentation is to discuss preliminary results of a media discourse analysis on this controversial topic of girls, clothes, sexuality and school. Who are the experts in this debate and what do they say? Who is allowed to speak out and who is not ? Who is said to be responsible for the problematic situation? What are the institutional and political responses to the problem? What are the consequences for girls who are usually targeted by dress codes and other attempts to control their behaviour?

Too Sexy to go to School: A discourse analysis of the recurring public debate on girls' dress¹

INTRODUCTION

For parents, educators and school principals, the start of every school year marks the beginning of an exhausting struggle over clothing. During the last 5 years, the hypersexualization of girls' fashions and girls in the media has exacerbated these concerns and fuelled public anxiety. To deal with girls dressing in provocative clothing at high school, several school boards in Quebec reformed their dress codes or even introduced school uniforms. These measures of containment are usually implicitly or explicitly directed only toward girls, even though young boys' baggy clothes do not fit social norms.

Since 2000, this controversy has been intensely debated in the Quebec francophone media. A specific vocabulary has emerged to refer to the girls who wear revealing clothes. They are said to dress like Britney Spears and they are called : « les nombrils » (navel rings). But more crudely, to many people, including adolescent boys and other girls, they are just « sluts » -*My apologies for the term*. This is to say that the social imagery raised through the social discourse on hypersexualization and girls' dress is now part of our collective representations. A trace of this can be found in the brand new cartoon, *Les Nombriils*, produced by two young Quebecers and successfully exported to France earlier this year. The ongoing process of stigmatization involved here warrants a critical look at some of the assumptions embedded in the ongoing social discourse on girls' clothes and sexuality.

Today I will review the preliminary results of the media discourse analysis I conducted on the controversial topic of girls, clothes, sexuality and school. This analysis is based on material from Quebec's francophone media in a period from 2001 to 2006, including: newspapers (such as articles, editorials and readers' letters), magazines, radio and television broadcasts

¹ I acknowledge the support of the Trudeau Foundation as well as the SSHRC, which allowed me to prepare this paper and attend this annual conference. I am also grateful to my Ph. D. student colleague, Nikki Porter, for her thorough linguistic assistance on the editing process, which improved the clarity of my presentation.

(such as programmes, interviews, reports, debates and call-in shows dealing with the issue), surveys, documentaries, reports, and public events.

I had several questions in mind while looking at this material:

- Who is speaking? As well, *who is not speaking?*
- Who are the experts and what do they say? How is the problem being defined?
- Who is blamed? *And who is not?* Which solutions are being considered and undertaken?

Working from a feminist perspective, I was particularly concerned with the girls' voices within these public discussions. I wondered :« Are the girls being heard ? ».

My analysis reveals some troubling presences and absences in public discourse, that I call « paradoxes in visibility ». In this presentation, I will draw out this idea and in order to emphasize the rhetorical contradictions found in this controversy as well as in the institutional and political responses to the so-called « navel ring problem ».

THE COMMON PATTERN : GIRLS AS PROVOCATION OR AS MANIPULATED VICTIMS

A closer look at the recurring debate over how girls dress at school and their hypersexualization in the media reveals two major trends in the way that the discussion is framed: girls are either positioned as social disturbance or as manipulated victims. I found very few exceptions to this pattern.

The discussion heated up around the year 2000, with readers' letters and viewers' opinions raising concerns about the « suggestive », « inappropriate » and « offensive » clothes that girls wore in high school –and sometimes primary school. Actually, principals and male teachers made public their discomfort with girls' sexy clothes, such as visible g-strings, skimpy tank-tops and belly-shirts. Journalists then reported on what was going on in public schools: a day-to-day struggle over students' clothes –usually focusing on girls. Over the next several years, they regularly revisited the topic, particularly at the start of each school year. People thus learned that an extensive and exhausting fight had been undertaken across the province to

overcome the « invasion » of navel rings, g-strings and spaghetti straps in Quebec's public and private schools.

According to media reports, one of the more common punishments that school boards used to deal with the problem was to compel the offenders to put on ugly, oversized sweaters. Although less typical, measuring the length of skirts and shirts to ensure they appropriately covered girls' body was also reported as a regulatory measure. But obviously, these attempts to monitor and regulate girls' clothing failed to prevent them from dressing in ways that the school board considered inappropriate. In fact, the problem was so persistent that it came to be described as an « epidemic » of navel rings, g-strings and spaghetti straps. Given the difficulty in regulating the situation, a growing number of schools introduced –or even imposed- a conventional school uniform. The decision outraged many students and parents across the province, but this reaction did not gain much media attention. Nevertheless, the uniform solution has gained a growing acceptance among the public. For example, last fall, 88% of 2 000 viewers of a TV local news programme answered yes to the question: Should public schools introduce schools uniforms? (In the context of that night's news report this question was situated in relation to the on-going debate over girls dressing too sexy). Although non-scientific, this poll's result is fairly indicative of the growing social acceptance of the school uniform to govern girls who don't « respect themselves » -a recurring expression to refer to the concerned girls. I contend that this is also closely connected to the way that the discussion has been framed within the media over the years. I will return to this issue of adolescent girls facing social reprobation for adopting the mainstream fashion styles.

More recently several feminist scholars and experts challenged the male-centred perspective of this dominant discourse –girls as provocation. They contend that the problem is not that girls who wear revealing clothes are disturbing male students and teachers at school. They are rather concerned by the detrimental social pressure girls face from advertising, fashion and popular culture. This image and sex-obsessed culture teaches the girls to conform to an unreachable ideal of beauty and to look for boys' approval through heterosexual seduction and early sexual activity. According to these feminist scholars and experts, the lack of counter-discourse is likely to direct adolescent girls along a path of emotional dependence, that might expose them to sexual abuse and violence. Besides criticizing the male-centred perspective of the ongoing debate over the « navel ring problem », they show a concern about

the use -and abuse- of school measures of control targeting girls while ignoring boys. Moreover, they urge parents, educators and decision-makers to improve the current high school sex education programmes and to educate young people on egalitarian male-female relationships. In this feminist counter discourse, the girls are currently victims of the patriarchal culture of the media and fashion industries, which expose them to potential abuse. Thus, they must be protected, not controlled.

PARADOXES IN VISIBILITY

At first glance, these two perspectives may seem at odds. At a deeper level however, they often overlap even in their contradictions.

First of all, in both cases, girls are silenced. School principals, teachers, experts, parents, citizens, and commentators express their view on the problem and claim their expertise on the topic, whereas girls are seldom asked to voice their opinions and to comment on the culture that they live in. In fact, girls are at the centre of the controversy, but at the margins of the discussion; even though each perspective claims to protect the children, the girls and even the society, the girls' voices are muted. However, from a feminist perspective, we must remember that protecting those who are vulnerable has historically been a very successful argument used against women to keep them away from the public sphere.

Secondly, both perspectives blame the media for the « navel ring problem » and they made Britney Spears into an icon of the sex-obsessed media culture in which young people live. According to these so-called experts, Britney Spears' provocative lyrics and the way she dresses and behaves in her videos provide a bad example for youth. It is notable that, in this discussion, connections are often traced between adolescents' clothes and early sexual activity.

Thirdly, both approaches in the discussion blame the girls for being either (intentionally) manipulative or (unconsciously) manipulated.

In the end, whether they are positioned as a social disturbance or as victims, girls are not only silenced; they are also stigmatized, especially those who conform to the current fashion trends. And their parents are not exempt from blame: many experts and commentators

attribute the « offensive » way that girls dress in schools to their parents' lack of judgement and authority. Mothers, in particular, are under pressure, because they are accused of being too permissive and even of providing their daughter with a bad example by dressing like young girls themselves. Teen girls' magazines do not address the silencing of the girls in this controversy over girls' clothes. However, other magazines do tackle the parents' concerns. For instance, in a 2005 issue of the magazine *Parents-Ados*, an article entitled "Nos filles portent-elles des vêtements trop sexy"² deals with the issue: are the girls' clothes too sexy in schools? The reporter explains that it is crucial to understand that there are two types of sexy girls: 1) those who want to show off their bodies and 2) those who innocently enjoy fashion. The first are looking to be provocative – *and parents must be vigilant*–, the second are not aware of what they are doing – *they must be taught about the sexual meaning of clothes* (*Parents-Ados*, p. 56).

The latter example illustrates how the pattern of « girls as provocation/girls as victims » has become accepted knowledge, supported by experts and reinforced through media discourse, that privileges a certain conception of the problem. That is, the way the recurring controversy over hypersexualization has been fuelled and debated over the years is not neutral, but rather embedded in social and gendered relations of power. It does not tell the whole story: some people can voice their opinion, others cannot. In this display of visibility/invisibility, there are many troubling contradictions, that I call « paradoxes in visibility ».

For example, *adults worry about girls, arguing that they want to protect them, but nevertheless silencing them*. Furthermore, when girls are allowed to speak, their voices are disqualified. In Bouchard and Bouchard's work on preadolescent girls and teenage girls' magazines, for example, girls who endorse the mainstream fashion model are considered as ideologically manipulated. On the other hand, those who reject it must credit their parents for teaching them good judgment. In fact, their opinions are never really considered theirs to begin with. From a feminist perspective, it is crucial to reflect on the diminished status of girls' voices in our society - they are considered questionable and untrustworthy.

Another issue evident in the material is the consistent blaming of the media. Nevertheless, this blame is fairly elusive compared to the very specific blame directed at mothers and the

² « Our Daughters are Wearing Too Sexy Clothes » or « Our Daughters are Dressing Too Sexy ».

feminist movement. Indeed, Britney Spears, pop icons, advertising, the music industry and the television are blamed, but not the specific people or corporations who profit from the situation. I have not found a single instance of anyone asking why girls are punished when the media are supposedly the cause of the problem.

These visible contradictions contrast with noticeable absences I found in the material. For example, boys' and men's position toward the issue of hypersexualization is not problematized. In a television newsmagazine report (*Enjeux*), a male teacher admitted to look « at what the girls were consciously showing off ». However, the media didn't report that much on the men who actually think there is no problem, who sincerely think that is just normal for girl to try to attract men, even at 12. Although in a TV debate the blame was put on women and the feminist movement which had presumably failed to prevent the situation, blaming men - either fathers or those who enjoy looking at these young sexualized girls - seems unthinkable. However, this contrast is coherent with the unproblematized young and adult male sexuality, opposed to the moral panic over the girls' early sexual activity issue. It reminds us that in our culture, women's bodies signify sexuality while the male's body and sexuality is presumed neutral. And also that the woman's sexuality is equated with her morality.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this research is not to decide whether the problem of hypersexualization exists or not. It does exist in language, as the *Office québécois de la langue française* has confirmed in providing a definition for it (there is a power point slide showing the definition they gave to hypersexualization). Indeed, at the first-stage of the media discourse analysis I am conducting for my dissertation, I wanted to take a critical look at the assumptions embedded in the controversial discussion going on for the last five years in Quebec.

Hypersexualisation is becoming a confusing buzz word, referring simultaneously to a « shocking » fashion style, a media phenomenon and early sexuality. Girls are scrutinized and divided into groups according to binary positions such as good girls/bad girls, provocative/innocent, manipulative/unaware, and so on. Even a film documentary entitled *Les Salopettes* (« little sluts »), made by four young women in their twenties to show how teenage girls behave and dress, perpetuates these dichotomies.

A critical analysis of the controversy is necessary, because adults (parents, teachers, school boards, etc.) make decisions that affect girls, often by increased measures of control. It has gone so far last summer that the youth wing of the Liberal Party proposed banning g-string underwear at schools and that hypersexualization has been discussed at the National Assembly of Quebec.

This shows that public discourse dictates and legitimizes certain options over others. Reframing the problem from a critical female-centred perspective might be more beneficial for girls. In Norway, for example, the problem was framed in terms of the « sexualisation of the public sphere » and education programmes were implemented to counter the hypersexualization phenomenon. Yet, the question remains: why is the public sphere considered sexualized only when women are present?

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