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Sexualized social and dress codes of girl performers in the West

Abstract: The mainstream media, especially in the west, increasingly portrays girl performers as objectified sexual beings, from movies, TV programs, music videos, magazines, videogames, beauty pageants, and fashion shows, to social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok that amplify these depictions of girlhood, reaching millions of young people at any time of day and night. This article conducts a semiotic analysis of "sexualized social and dress codes," i.e., codes promoted by the mainstream and social media that oversexualize and objectify girl child performers as commodities, foster unhealthy beauty ideals, and glorify the practices of online pornography and even prostitution involving girl and young women performers as "girl empowerment." The article employs Victoria Welby's Significs theory to explore the philosophical and sociological ramifications of these codes for both girl children and western society. For this purpose, it applies the Meaning Triad to examine the sense, meaning, and significance of sexualized social and dress codes. It analyses the sense of these codes, their ultimate significance, and questions the *meaning-intention* behind their widespread promotion on all platforms.

> There is no veil over ineffable priceless Reality to be withdrawn: only over clouded human eyes.
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> – Welby (1911: 91)

1 Introduction

The mainstream media, especially in the western world, increasingly portrays girl performers as objectified sexual beings, from TV programs – even those targeted to

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children – to movies, music videos, magazines, videogames, beauty pageants, and fashion shows (Behm-Morawitz 2013; Darbyshire 2007; Gerding Speno and Stevens 2018; Kelly and Garmon 2016; Ortega 2014; Paccione 2017; Sorin 2005; Vandenbosch et al. 2013). On social media platforms, such as the very popular Instagram and TikTok, these depictions of girlhood are amplified, whereby "influencers" reach the average young person on every cellphone, and at any time of day and night (Bissonette and Szymanski 2022; Brown and Tiggemann 2016; Kleemans et al. 2018; Pilgrim and Bohnet-Joschko 2019). While studies have examined the phenomenon of oversexualization in the past decades (Bissonette and Szymanski 2022; Darbyshire 2007; Kleemans et al. 2018; Maes and Vandenbosch 2022; Sorin 2005; Walkerdine 1998), the present article studies the semiotic meaning of "sexualized social and dress codes," notably the philosophical and sociological ramifications of these codes. The present article coins the expression "sexualized social and dress codes" to describe codes promoted by mainstream and social media, mostly originating in the west, that 1) oversexualize and objectify girl child performers as commodities, 2) foster unhealthy beauty ideals, and 3) glorify the practices of online pornography, strip clubs, and even prostitution involving girl and young women performers as "girl empowerment." This article adopts the Significs theory, devised by the philosopher and foremother of modern semiotics, Victoria Lady Welby, and applies the Meaning Triad to decode the 1) sense, 2) meaning, and 3) significance of these codes for girl children as well as members of society more broadly, including boys, adult women, and adult men (Welby 1911).

2 The Meaning Triad

Lady Victoria Welby's impressive corpus in the field of semiotics was characterized by a great concern for the concept of "expression": its *raison d'être*, meaning, and ultimate interpretation (Welby 1893, 1897, 1903, 1911). She devised Significs theory to decode and deconstruct the meaning of all forms of expression, a theory that was later incorporated in the Oxford English Dictionary as "a proposed science and educational method based upon the importance of realizing the exact significance of terms and conceptions, and their influence on thought and life" (OED 2011). Welby emphasized that all forms of expression, whether language and text, visual symbols, or sounds, comprise several layers of meaning that may lead interpreters to varied pathways. Her theory of Significs is especially relevant when interpreting sexualized social and dress codes as the latter are not limited to words, but also encompass visual and three-dimensional portrayals of girlhood on mainstream and social media. Welby devised the Meaning Triad – Sense, Meaning, and Significance – to assist in interpreting signs and symbols, which she described as follows:

> [T]he one crucial question in all Expression, whether by action or sound, symbol or picture, is its special property, first of Sense, that in which it is used, then of Meaning as the intention of the user, and, most far-reaching and momentous of all, of implication, of ultimate Significance. (Welby 1911: 9)

In the case of sexualized social and dress codes, the first element of the Meaning Triad, "Sense," is the actual portrayal of girl performers in the media. This article will begin by exploring depictions of girlhood on various media and platforms. We will secondly examine the third element of The Meaning Triad: the ultimate Significance of these sexualized codes for girls and how they perceive their own bodies and self-worth, their relationships with others, namely, boys, and their interactions with broader society, including male adult clients and customers. Significance will also comprise an examination of how boys as well as adult men and women view girls as a result of these sexualized social and dress codes. Finally, this article will consider the Meaning of sexualized social and dress codes. Meaning is the second element of the Meaning Triad, and one would normally expect it to be examined "chronologically," thus *before* Significance. However, in the case at hand, it will be necessary to explore both the Sense *and* the Significance of these depictions of girlhood to attempt to unveil the possible *meaning-intention* behind their massive conception, production, and distribution in the western world, and globally. In this context, we will analyze sexualized social and dress codes in light of Welby's theory that Expression may be employed to "mask" and even "falsify" urgent realities that are before its ultimate interpretants. In *Significs and Language*, Welby observes that:

> But we allow what we call Expression, and especially that articulate language which should be our truest servant and greatest faculty, not merely to fail in revealing, but to mask and even falsify the urgent realities ever waiting for their appointed revealer. (Welby 1911: 91)

Indeed, Welby explains that expression, in any of its forms, may be employed to mask rather than reveal the very reality before us. Accordingly, what we, as willing or unwilling consumers of these sexualized codes, perceive as "entertainment" and even "news" may be falsifying or at least distorting our perceived lived experiences and those of others in our global community.

3 Sense

In the past decades, girl children have been increasingly involved in the entertainment industry as actors, singers, dancers, models, and in more recent years, in reality TV and social media. As the present article conducts a semiotic examination of girl performers, it is crucial to clarify the members of the girl child identity category, in

the case at hand, girls under 18 years old, as per the definition of child under article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: "a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" (CRC 1989), while the term "girl performer" broadly encompasses girls in the spotlight, from movie and TV stars to girls performing for their parents on social media platforms for financial and/or social gain. In Canada and the USA, 80 % of human characters portrayed on children's television are youth and 50 % of those are girls, whereas only 21 % of the adult characters are female (Centre for Scholars and Storytellers 2019: 15), which signifies that girl performers are more present on television than adult women compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, a significant shift has occurred since the 1980s: girl performers are more and more presented as reified sexual beings on mainstream media, and the sexual content in children's media is specifically on the rise, with a Kaiser Foundation study indicating that sexual references have both increased in number and explicitness (Durham 2009: 36). The next section shall evaluate three key components of the Sense of sexualized social and dress codes: 1) oversexualization; 2) body image; and 3) prostitution and violence.

3.1 Oversexualization

Whereas TV shows in the 1990s such as *Degrassi High*, *My So-Called Life, Dawson's Creek*, and *Get Real* portrayed adolescent girls as fully-fledged characters whose bodies were not constantly "flaunted" – they generally wore baggy jeans, t-shorts, and sweaters – (Holzman 1994–1995; Phillips 1999–2000; Schuyler and Hood 1987–1991; Williamson 1998–2003), since the 2000s and especially the 2010s, adolescent and tween girl performers on both adult and child TV shows have been wearing heavy make-up and tightly fitting clothes showing their breast size, at times displaying breast implants, and short skirts or shorts and bikinis. That is not to say that girl performers were always wearing non-revealing clothes in previous programs, for they might have been pictured wearing more provocative clothing. However, these signs and symbols were usually adopted as part of the storyline: for example, as a cautionary tale in *Degrassi High* about using one's looks to win a student election, or to depict rebellion against parents when an adolescent girl lives with her strict father and older brother and decides to "act out," which leads her to get in trouble and thereafter regret her actions, but also helps her family acknowledge her need for freedom (Hood 1987a, 1987b). Hence, these signs and symbols were not presented as normalized everyday behavior. The shift can be seen in the 2000s and 2010s, especially in Nickelodeon shows created or co-created by producer Dan Schneider, such as *The Amanda Show*, *Zoey 101*, and *Sam and Cat,* the latter featuring Ariane Grande

and Jennette McCurdy, which depict girls in tight clothing, in some cases adopting flirtatious poses, and several sexual innuendos that a child might not perceive, but an adult, especially with a sexual interest in children, might enjoy (Fellows and Schneider 2005–2008; Kennedy 2024; Schneider 1999–2002, 2013–2014). In fact, it is no surprise that several adults working on these Nickelodeon shows were found guilty of sexual assaults on children, possession or distribution of child pornography, sentenced to prison and/or forced to register as sex offenders (Kennedy 2024; Richardson 2024; Saad 2022; Zhou 2024). Ironically, these shows were aimed at children and under the "family" and "comedy" categories. The same over-sexualization can be observed in western magazines. Studies indicate a strong increase in "low cut clothing, tight clothing, and high heels" between the 1990s and 2010s (Kelly and Garmon 2016: 202). As for the music industry, the late 1990s experienced a shift in placing young women performers as "ornaments" in hip hop music videos, showing their bodies in tight clothes and adopting provocative demeanor, while the men are fully clothed and appear to be "in control" (Vandenbosch et al. 2013: 190). The oversexualization of girls has also permeated western videogames, some of which even portray violent acts on girls and women, such as rape, for example *Grand Theft Auto V* (Houser et al. 2013). Sanbonmatsu notes that in many of these games "exaggerated sex stereotyping, misogyny, and simulated violence against women are norm," and cites *Grand Theft Auto* as inviting the player to "exploit women sexually" (Sanbonmatsu 2011: 427–428). Studies have shown that female characters in western games are usually more sexualized than male characters, and given minor roles in the storyline (Gabbiadini et al. 2017: 2462). Aroni (2022a) explains that the visual semiotics of digital games impact narration as well as gameplay, and thus how players relate to games. Moreover, these virtual depictions elicit strong emotions in players. Indeed, whereas a movie is usually under 3 h, and generally under 1.30 h, players spend a multitude of hours immersed in a videogame, thus its visual portrayals of characters is likely to penetrate the subconscious mind (Gabbiadini et al. 2017). Players can be so involved that they participate in taking pictures, or more accurately screenshots, of virtual environments, which has led to questions as to who owns the copyrights of certain images in games (Aroni 2023). The portrayal of girls and women in videogames thus constitutes a significant semiotic sign within the entertainment industry.

Of particular concern is the promotion of child beauty pageants involving toddler girl performers dressed in provocative clothing. Very young girls are placed in the center stage in reality television shows such as *Toddlers with Tiaras* on TLC (USA), in which girls, including literal toddlers, participate in beauty contests, or *The Voice*, in which children, including girls, are involved in singing competitions (Kelly and Garmon 2016; Tamer 2011). These "Glitz Child Beauty Pageants," as opposed to "Natural Child Beauty Pageants," are characterized by the oversexualization of

young girl performers: they are covered in heavy make-up, spray tanned, wear false teeth, and are dressed in bikinis and high heels (Kelly and Garmon 2016: 201). In one competition, a three-year-old girl wore the same clothing as the main character, a prostitute, in the movie *Pretty Woman*: a short tight leather skirt and high leather boots, and in another, a girl danced to the song "Sexy and I know it" in a manner described as "sexual and provocative" (Kelly and Garmon 2016: 202; Wolf 2012: 430). Tamer summarizes the image of girlhood as portrayed on these competitions:

> Wearing tiny, tight hot shorts and a cut-off top bearing her midriff, Candi … is coached to "shake that bootie" and "work it." Everything naturally beautiful about Candi is gone. She has fake hair, a fake tan, fake eyelashes, fake nails, and fake teeth. Scantily clad and covered in makeup, she walks out on stage … Candi plasters on a fake smile and waits for the curtain to rise. She has already done the sexy policewoman, cowgirl, and nurse. This time the theme is "schoolgirl." The music starts. Wink, booty pop, raised leg, and a shimmy … Candi is a six-year-old beauty pageant princess. (Tamer 2011: 85)

The semiotics of girl child beauty pageants are so obvious that any person with common sense would understand their underlying meaning, and potential target audience: pedophiles (Tamer 2011). While boys are also exploited, girl performers are sexualized twice as much as boys in the entertainment industry, which increases the likelihood for sexual exploitation (Centre for Scholars and Storytellers 2019: 17; Durham 2009; Gerding Speno and Stevens 2018: 640; Johnson 2012: 866). Durham notes that boys are rarely "the objects of the gaze" while girls are "bombarded with the myth that semi-nudity constitutes 'girl power'" (Durham 2009: 61).

The portrayals of girlhood are not limited to the entertainment industry: they are in turn emulated in everyday life across schools, notably in North America. The clothing and cosmetic industries have been selling lingerie, make-up, and perfumes targeting prepubescent girls for over fifteen years (American Psychological Association 2007: 13–14). The American Psychological Association refers to the "trickle up" and "trickle down" framework concerning young girls and adult women whereby the former are "adultified" and "dressed up" as adult women and the latter are "dressed down" to look like little girls (American Psychological Association 2007: 12). Indeed, beauty pageants occur "in real life" across countries such as the US and Canada, and are becoming overly sexualized; they constitute a five billion dollar industry comprising thousands of participants yearly (Tamer 2011: 85). In fact, fashion shows are replacing other extra-curricular activities in schools (Kelly and Garmon 2016; Murphy 2012; Tamer 2011). Murphy stresses that fashion shows are organized by teachers and children in many high schools, and are now trickling down into *elementary schools*, thereby placing an emphasis on the physical appearance of young girls (Murphy 2012). Finally, the relatively new phenomenon of "sharenting" whereby parents share everyday events of their children, has also been

accompanied by the oversexualization of children, especially girls, by their own parents on social media (Blum-Ross and Livingstone 2017; Llovet Rodríguez et al. 2022; Marasli et al. 2016; Siibak and Traks 2019; Steinberg 2017). Steinberg notes that naked photos of children, or children wearing a bathing suit or "similarly scant attire" are easy targets for pedophiles, and Australia's eSafety Commissioner notes that nearly half of all images recently retrieved from pedophile image sharing sites were posted by parents on social media and family blogs (Steinberg 2017: 881). In fact, some parents offer photos for purchase of their preteen daughters and friends in "midriff-baring attire," clearly aiming for a special clientele, i.e., pedophiles (Rachini 2023).

3.2 Unhealthy beauty ideals

The second main component of sexualized social and dress codes is the promotion of unhealthy beauty standards. Since the 1990s, the female ideal body advertised is a physical anomaly: she has a tiny waist, thin arms and legs, yet voluminous breasts, and her face has very delicate features and a tiny nose, yet very large lips. Vandenbosch et al. (2013: 190) observe that treating women and girl performers as simple "bodies" increases the internalization of beauty ideals and self-objectification in girls, who "endorse the view that their body is the sole 'instrument' they can apply to attract a boy." The same situation occurs in most western videogames. Gabbiadini et al. (2017: 2462) deconstruct the "female body" portrayed in games, noting that "[f]emale characters often have a huge bust with disproportionally small waist and hips."

A recent, and significantly more powerful instrument for the promotion of sexualized social and dress codes is so-called social media "influencers" defined as "usually young, attractive users who have thousands, if not millions of followers, and are then imitated by other users" (Bissonette and Szymanski 2022: 206). As the name indicates, these new girl celebrities significantly "influence" viewers, including girl children, with a budget that went from two to fifteen billion in marketing spending between 2017 and 2022 (Ah Lee et al. 2022; Brown and Tiggemann 2016; Scholz 2021: 510). For example, a recent trend in cosmetic plastic surgery has seen girls and women "requesting specific body parts of celebrities," such as the eyes and jawline of Kim Kardashian, an influencer "famous for being famous" (Brown and Tiggemann 2016: 37).

3.3 Glorified prostitution and violence

Sexualized social and dress codes treat girl performers as commodities, and moreover promote sexual exploitation and violence against them by peers and adults,

including via online pornography. In recent years, online pornography involving young women and girl performers on platforms such as OnlyFans has been marketed as "girl empowerment" on the grounds that young women can earn "easy money" in a "safe setting" (Rubattu et al. 2023; Sanchez 2022). It is worthy of note that advertisement campaigns of OnlyFans were well-coordinated on mainstream and social media platforms to promote its so-called "empowering" features: from earning fast, easy money, to removing the stigma from "sex work," to its "healing" powers for the young women selling their bodies, and even as a pathway to raise money for charity (Greig 2020). Hollywood celebrities vouched that they would join this site and happily undress for strangers (Greig 2020; Respers 2020; Russon 2020). An interesting case study is that of actress and singer Bella Thorne. At the time, she epitomized the "girl child" performer image as a former child actress for the Disney channel, a medium officially dedicated to content for children and families. As soon as Thorne joined OnlyFans, the mainstream media advertised that she earned over one million in a single day, and two million within a week, thereby implying that this platform enables "content creators" to earn easy money (Respers 2020; Russon 2020). The mainstream media, including renowned corporations such as the BBC, referred to young women who partook in pornography on OnlyFans as "content creators," a term that does not seem to encompass all the complexities of selling one's body to strangers online (Russon 2020). Thorne was quoted as saying "How far are you willing to go, and how far do you WANT to go? You can be me, or this talented *girl* from Montana, and OnlyFans could change your life – if you want it to, of course" (Respers 2020). The "sense" of Bella Thorne's quote is particularly interesting from a semiotic viewpoint. Indeed, Thorne refers to "girls," not adult "women" in the context of nudity on OnlyFans. While this platform, which features prostitution, is officially illegal for minors, the actual advertised product is "the girl child," not the adult woman. Another male celebrity, very popular among young women and girls, Michael B. Jordan, stated that he would join OnlyFans "for charity" to raise money for a barber school, thereby linking this platform to helping the community, and thus for good charitable values (Greig 2020). Online pornography has also been associated, by the mainstream media, with "therapy" and "healing" for the young women involved in selling their bodies. An interesting case study is that of Steven Spielberg's daughter, Mikaela, who was quoted by the media as saying that appearing in porn had been healing and self-affirming for her, while OnlyFans reported that her channel involved full nudity and various sex toys (Day 2020; Sparks 2020). Indeed, this is not a young woman raised in poverty, but the daughter of a famous movie director and producer, and key figure in the western movie industry, especially for movies targeting children. Accordingly, having the daughter of such an iconic western celebrity join online prostitution was especially impactful for fans. However, in this powerful advertisement campaign, linking celebrities to OnlyFans was

not sufficient. Another important element of sexualized codes was necessary to recruit everyday girls as performers: the success stories of unknown young women also known as "content creators" claiming to earn generous amounts of money with very little work involved. For example, the *Business Insider* wrote that:

> For many OnlyFans creators with business acumen and a serious work ethic, turning a side hustle into a full-time, high paying job is a real possibility … A number of successful OnlyFans creators – who largely create adult content – have become multimillionaires, even after the platform's 20% cut. OnlyFans, launched in 2016, had paid creators more than $8 billion as of September 2021, and its revenues swelled 160% to $932 million that year. (Mangalindan 2022)

The young women featured in those stories are presented as "the girl or woman next door": a former real estate agent in New York, or a wholesome pharmacy technician from Missouri; they share their advice and success stories, referring to themselves prior to partaking in online pornography as "self-admitted newbies" who acquired knowledge, experience, and significant revenue by selling their bodies online (Mangalindan 2022). These ad campaigns for online prostitution, under the guise of information and entertainment on news outlets, from the BBC to Fox News, epitomize the power of sexualized social and dress codes to promote the objectification of girl performers as a form of "entrepreneurship" (Day 2020; Respers 2020; Russon 2020; Sparks 2020). Simultaneously, it was important to accompany the promotion of sexualized codes in the media with the approval of experts, i.e., academics. In this regard, several academic publications have argued in recent years that online pornography, such as that on OnlyFans, increases the agency of the products sold, i.e., young women, as a form of "sexual e-commerce," as 1) women can join these services without "third-party management like pimps or pornography directors," 2) have the autonomy to offer their own schedules, and 3) in a consensual transaction in which monetizing one's "sexuality" is empowering because "[s]ex workers offer consensual sexual services or erotic performances in exchange for money or goods" (Comerford 2022; McKee and Lumby 2022; Rubattu et al. 2023; Sanchez 2022: 4, 5, 7).

Yet, contrary to the idealized depiction of online pornography on platforms such as OnlyFans, by the mainstream and social media as well as academia, the real young women and girls on these sites are treated as mere objects: they undress and perform sexual acts, including very degrading ones with "sex toys," under the order of (presumably male) customers. Those customers can be acquaintances, neighbors, colleagues, fellow teachers or students, and even, family members. And contrary to the ad campaigns claiming that being an online "sex worker" is an empowering career choice, the reality is that such films and images tarnish the reputation and even the future of these girls and women, preventing other career paths, and leading to stalking and harassment from customers and pimps (Fritz et al. 2020; Rubattu et al. 2023). Additionally, reports have shown that some of these "camgirls" are actually

girl children, i.e., under 18 years old, including sex trafficked and missing girls under the control of a pimp and/or organized crime, and thereby *actually enslaved*; hence, the very opposite of the stories promoted in the above discussed mainstream media marketing campaigns (Titheradge and Croxford 2021).

While platforms such as OnlyFans raise serious questions, the content offered on pornography sites such as Pornhub is especially problematic for girls. In their study, Fritz et al. (2020) observe that 45 % of Pornhub and 35 % of Xvideo.com scenes contain at least one act of physical aggression and that women were the target of nearly 97 % of all physically aggressive acts in the samples from both sites (Fritz et al. 2020: 3041, 3046, 3047). The violence featured was mostly spanking, slapping, and "gagging." Moreover, the women performed self-aggressive behaviors such as slapping their own breasts and spanking their buttocks, while "there were almost no acts of men aggressing against themselves or other men" (Fritz et al. 2020: 3046, 3047). And once again, while these platforms officially only feature adult women, the actual product advertised is the girl child. Reports indicated that Pornhub has suggested a series of key words targeting girls and children more broadly to its customers under "related searches," such as "young tiny teen," "extra small petite teen," "Asian teen" and "young girl" (Kristof 2020a). Hence, while these sites do not officially display the rape of girl children but only "fictional" rapes of adult women, they aggressively advertise that the females portrayed on screen are girls, thereby normalizing sexual violence against girl children. Moreover, some content featured on the Pornhub channel has been entitled "exploited teen Asia" and playlists "less than 18" and "under-age" and has included content from spy cameras in toilets or changing rooms that show children only eight to 12 years old as well as videos from the GirlsdoPorn.com channel (Cole 2019; Kristof 2020a; Limehouse 2024). The semiotic "sense" of the channel named "GirlsdoPorn" is itself significant. It demonstrates that the target product is the girl child rather than adult women, and moreover, it is notable that the owners of this channel did not have to hide behind technicalities: they straightforwardly gave a name to their channel, GirlsdoPorn, that if true, would be considered a crime: the sexual abuse of a girl child. Pornhub has featured videos that involve underage girl children, including victims of sex trafficking who had been reported as missing by their families, and extremely violent and degrading gang rapes of these girls (Kristof 2020a; Lati 2021). Other popular porn sites, such as Xvideos, offer suggestions such as "really young" and "she's not adult," thereby clarifying once again that the product advertised is the girl child (Kristof 2020a, 2020b). Of particular concern are suggestions such as "pre-teen" and "11yo," which clearly do not concern adolescent girls but rather young girls (Kristof 2020a, 2020b). Also, searches for "middle school" on this site lead to "elementary school," thereby referring once again to prepubescent girls (Kristof 2020b).

In spite of serious sex trafficking and sexual slavery concerns, Pornhub, which originated in Canada, has operated globally and been extremely successful (Exodus Cry 2020). It reported 42 billion visits worldwide in 2019, with an average of 115 million visits per day, and Pornhub itself stated: "One-Hundred-Fifteen Million – that's the equivalent of the populations of Canada, Australia, Poland and the Netherlands all visiting in one day!" (PornHub 2019). *Business Insider* observes that as of 2024, the website boasts 100 million visits per day (Italiano 2024). Of particular concern were the "Top Gaining" categories in 2022, such as Gangbang (+88 %); Babysitter (+155 % – the site specifies the latter are 18 and over, yet how can this be ensured?); and the viewers age group 18–34 increased by 2 %, which signifies that such platforms impact young men (PornHub 2022). In its recent report, the newspaper *La Presse* observed that violent and degrading material against women and girls is still omnipresent on Pornhub, and even recommended, via algorithms, to its users (Péloquin 2023). Furthermore, Pornhub has recently protested against age verification laws implemented to protect minors (Oxenden 2023). From a semiotic perspective, it is notable that the company that now owns Pornhub and MindGeek is named "Ethical Capital Partners" (Benchetrit 2023), given that its practices appear to be located at the extreme opposite of the very definition of ethics. Child pornography on platforms such as Pornhub is especially traumatic for the victimized children, including girls, as it propels a perpetual trauma: the images and videos of their abuse are eternally "out there" and many survivors explain that they "live in constant fear about when, how and if they would surface," wondering if colleagues, family members, their own children, or even passersby might recognize them, or whether "the images would be used by sex offenders for masturbation or to entice other children into abusive situations" (Gewirtz-Meydan et al. 2018: 244, 246). In this regard, Gewirtz-Meydan et al. (2018: 244) observe that survivors are triggered daily by the fear that someone might recognize them and expose their past, and as a result many have cancelled possible careers in public office or any employment of a public nature, such as teacher or nurse, while many are unable to simply leave their homes. The same issue arises with the young and older women whose videos were posted on these platforms without their knowledge or consent, or via manipulation or as "sex workers" in financial need, a reality ever increasing given how these sites operate: allowing users to post videos directly, or through industry companies that in turn upload these videos (Cole 2023; Limehouse 2024).

Sexualized codes not only blur the lines between sexual empowerment and online prostitution on platforms such as OnlyFans, but also "sex work" in strip clubs and physical prostitution whereby clients have actual intercourse *in-person* with girl children. Some news outlets from the western mainstream media have recently argued that physical prostitution brings "inspiration" and "value" to the commodified young women. In Canada, the public state broadcaster, CBC News (2019),

published an article interviewing a sex worker on her positive experiences. In this interview, the public broadcaster went as far as stating that this person involved in prostitution "continued to find value in it even after being sexually assaulted" by her customers (CBC News 2019). There is currently a debate between scholars and members of the mainstream media, who in line with sex trafficking survivors, consider that online pornography and prostitution constitute forms of sexual exploitation (Adarsh and Sahoo 2023; Dines 2017; Fritz et al. 2020; Sharma 2019), and others who regard the latter as "sex work" and moreover, as "empowering." For example, Pornhub has argued that the movement to cancel its videos was causing "deep harm to the adult industry and the thousands of performers who make their livelihoods from it" and academic and newspaper publications have implied that attempts to regulate sites such as Pornhub could be doing harm to sex workers, and/ or questioned the character of individual advocates campaigning against child sexual exploitation on these sites, claiming that the latter are "anti-pornography campaigners" guided by a "puritanical agenda" or the desire to "gain notoriety" and somehow linked to individuals or institutions that have in turn been related to "anti-sex work" (Comerford 2022: 1184; Marcus 2024; McKee and Lumby 2022: 466). Another strategy is to re-qualify feminists who oppose online exploitative platforms as "neo-anti-porn feminists," thereby distancing these advocates from mainstream feminist groups (McKee and Lumby 2022: 471), or arguing that most fourth wave feminists are "explicitly pro-sex worker" (Comerford 2022: 1193). These reactions from mainstream and social media as well as academics epitomize the promotion of sexualized social and dress codes in society: criticizing the latter, even its extreme forms, i.e., pedophilia, can lead to ad hominem attacks rather than examining the substance of the argument: the necessity to abolish violence and exploitation against girls on these platforms. The semiotics of the term "sex work" as opposed to "prostitution" is also relevant in the case at hand, as it implies that online and physical pornography constitute a form of work like any other. For example, Bella Thorne was quoted as saying that by joining OnlyFans she "wanted to remove the stigma behind sex work" (Russon 2020). Instead, prostitution is defined in the OED (2011) as "the practice or occupation of engaging in sexual activity with someone for payment," which clearly applies to women who sell their bodies. Sanchez argues that the term "prostitution" can be viewed as stigmatizing in implying criminality and immorality, while acknowledging that "[l]ike any other form of labor under capitalism, people trade sex for reasons that exist on a continuum of choice, circumstance, or coercion. Most sex workers trade sex because of circumstance" (Sanchez 2022: 4). Indeed, as pointed by Sanchez, most sex workers trade sex because of circumstances, namely, financial need, a past of abuse normalizing sexual violence, and/or manipulation from organized crime, and even then, several have expressed that they were coerced into filming, or regretted it afterwards, and lost control over their images (Cole 2023; Lee

2020; Limehouse 2024). For example, in some of the lawsuits against GirlsDoPorn, the adult women were lured into what they believed to be modeling sessions, or agreed to make an erotic or pornographic video on the condition that it not be distributed, and did so because of financial need; they certainly did not agree to being violently sexually assaulted and barricaded in a room for over 10 h, nor to have those videos posted online and available worldwide (Cole 2019, 2023; Limehouse 2024). Moreover, it is important to explain that the content featured on sites such as Pornhub involves extreme violence and degradation against women and girls that would perhaps be impossible to even conceive for the present reader, resembling that of the *torture porn* genre of film series such as *Saw*, *The Collector*, and *Hostel* (Dunstan 2009; Roth 2005; Wan 2004). The present article acknowledges the unequal bargaining power of women who engage in online and in-person prostitution as defined in the OED, i.e., engage in sexual activity for payment, and the exploitation it involves. We consider that regardless of one's viewpoint, the sexual exploitation, sexual violence, rape, and kidnapping of children and adults featured or related to the above-mentioned pornographic sites and platforms, constitute serious violations of human rights, and are in fact crimes. Finally, to conclude this section on the sense of sexualized social and dress codes, it is notable that its three main elements: 1) oversexualization, 2) unhealthy beauty ideals, and 3) glorification of pornography and even prostitution are interconnected, as the mainstream and social media will often operate two or more of these elements concurrently. For example, a music video will display oversexualized girl performers dressed provocatively as ornaments, and simultaneously promote unhealthy beauty ideals by selecting girl models who underwent significant cosmetic surgery and experience eating disorders.

3.4 From the west to the east

Although sexualized social and dress codes originated in the west, they have permeated most regions of the world with the advent of globalization, including the Bollywood, Nollywood, and K-pop industries (Endong 2019; Ghaznavi et al. 2017; Girija and Basavaraja 2019; Gooyong 2017; Jain et al. 2019; Kaya 2019; Rahman and Zannat 2021). In this regard, sexualized social and dress codes constitute a manifestation of globalization, defined in the OED as "the action, process, or fact of making global, especially the process by which businesses or other organizations develop international influence or start operating on an international scale, widely considered to be at the expense of national identity" (OED 2011). For instance, the very popular Bollywood, Nollywood, and K-pop industries increasingly promote a fair complexion and the cult of thinness, which requires significant cosmetic surgery for the girl performers involved, especially in actresses and singers respectively, as well

as oversexualization (Endong 2019; Girija and Basavaraja 2019; Gooyong 2017; Jain et al. 2019). Girija and Basavaraja (2019: 38) note that skin whitening creams have gone up from 27 % to 77 % in Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America, and many of these products contain steroids and mercury that are dangerous to health. The K-Pop industry has been promoting beauty ideals that require significant cosmetic plastic surgery to "westernize" Asian girl performers, and these codes moreover sexualize girls as "innocent" yet "provocative" dolls. Gooyong underscores that these codes are "carefully crafting eroticized cuteness and playful sexualization, meeting expectations from both patriarchal gender hierarchy and neoliberal commercialization of sexuality: being innocent and sexualized at the same time is a hallmark of K-pop female idols' positionality" (Gooyong 2017: 2376). Moreover, Kaya observes that Turkish television programs have used gang rape scenes to attract more audiences, noting that "[t]he images of female characters brutalized and raped become part of prime-time episodic television and we are surrounded by these brutal representations of girls and women" (Kaya 2019: 689). However, the glorified "online and in person prostitution" component of sexualized social and dress codes does not appear to have reached the east nor the global south as profoundly as the west, as shall be examined in the *Significance* section.

4 Significance

In her description of the Meaning Triad, Welby emphasizes the import of significance. She explains that significance constitutes a central element of her significs theory as it embodies the infinite value of signs: their bearing at the micro, meso, and macro levels. Indeed, if we apply decodification semiotics as devised by De Saussure and thereby contemplate the sign as dyadic, every form of expression not only impacts the individual interpretant of the projected "signifier," but also the very conceptual notion that is the "signified" (Bouquet and Engler 2006). In the case at hand, the objectified and oversexualized portrayals of girl children correspond to the "signifier," while the "signified" entails the very notion of girlhood. Hence, while sexualized social and dress codes will impact individual interpreters, from girl children to other members of society, namely, boys, adult women, and men, they also more broadly delineate and constantly redefine the boundaries of girlhood. Welby observes that significance expresses its "appeal to us, its moment for us, its emotional force, its ideal value, its moral aspect, its universal or at least social range" (Welby 1903: 5–6). She thereby notes that the significance of signs is not limited to their meaning-value as it also embraces many emotions that are consciously and at times subconsciously triggered by their display in each and every person. It is worthy of note that Welby also refers to morality in this context, underlying that signs have an

ethical – or lack thereof – value for individual and collective interpretants. Welby moreover observes that the import of these signs is not limited to each of us, for it has a social and even universal range: how we view girlhood as a society. In light of this definition of significance, the sense of sexualized social and dress codes is not limited to the intrinsic meaning of the signifier as it also has several repercussions for its interpretants and the conceptual notion of girlhood that is signified. In this context, it is argued that sexualized social and dress codes of girl child performers have several adverse consequences for girl children, which could be grouped into three categories: 1) body image, 2) internalized violence and rape culture, and 3) an increase in the demand for child pornography and child sex trafficking. Indeed, one must not underestimate the power of the mainstream media in influencing behavior, especially that of children. As noted by Durham (2009: 111), "movies are significant forms of entertainment in the lives of young people: they offer scripts, particularly scripts of sexuality, that help to shape the way teenagers and children see the world." Sexualized social and dress codes are moreover not limited to movies – they permeate all media, from television, to magazines, music, and, most notably, social media, and are thereby omnipresent in everyday life. Their potential impact on society is therefore boundless, displaying the semiotic concept of infinite semiosis, whereby signs constitute a never-ending chain of meaning-making.

4.1 Body image

First, unrealistic beauty models undermine girl children's self-worth, thereby leading to depression and digitized dysmorphia (Brown and Tiggemann 2016; Kleemans et al. 2018; Maes and Vandenbosch 2022; Pedalino and Camerini 2022; Verrastro 2020). As previously mentioned, the beauty ideals currently promoted, that is, a very thin body with huge breasts and buttocks, cannot be reached naturally (Logrieco et al. 2021; Seekis and Barker 2022; Wallner et al. 2023). In order to meet these ideals, girls resort to life-threatening eating disorders notably anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, i.e., mental disorders characterized by an unrealistic fear of weight gain and a distortion of body image (Logrieco et al. 2021). The World Health Organization notes that the constant promotion of thinness as the *ideal body habitus* in the mass media during the past sixty years has played a central role in both triggering and further strengthening the occurrence of eating disorders (Delisle 2005; Patel 2004). The WHO stresses that the cult of thinness has been cited as the key reason behind the rise of eating disorders, noting that countries that have been relatively immune to such beauty propaganda, such as the Republic of Fiji, have low rates of these disorders (Patel 2004: 20). Additionally, eating disorders are becoming more prevalent and observable across cultures (World Health Organization 2003: 4, 2022). Initially

confined to the most highly industrialized nations, unhealthy dietary practices have been on the rise with the advent of globalization (Patel 2004: 20; World Health Organization 2003: 4, 2022).

Sexualized social and dress codes, combined with peer pressure, can also lead girls to "sculpt" their body as a reified object by undergoing cosmetic plastic surgery (Kleemans et al. 2018; Seekis and Barker 2022; Verrastro 2020; Wallner et al. 2023). Presently, girls and women outnumber men and boys in cosmetic plastic surgeries, for example, liposuction (85 %), eyelid surgery (77 %), rhinoplasty (75 %), fat grafting (82 %), brow lift (80 %), and facial bone contouring (73 %; International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery 2023: 60). Moreover, the types of cosmetic plastic surgeries advertised are constantly broadening. For example, the pornographic industry has been promoting an ideal "vulva," which has led to a significant increase in a western form of female genital mutilation: labiaplasty (Drolet and Drolet 2019; Maki et al. 2023; Runacres and Wood 2016). Hence, the expression "dress codes" in "sexualized social and dress codes" also refers to the pressure to modify the body *itself,* whereby girl children are compelled to carve inhuman features onto their human bodies through eating disorders and cosmetic surgeries, including rhinoplasty, breast implants, buttock surgery, and female genital mutilation such as labiaplasty (Drolet and Drolet 2019; Logrieco et al. 2021; Maki et al. 2023; Runacres and Wood 2016; Seekis and Barker 2022; Wallner et al. 2023). The present article thus employs the expression "dress codes" to encompass the modifications of the body as a "reified piece of clothing."

4.2 Internalized violence and rape culture

Secondly, girl children integrate these standards of behavior and emulate sexualized images promoted in the media. Accordingly, many girls adopt sexualized dress codes and provide sexualized presentations of themselves on social networks and platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, including "sexualized dance moves" and tight clothing (Bissonette and Szymanski 2022: 206). In addition, girls take part in virtual sex-related activities, such as sexting, i.e., sending sexual messages or images of themselves to others (End Prostitution and Child Trafficking [ECPAT] 2016; Ringrose et al. 2012). The objectification and hyper-sexualization of girls in the media also strengthen sexual harassment and sex coercion as well as the acceptance of rape myths and sex role stereotypes (Dardis and Richards 2022; Harde 2021; Stubbs-Richardson et al. 2018). Indeed, these sexual codes dehumanize girls in the eyes of others to the extent that sexual violence perpetrated against them by peers, notably boys, and adults, is banalized, a phenomenon described as "rape culture" (Harde 2021; Stubbs-Richardson et al. 2018). Many girls are coerced into sending sexual

images of themselves to male peers, and sexting is linked to harassment, bullying, and even violence (Maddocks 2022). UNICEF reveals that nine million adolescent girls between the ages of 15 and 19 years will experience forced sex in a given year. Most of the sexual coercion is perpetrated by peers, including the intimate partner (UNICEF 2017: 7). This violence is recorded and shared on social media as a trivial event. To wit, the US Steubenville Rape Case in which adolescent boys repeatedly and publicly sexually assaulted a girl and documented the crime, while other adolescent by-standers did nothing to protect her, and instead took pictures of the assault while posting denigrating comments about the victim on social media (Kosloski et al. 2018; Moody-Ramirez et al. 2015). The recent rape case of a 15-year old girl by an 18-year old young man at the St. Paul elite boarding school in the US illustrates that girls belonging to a privileged social class are also victimized by their male peers (Buncombe 2015; Dewitt 2021). It lifted the veil on the "senior salute" tradition whereby graduating boys allegedly compete to take the virginity of as many younger girls of the school as possible, employing vulgar and demeaning references to girls as "conquests" on walls and online, and rewarded accordingly by gaining status among male peers (Bidgood and Rich 2015; Buncombe 2015). This culture of violence against girls is pursued in higher education, as demonstrated by numerous sexual assault cases reported in universities, including ivy league universities in North America (Muehlenhard et al. 2017; Ricci and Bergeron 2019; Simard 2021; Steinhauer and Joachim 2014).

4.3 Pornography, prostitution, and child sex trafficking

The third consequence of sexualized social and dress codes is that they normalize and promote online pornography involving increasingly young women and girls, leading to very popular and lucrative platforms such as OnlyFans and Pornhub, which, as previously discussed, have featured pornographic material involving girls, including violent, degrading, and criminal videos such as gang rapes of girls perpetrated by adolescents and adult men (ABC News 2022; Fritz et al. 2020; Lund-strom and Henderson 2024; Marcelo 2023; Rubattu et al. 2023; Sharma 2019; So et al. 2024; Titheradge and Croxford 2021), and to an increase in the overall demand for child pornography and sex trafficking of girls globally (Dines 2017; Flood 2009; Giammarinaro 2020; Lim 2016; Singhateh 2021; UNODC UN Office on Drugs and Crime 2020: 122). Fritz et al. (2020) warn that such scenes endorse a sexual script "suggesting women enjoy and welcome aggression" or that the woman is "not even engaged with the sexual aggression against her," whereby male viewers may assume that women "either enjoy aggression or that their feelings or feedback regarding aggression is simply not important," and girls watching this content may internalize that they

should "ignore any discomfort they do experience" (Fritz et al. 2020: 3050). Adarsh and Sahoo explain that pornographic material, as presented, *rewires* the brains of consumers, which is especially disquieting for boys:

> Pornography can excite the brain's reward system, which can lead to severe brain alterations akin to those found in drug addictions ... By showing an absence of emotional connection between consensual couples, unprotected sexual contact, and, occasionally, violence and rape, pornography normalizes sexual harm. Male adolescents may learn that it is okay and even desired to act violently and aggressively toward and degrade their female partners from the aggressive and violent depictions of women that are prevalent in much of today's popular pornography. (Adarsh and Sahoo 2023: 37)

Dines observes that porn sites get more visitors each month than Netflix, Amazon, and X/Twitter combined, thereby impacting a significant amount of the population, and that "[w]hile girls are not the major consumers of pornography, they suffer the consequences because they engage in sexual relationships with boys and men who have had their sexual templates shaped by mainstream online violent pornography" (Dines 2017: 2, 4). In this regard, Adarsh and Sahoo (2023: 37) note that "[w]atching more hardcore pornography containing abuse, rape, and child sex is associated with the normalizing of this behavior." Moreover, Pornhub has operated as a user-generated platform whereby pornographic videos are uploaded directly by users onto the site, who earn a percentage of the benefits from views generated by each video (Kristof 2020b; McKee and Lumby 2022). The origin of these videos, including whether the persons consented to being filmed or to the sexual acts, or were adults or children, is thus difficult to verify, especially in real time. McKee and Lumby argue that in this context, filtering child rape via content moderation, especially given the small number of moderators, can amount to an "impossible job" because "[a]uto-mated systems ... cannot tell the difference between a naked photograph of someone who is 17 years old (illegal) and someone who is 18 years old (legal), meaning these decisions have to be made by human beings," although these authors fail to address the issue of rape *per se* of adult females, i.e., whether the person depicted was sex trafficked or a "willing sex worker" and moreover, whether this sex worker consents to such image or video being shared (McKee and Lumby 2022: 471). For example the GirlsDoPorn.com website, accused of featuring trafficked girls and sexual assault, as well as the rape of young women, was also hosted on the very prolific Pornhub international website as a premium partner (Cole 2023; Lee 2020; Limehouse 2024; Rodeschini 2021).

Sexualized social and dress codes thereby increase the demand for sex trafficking and child pornography featuring girl children. The APA study indicates that when girls are dressed as adult women, "adults may project adult motives as well as an adult level of responsibility and agency on girls," and Tamer observes that "the

images of child beauty queens may serve to foster and validate a pedophile's desires" (American Psychological Association 2007: 34; Tamer 2011: 89). Cino warns that constant sexualized portrayals of girlhood may normalize pedophilia in wider society: "the adults may, as well, get used to children's bodies being sexually eye-catching and end up with finding them normal, if not interesting, regardless of an abnormal sexual behavior or 'paraphilia'" (Cino 2017: 277). Hence, men and boys are unknowingly "trained" to be attracted to children, especially girls. In Canada, the possession and distribution of child pornography increased by 233 % between 2006 and 2016 (Keighley 2016: 20). Presently, sex trafficking of girls represents over 16 % of all forms of human trafficking worldwide, and 72 % of trafficked girls are sold for sex trafficking. The average price for a girl child for sexual exploitation is between 10,000 and 15,000 US dollars (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2020: 33, 36, 49).

5 Meaning

While in the previous sections, the semiotics of sexualized social and dress codes could be explored by analyzing the content of these codes (sense) and their impact on girls and society more broadly (significance), the second element of the Meaning Triad, "Meaning," is much more difficult to identify. Indeed, how can we evaluate the meaning-intention behind sexualized social and dress codes without penetrating the souls of their promoters, namely, master signifiers, i.e., those who create content and its meaning? Indeed, master signifiers constitute influential individuals in a society, from lawyers, judges, policy makers, and scholars, to the media (Chapdelaine-Feliciati 2025; Cyran 2011: 120). In the case at hand, the master signifiers of sexualized social and dress codes are those in decision-making positions in mainstream and social media. Previous studies of Welby's Meaning Triad, for example in architecture and law, referred to specific instruments and thus *written evidence* to extrapolate on the intentions of master signifiers. For example, Aroni (2022b) refers to Vitruvius' works to ascertain the Meaning-Intention behind architecture in the Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence, Italy, while the intention of the drafters of international human rights treaties can be inferred from the *travaux préparatoires* comprising the discussions leading to their adoption (Chapdelaine-Feliciati 2018, 2022). In the case at hand, however, some indicators, i.e., signs and symbols, can lead us to deduce possible reasons behind the promotion of sexualized social and dress codes in western society.

The first, obvious meaning-intention would be economic profit as "insecurity sells." Corporations and advertisers could be objectifying girl performers to attract a new market of very young consumers whose focus on looks and insecurities caused by unattainable beauty ideals will induce overcompensation *via* the purchase of

cosmetics, clothes. and weight-loss products, as well as cosmetic aesthetic surgery, throughout their lives (Darbyshire 2007: 89). For example, the market of skin whitening creams is worth an estimated 31.2 billion globally, and 450 million in India alone (Girija and Basavaraja 2019: 38). The International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (IAPS) report for the year 2023, that over 2,237,000 liposuctions, close to 2 million breast augmentations, 1,746,000 eyelid surgeries, 1,148,000 rhinoplasties, 771,000 buttock augmentations, 646,000 face lifts, 386,000 brow lifts, and 189,000 labiaplasties were performed worldwide (International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery 2023: 9). In fact, the demand for cosmetic surgery has been in constant rise: for example, we have witnessed a nearly 40 % increase in rhinoplasties and eyelid surgeries, and 15 % in labiaplasties since 2019 (International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery 2023: 9).

The second possible meaning-intention behind sexualized social and dress codes is that sexualized girl performers attract an audience of adults for whom such images fulfill sexual fantasies, namely, pedophiles, who will consume sexualized images of girl children (American Psychological Association 2007: 34). Accordingly, these codes cater to a specific market. The popularity of reality shows portraying sexualized girls, including toddler girls, demonstrates that there is a demand: *Toddlers and Tiaras* reported an average one million viewers per episode and its spinoff *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, over three million, showing an increase in viewership (Kelly and Garmon 2016: 203). As previously mentioned, half of all material from pedophiles reported in Australia came from sharenting sites, and some "sharenting" parents actually sell their own prepubescent daughters' scantily dressed images for a specific clientele (Rachini 2023; Steinberg 2017: 881). As for the Nickelodeon shows targeted at children previously mentioned, it is interesting that they featured content, in several episodes, that did not have a logical purpose for an audience of children, but that would instead please male adults, especially those with a fetish, including a foot fetish (Carrera 2024; Kennedy 2024; Richardson 2024; Saad 2022; Schwab Dunn 2024; Walsh 2022; Zhou 2024). Was this done to appeal to a specific clientele, or were some of the content creators, i.e., the producers, directors and writers themselves involved in those networks and aiming to normalize their own crimes? As previously mentioned, it is worthy of note that several Nickelodeon adult staff were convicted of child sexual abuse and possession of child pornography (Kennedy 2024; Richardson 2024; Zhou 2024). For example, a staff member that interacted directly with children on set, served six years in prison for actions towards girl children on Nickelodeon shows, including "distribution of sexually explicit material" and owning thousands of images of young girls in "sexually explicit poses," some with girls in "bondage activity"; another was convicted of lewd acts on a minor and showing minor pornography – he had already been convicted as a sex offender before working directly with children for Nickelodeon, and several allegations from former and

current child actors have concerned powerful producer Dan Schneider, although he has not been convicted criminally (Carrera 2024; Kennedy 2024; Richardson 2024; Saad 2022; Schwab Dunn 2024; Walsh 2022; Zhou 2024). As for the implementation of sexualized social and dress codes in the music industry, it is worthy of note that one of the main hip hop music producers, Sean "Diddy" Combs, who is known for having participated in launching the oversexualized portrayal of girls in hip hop videos, is currently investigated for sex trafficking and sexual violence, and has been referred to as the "Jeffrey Epstein of Hip Hop" (Bamidele 2024; Mussen 2024; Pequeño IV and Whitfill Roeloffs 2024; Winton 2024).

A third possible reason behind the widespread promotion of sexualized social and dress codes in the western world could be *distraction*, leading back to Welby's quote that expression can be employed to veil the very reality before us (Welby 1911: 91). At a time when western nations are experiencing significant economic and social crises, "sex sells and distracts," and thus keeps the average person belonging to the working and middle class from evaluating pressing problems. We have witnessed, in the west, a significant loss of workers' rights, access to property, lower purchase power, increase in taxes, accompanied by a surge of violence in public spaces, which leads one to stay home and consume these sexualized social and dress codes (González Moreno et al. 2022; Government of Canada 2019; Pedersen 2020; Roberts et al. 2022; Vansetti Miranda and van Nes 2020). As a result, individuals are more isolated, and some argue that the constant promotion of sexualized social and dress codes further precludes meaningful relationships between young people. The new generation of young, isolated men, who cannot provide for themselves, let alone for a family, are offered, by sexualized social and dress codes, the perfect scapegoat: the prostitute "girl performer" on OnlyFans or Pornhub, or even, the actual girl child who is sex trafficked on those sites. The record numbers of child sex trafficking victims and the significant increase in the demand for child pornography in the western world demonstrate that there is indeed a surge in the request for trafficked girl children from an ever-growing base of customers (Giammarinaro 2020; Singhateh 2021; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2020). The combined factors of isolation, lack of safety in public spaces, and economic difficulties keep a new generation of young people in megalopolis glass towers or basements who spend their evenings watching Netflix, Pornhub, and/or OnlyFans, thereby going full circle in further strengthening the significance, on their lives, of sexualized social and dress codes.

6 Conclusion: girlhood in the western world

Sexualized social and dress codes of girl performers did not appear in a vacuum. Their presence, and overall passive acceptance in the western world by the wider

population, raises questions as to how we, as a society, view girl children. These codes are an obvious expression of sexism, as they objectify girl performers as well as adult women. The reification of girls, notably the reduction of their human identities and worth to their physical attributes, is a manifestation of sexism for it confines them into sexually stereotyped social roles. However, sexualized codes also constitute "childism," defined by Young-Bruehl (2012) as a prejudice against children whereby adults use children to serve their own interests and fantasies. Parents and managers of girl celebrities, models and beauty pageants oversexualize them to win beauty contests and obtain contracts with the entertainment industry and advertisement companies for money and fame (Ortega 2014; Paccione 2017; Sorin 2005). Sorin stresses that the girl child is exploited by her parents, legal guardians and managers in this context: "[w]hile the child may have the illusion of power (for example, by earning a salary or having their picture in a magazine), s/he is ultimately powerless as it is the adult who is in control of the marketing of these children as saleable items" (Sorin 2005: 17). Paccione (2017: 419) emphasizes that girl models are controlled by managers and fashion photographers, and display limited to no agency in decision-making. Moreover, Ortega (2014: 2539–2541) notes that the average age for girls to begin their modelling "career" is between 13 and 16 years, and that the vast majority are not accompanied by a guardian on set, which leaves them vulnerable to various forms of abuse, including sexual violence. Finally, parents that pursue sharenting are showing their child's most personal and intimate moments and sharing them online, including with complete strangers, thereby benefiting financially and socially at the cost of their child's privacy, and even safety (Rachini 2023; Siibak and Traks 2019; Steinberg 2017). As discussed in the Meaning-intention section of this article, there may be various reasons as to *why* these codes are constantly promoted in the west, and on all platforms, from social media to mainstream media. However, beyond the *raison d'être* of and *meaning-intention* behind these codes, there is an unanswered question: Why do we in western society accept the exploitation of girlhood? Why is it that we tolerate the existence of violent depictions of gang rapes, whereby kidnapped girls are victimized, and their accessibility on platforms such as Pornhub? And why is it that we allow narcissistic parents to sell their children and sexualize them on social media? We can also question why as adults, we accept, normalize and at times even partake in cosmetic plastic surgery and eating disorders. Hence, while sexualized social and dress codes of girl child performers have a significant impact on girls and society more broadly, they constitute a semiotic sign as to how we perceive children, adult women, and those located at the intersection of femalehood and childhood: girl children. As Victoria Welby aptly put it:

> Let us tread softly with our merelys, onlys, simplys … and use them with fear and trembling. Yet even in silence there is no escape for us from danger or duty. Silence is often a most significant declaration, and a most misleading one. (Welby 1911: 41)

Our silence in the face of the sexual exploitation of girl child performers is a most significant semiotic sign (Chapdelaine-Feliciati 2024). It signifies our passive acceptance of the slow – yet steady – distortion and destruction of girlhood.

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