Desiring to be desired: A discursive analysis of women’s responses to the ‘raunch culture’ debates

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Abstract

In recent years, an explicitly sexualised style of femininity has become more visible in Western media and societies, accompanied by the idea that women can freely choose to use this mode of sexuality to signify their empowerment. This emergence of ‘raunch culture’ has sparked significant debates within the feminist literature as to how female agency should be conceptualised in a context wherein the seemingly continued objectification of women has come to be widely (re)interpreted as reflecting female empowerment and choice. This study seeks to contribute to these debates through a discursive analysis of talk produced in a series of focus groups with seventeen women, in which they discussed the raunch culture phenomenon and some of the related feminist arguments that have been raised. Whilst the participants frequently drew on the notions of ‘confidence/self-esteem’, ‘choice’ and ‘doing it for yourself’ as a defence for women’s participation in raunch culture, an underlying ambivalence and sense of discomfort about the quest for ‘empowerment’ via raunchiness was detected in their talk, though this was only rarely expressed as an explicit social critique of the gendered aspects of their lives. These findings are discussed in relation to the ways in which the participants’ use of these discourses allows them to position themselves as autonomous and freed from gendered constraints, as well as where these discourses become insufficient.
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In recent years, there has been a dramatic (re)sexualisation of young women’s bodies in the media and society more broadly, which has prompted significant debate in academic and online feminist communities. This phenomenon has commonly come to be known as ‘raunch culture’ (Levy, 2005), and is considered a part of the increasing sexualisation of Western cultures wherein pornography has had an increasingly visible presence (McNair, 2002). A key feature of raunch culture involves a marked shift in constructions of female sexuality from a passive object of the male gaze to a confident, agentic and ‘up for it’ (hetero)sexual subject who freely chooses to use her sexuality to empower herself, that is, by gaining sexual power over men (Gill, 2007a, 2008). These constructions are not only evident in cultural representations of women (for example, in advertising) but appear to have taken root in the public consciousness, as products and services aimed at women to help them develop and express an ‘empowering’, explicit sexual style of femininity have proliferated (Evans, Riley & Shankar, 2010). Such opportunities include recreational burlesque classes (Regeher, 2012); pole dancing, which is now a popular form of exercise (Donaghue, Whitehead & Kurz, 2011; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009); and ‘porno-chic’ fashion such as G-strings and midriff tops (Duitz & van Zoonen, 2006). Nonetheless, these ‘new’ visions of female sexuality still appear objectifying in the sense that they emphasise women’s bodies and sexual appeal to the exclusion of other attributes, and typically do so through representational practises lifted from heterosexual pornography (Amy-Chinn, 2006; Gill, 2008).
This contradiction between the seemingly continued objectification of women and the promises of empowerment on offer has generated significant debate in the feminist literature as to how female agency may be best conceptualised in this cultural context. At one end of the debate are those who argue that raunch culture does indeed provide women with a route to sexual liberation and empowerment (e.g. Atwood, 2006; McNair, 2002) whilst on the other, it is seen as simply dressing sexual objectification up in empty rhetoric that sounds like empowerment, but which does not truly liberate women (e.g. Lamb, 2010; Levy, 2005; Walter, 2010).

However, little is known about how young women themselves conceptualise raunch culture and its relation to female agency. To contribute to current efforts at developing a more nuanced understanding of female agency, in the present study I explore how female undergraduate students respond to these debates and discursively construct the phenomenon of raunch culture through an analysis of talk produced in a series of focus group discussions. In particular, I examine how participants respond to feminist critique of the rhetoric of empowerment and choice to investigate both the ‘ways of being’ and ‘ways of seeing’ made available to women in a ‘postfeminist’, neoliberal society and also whether dominant discourses can be challenged by alternative, feminist ones. The term discourse as it is used in this paper means “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about a particular topic at a particular historical moment” (Hall, 2001, p. 72).

**Raunch Culture and the Rhetoric of Empowerment and Choice**

The inspiration for raunch culture appears to stem from the idea - articulated during the second-wave of feminism - that an active, confident and engaged sexuality is a source of liberation and empowerment for women (Harvey & Gill,
In raunch culture, this vision has materialised into the figure of the sexually agentic, ‘up for it’ woman who is unafraid to flaunt her sexuality, whether it be through a ‘porno-chic’ aesthetic or learning ‘sexy’ dance moves (Levy, 2005).

‘Empowerment’ is thus a central tenet of raunch culture, and has become a common buzzword in marketing activities and products such as pole dancing (see Donaghue, et al, 2011), as well as in some women’s positive accounts of their experiences with them (e.g. Holland & Atwood, 2009; Regeher, 2012; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009). This conceptualisation of empowerment is based on a view of female power as being the ability to incite desire in men, and hence wield sexual power over them (see Hakim, 2010). Subjective feelings of empowerment are also constructed as stemming from the self-confidence that (apparently) ensues from being found desirable under the male gaze.

The notion of ‘choice’ is also central in raunch culture discourses. Despite the fact that current sexualised depictions of women appear highly similar to male-imagined images typically found in heterosexual pornography (a site of significant critique in second-wave feminism), the idea that women choose to emulate them for their own benefit rather than for men has gained ground (e.g. Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). Gill has theorised this as reflecting a shift from sexual objectification to subjectification, wherein objectification is understood not as something done to women by external forces (i.e. by the oppressive male gaze) but rather something that they freely choose to do to themselves for their own purposes (Gill, 2003, 2007a, 2008). This sexual subjectification is particularly evident in the advertising construct of the ‘midriff’: a young, attractive, (hetero)sexually desiring woman who is depicted as agentically using her attractiveness for her own amusement, pleasure and/or gain (Gill, 2008). An example of midriff advertising is
the 2002-2003 UK campaign for lingerie brand Gossard, in which a picture of a woman pulling a pair of jeans on over her G-string is accompanied by the text “this is just for men” with the “n” crossed out (i.e. changing it to “me”; Amy-Chinn, 2006). Recent research has highlighted how the notion of choice features strongly in women’s talk across a number of contexts, such as in discussion of beauty practices (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011) and the purchasing of lingerie (Storr, 2003). As noted in this research, the emphasis on women’s own choices and desires serves to deflect any accusations that engagement in raunch culture reflects submission to men, instead positioning women as being agentically engaged in their own liberation and empowerment.

A key contingency attached to the empowerment on offer in raunch culture is the possession of a slim, toned, largely hairless body that can be flaunted to maximum effect. Indeed as Gill (2007a, 2008) and Wolf (1990) argue, in contemporary Western cultures possessing a ‘sexy body’ has become more socially valued than other traditional feminine attributes (such being nurturing or domestically skilled), and so has come to form a cornerstone of feminine identity. Not surprisingly then, many raunch culture activities are oriented towards developing one’s sex appeal and ability to perform sexiness. For example, one of the purported benefits of pole dancing classes is that, as a fitness activity, it can help women achieve a slender, toned body and hence improve their self-confidence (Whitehead & Kurz, 2009). Raunch culture has therefore been conceptualised as providing women with the ‘technologies of sexiness’ required to transform the self into the confident, sexualised feminine subject that is currently desirable (Evans et al, 2010).
Postfeminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity

As a number of scholars have argued, the empowerment and choice rhetoric infusing raunch culture discourses reflects the influence of postfeminism, which is itself tied to the dominant ideological perspective of neoliberalism in the West (e.g. Evans et al, 2010; Gill, 2007a, 2008; Gill & Donaghue, in press). Therefore, there has been a focus in the literature on unravelling the postfeminist, neoliberal values and ideas behind raunch culture in an effort to explore how contemporary feminine experience is shaped by cultural ideologies that promote an explicitly sexualised style of femininity over others ways of being.

Postfeminism can perhaps best be understood as a sensibility, in which one of the key elements is an emphasis on individualism, choice and empowerment (Gill, 2007a). In postfeminist culture, gender inequality is deemed to have already been adequately dealt with by feminism, freeing women from the constraints of the past and rendering them now able to fully exercise individual choice (McRobbie, 2004). Women are thus perceived to be liberated, autonomous agents whose practises reflect freely made choices rather than the influence of gendered power structures. In postfeminist discourses women are constructed to live in a world full of opportunities and possibilities previously denied to them and choice has become a bottom-line value (Baker, 2008; 2010). Women’s participation in practises that were once considered by second-wave feminists as signs of submission to the patriarchy, such as beauty practises and the adoption of an aesthetic designed to emphasise sexual availability, have since been reinterpreted as signs of female liberation as women are believed to be already released from the burden of gender inequity and thus able to freely choose to engage in them (e.g. Baumgardner & Richard, 2006).
As Gill and Donaghue (in press) argue, these postfeminist values and ideas are intrinsically intertwined with the overarching ideology of neoliberalism. From the neoliberal perspective, people are viewed as autonomous, self-responsible individuals who are largely unaffected by social pressures and influences (Rose, 1996). The neoliberal subject is not merely free to choose but also obliged to be free; to understand the circumstances of their lives as resulting from their own personal choices, (however constrained those choices may actually be), and to be held wholly responsible and accountable for what happens to them. As the ‘choices’ one makes now reflect back upon the individual as expressions of the self, Rose argues that constructing and perfecting the self through this narrative of choice becomes the central life task for the neoliberal subject.

Neoliberal ideologies are thus theorised to profoundly shape an individual’s thoughts, emotions, their sense of self, and their understanding of the relation of their self to the world, otherwise known as ‘subjectivity’ (Gavey, 1997). Drawing on the Foucauldian notion of governmentality, Rose (1996) argues that the neoliberal conception of the self is constitutive of subjectivity as it produces an internalised disciplinary regime that makes people govern themselves. Foucault understood governmentality as being produced through discourse, as all knowledge is considered to be discursively constructed through language, and inherently linked to power (Gavey, 1997). The dominant discourses in a certain culture produce what appear to be normal and obvious truths, which Foucault argued serve to regulate the conduct of individuals by making certain subject positions (ways of being) visible against which individuals can actively monitor themselves (Hall, 2001). For example, through the discourses around sexuality, contemporary Western individuals have come to think of themselves as having a sexual orientation which shapes their
sexual preferences and behaviours; a social construction which Foucault argued has not been present in all societies and cultures, yet nonetheless constitutes our experiences of sexuality (Gauntlett, 2002). It is theorised then that by taking up the subject positions made available through dominant discourses, individuals govern themselves without force or coercion as they mould their subjectivity to fit the types of selves that are socially promoted/acknowledged.

Neoliberal discourses of choice and freedom are therefore argued to pull individuals into the process of their own self-governance and create a self-policing gaze, as they work to make sense of their lives through a biography of choice (Baker, 2010; Gill, 2007a; Rose, 1996). It can be seen that postfeminism, with its disavowal of gender inequity as a major force in contemporary women’s lives, and its celebration of women’s capacity for free choice, closely parallels the neoliberal conception of the self as autonomous and self-responsible (Gill & Donaghue, in press). Furthermore, the postfeminist emphasis on perfecting the aesthetic appearance of the body and transforming the self to fit current sexualised feminine ideals also embraces the neoliberal tenant that the self must be endlessly constructed and transformed in a quest for self-perfection (Press, 2011).

In advocating that women can freely choose to express an exhibitive, ‘up for it’ sexuality for their own enjoyment and as a means of empowerment, raunch culture draws upon distinctly postfeminist ideas and reproduces the neoliberal requirements of the self. As Gill (2007a, 2008) claims, through postfeminist discourses the male gaze appears to have been internalised into a self-policing, narcissistic one. Nonetheless, the fact that many women report enjoyment from participating in raunch culture activities makes the phenomenon hard to read, which has led to a host of competing arguments being made within the literature. In this
paper it is my intention to explore how young women respond to these debates and so I would now like to turn to tracing some of the arguments and claims that have been made on both ‘sides’ of this issue.

**The Case for Raunch Culture**

At one end of the debate, scholars have argued that this contemporary, raunchy version of femininity does indeed liberate women from oppressive notions of female sexuality as passive and inferior to male sexuality, and instead perform a femininity that is active, desiring and sexually confident. For example, Atwood (2006, p. 86) claims that “a whole series of signifiers are linked to connote a new, liberated, contemporary sexuality for women; sex is stylish, a source of physical pleasure, a means of creating identity, a form of body work, self-expression, a quest for individual fulfilment”. From this perspective, the increase in pornographic representations in mainstream media is not interpreted as the objectification of women anew but rather illustrates a general ‘democratisation of desire’, in which both male and female sexual perspectives and interests are being represented in popular culture (McNair, 2002). This ‘democratisation’ is argued to extend to the increasing visibility of traditionally stigmatised sexualities, such as lesbian sexualities, as well new, diverse forms of sexual self-representation. Through an analysis of alternative porn websites such as ‘SuicideGirls’, in which the women take up a gothic aesthetic, Atwood (2011) similarly argues that new feminine subject positions are being opened up for women that do not necessarily comply to traditional, strict norms for female sexiness.

Another way raunch culture could be understood to be empowering is reflected in Hakim’s (2010) concept of ‘erotic capital’, which the author argues is an
important form of sexual power more readily available to women. Hakim contends that women have more erotic capital, which involves both physical assets (e.g. sexual attractiveness) and social aspects (e.g. social skill), because they work harder at it. As men are (supposedly) more interested in sex than women are, Hakim argues that women are well placed to exploit their greater erotic capital and so have a relative advantage over men, which they should be free to legitimately exploit. From this perspective, raunch culture seemingly provides women with the opportunity to develop and deploy their ‘erotic capital’ and thus gain empowerment.

Finally, the fact that many women reportedly enjoy participating in, and claim to feel empowered by raunch culture practises is touted as evidence for its positive qualities. For example, in research by Holland and Atwood (2009), which involved the authors participating in pole dancing classes and interviewing students, they found the women (and themselves) felt a sense of confidence and achievement from successfully performing sexy moves. The authors therefore concluded that recreational pole dancing gives women an opportunity in a safe environment to work through “issues of body management, body image and sexual display in ways which make them feel powerful” (pg. 180)

Similar claims have been made about recreational burlesque, a sexualised form of dance which typically includes an element of striptease. For instance, Regehr (2012) examined the experiences of a group of newly single women learning to dance burlesque on a reality TV show, and found the women perceived the burlesque training to be empowering by helping them get in touch with their “sensual selves”, which was claimed as evidence for burlesque’s positive qualities.

Although activities such as recreational pole dancing and burlesque have been critiqued as reinforcing restrictive notions of female sexuality as an object for
male (visual) consumption (e.g. Whitehead & Kurz, 2009) from these accounts it can be seen that if women claim to freely choose to engage in, and ultimately enjoy, performances of raunchiness than no further critique or analysis is seen as necessary (Gill & Donaghue, in press). It is argued that researchers do not have the right to determine women’s experiences for them, but should be respectful of women’s accounts and allow them to define their own actions (e.g. Duitz & van Zoonen, 2006). In this perspective, individual choice and pleasure have become bottom-line values, to the extent that attempts to problematize such a reading by considering wider societal oppression (e.g. Gill, 2007b) has been critiqued as silencing women’s appeals to autonomy and invalidating their accounts by positioning them as ‘cultural dupes’ (Duitz & van Zoonen, 2007; Peterson, 2010).

**The Case against Raunch Culture**

However, as Gill (2007b) points out, such highly individualistic conceptions of agency tend to overlook the ways in which individuals are shaped by their social and cultural contexts, and wherein certain ‘choices’ are more socially approved of or privileged than others. Theorizing women’s engagement with raunch culture as simply a matter of individual choice cannot properly explain why large numbers of women ‘freely’ choose to pursue the same sexy, exhibitionist, version of femininity currently popularised by raunch culture. Furthermore, it is questionable why a vision of female sexuality that bears a striking resemblance to the representations of women in pornography aimed at heterosexual men should now be understood as reflecting women’s own, authentic sexuality (e.g. Lamb, 2010, Levy, 2005; Gill, 2008;). Given that there is a long history of denying women sexual autonomy and a privileging of male (hetero)sexuality – giving rise to what Fine (1988) has termed “the missing
discourse of female desire” – a number of feminists are cautious in interpreting the vision of sexuality currently marketed to women as reflecting women’s choices (Lamb, 2010).

Indeed it has been argued that the sexual agency on offer in raunch culture has become a form of regulation as young women are compelled to take up the current sexualised ideal to position themselves as modern, liberated and feminine (Levy, 2005; Gill, 2007a, 2008). In reinstating women as sexual objects and yet maintaining that (some) women can actively ‘choose’ this sex object status, raunch culture discourses appear to produce a self-policing, internalised male gaze as feminine subjectivities are fashioned around being sexually attractive, ‘up for it’ and happy to flaunt their sexuality (Evans et al, 2010). In this sense, it would seem that women are subjected to a deeper, more insidious level of oppression in which they must “understand their own objectification as pleasurable and self-chosen” (Gill, 2008; pg. 45).

Consequently, it becomes harder to recognise and critique the influence of power imbalances between men and women, particularly in regard to sexuality. For example, in Whitehead and Kurz’ (2009) research on recreational pole dancing, women constructed pole dancing as empowering in that it helped them achieve culturally desired body/fitness standards, and present themselves erotically to a male partner. However as the authors argue, what is overlooked in such accounts is that this form of individual empowerment reproduces oppressive societal discourses of female and male sexuality, in which women are presented as erotic objects to be consumed by men.

Another concern that has been raised with the form of ‘empowerment’ on offer in raunch culture is that it is a limited, tenuous form of power, contingent on
male approval (e.g. Donaghue et al, 2011; Lamb, 2010). Whilst those such as Hakim (2010) argue that women should exploit their erotic appeal to wield sexual power over men, what is problematic about this view is that it is not power based on one’s own terms, but rather based on provoking a very specific reaction in others.

Furthermore, given the longstanding history of the virgin-whore dichotomy, women who perform raunchiness may run the risk of being judged as cheap, slutty or desperate. Indeed as Gill (2007a) notes, the figure of a woman who ‘mistakenly’ believes she is desirable is often a source of ridicule and disdain. For example, this kind of cruel judgment is particularly evident in the British reality TV show *Snog Marry Avoid?* (Bradshaw, 2011) which showcases women who are deemed to have taken the porno-chic aesthetic of revealing clothing and heavy make-up ‘too far’ and are thus subjected to a “make-under”. Before the make-under, participants of the show are subjected to disparaging comments about their image, with taunts typically revolving around them looking “cheap” or “trashy”, and are then shown a survey of men who, when asked whether they would like to “snog, marry or avoid” the woman in question, typically respond with “avoid”. This example highlights the ‘threat’ to women that is entwined with this means of ‘empowerment’ through raunchiness.

Some research has noted this sense of uneasiness that exists about the form of power on offer in raunch culture. For example, in their analysis of websites marketing pole dancing, Donaghue et al (2011) discovered pole dancing was frequently presented as a pathway to authentic empowerment alongside the seemingly contradictory construction of pole dancing as simply an enjoyable, funny form of exercise where one can have “a bit of a laugh” (p. 453). The authors argued that the emphasis on light-heartedness and laughter served to avoid constructing pole dancing classes as a serious attempt to perform sexiness, in which there is potential
for failure and social derision. As Donaghue et al (2011) argue, this may reflect a general tension inherent in raunch culture, in which women cannot control how others interpret their performances of raunchiness, and so attempts for empowerment through this sexualised route remain fraught and insecure.

It has also been argued that rather than opening up multiple, new feminine subjectivities, raunch culture simply reiterates a stereotypical, limited and exclusionary vision of female sexual ‘agency’ (e.g. Lamb & Peterson, 2010; Levy, 2005; Gill, 2007a, 2008). Gill (2008) states that it is notable which women are excluded from postfeminist media images – that is, anyone who is not young, White, heterosexual, slim and conventionally attractive. Women who are older or larger and so forth are deemed as unable to access the form of sexy femininity required for empowerment and thus not accorded sexual subjecthood. In contrast to Atwood’s (2011) claim that new, diverse forms of sexual self-representation are opening up, Levy (2005) argues that “raunch culture… is about endlessly reiterating one particular – and particularly commercial – shorthand for sexiness.” (p. 30).

Furthermore, as raunch is primarily about portraying oneself as sexual in an alluring way, Fine and McClelland (2006) claim that young women have simply taken on the ‘performance of desire’ and that the discourse of actual female desire is still largely missing, continuing to leave women with limited possibilities for feminine sexuality.

Research by Ringrose (2011) supports some of these contentions about limitations in her research with adolescent girls. Exploring how British teenage girls perform sexual identities in social networking sites, Ringrose found the girls frequently experimented with sexualised self-images and discourses online. However interview data revealed that in a real world context, they still faced tight peer group norms and regulations as evident through the branding of certain girls as ‘sluts’ or
‘fat slags’. Also noting the phallocentric nature of many of the themes and images on the websites, Ringrose concluded the girls had limited access to discourses that support an actively engaged feminine sexual subjectivity focussed on their own desires.

Lastly, psychological research on self-objectification has often been used to support the case against raunch culture, or ‘sexualisation’, which is deemed to increase the amount that women (and girls) objectify themselves (Liss, Erchull & Ramsey, 2011). Self-objectification is theorised to be a harmful psychological process in which women learn to internalise an outsider’s perspective of their physical appearance and to treat themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated based on their appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In recent years, a number of quantitative studies have looked at the effects of self-objectification, including the high profile “Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls” (APA, 2007). Through an extensive summary of the literature, the Task Force concluded that self-objectification is damaging for girls and women, linking it to a variety of negative outcomes such as body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem, and argued that widespread sexualisation of girls and women is a contributing factor in self-objectification. A number of other quantitative studies have come to similar conclusions. For example, research by Halliwell, Malson and Tischner (2011) reported that images from ‘midriff advertising’ increased both weight dissatisfaction and state self-objectification, and a study by Liss, Erchull and Ramsey (2011) which tested an “Enjoyment of Sexualisation Scale” found that enjoyment was positively correlated with sexist attitudes, heightened self-objectification and negative eating attitudes.
Whilst such quantitative research provides welcome contributions to academic conversations about femininity and sexuality, measuring attitudes or other operationalized variables does not give us access to women’s own accounts of raunch culture as described in their own words (Lerum & Dworkin, 2009). There is a recognised need for feminist research that makes women the subjects, rather than the objects, of study so that their voices can be heard (Duitz & van Zoonen, 2006). Whilst there has been some empirical work into women’s experiences with different aspects of raunch culture and numerous efforts to theorise and interpret it as outlined above, to date no research has investigated how young women interpret this phenomenon and what they make of the debates that surround it.

**Aims and Approach of this Study**

Therefore, the aim of the present study was to explore the ways in which young women talk about raunch culture and how they respond to arguments drawn from both the feminist literature and feminist ‘blogosphere’ critiquing the rhetoric of empowerment and choice underpinning postfeminist discourses. By engaging undergraduate women with such arguments in a series of focus group discussions, this study sought to investigate not only the ‘ways of being’ made available to women in raunch culture discourses, but also whether any counter-narratives can be generated through probing and challenging common-sense views of gender and female sexuality. To date, such an approach has been under-utilised in the literature on raunch culture, although it has been suggested as a fruitful angle for research (Whitehead and Kurz, 2009). As Foucault argued, wherever power is exercised there is always the possibility of resistance, which can manifest as quiet tensions or speech that undermines power (Gauntlett, 2002). Thus to develop our understanding of
female agency within the context of raunch culture, it is necessary to allow for lived experience and agency of women by exploring any resistance to it, rather than simply representing them as passive and completely constrained by dominant, postfeminist discourses (Gill, 2007b). Moreover, in keeping with the feminist nature of this project, it was my intention to not only investigate, but to also provide opportunities for women to take up alternative, feminist discourses that challenge the limitations that still exist for feminine subjectivities. From a post-structuralist view, power relations are seen as being established and maintained through discourses and thus it is through discourse that dominant, oppressive ideologies can be challenged and replaced (Gavey, 1997). There is a need for feminist research that not only exposes oppressive conditions for women but also looks at the ways in which women already work to overcome and reinterpret restrictive cultural messages and help support this resistance.

To achieve these aims, I approach the analysis from a feminist post-structuralist framework, which focuses on the construction of understanding and power through language (Gavey, 1997). Feminist post-structuralism provides a theoretical perspective for analysing which social discourses are available to men and women, what subject positions these discourses offer, and how these help reproduce or challenge existing gender relations. To carry out the analysis I use the method of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA), which provides a way of examining the role of language in constituting social and psychological life (Willig, 2001). By taking this approach I heed Gill’s (2007b) call for research that does not remove women’s voices from the cultural context they are created in, but which rather explores the complicated relationship between culture and women’s subjectivity.
Method

Participants

Seventeen women were recruited to participate, ranging in age from 18 to 41 years old ($M = 23.73$). Two participants did not specify their age. All participants were undergraduate students recruited from Murdoch University, with the majority being psychology students who received credit hours for their participation. Two students, however, were not enrolled in a psychology degree and instead were put in a draw to win a $100 voucher. Participants were recruited by advertising the study on a psychology subject pool website, as well as placing advertisement posters around the university (see Appendix K).

Procedure

An information letter and consent form were signed by each participant, informing them that the sessions would be audio recorded and that real names would be kept confidential. Four sets of focus groups were conducted with two to five participants in each group. Each set consisted of two, 90 minute long sessions which were spaced one to two weeks apart. Throughout the focus group sessions participants were given material to read and discuss (see Materials section below). The sessions were guided by a schedule consisting of seven questions designed to stimulate critical discussion about the arguments presented in the materials and about raunch culture. After participants had finished reading a material, they were first asked what they thought the argument was to ensure comprehension, with prompts being given if there was any confusion. Further questions were then asked about what participants thought about the argument and whether they agreed or disagreed with particular points. Although this agenda was used it remained flexible to allow participants to focus on what they considered to be relevant and to bring up any other
issues or points not raised in the materials, with participants ultimately having the most control over the direction of the discussion.

The sessions were audio-recorded and orthographically transcribed. An outline of the transcription notation symbols is provided in Appendix A. Pseudonyms were used to keep the participants’ responses anonymous. The transcripts were labelled with a number to indicate which series they are for, and a letter to signify the session within that series. For example ‘1A’ is series 1, session 1.

Materials

The focus group materials were drawn from feminist blogs and academic feminist literature, and were centred on critiquing raunch culture and the discourses of empowerment and choice. These materials were used to attempt to engage the participants in a more critical analysis of postfeminist discourses and to examine how they respond to various feminist arguments.

The first session of focus groups commenced by showing participants a short video clip featuring a montage of sexualised media images and students performing burlesque shows at a British university (via YouTube http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BN4ANtVKtPQ) to visually illustrate raunch culture and to prompt discussion. Participants also read an extract from Levy (2005) describing the rise of raunch culture (Appendix C) and two blog posts: one critiquing the rhetoric of empowerment used to justify sexualised media (Appendix D) and the other critiquing the idea of ‘choice feminism’ (Appendix E).

Three materials were used for the second round of focus groups: a blog post arguing that sexualisation negatively impacts women’s sexuality (Appendix F); an extract from Gill (2012) questioning the use of media literacy education in combatting sexualisation (Appendix H); and a radical feminist blog post arguing that
women cannot ‘freely’ choose to participate in patriarchy-approved, raunch practises (Appendix G).

**Method of Analysis**

Data analysis took place by becoming immersed in the data through repeated reading of the transcripts whilst making notes of initial impressions of recurring themes and expressions. The first body of instances was formed by collecting all instances of talk that referred to raunch culture and were related in some way to the notions of empowerment (or disempowerment) and choice. The body of instances was then revised several times, with each revision becoming more narrow and specific until only the most central and commonly encountered issues were included.

Data analysis was approached from the theoretical perspective of feminist post-structuralism, using Willig’s (2001) six steps for Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. This method of analysis seeks to locate particular statements within the wider social discourses and understandings upon which they rest, with the aim of uncovering the particular ‘ways of seeing’ and ‘ways of being’ provided by these discourses. The analysis was undertaken with two major aims in mind. The first of these was to explore whether participants drew on the postfeminist discourses that have come to be widely articulated in recent years and secondly, whether upon reading some of the materials, participants would counteract these with more alternative, feminist discourses.

**Analysis and Discussion**

The analysis is organised into two sections. The first section explores how the notions of ‘empowerment’ and ‘choice’ were predominantly taken up to subtly
endorse raunch culture. In this section I discuss how participants invoked the notion of confidence/self-esteem to account for the ‘empowering’ benefits of raunch culture, as well as examine some of the nuances in these constructions. I also examine how the principle of ‘choice’ was formulated and positioned in direct opposition to conformity, and how raunch culture was constructed as being something primarily ‘for’ women rather than men. The second section then discusses how these dominant discursive constructions were on occasion resisted and challenged by more feminist-like critiques.

Section I: Endorsing Raunch Culture

Confidence, self-esteem and the male gaze. One of the main ways participants conceptualised raunch culture was in relation to wearing revealing clothing when going out to a nightclub to receive sexual attention from men (all of the participants in the focus groups identified as heterosexual). This sort of attention was constructed as making women “feel good”, thereby making it empowering. The following extracts demonstrate some of this discourse.

Extract 1 (Transcript 1A-2, lines 835-845)
Karise: I think personally it would be (empowering), like while I wouldn’t go out and put that much make up on and act in the way that they do they probably do it because it makes themselves feel good, like I don’t understand why they would do something that-
Danielle: It’s not something that they’d do-
Karise: Doesn’t make them feel good like
Facilitator: Are there expectations on? Is that why some people might do it? Do you think?
Karise: That they think they’re going to get attention
Facilitator: Yeah like would you-
Karise: Yeah I would say that’s the main idea, whether they want that attention from sex or attention as in- ‘cause you know I know people that have got boyfriends, and they go out with their girlfriends and dress like that and act like that they just want to know that everyone else thinks they’re sexy

As Extract 1 demonstrates, wearing sexy clothing was frequently defended as
being empowering due to the potential to attract male interest, which makes women “feel good”. This reasoning functions as a ‘rhetorically self-sufficient argument’ (Potter, 1996) in the sense that it draws on the common-sense understanding that if something feels good then it must be positive, effectively shutting down interrogation of this form of ‘empowerment’. Using ‘feeling good’ as the bottom line thus also shuts down alternative explanations as it makes it difficult to conceptualise why someone would voluntarily do something they don’t enjoy, which is evident in Karise’s statement: “I don’t understand why they would do something that doesn’t make them feel good”. Interestingly though, there is a sense of ambivalence or uneasiness about attracting male attention through sexualised dress that can be detected in Karise’s talk, as she personally distances herself from the idea by referring to “they” (i.e. other women who take this route) and making it clear that she personally “wouldn’t go out and put that much makeup on and act in the way that they do”. The next extract further illustrates this notion of male attention as making one feel “sexy” and hence empowered.

Extract 2 (Transcript 1A-2, lines 373-386)

Karise: If you were in you know your (sexy) pirate costume and you, I don’t know where you went in, but if you’ve seen a guy looking at you, would you think- what would you think? Like if he kept staring, like giving a bit of a smile sort of being
Danielle: Well obviously I would feel sexy
Karise: Yeah
Danielle: I would feel, I suppose empowered by, you know. Yeah I would just feel good like someone’s looking at me, I’m getting a little bit of attention but at the same time I wouldn’t change what I’m doing but I’m wearing- what I’m wearing I’m expecting to get so- maybe expecting to get trouble I suppose
Karise: (h) yeah
Danielle: You know somebody walking up to me and going “oh nice tits” or harass you but I’ve gone out expecting that I’ve gone out expecting the worst “oh my boobs gonna fall out, someone’s gonna grab my boob”
Karise: (laughs)
Danielle: But looks, I’m not going to bother about, looks are looks

In answer to Karise’s question, Danielle responds “obviously I would feel sexy”, framing the link between attention from men and feeling attractive as an
evident one that all women can relate to. This reflects how in contemporary Western cultures achieving/maintaining a sexually attractive appearance (and being admired for it by other people) is highly valued and indeed, as Gill (2007a) and Wolf (1990) argue, forms a crucial part of feminine identity. Danielle also goes on to distinguish the line between what sort of male attention is desirable, that is, “looks” or “smile[s]”, versus what classifies as “trouble”, which is having men make comments about or grab her breasts (i.e. being treated as a sexual object). This is indicative of the postfeminist distinction between sexual ‘subjectification’, wherein the woman is positioned as still being in control of men’s responses to her and hence is ‘empowered’, and sexual objectification, in which she is placed in a position of relative powerlessness (Gill, 2008).

Extracts 3 and 4 expand on the notion of “feeling good” from receiving male attention by specifying how it can heighten one’s sense of self-esteem.

Extract 3 (Transcript 1B, lines 820-824)
Rachel: Yeah still comes down to the fact that they’re (burlesque dancers) wanted by men and that their “empowerfulizing” (quoting Pornulation empowerfulizes us blog post) is from the fans and yeah, she said they were women and men but yeah
Nicole: Think the idea of empowerment comes from “look people are watching me do this thing” it’s kind of
Louise: More like to build up your self esteem

Extract 4 (Transcript 3A, lines 595-601)
Facilitator: […] Um, I mean what do you think are the consequences, both positive and negative, for a woman that chooses to be you know a "hot chick" (quoting Choice feminism blog post) (h) or whatever? That chooses to go out and -
Sophie: I think it’s good for their self-esteem
Facilitator: Yep
Sophie: Like as you (to Emily) said, you know getting compliments from guys, all girls like that, I mean we all want that so that would be positive but maybe feeling like they have to always dress like that and feeling like ‘oh I can’t go out in jeans and a top’

As these extracts highlight, being “wanted by men” (Extract 3) or “getting compliments from guys” (Extract 4) is positive for women because it is “good for
their self-esteem” (Extract 4). By invoking the notion of self-esteem, such accounts render counter-argument (that receiving male attention isn’t empowering) more difficult, as good self-esteem is generally considered to be both desirable and attainable, and thus something that can help build it up must be positive.

Furthermore, Sophie naturalises women’s pursuit to be found attractive under the male gaze by stating that is something that “all girls like” and “we all want”.

Increasing one’s self-esteem is thus constructed as a legitimate and justifiable, and so not a legitimately criticisable reason, for performing a sexualised style of femininity.

Given this incentive for women to seek out male sexual interest, in Extract 3 there is acknowledgement that there is potential for women to feel compelled “to always dress like that”, a sense which is expanded on in Extracts 4 and 5.

Extract 5 (Transcript 3A, lines 595-605)

Facilitator: Yeah sure. Do you think um that there are limited choices, like do you think there’s limits on what you can wear out? […]

Emily: Yeah definitely uh from, well in my opinion I’ve gone to my wardrobe and gone “oh it’s really cold out there and I would love to wear my jeans but for me to want to feel good and go out and look nice and maybe get a bit of attention”, because it does make you feel good, I mean it makes me feel good

Claire: Yeah

Emily: I think “no I’ll wear my dress because I know I’ll get more attention in that”, so in my opinion I have that like definitely

In this extract, Emily justifies braving cold weather in a dress when she goes out rather than something warmer like jeans (which would reveal less of her body), because it will bring her “more attention” which makes her “feel good”. The decision to wear more revealing clothing is therefore again defended through the bottom line argument of “feeling good” (as seen in Extract 1). To the extent that Emily depicts her choices as being limited, they are framed as being limited because of a personal desire to “get a bit of attention”, rather than critiquing or analysing why it may be that she feels she has to show off more of her body to enjoy a night out. Extract 6
further demonstrates some recognition (albeit an implicit one) of the pressure to conform to a sexualised image.

Extract 6 (Transcript 1A-1, lines 257-265)

Rachael: I think um especially when I go out and stuff I um I dunno, I- I dunno like my style is very- I like- I don’t like very skimpy little clothes
Louise: Mm mm
Rachael: Um but when I go out, if I go out and I’m wearing like more of like a - a dress that’s sort of maybe not that fitted or it’s not that short or it’s you know too high or something you feel uncomfortable, it’s you look around, you don’t feel sexy
Louise: Yeah yeah
Rachael: You don’t feel attractive and you lose your complete confidence
Louise: Mm that’s right
Rachel: And it doesn’t matter if- like I’ve been with my boyfriend for six years and we can still go out to a club and I’ll be like “oh I just feel, I’m just not confident, I just don’t want to be here”
Louise: Yeah yeah
Facilitator: ‘Cause it’s not fitting the-
Louise: Yeah
Facilitator: image? Like ‘cause-
Rachel: Yes it’s almost like you’re weird or something

Expanding on the idea expressed in the previous extract, Rachel highlights how her not wearing “skimpy little clothes” when she goes out diminishes her feelings of self-confidence, implying that this is due to a lack of male attention. Rachel achieves this implication by stating that even if she goes to a nightclub with her long-term partner, and so theoretically shouldn’t need or want male attention, when she “look[s] around” and sees the other women who are wearing more revealing clothing than her (and presumably attracting the male gaze to a greater extent), she feels less desirable and hence loses her “complete confidence”. Much like Extract 5, Rachel does not question or criticise why it is that she should feel less attractive or confident if she doesn’t conform to the ‘sexy’ look normatively required of women when nightclubbing. As Gill (2008) argues, this lack of explicit social critique suggests that “compulsory sexual agency” (pg. 40) has become fashioned
into feminine subjectivity itself, making it much harder to recognise and critique (oppressive) gendered norms.

**Self-esteem/ confidence as a qualifier for empowerment.** An intriguing complexity was noted in the ways participants drew on notions of confidence and self-esteem: whilst it is legitimate for women to enjoy male attention because it makes them feel attractive and improves their self-esteem, it becomes problematic if women portray themselves sexually because they ‘need’ such validation and/or because they are conforming due to low self-confidence or self-esteem. The following extracts show some examples:

**Extract 7** (Transcript 1B, lines 182-187)

Brittany: I think self-esteem probably has to play a role, like I would imagine people with lower self-esteem would feel more pressured to be like that (overtly sexual) whereas someone that can stand up for themselves like can understand that they don’t need that stuff, to you know to feel sexy or to be empowered or to have a place in society

Facilitator: Yeah

Nicole: People who are, perhaps have a stronger sense of self are less likely to be affected by it. […]

**Extract 8** (Transcript 4B, lines 484-493)

Karise: She’s (my sister) just like the opposite to me and I don’t know maybe me being a stripper, me working at night clubs and doing all that influenced what she saw as normal […] (h) I’d borrow clothes that she’d wear on the street to go to work in ‘cause she’s just shocking but and I think it’s depends on the individual but I think it’s so hard to sort of say what makes people like that, is it the media? Is it family?

Hayley: I reckon it’s self-esteem, the biggest one and I think that once you start getting into sexualisation being like your sister then it actually makes your self-esteem lower ‘cause it makes you feel like an object

In Extracts 7 and 8, low “self-esteem” is identified as being the defining factor in whether one feels “pressured” (Extract 7) or not to display their sexuality for attention. In contradiction to the previous endorsements of attracting male sexual interest, participants using this discourse often took a more critical stance to the idea by depicting it as less benign and less necessary for self-worth. This can be seen
when Brittany says that women who can “stand up for themselves like can understand that they don’t need that stuff to be sexy or empowered” (Extract 7) and in Extract 8 where Hayley, in complete contrast to the previous extracts, states that “sexualisation” is actually worse for one’s self-esteem “cause it makes you feel like an object”. This more critical orientation is in an indication of how social coercion is incompatible with the neoliberal view of the self (Gill, 2007b); it is not okay if women “need” to take part in raunch culture to feel good about themselves and those who do lack the self-esteem needed for the “stronger sense of self” (Extract 7) required to throw off social influence. This idea of self-esteem as being a protective factor has also been noted in research on women’s accounts of their engagement in beauty practises (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011).

The perceived importance of having adequate self-esteem was also raised several times in regard to professional strippers, as shown in these next extracts.

Extract 9 (Transcript 1A-1, lines 780-785)

Nicole: It’s- it presents danger for people who are likely to need other people’s approval to feed off because it would be very easy for them to get sucked in and to stop, I guess to not know where to draw the line anymore, so far as what they will or won’t do and what they’re enjoying or whether or not it’s a good job for them. But then again if it’s something where you go home and you’re you, and your identity is not actually centred around what attention you’re getting from your job and then it probably is empowering

Extract 10 (Transcript 4A, lines 481-490)

Facilitator: Yeah. What do you think they get out of it then if um-out of being a stripper or doing these sorts of things, why do you think they would do it even if they did hear things like that?
Natasha: I guess maybe they get more good comments then they do bad
Facilitator: Yeah
Natasha: Which then is liberating, I guess for them
Facilitator: Yeah
Jane: But like- I don’t know, like for me I get enough comments as myself that I don’t feel like I need to do it but then I’m wondering what do these people in their normal life- do they not get enough good comments in their normal life that they feel like they need to do this to get comments that they don’t get normally? Know what I mean like
Facilitator: Yep

Jane: Like I’ve got my parents, and my little baby and my husband and like my family that always sort of say “oh you know you’re <indiscernible>” and like always give me that validation. I mean are these women not surrounded by that sort of thing and they feel that they need to go and do this to make themselves feel good? You know what I mean

In Extract 9, Nicole highlights the “danger” attached to being too reliant on the approving male gaze for women in the stripping profession, which involves “not know[ing] where to draw the line” as to what (sexual) acts they will perform for patrons. Nonetheless, she asserts that as long as their “identity is not actually centred around” the attention they receive than it can still be “empowering”. This distinction appears to again draw on the constructed difference between sexual subjectification versus sexual objectification (as seen in Extract 2; Gill, 2008).

Extract 10 slightly differs in that Jane explicitly calls into question whether receiving compliments from male patrons is ever truly “liberating” for professional strippers by implying that most in the industry must have low self-esteem or self-worth to begin with, which is achieved through the categorisation of “these people” and questioning whether “they feel that they need to go and do this to make themselves feel good”. Taken together, Extracts 9 and 10 further highlight how empowerment and/or liberation were predicated on free choice, and if one feels compelled to seek out sexualised attention from men (as in stripping for a job), this form of ‘empowerment’ was depicted as being more questionable and perhaps ultimately destructive.

Adequate self-esteem or self-confidence was not only constructed as protecting against feeling the need to boost it through attracting male attention, but also as providing women with the strength to resist portraying themselves sexually to fit in with other women, as Extract 11 illustrates.
Facilitator: What would you say- would you say if someone came out with “well this is just my choice I’m making, you know it’s my own personal choice” would you say anything to that person or would you think anything?
Sophie: If it’s what they wanna do it’s ok, if it’s they’re just doing it coz everyone else has done it I don’t think that’s good but if they’re doing it just because they want to I think that’s ok
Facilitator: Mm. How would you differentiate do you know how?
[Sophie: I think it would depend on confidence level as well, a lot
Facilitator: Like if..
Sophie: If you’re not confident you might be doing it to try feel better about yourself
Facilitator: Yeah, to fit in?
Sophie: Yeah to fit in, yeah
Facilitator: And if you have a lot of confidence is that-
Claire: You might not care as much
Sophie: You might not care as much yeah
Claire: Whereas if you lack the confidence like if, if people look at you you’ll be like “oh my god they’re looking at me funny because I have done this or I haven’t done this”

Here, Sophie depicts wearing revealing clothing to gain attention because “everyone else has done it” rather than “just ‘cause they want to” as being a problematic reason. She then identifies one’s “confidence level” as being the differentiating factor between these two motives, which would seem to be at odds with her assertion in Extract 3 that gaining sexual attention is a legitimate and positive reason for women to dress ‘sexily’ precisely because it is good for one’s ‘self-esteem’, Nonetheless, what this apparent tension between these constructions of ‘confidence/self-esteem’ suggests is that wanting sexualised attention from men to ‘feel good’ is not problem in and of itself, however, it is problematic if a woman is relying on such validation to build up a fragile sense of self-esteem or to fit in with others. This can be seen as an indication of how the neoliberal self is required to be autonomous, self-responsible and free from social influence (Baker, 2010).
Choice and conformity. Similar to the ways in which adequate self-esteem was constructed as a qualifying condition, participants also invoked the notion of ‘choice’ to defend women’s engagement in raunch culture practices, with concern only being expressed if women do it to ‘conform’. This idea is demonstrated in the next extract.

Extract 12 (Transcript 3A, lines 117-122)

Sophie: Like if people want to be strippers I don’t think there’s a problem with that.
Facilitator: Yep sure
Claire: Yeah people can really be anything for a reason they wanted to do it. yeah would be like that, like wearing the short shorts coz you know they want guys to look at them when they’re wearing them coz they think it looks good. Like I think that also comes into play, like actual reason and justification they have for wearing or doing something as well
Sophie: Mm. I don’t think women should be doing it just to conform with other women though
Facilitator: Mm
Sophie: Think it should be a personal choice

Claire’s statement that “people can really be anything for a reason” reflects the postfeminist notion that, freed from the constraints of the past, women can legitimately pursue whatever course of action they wish (Baker, 2008), including stripping or wearing ‘short shorts’. Similar to the idea expressed in Extract 11, if women have the appropriate “reason and justification” for engaging in such practices, that is, that it reflects what “they want” and it is “a personal choice”, then there is no problem. “Doing it just to conform”, however is not portrayed as being a justifiable reason. Through this juxtaposition, “personal choice” and “conform[ity]” are constructed as self-evident opposites, wherein social influence is not conceived of as shaping those choices or desires. Rather culture is seen as something ‘out there’ that a person with sufficient self-esteem should not feel pressured/influenced by (as demonstrated in the previous section).

Extract 13 further develops this distinction between choice and conformity.

Extract 13 (Transcript 2A, lines 91-103)
Samantha: And um so in a way, I think it (raunch culture)’s good because it’s whether- whether you’re married or whether you’re- you should feel nice about yourself, um whether you should be flashing your boobs and so on is another thing that I don’t necessarily agree with but um there is that right that you know it’s ok to want to look sexy and if you work at your body or you’re genetically nice and you want to show it off I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that.

Facilitator: Mm
<unknown>: Mm
Samantha: But um some- some of that stuff (from the Raunch culture video clip) is just rude and gross (laughs)
All: (laughs)
Samantha: But- but if people are comfortable with that then I don’t- I think we have a right to be able to do that. What we probably would be concerned about is that you have to do it because otherwise you’re not sexy or you have to do it because that boy is not wanting- want- does- doesn’t want to go out with you, that would be the big issue. […]

Here Samantha embraces one of the central tenets of raunch culture: that woman have a “right … to want to look sexy” and “show it off”. However, she qualifies this position by saying that some aspects of raunchiness (e.g. flashing one’s breasts) are “rude and gross”, insinuating that there is still a line of ‘respectability’ which is not desirable for women to cross. Similar to the argument made in the previous extracts about ‘feeling good’ under the approving male gaze, being “comfortable” with performing sexiness is used as a bottom line argument. Again, this pre-emptively defends against critique of raunch culture by appealing to the common-sense notion that if one is “comfortable” with a certain action than it cannot possibly be harmful to them. Concern was only seen as warranted if women feel that they “have to do it”. This sort of reasoning appeared numerous times in the focus groups, for example, as in the following extracts where the participants discuss women performing burlesque or glamour modelling (which involves posing semi-nude for men’s publications).

Extract 14 (Transcript 1B, lines 810-823)

Brittany: Using like the burlesque thing, because we discussed last time of how it’s you know completely fine, it’s in the women’s control and like you know you don’t have to go any further than doing that dance or performing or it’s
fun, as opposed to people on the streets. Usually if a girl dresses like that, it’s because she wants that attention, then that attention is expected to turn into like sex or something where it’s I think there’s a big difference depending on where it’s being used

Facilitator: yeah so you don’t think this argument (referencing ‘Pornulation empowerfulizes us’ blog post) relates to people who are doing burlesque or stripping as a profession?

Brittany: Um I think it- yeah as a profession if the reasons are like good, if it’s not just “oh I need it for the money” it’s like their only work they can get, or it’s not like if no-one’s forced you to do if it’s like “yeah I want to do this, I find it fun, I’m not affected by it”, but it’s different when it’s just with the general population

Facilitator: Yeah

Brittany: Who see this stuff think it’s right and then they do it and it always leads to something worse, like low self-esteem all that jazz

Extract 15 (Transcript 1B, lines 688-693)

Holly: But the (glamour) models that go in they like, it’s a choice for them to go in and do it they don’t have to go and do that, if they want to it’s their choice so I think that it’s like there shouldn’t be any blame game in it if they’re willing and happy to go and do that, then let them do that

Facilitator: Yep

Holly: If they’re like- if they’re being forced into it then not at all or if they’re not comfortable- nothing to do- but if they’re happy to do that and they’re willing why not? […]

As seen in these extracts, participants were often quick to defend women’s choices to take on these sexualised professions, as long as “the reasons are good” (Extract 14) and they “want to” and are “happy to” (Extract 15), but not if the women are “forced” to (Extracts 14, 15) or are “not comfortable” (Extract 15). This juxtaposition further highlights how social influence was only conceived of as being something that is “forced” on someone by an identifiable other, producing a distinctly individualistic view of the female subject, whose actions are put down to purely personal, idiosyncratic choices and desires that exist independently of her social and cultural context (Gill & Donaghue, in press). These discursive constructions of choice and conformity can thus be said to conceal the extent to which (oppressive) gender norms still shape societal notions of desirable femininity,
which likely impact on women’s preferences, desires, choices and what they find to be enjoyable or “comfortable” (see Gill, 2007b for a discussion of social influence).

Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that this notion of being “comfortable” constructs women’s feelings about participating in raunch culture as being straightforward and easily defined, as it is assumed that one should be able to tell whether they feel okay about doing something or not. Yet as seen through the participants’ talk of the contingencies, the ‘lines’ that shouldn’t be crossed and a detectable sense of general uneasiness, perhaps one of the defining features of how they feel about idea of empowerment via raunchiness, it is that, although they can see the appeal, they are not entirely comfortable with it but rather are ambivalent. As Gavey (2012) argues, it is probably the case that women have a much more complicated relationship to the idea of raunch culture than either simply fully embracing it or rejecting it.

‘Doing it for yourself’. Another indication of the participants’ tendency to downplay notions of social influence in favour of highlighting female autonomy was evident in how they often took offence to the idea that raunch culture might be ‘for’ men, as indicated in this next extract.

Extract 16 (Transcript 3B, lines 79-86)
((In response to Appendix D, ‘I Blame the Patriarchy’ blog post)
Claire: What about the women? I mean a lot of the times when I go out I’m thinking ‘oo what will my friends say?’ not ‘what will some random guy say?’ Like I do it for the women more than the men ’cause I don’t really care what they think.
Facilitator: Yeah
Claire: I don’t know think it’s just a bit harsh to say they’re doing it for the men like yeah they get the attention but that’s still about them, it’s not about the men.
Facilitator: Yep
Claire: Like if they react well they feel better, but it’s just the reaction they want not the anything else
Claire’s negative reaction here to the post from the radical feminist blog “I Blame the Patriarchy” was typical across the focus groups; none of the participants said they agreed with the argument put across in this material, which they typically interpreted as being that women participate in raunch culture ‘for men’. As exemplified in this extract, the participants frequently challenged this perceived feminist argument by highlighting how women often dress for other women (such as friends), thereby downplaying the importance of the male gaze; as Claire says “I don’t really care what they [men] think”. Nevertheless, Claire also states that it is the attention/reaction from men that makes women “feel better” which would suggest that men ultimately have the power to judge whether something that is meant to look sexy ‘really is’ sexy. However, this point was not acknowledged by Claire nor any of the other participants which used this discourse, supporting Gill’s (2008) argument that the idea of the judging, oppressive male gaze has become largely eschewed in postfeminist discourses The next two extracts further specify what participants typically meant by “doing it for the women”.

Extract 17 (Transcript 4A, lines 191-197)

Erica: But well I mean it’s like in, why’s it male attention? Um does it have to be, is it for men? Um you know I don’t- I’m not on Facebook and I’m not in the youngest scene, my son he’s twenty although I don’t really see, you know see what from what you’ve (to Natasha) been saying but um I don’t think all the time it has to be for men and you know women probably a lot of the time do it for each other or they compete against each other

Facilitator: Yeah

Erica: Or for their own you know reasons other than just men

Extract 18 (Transcript 4B, lines 816-824)

Hayley: I don’t think it’s all about men, probably to me even more of a girl thing because you don’t want girls bitching about you and the whole thing

Facilitator: Why do you think girls care so much about other girls’ appearances?

Hayley: Competition

Sophie: Competition for males

Karise: Competition definitely yeah

Hayley: You want to be the best I suppose
Facilitator: Mm
Hayley: The most desired

In these extracts women are seen as performing sexiness women as a form of competition (Extract 17, 18) and for in-group acceptance (Extract 18) with other women. Although in this discourse considerable effort was made to undermine the idea that men have an active influence on women’s choices, male attention and “to be the most desired” (Extract 18) was depicted as being what women were in competition for, tying women’s social status to their ability to incite male desire. By framing it in these terms, women are cast as the primary beneficiaries of raunch culture as it allows them to gain social cache which, as Stuart and Donaghue (2011) argue, deflects the notion that participating in raunch culture is an act of subordination to the (validating) male gaze.

The following extracts further illustrate how the notion of social influence tended to be evacuated in participant’s accounts of participating in raunch culture, through the idea of ‘doing it for me’.

Extract 19 (Transcript 2A, lines 584-588)
Samantha: But remembering some women um like me for example, sometimes I like to wear the red shoes and it’s not for me to be more attractive
Anna: Mm
Samantha: Or you know and forgo the holiday, not to be attractive just because I like shoes, I like clothes, and I like to look nice and not necessarily for everyone else, for myself

Extract 20 (Transcript 1B, lines 66-73)
Nicole: I’ve gotten that (judgement for what you’re wearing) from people like I- ‘cause I often dress kind of, atten- not really skanky or slutty just
Brittany: Provocatively
Nicole: Yes, I-I would use the word dramatic and I had this one friend who would not leave it alone and I was like “ok you’re making me really uncomfortable now, stop it” and he goes “well why did you dress like that then?” and I’m like “well because I like to, I do it for me” and it was, an interesting kind of moment like “huh, cultural what?” because it was almost as if it was his god given right to say whatever he liked
Facilitator: Mm
Nicole: Because of the way I was dressing
In these extracts, Samantha’s assertion that her wearing of red shoes (which have long been a symbol of an overtly sexual femininity) and Nicole’s ‘provocative’ dress style are framed as explicitly personal choices that they do for themselves because they “like to” (Extracts 19, 20). They are quite clear to dismiss the idea that it is for “everyone else” (Extract 19) or for men, yet they do not clearly explain what it is they enjoy about donning these traditional indicators of a sexualised femininity. This kind of circular reasoning suggests that the ability to articulate the socialised aspects behind one’s choices has been largely removed by postfeminism and neoliberalism (Gill, 2007b). Similar reasoning can also be seen in the next extract:

Extract 21 (Transcript 3A, lines 167-172)

Emily: […] having a relationship, doing pole dancing classes it could be “I want to do this to get fit and to bring something to the bedroom and look sexy for myself”
Facilitator: Mm
Emily: So you can kinda look at it that way that being empowerment and something good for yourself but then people do it for other people as well I don’t- it’s- I don’t know how they feel

Emily gives three reasons as to why a would-be client may take up pole dancing classes (whilst in a relationship): “to get fit and to bring something to the bedroom and look sexy”. Crucially, these reasons are not framed as being done for their partner but as something “I want to do … for myself”, which is what makes it a form of “empowerment”, again demonstrating that the idea of sexual subjectification (Gill, 2007a, 2008) has gained ground. As Whitehead & Kurz (2009) argue though, the empowerment on offer through pole dancing primarily rests on achieving certain societal standards of femininity (i.e. being fit, sexy, and visually pleasing a male sexual partner), which is arguably obscured by framing it as merely “something good for yourself”.
As demonstrated in this first section of the analysis, overall the participants predominantly drew on distinctly postfeminist, neoliberal discourses by invoking the individualised concepts of ‘confidence’ and/or ‘self-esteem’, ‘choice’ and ‘doing it for yourself’. In these constructions, participants tended to rhetorically endorse raunch culture, although even when ambivalence was expressed it was not in the form of social analysis or critique, but rather the individual was indicted as responsible for suffering any untoward effects, due to lacking the required level of self-esteem or confidence to resist pressure and/or conformity.

Section II: Resisting Raunch Culture

A less common, but nonetheless important, aspect of the participants’ talk was in the form of resistance to the dominant discursive constructions detailed above. These examples of resistance often took the form of questions or challenges to postfeminist ideas by including a deeper analysis of social context and/or underlying sexism. For instance, whilst most of the time participants were hesitant to characterise raunch culture as inherently degrading and harmful to women, the next two extracts demonstrate notable exceptions.

Extract 22 (Transcript 3A, lines 85-87)
Emily: I don’t think that dressing like that is it showing of empowerment, I think it is we- we feel like we have to. I think it’s degrading and we have to act like this to try and get attention from men or try and um kind of get to their level because they are so up here if that kind of makes sense

Extract 23 (Transcript 2A, lines 889-897)
Anna: But I guess the whole raunch culture thing maybe feminism needs to, maybe it needs- maybe not the word feminism we need something else to sort of bring women back to equal because now we’ve gone to the extreme, not in the work sense but like women are now sexualised, so sexualised and degraded and porn and any like that sort of things and billboards of women in little knickers trying to sell hairspray or something you know something ridiculous like that
Facilitator: Mm
Anna: And so maybe instead of going “oh feminists will need to get on board” yeah maybe we don’t need feminists there we just need women in general
who don’t want to be looked down and treated unequal in that regard and
why do you have to, you don’t necessarily have to be labelled a feminist

Both of these extracts indicate a recognition of gender inequality, as can be
seen where Emily says that men are “so up here” (Extract 22) and Anna’s assertion
that there is a need to “bring women back to equal” (Extract 23). Emily’s statement
particular is in direct opposition to the ways in which male sexual attention was
previously discussed as being empowering, constructed here as being “degrading”
because we “have to act like this to try … get to their level”, which is reminiscent of
Levy’s (2005) argument that raunch culture is a poor attempt at providing women
with equality. Intriguingly, this would seem to contradict Emily’s previous assertion
in Extract 5 about male attention making her ‘feel good’, which is again revealing of
the ambivalence that participants often had towards these ideas.

Anna was the only participant who consistently rejected the dominant
discursive constructions of raunch culture across the discussions. In Extract 23, she
draws on feminist arguments that have been made (e.g. Lamb, 2010; Walter, 2010)
that women are “degraded” and “treated unequal” in a sexualised culture. Despite
this, she does not position herself as being feminist but rather actively distances
herself from feminism. Similar findings have been observed in women’s discussions
of sexualised adverts (Malson, Halliwell & Tischner, 2011), highlighting how
feminism has come to be widely disregarded in contemporary Western societies,
even when the ideas being drawn upon are distinctly feminist (McRobbie, 2004).
The following extracts further demonstrate how participants occasionally took up an
(implicit) feminist critique.

Extract 24 (Transcript 4A, lines 254-263)
Natasha: Well some of it says that things like getting bikini waxes and stuff are
actually empowering feminism but I guess she- and you know that’s making
women feel better about themselves rather than this sexualisation but I guess
really if you look at it, is it that making them feel better or do they feel better because they fit in with this sexualisation that’s going around in our culture? If that makes sense

Facilitator: Yeah it does
Natasha: Um you know it’s hard to say because women do get their eyebrows waxed [F: mm] they get fake tints and all sorts and they say it’s ‘cause they feel better about themselves but is it because it makes them feel better? Or is it because they feel better ‘cause they’re fitting in with this culture that’s expected?

Extract 25 (Transcript 2B, lines 794-799)
Facilitator: So you would you would say that being ultra-feminine is something that you can do for yourself?
Lauren: I think if –
Samantha: yeah but who- who- who classifies what’s ultra-feminine? This is the thing
Anna: I know, it’s that one choice like last time (referring to ‘Choice Feminism’ blog post from previous session)) you’re only given this choice […]

Extract 26 (Transcript 3A, lines 546-550)
Emily: So it’s not really a choice when you say “oh I’m gonna, I’m gonna dress like this because I want to tease”, to get the effects that you really want, attention, you have to do it whereas going in with your pjs or something- so I don’t think it’s really a choice anymore after reading that (Choice Feminism blog post)
Claire: I think there’s-
Emily: And is that why you’re really doing it for yourself as well?

As seen in these extracts, participants did occasionally take up a more critical argument in regards to the notion of “doing it for yourself” by acknowledging that women are held to certain societal expectations of femininity. Extracts 25 and 26 show how these critiques were sometimes expressed after reading some of the materials (which was the intention behind including them). Natasha’s questioning (Extract 24), however, was initiated without having yet read that material. In recognising that some choices are socially preferred, it was questioned whether raunch culture really reflects “empowering feminism” (Extract 24) or whether it is “really a choice” for women (Extract 26), which significantly converged with some of the feminist critiques that have been made of neoliberal gender politics (e.g. Evans et al, 2010; Gill, 2007, 2008). The fact that participants often agreed with the critique of ‘choice’ put forward in the Choice Feminism blog post, suggests that there is likely a wider implicit recognition of the limits on women’s choices, but the
removal of this vocabulary within neoliberal discourses makes it difficult for women
to freely articulate this without being exposed to such arguments.

**Conclusion**

This research was intended to contribute to feminist debates around raunch culture
and women’s agency by examining how young women interpret this cultural
phenomenon and how they respond to feminist critique of the rhetoric of
empowerment and choice which infuses raunch culture and postfeminist discourses
more generally. As demonstrated in the analysis, participants frequently took up
postfeminist discourses in drawing on the principles of ‘confidence/self-esteem’,
‘choice’ and ‘doing it for yourself’ to account for women’s performances of
raunchiness (e.g. adopting sexually provocative clothing when nightclubbing or
performing sexualised dances such as burlesque or stripping). However, there was
also a sense of underlying ambivalence and discomfort about raunch culture within
these accounts, as well as there being instances when the dominant discursive
constructions of empowerment and choice were actively resisted.

One of the ways in which women’s engagement in raunch culture practises
was constructed as being empowering was that “getting [sexualised] attention” from
men was argued to make women “feel good” by boosting their “self-esteem” and/or
self-confidence. In these accounts, the pleasure to be gained from being found
desirable under the male gaze formed the bottom line, and there was no further
critique or analysis of why it is that women might feel better about themselves
through male approval. This discursive construction of empowerment thus side-steps
the more pernicious implications of such a view of power; that is, that it is not power
based one’s own terms, but rather based on men’s judgement of whether an attempt
to perform sexiness ‘really is’ sexy.
Perhaps one of the reasons this discourse has become widely taken up within postfeminist culture then is precisely because this discourse allows women to position themselves as not being oppressed by the male gaze or subordinating themselves to male sexual interests, but rather as seeking out male attention for their own amusement, pleasure and/or gain (Gill, 2008). In saying this, I do not mean that women’s subjective feelings of empowerment and enjoyment are not ‘real’ - a concern that has been expressed by those such as Duitz and van Zoonen (2006) and Peterson (2010) - nor am I criticising women for wanting to feel desirable. Rather my critique is aimed at uncovering the more problematic aspects of this view of empowerment that are concealed within this discursive framing; as Gavey (2012) argues, we can recognise that acts can be personally experienced as agentic and pleasurable, but we need to situate these within the disappointing limitations that currently exist for societal discourses of female sexuality.

The notion of ‘choice’ was also similarly used by participants to defend women’s performances of raunchiness, wherein it was argued that it is not problematic as long as such decisions reflect a “personal choice” which women are “comfortable” with. Conformity, on the other hand, was constructed as being in direct opposition to choice, and an insufficient reason for women to participate in raunch culture. By contending that women can autonomously ‘choose’ to emulate a sexualised vision of femininity, the use of this discourse conceals the extent to which these ideals have in fact become normatively required of young women (Evans, et al, 2010; Lamb, 2010; Gill, 2007a, 2008). It can be argued that the ‘choice’ discourse thus functions to allow the postfeminist subject to assert her freedom from social influence and restrictive gender norms, and attribute her actions to her own personal
desires and choices, in keeping with the neoliberal requirements of the self (Baker, 2008, 2010; ).

The refutation of social influence was also particularly evident in how participants often took offence to the perceived feminist argument that women’s engagement in raunch culture are acts of submission to men (or the patriarchy), claiming instead that women do it to compete with or be accepted by other women and above all, to benefit themselves. Such accounts represent women as being freed from gender power imbalances and seem designed to avoid positioning women as ‘victims’ (Baker, 2010) of the oppressive male gaze and/or limiting societal ideals of feminine sexuality. In this sense, it could be argued that the notion of the external, oppressive male gaze has disappeared within postfeminist discourses only to be replaced by a self-policing, internalised one (Gill, 2008).

Another notable feature of the discursive constructions of ‘confidence/self-esteem’ and ‘choice’, was that the participants’ endorsement of raunch culture was limited to its ability to help women gain admiration for their (hetero)sex appeal, rather than to assist them to freely express their sexual desires or experience sexual pleasure. Wanting to “look sexy” and receive attention from men in the form of looks or compliments was discussed as being a positive experience for all women, but seeking attention through sex was construed as being less acceptable for women and less ‘empowering’, instead leading to negative consequences or attributions such as “low self-esteem”. These accounts therefore embrace displays of sexuality that have an instrumental purpose (helping women to “feel sexy”) but not as an expression of personhood, which supports Fine and McClelland’s (2006) argument that whilst young women may have taken on the performance of desire, the actual discourse of desire is still largely missing.
Despite the fact that participants often espoused these postfeminist discourses of sexuality as both a means to and an emblem of empowerment, there were numerous tensions, ambiguities and seeming contradictions that were detected in their talk. For instance, participants often personally distanced themselves from the idea of empowerment through raunchiness, and there was also an awareness that this route can present ‘dangers’ for women and be sexually objectifying, as well as a recognition that it can cease to become less optional for women. However, potential for turning these insights into a critique of the gendered order of society was frequently thwarted as they typically indicted the individual as being responsible for whether they will be negatively “affected” by raunch culture, as “self-esteem” was constructed as being the predictive factor in whether women feel pressured or influenced to participate in it. This suggests that although there is an acknowledgment of the darker side of raunch culture, the dominance of the neoliberal view of the self has largely removed the discursive tools needed to recognise and critique the underlying sexism (see Baker, 2008 for a similar argument in regards to other women’s issues).

There were, however, notable exceptions to this rule as was seen in the less frequent examples of resistance to dominant discursive constructions, wherein participants explicitly called into question the extent to which women’s participation in raunch culture reflects ‘empowerment’ and ‘choice’. In these examples there was a heightened awareness of gender inequality and the societal expectations of femininity that women are evaluated against. Whilst some of these comments arose prior to reading the materials, others appear to have been stimulated through critical discussion of some of the feminist critiques put forward. These findings suggest that
(at least some) feminist arguments can still resonate with young women and provide them with the discursive resources to critique raunch culture.

Whilst the intention behind providing such materials and asking probing, challenging questions was to help bring out such critique, this methodological feature could have had other implications for the talk that was produced. That is, providing feminist critiques of the rhetoric of raunch culture could have lead participants to discursively frame their experiences in terms of empowerment and choice to a greater extent than they might have had they not read such materials. Although it is unlikely that these themes were purely an artefact of the methodology (given that they been noted in similar studies e.g. Stuart & Donaghue, 2011; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009), future research could use a less directive approach to more fully explore the other ways in which women frame raunch culture.

Nevertheless, the findings of the present study have several implications for the feminist debates about female agency within the context of raunch culture. Firstly, the fact that these women did readily draw on raunch culture discourses of choice and empowerment highlights how postfeminist and neoliberal discourses have become central in young women’s articulations of their experiences. However, I argue that these women are not completely constrained by these discourses nor do they completely ‘buy into’ the tenets of raunch culture, as there was a significant sense of ambivalence about the form of ‘power’ on offer in raunch culture. Whilst it was often difficult for them to articulate these misgivings without ultimately putting the blame back onto the individual, when exposed to feminist arguments and challenged some women did take on a more explicitly social critique. This highlights how women can, and indeed to some extent already do, resist hegemonic notions of femininity in raunch culture.
The present study therefore also has potential implications for applied feminist work in this area. These demonstrations of resistance suggest that providing women with more opportunities to critically discuss raunch culture could be a useful way of engaging women with some of the current issues arising from a highly sexualised culture. Indeed, voluntary feedback from a number of participants indicated that they enjoyed participating in the focus groups discussions and thought that such discussions have the potential to create social change. For instance, one of the participants stated: “I do think we need to fight and stand up and talk about things in that way, like even having discussions like this [focus group] with groups of friends do change the way that we see it” (Leanne, Transcript 2B, lines 626-628).

By giving women more safe spaces to voice their concerns and opinions on the impacts of raunch culture, there is potential for existing ‘points of resistance’ (Gauntlett, 2002) to spread, and to challenge dominant, oppressive discourses of femininity and sexuality.

In conclusion, feminist post-structuralist research such as this can provide insight into the ways in which the dominant discourses constitute contemporary feminine experience with raunch culture, as well as help identify spaces for resistance, in order to make visible and critique oppressive, societal discourses of femininity and female sexuality (Gavey, 1997). The present study makes an original contribution to the literature by examining how young women respond to feminist arguments about raunch culture, incorporating a perspective in the debates that to date has been underrepresented within the literature. In this paper I have argued that whilst the ideologies of postfeminism and neoliberalism provide a dominant ‘way of being’ in the world for these young women, they are not completely constrained by them, as evidenced in their ability to occasionally resist these dominant discourses.
Ultimately, I would argue that what is needed to expand societal views of female sexuality beyond the currently limited one on offer in raunch culture is for such cracks of resistance to widen to effectively challenge existing gender relations.
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We welcome manuscripts in a variety of formats, including work that introduces innovative forms of feminist psychology scholarship. In addition to full length Articles, Observations and Commentaries, and Brief Reports, we publish Book Reviews, and welcome submissions for Special Features. Queries about the latter should be directed to the Editors; submission guidelines for the others follow. If you are uncertain about the relevance of your manuscript for the journal, please contact the Editors.

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Submissions of full length Articles, Brief Reports, and Observations and Commentaries should be emailed to the Editors, Nicola Gavey and Virginia Braun at feminism.psychology@auckland.ac.nz

Authors should consult the Aims and Scope before submitting a manuscript for review, and are also advised to consult the Editorial in volume 18(1) if more detail is required. Authors should also take note of the following:

1. Manuscripts must be written in English, and can not have been published, nor be currently under consideration, elsewhere. Manuscripts need to be at least 70% different to other previously published work.

2. The following word lengths apply and include references and any supplementary material: up to 8000 words for full-length articles (please contact the editors if you want to submit a substantially longer manuscript); 500-2000 words for Observations and Commentaries; up to 3000 words for Brief Reports. Please provide a word count.

3. All submissions fitting within the Aims and Scope will be peer reviewed anonymously.

4. Submissions should be prepared for anonymous peer review. This means that any identifiable author details (such as reference to previous works as part of the same project) need to be removed or anonymised (e.g., Author 1, 2007), and all author details should be sent as a separate cover-sheet document.

5. Submissions should be prepared in accordance with the following style. They should be double-spaced throughout, with generous margins, and not right-justified. References should be Harvard system, and in the following style:


6. Footnotes should be kept to a minimum, and presented as End Notes.

7. All figures should be of a reproducible standard.

8. Extracts of qualitative data containing transcription notation should be prepared in the exact format you wish them to appear, especially as regards punctuation, spacing, underlining, etc. Each line should contain no more than 80 characters in 10pt including numbering and the speaker’s name.

9. Authors should avoid the use of sexist, racist and heterosexist language. Manuscripts that do not conform to these specifications will not be considered. Authors are encouraged to use clear language which avoids unnecessary jargon.

10. An abstract of approximately 150 words, plus 5-10 key words, should be included with each full length article submission.

11. Authors’ names, titles and affiliations, with complete postal and email addresses and telephone/fax numbers, should appear on a separate cover page.

13. Authors will receive electronic offprints of their article and a complimentary journal copy. A maximum of 5 journal copies will be supplied for multi-authored articles. These will be supplied to the main author.
Appendix A: Transcription Notation

*Italics* – denotes emphasis on word

Comma , – short pause

Full stop . – long pause

Wor- dash shows a sharp cut-off

“quote” – person is mimicking someone else

? – questioning intonation

(h) – laughter within speech

(text) – text added by the researcher, such as describing actions, laughter, etc

<indiscernible> - unclear recording, unable to transcribe
Appendix B

First Focus Group Schedule

1. Introduction
2. Play Raunch culture video clip\(^1\) to visually illustrate idea of raunch culture.
3. What are you general thoughts and feelings about these images and the fact that things like burlesque classes are becoming popular?

4. Read Female Chauvinist Pigs extract (Appendix C)
5. Have you noticed this trend/message much here? Any experiences or examples? What do you think about this message that the way for women to become empowered and liberated is to flaunt their sexuality?

6. Read “The New Feminism” blog post (Appendix D)
7. What do you think is the main argument or the main points the author is trying to get across here? Do you agree with them? PROMPT – who do you think is responsible for women being sexualised in the media? In society more broadly?
8. How would you define feminism? What about anti-feminism and post-feminism? Do you agree or disagree with the author that phenomena like the Pussycat Dolls represent a “backlash” against feminism? Why?
9. Do you agree or disagree with the author there are some aspects of raunch culture that can be fun and not necessarily anti-feminist? Why? Is it possible to enjoy parts of it but still be critical?

10. Read “Why Choice Feminism is an Illusion” blog post (Appendix E)
11. What are your reactions or feelings towards this blog? What do you think about the argument that women’s choices aren’t ever “freely” made?
12. What do you think are the consequences (both positive and negative) for a woman “choosing” to be a “Hot Chick”? What about for a woman who rejects this idea?

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\(^1\) YouTube (2012). “Raunch culture”. Retrieved February 27, 2012 from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BN4ANtVKtPQ
Second Focus Group Schedule

1. Summarise last week, frame today’s agenda
2. Did anyone think of anything since the last time we met that they would like to bring up? Any questions?

4. What do you think about the main argument in this blog? PROMPT – What sort of impact do you think sexualisation has on a woman’s sexuality? Do you think that the pressure to be sexy restricts women from freely exploring their sexuality?
5. What do you think about the solution proposed by the blogger? Do you think it is up to individuals to choose what media they are exposed to and be more critical of media and societal messages? Or do you think we should be challenging those messages?

6. Read extract from “Media, empowerment and the ‘sexualisation of culture’ debates” (Appendix H)
7. How do you feel about this critique of media literacy as a solution? Do you feel as though you are already critical of the media? How does this affect you in terms of being able to resist or feel pressured by unhelpful media messages?
8. What are your thoughts about the author’s calls to action? What can or should be done about sexualisation? Do you think if women (and men) protest or engage in other forms of activism we would be able to create cultural change?

9. Read “Pornulation empowerfulizes us, say humorous ironic hotties” blog post (Appendix G)
10. What are your reactions or feelings to this piece? PROMPT – what is the author arguing about how much choice women have and about who is really benefiting from raunch culture? What are your thoughts about this?

11. Before we finish are there any other points you would like to bring up that you feel we haven’t covered?
Appendix C


Introduction

I first noticed it several years ago. I would turn on the television and find strippers in pasties explaining how best to lap dance a man to orgasm. I would flip the channel and see babes in tight, tiny uniforms bouncing up and down on trampolines. Britney Spears was becoming increasingly popular and increasingly unclothed, and her undulating body ultimately became so familiar to me I felt like we used to go out.

Charlie’s Angels, the film remake of the quintessential jiggle show, opened at number one in 2000 and made $125 million in theaters nationally, reinvig-
orating the interest of men and women alike in leggy crime fighting. Its stars, who kept talking about “strong women” and “empowerment,” were dressed in alternating soft-porn styles—as massage parlor geishas, dominatrixes, yodeling Heidis in alpine bustiers. (The summer sequel in 2003—in which the Angels’ perilous mission required them to perform stripteases—pulled in another $100 million domestically.) In my own industry, magazines, a porny new genre called the Lad Mag, which included titles like Maxim, FHM, and Stuff, was hitting the stands and becoming a huge success by delivering what Playboy had only occasionally managed to capture: greased celebrities in little scraps of fabric humping the floor.

This didn’t end when I switched off the radio or the television or closed the magazines. I’d walk down the street and see teens and young women—and the occasional wild fifty-year-old—wearing jeans cut so low they exposed what came to be known as butt cleavage paired with miniature tops that showed off breast implants and pierced navels alike. Sometimes, in case the overall message of the outfit was too subtle, the shirts would be emblazoned with the Playboy bunny or say Porn Star across the chest.

Some odd things were happening in my social life, too. People I knew (female people) liked going to strip clubs (female strippers). It was sexy and fun, they explained; it was liberating and rebellious. My best friend from college, who used to go to Take Back the Night marches on campus, had become capti-

vated by porn stars. She would point them out to me in music videos and watch their (topless) interviews on Howard Stern. As for me, I wasn’t going to strip clubs or buying Hustler T-shirts, but I was starting to show signs of impact all the same. It had only been a few years since I’d graduated from Wesleyan University, a place where you could pretty much get expelled for saying “girl” instead of “woman,” but somewhere along the line I’d started saying “chick.” And, like most chicks I knew, I’d taken to wearing thongs.

What was going on? My mother, a shiatsu masseuse who attended weekly women’s consciousness-raising groups for twenty-four years, didn’t own makeup. My father, whom she met as a student radical at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in the sixties was a consultant for Planned Parenthood, NARAL, and NOW. Only thirty years (my lifetime) ago, our mothers were “burning their bras” and picketing Playboy, and suddenly we were getting implants and wearing the bunny logo as supposed symbols of our liberation. How had the culture shifted so drastically in such a short period of time?

What was almost more surprising than the change itself were the responses I got when I started interviewing the men and—often—women who edit magazines like Maxim and make programs like The Man Show and Girls Gone Wild. This new raunch culture didn’t mark the death of feminism, they told me; it was evidence that the feminist project had already been achieved. We’d earned the right to look at Play-
Despite the rising power of Evangelical Christianity and the political right in the United States, this trend has only grown more extreme and more pervasive in the years that have passed since I first became aware of it. A tawdry, tarty, cartoonlike version of female sexuality has become so ubiquitous, it no longer seems particular. What we once regarded as a kind of sexual expression we now view as sexuality. As former adult film star Traci Lords put it to a reporter a few days before her memoir hit the best-seller list in 2003, “When I was in porn, it was like a back-alley thing. Now it’s everywhere.” Spectacles of naked ladies have moved from seedy side streets to center stage, where everyone—men and women—can watch them in broad daylight. Playboy and its ilk are being “embraced by young women in a curious way in a postfeminist world,” to borrow the words of Hugh Hefner.

But just because we are post doesn’t automatically mean we are feminists. There is a widespread assumption that simply because my generation of women has the good fortune to live in a world touched by the feminist movement, that means everything we do is magically imbued with its agenda. It doesn’t work that way. “Raunchy” and “liberated” are not synonyms. It is worth asking ourselves if this bawdy world of boobs and gams we have resurrected reflects how far we’ve come, or how far we have left to go.
If there's one thing that screams “empowerful,” it’s visible buttcheeks.

Stand aside, hairy-legged femi-Nazis, because there’s a new feminism in town. And it’s wearing some really tall heels.

Parents looking for role models for teenage daughters: Finally there is a show for you.

“Pussycat Dolls Present: The Search for the Next Doll,” which is to have its premiere on Tuesday night on the CW network, may look like just another reality show with attractive, slinkily dressed women preening for the camera in the hope of a shot at stardom.

But “Pussycat Dolls Present” is about female empowerment, the show’s producers explained to a group of television writers and critics here in January.

In theory, there’s nothing wrong with women dancing in their underwear. But we aren’t living in “theory.” We’re living in a society wherein women in their underwear on TV are there primarily for male pleasure, and to remind
all other women of our inferior status — and to make a lot of money for male-run enterprises. And in our supposedly post-feminist society, spending a shitload of money on make-up and fancy lingerie, tottering around in toe-pinning high heels, and twisting your body into painful — but, lower back be damned, sexxy! — positions is now empowerment. According, of course, to the dudes who are making a lot of cash from “empowering” these women.

For the uninitiated, the Pussycat Dolls are a female singing group whose six members slither through their music videos dressed like Barbie’s nasty cousins. In their best known song they ask the musical question: “Don’t cha wish your girlfriend was a freak like me?”

Dismiss immediately whatever pornographic inferences such a performance might bring to mind, said McG, the music producer and film director who is an executive producer of “Pussycat Dolls Present.” The Dolls, McG said, are simply making a heartfelt inquiry: “It’s just like saying, ‘Don’t you wish your girlfriend could be free and comfortable in her own skin and do her own thing, like me?’ ”

Here are the lyrics to Don’t Cha (which, full disclosure, is one of my favorite songs to listen to while I run on the treadmill). No, it is not about being comfortable in your own skin. It is about — surprise, surprise — a big ole catfight, wherein the Pussycat Dolls are in competition with another (less freaky, less “raw”) girl for a man. Groundbreaking shit, right?

When one reporter said his 17-year-old daughter looked at the group and their antics as a giant step backward for women, the Pussycat Dolls’ founder, Robin Antin, became defensive, invoking female role models who follow the Dolls.

“There’s a reason why people like Scarlett Johansson, Gwen Stefani, Cameron Diaz have all been so interested in what Pussycat Dolls is all about,” she said. “They feel that it is empowering to get up there and dress up like a Doll. It’s fun, and it’s something that every girl in the world — she may think one thing, but I think inside every girl in the world wants to do it.”
She might think it’s bad for women, but we all know that it’s a waste of time for women to use their puny lady-brains. Deep inside, she wants nothing more than to be a porno Barbie.

Now, I think there’s something to be said for the fun of burlesque, and I think there are ways that burlesque shows can be done which aren’t necessarily feminist, but also aren’t straight-up anti-feminist. The Pussycat Dolls are not that show. “Dressing up like a Doll” does not sound particularly powerful. And yes, many people — myself included — think that playing dress-up can be fun. I think it can be fun when a woman performs a burlesque show, or when a woman performs male-ness, or when a man performs as a woman, or when we show that gender and “sexiness” are largely performances. Pretend. Dress-up. Ways to emphasize that both femininity and masculinity are the result of a lot of effort, and men and women are made rather than born.

But the creators of the Pussycat Dolls show aren’t about dress-up or gender-fucking or making a statement about how thoroughly false the entire thing is — and how that falsity can be turned into a pretty good time. They’re about making this an identity, about further equating female sexuality with pleasing men and being a toy (they are “dolls,” after all).

When another male writer asked what kind of women truly aspire to the Dolls’ aesthetic, McG responded: “You must understand the fundamental paradox of a gentleman of your age asking that very question.”

He added: “Being a step backwards for women suggests it’s in the service of men. Under no circumstances is this in the service of men.”

On the contrary, he said: “There’s even a position to take if this is, frankly, third-wave feminism.”

“Under no circumstances is this in the service of men.” That is a mind-fuck so thorough that I’m not sure where to start with it.

I love it when non-feminists decide that they will define “feminism” in order to suit their own aims. Third-wave feminists have enough trouble trying to explain that “sex-positive” doesn’t always mean “totally ok with all
pornography and traditional female subjugation.” The backlash is in full swing, and part of it involves using feminism to suit your own, non-feminist aims: Selling sexist shit as “empowerful,” fear-mongering about Femi-Nazis, arguing that feminism created the mainstreaming of pornography, or deciding that a woman is a real feminist if she embraces every requirement of traditional femininity. When conservative writers and talking heads complain about “feminism,” they take one of two tacks: Either they emphasize the non-conformity aspect and harangue hairy-legged semi-Nazis for trying to ruin it for the mens, or they blame feminism for things like Girls Gone Wild and the sexualization of girls.

Now, we all know that the Pussycat Dolls phenomenon is backlash politics at its best, not Third Wave feminism. I think you’d have a hard time finding an actual feminist who thinks that the Dolls are a sign that the revolution has come and we won out.

I am deeply troubled at the use of feminist language to promote things that are decidedly anti-feminist, and that only serve to keep women in their place as either virgins or whores. But I’m further troubled by some of the feminist response to that phenomenon, as exemplified by books like Female Chauvinist Pigs. That response seems to be, “blame the sluts.” Which isn’t particularly helpful.

Younger women may have more choices today than ever before, but we still don’t have a full array. Younger women are presented with an image of male-defined “sexiness” as the best way for them to be attractive, fun and desirable. Dancing on the bar or flashing their breasts secures them the positive attention that they probably wouldn’t get from being the smartest girl in class. It’s the new way to prove that you’re “fun” and “independent” if you’re “doing it for me.” And while men are fully permitted to be both sexual and serious, and otherwise possessive of complex identities, women who seek male attention are pushed into the sexbot role. The Pussycat Dolls are making a lot of money — certainly much more than they would make if they wore long pants and button-downs. I would guess that they’re making more money than most Congresswomen or lawyers or businesswomen. They aren’t stupid, and they’re rational actors. This benefits them. They do it.
It also benefits the dudes who put groups like this together, market them, direct their videos, and profit from their record sales. Those dudes get to earn the cash without having to get their chests sliced open and a hunk of saline jammed in so that their bodies can be adequate play-toys. They get to earn the cash without politicians, writers, parents, and feminists telling them that they’re horrible immoral sluts. They get to earn the cash without the threat of being replaced by the next girl who’s willing to go a step further, who looks a few years younger, who’s better at shutting up and doing what she’s told.

But it’s easier to blame the girl who’s shaking her ass for money than it is to blame the guy who’s paying her to do it, or the guy who’s profiting from it. And it’s easier to shout “feminism” in order to give your misogynist endeavors some credibility than it is to actually evaluate them, cut the “empowerful” shit, and at least admit that what you’re doing is thoroughly and unapologetically using women’s bodies to please men and to make things a little bit harder for the rest of us.
Appendix E


Why "Choice Feminism" is an Illusion (With Bonus "Lost" Analogy)

Whatever aspects of being a “Hot Chick” work for you, enjoy them. But don’t fool yourself that you’re doing so of your own unconstrained free will.

Jess

Oct 20, 2011 at 2:00pm | 119 comments

Source: joe lvl 1 and david_shankbone on Flickr

So I was looking at “Hot Chicks of Occupy Wall Street,” which is so blatantly sexist I got bored trying to write about it. The site’s slogan is “The Sexy Side of Protesting Corruption,” but it might as well be “Come On Down, Boys, Some Boobs Are Here!”

If you were concerned that people at the Occupy Wall Street protests might accidentally focus more on economic inequality than on whether they’d like to bang you, well, apparently you did not have to worry about that.

On the front page currently is a note from one of the Hot Chicks. The women are not asked in advance whether they would like to be put in a Tumblr heralding their Hot Chickness -- many of them actually appear to have been
photographed without their knowledge. But one of them has spoken up, and she says she doesn’t mind being considered a Hot Chick. Well, that’s cleared that up then! Sexism: over.

This got me thinking about the phenomenon of “choice feminism,” where women argue that even anti-feminist behaviors are feminist because “feminism is about choice.” If you choose to be on a Hot Chicks Tumblr -- or if you decide after the fact that, having been put on a Hot Chicks Tumblr without your knowledge, you will choose to be okay with it -- that means the Tumblr isn’t misogynistic, because anything you as a woman choose to do is feminist. In fact, the real misogynist is the feminist who’s trying to tell you that being a Hot Chick isn’t okay.

Choice feminism gets one thing right: You should be able to make the choices that are right for you. And yes, of course that should include the choice to be ogled by strangers, or have your body used as a recruitment poster to bait guys into caring about important causes. Where choice feminism falls down, though, is in assuming that any of those things are actual choices right now.

They’re not. Like the Hot Chicks founder (I’m not giving him the Google hits), patriarchy just slaps your face up on a public site with a sign saying “OGLE THIS.” You can decide to be OK with it, or you can decide to raise a stink, but the options aren’t equal -- one of them’s going to make for a much harder life, fielding a lot of hostility from people who think you shouldn’t complain. And the option to just not be treated as public property in the first place? That one’s not really live.

I feel like talking about Patriarchy turns some people off, because it’s so vague and academic-sounding and also because it’s the Matrix -- i.e., you’re soaking in it, all the time. Therefore, I have come up with a super-reductive parable based on "Lost"! And you will either like it or you will go read something else.

OK, let’s say your plane crashes on a desert island, where a mysterious group of Others brings you to a temple. They give you two options: One, you can stay with them and have all your needs met, as long as you wear a little bikini and feed them grapes. If you don’t like that, you can go back out into the jungle. You’ll probably survive, but life won’t be easy; you’ll be cast out from the only
society existing on the island, and you’ll miss out on a lot of comforts, and you might get eaten by a polar bear.

One castaway, Claire, has genuinely always wanted to wear a tiny bikini and feed people grapes. She’s hot, she’s maternal: it’s perfect. She still doesn’t really get to make that choice freely, because it’s the only one available that lets her stay in society — when the options are “cake or death,” it doesn’t really matter how much you like cake. But at least she lucked out! She’s not just making the best of a bad situation; she’s actually enjoying it.

Sun, on the other hand, didn’t spend the whole first season becoming self-actualized just to take a job at Dharma Hooters. She flips the Others the bird and goes back out to the jungle, and once she’s there, she joins forces with other jungle-dwellers to destroy the Temple and its unfair restrictions.

Guys, this would be a WAY better show than "Lost" ended up being! But that’s not the point. The point is, it’s not fair for Sun to judge Claire -- the problem isn’t her, it’s a society whose main rule is “You must be decorative and servile or be cast out.” Claire’s just trying to get by, and enjoy her luck at actually liking the thing she’s supposed to do anyway.

But if Claire rolls her eyes at poor humorless Sun -- “I love wearing bikinis, you buzzkill” -- she’s missing the point. Wearing a bikini because you love it is great, but that choice is diminished when it’s the only one available. Making it OK to wear other kinds of clothes and do things besides serve fruit won’t keep Claire from passing out grapes in a bikini, if that’s what she likes. It’ll just mean that she gets to do it solely because she wants to.

The real world, being many times the size of the island and also not magic, is significantly more complicated. But the same basic principles pertain: If there are only a handful of options available to you, then it’s damn fortunate if you like one, but that doesn’t make it OK that there aren’t more. If your favorite pastimes are dieting, getting shiny hair, and having your legs looked at, hallelujah: You will receive plenty of support in doing the things you like best. But liking your limited options doesn’t mean your choice is free. It’s still constrained -- you just happen to be lucky.
So you should go ahead and do things that are patriarchy-approved, if you want to. Buy new nail polish! Care about celebrities! Have a giant wedding! Wear a thong in your hair! Put your picture on the Internet! Look good according to particular patriarchal ideas of what looks good! Be flattered when men wolf whistle at you, literally or metaphorically! Whatever aspects of being a “Hot Chick” work for you, enjoy them. Maybe except the hair thong.

But don’t fool yourself that you’re doing so of your own unconstrained free will. Until the woman who doesn’t want to be seen as sexually available can go out with certainty that she won’t be harassed or ogled, your choice to turn heads and revel in attention is a privileged one. Until the woman who doesn’t prioritize appearance gets taken just as seriously in just the same contexts, it’s a privileged choice to achieve certain standards of beauty. You may be doing what you love, but you’re also doing what you’re told.

There’s nothing wrong with YOU for making that choice -- you’re doing what it takes to get by, and if you like it, you’re enjoying your good luck. But there’s something wrong when other options engender so much hostility or disdain.

Feminists who want to fight for your ability to reject patriarchal standards of beauty or behavior or availability or occupation aren’t trying to constrain your choices. (Well, some probably are, but screw ’em.) They’re trying to give you more genuine, valid, supported options. If you still like reading scratch-and-sniff wedding magazines or being on “sexy activist” Tumblrs after that, by all means do it! Just make people stop telling you that it’s the only acceptable option, so you can go back to doing it because it’s your favorite thing.

The Paris Paradox: how sexualization replaces opportunity with obligation

Posted on November 9, 2010 by Hugo Schwyzer

I’ve often quoted Courtney Martin’s now-famous line from her Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters:

*We are the daughters of feminists who said, “You can be anything” • and we heard “You have to be everything.”*

I call it the Martha Complex, others call it the Supergirl syndrome; whatever name you give it, most of us who work with young people agree that it’s absolutely rampant among contemporary girls and young women (even those whose mothers weren’t feminists!) The complex has many sources, but one factor that particularly exacerbates the problem is sexualization.

Ariel Levy, in her powerful and controversial Female Chauvinist Pigs, quoted Paris Hilton’s remarkably perceptive remark about herself that she was “sexy, but not sexual.” Hilton isn’t alone. My students today, who are mostly in their late teens (though I have many older ones as well) were deeply influenced by Hilton, who was at the peak of her notoriety four or five years ago, when these now-college freshman were just entering high school. And sadly, not unlike many of their older sisters, they find themselves stuck in what we might call the “Paris Paradox”.

Young women with the Paris Paradox were raised in a culture that promised sexual freedom, but what they ended up with looked a lot more like obligation than opportunity. It’s not hard to understand why the pressure to be sexy so often trumps the freedom to discover one’s authentic sexuality. As Levy and Martin and others have been pointing out for the past decade, we’ve begun to sexualize girls at ever earlier ages, as anyone who noticed the Halloween costumes marketed to tween girls will be aware. The explicitness — the raunchiness, to use Levy’s word — of this sexualization is relatively new. But when that sexualization (or pornification, to use another popular term) meets the far-older pressure on young women to be people-pleasers, we have a recipe for misery.

For all its successes, feminism has not succeeded in eradicating the factors that lead so many young girls to be obsessed with praise and validation. We still thrust dolls into the hands of toddler girls, which isn’t a
problem — and then we encourage these small children to take responsibility for the emotional well-being of these inanimate objects. (As child psychologists will confirm, people respond differently to a child smashing a doll/action figure. Boys tend to be told “Don’t break your toys”; girls are much more likely to hear “Don’t let your dolly hit her head on the ground. It hurts her.”) While both boys and girls may grow up hearing the old adage that it is “better to give than to receive”, girls are much more likely to be given regular instruction in how to give — and much more likely to be rebuked for “selfishness” if they show too much desire to receive. (Ask around.

“Selfish” ranks right up there with “slut” and “fat” as an epithet with tremendous power to wound women. It only rarely does the same damage when applied to men.)

Girls grow up with an often grandiose sense of their own capacity to love and to heal (a sense encouraged by “princess” culture), something I wrote about in a post called “I Have So Much Love to Give: Young Women and Self-flattery.” That ain’t new. What’s new is the degree to which young girls, often barely into puberty, find themselves on the receiving end of the aggressive cultural sexualization that has become so commonplace in recent years. You combine the pressure to please with the requirement to be sexy, add in the wild overestimation of one’s own capacity to change and influence others for good, and top it off with the common and tragic overestimation of one’s capacity to suffer, and you’ve got a young woman keenly aware of how she appears to others and what others want from her — and far less capacity to articulate her own desires.

Not every young girl experiences herself as an object of desire. But virtually every young girl is aware that young women are “supposed” to be desired. Unprecedented opportunities to compete on an equal playing field educationally, socially and financially with men have done damn all to release young women from the pressure to be sexually alluring. And given how blunt and brazen so many of their male peers (and, sadly, so many much older men) are about what they want sexually, it’s little wonder that developing one’s own sexuality is often a much-later development than developing one’s sexiness.

One of the canniest strategies of social conservatives in recent years has been to paint the sexual revolution as a failure for women. As the religious right has sought to market itself to a broader audience, it’s made the case that the Sixties and its aftermath liberated men to be irresponsible while only liberating women to be exploited. To put it another way, the right argues that men have gained the freedom to have far more uncommitted sex than ever, while women have lost the freedom from the tremendous pressure to be sexually available. “Women were lied to”, the right declares, and at least some women wonder if perhaps the conservatives aren’t on to something. Many girls, overwhelmed by the pressure to be sexy — while still suffering the stigma of the “slut” if they choose to be sexual — may wonder the same thing.
But while the conservatives are partly right in their suggestion that the sexual revolution has not fully delivered on its promise, they are utterly wrong about the remedy. Their solution — a wholesale return to an earlier era characterized by the Holy Trinity of pre-marital chastity, early marriage, and post-marital fecundity — would be an unmitigated disaster for women. What we need instead is to push back against sexualization with far better and more inclusive sex education. Too often, the exploitation of young women has been dressed up in the language of empowerment, which leads both feminists and social conservatives alike to point out that a lot of this talk about young women’s agency is, as Joan Brumberg remarked, “oversold if not illusory.” But that’s because we’ve only offered the rhetoric of “empowerment” (think the Nike injunction to “Just Do It!”) without providing young people with practical and effective tools for taking in and living out that empowerment.

It boils down to this: the freedom to learn how to be sexual requires the freedom from sexualization. As I wrote long ago in a post about adults, desire and duty are enemies. This means, of course, that we do need to push back against the media forces that foist “raunch culture” on the very young. But we don’t push back through censorship. We push back by giving young people the tools to navigate their way through the bewildering blitzkrieg of messages which they receive about sexuality.

One of the most important tools we can give young people — boys and girls alike — is the reminder that their sexuality belongs to them. Pleasure is a deep and profound good, and for all of what we imagine to be their self-indulgence, young people today don’t have nearly as much healthy pleasure as they need. This is about more than teaching young people to masturbate without shame (though that’s never a bad idea.) It’s about giving them the time and space and privacy to reflect on their sexuality as something that belongs to them. With young women, it’s about teaching the difference between the desire to be desired and desire itself. (I’ll deal with young men in another post.) It only takes a girl a few seconds to realize what someone else may want from her sexually. It often takes her much longer to figure out what she really wants, to discern the pleasure she gets from bringing pleasure to another from the pleasure she wants for herself. And once she’s figured that out, it’s vital to work to create a culture where she can articulate that want without shame. That’s part and parcel of what it means to stand up for sexuality — and stand against sexualization.
Appendix G


Pornulation empowerfulizes us, say humorous ironic hotties

Categories:

Femininity, Sexploitation, The Spinster's Finger on the Pulse of Today, Women hate you

by Twisty

Gawd, remember that hipster burlesque crap from the 90’s? I thought it was over, but no, it lives on. An article in today’s Kansas City Star about a “neo-burlesque” show in town is headlined thusly: “Burlesque’s practitioners find humor, art and feminism in their risqué shows”.

Fun feminism, that is. "Neo" burlesque is funny and ironic, see. So it’s rebellious and iconoclastic and artsy. The Star runs a photo to illustrate the pertinent bits of the story. The photo is of neo-burlesque practitioner Honey Valentine’s headless, enbustiered torso.

Burlesque practitioner and funfeminist Lola Van Ella says “[What’s happening now is a feminist movement in burlesque] because it’s women saying, ‘I can be ultra feminine and I can shave and wear makeup and red lipstick and G-strings and pasties. Men may or may not enjoy it, but I’m doing it for myself.’”

How is fun-feminism different from regular feminism? Not at all, except that it’s antifeminist. It’s when you capitulate to, participate in, embrace, and openly promote rape culture in exchange for approval, claiming that it empowerfulizes you.

Van Ella said that contemporary burlesque appeals to both genders and that she has as many female fans as guys. And there’s a reason: Modern burlesque performers are clearly in charge of their own destiny.

“I have nothing against commercial stripping as a business, but it is that,” she said. “It’s a sales job. But burlesque is a tease, and that is the big difference. The woman doing it is completely in control of her own sexuality. She decides. And she says, ‘I’m gonna give you this much but not any more and if you want more you’ll have to beg.’”

Are you fucking kidding me?
It sorely chaps the Twisty hide when women get all cutesy with pornulation, misconstruing irony for agency.

The idea that women’s public sexuality can so precisely mirror traditional male fantasy while simultaneously existing in a kind of pro-woman, I-do-it-for-myself alternate universe is the cornerstone of funfeminist “thought.” The flaw in this reasoning is that all women must participate in patriarchy regardless of what they say motivates their participation; patriarchy is the dominant culture, and there is no opting out. Which means there is no opting in, either. Do it for me, do it for you, whatever; the primary beneficiaries of women’s participation — willing or unwilling, ironic or sincere — in patriarchy, are men.
Appendix H


some critical questions about the status of self-evident value it has achieved, both in Lamb and Peterson’s article and more broadly.

Lamb and Peterson argue that media literacy is “vital to optimizing adolescent girls’ sexual empowerment” (this issue). Media education is crucial, they note, because “in classrooms, adolescents can get some distance from the images’ potential to transform their sexuality by dissecting the intentions and multiple possible meanings of these messages” (this issue). One of the problems with this view, it seems to me, (in common with most articulations of media literacy), is the implicit understanding of subjectivity on which it rests. The project of critique, dissection, comparison and deconstruction seems to rely upon a model of the subject as unified and rational, and to operate largely as a cognitive process. The implicit idea seems to be that if someone is media literate, that is to say if they can discourse critically on the aims and techniques that comprise an image or text, they will somehow be ‘inoculated’ or protected against its otherwise harmful effects. It relies upon the idea of subjectivity as coherent, rather than split or contradictory, with the assumption that affect follows knowledge in a neat and obedient manner. It is this conception that I seek to question.

What we have found in our research throws into question any easy celebration of media literacy. The girls in our study show varying degrees of media literacy, with some of them extremely critical consumers of media, even from the age of 10. They are familiar with the language of critique and, moreover, take pleasure in ‘unpacking’ media images to show their artifice. In particular the girls enjoyed displaying their awareness that media images are constructed, with many exchanges about techniques such as airbrushing, the use of Photoshop or the difference between magazines’ standard ‘before and after’ shots in which ‘everything had changed’ not just the area of the body that ‘should’ have done.

Some girls also discussed their anger about ‘anorexic models’, magazine girls with ‘perfect skin’ and, more broadly, the gap they observed between media images of girls and young women and those in the real world. They were contemptuous of the idea that celebrity endorsements would persuade them to buy any particular product. Indeed, in many senses the girls seemed archetypal media literate subjects – knowing, critical appraisers of adverts, magazines and a whole variety of other genres. So far, so media literate, it would seem. And yet despite this – despite an extraordinarily sophisticated vocabulary of critique – media representations still got to them, still had an ability to hurt them, still – as they repeatedly told us – made them ‘feel bad’ or ‘feel sad’ and/or made them long to look a particular way or to own a particular product. In other words, the girls’ ability to produce subtle and sometimes angry ‘decodings’ of media content did not seem in any way to displace alternative, powerful responses to what they saw, read and heard.

Interestingly, this speaks to a very important question that Lamb and Peterson raise. They ask: “Is a girl who ‘buys into’ mass-media-promoted forms of sexuality less empowered, and does an awareness of media, an ability to critique or observe its influence, make a girl more empowered even as she imitates?” (this issue). Setting aside the – in my view – problematic notion of imitation, this is a crucial question that has, to date, been largely ignored by proponents of media literacy: namely what difference does it make? Our research would indicate that the difference is not the self-evident benefit that is often suggested. The impact of media literacy is complicated and needs to be carefully assessed over time. The girls we spoke with did not seem to feel ‘better’ or more ‘empowered’ by dint of their knowledge of media practices and techniques. They might enjoy showing off this knowledge but it did not negate or change other, often painful, feelings. In some cases having the knowledge made them feel even more trapped – with the sense that they understood how it all worked, appreciated the ‘fakeness; (as they put it), yet still had to live up to the particular images of beauty they were fed.

A particularly vivid and moving example from our research was to be found in a video diary produced by Lily. In it she explained that she ‘never reads magazines’, because they make her ‘grit her teeth’ and feel ‘so cross’ about ‘fakeness and lip gloss’. She identified herself as a very critical consumer of media constructions of femininity, but also someone who was ‘too busy’ with other activities to have much time to spend with media. However, alongside these sentiments, which would no doubt be welcomed by audience scholars and feminists interested in empowerment alike, Lily also articulated a range of other more painful, complicated and difficult feelings. She spoke poignantly of her severe anxiety that her closest friend was developing anorexia, something she attributed to repeated and relentless exposure to ‘film stars’ flat tummies and how bad they make us feel’. She also confided in her video diary that she felt like ‘a social retard’ and was trying to ‘turn over a new page’. She said repeatedly that she felt ‘terrible’ and that she did not, even could not ‘like herself’ – even as she explained how she understood that her feelings of self-hatred were socially produced, and how ‘the media influences absolutely everything’.

Listening to the words of this passionate and fiercely intelligent 12 year old girl, it was impossible to feel complacent about the benefits of media literacy education. It had given her an acute awareness of the role of media in her and her friends lives but this knowledge had not helped – at least in the short term - to make her feel stronger, happier or more empowered.

If this is one powerful objection to the idea of media literacy as a panacea, then another is to be found in a
critique of the way that media literacy forces the work of deconstructing media back onto individuals. This is part of a wider shift in power and governance towards greater self-governamental, in which individuals are constituted as ‘responsible’, self-governing subjects, who must “bear the serious burdens of liberty” (Rose 1999, p. 67). In relation to media regulation it can be seen at a policy level (at least in the UK) with a move away from state regulation and an increasing focus on media literate individuals self-regulating in relation to media content (Arthur 2004). Media literacy thus becomes an individual obligation; we are made responsible for our own engagements with media—both what we use and how we engage. To champion media literacy, then, may be implicitly to endorse this shift in power, and to make individuals responsible for the work of thinking critically and deconstructing media content. But it is also, surely, to espouse a kind of defeatism, for it seems to suggest that media cannot be changed; all that can be changed is how we engage with them. Thus young people are asked to come equipped with tools to deconstruct sexism; young women are exhorted to become better at dissecting media’s ‘sexualized’ images, to “get distance”, as Lamb and Peterson put it (2011, this issue), from images that would harm or transform their sexuality.

I want to ask: why have we (feminists) become so quietist? When did engaging with sexist media seem to call for an ever more sophisticated and literate media user, rather than a campaign to stamp out sexism? Have we given up on changing the world, to focus only on tweaking our critical orientations to it? It seems to me that as well as being part of a wider shift in the operation of power, this issue is also itself deeply gendered, part of the ‘postfeminist problem’ in which gender inequality is no longer seen very seriously in Northern/Western developed societies, is not felt to be a ‘real’ problem or form of oppression (see Gill 2007). Quite rightly we do not respond to racism in the media with calls to educate young Black people to better deconstruct racist images; on the contrary, we work to eradicate racism and we speak of its institutional nature, as a structural feature that is endemic to many organizations, including media (Downing and Husband 2005; Rattansi 2007). Yet on issues pertaining to gender, sexuality and ‘sexualization’ there is little evidence of such a robust response – with the exception of some interesting initiatives such as the USA social media based initiative SPARK (Sexualisation, Protest, Action, Knowledge; http://www.sparksummit.com/). Instead there are calls for ‘media literacy education’ as if an informed populace of ‘critical’ young women is the best that can be hoped for. Perhaps ironically this focus can itself seem sexist, not only because it treats gender oppression as trivial, but also because it emphasises the requirement for girls and young women to work on the self, to perfect the ways they engage with media, to become ever more responsible neo-liberal subjects. Instead of this, might it not be time to get angry again, to try to change the world? These issues suggest, at the very least, that media literacy as a kind of catch-all solution needs to be interrogated.

Power, Politics and Sexual Empowerment

In this section I want to turn to questions about power, ideology and politics. It seems to me striking that in Lamb and Peterson’s paper – as in so much of the discussion about ‘sexualization’ (APA 2007; Papadopoulos 2010; Bailey 2011) – there is scant consideration of power. Curiously, empowerment seems to be cast as an individualized phenomenon which, though clearly connected to gender and age, is not related analytically to issues of power, inequality or oppression. The wider context in which sexual empowerment might take place seems conspicuous by its absence. Moreover there is little political framing of the discussion of sexualized culture.

I find myself bewildered by this silence - which, again, surely relates to the formulation of media and media influence – in which empowerment appears such a dislocated, individualized and atomized experience and, conversely, sexualization is not explicitly linked to questions of power. Why, I wonder, is sexualization in this argument not connected to sexism or to racism, to class inequality or homophobia? How could empowerment be thought of independently of such categories?

Such questions relate to my own ongoing dilemmas about the utility of the notion of ‘sexualization’ at all (and indeed the notion of empowerment – as I discuss below). Despite the way they appear to speak to something apparently ‘new’ and ‘real’, there are many problems with the notions of ‘sexualization’ or ‘pornification’ or ‘raunch’ (McNair 2002; Levy 2005; Paul 2005). The terms are too general; they are difficult to operationalize and therefore to use analytically. More than this, they tend to homogenize, ignoring differences and obscuring the fact that different people are ‘sexualized’in different ways and with different meanings. Sexualization does not operate outside of processes of gendering, racialization and classing, and works within a visual economy that remains profoundly ageist, (dis)ablist and heteronormative (Gill 2009). Furthermore the terms seem to pull us back into a moral domain, rather than one of politics or ethics—they pull towards judgments about ‘explicitness’ and ‘exposure’ rather than questions about equality or justice. Might it not be more productive to talk about sexism rather than sexualization? For all their force in animating and inspiring a new generation of feminists (Banyard 2010), I worry too that these terms threaten to reinstate the terms of the ‘sex wars’ of the 1980s, with their familiar polarizations and discomfiting
Appendix I

Information Letter

Project Title: A Discursive Analysis of Women’s Responses to the ‘Sexualisation of Culture’ Debates

Investigator
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You are invited to participate in this study.

Background and Aim of the Study
In recent years, an explicit, ‘raunchy’ version of female sexuality has become more visible in Western media and societies, along with the idea that women can use this mode of sexuality to signify their empowerment and liberation. However a number of feminist academics have questioned whether this new ‘raunch culture’ represents true gains for women’s empowerment and sexual agency, or rather if it reflects a new form of oppression for women. I am interested in hearing what women have to say about such arguments and so this study aims to add women’s voices to the debates about this sexualisation of culture.

What Does Your Participation Involve?
Your participation will involve attending two 90 minute-long focus groups involving around 4-6 women. Focus groups are forums for interactive discussion with fellow participants, guided by open-ended and flexible questions. During these discussions, you will be presented with a variety of materials which aim to encourage critical reflection and discussion about raunch culture, empowerment and choice.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal from the Study
It is important that you understand that your involvement is this study is voluntary. While we would be pleased to have you participate, we respect your right to decline. If you decide to discontinue participation at any time, you may do so without providing an explanation, and all information you have provided will be withdrawn and not included in the analysis. All information will be treated in a confidential manner and your name will not be used in any publication arising out of the research. Please note that the focus groups will be audio recorded, however all audio tapes will be securely stored in a locked cabinet in the office of Associate Professor Ngaire Donaghue, School of Psychology, and will not be released to any third party unless required by law.

Possible Benefits
This study aims to be an opportunity for women to reflect on and discuss with their peers some of the issues surrounding a current social phenomenon affecting women, and a chance to practice their skills at social critique. For the wider community, this research is intended to add to current theorising about the sexualisation of culture and women’s sexual empowerment, in which there has been much scholarly debate but little research into what women have to say about it and how it relates to their own lives.
Possible Risks
There are no specific risks anticipated with participation in this study. However, if you find that you are becoming distressed or anxious at any point, we recommend the Murdoch Counselling service located of Bush Court, South Street campus ph 9360 2293

Reimbursement
Participants will be given the choice to either receive 90 minutes of subject pool credit (psychology students only) or go in a draw to win a $100 Coles/Myer gift card for each focus group attended.

Questions
If you would like to discuss any aspect of this study please feel free to contact either Laura Thompson on ph 0439669363 or Ngaire Donaghue on ph 9360 6450. Either of us would be happy to discuss any aspect of the research with you. A summary of the research findings will be available in November on the School of Psychology website http://www.psychology.murdoch.edu.au/research results/research_results.html.

We would like to thank you in advance for your assistance with this research project. We look forward to hearing from you soon.

This study has been approved by the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval 2012/070). If you have any reservation or complaint about the ethical conduct of this research, and wish to talk with an independent person, you may contact Murdoch University’s Research Ethics Office (Tel. 08 9360 6677 (for overseas studies, +61 8 9360 6677) or e-mail ethics@murdoch.edu.au). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
Appendix J

Consent Form

A Discursive Analysis of Women’s Responses to the ‘Sexualisation of Culture’ Debates

Participant

I have read the participant information sheet, which explains the nature of the research and the possible risks. The information has been explained to me and all my questions have been satisfactorily answered. I have been given a copy of the information sheet to keep.

I am happy to participate in a focus group and for the focus group to be audio recorded as part of this research. I understand that I do not have to answer particular questions if I do not want to and that I can withdraw at any time without consequences to myself.

I agree that research data gathered from the results of the study may be published provided my name or any identifying data is not used. I have also been informed that I may not receive any direct benefits from participating in this study.

I understand that all information provided by me is treated as confidential and will not be released by the researcher to a third party unless required to do so by law.

___________________________________
Signature of Participant                      Date

Investigator

I have fully explained to _____________________________ the nature and purpose of the research, the procedures to be employed, and the possible risks involved. I have provided the participant with a copy of the Information Sheet.

___________________________________
Signature of Investigator                      Date

___________________________________
Print Name                                      Position
Appendix K: Advertisement Poster

Raunch culture: is it empowering? 
Sexist? Or something else?

Ladies, we want to hear what YOU have to say!

“Raunch culture” is a recent social phenomenon which promotes overtly sexual representations of women and the idea that women can use their sexuality to become empowered. Whilst it has prompted a lot of academic debate, there is little research on what women themselves have to say - which is why we need your voice for this qualitative study!

If you choose to participate you will take part in 2 focus groups (each 90 minutes long) where you will read various arguments about raunch culture and discuss your views with other participants. All responses will be kept confidential and your name will not be reported.

As a reimbursement you will receive either 3 hours of subject pool credit or choose to go in a draw to receive a $100 Coles-Myer gift card! Coffee/tea and refreshments will also be provided after the discussions.

For further information please contact Laura Thompson (laura-amy@hotmail.com) or Associate Professor Ngaire Donaghue, School of Psychology (n.donaghue@murdoch.edu.au)
Appendix L: Subject Pool Advertisement

Project Title: Young Women’s Views on Raunch Culture

Ethics Permit Number: 2012/070

Investigator: Laura Thompson (31004559)

Supervisor: Ngaire Donaghue

Description:

We invite you to participate in a qualitative study investigating how women talk about “raunch culture” – a current social phenomenon in which young women are being increasingly sexualised in the media and society, and which promotes the idea that women are free to use their sexuality to become empowered. Whilst there has been a lot of academic debate on the subject there currently is not much research on what women themselves have to say so we need your voice! Your participation will involve taking part in two audio-recorded focus groups, each approximately 1.5 hours long. In the focus groups you will read various arguments about raunch culture and get to discuss your opinion on them with other participants. All names will be changed for the analysis and you will not be pressured to answer any questions you do not wish to. There will be coffee/tea and refreshments provided afterwards and for each focus group you attend you will be rewarded with either 1.5 hours of subject pool credit or a chance to go in a draw to receive a $100 Coles/Myer gift card. For further information please contact: Laura Thompson (laura-amy@hotmail.com) or Associate Professor Ngaire Donaghue (n.donaghue@murdoch.edu.au, 93606450).