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Article

Spinning the pole – a discursive analysis of the websites of recreational pole-
dancing studios

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Abstract

Pole dancing is an activity that came to prominence in strip clubs. Despite its widespread reinvention as a fitness activity for women, pole dancing is still strongly associated with, and indeed trades on, its exotic, erotic, and sexual connotations. In this paper, we examine how the pole dancing industry portrays itself to potential participants via a discursive analysis of the websites of 15 major pole dancing studios in Australia. In particular, we examine some of the ways in which pole dancing trades on its erotic associations and capitalises on the emerging postfeminist sensibility in western countries and its advocacy of empowerment through sexual agency, while at the same time promoting an alternative, ironic construction in which pole dancing is simply something a bit different -- a novel way to get an upper body workout while having 'a bit of a laugh'. We argue that the tensions between authenticity and parody uncovered by our analyses reflect a tension that infuses 'raunch culture' more widely, and discuss the insecurity and contingency of the 'empowerment' offered in these practices.

Key words: postfeminism, raunch culture, empowerment, sexualisation of culture, pole dancing

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Spinning the pole – a discursive analysis of the websites of recreational pole-dancing studios

A key feature of an emerging ‘postfeminist’ sensibility in western countries is the notion of empowerment through sexual agency (Gill, 2007). With the rise of what has been variously termed ‘raunch culture’ (Levy, 2005), ‘porno chic’ and ‘striptease culture’ (McNair, 2002), we have witnessed a notable shift in the kinds of ideals to which young western women are encouraged to aspire. Postfeminism presents to women a world in which feminist goals have apparently been achieved, and in which women are now simply ‘free’ to ‘choose’ to enjoy the expression and celebration of their femininity, and to reclaim those things that were ‘taken from them’ by feminism (McRobbie, 2009). Two of the major sites of this postfeminist empowerment-through-choice are the presentation of the body and sexual agency (Gill, 2007). Unsurprisingly, as the notion of empowerment through the performance of a particular kind of brash sexuality takes hold in the public imagination, a range of venues, products and services has correspondingly developed through which women can develop and display this ‘empowering’ version of their sexuality. Such opportunities include fashion, grooming practices, cosmetic surgery, and, the subject of this paper, pole dancing as a recreational activity.

Pole dancing is an activity that came to prominence in strip clubs. Despite its widespread reinvention as a fitness activity for women, it is still strongly associated with, and indeed trades on, its exotic, erotic, and sexual connotations. Proponents of pole dancing argue that it provides an enjoyable form of exercise that is ‘liberating’ and ‘empowering’ (Holland, 2010), while critics emphasise the seamless reproduction of contemporary standards for women’s beauty and sexuality that are exemplified in pole

dancing (e.g., McRobbie, 2009). In this paper, we examine how the recreational pole dancing industry portrays itself to potential customers via an examination of the websites of 15 major pole dancing studios in Australia. In particular, we examine the tensions between the ways in which pole dancing trades on its erotic associations and develops its promises of empowerment while at the same time promoting an alternative, ironic construction in which pole dancing is simply something a bit different -- a novel way to get an upper body workout while having 'a bit of a laugh'.

Discursive Context: Problematic Empowerment

Many of the activities of raunch culture are clearly oriented towards the anticipated disapproval of 'traditional' feminism. There is a sense in which feminism is understood as having prevented women from fully experiencing and enjoying their (apparently essential) femininity (e.g., Baumgardner and Richards, 2000). By promoting a view of feminism as having increased women's material power, but at the expense of sexual allure, a certain kind of subjectivity is promoted in which women's desirability is put at risk and women must ensure that they do not 'miss out' on the experience of being found desirable under the male gaze. Raunch culture activities, with their emphasis on light-heartedness, humor, sexiness and extreme grooming, seem explicitly designed to repudiate the postfeminist caricature of a feminist; serious, humorless, anti-sex, and hairy (Edley and Wetherell, 2001; Gill, 2003, 2007; Quinn and Radtke, 2006). In this view, the increased emphasis on 'fun', 'sexy', 'femininity' can be seen as part of the postfeminist backlash that attempts to persuade women that they have transcended the need for feminism, despite never having attained its goals (McRobbie, 2009).

‘Empowerment’ has become a major catch-cry of raunch culture. There are several discourses within which women’s participation in raunch culture activities might be understood as empowering. The first of these rests largely on a view that the ability to incite desire is a form of power. Performances of raunch culture are thus reinterpreted not as a capitulation to men, but as a means of celebrating one’s potential power *over* men. The increasing (hetero)sexualisation of popular culture has been met with a rise in scholarly interest in what Gill has termed the shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification, which relies on a distinction between women *being* objectified, and women freely and agentially *choosing* to objectify themselves, at their own discretion and for their own purposes (Gill, 2003, 2007, 2008). This discursive invocation of the principle of choice has been highlighted across a number of different contexts and activities, including ‘choices’ to partake in cosmetic surgery (Braun, 2009; Chambers, 1998; Gillespie, 1997) the wearing of particular kinds of lingerie (Amy-Chinn, 2006; Gill, 2008; Storr, 2003), and hair removal (Gill, 2007; Roach Anleu, 2006). The agentic choices of women and the desires of women themselves are given centre stage in these formulations, which works to head off claims that such activities might be undertaken primarily for the benefit of men. As Gill (2008) puts it, women are “presented as not seeking men’s approval but as pleasing themselves, and, in so doing, they ‘just happen’ to win men’s admiration” (p.42). Activities such as pole dancing can potentially be positioned within a similar account of female sexual agency in which a woman makes an active choice to engage in an activity primarily for her own pleasure, with the added benefit that, should she choose to, she could deploy her power to render men helpless. The emphasis on choice and agency in these postfeminist subjectivities reflects the wider

requirements of neoliberal selfhood, in which the subjects of contemporary western societies are required to understand themselves as fundamentally free and self-responsible, and whose success in living is measured by the ability to construct a style of living that reflects and expresses their 'authentic' self (Rose, 1996, 1999).

A second way in which pole dancing might be seen as empowering is via an emphasis on the parody of exploited sexuality, in which adopting a practice outside of its usual context can show the instability and constructedness of the norm being parodied (Butler, 1990; Evans, Riley and Shanker, 2010). By engaging for *fun* in an activity (pole dancing) that is conventionally understood as involving the exploitation of women's sexuality for men's pleasure, assumptions about the natural forms of and relations between women and men's sexuality may potentially be destabilized. That is, by choosing to learn a sexy pole dance (and indeed paying for the opportunity to do so), rather than pole dancing in order to be paid by men, recreational pole dancers may undermine the idea that women's desire to perform 'sexy' dances is primarily 'for' men.

In loudly rejecting the notion that women who 'flaunt' their sexuality are either downtrodden or deviant, raunch culture returns to these sites and practices with a different agenda; to reclaim them for women's benefit and women's pleasure. Langman (2008) writes that '... 'porn chic' can be seen as a critique of patriarchal codes of morality and adornment in which the body becomes the basis of empowerment and authenticity.' (p. 657). Furthermore, some self-described third wave feminists (e.g., Baumgardner and Richards, 2000) have drawn attention to the ways in which activities traditionally associated with women (such as knitting, sewing or baking, for example) are often denigrated and denounced by feminist scholars. This kind of analysis then suggests

that perhaps we could consider pole dancing as ‘reclaiming’ an activity that has been wrongly disparaged because of its historical status as a service performed for men. Rather than rejecting pole dancing as simply a capitulation to the objectifying male gaze, reclamation involves recognizing the simple pleasures to be had from spinning around a pole, and valuing the skill, hard work and artistry that are part of pole dancing.

However, although the promise of empowerment through the reclamation and/or parody of previously stigmatized activities may be enticing, the gains of this form of cultural restoration of women’s sexual agency have some problematic aspects. Gill (2008) has warned against ‘too easy celebration’ of these apparent gains. Although the practices of raunch culture seem to clearly reject the Madonna/Whore dichotomy that has presented women with a pernicious choice between sexual agency and social respectability, the notion that women’s sexuality has somehow suddenly been liberated from the dowdy constraints of the past falters under closer analysis. For one thing, the image of the sexually knowledgeable and desiring agent that women are ‘empowered’ to ‘express’ via raunch culture is very narrowly drawn, and hardly distinguishable from her objectified predecessors; a scantily and provocatively clad, usually white, young, thin and mostly hairless body, presenting herself for approval under the (internalized) male gaze (Gill, 2003, 2007).

The embodiment contingencies of empowerment via sexual subjectification usher in particular forms of surveillance and regulation that are required to successfully engage in these ‘empowering’ practices. Engagement in the “technologies of sexiness” (Evans et al, 2010) that produce the ‘new feminine’ subjectivities of postfeminism (Gill, 2007) requires an internalization of the male gaze into a ‘self-policing narcissistic gaze’ (Gill,

2003, p. 104). In this way, the desire for postfeminist ‘empowerment’ naturalises and internalizes a disciplinary regime in which the body is controlled so as to achieve/maintain a slender, toned, groomed presentation, and sexuality is modulated to be sufficiently ‘out there’ without going ‘too far’ (Evans et al, 2010; Gill, 2007, 2008).

The foregoing analysis has illustrated the shifting and contested nature of the social space in which the practice of recreational pole dancing finds its meanings. Our intention is not to uncover the ‘true’ meaning of pole dancing, but rather to examine the ways in which potential readings of recreational pole dancing are managed – some taken up and others resisted -- by pole-dancing studios on their websites. Websites are a form of advertising, allowing studios to provide a targeted message to people who seek out information about pole dancing. Pole dancing studios are commercial enterprises, and thus the main aim of these websites is to attract students to pay for classes. We can assume that in creating the images and text that comprise the website, the designers of these websites draw on their understandings about what it is that attracts (or may attract) women to pole dancing, as well as the kinds of concerns that women may have that can be preemptively addressed in the website copy. Thus, in analyzing the content of these sites, we can see how recreational pole dancing studios position themselves within the postfeminist discursive field.

Although the pole dancing studios’ websites are a targeted form of communication, providing information to those who deliberately seek it, the web pages do nonetheless address a range of different audiences. Among these are curious newcomers deciding whether or not to try pole dancing, returning students looking for information about more advanced classes, women ‘in the industry’ who might be interested in adding pole

dancing to their repertoire, as well as journalists and members of the general public interested in the 'new phenomenon' of recreational pole dancing. The pole dancing studio websites therefore have a complex agenda, which includes both attracting paying customers (of varying levels of experience) to pole dancing classes as well as contributing to public understandings of what recreational pole dancing is and where it fits in relation to other activities. As such, we see them as an ideal site for analysis in our investigation of the social construction of the social object of pole dancing within postfeminist culture. Thus, this paper contributes to the small but rapidly growing feminist literature that has interrogated the new social phenomena that is 'recreational pole dancing' (Whitehead and Kurz, 2009) or 'poling' (Holland, 2010). Previous examinations of this phenomenon have thus far been focused on the accounts of 'polers' (or would-be 'polers'). In the analysis that follows, we extend this work by examining the ways in which the activity is actively marketed to women by the pole dancing studios themselves. In doing so, we hope to also add further complexity to contemporary feminist debates about the sexualisation of culture and the ways in which women's sexual agency is figured within the specific practices of this 'raunch culture' activity.

Method

The data for this analysis come from the websites of pole dancing studios whose physical premises were located in Australia. An internet search engine was used to generate a list of pole dancing studios, and all studios with a dedicated website were included in the analysis (studios that only generated a listing in a phone or email directory were not included). Many of the websites were for franchised businesses that had

multiple physical locations. In total, fifteen websites were identified as a result of this selection process, each of which had multiple pages.

Approach to analysis

In beginning to analyse these data, our first step was to copy all the text and images from each page of the 15 websites into a single document that formed the data corpus for our analysis. We each then separately read over the entire data corpus, making notes of our initial impressions of recurring images, themes, and expressions across the websites. Over a series of meetings we discussed the themes that we each saw in the data, and began to focus on the issues of fitness, empowerment, audience and humour that struck us as being key aspects of recreational pole dancing that were attended to by the studios in promoting pole dancing to women. We then edited the data corpus by selecting extracts relevant to these issues, which formed the body of instances for our analysis.

Our approach to the analysis can be characterized as feminist post-structuralist (Gavey, 1989;1995). This method of analysis seeks to locate particular statements within a wider discursive matrix, with a view to illuminating the unarticulated ideological framework that organizes and animates particular instances of speech or text. We examined the text from the websites with two major aims in mind. First, we were interested to see how pole dancing was marketed to women; which features would be emphasized, what claims of benefits would be made, and what potential concerns of participants would be managed in the marketing of pole dancing as a recreational activity. In addition to this primarily descriptive aim, we were also alert for the ways in which the pole dancing studios positioned their offerings in relation to the postfeminist and raunch culture discourses that have come to prominence in recent years. Thus we expected that

claims about the empowering nature of pole dancing would feature strongly, and we were interested to explore how such claims were grounded. Also, because pole dancing is an activity that is best known as a part of the repertoire of professional strippers, we were interested in the ways in which the ‘sexiness’ of pole dancing would be handled by the studios to maximize its appeal to women while also guarding against the potential threat of being ‘too’ sexy.

Analysis and Discussion

Our analysis is organized around several themes that were prevalent in the text of the pole dancing studio websites. We first discuss the ubiquity and primacy of claims about the fitness benefits of pole dancing, before moving on to consider the ways in which pole dancing was presented as ‘empowering’. We then turn to issues of performance, and explore the various ways in which the idea of an ‘audience’ for pole dancing performances are invoked and managed. Our analysis concludes with an exploration of references to the humorous, funny, and light-hearted nature of pole dancing, focusing on the ways in which these work to create an ironic distance from any suggestion that the recreational pole dancer is being (or trying to be) ‘seriously’ sexy.

Fitness first

All of the websites referred to the fitness benefits of pole dancing on their opening pages; whatever else it may provide, pole dancing was presented first and foremost as a fitness activity. Pole dancing was routinely put forward as an activity that could be part of a suite of fitness activities, and a way of ‘mixing up’ one’s workout by doing something a bit different;

‘Pole dancing is an alternative to crowded gyms and it has been labeled as the best exercise activity to give your body a full workout’ (Girlfriend Fun and Fitness)

‘Add some sexy fun to your fitness goals this year, with a pole dancing class!’

(MPole)

As well as general references to improving fitness, and becoming ‘fit and fabulous’, most websites provided quite detailed claims about the fitness benefits. For example,

‘Pole dancing is a great form of cardio...pole tricks are a form of weight training’

(Pole Princess)

‘If you want to unleash your inhibitions and release your inner sex goddess while getting fit & fabulous, pole dancing is it!’ (Pole Divas)

‘You’ll be amazed at the fitness and tone you’ll get from this fun, unique, sensual and liberating program’ (Flinders Sports Centre)

‘...carefully designed to improve core strength, flexibility and muscle tone’ (She Moves)

There was some variation among the studios in the ways in which the fitness benefits were presented. Some studios accompanied their claims with action shots of their participants, in brightly lit studios with participants wearing typical gym clothes and shoes (e.g., Studio Verve), while others used softer lighting and showed participants in hot pants and high heels (e.g., SusieQ). Other studios included sections on their websites devoted to tips from ‘fitness professionals’ (e.g., Pole Fitness) which took the form of regular features highlighting a specific benefit of pole dancing, or providing nutritional tips. Most of the studio websites integrated their fitness claims with claims about other benefits of pole dancing (as can be seen in extracts throughout this section).

Confidence/Empowerment

In addition to establishing pole dancing's credentials as a legitimate fitness activity, the studios strongly emphasized the distinctive benefits of pole dancing over and above a gym workout. A key claim across the sites was that pole dancing would increase confidence and be both liberating and empowering; some claim of this form was found on the opening pages of every website.

'Your self-confidence will soar as you experience a sense of accomplishment and express yourself through some of the more sensual pole tricks (Studio Verve)

'The confidence you gain will spill over into everyday life' (Suzie Q)

'...people gain empowerment and self-confidence through the sensual expression'
(Pole Play)

'All the instructors know just how empowering Pole Dancing and the Art of Striptease really are, and they are only too obliged in guiding women into the next revolution of dance' (Pole Divas)

Although the source of this confidence/power was rarely explicitly specified, claims about improved confidence were routinely accompanied by references to sensuality, intimacy, and being liberated. These references were found both in the descriptions of the benefits of pole dancing and in the testimonials from former students that were featured on the websites. For example,

'learn to artfully express your inner sensuality while gaining fitness and self-empowerment...' (Pole Play)

‘...inspire you to allow your body to move in a way that is natural, to give women a sense of empowerment and strength in their Femininity.’ (Pole Catz)

‘For the first time in my life I actually feel sexy inside and outside my body. I didn't just learn how to move and tease but also to show my beauty with confidence.’ (Pole Play)

The apparently self-evident nature of the relationship between confidence/empowerment and sensuality suggests an expectation that women will easily recognize and identify with the idea that insecurity about their ‘sensuality’ undermines their confidence more generally. These calls to women seemed designed to draw on some uncertainty surrounding women’s ability to access the power of their ‘sensuality’; a sense that women have somehow become disconnected from their sexual power and now need to ‘get in touch with’ this aspect of themselves or be ‘liberated’ from whatever it is that is preventing full connection with this power. The implication is that by exploring this aspect of herself in the safe environment of a pole dancing studio, the novice pole dancer will learn to access her sexuality and will gain confidence and power from understanding herself as being able to successfully perform desirable femininity.

Frequent references were also made to the notion of releasing ‘the goddess within’. Confidence and power is thus understood as being gained, not from the addition of new skills, techniques or experiences, but from releasing something already ‘inside’ by liberating oneself from inhibitions.

‘Awaken the Goddess within! This package offers a unique combination of Fun, Relaxation, Mysticism and Insight!’ (She Moves)

‘PoleDiva’s enables women to unleash your inner sex goddess’ (Pole Divas)

‘Bring out the hidden erotic sexual creature that exists in every woman by practicing the art of exotic dance’ (Pole Divas)

‘Put your body to the test. All who take this class are a little more in tune with their inner goddess’ (Pole Fitness)

The promise that pole dancing can unlock the power of an inner goddess invites a view of pole dancing as a transformative activity. Here, the offer is for much more than toned triceps and a vigorous workout; it is an opportunity to become the goddess that one has the potential to be – sensual, desirable, powerful. In this construction, these attributes -- possessed all along but previously neglected, hidden or repressed -- are recovered during pole dancing. The implication of many of these accounts is that, following such ‘awakening’, these attributes transcend the activity itself to become the real reward of the dance, transforming the pole dancer in a profound and lasting way. Thus, we see how pole dancing is marketed in such a way as to suggest that the would-be pole dancer can expect far more than just a physical transformation as a consequence of partaking in the classes. It is this supposed potential for pole dancing to ‘awaken’ one’s inner goddess that is commonly deployed by the websites in order to distinguish pole dancing from more traditional forms of exercise such as aerobics or working out at the gym.

Performance and audience

The absence of an audience (except for other participants) is a key feature that distinguishes recreational pole dancing from other forms of pole dancing. All of the pole dancing studios explicitly stated that their classes are for women only, unless otherwise specified, and the emphasis was firmly on self-focused enjoyment of learning moves and development of routines, with little attention paid to the idea of an audience. However,

there are many indications in the design of the studios and the description of the classes that suggest that the pole dance is oriented to how it looks, despite the absence of an actual audience. For example, pictures of studios on the websites featured mirrored walls to allow the dancers to see themselves from every angle, and frequent references to learning ‘sexy moves’ acknowledge the potential (although presently absent) audience.

While it is the inherent pleasures of pole dancing that are primarily offered to those who are considering signing up for a first class, as participants become more skilled in their execution of ‘tricks’ and more confident in their mastery of the ‘sensual moves’ greater emphasis was placed on the potential audience for these performances. In the pages describing classes beyond the beginner level, increasing frequent references were made to the performance aspects of pole dancing and the potential audiences for these performances. These pages serve (at least) two functions; they address the group of women who already have some experience with pole dancing and who are interested in doing more, and they provide an aspirational sense of what might potentially be achieved to beginning pole dancers.

‘Want to WOW an audience?’ (She Moves)

‘You will take home from this class a sexy chair dancing routine, a newly developed sensual confidence that comes from learning to move your body in a sexy and confident way’ (MPole)

‘Mastering the art of seduction will give you a total body workout, leave your feeling empowered, and give you something to take home for your partner to enjoy!’ (Pole Divas)

‘Our training program works best with a THREE day a week commitment to allow us to whip your body into shape and learn and perfect moves to make you look AWESOME on stage’ (Pole Princess)

‘This is the course that will explain how to get you to Sydney and get that crown.’
(Bobbi’s Pole Dancing Studio)

There seems to be a clear expectation inherent in these accounts that, once a certain level of proficiency is achieved, pole dancers will naturally want to orient their performances towards an audience. However, although audiences are strongly alluded to, the precise nature of these audiences remains vague; there are occasional references to ‘your partner’, and to ‘Sydney’ (where the national pole dancing championship is held each year), but otherwise the references to ‘stages’, ‘crowds’ and ‘audiences’ seem to be intentionally non-specific, leaving the reader to imagine for herself the kind of audience she wants to ‘wow’. This ambiguity reflects the way in which the seductive aspects of pole dancing are managed across the websites, in a way that allows for a clear promise of a skill that has the power to affect those watching while at the same time maintaining plausible deniability that pole dancing might ‘really’ be about turning men on. The sensuality and sexiness of pole dancing are not repudiated, but the way in which these capacities are deployed is left to the discretion of the talented pole dancer herself.

The issue of ‘audience’ is further complicated by wide range of merchandise available from most of the pole dancing studios, much of which is designed to be worn outside of pole dancing classes. In this way, pole dancing can be not only a fitness activity and a means of empowerment, but also an identity project; by wearing a ‘pole dancer’ t-shirt, it is possible for a woman to access the social cache produced from her willingness to be a

little 'raunchy' without the need to actually put on a show -- there can be an audience for the pole dancer without an audience for the pole dance.

'Having a laugh'

The notion that pole dancing is not only fun, but also *funny*, was a strong theme across the studio websites. Frequent references were made not only to the enjoyment of pole dancing, but also to the idea that participants would be 'having a bit of a laugh' throughout the classes.

'She-parties are the perfect excuse to get the girls together and laugh yourselves silly as your instructors guide you through a series of pole dance and/or lap dance routines' (She Moves)

'Pole dancing is an entertaining, fun and unusual way to get together and have a laugh with your closest friends' (Pole Revolution)

'This new class of pole dancing is strictly for fun and it is purely for women who want to get fit, have a laugh and discover their sensual side' (Mpole)

This strong emphasis on light-heartedness and laughter suggests that it is understood that pole dancing participants won't be taking themselves 'too seriously'. One of the uses of laughter is to mark an interactional context as playful and in doing so offer a plausible defence in situations in which one risks losing face (such as in 'courtship' interactions, Glenn, 2003). In a similar way, one might suggest that the ubiquitous, upfront emphasis on laughter as an inherent component of pole dancing in the website's accounts suggests an orientation to the existence of a clear threat posed by pole dancing. By disavowing the intent of the classes to be 'seriously' sexy, the foregrounding of laughter works to

acknowledge the potential riskiness of the quest for empowerment via raunchiness; it preemptively defends against the potential ‘failure’ of a performance of sexiness. As Gill (2003, 2007) has noted, the figure of a woman who ‘mistakenly’ believes she is sexy/desirable is mocked, pitied, and reviled – creating a strong incentive for ensuring that such potential humiliation is deflected. However, these ubiquitous disclaimers about the ‘seriousness’ of the sensuality of pole dancing seem at odds with the promises of ‘empowerment’ that result from getting in touch with some inner power (or ‘goddess’), a point to which we will return in our general discussion.

References to laughter also seem to work on the websites as a means of maintaining an ironic distance between the recreational participants in pole dancing classes and professional pole dancers in the sex industry. Laughter reinforces the idea that pole dancing, in this context and by these women, involves a parody of ‘real’ pole dancing in strip clubs. This contrast is explicitly invoked by creating an ‘hilarious’ juxtaposition between the two, such as in the following description of one of the packages offered at one studio:

‘With drinks and nibbles provided and the (optional) field trip to a gentleman's club¹ afterwards, many ladies love to spend this hilarious night out with girlfriends’ (She Moves)

General Discussion

In this paper, we have explored the ways in which recreational pole dancing studios present themselves and the activity they are selling to would-be customers. In so doing, we explored the constructions of the social object of pole dancing that were mobilized in

these accounts. We have detailed the common issues that were discursively managed across the websites analyzed, including the primacy of fitness as a motive for enrolment, the confidence and empowerment benefits one might expect to obtain, and the performative aspects of pole dancing. Our analysis also highlights the ways in which the act of participating in pole dancing classes was constructed as ‘funny’ (in addition to being ‘fun’).

Recreational pole dancing studios do not present themselves directly as a raunch culture activity; rather, they emphasize their primary function as providing a fitness activity. The strong emphasis on providing this kind of ‘legitimate’ cover for pole dancing suggests that the proprietors of these businesses believe that (at least some of) their potential clients would be uncomfortable with an activity that was primarily focused on ‘learning sexy moves’ or ‘getting in touch with their sensuality’. A framing is offered in which these benefits are an almost incidental bonus of switching a workout at the gym for a (functionally equivalent) pole dancing class. By ‘hailing’ potential clients in this way -- as modern women who are open to a bit of raunchiness but who are not seeking it out entirely for its own sake -- this discursive strategy produces a tempered subject position for women, which is both engaged with yet at the same time distanced from raunch culture.

Beyond the promise of toned biceps and a great core workout, the ‘empowering’ and ‘confidence boosting’ properties of pole dancing are central to the offering presented to women. As we note in the analysis, the specific means by which this empowerment is produced is not directly articulated. However, because claims of empowerment are generally presented alongside allusions to the ‘sensual’, ‘sexy’ and ‘liberating’ nature of

pole dancing, we can read the empowerment as being understood to flow from the opportunity to engage in 'sensual' activities that is presumed not to be routinely present in the lives of the women being addressed. In this way, the studios draw on a discourse of separation of women from full access to the power and pleasures of their desirability, and although 'feminism' is not named as the source of this separation, it is not hard to hear the standard lines of postfeminist culture in this call to women (c.f, Gill, 2007). The ubiquitous use of metaphors of interiority -- references to 'getting in touch with' and 'releasing' one's 'natural' 'inner goddess' -- reinforce the idea that something is preventing women from having access to the full experience of themselves, and that pole dancing provides an opportunity for women to reconnect these separated aspects of their essential selves. In this way, pole dancing is offered as an avenue for the self-exploration and self-realisation that are the key projects of neoliberal selfhood (Rose, 1996, 1999).

These claims relating to the power of pole dancing to reintegrate the fractured aspects of contemporary (young, heterosexual, white, western, able-bodied) women's selves sit somewhat uneasily with the parallel presentation of pole dancing as a parodic, ironic activity, in which participants focus on having a laugh and are clearly understood to not be taking themselves too seriously. We argue that this emphasis on light-heartedness works to manage and defuse the potential riskiness of attempts to be 'sexy', and guards against the potential 'failure' of a performance of sexiness by maintaining a plausible deniability that the performance is meant to be anything other than 'a bit of fun'. The tension between authentic empowerment and ironic parody is not self-consciously addressed in the websites, and exemplifies a tension that arguably infuses raunch culture more generally. Close attention reveals some of the questions that hover around this

emerging social space: Is this serious? Who is it for? How much is 'too much'? Who decides what is 'empowering' and what is 'desperate' and thus humiliating (or 'exploitative')?

These questions lead us to the complex issue of the meanings attached to performances of raunchiness. Although raunch culture discourse (and postfeminist discourse more generally) are saturated with references to 'choice', the choices they invoke are primarily about action; they obscure the harder reality in which none of us gets to choose the *meaning* assigned to our actions (and some of us less than others). The polysemous nature of (potentially) raunchy activities such as pole dancing mean that readings which emphasize the sexy, adventurous, confident, 'up for it' aspects of the pole dancer coexist with the potential for less flattering readings in which the pole dancer is derided as tacky, slutty, desperate, or deluded. The ever-revisable line between gaining social cache and risking derision seems to render women's bids for 'empowerment' via performances of raunchiness unstable and contingent on interpretations of her actions that are beyond her power to control. This instability, we argue, promotes the need for deniability ('it's not serious', or 'it's a great workout'), which in turn produces a confused and uneasy sense of the kind of 'self expression' or 'empowerment' that raunch culture can provide.

In conclusion, we have argued that the appeal of recreational pole dancing can be understood as part of a general postfeminist repudiation of some of the projects of feminism (c.f., Gill, 2007). With its emphasis on 'empowerment' via the mastery of 'sexy' movement of the body to (potentially) provocative effect and the achievement/maintenance of a fit/slender body, pole dancing is thoroughly immersed in

the postfeminist sensibility in which the body is located as both the source of authentic self expression and the means to power (Gill, 2007). We argue that the tensions and contradictions between authenticity and parody are revealing of the uneasiness of this postfeminist space, in which bids for 'empowerment' are attractive and compelling, yet at the same time contingent, fragile and insecure.

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ⁱ A ‘gentlemen’s club’ is a euphemistic name for a strip club where women strip for a primarily male audience.