



## The confidence trick: Competing constructions of confidence and self-esteem in young Australian women's discussions of the sexualisation of culture



Laura Thompson, Ngaire Donaghue

School of Psychology and Exercise Science, Murdoch University, Murdoch, WA, 6150, Australia

### ARTICLE INFO

Available online 9 August 2014

### SYNOPSIS

In recent years, an explicitly sexualised style of femininity has become associated with the idea that women choose to self-sexualise to signify their empowerment. But alongside these celebratory interpretations, self-sexualisation among young women has been subject to more patronising readings; in particular, the view that women are duped into engaging in thinly disguised sexual self-exploitation, to which they are made vulnerable by low self-esteem. This paper presents a discursive analysis of focus groups with seventeen Australian undergraduate women, in which they discussed young women's engagements with sexualised culture. Participants saw sexualised self-presentations as providing benefits to women, most notably enjoyment and heightened confidence. However, they viewed some self-sexualisation as being motivated by low self-esteem, engaging women in a downward spiral of objectification and decreasing self esteem. These competing constructions of self-sexualisation as both promoting and threatening confidence and self-esteem highlight how young women's engagement in sexualised culture is simultaneously open to empowering and disempowering readings.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

In the long-running U.S. television comedy show *Arrested Development*, the video series *Girls Gone Wild* is the subject of a recurring parody in the form of a series entitled *Girls With Low Self-Esteem*. The parody is achieved simply by the retitling of the series; no explanations are needed in order for the audience to “get the joke”. This neatly captures a paradox presented by the sexualisation of culture: on the one hand engaging in a raunchy, overtly sexualised form of self-presentation is offered as a means of increasing confidence and feeling empowered by “wildly” transgressing conventional boundaries that restrict feminine sexuality, while on the other, engagement in these practices can often result in patronising and pathologising judgements concerning the allegedly low self-esteem of women who seek male attention in this way.

The phrase “sexualisation of culture” has come to stand in for a set of related phenomena in western cultures involving a marked (re)sexualisation of young women's bodies in the media and society more broadly. These phenomena include the dramatic increase in the prevalence of sexually explicit images

in the media (see [Hatton & Trautner, 2011](#)), the mainstreaming of pornography, and changes in sexual mores ([Atwood, 2006](#); [McNair, 2002](#); [Yost & McCarthy, 2012](#)). Within this broad context there has been a great deal of interest in what has become known as “self-sexualisation” – the adoption of an overtly sexual style of self-presentation (particularly among young women), features of which include the wearing of revealing clothing to go clubbing, sexually suggestive dancing, and the presentation of a light-hearted, open-minded, “up for it” attitude to sex (e.g., [Gill, 2007a](#)).

The meaning of these changes in representational and personal practices around sex and femininity has been the subject of significant contestation in academic and online feminist communities. Without wishing to oversimplify a complex range of positions, the debate can be broadly characterised as occurring between those who argue that the increased sexualisation of culture does (or can) provide women with greater opportunities for sexual self-expression, liberation and empowerment (e.g., [Atwood, 2006](#); [McNair, 2002, 2012](#);

Peterson, 2010; Vanwesenbeeck, 2009) versus those who argue that it merely dresses objectification up in empty rhetoric that sounds like empowerment, but that does little to either change sexual politics or to broaden the opportunities available for women's sexual self-expression (e.g., Coy & Garner, 2010; Lamb, 2010; Levy, 2005). Notably, although there has been a clear moral panic around the putative effects of sexualised culture on teenage (and younger) girls, most of this panic is centred around the idea that girls are being addressed as sexual subjects "too soon" (e.g. the APA report on the sexualisation of girls; APA, 2007) rather than engaging substantively with how adult women are addressed by sexualised culture (Gill, 2012). In this paper, we examine how undergraduate women negotiate a distinction between "empowering" engagements with sexualised culture from that which they construe as concerning. In particular, we explore how confidence and self-esteem are invoked both as the benefit of appropriate participation in sexualised culture, and as the necessary precondition for women to be able to make a "free" choice about whether and how to participate.

### *Self-sexualisation as empowerment*

Part of the appeal of self-sexualisation 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 (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Rubin, 1984). This vision has materialised into the figure of the sexually agentic, adventurous woman who is unafraid to flaunt her sexuality (Gill, 2003), whether it be through wearing revealing clothing (Duits & van Zoonen, 2006), learning to pole dance (Donaghue, Kurz, & Whitehead, 2011), displaying a "performative shamelessness" in social media profiles (Dobson, 2013), or engaging in "raunchy" public displays of sexually suggestive behaviour (Levy, 2005). Confidence and empowerment are central tenets of sexualised culture, and have become common buzzwords in marketing products such as pole-dancing lessons (see Donaghue et al., 2011) and lingerie (Amy-Chinn, 2006), as well as in some women's positive accounts of their experiences with them (e.g., Holland & Atwood, 2009; Regehr, 2012; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009). Yet despite the focus on confidence and empowerment as key gains to be had from such forms of self-sexualisation, the precise nature of the "empowerment" on offer is often not explicitly articulated. In the section below, we consider three possible forms that such empowerment has been conceptualised as taking.

Some scholars have argued that an explicitly sexual style of femininity does (or can) liberate women from oppressive notions of female sexuality as passive and defined in relation to male sexuality, and instead allows women to inhabit a version of femininity that is active, desiring and sexually confident. Atwood (2006, p. 86) contends 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". This perspective aligns with other scholarship that views the increase in sexualised representations in mainstream media as illustrating a general "democratisation of desire", in which traditionally marginalised forms of sexuality,

including women as active and desiring sexual subjects, are now being represented and celebrated in popular culture (McNair, 2002). This opening up of possibilities for sexual self-expression is welcomed by those who see it as removing pernicious double standards that have highly limited women's forms of sexual self-expression by harshly judging women who deviate from the narrow confines of "respectable" feminine sexuality.

Another possibility for understanding sexualised culture as empowering for women is reflected in Hakim's (2010) concept of "erotic capital". Erotic capital refers to "the combination of beauty, sex appeal, skills of self-presentation and social skills" (2010, p. 500) that Hakim argues is an important form of power for women, one that has traditionally been delegitimised by both conservative ideological prohibitions on women's displays of sexual allure and by alleged feminist disapproval of women's exploitation of the privileges associated with sexual attractiveness. In other words, Hakim argues that women can now be "empowered" by using a form of influence that has always been available to them, without risking the sanctions that have shadowed this type of power in the past. Appeals to this form of "empowerment" can be seen in advertising tropes that suggest to (young, conventionally attractive) women that the right kinds of deployment of their sexual attractiveness will cause men to be rendered powerless to resist them (Gill, 2003, 2008; Lazar, 2006).

Finally, empowerment can be conceptualised as an affective experience, reflected in the enjoyable mix of confidence, boldness, fun and (harmless) transgression reported by many women of their experiences of intentionally courting sexualised attention. For example, studies of women taking pole-dancing classes found that they felt a sense of confidence and achievement from successfully performing "sexy moves" (e.g., Holland & Atwood, 2009; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009). In this view, engaging in practices of sexualised culture (such as recreational pole-dancing) gives women an opportunity to work through "issues of body management, body image and sexual display in ways which make them feel powerful" (Holland & Atwood, 2009, p. 180). Similar claims have been made for participation in burlesque theatre, a sexualised form of dance which typically includes an element of striptease (see Regehr, 2012). "Empowerment" is understood here as arising from women's increased opportunities to transgress symbolic boundaries delimiting acceptable kinds of sexualised self-presentations, thus providing some direct experiential evidence of the enhanced possibilities and freedoms available to them in the postfeminist world.

Although there are some important possibilities for real change in the opportunities available for expressions of feminine sexualities that are highlighted in these various analyses of "empowerment", their individualistic focus provides a narrow lens through which to analyse the conditions and consequences of self-sexualisation. In the next section, we discuss how postfeminist rhetoric around empowerment reproduces the neoliberal fetishisation of "choice" and evacuates any analysis of cultural pressure from discussion of the cultural conditions within which these "choices" are made.

### *Postfeminism, culture and "choice"*

Postfeminist values and ideas are fundamentally enmeshed in the overarching ideology of neoliberalism (Gill & Donaghue,

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/375896>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/375896>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)