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

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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.

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 connotes 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 fulfillment”. 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 delegitimized 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 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,
2013; McRobbie, 2009). Under neoliberalism, people are understood as autonomous, self-responsible individuals who are largely unaffected by social pressures and influences (Rose, 1996); “culture” is nothing more than a smorgasbord of choices, from which the postfeminist subject is free to make her selections. Making “good” choices is a key task and major site of personal accountability in the postfeminist world. Postfeminism, with its disavowal of gender inequity as a force in contemporary Western women's lives and its celebration of women’s capacity for free choice, addresses women as unconstrained subjects living in a world full of opportunities and possibilities previously denied to them. Unfettered access to these “choices” has become a bottom-line value of postfeminism (Baker, 2008, 2010; Braun, 2009; Stuart & Donaghue, 2012). This emphasis on “choice” is also a central feature of the discourses of sexualised culture, and the idea that women choose to engage in sexualised self-presentations purely for their own benefit (rather than for men) has firmly taken hold (e.g., Amy-Chinn, 2006; Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). Critiques of elements of the sexualisation of culture therefore now risk being dismissed as prudish and illegitimate attempts to interfere with women’s rights to make their own choices.

Missing from this view of sexualised culture is a sense of constraint or pressure that might shape the “choices” of its members. Although some cultural institutions, most notably “the media”, are understood as creating pressures on women (and others) to adopt certain modes of personal presentation and behaviour, these are typically constructed as frivolous exhortations that should be easily resisted by competent adult women (Gill, 2007b). This view of “culture” (especially “the media”) as entirely distinct from the individual self fails to capture the fundamental ways in which personal identities and the characteristics, values, priorities, desires and fears that comprise them, are constituted in and by cultural discourses and processes (Foucault, 1994; see also Gill, 2007b). Scant attention is directed to considering how personal experiences and desires are shaped by forces outside the individual, and to the social privileges (and sanctions) that are attached to making certain kinds of “personal” choices.

A more ambivalent view of the sexualisation of culture

As Renold and Ringrose (2011) have argued, girls and young women describe themselves as experiencing both “pushes” and “pulls” in relation to sexualised culture. Theorising women’s engagement with sexualised culture as a simple matter of individual choice cannot fully explain why large numbers of young Western women “autonomously” choose to pursue the same sexy, exhibitionist version of femininity currently popularised by sexualised culture (Gill, 2007b). Although “alternative” representations of feminine sexuality can be found in sexualised culture (e.g., Atwood, 2011), they are vastly outnumbered by images that are hardly distinguishable from traditionally objectifying representations of women; both tend to feature young, slim, White, conventionally attractive women in little clothing and sexually suggestive poses. Given there is also a long history of silencing women as sexual subjects in favour of rendering women as the passive objects of male (hetero)sexual desire, it is doubtful that such a vision of female sexuality should now be understood as reflecting women’s own, authentic sexual desires (e.g., Gill, 2008; Lamb, 2010; Levy, 2005). Levy argues that “raunch culture” does not provide a means for feminine sexuality to break free from its historical constraints, but instead constructs a superficially different, but ultimately just as prescriptive, version that “isn’t about opening our minds to the possibilities and mysteries of sexuality. It’s about endlessly reiterating one particular — and particularly saleable — shorthand for sexiness” (Levy, 2005, p. 30).

Indeed it has been argued that the sexual “empowerment” on offer in sexualised culture has become a form of regulation wherein young women are compelled to take up the current sexualised ideal in order to position themselves as modern, liberated and feminine, and to avoid being seen as dated or prudish (Evans, Riley, & Shankar, 2010; Gill, 2007a, 2008; Levy, 2005). Gill argues that the shift to sexualised culture has replaced traditional sexual objectification of women with new forms of sexual subjectification (Gill, 2003). She argues that the postfeminist requirement for women to understand their actions as freely chosen means that the values and practices of sexualised culture are taken on, not as “pressures” but as freely chosen responses to the “natural” feminine desire to be found desirable. Because of its apparently optional character and its internalised self-policing, Gill argues that this “subjectification” represents “a higher or deeper form of exploitation than objectification” (Gill, 2003, p. 104).

Beyond questions of what motivates young women’s engagement in self-sexualisation, there are also important questions about the range of consequences that attend these practices. Although experiences of pleasure and confidence are highlighted as key benefits for women, research suggests that there is a wider and more complicated range of outcomes, many of which are marginalised by the “empowering choice” discourse surrounding these practices. Yost and McCarthy (2012) found that many young heterosexual women feel highly ambivalent about their experiences of kissing their female friends for the benefit of male onlookers at college parties; although many of their participants reported that it was “fun” and that they enjoyed the attention, there was also a strong sense of pressure, negotiation, and some regret — all of which sit uneasily with a dominant discourse of agentic self-sexualisation (see also Fahs’ (2009) discussion of “performative bisexuality”). Donaghue et al. (2011) show how the language used to advertise recreational pole-dancing classes combines both an appeal to the “sexy”, “empowering”, “confidence-boosting” prospects of pole-dancing while at the same time reassuring participants that it will be “a bit of a laugh”. They argue that this discursive rendering of pole-dancing classes as being light-hearted and “not-serious” is a pre-emptive defence against the risk of a “failed” performance of sexiness. Similarly, reality television programmes such as BBC Three’s Snog, Marry, Avoid? make a spectacle out of the efforts of young women, often from working class backgrounds, to gain social cache through sexualised self-presentation. The message of this programme is clearly that women who go “too far” in sexualising themselves are repugnant, desperate and pitiable (and certainly not “empowered” or desirable). These examples highlight the ease with which a bid for empowerment via sexiness can be turned against the woman making it; what constitutes “too far” is highly audience dependent and revisable. The tendency to construct self-sexualisation practices as either straightforward exercises in free choice or as pressured compliance obscures the
possibility of a more complex entanglement of choice and pressure, or of empowerment and humiliation.

In taking seriously the power of sexualised culture to shape the subjective desires, experiences and actions of women, we are mindful of the dangers of positioning women as “cultural dupes” (e.g., Duits & van Zoonen, 2007; Peterson, 2010). A key tension has emerged in feminist scholarship around self-sexualisation practices concerning how to temper an analysis of cultural pressures and effects with respect for women’s ability to define the meaning of own their choices (e.g., Duits & van Zoonen, 2006; Gill, 2007b). Attempts to problematize individualistic analyses of behaviour by considering wider social forces have been critiqued as ignoring women’s autonomy and invalidating their accounts of their own experiences and actions (Duits & van Zoonen, 2007; Lerum & Dworkin, 2009; Peterson, 2010). But although it is of course important to take seriously women’s understandings of their own behaviour and their subjective feelings of empowerment and experiences of pleasure, we consider it important to resist an analysis of this important phenomenon in which experience is the only, or final, word (Gavey, 2012; Gill, 2007b; Gill & Donaghue, 2013). This is particularly the case because the emphasis on participation in sexualised culture as a freely chosen expression of self is itself a key feature of postfeminist discourses of sexualised culture and is thus part of the phenomenon under analysis.

Aims and approach of this study

The aim of the present study was to explore how young women talk about sexualised culture and how they respond to arguments drawn from both feminist literature and the 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” and “ways of seeing” made available to women in sexualised culture, but also whether any counter-discourses could be mobilised through probing and challenging the taken-for-granted postfeminist constructions of gender and female sexuality. To achieve these aims, we approached the analysis from a feminist post-structuralist framework, which focuses on the construction of understanding and power through language (Gavey, 1989). Feminist post-structuralism provides a theoretical perspective for analysing how social discourses are drawn on by women to account for their own and others’ experiences, the kinds of possibilities for identity that are made available within these discourses, and how these help to reproduce or challenge existing sexual politics.

Method

Participants

Seventeen women were recruited to participate in the study, ranging in age from 18 to 41 years old (M = 23.73). All of the participants identified as heterosexual, and almost all were European–Australian (one was of Chinese–Singaporean background). All participants were undergraduate students recruited from [redacted] University, with the majority being psychology students (two were not) who received credit hours for their participation. The participants were recruited via advertisements on a psychology research participation website, as well as posters displayed around the university.

Procedure

All procedures for the study were approved by [redacted] University Ethics Committee. We conducted four sets of focus groups, each set consisting of two, 90 minute long sessions which were spaced one to two weeks apart. During the focus group sessions the participants were given material to read and discuss (see below). The sessions were guided by a schedule consisting of questions designed to stimulate discussion about the arguments presented in the materials and about self-sexualisation practices in general. After participants had finished reading each piece, they were invited to comment, and discussion proceeded as participants responded to each others’ observations. In this way the discussions remained flexible and largely directed by the participants, allowing them to focus on what they considered relevant and to bring up any other issues or arguments not raised in the materials. Participants frequently addressed each other during the focus group sessions, posing and responding to each others’ questions, and extending or questioning opinions put forward by others in the group. Although participants were not asked to describe or explain their own engagement in self-sexualisation practices (or that of their friends), the discussions frequently revolved around these kinds of personal anecdotes that participants brought up in response to the materials presented. The nature of the discussions in each of the focus groups was quite similar, and after four sets of focus groups had been conducted it was clear that data saturation had been reached. The sessions were audio-recorded and orthographically transcribed, with pseudonyms used to ensure anonymity.

Discussion prompts

The discussion prompts used during the focus groups were drawn from feminist blogs and academic feminist literature, and were centred on challenging the discourses of empowerment and personal choice that infuse post-feminist constructions of self-sexualisation (see Table 1 for descriptions and sources for all of the discussion prompts). They were selected to provide specific examples of self-sexualisation practices (e.g. the video clip from the university burlesque club), and to introduce a variety of types of critiques of post-feminist empowerment discourse. These materials were used to explore how participants responded to various arguments that problematize post-feminist constructions of “choice” and “empowerment”. The materials were presented in what we considered to be a rough order of approachability — we began with examples that were directed to a general audience without much previous exposure to feminist analyses (blog posts and books written for a general audience with an interest in gender issues), followed by a popular academic article published in a feminist journal, and ending with an excerpt from a self-described radical feminist blog. The first session of each focus group commenced by showing participants a short video clip featuring students performing burlesque shows at a British university to provide an example of sexualised culture and to prompt discussion. Following this initial discussion participants also read an extract
from Levy (2005) describing the rise of “raunch culture” and two blog posts: one critiquing the “empowerment” argument used to justify popstars’ sexualised performances, the other critiquing the idea of “choice feminism”. In the second round of focus group materials included: a blog post arguing that sexualisation imposes a new form of pressure on women; an extract from an article by Rosalind Gill questioning the use of media literacy education in combating sexualisation; and a post from a radical feminist blog (I blame the patriarchy) arguing that women cannot “freely” choose to participate in practices that reproduce the values of the dominant patriarchal social order.

**Approach to analysis**

We approached the analysis from the theoretical perspective of feminist post-structuralism (Gavey, 1989), using Willig’s (2001) six steps for Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. This method of analysis seeks to locate participants’ 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 aim of this style of analysis is to uncover the “cultural logic” that is drawn on to make sense of (and to problematise) particular kinds of practices. Although we expected that there might be differences among our participants in terms of their enthusiasm for and participation in various practices of sexualised culture, we were less interested in documenting and accounting for these differences, and more concerned with describing the shared assumptions, values, and bottom-line arguments that form the shared framework that these women use to discuss various elements of sexualised culture. We operate from a critical realist epistemology (Frauley & Pearce, 2007); although we are alert to the performative, interactionally contingent nature of the talk produced in focus groups, we nevertheless contend that the kinds of arguments and sense-making practices the women used in the focus groups reflect the cultural logic that operates in their thinking around these issues as they arise in their everyday lives.

The analysis was undertaken with two major aims in mind. The first of these was to explore whether and how participants drew on the widely articulated postfeminist discourses of “empowerment” and “personal choice” to account for their own and others’ attitudes and experiences in relation to sexualised culture. A second aim was to explore whether reading some feminist critiques would prompt participants to problematise postfeminist discourses of “choice” and “empowerment”. In addition to these a priori questions that we brought to the data, we were also curious to learn more about participants’ own interests and concerns about sexualised culture and its various manifestations in their lives.

We began the analysis by becoming immersed in the data through repeated reading of the data corpus by both authors, making notes of initial impressions of recurring themes and expressions and discussing the transcripts across a series of meetings. The body of instances for analysis was formed by collecting all instances of talk that referred to sexualised culture and specific practices that were related in some way to overtly “sexy” behaviour as a means of empowerment (or disempowerment) and choice. The body of instances was then reviewed several times to identify the most central and commonly encountered topics and issues, and to form these into the analytic themes that we present in the following section.

**Analysis and discussion**

Our analysis is based around three major themes that recurred extensively across all the focus groups. The first theme concerns how the notions of “empowerment” and pleasure (feeling good) were constructed as being the rewards
for sexualised self-presentation, mediated through the receipt of appreciative male attention. In the second theme we explore how participants invoked notions of confidence and self-esteem to account for the empowering and pleasurable benefits of sexualised self-presentation, as well as examining some of the contradictions evident in these constructions. Our final theme explores how the principle of “choice” was formulated and positioned in opposition to conformity or pressure, and shows how sexualised culture was constructed as being something primarily “for” women rather than men.

“Empowerment”, pleasure and the male gaze

One of the main ways participants discussed sexualised culture, as it manifested in their own lives, was in terms of wearing revealing clothing when nightclubbing to attract sexual attention from men. This sort of attention was argued to make women “feel good”. For example:

Extract 1 (FG 1A)

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.

Extract 1 illustrates how the pleasure of being found attractive under the male gaze was often seamlessly equated with empowerment, as seen where Karise says that “it would be (empowering)...because it makes themselves feel good”. This rhetorically self-sufficient argument (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) draws on the common-sense understanding that if something feels good then it must be positive, effectively sidestepping any need to further interrogate this form of “empowerment”. The apparent self-evidence that dressing in a way designed to receive sexual attention is an unproblematic personal choice is reflected in Karise’s statement: “I don’t understand why they would do something that doesn’t make them feel good”. However, despite the apparent obviousness that these choices are freely made, there is some 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 make-up 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 (FG 1A)

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 boob’s gonna fall out, someone’s gonna grab my boob”.

In answer to Karise’s question, Danielle responds “obviously I would feel sexy”, constructing the link between “attention” from men and feeling attractive as an “obvious” one that all women can relate to. However, Danielle goes on to say that along with the kind of male attention that is desirable (“looks” or “smiles”), “at the same time” comes the possibility of unwanted, “troubling” forms of attention (such as having men make comments about or grab her breasts). This suggests that the distinction between sexual agency, wherein the woman is celebrated as an empowered sexual subject, and sexual objectification, in which she is an object of men’s sometimes threatening sexual attention is understood as unpredictable and not entirely within a woman’s control.

Although the experience of wearing revealing clothes and receiving sexual attention from men was primarily constructed as being pleasurable and self-chosen, some participants also talked about how it can come to feel almost compulsory at times. For example:

Extract 3 (FG 3A)

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 explains braving cold weather in a dress when she goes out rather than something warmer like jeans, because it will bring her “more attention” which makes her “feel good”. The decision to wear more revealing clothing is therefore again explained by appealing to the rhetorically self-sufficient argument of “feeling good” (as seen in Extract 1). To the extent that Emily depicts her choices as being limited, it is because of
her personal desire to “get a bit of attention”; she does not suggest that there is any external requirement for her to dress in a particular style. In Extract 4, Rachel makes a similar point but takes it further to discuss how she feels when she does not dress in the way that she feels is expected.

Extract 4 (FG 1A)

Rachel: I think um especially when I go out and stuff I um like my, um I dunno, I — I dunno like my style is very — I like — I don’t like very skimpy little clothes.
Louise: Mmmm.
Rachel: 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.
Rachel: 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”.

Expanding on the idea expressed in Extract 3, Rachel discusses how not wearing “very skimpy little clothes” when she goes out diminishes her feelings of self-confidence, implying that this is due to a lack of (the right kind of) male attention. Rachel emphasises the apparent paradox of her experience by stating that even if she goes to a nightclub with her long-term boyfriend, and so theoretically doesn’t need or experience by stating that even if she goes out diminishes her feelings of self-confidence, the other women who are wearing more revealing clothing is that she should feel less attractive or confident if she doesn’t feel less desirable and hence loses her “complete confidence”. Much as in Extract 3, 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 nightclouting. This lack of social critique suggests that “compulsory sexual agency” (Gill, 2008; pg. 40) has become fashioned into feminine subjectivity itself, making it difficult to recognise and critique its potentially oppressive or otherwise negative aspects.

Confidence and self-esteem

We were struck by an intriguing paradox in the ways participants drew on notions of confidence and self-esteem: although they consider it perfectly legitimate for women to enjoy male attention because it makes them feel attractive and improves their self-esteem, they see it as problematic if women emphasise their sexual attractiveness because they “need” validation and/or because they are conforming due to low self-confidence or self-esteem.

Extracts 5 and 6 illustrate the general endorsement across the focus groups of the idea that receiving approving male attention can heighten one’s sense of self-esteem.

Extract 5 (FG 1B)

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 ofLouise: More like to build up your self esteem.

Extract 6 (FG 3A)

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: Yes.
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, participants often specified that male sexual interest (e.g., “being wanted by men” [Extract 5]) or “getting compliments from guys” [Extract 6]) is empowering for women, because it is “good for their self-esteem” (Extract 6). As possessing good self-esteem is considered highly important in contemporary Western cultures, the invocation of this notion works to legitimise women’s efforts to receive male attention via a sexualised self-presentation. This justification is helped along by Sophie naturalising women’s desire to be found attractive by men as something that “all girls like” and “we all want” (Extract 6).

However, at the same time, participants also constructed a second, less positive, relationship between sexualised male attention and self-esteem. In these cases women’s sexualised self-presentations were viewed as being much more concerning, and seen as arising because of low self-esteem. For example:

Extract 7 (FG 1B)

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 (FG 4B)

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 factor that makes one vulnerable to “pressure” (Extract 7) to use sexualised self-presentation to get attention. 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 striking contrast to the previous extracts, states that sexualised attention 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 sexualised culture to feel good about themselves and those who do lack the “stronger sense of self” (Extract 7) required to resist social influence. This discursive appeal to “self-esteem” as a factor distinguishing between women who can be seen as making truly “free choices” and those who are understood as conforming to pressure resonates with similar findings from research on women’s accounts of their own and others’ engagement in beauty practices (Stuart & Donaghue, 2012) and various forms of cosmetic surgery (Braun, 2009; Stuart, Kurz, & Ashby, 2012).

The tension between these constructions of confidence and self-esteem was not explicitly orientated to by participants during the course of the focus groups; it was not the case that there were two “camps” with different views of the role of self-esteem in sexualised self-presentation, but rather participants moved easily between these two constructions without addressing (or even appearing to notice) that they were doing so. This suggests that both constructions of the sexualised self-presentation and confidence/self-esteem are readily available to be drawn on, reinforcing the openness to interpretation of these self-presentations. It highlights the potential for an act of “empowered” sexiness that is intended as an expression of and justification for attention and validation that indicates a fragile sense of self-esteem. This echoes the argument of Donaghue et al. (2011) that there is a fundamental instability of meaning attached to efforts to achieve empowerment via sexualised self-presentations.

“Personal choice” versus “conformity”

Adequate self-esteem or self-confidence was not only constructed as protecting against the problematic pursuit of male attention, but also as providing women with the strength to make “personal choices” about their sexualised self-presentations. Those deemed to be lacking in confidence were more likely to be understood as complying with what they believe others expect of them. For example:

Extract 9 (FG 3A)

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?[turns omitted]

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.

Extract 10 (FG 3A)

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.

In Extract 9, Sophie distinguishes between someone wearing revealing clothing to gain attention because “everyone else has done it” rather than “just because they want to”. She then identifies “confidence level” as being the differentiating factor between these two motives. Similarly, 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 9, if women have the appropriate “reason and justification” for engaging in such practices, that is, if it reflects what “they want” and it is “a personal choice”, then there is no issue. “Doing it just to conform”, however, is not portrayed as being a sufficient reason. Through this juxtaposition, “personal choice” and “conform[ity]” are constructed as self-evident opposites, wherein social influence is not conceived of as shaping one’s “personal choices” or desires. Rather culture is again constructed as something “out there” that a person with sufficient self-esteem should not feel pressured or influenced by (Gill, 2007b).

Extract 11 further develops this distinction between choice and conformity.

Extract 11 (FG 2A)

Samantha: And um so in a way, I think it (sexualised culture’s) good because it’s whether – whether you’re married or whether you’re — you — 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.

Samantha: But um some — some of that stuff (from the burlesque 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 to go out with you, that would be the big issue.

Here Samantha endorses one of the central tenets of postfeminist 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. Even then, however, these options are still presented as being legitimate choices for women, so long as they “are comfortable with that”. 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 rhetorically self-sufficient argument. Again, this pre-emptively defends women’s engagement with sexualised culture against critique by appealing to the common-sense notion that if one is “comfortable” with a certain action it cannot be harmful to them. Concern was only seen as warranted if women feel that they “have to do it”.

These constructions produce 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, 2007b; Gill & Donaghue, 2013). In so doing, these discursive constructions conceal the extent to which traditional sexual politics still shape social notions of desirable femininity, and obscure their impact on women’s preferences, desires, choices and what they find to be “comfortable”. Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that this notion of being “comfortable” constructs women’s feelings about engaging in sexualised self-presentation as being straightforward and easily identifiable; it is assumed that women can always easily tell whether they feel okay about doing something or not (see Burkett & Hamilton, 2012, for a related discussion of sexual consent). Yet as seen through the participants’ talk of the contingencies, the “lines” that shouldn’t be crossed, and the frequent distancing of themselves from the practices that they discuss, perhaps one of the defining features of how they feel about the idea of empowerment via sexiness is that, although they can see the appeal, their relationship with it is better characterised as ambivalent rather than “comfortable”. As Gavey (2012) argues, it may well be the case that women have a much more complicated relationship to their (potential) participation in sexualised culture than either simply fully embracing it or rejecting it.

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 sexualised culture might be “for” men, as indicated in this next extract.

Extract 12 (FG 3B)
(In response to, '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, I 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 sexualised culture for men’s benefit. As exemplified in this extract, the participants frequently challenged this argument by asserting that 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 who 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 13 (FG 4B)

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 this extract, women are seen as performing sexiness as a form of competition and bonding 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 13) 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 sexualised culture as it allows them to gain social cache which, as Stuart and Donaghue (2012) argue, deflects the notion that participating in sexualised culture is an act of subordination to the (validating) male gaze. Even though men are assigned a role as judges of women’s desirability, this desirability is notably not constructed as being either required by nor “for” men.

The following extracts further illustrate how the notion of social influence tended to be evacuated in participants’ accounts of participating in sexualised culture, through the idea of “doing it for me”.

Extract 14 (FG 2A)

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 forg [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 15 (FG 1B)
Nicole: I’ve gotten that [judgement for what you’re wearing]
from people like I — ‘cause I often dress kind of, atten — not
really slinky or slutty just.
Brittany: Provocatively.
Nicole: Yes, I—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” and Nicole’s “dramatic” dress style are framed as
explicitly personal choices that they do for themselves because
they “like to” (Extracts 14, 15). They clearly dismiss the idea
that it is for “everyone else” (Extract 14) or for men; indeed
Nicole draws attention to her annoyance with her male friend’s
self-perceived “god given right” to interrogate her style of dress.
Yet despite their clear assertion that their wardrobe choices are
“for me”, they do not clearly explain what it is that they enjoy
about donning these traditional indicators of a sexualised
femininity. In constructing themselves as autonomous and free
of influence, both Samantha and Nicole draw on a discourse of
personal preference that is ungrounded in any consideration of
why we might come to like the things we like (Gill, 2007b).

Finally, we end with an example of how participants
sometimes complicated the question of women’s motivations
for engaging in sexualised self-presentation.

Extract 16 (FG 3A)
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 woman might take up
pole-dancing classes: “to get fit and to bring something to the
bedroom and look sexy”. Importantly, these are not presented
as mutually exclusive alternatives — instead she stresses the
“and” between each option to highlight their simultaneous
possibility. In doing so, she expresses a more complicated view
of women’s motivation for engaging in activities such as pole-
dancing, rejecting the notion that these actions always have a
single, unambiguous meaning. Emily also subtly rejects the
idea that people’s motives can be read directly from actions, by
concluding her discussion of possible motives for pole-dancing
with the statement “I don’t know how they feel”. Although this
type of construction was not nearly as common as more
straightforward claims that participation was either a positive
personal choice or a negative expression of conformity, across
the focus groups there were some moments in which these
more complicated, multiple motives were hinted at.

Conclusions
This research was intended to explore how young women
understand and locate themselves within the debates around
sexualised culture. We examined both how the participants
interpreted this cultural phenomenon and how they responded
to feminist critique of the rhetoric of empowerment and choice
which infuses sexualised culture and postfeminist discourses
more generally. As demonstrated in the analysis, participants
frequently took up postfeminist discourses in drawing on the
principles of “fun”, “confidence/self-esteem”, “choice” and
“doing it for yourself” to account for women’s sexualised self-
presentations (e.g., wearing revealing clothing when night-
clubbing or engaging in sexualised performances such as
burlesque or pole-dancing).

The major way in which women’s engagement in self-
sexualisation was constructed as being beneficial was via
the claim that “getting [sexualised] attention” from men
makes women “feel good” by boosting their self-esteem and
self-confidence. It is notable that the women rarely used the
term “empowerment” directly; discussion prompts that
were framed in terms of “empowerment” were taken up
and discussed in terms of “feeling good”. Throughout the
focus groups there was no talk of self-sexualisation provid-
ing “empowerment” in terms of increased opportunities for
sexual self-expression, or greater freedom for women to
pursue their own desires; the benefits of self-sexualisation
were almost entirely mediated by (positive) male attention.
Nor did participants invoke a version of empowerment in
line with Hakim’s (2010) construct of “erotic capital”; they
did not talk about using the sexualised attention they received
from men for any purpose other than building confidence and
“feeling good”. Instead, across the focus groups, there was a
seamless, unmarked translation of the concept of empow-
rement into the pleasure of being found desirable. Empowerment
was thus engaged with as an affective experience, understood
in terms of pleasure, confidence and approval.

Confident choice versus counterproductive conformity

The key element separating “positive” engagement in self-
sexualisation from more concerning practices for our partici-
pants was confidence or self-esteem. Confident women were
seen as able to make “personal choices” to engage in sexualised
behaviour that they were “comfortable” with. Enhanced con-
idence was also seen as one of the rewards of a successful
performance of sexiness, as well as being at risk if one was not
sufficiently “sexy”; in Extract 6, Rachel described “losing [her]
complete confidence” when going to a nightclub dressed in
clothes that were not “sexy”. Confidence is thus constructed as
both required for and reinforced by successful sexualised self-
presentations. Women with “low self-esteem”, however, were
constructed in much more problematic terms as “conforming” to
a sexualised ideal that they might not “really” wish to in order to
receive the attention that they “need”. Furthermore, attempts
by women “with low self-esteem” to gain sexualised attention were seen not only as undesirable, they were also considered counterproductive, as entering a cycle of “needing” sexualised attention to feel worthwhile was seen as running the risk of lowering self-esteem even further by leading women to “feel like an object” (Extract 8). This distinction between acts of sexualised self-presentation that enhance confidence versus those that remediate low self-esteem is open to interpretation, with the result that, whatever her actual motivation, women’s engagement in sexualised culture can always potentially be read patronisingly as evidence of low self-esteem.

Even though participants expressed some scepticism about whether sexualised self-presentations could always be understood simply as “choices”, they stopped short of identifying any kind of coercion of women’s behaviour: the opposite of “choice” was constructed as “conformity”, rather than “pressure”. The refutation of social pressure was particularly evident in how participants often took offence to the suggestion that women’s sexualised self-presentations are acts of submission to men (or to patriarchy). Although men are positioned as the arbiters of what is and is not “sexy” (via their bestowal of “attention”), participants emphasised the view that women seek this attention for themselves (it “feels good”), or sometimes to bond or compete with other women (“to be the most desired”). There is a flat rejection of the idea that sexualised behaviour is either required by, or “for”, men. These constructions position women as being freed from gender power imbalances and seem designed to avoid any sense of women as “victims” of the oppressive male gaze and/or limiting cultural ideals of feminine sexuality (Baker, 2010; Stuart & Donaghue, 2012). These findings are consistent with other recent research that has found that even when young women recognise some of the ways in which their personal practices (including personal grooming and beauty practices) feel “non-optional”, they nonetheless continue to talk about them primarily using the rhetoric of “choice” (e.g., Braun, Tricklebank, & Clarke, 2013; Stuart & Donaghue, 2012).

How might we understand young women’s apparent investments in maintaining these individualistic accounts of self-sexualisation practices? By contending that women can autonomously “choose” to enact a sexualised vision of femininity, the use of this discourse conceals the extent to which these ideals have become normatively required of young women (Evans et al., 2010; Gill, 2007a, 2008; Lamb, 2010). The “choice” discourse thus arguably functions to allow the postfeminist subject to fulfil the neoliberal requirement that she understand herself as being free from social influence and restrictive gender norms, and that she attribute her actions to her own authentic personal desires and choices (Baker, 2008, 2010). This also requires that, at times when a potential darker side to sexualised self-presentation is discussed, that these negative engagements are accounted for in terms of individual characteristics of vulnerable women (those with low self-esteem) that lead them to conform to practices that they might not “really” want. The neoliberal insistence on understanding all actions as “choices” has largely removed the discursive tools needed to recognise and critique the underlying sexism and sexual politics of many elements of sexualised culture (Baker, 2008; Gavey, 2012; Gill, 2012; Gill & Donaghue, 2013; Stuart & Donaghue, 2012).

It is worth noting that we did not ask participants to explain or “justify” their own or others’ participation in sexualisation practices — indeed, far from leading participants to account for these practices in individualistic terms, the discussion materials we chose were selected to provide alternative ways of thinking about “individual choices” as forms of pressured (or rewarded) social compliance. The reluctance of our participants to take up these alternative accounts of self-sexualisation is somewhat discouraging for feminist interventions that hope to disrupt straightforward individualistic understandings in favour of opening up space for young women to consider that “pleasure” and “conformity” might not be mutually exclusive, and that, as Nicola Gavey (2012) notes, we can recognise that acts can be personally experienced as agentic and pleasurable, while at the same time situating these acts within the disappointing limitations that currently exist for cultural discourses of female sexuality (and power). Yet despite the absence of sustained engagement with the critiques that we presented, we did find that many of the young women in our focus groups said that they greatly enjoyed the materials and the discussions, and agreed with many of the arguments made in the critiques.

Perhaps if these focus groups had continued to meet (beyond the two sessions that we ran), it is possible that more time and repeated returns to the issues raised would have allowed for a deeper engagement with these challenging alternatives. Future research might consider working with young women’s established peer or friendship groups, to explore whether these ongoing relationships could provide a context for continuing to reinforce alternatives to straightforward, “choice” based understandings of their own actions and experiences.

Limitations

There are some features of this study that may limit the generalisability of our conclusions. In particular, the inclusion in the focus groups of various discussion prompts may have shaped the ways in which these discussions developed. Our intention in providing these materials was to introduce ways of thinking about the sexualisation of culture that challenge the “individual choice” analysis; this methodological feature may have lead participants to discursively frame their talk in terms of “empowerment” and “choice” to a greater extent than they otherwise might have. However, participants’ use of the language of “empowerment” and “choice” was far more similar to that used in postfeminist celebrations of sexualised culture than with the critiques of this discourse that we provided, suggesting that participants already formulated the issues raised in thinking and talking about sexualised culture in these terms. We also note that the Australian context of this research may introduce particularities to the focus group discussion that might not be found in other places, especially in cultural context in which postfeminism has not taken as strong a hold as it has in the Anglophone West. A further limitation concerns our sample, which comprised almost all European–Australian undergraduate women, all identifying as heterosexual. Although more highly educated that the general population, we argue that middle class white women are a key demographic for sexualised culture (Gill, 2007a), and are thus likely an appropriate group among which to explore how this cultural development is constructed and engaged with. Most of our participants were in their late teens or early 20s, but one group did include a slightly older woman (aged 41). Although we limit our conclusions about the ways in which sexualised culture is
constructed to young women, it is interesting to note that the contributions to the focus group discussions this woman made drew on the same kinds of assumptions and values as those of the younger women in the study.

Concluding comments

The findings of the present study have implications for feminist debates about the emancipatory potential for women presented by the increasing sexualisation of culture. The ease with which these women drew on discourses of choice and pleasure when discussing sexualised culture highlights how central postfeminist discourses have become in young women's articulations of their experiences, and their sense-making practices regarding their own and others' behaviour. Participants generally reproduced the postfeminist construction of sexualised self-presentation as both a means to and an emblem of confidence. On occasions when they did express concern about some instances of engagement with sexualised culture, these were predominantly framed in terms of the motivations of the women involved rather than as any kind of critique of sexualised culture. In particular, participants strongly rejected any notion that women's involvement in sexualised culture could be understood as being pressured by, or even catering to, men's interests. Any problems expressed were framed in terms of the vulnerability of women with "low self-esteem", with the implication that efforts at ameliorating harm should attend to remedying the defects of individual women, rather than challenging any of the pressures created by sexualised culture. This illustrates Angela McRobbie's (2009) warning that the possibility of seeing these issues as a shared struggle and responding with forms of solidarity and collective action is likely to remain foreclosed so long as self-sexualisation practices continue to be understood so firmly within the individualistic logics of postfeminism and neoliberalism.

References


