

Sexually progressive and proficient: Pornographic syntax and postfeminist fantasies

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Abstract

Mainstream and pornographic images and practice norms are becoming increasingly blurred (Paasonen et al., 2007), while sexual entrepreneurship discourses (Gill, 2009) promote ongoing sexual self-transformation. Women's sexuality, specifically, is expected to be proficient and perpetually practising. We examine what the mainstreaming of pornography means for sexual desire and agency among 27 young women negotiating heterosex. Participants' accounts of sexuality and pornography are reflected in a *(dis)ordering porn* interpretive repertoire. Porn is positioned alternately as: *ridiculous and recapitulated performance*; *a (contested) arousal tool*; *pedagogy and pictogram*; and *(resisted) re-enactment pressure*. Pornography's regulatory effects are both rejected and recapitulated. Whether they use porn as a template for sexual possibilities or decry its codes as undesirable, porn acts as an unavoidable cultural reference point for considering sexuality for these young

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women. A sexual syntax that draws on pornographic images and tropes for sexual desire, pleasure and agency is described.

Keywords

neoliberalism, pornography, postfeminism, sexual desire, sexual practices

Introduction

The erotic landscape for negotiating sexual possibilities and practices is currently being redefined as a result of several interrelated sexuo-social shifts, wherein culture and commerce converge. One such key cultural turn concerns the ubiquity of pornography (D'Orlando, 2011) and the rise of 'porno-chic' (McNair, 2002, 2013) or the 'pornification' of everyday life (Paasonen et al., 2007); that is, activity and appearance norms formerly associated with pornography are routinely adopted in social and interpersonal contexts. Popular examples include: recreational pole dancing, promoted as empowered fitness (Whitehead and Kurz, 2009); amateur pornography and sex blogs, branded as authentic self-expression (Attwood, 2007); and sexually explicit textual and visual materials, sex parties, and products targeted at female consumers (Attwood, 2005a). This 'domestication' of porn (Juffer, 1998) – co-mingling fashion, consumerism and eroticism – is essential to the socialization of a specific form of feminine heterosexuality that is branded as progressive and sexually emancipated.

This mobile sexual scaffolding stands alongside postfeminism, with its promise of liberation and limitless sexual possibilities (Gill, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; McRobbie, 2007). The postfeminist woman is free to engage in self-care and other pleasurable free-market goals of neoliberal subjects (Harvey, 2005; Rose, 1996). The postfeminist ethos is reflected in related 'sexual entrepreneurship' discourses (Harvey and Gill, 2011a, 2011b), which advocate a persistent pursuit of maximal sexual satisfaction and improvement. It is within this shifting cultural landscape that young women are negotiating sexual norms and practices. This article describes findings from a larger project on the cultural backdrop of sexual agency and desire among young women and men (see Brown-Bowers et al., 2015; Gurevich, in prep.; Gurevich et al., 2015). Focusing here on young women's sexual lexicon and repertoires in the context of pornography, postfeminism and sexual entrepreneurship, the approach reflects feminist scholarship that extends epistemic and empirical considerations beyond sexual emancipation/subjugation oppositions (e.g. Gavey, 2012; Jagose, 2010; McClelland, 2010; Thomas et al., 2016). The article addresses the ways in which the social and symbolic significance of pornography for sexual subjectivity is actively negotiated by young women.

Sexual subjectification, postfeminism and sexual entrepreneurship

As the line between mainstream and pornographic cultures becomes increasingly permeable (Paasonen et al., 2007), sexual practice and appearance standards

formerly associated with pornography are now quotidian. The neoliberal trio of choice, consumerism and authenticity (Harvey, 2005) operates through ‘technologies of the self’ (i.e. corporeal and psychological self-transformation projects) (Foucault, 1990 [1978], 1988, 1994) to hone identities, bodies and sexualities. The adoption of cultural sexual codes as personal preferences is indispensable to their normalization (Foucault, 1990 [1978]). For women specifically, a disciplined approach to appearance and sexual practice is central to these ‘technologies of sexiness’ (Evans and Riley, 2015; Evans et al., 2010; Radner, 1999); they reflect the ‘doubled movements in which agency is complexly enabled and disabled’ as women negotiate sexual liberation, neoliberal and consumerist discourses (Evans et al., 2010: 114).

The formerly battle-bound feminist compass is now redirected at a postfeminist ‘new sexual contract’ (McRobbie, 2007), offering sexual entitlement and choice, and predicated on consumer culture involvement (McRobbie, 2008). With feminist principles simultaneously appropriated and emptied of political content (McRobbie, 2007, 2008), sexual empowerment is postfeminism’s most tantalizing talisman – an incessant parade of sexual possibilities and pleasures. Postfeminism’s chief conceit is that women are no longer passive recipients of objectification; the goalpost of feminine achievement has moved to ‘subjectification’ of women, wherein self-disciplining empowerment is directed at sustaining ‘compulsory sexual agency’ (Gill, 2008a, 2008b). Drawing on Foucault’s concept of ‘subjectification’ (Foucault, 1988) as the making of subjects (i.e. the conferral of a subject position), ‘sexual subjectification’ (Gill, 2003) refers to the ways that cultural anchors (e.g. media, porn, expert knowledge) converge upon individuals, such that they come to view sexuality as central to self-understanding (thus becoming sexual subjects). Sexual subjects, in this sense, not only engage in various bodily and sexual practices, but are ‘materialized’ or formed by these ongoing performances (Harvey and Gill, 2011a): ‘discipline “makes” individuals’ (Foucault, 1995 [1977]: 170).

Adopting Jackson and Scott’s (1997: 569) gendered genealogy of ‘discursive shifts through which human sexuality came to be conceptualised both as obeying predictable natural laws and as being amenable to incorporation into a rational, reflexive project of the self’, ‘sexual entrepreneurship’ can similarly be understood within the context of a ‘gendered technology of sexual subjectification’ (Harvey and Gill, 2011b: 495). While sexuality retains its cultural status as a spontaneous and obdurate instinctual drive, training and commodifying sexual pleasures has become a desirable rational goal (Jackson and Scott, 1997), with increasing emphasis on sexuality as the foundational platform for self-transformation (Jackson and Scott, 2010). The sexual entrepreneur embodies maximal sexual satisfaction, spirited sexual experimentation and an empowered sexual subjectivity, underpinned by both postfeminist and consumerist ideals (Harvey and Gill, 2011a, 2011b). Relying on business, science and military language, sexual productivity and skill development, performance assessment and goal setting are central obligations for both men (Rogers, 2005; Tyler, 2004) and women (Gill, 2009).

The promise of peak pleasure is central to the sexual entrepreneurship doctrine. Men, however, are simply required to upgrade their skills, enhance ‘productivity’ (Cortese and Ling, 2011; Rogers, 2005; Tyler, 2004) and ‘streamline’ their sexuality – tweaking a presumed robust sexual appetite and repertoire into ‘peak’ shape (Tyler, 2004: 95–96). For women, the goal extends beyond developing a savvy sexual toolbox to remoulding their sexual subjectivity to exude sexual confidence and appeal, perpetual preparedness for sexual adventure (Gill, 2009) and to be ‘willing to perform a number of practices previously associated with the sex industry’ (Harvey and Gill, 2011b: 487). As a ‘technology of sexiness’ (Evans and Riley, 2015; Evans et al., 2010), pornography fits well with the sexual entrepreneurship credo, with porn stars acting as celebrated authorities on ‘spicing up’ quotidian sex lives (Harvey and Gill, 2011a).

Empirical explorations of women’s experiences with pornography

Psychology has a long tradition of research on pornography, with a predominant focus on attitudes and behaviours engendered by exposure to pornographic images (Barker, 2014; see also McNair, 2014 for research outside psychology). While the sexual socialization effects of pornography (e.g. impacts on sexual satisfaction, sexual practices and intimacy) on both men and women (Braithwaite et al., 2015; Corley and Hook, 2012; Peter and Valkenburg, 2011) is a growing area, it is typically examined quantitatively. Qualitative research on women’s experiences with pornography remains limited (see Attwood, 2005b for detailed review). A notable exception by Ciclitira (2004) described the dilemmas posed by feminist politics and personal (sometime pleasurable) experiences with porn among British women. Parvez (2006) reported US women’s reasons for porn viewing, including: masturbation, curiosity, minimizing sexual boredom and sexual rebellion. Women also described ambivalence and distress about porn actors’ safety, questioned the authenticity of their portrayed pleasure, and connected porn to personal histories of sexual violence. More recently, a study of young women and men in Sweden found that while pornography use was normalized as an easily accessed sexual arousal tool and reference point for evaluating body ideals and sexual acts, it was also a source of ambivalence (Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson, 2010). A memory-work project on early porn exposure with Finnish women and men described porn as predominantly facilitating self-reflexive discovery, fantasy and exploration of sexual practices and identities (Paasonen et al., 2015). Relatedly, the preliminary report from an ongoing mixed-methods project on online porn use among over 5000 individuals (Smith et al., 2013) found that key reasons for engaging with porn included: intensifying sexual pleasure; expanding sexual expression and consolidating sexual identity; enhancing partnered sex; replacing unavailable sexual opportunities; and aesthetic and erotic exploration. In summary, qualitative research on women’s experiences with porn performs myriad (sometimes ambivalent) functions, including acting as: a template for imagined practices and identity constructions; a way to organize aesthetic and sexual hierarchies of acceptability;

and a demarcation of varying alliances to femininity and feminism (Albury, 2009; Attwood, 2005b; Paasonen, 2009; Smith et al., 2013).

Current study focus and method

'Intimate citizenship' (Plummer, 2003) is being reconfigured as discourses joining consumerism, choice and expert authority with sexuality (Evans and Riley, 2015; Evans et al., 2010; Harvey and Gill, 2011a, 2011b) shape desiring subjects for whom the merging of the 'pornosphere' (McNair, 2002, 2013) with the quotidian is both mundane and mandatory. In our work, we locate pornography as one of many cultural registers that shape sexual norms and practices (see method section). Specifically, we examine the reconfiguration of sexual intimacy in young women in the context of a cultural landscape characterized by discourses that, directly or indirectly, make use of pornographic portrayals and practices (Paasonen et al., 2007; McNair, 2013). Accordingly, specific questions we addressed are: What sexual messages and models are transmitted by pornography? How are pornographic images and messages incorporated in the formation of desire and agency? And how do young women comply with and contest pornographic scripts?

Semi-structured audio-taped interviews (mean duration = 2.5 hours, range = 1.5–3 hours) were conducted with 40 Canadian young women following university Research Ethics Board approval.¹ Interviews were conducted individually either by the first author (psychology professor), second author (psychology graduate student) or another trained research assistant, and transcript material was analysed by three graduate students (second, third and fourth authors) and one psychology professor (first author). Recruitment relied on posters displayed at an urban university campus and neighbouring communities, in addition to brief presentations in undergraduate classrooms and online social media sources (e.g. craigslist). All recruitment materials contained the non-specific title 'Youth and Sexuality Study', and the study was described as exploring the ways sexuality among youth is developing in the context of available cultural messages, such as sexual education, peers and media. Our focus in this work is on women negotiating relationships with men; thus, data for one woman who identified as lesbian was not included. The final sample comprised 39 women; 32 identified as heterosexual and seven identified as bisexual (mean age = 20.68, range = 18–26). Most women were in a relationship at the time of data collection (71.79 %). Discrete categories (e.g. Black/White) are inadequate in capturing ethno-cultural identification (Gunaratnam, 2003); thus, a range of questions addressed cultural context (e.g. parents' cultural background, languages spoken, religious affiliation). A Canadian multicultural urban context is reflected in the 28 different parental country-of-origin backgrounds listed by the total sample of 39 women (e.g. German, East Indian, Hungarian, Romanian, Dutch, Guyanese, Jamaican, Chinese). Likewise, the religious backgrounds were too diverse to be meaningfully categorized in percentages (e.g. Hindu, Catholic, Sikh, Jewish); 27 women identified as not religious or as atheist.

Participants were informed that the following sexuality domains would be covered by the interview schedule: education, experiences, relationships, media, agency, desire and identity. Several questions and related prompts addressed each section. The larger study did not centre on pornography; it comprised one component of multiple sources of information about and experiences with sexuality. Interview time was distributed among these topics, with slightly varying time allocation devoted to pornography in each interview based on participant interest in this subtopic. Of the 39 women, 27 engaged with questions about pornography; the rest did not provide answers that were sufficiently complete for this analysis. These 27 women all had prior or current exposure to porn; most of this was accidental (e.g. porn pop-ups, seeing it at someone's house) and directed by others. Of these 27 women, 17 indicated past or current porn consumption, most of which was initiated by a male partner or a (male or female) friend. Frequency of consumption was not provided by most; when it was, 'sometimes' was the most common response. Examples of porn-relevant questions include: Tell me about your experiences with pornography? Where/when were you first introduced to pornography? Who first introduced you to pornography? How did your first experiences with pornography shape your ideas and feelings about sex? How do your experiences with pornography fit into the way you experience sexuality now? How often do you look at pornography? Interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Theoretical and analytic approach

This work adopts a feminist post-structuralist lens (Weedon, 1987), wherein subjectivity is viewed as discontinuous and formed by socio-historically located discursive practices. Feminist post-structuralism is concerned with the ideological work performed by this socio-symbolic universe – cultural representations, social norms, and gender roles and practices – which carves out the contours of subjectivity (Gavey, 1989). Knowledge is understood as being structured by and through language and various meaning systems that are available (or unavailable) in a given time and place (Gavey, 1989). Thus, what we think of as individual experiences are viewed as socially constituted through linguistic and other signifying practices (Burr, 2003).

Discourse analysis is used to identify patterns in the data, which focuses on what people *do* with words – treating talk as action – in order to achieve specific goals (e.g. presenting points of view, displaying particular identities, positioning oneself in certain ways) (Parker, 2002). Thus, the unit of analysis is discourse itself, rather than presumed primary aspects of experience or affect. We focus on interpretive repertoires to describe how individual accounts reference available discourses. Interpretive repertoires refer to patterns in the data that draw on a cultural catalogue of meaning; individual descriptions of experience are located within this broader shared log (Wetherell, 1998). This reservoir of possible multiple, conflicting messages (i.e. discourses) actively produces our understandings, interpretations and ways of viewing the world (i.e. interpretive repertoires); they are not simply

reproduced in social or political institutions, but brandish material bases of power at the level of individual subjectivity (Burr, 2003; Henriques et al., 1984). Furthermore, as a subjectivizing force, discourses construct subjects through normalizing, regulatory powers that are exercised rather than possessed, and productive rather than repressive (Foucault, 1995 [1977]).

The initial coding template was mapped onto key domains explored in the interview schedule, drawing upon material specifically relating to pornography for this article. The analytic approach is iterative, with close and repeated readings of transcripts in their entirety to contextualize pornography-relevant material within participants' specific responses. Transcript excerpts were organized around key themes, which emerged in response to specific questions outlined earlier (e.g. How do your experiences with pornography fit into the way you experience sexuality?). Themes included descriptions, analogies, and metaphors about pornography and sexuality that cited sexual experimentation, practice and appearance norms, choice, expectations, the reality status of depictions, pornography's effects, sexual pleasure, wanting and sexual practice negotiations. Analysis involved close examination of how participant accounts and arguments were constructed around these themes, including contradictions and tensions.

(Dis)ordering porn: Preposterous and prescriptive sexual work

The interpretive repertoire (*dis*)ordering porn refers to the simultaneously derided and desired ways that mainstream pornographic codes are described as permeating these young women's sexual lives. The designation of (dis)order refers simultaneously to: porn's ability to order or direct sexual lives; porn's disordering or disquieting effects, such that 'everyday' sexual practices appear lacklustre compared to porn practices; porn's ability to disturb, via images and expectations that are framed as distressing; and participants' attempts to strip porn of its organizing power by disordering or deconstructing porn as unnatural or ludicrous. Porn in these accounts is positioned as a regulatory order, orienting the young women's sexual fantasies and conduct in specific directions, with ambivalent impacts and affects. Sometimes they refer to direct effects (wanted or unwanted) on how they view their bodies and their sexual activities, possibilities and partners. At other times, they claim that porn is irrelevant to their lives, while nonetheless citing its indirect presence (e.g. comparisons between porn images and what they are not willing to do, be or look like). In all cases, the women move between residing in porn's immersive grip and distancing themselves to refute its ordering impressions (i.e. disordering or attempting to dislodge its effects). Their criticisms target everything from cinematic tropes to the sexual positions that are depicted in mainstream porn, focusing chiefly on unrealistic appearance norms and specific acts deemed as distasteful or unrealizable for 'real' women.

The majority of reactions to porn exposure or consumption were in the negative-ambivalent range (e.g. disgust; shock; embarrassment; self-consciousness about

their bodies, acts or expectations; desensitization; mild curiosity – $n = 12$), while the remaining women provided either predominantly positive (e.g. arousal, excitement, fascination, curiosity, interest, educative – $n = 6$) or neutral responses (e.g. lack of interest, mild amusement, no effect – $n = 6$). Notably, most responses in all three categories were compound, combining both negative and positive appraisals (e.g. shock mixed with excitement; disgust mixed with curiosity). Unequivocally either positive or negative responses were provided by only two women (in each category). Descriptions of bodies and sexual acts focused on a range of predominantly negatively-valenced oppositions constructed between porn depictions and real life. The following themes were central: fake, unnatural, plastic or vulgar women's (and, less frequently, men's) bodies; unrealistic, unattainable, unnatural, graphic or male-oriented sexual acts; violent, misogynistic, degrading, objectifying images of women; porn sets up ridiculous, unrealistic, exaggerated or unfair expectations about real sex. Among the positive parallels between porn and real life were: porn as a useful guide for exploring sexuality/practices; porn helping to define boundaries (i.e. what not to do); and alternative/amateur porn or erotica as more arousing and containing more sexually appealing or 'real' women/men. Importantly, while the women tended to emphasize this demarcation between real sex and porn sex, it is not clear to what extent they are mutually informative. As media convergence increasingly characterizes visual culture (Church Gibson and Kirkham, 2014), many common sexual practices reside in both domains, as well as in mainstream media, film, art and literature (Gurevich, in prep.), and their origins are not traceable. We are not suggesting that ideas and imaginings about sexuality run unidirectionally from porn to life; rather, we follow the trajectories described by participants. In interpreting these accounts, we remain agnostic about origin stories, while at the same time keeping in mind the common observation that the line between daily-life and pornographic images, fashions and practices is increasingly indecipherable (Attwood, 2005a; McNair, 2002; Paasonen et al., 2007).

Porn as ridiculous and recapitulated performance

Porn's presence is unavoidable scaffolding for framing these young women's sexuality: they rely on the images for both their recognition and misrecognition, as they work with and (often) against porn. Pornography is always 'two contradictory things at once: documents of sexual acts, and fantasies spun around knowing the pleasure or pain of those acts' (Williams, 2014: 37). Thus, engaging with the acculturation impacts of pornography necessarily entails a confrontation with fantasy dimensions and their limits. In considering the mechanisms of activation that form sexual subjects and embodiment, Butler's (2004a: 264) caution is instructive – social norms that activate the subject, 'produc[ing] its desires and restrict[ing] its operation do not operate unilaterally' because norms cannot 'operate in a subject without the activation of fantasy and, more specifically, the phantasmatic attachment to ideals that are at once social and psychic'. In other words, operating through a

recursive function, fantasy struggles with signification, norm internalization and meaning making (Butler, 2004b).

In the accounts we describe, the women actively struggle with porn's images, with imaginings about what counts as real (bodies, sexual acts), what is possible or expected, how the women depicted are seen (by men), and how they themselves will be viewed in relation to those messages. In navigating the symbolic significance of porn portrayals and its relationship to their own sexual practices, porn norms are not simply ingested or rejected in their entirety. The negotiations commingle cultural ideals about: sexual entrepreneurship, with investments in sexual adventure and improvement; men's (presumed) expectations and need for variety and surprise; and postfeminist discourses of (women's) entitlement to choice and sexual pleasure. The regulatory capacity of porn sits uneasily in these complex traversals, with porn's effects alternately declared and disavowed.

Porn's regulatory effects are both rejected and re-enacted in these accounts. As a symbolic system that installs sexual possibilities and prescriptions, porn constitutes a deployment of sexuality (Foucault, 1990 [1978]) as a condition of culture; that is, it orders sexuality at particular sites and by particular rules about what can be done or said sexually. While all the women engage in varying levels of critique about mainstream porn's depictions of (mainly women's) appearance and acts, the line between absurd and aspirational is often blurred. They are keenly aware that 'open', 'adventurous' and 'exciting' sexual subjects represent prized cultural currency, which leads alternately to both interrogating and instantiating sexual experimentation and novelty as desirable routes to pleasure, wanting and agency.

You look at these people and expect that it's going to be some ridiculous, exotic, crazy experience and it kind of makes you feel like you have to kind of act a certain way or look a certain way... Definitely the girl's supposed to be sexy, provocative, I remember she [porn actor] had on cowboy boots and a cowgirl hat and she had her stuff shaved into an exciting shape and I was like 'Really, are you supposed to do that? I didn't know' and it was definitely an emphasis on the way that the girl looked and I'm pretty sure they were in a kitchen, don't know why she's wearing a cowboy hat in a kitchen, not my first thing but whatever... It's like we would watch things in a pornography and we would be 'okay, let's try that'... almost everything I would do, okay there are some times, but only because it's like not hygienic as far as I'm concerned. I'm gonna do 99% of the things. (Participant 32 (22, Italian-Dutch, straight))

I actually thought about how I looked, or would look when I was having sex, because obviously they [men] think that and then it gets important how they look, which is annoying... and even the movements I did and like, even the sounds, because they [porn actors] make ridiculous, outrageous sounds, and I was like, 'Oh my gosh, is there something wrong with me if I'm not like that' or something, or, 'What does the guy think, does he think it's not sexy if I don't do all these, like, womanly things'. (Participant 24 (19, French-Canadian, straight))

Pornographic representations are framed as both preposterous and prescriptive. While the portrayals are deemed absurd and atypical, they nonetheless set up expectations that are difficult to dismiss. They are derided for their depictions of physical features that are not commonly seen (i.e. unusual decorative arrangements of pubic hair, attire not commonly found in certain locations), while simultaneously serving as possible sexual scripts.² A chief tension centres on images and acts positioned as unrealistic or unviable, and performance expectations that are either presumed as desirable for male partners (P24) or adopted as possible preferences by the women themselves (P32). For Participant 24, being found inadequate is a preoccupation amplified by porn portrayals. Failing to explicitly display appropriate levels of enthusiasm during sex is equated with failing the proficiency requirements for modern female sexual subjects. For participant 32, the female porn protagonist's subject position as provocateur is questioned, while simultaneously appealing to the allure of an expanding sexual repertoire; being receptive to maximal sexual exploration is an uncontested, valuable goal. Although the sexual depictions are often criticized as absurd and lacking realism, an undercurrent of anxiety about possible male partner expectations, sexual inadequacy and deviating from proper – which is read as perpetually sexually eager – feminine conduct lurks ('does he think it's not sexy' (P24)). Porn is similarly simultaneously ridiculed and recapitulated in the following quotation from Participant 51:

When I saw porn, to me it was more ridiculous. I was like that is not how sex is at all. Sex is not that, it's ridiculous. It was just such high expectations, I was like 'they're obviously professionals in acrobatics'. This is something that I would never be able to do and it is unfair for someone to expect that from me. So it has not affected it because if that is what someone expects from me, I'm sorry. I can't do that. No, it hasn't really affected it too much. (Participant 51 (19, Austrian-Irish, bisexual))

Porn is dismissed as both unrealistic and unrealizable here, but it also sets up (albeit lofty) target goals. The exemptive clause – that few ever achieve these impractical objectives – has a double meaning: this kind of spectacle sex is not for ordinary folks, but it also gestures towards some (lucky) few who do derive such pleasures. Her anxious intimations about porn's unrealistic portrayals of women and sexuality are temporarily assuaged. Nonetheless, uncertainty about whether men (semantically dislocated as 'someone') are cognizant of the depicted 'super'-sexualization of women – and whether it impacts their expectations – lingers. Temporarily distancing herself from deferred pornographic acts (e.g. professional acrobatics), participant 51 negates their impact even as she sustains their possible enactment. Because someone can perform such impossible feats, even if it's not her, this renders them conceivable. The use of 'high expectations' and lack of 'fairness' pointedly locates this porn repertoire as an implicit demand. She quickly distances herself from porn's projections, using her body's inflexibility as the index

of possible effects. Because she does not possess the body of a trained gymnast, certain demands cannot be made of her and this is linked, by a sleight of mental gymnastics, as an absence of influence; porn's tentacles temporarily recede. Precisely what it is that might be required of her, apart from abstract references to unachievable acrobatics, remains unspecified, but the threat of potential pressures retain their force, even as she refutes them.

Drawing on Butler's (2004b) interrogation of the typical divide erected between fantasy and the 'real', we can consider the women's recursive sliding between constructing porn as unrealistic and required as a way to reconcile myriad competing and contradictory discourses about gender and sexual practices. Because fantasy functions as a filter for sifting through available symbolic representations that sustain them as normatively potent (Butler, 2004b), what becomes ingested (the prescriptive) and expelled (the preposterous) about porn moves along the same plane of sexual entanglement, where porn resides alongside mainstream cultural conduits (e.g. media, sex and relationship advice) and ideological messages (e.g. postfeminism, sexual entrepreneurship). In rejecting some specific acts as ludicrous and undesirable, their viability and desirability are simultaneously reinscribed through imagined others' expectations.

Porn as a (contested) arousal tool

Research on women's consumption of pornography suggests that while it is not uncommon for women to use it for enhancing arousal (alone or with a partner), this use rarely occurs without engendering conflict (Ciclitira, 2004; Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson, 2010; Parvez, 2006). Women's enjoyment of porn presents a set of (often) irreconcilable contradictions; while some images are pleasurable arousing, they can be simultaneously distressing or lead to engaging with other women's possible distress. Concerns about the treatment of female porn actors, the objectifying and/or unrealistic images of women, and questions about men's ability to discern reality and fantasy sex are central dilemmas.

The women in our study similarly refer to their ambivalent enjoyment of porn in seeking out porn for specific purposes. While they express interest in viewing porn, they also hold on to their critique of its: potential for blurring lines between reality and fantasy; artificial representations; threatening moral platforms; impacting men's sexual standards (P07); and (occasional) debasement of women (P38). Porn's probable hazards are emphasized alongside its possible pleasures.

I like porn, but I can see how it definitely screws people up with their perceptions and conceptions of the world. Like you know, what's right and wrong and what works and what's real in the world, because if you actually look at it, it's all contrived – the image that – especially males, that that's the way they appreciate sex and expect sex to be. (Participant 07 (19, Irish-English, straight))

In the next extract, Participant 38, adopts an instrumental approach to porn, referring to its utility for masturbation and building sexual excitement more generally – it is useful for autoerotic activity and for sustaining sexual attention.

I've had really mixed feelings about pornography, like sometimes I feel like it's really degrading to women and objectifies women and it's not right, but then I also see how it can be useful for some people... I don't really think it's very realistic, if I do, like I have in the past used pornography, and it's always just like to stimulate myself and like I guess get myself excited, not being like 'Oh my god, this is amazing, this is going to happen to me'. I think it's sort of to entice people more, maybe and keep people more interested but also in my experience, I don't see a lot of storylines in pornography, it's more just action. (Participant 38 (21, Canadian, straight))

She elaborates her perception of mainstream porn as deliberately provocative, sometimes serving an arousing purpose, but not as a model for her own sexual actions. Unlike participants who view porn as a model for possible sexual alternatives (see Section 'Porn as pedagogy and pictogram'), she asserts that porn is not a guide for 'real' future enactments. At the same time, arousal (while engaging fantasy) in response to specific scenes can be read as a kind of 'happening'. If we consider pornographic images as making use of the tension between what is possible and what is impossible, 'pornographic action is always suspended action' (Butler, 2004b: 192). In this sense, fantasy both forestalls action (i.e. making room for doing while deferring) and keeps the action moving (i.e. imagining what can be done). For this participant, however, porn is all about the action – what is done to whom and by whom. In emphasizing this achievement dimension of porn, she draws a distinction between 'doing bodies' in porn and 'feeling people' in erotica:

It almost humanizes sex in a way, like erotica, whereas pornography is just kind of like we're bodies, and we're going to do this, and we're going to do that, and it's all about instant gratification I guess, as opposed to emotions... I do feel that there's a difference between erotica and pornography. Like pornography to me is exploiting something. (Participant 38 (21, Canadian, straight))

Porn is positioned as manipulative and dehumanizing – it is intended to entice and induce arousal. In contrast, erotica is framed as a civilized, less opportunistic representation of sexuality. Erotica is about whole humans, versus part-objects and body parts depicted in porn.

Participant 42 (next extract) likewise ridiculed mainstream porn for its counterfeit status and women's debased portrayals, with alternative porn sites elevated as a higher standard. In this case, she laments her boyfriend's lack of interest in pornography ('I would like to watch it together but he doesn't get off on it because

he thinks it looks fake'), contrasting it to her own definite preferences and pleasures:

I like them [women] to look more real; like if they have fake boobs or really, really bleached hair and like a lot of make-up, it kind of turns me off, like I tend not to watch that porn. I guess either sort of amateur porn or very polished... I guess usually if the guy is hot, that's the only time I would watch straight porn, and a lot of time, he isn't. And then I find lesbian porn better quality, it tends to be better quality even though it's still aimed at men. I mean the hottest stuff is obviously like websites like *Suicide Girls*; the women are really into it but that stuff is harder to get. (Participant 42 (24, American-British, bisexual))

Amateur porn is declared superior, with a focus on genuine female pleasure as an index of authenticity. While there is a nod to evaluating men's appearance here, the focus centres women's representations and their (presumed) candid enjoyment in alternative porn. Alternative pornography is seen as more liberated, real and non-exploitative, which is contrasted with mainstream commercial pornography – regarded as crude, tasteless, 'standardized, bland, and anodyne' (Attwood, 2007: 443). She contrasts this to her first porn experiences, which she found jarring, given an extended focus on women performing fellatio.

I remember exactly, the first 10 minutes of it was a blowjob and I couldn't believe it, I was like 'how can she keep going for that long' and I felt sick, like I felt sick to my stomach because, I'm not so much like this anymore, but I had hang ups about blowjobs because I thought they were dirty and everything... I don't mind it now, 'cause I think it's hot but definitely when I was like 18 or 19 and I saw that, I was like 'No!'... I guess I expected it to be more interactive like just both of them having sex, not just the woman servicing the man. I knew all about women being exploited on porn and all that but I still somehow expected it to be more, like in the movies, you know, it's all about them having sex, not just you know, like the woman sucking the guy off so... As I got more sexually experienced, I got more comfortable with male organs I guess, and I was able to watch that aspect of it and gradually, as I got more comfortable with it, I started finding it hot. (Participant 42 (24, American-British, bisexual))

Her disgust response in those initial viewings is attributed both to a personal inhibition about oral sex performed on men and a perceived lack of reciprocity in porn scenes. This unidirectional portrayal of a lengthy oral sex act is framed as both repulsive and unreasonable. She attempts to reconcile her abstract awareness of women's reputed exploited status within porn with its explicit illustration. Imagining that porn would resemble mainstream filmic depictions gestures towards a wish for something beyond what is being represented. She really wants porn to deliver something more of what she wants – mutuality and visible signs of women's pleasure. And she seeks out a specific porn genre (alternative porn) to fulfil these

goals. Notably, mainstream porn is positioned here as real and movies as fantasy. She is disabused of the fantasy of movie sex ('all about *them* having sex') through the educative experience of porn ('the woman sucking the guy off'). Negation of early responses and deliberate initiation emphasizes slow habituation that eventually turns into appreciation; the transition from earlier revulsion to current enjoyment is presented as process of persistence, practice and sexual maturity. Although she comes back to this again at other points in the interview, admitting that 'I'm still not that comfortable with cum, like I have to sort of get myself used to it, but I'm better than I was'. She is determined to get more comfortable, despite many references to her dislike bordering on disgust; her sense of herself as being experimental ('there's not much that I wouldn't try... I try really hard to define myself against that upbringing and so I've made a lot of effort to be more open') trumps her visceral responses in the moment of performing sexual acts she finds distasteful.

Porn as pedagogy and pictogram

In some cases, porn is explicitly positioned as an educative medium, echoing an increasingly common observation that young people may rely on porn to provide information about bodies, sexual activity and initiation practices that supplement or are missing from sexual education received in schools (Allen, 2011; McKee, 2007).

That's a really interesting question. How's it shaped my sexuality; as you can see, I feel absolutely no embarrassment sitting here talking to you about this. So I guess it's sort of helped me be more comfortable with it, 'cause I've never been uncomfortable with sex and the idea of sex... I guess it's just made me more like, just open to the idea of sex and different kinds of sex because I'm the kind of person who, you know, always tries something once... I've probably been really socialized by that because it was always like the films, with shitty storylines but storylines nonetheless, so I think it did shape it. (Participant 41 (20, Jamaican-British, bisexual))

The educative potential of porn stands alongside an accompanying critique of its cinematic quality. The emphasis is on porn's capacity to diminish discomfort in both sexual talk and action, referencing its use as a form of 'erotic education' (McKee, 2007). Porn as a pedagogic tool is increasingly a focus of academic and popular attention, and has been described as providing a potential 'discourse of erotics' (Albury, 2014) for young people, in particular, for whom the 'missing discourse of desire' (Fine and McClelland, 2006) continues to characterize much of school-based sex education. While a general sexual openness is also cited by participants, porn is positioned as providing enhanced permission and support for this predisposition. It is also credited with further diminishing (residual) discomfort, as well as expanding receptivity to sexual variety and willingness to explore a broader gamut of sexual possibilities.

Similarly, the following participant refers to her growing sexual repertoire, in which porn is positioned as a distant, uninfluential medium, while simultaneously referencing activities that are common staples of porn.

There were a lot of things that I thought would be so gross, it's kind of like when I did drugs, I would be like you know what, I'm never going to do that, that is so gross, that's only what slutty girls do, and then all of a sudden somehow I would be doing that . . . like I felt so comfortable with him and honestly, if I was dating someone else, I wouldn't be doing that, I don't know how it is, like I feel so comfortable with him and I really trust him. Like anal sex, like stuff with like toys and with like handcuffs and restraints and all kinds of stuff, but not like scary forms of things that you see in porn, like the tamer stuff, like honestly I would never do those like really insane things . . . - like I've hooked up with girls but I wouldn't like define myself as bi, like I've had a threesome with [boyfriend name] . . . I don't walk down the street and I'm not like 'Oh, that's a hot girl.' And I wouldn't be in a relationship with another girl. (Participant 39 (20, Spanish-British, straight))

A narrative of sexual maturation emerges – with parallels to maturation about other matters of taste (e.g. drug attitudes and use) – that carves a direct path from earlier repulsion and designation of some acts as linked to 'slutty girls' to later comfort with those same acts. This transition is constructed as unexpected; the attribution cites a partner who elicits a sense of safety and trust, which is necessary but not sufficient; uncertainty concerning how ideas about those specific practices are shaped lingers. Sexual subjectification is successfully achieved (Harvey and Gill, 2011b) – she is a competent and confident sexual agent with an expansive repertoire. The explanation for this relies on an individualistic discourse of personal growth and partner choice, while negating the socio-sexual matrix within which her sexuality is formed. The list includes activities that are designated as more mundane, in opposition to the 'insane', 'scary' category that she designates as the proper domain of porn. The mention of 'hooking up with girls' and engaging in a threesome, despite the absence of a bisexual self-ascription, stands alongside early viewing of lesbian porn with friends at age 14 ('We looked at lesbian porn, we looked at normal porn, we looked at all kinds of porn 'cause like everyone talks of porn'). She tries to articulate a construct of sexuality that extends beyond bodies doing to explanations entailing sexual attraction, pleasure and wanting. But it remains unclear why, for example, a threesome would be appealing and performed in the absence of her desire, interest or pleasure. If women are not viable objects of her attraction, as she asserts, why would sex with women be alluring? Curiosity is certainly a possible motive, but this is not cited.

In the following extract, mainstream porn is, again, disparaged for its unrealistic portrayals of both appearance and acts, while alternative porn is lauded for its realism and as a template for relationships. This elevation of 'alt porn' to a higher

status than its mainstream counterpart is an increasingly common motif (Attwood, 2007; Smith et al., 2013).

It can give ideas sometimes I guess, most mainstream stuff is just garbage watching it anyways... the women are altered, the men are present, and really ugly most of the time... but like some more alternative stuff like *Suicide Girls* or videos from *Redtube*. Stuff like that have actual couples having actual sex... it can give you ideas for your own relationship... [I look at porn] every couple of days. Mostly it's my boyfriend's idea because we have, kind of, the same taste and he'll bring it up and involve it. (Participant 44 (22, Canadian, bisexual))

The presumed authenticity of the couples and their sexual acts is linked to their educative potential here. While mainstream porn is dismissed as useless owing to the women's enhanced physical appearance and the men's unattractiveness, the 'alternative stuff' is deemed worthy of imitation. Because they are assumed to be 'real' – a perception facilitated by the use of 'ordinary' protagonists, domestic locations and (purposefully) nonprofessional production techniques (Paasonen, 2011) – they represent legitimate models for sexual and relationship conduct. In the foregoing extract, the consumption is regular and frequent and the male partner is cast in the role of porn purveyor, although they share genre preferences. Although mutual enjoyment of porn is implied, there is no explicit mention of her specific pleasures or desires for certain kinds of imagery. The consumption conditions are fixed; porn is chosen and provided by the male partner and he decides when to introduce its use ('bring it up and involve it'). The phrasing is informative here: the porn is brought into the sexual practice at specified times and used as a menu of sexual possibilities.

Porn as (resisted) re-enactment pressure

In tracing the historical and discursive conditions under which 'normative heterosex provides the cultural scaffolding for rape', Gavey (2005: 231) deconstructs commonly accepted beliefs about how and why sexual coercion, compliance and choice proceed. She reconfigures the terms of the conversation about sexual agency, power and choice from individual-level decision making to the cultural conditions that make choice and change possible. Gavey argues that dominant heterosex discourses narrowly define how sex is understood and dictate which sexual scripts men and women can adopt as well as the role of sex in relationships. Two dominant discourses are key here: the male sex-drive discourse positions men as always needing sex, and the have-hold discourse (Hollway, 1989) views women as obligated 'to give men sex in order to retain the relationship that they desire' (Gavey, 2005: 139). The convergence of these discursive practices of heterosex leads to an 'absence of a reliable language in which to say no' to unwanted sexual practices (Gavey, 2005: 157).

While these edicts are familiar and even seemingly out-dated, the added modern twist is that a cultural context that prizes maximal sexual experimentation and variety (Gill, 2009; Harvey and Gill, 2011a, 2011b) – and in which (hetero)sexual choices are presumed to belong equally to men and women – can obscure the fact that the ‘other set of cultural norms that direct refusals may well contravene are the norms of femininity’ (Gavey, 2005: 145). If saying no is already a breach of the (hetero)feminine contract, layering the (postfeminist) requirement to enthusiastically embrace sexual experimentation becomes more palatable and (seemingly) empowering. Because the cultural vehicles for these messages are many, porn hitches an easy ride along this lengthy chain of dictates about how to perform female sexual subjectivity.

The following participant later describes participating in unwanted sexual activities that were modelled on porn images, while at the same time indicating that porn has no direct bearing on her sex life. In the following excerpt, porn is raised as a catalogue of sexual possibilities, including ones in which she has no interest.

My boyfriend really wants to try anal sex but I’ve never, it’s like one thing that I just won’t do, I don’t feel like that’s a natural thing, I guess maybe because I haven’t seen a lot of porn or something... I’m pretty open-minded, even though I’m not like bi curious, I think I would like do like a threesome or something like that... Having sex I wasn’t embarrassed about but like trying different positions and being experimental with it, I was kind of embarrassed and you know, certain things like talking dirty you know, I felt like it was weird, just ‘cause I’ve never done it but then eventually, I just kind of came out of that and it’s totally natural and all for me now, he’s kind of transformed me from that, embarrassed shy girl to an open sexual being I guess. (Participant 37 (21, Dutch-Serbian, straight))

Anal sex is constructed as unnatural and therefore undesirable, while her lack of interest is simultaneously linked to insufficient porn viewing. At the same time, like participant 39 quoted earlier, she attributes her increasing receptivity to trying out activities that are common porn staples (‘threesomes’, ‘different positions’, ‘talking dirty’) to a specific partner who has promoted her sexual comfort and awareness. The initiation from self-conscious girlhood to sexually adventurous womanhood stands outside of other influences, while at the same time being encased in exposure to a range of media messages, from porn to sexual expert advice on TV and *Cosmo* (Brown-Bowers et al., 2015; Gurevich, in prep.; Gurevich et al., 2015). The transformation is presented as an evolution – overcoming timidity, reluctance and negative judgement to arrive at a position where a range of acts has been internalized as completely ordinary. The lexicon (‘bi-curious’) and possible practices (‘threesomes’) are adapted from myriad cultural carriers, with porn as just one modality, but the adoption is individualized, with these possible influences cast as peripheral characters. The desirability of novelty and experimentation are not questioned in these accounts. Ongoing sexual retooling and innovation are constructed as legitimate imperatives in their own right (Harvey and Gill, 2011a, 2011b; Jackson and

Scott, 1997). Receptivity to a varied sexual repertoire is central to the postfeminist sexual contract, wherein maximal sexual enthusiasm is coupled with consumption (McRobbie, 2007, 2008), in this case porn consumption. Lacking sexual limits is essential to forging compulsory sexual agency (Gill, 2008a, 2008b). A sexual explorer still requires a compass and a map; porn provides both, even as it is derided as flawed.

Sometimes the women (and/or their partners) actively seek out porn to locate new sexual alternatives (P32 and P41 quoted earlier), even as they maintain a critical stance. At other times, enactments occur following a partner's viewing, and women experience the experimentation as undesirable or alienating. The following three participants report male partners' literal adoption of porn as a pictogram for sexual activity, which is experienced as pressure and stands in contrast to the women's own (unspecified) desires.

Sometimes it kind of just relates to a porn movie after because he gets ideas from porn movies and then you feel like a porn star, it's just weird. (Participant 33 (18, Indian, straight))

He had a really bad relationship with pornography. He watched it every day and would have to chronically masturbate and chronically watch it and it was almost like he wanted to recreate that. He had this thing for face shots and it's not always the nicest thing to have a guy cum on your face... I think it's [porn] kind of blown out of proportion, and I wouldn't compare that to my own experiences at all or what I would like... It's kind of distasteful, there's no tasteful pornography, in my opinion. Like it's quite cheesy, the storyline and they kind of make it look like all men have huge penises, and all women are blonde and have large breasts, very unrealistic I think. Just cheesy and kind of cliché, I guess. Like the gardener and the housewife thing. (Participant 40 (21, Irish, straight))

Like if I've never done it, I don't know what to do kind of thing, you just kind of assume from what you see in movies or like porn and whatever. So he'd [former boyfriend] kind of be like okay, I'm going to do this now and he'd kind of just move me around. I don't know, it was so bad... I think pornography has like somewhat of an impact on me, I mean it kind of got like my curiosity going. But in terms of like shaping my sexuality, I don't think it really has much to do with it. I don't know, pornography is like always out there, like my friends always talk about it and stuff, it was like we ask each other 'do you watch porn whatever', I've never really been one to watch it, like get excited and everything. (Participant 37 (21, Dutch-Serbian, straight))

In all three cases, the women describe instances of direct impact of porn on their sexual experiences, wherein attempts to re-enact specific scenes are made, with acts the women find unappealing or unwanted, and arising from outside of their sphere of desire. These women describe being used as empty vessels into which male

partners pour porn-fuelled fantasies. Images of male ejaculation on female faces – colloquially termed the ‘cum-shot’ – is a familiar trope in hardcore heterosexual porn (Beggan and Allison, 2003). Its significance as an index of male pleasure and potency relies on visual confirmation of a successfully completed sexual act (Williams, 1989) – to see it, is to believe it. Believability is most evident on the part of the body that exhibits emotion – the face; facial expressions provide maximal evidence of success.

While women relate explicit examples of porn’s effects on their sexual lives, at the same time, porn is positioned as a distant and exaggerated force (‘blown out of proportion’ (P40)) that has no bearing on their sexual lives. They are also trying to articulate that their own sexual preferences for particular acts do not resemble the porn scenes they describe as tawdry, formulaic, cartoonish (P40), or repugnant (P37). At the same time, they downplay pornographic dictates that have shaped specific acts in which they have engaged. Porn’s presence is framed as simultaneously ubiquitous – a source of conversation, (sometimes unwanted) imitation and opposition – and distant. Its ‘always out there’ (P37) status gestures, at once, to its pervasiveness and remoteness. Whether they turn towards or away from it, porn is the backdrop for socio-sexual exchange and imagined possibilities for (dis) pleasure.

In summary, pornography in these accounts can be seen as ordering the arc of the women’s desires and practices – from incredulity to insecurity, from disgust to titillation, from derision to imitation. Sometimes porn is used to create a specific performance map or to diminish inhibition on the path to becoming progressive and proficient sexual subjects; at other times, it is a barometer of boundaries. In general, the focus leans more towards the practice of specific acts rather than forging fantasies. Attempts to disorder or diminish porn’s effects – for example, through allegations of inauthenticity or lack of aesthetic appeal – are laborious and ambivalent.

Discussion

We explore the messages and mandates linked to the mainstreaming of pornography as young women negotiate sexual desire and agency in heterosex. Our findings suggest that young women are developing a sexual syntax derived from a pornographic lexicon to describe sexual desire, pleasure and agency. This sexual grammar is anchored to sexual entrepreneurship discourses (Harvey and Gill, 2011a, 2011b) and a postfeminist compulsory sexual agency (Gill, 2008b) that collectively prize mastery and novelty as central sexual markers of a competent contemporary sexual subject. Consistent with research on women’s experience with porn (Parvez, 2006; Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson, 2010), where porn serves many functions – such as facilitating identity and sexual practice exploration and organizing aesthetic and sexual hierarchies (Attwood, 2005b; Smith et al., 2013) – in our study porn is positioned alternately as: *ridiculous and recapitulated performance*; a *(contested) arousal tool*; *pedagogy and pictogram*; and *(resisted) re-enactment pressure*.

Returning to our initial questions about the role of pornography in the sexual lives of young women, we ask: What sexual messages and models are transmitted by pornography? How are pornographic images and messages incorporated in the formation of desire and agency? How do young women comply with and contest pornographic scripts? In relation to messages and models, the status of the 'real' is a recurring theme. A dualistic metaphysics of erotic possibilities is erected – the demarcation sets apart acts deemed worthy of imitation versus those designated as impossible or undesirable to mimic. Acts that (merely) stimulate the imagination appear to fall on the side of the unreal; behaviours in which they are willing to engage fall in the domain of the real. Porn is more often positioned as a pictogram for action rather than as a site for imaginative play; while trying to sustain the distance between porn 'fantasy' and 'real' sex, it is often referenced as a sexual compass for concrete possibilities. Designations of authentic versus fake appearances and practices are also cast as a dividing line between porn-sex and real-life sex, while anxiety arises about whether men can tell the difference.

In navigating these pornographic images and messages, pornography is the site for negotiating several key tensions: reality versus fantasy; doing versus desiring; natural versus unnatural; authenticity versus artificiality; titillation versus disgust; and yearning versus disenchantment. Pornography's cultural reach (McNair, 2013) renders it a consistent sexual spectre, alternately appearing and receding in the women's sexual syntax. Sometimes referencing pornography's more remote quality, they nonetheless cite it as a filter for either replication or resistance. Women's enjoyment of porn, in particular, poses ideological and aesthetic dilemmas – potentially damaging effects on sexual practice expectations, demeaning representations of women, and counterfeit appearance and practice portrayals – their pleasures are difficult to reconcile with their reservations.

Compliance with and contestation of pornographic scripts are twin nodes in the ordering and unsettling of their desires. Porn is very much on their minds; whether they consume it or its content is hearsay, they are decidedly familiar with its tropes, tensions, titillations and terrors. Porn's power is alternately installed and disavowed, as they move back and forth between porn's global potency and its ostensible impotence in the specific contours of their sexual lives. This simultaneity – both omnipresence and farawayness – speaks to porn's adhesiveness as a sexual sign that 'takes residence' in corporeal and social bodies (Ahmed, 2006) through ceaseless circulation (Ahmed, 2004), moving recursively from screens to bodies. Porn 'takes residence' in the sense that it becomes linked to ideas about properly modern sexual subjects, including norms about (sexy) appearances and acts. Pornography resides resolutely among key current social changes, where the creating, accessing and disseminating of sexual images are undergoing rapid transformation (McNair, 2013), and 'empowered eroticism' is a chief mantra of modern female sexual subjects (Attwood, 2007). Specifically, porn's effects cannot be isolated from parallel portrayals in mainstream media (Gurevich, in prep), expert (hetero)sexuality discourses and postfeminist tenets. The 'carnal resonance' (Paasonen, 2014) of porn relies on recognizing cultural topologies and sexual

syntax represented elsewhere. Porn's images and messages are only as transmissible – be they reviled or relished – as those the larger social imaginary recapitulates.

In considering women's experiences with pornography, we have tried to capture how this medium's possibilities and limits for empowered sexual pleasure and exploration are part of larger ongoing debates about how sexual(ized) subjectivity comes into being through multiple contradictory discourses concerning ways to 'properly' embody femininity and sexuality (Duits and van Zoonen, 2006, 2007; Gavey, 2012; Gill, 2007, 2008b, 2012; Tolman, 2012). Conditions that can enable sexual agency, desire and pleasure cannot be understood without addressing the 'cultural scaffolding' that can work to undermine these possibilities (Gavey, 2005, 2012; Thomas et al., 2016). As McClelland (2014: 1010) argues, 'biographies and structural contexts move under the skin and into the bedroom, influencing how individuals think, feel, and experience their intimate lives'.

In thinking about the role of pornography in contemporary young women's sexuality, while attempting to move beyond empowerment/entrapment tropes, Gavey's (2012: 719) reminder about a key inescapable tension is instructive: '*feeling* empowered is not necessarily the same as being empowered'. This is not to negate women's subjective sexual experiences, nor to imply a top-down process of domination or wholesale internalization of 'pornified' rhetoric; it is to recognize that power works through knowledge, ideology and social practices – through normalizing mechanisms of 'reality' and identity – to regulate and delineate the subject from within (Foucault, 1972, 1990 [1978], 1988). This permits us to 'open up a language in which subject–object, power–pleasure, [and] discipline–agency are no longer counterposed as antithetical, binary opposites' (Harvey and Gill, 2011a: 56), but are viewed as coextensive processes of power and resistance within subjects (Foucault, 1990 [1978]).

The women describe reading their bodies, sexual desires and practices, and sexual partners' (actual or presumed) preferences through a prism of porn. Importantly, we do not claim (nor do the women) that this is a singular, unidirectional or definitive force; rather, it is one potent purveyor of sexual messages and norms that magnifies myriad others. Porn is a chief (if contested) site among other prominent nodes of contemporary sexual citizenship (Plummer, 2003), where individual sexual pleasures and practices move through numerous operations of normalization and differentiation, with porn as a 'panoptic modality of power' in the 'age of the infinite examination and compulsory objectification' (Foucault, 1994: 211, 200).

As the co-editors of the 2014 inaugural edition of the journal *Porn Studies*, Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith (2014: 4) note, the shift from an earlier predominant focus on porn as an 'object of concern' (McNair, 2013) to a growing focus on tracing its historical roots, aesthetic value and role in culture has been prompted by technological acceleration. As a pervasive cultural symbol – tied to heterogeneous production and consumption contexts – 'one cannot study "pornography" but certain articulations of the pornographic and its co-articulation together with politics, values and cultural phenomena' (Paasonen, 2009: 597).

Our work dovetails with this approach of a discipline that, by its very existence, acknowledges the pervasiveness of porn as a western contemporary cultural staple. In examining these young women's experiences with porn, as one of many cultural conduits for sexuality messages and mandates (Albury, 2009; Paasonen, 2009), we hope to sustain a vital ongoing conversation about the possibilities and limits of experiencing 'intimate justice' (McClelland, 2009, 2010), where desire represents a 'political act of wanting' (Fine and McClelland, 2006: 325) – a feeling of entitlement to sexual pleasure, yes, but also to resources, safety and community (Gavey, 2012). Access to individual progressive pleasures (Gavey, 2012) requires sociopolitical work to achieve such 'thick desire' (Fine and McClelland, 2006).

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Notes

1. There were also 10 men who were interviewed, whose data are not included in this article. Participants were numbered consecutively as they were recruited; thus, identification numbers exceed 40.
2. We use the term sexual script throughout the article in its common usage, referring to the range of sexual ideas and practices that people adopt in enacting sexuality. The formal sociological construct developed by Simon and Gagnon (1986) references scripting theory, positing that sexuality is a function of the interaction among collective sets of beliefs about sexuality, individual expressions based on these norms, and intrapsychic organization of desires. While this theoretical framework is broadly consistent with our approach, we did not use scripting theory as a theoretical or analytic lens.

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