

Managed Not Missing: Young Women's Discourses of Sexual Desire Within a Postfeminist Heterosexual Marketplace

Psychology of Women Quarterly
2015, Vol. 39(3) 320-336
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DOI: 10.1177/0361684314567303
pwq.sagepub.com


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Abstract

Our article describes findings from a project exploring sexual agency and desire among young women, focusing on the negotiation of sexuality within relationship contexts. Adopting a social constructionist framework, we used discourse analysis to examine semi-structured, audio-taped interviews with 39 Canadian young women (aged 18–26). Three related interpretive repertoires were identified, namely, (a) Sex as Relationship Hygiene (i.e., beneficial to the health of one's relationship), (b) Sex as Exercise-esque (i.e., part of a wellness regime), and (c) Sex as Economy Exchange (i.e., a commodifiable practice within the heterosexual marketplace). Desire was not absent from participants' accounts, however, it was channeled into specific forms of sexual expression and mediated by multiple and competing cultural imperatives. The interpretive repertoires provided spaces for agentic sex within which subjective sexual desire was not the primary motive but rather was subordinate to a rhetoric of self- and relationship improvement as a key register of sexuality. We discuss these findings in the context of postfeminist directives about sexual desirability and proficiency that young women must traverse as they develop ideas about successful female sexuality within heterosexual relationships.

Keywords

sexuality, sexual satisfaction, motivation, feminism, intimacy, relationship satisfaction

Most research on the associations between young women's romantic relationships and sexuality has historically focused on bodies and behaviors—particularly on what young women do with (or what is done to) their bodies, factors that affect these behaviors, and various (often negative) outcomes (Biggs, Karasek, & Foster, 2012; Campo, Askelson, Spies, & Losch, 2012; Siebenbruner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Egeland, 2007). Much of this scholarship fits within the containment or risk model of adolescent female sexuality, which views sexuality as primarily biological, potentially dangerous, and impulse-driven and which excludes considerations of desire.

The “missing discourse of desire” (Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006) continues to characterize much of this work. In a seminal paper, Fine (1988) highlighted the dominance of discourses of sexuality as violence, victimization, and individual morality in sex education for young women and noted “the missing discourse of desire.” Revisiting this finding two decades later, Fine and McClelland (2006) concluded that a discourse of desire was “still missing after all these years.” In the present article, we join a growing number of scholars (Bay-Cheng, Robinson, & Zucker, 2009; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Impett & Tolman, 2006; McClelland, 2010; McClelland & Fine, 2008a, 2008b; Tolman, 2005a, 2005b) who are re-directing empirical attention away from

documenting young women's sexual activities and risk factors toward locating discourses of desire, pleasure, and wanting at the center of inquiry. We describe our findings from a qualitative project that explored sexual agency and desire among young women, with a specific focus on negotiating sexual practices within relationship contexts. We contend that the discourse of desire is better characterized as murky and managed than missing in the accounts of our participants.

Navigating sexuality in the context of romantic heterosexual relationships can be a complex endeavor for young women. With the proliferation of cultural directives about how to be desirable and sexually proficient (Gill & Scharff, 2011; Gill, 2003, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b; McRobbie, 2009; Radner, 1999), young women must traverse increasingly intricate and incongruous messages about the standards of successful female sexuality within such relationships.

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Although a discourse (system of meaning or way in which something is framed) of sexual emancipation is emerging for both genders, it continues to draw largely on the traditional “male sexual drive,” “have and hold” (Hollway, 1984, 1989), and “trust to love” discourses (Holland, Ramazonoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1998). In other words, men’s sexuality is constructed as an unproblematic biological necessity, which is easily aroused and satisfied, whereas women’s capacity for sexual pleasure is ostensibly more oriented toward intimacy and is difficult to achieve (Farvid & Braun, 2006). For men, already positioned as “sexperts” (Potts, 2002) who naturally possess sexual abilities, the goal of sexual improvement is to enhance “productivity” (Rogers, 2005; Tyler, 2004). Men are encouraged to “streamline” their sexuality by tweaking a robust sexual appetite and repertoire into “peak” shape (Tyler, 2004, pp. 95–96). For women, the sexual self-improvement rhetoric, deriving its potency from postfeminist ideology (i.e., sexual emancipation has been achieved), masquerades as a discourse of empowerment, agency, and control (McRobbie, 2009; Tyler, 2004).

Young Women Within Relationship Contexts

The experiences of young women as they navigate love, dating, and sex have been explored and a number of competing discourses that converge upon these life domains have been identified (Allen, 2003; Gilbert, Walker, McKinney, & Snell, 1999; Gill, 2009b; Hird & Jackson, 2001; Holland et al., 1998; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 2000; Jackson, 2001; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Malson, Halliwell, Tischner, & Rúdólfssdóttir, 2011; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2012; Powell, 2005; Sieg, 2007, 2008; Wood, 1993). Discourse here refers to a set of values, beliefs, and cultural practices that both stem from and constitute our collective perceptions and experiences of the world, including our institutions and institutional practices (Burr, 2003; Potts, 2002). Discourses are constantly evolving and changing. In this way, “discourse is a multi-faceted public process through which meanings are progressively and dynamically achieved” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 46). Discourses, which are multiple and often competing, serve as a reference framework for how we understand and articulate our experiences (Burr, 2003).

Young women in heterosexual relationships are positioned by and through discourses—in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways—as active, agentic, and motivated by sexual pleasure and conquest (Jackson & Cram, 2003; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2012) but also as passive, subordinate, vulnerable, and primarily driven by desires for love, intimacy, security, and stability (Gill, 2009b; Hird & Jackson, 2001; Holland et al., 2000; Powell, 2005). A common finding is that young women report less interest in sexual pleasure or fulfillment as well as greater responsibility for tending to relationships, resulting in pressure to respond to their partners’ sexual needs and engaging in sex in order to satisfy *their partners’* desires (Allen, 2003; Powell, 2005).

For example, Morgan and Zurbriggen (2007) found that women’s narratives of first sexual intercourse emphasized being pressured by their male partner to have sex and a corresponding giving in to unwanted sex in response to this pressure. Women adopted the male sexual drive discourse, emphasizing their boyfriends’ greater biological need for sex. They defended their decisions to have sex in the absence of their own subjective desire by resorting to explanations that relied on pleasing their partners and protecting their relationship. The narratives reproduced dominant discourses of compulsory heterosexuality, gender difference, and sexual coercion (Morgan & Zurbriggen, 2007). Similarly, in their analysis of letters to “Teen Magazine,” Van Roosmalen (2000) noted the emphasis placed on being in romantic relationships—with being a girlfriend as central to identity—and the consequent willingness of young women to make both sexual and emotional sacrifices in order to achieve and maintain their girlfriend status.

Furthermore, discrepancies exist between the day-to-day realities of young women’s experiences and the current cultural climate of “girl power” and supposed sexual freedom (Douglas, 2010; Levy, 2005). Women, who describe ideal relationship qualities such as respect, communication, and trust, also report feeling pressure to adhere to their partners’ sexual needs and requests (Powell, 2005). Young women construct heterosexual romantic and sexual narratives that include choice and agency alongside uncertainty, dissatisfaction, and gender-related inequality and constraint (Sieg, 2008). They talk about the need to adjust (lower) their expectations in order to accommodate the reality of unsatisfactory relationships. Despite endorsing egalitarian roles, women report numerous instances of inequality in their own relationships, such as disproportionate emotional investment and labor.

In summary, analyses of the narratives of young women suggest that their experiences are multifaceted and that there is ongoing relational and individual negotiation regarding expectations, desires, and disappointments. Sexuality is a particularly contested domain within romantic relationships, and it is subject to clashing cultural messages that young women must decode. Despite popular claims that women have achieved sexual equality with men, young women’s experiences are more complicated and conflicting. For example, although young women endorse non-traditional sexual scripts (i.e., both partners are allowed to express sexual desires and sex brings couples together; Schleicher & Gilbert, 2005), they simultaneously advocate traditional gendered scripts (i.e., men should initiate dates and sex, and women should wait for men’s overtures). Sex is depicted as a way to achieve girlfriend status, relationship harmony, sexual satisfaction, and exploration. In addition, having sex is positioned as a means to satisfy a partner’s needs and to (temporarily) silence their requests and demands. However, sex is also a potential means of experiencing coercion, manipulation, and unequal power.

Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Sexuality

Sexuality as a social practice is infused with relations of power and dominant cultural meaning systems (Foucault, 1978; Weeks, 1985) and is thoroughly contingent upon context and enculturation (Butler, 1999, 2004; Tiefer, 2004). In the context of romantic relationships, women—as self-policing subjects (Bartky, 1988)—have traditionally been taught to enact a rigid mode of femininity, wherein their desires are positioned as necessarily subservient to the wants of their male partners. While navigating love, dating, and sex, a young woman quickly discovers that she “must camouflage any knowledge she has of her own desires and pleasures, producing a masquerade of receptivity and submission to her partner” (Potts, 2002, p. 60). In response to dominant discourses positioning young woman as passive, submissive nurturers, lacking or “missing” desire, some feminist scholars have responded with calls for a “feminist reconceptualization of heterosexuality,” whereby women are able to “embody their own desires” such that “the female body [becomes] a site of resistance rather than maintaining it simply as a target for power” (Potts, 2002, p. 45).

However, this call for agency, control, and resistance has largely been appropriated and transformed by other compulsory requirements and propagated by a new postfeminist model of how young “emancipated” women ought to behave within romantic relationships (Gill, 2008a, 2009a, 2009b). Postfeminist refers to both a historical moment in time, following the height of second-wave feminism, wherein feminism became viewed as a vestige of the past and irrelevant for today’s presumed world of gender equality and sexual liberation (Gill & Scharff, 2011; Tasker & Negra, 2007) and a general backlash against second-wave feminism. Today’s young heterosexual women are faced with a ceaseless catalogue of instructions about how to “do sexy”—endorsing “active, recreational, material, independent, [and] consumerist” (Evans, 1993, p. 41) postfeminist models of sexual agency (Gill, 2003, 2008a, 2008b; McRobbie, 2008).

Although the postfeminist woman is believed to possess unlimited choices and freedoms (thus dispensing with the need for feminism), certain choices are positioned as more natural and preferable (e.g., foregoing a career to return to the home), so in actuality, a restricted range of choices is available. This restriction is strongly linked to an ideology of individualism. Furthermore, in our current cultural milieu, our understanding of successful (hetero)femininity is shifting and increasingly complicated. Indeed, young women no longer engage in sexual activities in order to “please their men”; rather, they appear to do it “for themselves.” No longer subservient to anti-feminist ideals, they are ostensible sexual adventurers who have adopted a language of empowerment, equality, and taking charge.

Despite the rhetoric of empowerment, the postfeminist—or “power femininity” (Lazar, 2006, p. 505)—discourses regarding Generation Y’s female sexual liberation do not necessarily combat traditional, dominant representations of

feminine passivity or lack of desire and are actually sutured (Goldman, 1992) to anti-feminist ideals (Gill, 2009a). The postfeminist ideal is “a young, attractive, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is always ‘up for’ sex” (Gill, 2008a, p. 41). She is agentic and unencumbered by oppression, patriarchy, and domination; her choices are autonomous and individual, stripped of any larger political or social meaning (McRobbie, 2004, 2009).

The deceptively empowering face of this postfeminist ideal, in which there is increasing representation and valorization of both traditional femininity and individualization (McRobbie, 2004, 2009), emphasizes autonomous choice. The politics of self-care and individual, “authentic” identities function as significant cultural forces within a neoliberal context (Giddens, 1991; Rose, 1996), operating on the body as a central site of identity negotiation. Neoliberalism refers to a political and economic stance in which privatization, deregulation, individual freedom, autonomy, responsibility, and self-determination are emphasized (Gill, 2007, 2008b, 2009b), and it is associated with non-feminism (Fitz, Zucker, & Bay-Cheng, 2012).

In the sexual arena, individualized discourses of sexual liberation or technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988) shape identities and bodies, activating self-disciplining power (i.e., self-regulating; Foucault, 1978) through the directive of choice (Evans, Riley, & Shankar, 2010). A disciplined approach to both appearance and sexual practice is central to these ways of working on identities and bodies, which rely on the installation of self-disciplining power (Foucault, 1978) through the mediational force of choice, consumerism, and authenticity (Evans et al., 2010). The modern Western woman, thus, “chooses” to engage in recreational pole dancing, wear lingerie, produce amateur pornography, and cosmetically alter her body. The marketing of women’s lingerie, for instance, relies on discourses that deliberately link power, consumer choice, and female sexual liberation (Amy-Chinn, 2006). Although targeted at women, lingerie advertising emphasizes its impact on men, which is to “disempower them [men] through distraction” (Amy-Chinn, 2006, p. 165). In fact, contemporary and supposedly sexually empowering media images of women, in which they are framed as agentic sexual subjects, have been found to increase levels of self-objectification and self-surveillance more so than traditionally objectifying images, thus raising questions about postfeminist promises of liberation and agency via sexual effectuation (Halliwell, Malson, & Tischner, 2011). Similarly, recreational pole dancing is promoted for women as an “empowering” activity that combines “fun and fitness,” an “exercise alternative” for which women actively decide to pay (Whitehead & Kurtz, 2009). This reversal of monetary exchange, wherein women become the consumers, demarcates the line from disempowering to empowering.

A range of elective surgical interventions, including cosmetic genital (Braun, 2009, 2010; Sharp, Tiggemann, &

Mattiske, 2014) and breast augmentation procedures (Solvi et al., 2010; Zuckerman & Abraham, 2008) are similarly couched as “choices,” obviating questions about who ultimately benefits from these decisions and masking conformity imperatives (Morgan, 1991). Likewise, women’s body hair removal is positioned as a personal choice freely made in response to women’s individual preferences for body hygiene, thus downplaying the very real social pressures upon women to depilate and the punishments enacted upon women who choose to grow their body hair (Fahs, 2014). Fahs (2014, p. 172) notes that this is an example of the ways in which “social norms may embed themselves silently and invisibly in women’s lives. In other words, women may find themselves in a familiar quandary: ‘I feel like I can choose whatever I want but I still choose to conform.’”

These self-presentational activities are framed as the pursuit of sexual agency, authenticity, and self-expression (Attwood, 2007; Jacobs, 2004; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009). The modern young woman is responsible for “endlessly updating her sexual skills and knowledge” (Gill, 2009b, p. 361) in order to satisfy her male partner’s needs. Notwithstanding the rhetoric of self-determination, young women are still required to “monitor their femininity” (Potts, 2002, p. 45), thus remaining subordinate in relation to men.

Some of these prominent motifs are echoed in Gill’s (2009b) analysis of a popular women’s magazine, where intimate entrepreneurship, men-ology, and transforming the self were identified as pervasive discourses governing young romantic relationships. Intimate entrepreneurship refers to adopting a professional approach to relationship conduct, wherein relationships and sex are constructed as work that requires strategic planning and constant effort on the part of young women. This discourse is organized around goal-setting and the scientific conduct and administration of relationships. Men-ology stresses the importance of young women learning to understand, please, and reassure their male partners; it impels women to become optimally educated about monitoring and pleasing men, with the task of managing the emotional aspects of relationships allocated to women. This process is packaged as an autonomous enterprise that signals women’s ability to take charge. Finally, transforming the self centers on women remodeling their interior lives and changing their psychic structures in order to achieve “a desirable subjectivity” (Gill, 2009b, p. 345). This desirability hinges on becoming more sexually open and adventurous, with the singular goal of finding and keeping a man.

In recent analyses of the sexual self-help genre, Harvey and Gill (2011a, 2011b) described the importance of being perpetually sexually open and skilled for modern (hetero)sexual women. Indeed, this compulsive sexual readiness, competency, and self-management were identified as the currency of the modern heterosexual woman who is “incited to be compulsory sexy and always ‘up for it’” (p. 56) and who is “exhorted to lead a ‘spiced up’ sex life, whose limits—not the least heterosexuality and monogamy—are tightly

policed, even as they are effaced or disavowed through discourses of playfulness and experimentation” (Harvey & Gill, 2011a, p. 56). In a similar examination of popular women’s fashion magazines, Farvid and Braun (2006) found that female (hetero)sexuality was regulated in that women were positioned as sexually liberal, agentic, and free to want and pursue sexual encounters and enjoy sex; however, finding and subsequently keeping Mr. Right was situated as the end goal of this sexual freedom. A sexual appetite that did not involve a dedicated search for Mr. Right, or focus on keeping Mr. Right, was absent from the magazines. They concluded that “female sexuality always exists in relation to its ‘target’—male sexuality” (p. 6). This discourse of choice-based sex generates a framework of sexuality that is centered on autonomy, self-improvement, performance imperatives, and competence (Harvey & Gill, 2011a, 2011b). Such a neoliberal femininity requires women to voluntarily and continually work on themselves and their sexuality (Gill, 2009a; Harvey & Gill, 2011a, 2011b), as this sexual disciplinary labor is camouflaged by a rhetoric of individuality and independence—central pillars of neoliberalism and the ideal postfeminist woman.

The Present Study

This recent iteration of ideal femininity is suffused with inconsistencies and contraventions that the participants in our study were required to navigate as they perform the dual roles of woman and girlfriend. Young women must walk a precariously thin line between being appropriately sexy, enticing, desirable, and skilled without being perceived as overly or incorrectly sexual, desiring, or promiscuous (Ringrose, 2011). There is a small margin of error, it seems, between the culturally endorsed sexy/desirable and the slutty/punishable subject positions. With these conflicting standards and ideologies in mind, we explored how young women construct sexuality within romantic relationships by focusing on the research question, “What discursive practices do young women rely on as they discuss intersections between sexuality and romantic relationships?”

Notably, we did not set out to look for instances of postfeminist or neoliberal discourses in the interviews, nor did we ask specific questions about how these meaning systems impacted their experiences of sexuality and expressions of sexual desire. Rather, these themes emerged throughout the interview process. The ways in which participants discussed desire in the context of relationships were consonant with discourses acknowledged in the literature about postfeminism and neoliberalism. The participants identified with and contested a number of discursive constructions in that both resistance and acceptance characterized their attempts to navigate contemporary ideals. Attention is paid to the justificatory mechanisms used by the participants in our study, as they discussed existing roles and obligations within their romantic relationships.

Table 1. Each Participant's Demographic Information by Study ID.

ID	Age	Ethnocultural Background	Sexual Orientation	Relationship Status
1	26	Indian	Bisexual	In relationship
2	20	Italian-Canadian	Bisexual	In relationship
4	20	Chinese	Straight	Single
5	20	Italian	Straight	In relationship
6	19	Ukrainian-Dutch	Straight	In relationship
7	19	Irish-British	Straight	In relationship
9	21	Romanian	Straight	In relationship
10	22	Canadian	Straight	Single
13	22	Canadian-Indian	Straight	Single
14	20	German-Irish	Straight	Single
15	18	German-Dutch-Canadian	Straight	In relationship
16	21	Latvian-Italian	Straight	Single
17	19	Dutch-British-Canadian	Straight	Single
19	23	Canadian-Scottish	Straight	In relationship
21	21	Guyanese	Straight	In relationship
22	22	Polish-Canadian	Straight	Casually dating
23	18	Ukrainian-Dutch	Straight	Single
24	19	French-Canadian	Straight	In relationship
25	21	Canadian	Pansexual	In relationship
27	21	Columbian	Straight	In relationship
28	19	Dutch	Straight	In relationship
29	23	Turkish	Straight	In relationship
32	22	Italian-Dutch	Straight	In relationship
33	18	Indian	Straight	In relationship
34	18	Jewish	Straight	In relationship
35	18	Chinese	Straight	In relationship
36	21	Hungarian	Straight	In relationship
37	21	Dutch-Serbian	Straight	In relationship
38	21	Canadian	Straight	Single
39	20	Spanish-British	Straight	In relationship
40	21	Irish	Straight	In relationship
41	20	Jamaican-British	Bisexual	Casually dating
42	24	American-British	Bisexual	In relationship
43	25	n/a	Straight	Married
44	22	Canadian	Bisexual	In relationship
46	21	Chinese	Straight	Single
48	18	Vietnamese	Straight	Single
50	21	Iranian	Bisexual	Single
51	19	Austrian-Irish	Bisexual	Single

Method

Participants and Procedure

We conducted semi-structured, audio-taped interviews with 40 Canadian young women, lasting an average of 2.5 hours (range = 1.5–3 hours), following approval by the university's Research Ethics Board. Participants were recruited through posters displayed around the campus of a large urban university as well as in neighboring communities. Recruitment was also done via brief presentations in undergraduate classrooms in a variety of academic disciplines. Participants were eligible for one of two prizes of CAD\$75 each in a draw. Previous sexual experience was not a requirement for participation in the study. Participants self-identified their sexual orientation during the course of the interview. Interviews were conducted, analyzed, and coded by a team of three trained

undergraduates, two graduate students, and one psychology faculty member, all of whom worked in the same gender and sexuality lab.

One woman who identified as lesbian and 10 men, also interviewed during this data collection, were not included in our article, given that our focus here is on women negotiating relationships with men. The final sample included 39 women (see Table 1 for demographic information listed by each participant's study ID, which was assigned consecutively from earliest to latest interviewed) ranging in age from 18 to 26 years. The majority of participants identified as heterosexual ($n = 31$), with seven identifying as bisexual and one as pansexual. Most women were currently in a romantic relationship ($n = 24$), with 1 woman indicating that she was married, 2 casually dating, and 12 single. Participants were prompted to refer to either current romantic or past romantic

relationships with men when responding to interview questions. As such, it was not a requirement for women to be in a current romantic relationship with a man. Our participants' self-identified 28 different ethnocultural backgrounds that reflect the Canadian urban context, which is among the most multicultural in the world.

The larger interview schedule addressed the following domains: sexual knowledge, education, experiences, relationships, agency, desire, and identity. A series of questions was developed and posed within each of these domains along with scripted prompts to elicit further elaboration and clarification. Examples of questions relevant to the present article include, "How does sex fit into your relationship?" "What role does sex play in relationships for you?" "How has your current relationship affected how you express your sexuality?" "In the context of your relationship, what are some of the reasons for having or not having sex?" "In your current relationship, how do you feel about initiating sex?" "How have your sexual boundaries changed since being in this relationship?" "How do you resolve sexual conflicts in a relationship?" and "How has your current relationship affected your expectations around sex?"

These questions were accompanied by prompts to facilitate further discussion. Terms like "sex" and "sexual boundaries" were deliberately left undefined for participants. Consistent with a social constructionist epistemological framework and discursive analysis, our focus was not on generalizability or replicability but on participants' definitions of these constructs. Also consistent with discursive approaches, we were interested in description and interpretation of women's accounts rather than making claims about general norms or experiences relevant to other young women.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim using specialized computer software. A coding template was developed as part of the larger project. Initial codes mapped onto the key domains explored in the interview schedule. A separate code for transcript material specifically relating to sexuality and romantic relationships was created, and transcripts with a substantive amount of relevant material were identified for inclusion in this study. Although all 39 interviews were included in the study, excerpts appearing in this article were pulled from a subset of these transcripts. Analysis involved close and repeated reading of interview transcripts in their entirety in order to contextualize the relationship-specific material within the broader context of the participants' responses. The authors met as a group regularly to conduct the analyses collectively and collaboratively, making this an iterative process.

Theoretical Lens and Analytic Approach

Our work resides broadly within a social constructionism framework (Burr, 2003). We adopted discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) to identify patterns in the data. This

approach focuses on language as a constitutive force, rather than as a transparent window into who the participants are and what they think, feel, or believe. In other words, a discursive approach 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; Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Thus, the unit of analysis is discourse itself rather than presumed primary aspects of experience or affect. Following Foucault (1972, p. 49), discourses are interpreted here as both language and social practices "that systematically form the objects of which they speak"; they refer to more than words, encompassing organized bodies of knowledge and practices that are integral to the ordering of social meanings and practices. These meanings and practices exert power in shaping and producing the very constructs they purportedly describe (i.e., they form objects). These symbolic systems and institutional forces are transmitted and sustained by larger stories, metaphors, and particular ways of understanding that are created through language (Yardley, 1997).

In this article, we focus on interpretive repertoires to describe how individual accounts reference available discourses. Interpretive repertoires refer to larger patterns in the data that draw on a cultural catalogue of meaning, and individual descriptions of experience are located within this broader shared log (Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Potter, 1988). This reservoir of possible multiple, conflicting messages (i.e., discourses) actively produce our understandings, interpretations, and ways of viewing the world (i.e., interpretive repertoires). Discourses are not simply reproduced in social or political institutions, but they exert normalizing and regulatory effects upon the individual subject (Burr, 2003; Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984). Discourses make possible certain subject positions, such as "woman"—or, (post)feminist woman, more specifically—and its concomitant notions of passivity (or empowerment). As Foucault (1972, p. 52) argued, "The positions of the subject are also defined by the situation that is possible for him [sic] to occupy in relation to the various domains or groups of objects." Demarcation of the ostensibly "old-school, sexually submissive" woman from the "contemporary, sexually empowered" woman, thus, renders viable and intelligible a postfeminist identity.

In conducting a discourse analysis, the following three kinds of questions act as guides: (a) What subject positions do participants take up? (b) What "kinds" or "selves" do they construct? and (c) What dominant or subordinate discourses do they reference, adopt, or resist? The analytic focus is on identifying patterns of meaning, including contradictions and tensions in meaning, and in making connections between these patterns of meaning and both power structures and broader cultural discourses. In accordance with a Foucauldian discourse analytic approach, specifically, which locates power structures at the center of discursive practices (Foucault, 1988; Parker, 2002; Wetherell, 1998), the

emphasis is on the embeddedness of discourses within broader social, cultural, and political contexts, such that attention is paid to “where do the connotations of the words fit in with different ways of talking about the world?” (Parker, 1992, p. 2). During our analysis, transcript excerpts were organized around key themes, which emerged in response to specific questions outlined earlier (e.g., How does sex fit into your relationship?). Such themes included descriptions, definitions, and metaphors about sex that referenced choice, decision-making, health, exercise, gender, relationship well-being, sexual pleasure, wanting and sexual practices, and negotiations of power. Our analysis involved close examination of how each participant’s accounts, arguments, and justifications were constructed around these themes. We reproduce large sections of interview text in our findings and the following discussion. This is done in order to contextualize the shorter segments highlighted in our analyses within participants’ larger narratives. In some cases we have changed potentially identifying details such as names of restaurants in order to protect the confidentiality of participants.

Results and Discussion

The following three related interpretive repertoires emerged in the analysis of interview transcripts: (a) Sex as Relationship Hygiene, (b) Sex as Exercise-esque, and (c) Sex as Economy Exchange. These interpretive repertoires appeared across multiple interviews, and although evidence of divergent views also appeared across interviews, these divergent views were less prominent. Analyses for this article focused on identifying dominant patterns of referring to things (e.g., sex, sexual desire) across interviews. We do not argue in our article that these are the only ways that the young women spoke about sex in the context of relationships but rather that these are the dominant and compelling systems of meaning that framed their thoughts, experiences, and discussions about these topics.

The overarching theme was that of “healthization” of sex, which is the close pairing of sex with medical and health outcomes (e.g., Tiefer, 2004). The Sex as Relationship Hygiene interpretive repertoire related sex to the concepts of health and wellness for the relationship and the individuals involved. Hygiene refers to both maintenance and upkeep and practices that are sequential and routine in nature. In this study, having sex was described as a means of achieving positive outcomes (optimal relationship health) and of preventing negative outcomes (relationship conflict). Sex as exercise-esque, the second interpretive repertoire, was often applied when participants described circumstances in which they did not report feeling desire to engage in sex for the experience of sex itself but rather in order to achieve extra-sexual benefits such as lower blood pressure or elevated mood. Relying on themes of self-discipline, surveillance, and desire for self-improvement, participants reported being able to “motivate” themselves when they did not initially want to

do sex, similar to motivating oneself to exercise when not in the mood. The sex as an economy-exchange interpretive repertoire framed sexual activity as a bargaining device in order to attain an end goal. Having sex for many participants meant getting something they valued—emotional or material—in return from their partners. The three themes we identified are better thought of as overlapping rather than discrete categories, with many excerpts highlighting elements of more than one interpretive repertoire. Analyses revealed that more than one and at times all three interpretive repertoires were present in a given participant account.

Participants’ accounts contained distinct differences between the desire to have sex for the physical pleasure of sex itself and the desire to have sex for additional or other non-sexual pleasures and perks, with the latter being more present and more heavily emphasized in interviews. Although desire was not absent from these accounts, it was channeled through a postfeminist and neoliberal filter. In this context, our understanding of sexual desire is akin to McClelland and Fine’s (2008c) “cellophane” metaphor, in that young women’s talk about their own desire is often structured by a range (or, “wrapped” in layers) of historical and contemporary processes as well as personal and social narratives. Although not missing per se, this “thick” desire (Fine & McClelland, 2006) is articulated through collective discursive cellophane, wherein layers manifest as postfeminist governance and heteronormative neoliberalism that work to deny or shutter young women’s sexual agency. We give voice to participants’ desire/agency, even as it is commodified in and shaped by the current heterosexual marketplace (Fahs, 2011). Residing within this cultural marketplace has implications for the ways in which women come to experience, understand, and express their own desires “because woman is marked as object—and can only have value to the extent that she subscribes to this status—she is stripped of her own subjective desire” (Fahs, 2011, p. 184). This is not to say that women do not experience sexual desire but rather their desire is funneled, morphed, and sometimes subsumed by the desires of others (their male partners) within the current cultural context (also see Yost & McCarthy, 2012). In our article, we interrogate a pattern in our participants’ narratives in which desire to have sex is often disconnected from sexual desire, and our analyses draw attention to the ways in which participants’ talk of desire and pleasure, notably present, may reflect their successful performance within the heterosexual matrix.

Sex as Relationship Hygiene

Participants invoked notions of health and wellness, describing having sex as essential to keeping both their partners and their relationships healthy. Sex was described as an antidote to, or a home-remedy for, agitation, friction, and displeasure with their partners, which then impacts the health and equilibrium of the relationship. Giving a “dose of sex” was viewed as a way to cure relationship and partner ills and to inoculate

the relationship from ailments, with booster shots to be used P.R.N. (pro re nata/prescribed on an as needed basis). Preoccupations with the frequency of having sex and with the ideal and most healthy pattern of sex emerged as a common theme. Regular dosing of sexual “medicine” or “vitamins” seemed required for optimal relationship health.

Extract 1: Participant 37

Participant: ... like for me, I feel like it doesn't affect me if I don't have sex, but for him, if he doesn't have sex, he gets really like aggravated and I could tell. Like okay maybe it's time to have sex kind of thing. And I feel like we do get into a lot more fights when we don't have sex, mostly because, we're both, not just him, but I get aggravated too because he's asking, because he's so persistent when I don't, like I'm not in the mood and I don't feel like it, so we're both kind of like on each other's back but eventually we both kind of just break down and have sex.

Interviewer: So do you feel like you're just caving [in] a lot of the times?

Participant: Yeah, sometimes, and I don't know what it is, I mean I kind of feel like a bitch when I say like “no” and then he gets kind of upset and I just kind of talk myself into it a lot of the times... It usually comes down to like, like I try to like talk myself into like you know, “just relax, it will be like good, you'll be happy about it once it's over kind of thing,” so I try to talk myself into it.

This participant positioned sex as an antidote to conflict in the relationship that occurs when there has been an unspecified gap of time since she has had sex with her boyfriend. The references to “talking herself into it” and “being happy about it once it's over” are reminiscent of body hygiene, like exercise regimes or dental care. She refers to sex as a solution to disharmony and conflict in her relationship. In particular, regular sexual activity, which happens to adhere to her partner's schedule of sexual desire, is an elixir for harmony between them. In her sexual decision-making, this interpersonal goal is prioritized over her own subjective sexual desire, which is subject to the process of commodification. In other words, her desire is channeled in particular ways rather than missing. Her account provides an example of how participation in the cultural marketplace alienates women “from their bodies and their sexual desires... teaches them to discipline and control their bodies to perform as good commodities, and puts them out of touch with any desire that does not directly nurture their roles as commodities” (Faas, 2011, p. 197). This is not to say that she does not derive pleasure or benefit from her participation in sex, but rather that her pleasure seems to principally reference relationship maintenance. According to the relationship-hygiene interpretive repertoire, it is acceptable and indeed expected to not feel like going to the gym/

dentist/bedroom, but doing these pro-health activities results in material benefits to the body/teeth/relationship.

In her analysis of the proliferation of social texts about heterosexual sex in the late 20th century (e.g., self-help guides, sex therapy manuals), Potts (2002) asserts that sex is positioned as *the* key to happy, healthy, and long-lasting romantic partnerships, and thus as compulsory activity within heterosexual dyads. Evidence of this “compulsory sexuality” emerged in the previous excerpt from Participant 37. Her boyfriend was described as needing sex on a regular basis to stay sane, considerate, and affectionate, and she, understanding this key biological sex difference, adapted and adjusted her sexual behavior in order to achieve favorable couple-dom. Notably, the participant did not regard her boyfriend's persistent requests for sex (even in response to her articulating her desire to not have sex) as coercive, as dismissive of her feelings, or as the crux of their conflict; rather, she positioned their discrepant desire for sex as the problem. Notably, she says “we're both kind of like on each other's back,” as opposed to pointing to him as being on her back to have sex. She also situated acquiescing to sex in this context as a joint decision—“eventually we both kind of just break down and have sex”—rather than as a caving in to his persuasive demands.

In several other instances, women viewed sex in a committed romantic relationship as something that is done irrespective of subjective sexual desire. Provision of sex to meet the needs of a boyfriend was situated as an expression of love and care, and a boyfriend's need for sex often overrode a participant's desire to not have sex. Thus, participants emphasized their partners' emotional well-being and positioned boyfriends' emotional and sexual needs as targets for their own sexual expression. Participants noted that sex in the context of a romantic relationship is done “just because” or because “I love this person so like whatever,” “I felt a little bit obligated,” “it's no big deal,” or “you kind of owe it to them” (Participant 51). Having sex on a regular basis was framed as part of what is required for the functioning of the relationship and the well-being of the partner, even in the absence of the woman's sexual wanting. Sex here was often constructed as unwanted but consensual (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2011). Consent is contested territory (Gavey, 1989, 2005; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2011), particularly in the context of a contemporary sexual politic that continues to regard sexual access as a right of the neoliberal man and now elevates it to an obligation of the postfeminist woman.

This is consistent with the Potts' (2002, p. 54) critique of popular sex texts, which recommend that “women's sexual availability to men thus [becomes] not only obligatory, but crucial and urgent. Without a frequent supply of great sex from willing women, men are deprived of physical health and spiritual happiness.” In her work identifying discourses that regulate heterosexual relations, Hollway (1984) identified the “have/hold” discourse and the “permissive” discourse. The have/hold discourse is associated with the rights and responsibilities that come with marriage for

women, such as monogamy and commitment. The permissive discourse is said to have emerged from women struggling for sexual freedom during the sexual revolution. It seems that there is more space for women to have agency within the permissive discourse, but scholars have noted a form of subtle interpersonal coercion at the intersection of these two discourses, much like we noticed in participants' responses. In reference to Hare-Mustin's work, Pott's (2002, p. 44) writes, "Women 'appear to consent freely' in heterosexual encounters, even when they may not want to; this occurs in response to 'men's pleading for free sexual activity, because it seems so important to me.'" In the following extract, the participant constructed sex as an essential ingredient for her boyfriend's—and, thus, their collective—well-being. Morning sex was designated as an especially potent restorative due to its power to set a positive trajectory for her boyfriend's day.

Extract 2: Participant 32

Participant: Well definitely important to the relationship and I think sex is important to all good relationships, that's just my opinion though. Obviously, he wants to have sex more than I do because he's a guy and his sex drive is way higher but I try to do it at least three times a week because I feel like that's just the bare minimum that he'll go crazy otherwise but you know, it also factors into the affection you feel for the other person because that is a way of being intimate and close without words that I think a lot of the relationship hinges on it and if we didn't have that, it would be probably way worse . . . I think a lot of the time we do sleep together before he goes to work and I know that he leaves to work feeling way better, like he can concentrate, his day starts off on the right foot and I know that he appreciates when I do that for him, so I mean it definitely helps our relationship with each other.

This young woman relied on a discourse of wellness and hygiene as she discusses providing sex to her boyfriend in the morning. Sex was presumed to provide him with an optimal start to his day and a proper send-off for work—good for his body and mind, something she can and perhaps ought to provide, given the health benefits. Within this interpretive repertoire, the provision of sex was analogous to cooking a nutritious breakfast, laying out a multivitamin, or packing a paper-bag lunch for her boyfriend. Her desire is routed through an ethic and practice of nurturing. There was no mention of sex in the morning being good for her mind, her mood, or her start to the day, only the reproduction of the "male sex drive" discourse (Hollway, 1984) in her declaration that he "obviously" needs sex more than she does. Thus, she tried to step up to the plate to give him what his body "naturally" needs. His needs were viewed as biological, normal, healthy, and uncontested, and she agreed to accommodate them unquestioningly.

Sex as Exercise-esque

In locating sex within a discourse of health, women also drew upon discourses of body discipline, self-surveillance, and self-improvement when discussing sex in the context of their romantic relationships. At times, their accounts were analogous to descriptions of working out, dieting, or dental hygiene. Echoes of neoliberal performance-driven slogans, such as "no pain/no gain," "just do it," and "you may not feel like XYZ now but you will be glad you did XYZ," were evident.

Extract 3: Participant 32

Interviewer: Why do you have sex? What are some of the reasons?

Participant: Pleasure, to keep my boyfriend happy, which may be a really weird answer . . . physical activity, it's good for you. And a lot of people say it helps you release hormones that contribute to happiness and stuff like that and I always think I'm not in the mood, but by the end of it, I'm always in the mood, you know, so I think why not, it will probably like, it's like a little pick me up, makes you feel good . . .

Extract 4: Participant 50

Participant: I was saying earlier, if you're sexually satisfied there's that like ease about you, a more relaxed, like it's good for blood pressure, it's good for stress . . . I mean sex has a physical effect too; it's very relaxing, it's very calming, it's kind of like, I always say as long as you're getting laid on a regular basis you're mentally stable.

In these and other participant accounts, sex was framed as being "good for you" because it counts as physical activity. Sex was positioned as a gateway to (physical) health, (hormone-induced) happiness, and stress relief, "It's really good for relieving stress" (Participant 41). The participants adopted discourses of self-discipline, self-improvement, and self-surveillance while simultaneously disregarding the absence of wanting or desiring sex in and of itself as a reason not to have sex. These participants prioritized wanting to have sex to alleviate stress and to provide relaxation and relief (the drug of choice) over the absence of their own subjective desire, an absence which became a hurdle easily overcome by discipline and self-talk.¹

"Doing sex" was paired with health and wellness. The women described sex as bringing a sense of ease, improving blood pressure, and diminishing stress. Reasons for "doing sex" were rooted in what the body needs to be medically well rather than what the body wants or desires. In doing so, less emphasis was placed on the social factors of a relationship or the intrapsychic experiences of subjective sexual arousal and desire than on a woman's own physical sexual drive. This discourse can be mapped onto the neoliberal health paradigm of

“healthicization” (Conrad, 1992), which is morally laden and based on an ethic of self-care and individual responsibility for wellness. This discourse also reflects the rhetoric of self-improvement and the need to discipline the body to be healthy and successful. “Doing sex” was equated with self-discipline, akin to exercising, flossing teeth, or eating the right amounts of vegetables and whole grains. This can be contrasted with Sex as Relationship Hygiene, wherein sex is done for the health and well-being of the relationship. Here, sex is positioned as an avenue to individual health and well-being. The need or desire to have sex for exercise can be understood as a neoliberal imperative that may alienate women from their own subjective desires and that also effectively routes their desires into particular forms of expression. Here, women are free to experience and express sexual desire in delimited and disciplinary ways.

Notably, sex was disconnected from subjective sexual desire, wanting, or pleasure in these accounts; desire for other non-sexual goals and goods was highlighted. Wanting sex was not a requirement or a reason for having sex and, conversely, not wanting to have sex was not a sufficient basis for not doing it. In her analysis of sex and relationship articles in a popular fashion magazine, Gill (2009b, p. 353) noted the lack of focus on subjective experience such as emotions, with “curiously affectless” descriptions of sexpert advice, “despite the focus on intimate relationships, there is no space for emotions—particularly negative ones.” This same devaluing and discounting of participants’ affective experiences was noticeable in our findings. Specifically, not wanting to have sex was trumped by the potential health benefits of having it.

This direct linking of sex to good health can also lead to elevating even painful consequences of sexual activity to the status of achievement. As the following participant described, experiencing lingering pain following intercourse was reframed as the mark of a successful sexual encounter.

Extract 5: Participant 42

- Interviewer: Okay, so in terms of being too big then, did that elicit a certain type of sex, or change the experience of sex?
- Participant: I know, well in the beginning we had to be a lot more careful and just take it slow, but now what we do is I, like I said, we just have more foreplay and now it’s okay.
- Interviewer: Okay, so the foreplay kind of balances out the sex?
- Participant: Cause the thing is the more relaxed you are, the more relaxed you are down there and the less it hurts down there.
- Interviewer: So, what about the experience of painful sex, would that still be categorized as good or part of a bad experience?
- Participant: Well, it depends; there is the morning after where you can’t like sit down. Which is good I guess? If you’ve had great sex the night before. I don’t, I

guess it’s not, I mean I guess I haven’t been with anyone that was so big it was like “I can’t do this again that was really painful.”

This participant’s account of having sex with a partner, who she described as having a large penis, centered on the need for foreplay in order to accomplish the main sexual act, that is, penetration of her vagina by his penis. She adopted a discourse of fitness and athletic performance, wherein penetration is something for which her body needs to warm up and prepare. Foreplay readied her body for the physical act of penetration (“the more relaxed you are down there, the less it hurts down there”). As part of this account, the participant demonstrates awareness of her body and the need for physiological arousal (expansion and lubrication) in order for her vagina to accommodate penetration. This demonstration of agency and awareness stands alongside her linking of good sex with genital/anal soreness the next day (“there is the morning after where you can’t like sit down. Which is good I guess?”). Soreness was articulated as a possible marker of good sex, not unlike muscle ache as a marker of a good workout. If you are sore the next day, you know it was a good (sexual) regimen. This is reminiscent of the “no pain/no gain” mantra of exercise as well as the injunction to discipline bodies that characterizes modern Western society (Foucault, 1988).

Evidence of the Sex as Exercise-esque interpretive repertoire abounds in popular literature. A June 2011 online article (Robb-Nicholson, 2011) posted by the Harvard Medical School entitled “Is sex exercise, and is it hard on the heart?” provides the following metrics on sex: average heart beats per minute for men during intercourse, the intensity of activity levels during sex for most men, oxygen consumption (which is about equivalent to dancing the foxtrot or playing ping pong), and calories burned per minute (which is about equivalent to walking the golf course). The promotion of such sex-related health benefits is consistent with neoliberalism’s construction of “individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating” (Gill, 2009b, p. 365), even in the most intimate of matters. Adopting an exercise-esque approach to sexuality also permits a de-coupling of sex from a specific sexual partner as well as from one’s own feelings of sexual desire. That is, to obtain the health benefits of sex, you do not need to like or lust after the person with whom you are having sex, nor is sexual desire required.

Sex as an Economy Exchange

Within this climate of sexual practices as mandatory competencies, sexuality is also transformed into a specific instrumental commodity. Although the commodification of sexuality is decidedly not novel, the current utilitarian version adopts a post-feminist rhetoric of sexual agency, self-interest, and liberation to position the exchange of sex for material goods as sexual freedom. In her analysis of female desire as commodity, Fahs

(2011) suggested that it is important to consider the power of commodification in women's sexual lives. In the sociocultural "marketplace," women are expected to understand and control their sexuality in keeping with the prevailing "economy" of patriarchal, postfeminist imperatives. Not only are women represented as sexual commodities, but they also come to apprehend (and talk about) their bodies and subjective sexual desires as products, items, and assets that may be "bought, sold, and traded between men" (Fahs, 2011, p. 180). Participants referenced resource exchange while describing sex in the context of relationships. At times, sex was a negotiation tactic—a means to achieving certain material or emotional goals. There were indications of implicit economy systems of sex within romantic relationships, which involve rules around trading and transacting. Sex, and sexuality in the relationship, operated as a negotiation tactic in accordance with rules of reciprocity, that is, "I give this in order to get that" or "I gave this and now I get that."

Extract 6: Participant 50

Participant: . . . sometimes I have used (sex) to literally get a man to literally do what I wanted.

Interviewer: Outside of sex you mean?

Participant: Yeah, and like, I mean, or like, you know the type of guys, they're out there and I'm not proud of it—the guys that, as long you as you keep them happy in bed, they'll buy you stuff.

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant: I'm not proud of it, that has happened, I mean not because I was after . . . it was kind of bonus, I mean, I remember like being with a guy who was slightly 14 years older, but he still like, it wasn't like, he is a single guy, like he was still good looking, and I remember the first time. I didn't, I didn't do it because of that, I didn't do it for that, but after the first time we slept together, we were just walking and we were passing Holt Renfrew [luxury retailer] and I see these pair of really nice shoes, okay, I'm not proud of this, I was 17 at the time, he was slightly older. It was my choice, like it wasn't a forced thing or anything, and I saw these shoes and he's like, "You like them? We'll get them." Like we literally walked and bought like four hundred and fifty dollar shoes. And I remember it was a nice feeling. And I, he wasn't a particular rich guy, I mean he did make a decent, like, amount of money and he had no kids or wife so like, he, he was kind of like a yuppie, but it wasn't like he was a millionaire that was like "Oh you can have the shoes" and just like, for him to pay that much plus tax and whatever and just buy me those it was, just because he got to screw a teenager. And before it was kind of, I mean it was kind of fucked up in retrospect, and I would, but at the time when I was in it I was like" Oh, I got,

I can, what's next?" Like I was like "Shoes! What's next?" . . . And I was like "Ohhhh I control his penis, I can do that." I'm not proud of it and you know what I mean, but it is what it is and I chose to do it. And I never had sex with someone I didn't enjoy having sex with just to get stuff, you know. I'm not a gold digger, but when the bonus is there, I like to play up my cards. I'm like if I do this, this week let's see what I can get. Like just like a little mental games for myself.

This participant described giving sex in exchange for material goods (e.g., shoes, dinner). In both examples, sex was positioned as part of an economic system, as a valuable commodity for male partners. Participants' use of financial and consumerist rhetoric is consistent with the analysis of heterosexual relations as residing within a commodity-driven marketplace, where female desire is not deficient but rather plays a central role as women come to gain value primarily to the extent that they enact a "performance of the desire to perpetuate the customs that mark them as property" (Fahs, 2011, p. 183). Within this professional approach to romantic and sexual relationships (Gill, 2009b; Harvey & Gill, 2011a, 2011b), if a woman wants "to literally get a man to literally do what [she wants]" (Participant 50), she can ostensibly choose to enter into an economic system of exchange wherein her sexuality may be bartered for, say, shoes or a dinner at East Side Mario's. However, this postfeminist conceptualization of female agency or "taking control" actually erects a double-bind that displaces female agency by subordinating female desire to male control (Potts, 2002).¹

In their presentation of an economic theory of sexual interactions, Baumeister and Vohs (2004, p. 339) noted that although sexual interactions are typically represented as personal and private events occurring between autonomous individuals, they occur within, and are greatly shaped by, broader social forces "in which men and women play different roles resembling buyer and seller—in a marketplace that is ineluctably affected by the exchanges between other buyers and sellers." Their work is based on principles of Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1950, 1961) and the premise that sex is a female resource. In any given social interaction, both parties give and get things in return, as the explication of the costs and benefits associated with a given social interaction facilitates predictions about people's behaviors, thoughts, and feelings (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). More specifically, the man must give something of value to the woman in order to get sex. Notably, this economic system of exchange is thoroughly suffused with neoliberal ideology, which valorizes concepts of privatization and personal responsibility (Duggan, 2003). As a discourse, neoliberalism dominates contemporary social relations by propagating "heterosexualized discursive binaries, 'natural facts' and gender/sex categories that sediments certain gendered subject

positions while proscribing others” (Griffin, 2007, p. 223). According to the World Bank’s policy interventions, for instance, women may be included in the definition of the modern “individual” (e.g., Ohmae, 1995, 2002) only if they demonstrate hegemonically masculine characteristics like competitiveness, rationality, and efficacy. Otherwise, unintelligible genders (non-men and non-masculine persons) are relegated to the spheres of non-productive or reproductive labor, where they are situated outside the “proper” society of male producers (Griffin, 2007). However, in the seemingly private context of romantic and sexual relationships, a (post-feminist) woman’s ability to competitively, rationally, and efficaciously “take control” is positioned as simply a matter of personal responsibility and limited to her willingness to sexually satisfy a man, which obscures how gendered neoliberal discourses actually (re)produce heteronormative heterosexuality and “attain ‘goals’ that are . . . ‘very traditional’” (Gill, 2009b, p. 353).

For instance, the male sexual drive discourse (Hollway, 1984) is securely embedded within the economy-exchange interpretive repertoire of sex. In our interviews, men’s sexuality was constituted as a biologically based need and an essential urge that can never be fully satiated, thus, men were located within the agentic asking/supplicant position in relation to their female partners when it comes to sexual requests. Women, then, became gatekeepers of the sexual activity commodity, which they could trade for both material (e.g., shoes, dinners) and emotional (e.g., eliciting an apology) possessions. Although this interpretive repertoire was prevalent throughout our interviews and taken up by many participants, it was alternately adopted and resisted. Likewise, the subject position of negotiator within the sexual economic system was both enthusiastically adopted (“When the bonus is there, I like to play up my cards. I’m like if I do this, this week let’s see what I can get. Like just like a little mental games for myself” “Like I was like “Shoes! What’s next?” “And I was like ‘Ohhhh I control his penis, I can do that’”) and strongly resisted (“I’m not a gold digger,” “I’m not proud of this, I was 17 at the time.”). The negotiator subject position was described as desirable and powerful as well as problematic and shameful. Participant 50 detailed her realization that she had control over her partner’s sexuality after he bought her a pair of CAD\$450 shoes early into their relationship, and the ways in which she would strategically exchange sex for other goods. Yet, this participant also actively distanced herself from the this “sexonomic” exchange by insisting, for example, that her partner was “good looking,” that it was her choice (“like it wasn’t a forced thing or anything”), that she “never had sex with someone [she] didn’t enjoy having sex with just to get stuff,” and that she was “not a gold digger.” Thus, this construction of sex is precarious, that is, women can both gain access to a powerful subject position by engaging in this economic system (they control the penis and thus the man) and risk being subjected to undesirable subject positions (e.g., gold digger, whore, woman who has sex for

reasons other than love or sexual desire). Here, as in the other interpretive repertoires, having sex in the absence of pleasure or wanting or desire was resisted through a postfeminist rhetoric of sexual liberation and autonomy (“I never had sex with someone I didn’t enjoy having sex with just to get stuff”), and yet ultimately this position was assumed.

General Discussion

We explored the ways that young women navigate the meanings and enactments of sexuality in the context of romantic relationships. Three interpretive repertoires emerged, namely, Sex as Relationship Hygiene—having sex in order to tend to and maintain the well-being of their partner and of the relationship, Sex as Exercise-esque—having sex for individual health benefits, and Sex as Economy Exchange—trading sex for psychological or material gains. Participants constructed accounts that were anchored to physicality, with women adopting discourses of *doing* sex in their relationships for particular concretized goals and achievements, rather than *wanting* or *desiring* sex as a response to subjective sexual desire. Desire was not absent from these accounts, rather it was channeled in particular ways to achieve particular (and often non-sexual) goals. Key among these goals is the health of both relationships and bodies, with the invocation of a medicalization of sexuality (i.e., linking sexual activity with health) as central. The implications of these discourses are significant. If having sex is healthful and good for you and for your relationship, then not having sex is constructed as unhealthy and bad for you and your relationship. As Segal (2012, p. 369) wrote, “Another part of the medicalization of sex, however, is especially insidious—because it is harder to see and it is harder to object to—is the equation of good sex and good health.”²

Notably, sex was positioned as an autonomous act that our participants performed for their body (or hair, or skin, or pores, or blood pressure, or weight, or pelvic muscles), not as a response to sexual want or desire. Here, we see evidence of the neoliberal rhetoric of self-regulation, which was similarly endorsed by our participants as they engaged in intense self-monitoring and self-scrutiny, such that sex was framed as individualized and decontextualized. Participants relied on postfeminist and neoliberal discourses of self-improvement, individuality, and self-discipline when discussing sexuality in the context of their relationships (Gill, 2008a, 2008b). Desire was thus transfigured and mediated by these discourses. A central precept of postfeminist ideology is that, “Using the vehicle of individualism, feminist tenets are both deployed and disavowed (McRobbie, 2004), such that sociopolitical analysis is silenced into a sanitized discourse of cheerful choices. The choices are represented as new and improved, while the messages remain conspicuously dated and homogenous” (Gurevich et al., in press, p. 15).

Participants positioned their sexual activity as decidedly agentic, while simultaneously couching their decisions to have sex or decline sexual overtures in more ambivalent

narratives of obligation, bartering, and resignation. The deployment of choice as both a right and an obligation of the neoliberal citizen is a staple of contemporary Western culture (Giddens, 1991, 1992). Choice is so thoroughly embedded in myriad discourses of late modernity that it becomes automatically activated even in the face of apparently limited possibilities.

This invocation of choice is gendered in the context of “sexual entrepreneurship” discourses (Harvey & Gill, 2011a, 2011b) that adopt the self-help genre to promote an approach to sexuality that is characterized by performance and competence imperatives. Such enterprising actors are expected to become sexual entrepreneurs who readily absorb sexpert advice, promising to “spice up” otherwise drab sex lives. These sexual self-enhancement directives rely strongly on a discourse of choice, empowerment, and the limitless potential of transformation, with a distinctive adaption by women in the current postfeminist climate (Gill, 2008a, 2008b; McRobbie, 2009). The postfeminist female (heterosexual) subject is increasingly valued for her ability to adopt the myriad “technologies of sexiness” (Radner, 1999, 2008; Ringrose, 2011) that demonstrate her sexual availability, desirability, and competence. These discourses exhort women to be permanently sexually prepared, proficient, and practicing (Gurevich, Brown-Bowers, Cosma, Vasilovsky, & Cormier, 2014).

The women in our study regularly invoked this rhetoric of choice and empowerment while they positioned both male sexuality as requiring ongoing attention and appeasement and female sexuality as compliant and commodifiable. Although they decidedly located themselves as wanting subjects, their accounts emphasized bodies doing sex rather than desire. Discourses of desire and agency were not so much “missing” (Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006) as managed for specifically desired goals, with sometimes discrepant-stated motivations. They appeared alternately as vivid, vibrant, and vocal while also at times receding in hesitation, ambivalence, and resignation. Within such sociocultural contexts, women’s own subjective sexual desire may become diminished as they come to experience sexual pleasure through their internalized subjugation, “Most importantly, *the pleasure she reports feeling* as a result of her commodification signifies the relentless ability of patriarchy to demand women’s compliance with, and submission to, phallic/patriarchal power” (Fahs, 2011, p. 189, italics in the original). Women must not only discipline their bodies to “stand up” against comparisons to other women’s bodies, but also develop ostensibly necessary sexual skills in order to adequately “perform their desire for . . . their subjective possessor” (Fahs, 2011, p. 190). This performance of “doing sex,” as an indicator of wanting to maintain the health of relationships and bodies, renders female desire as a commodity that may be traded for other material goods. Notably, male desire is rarely positioned in this manner because he is privileged and afforded other non-sexual assets. Gender retains its hold on the mobile

matrix of alternately compliant and resistant negotiations of cultural injunctions about sexuality, and “intimate justice” remains an intricate achievement (McClelland, 2010).

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation of our project was that, at times, the interviewer’s questions could be considered leading in the direction of the project’s main interests. Individual styles and agendas of the multiple interviewers also could have influenced participants’ responses. In its current layout, participants met with the interviewer once and were asked questions they may not have been asked or reflected upon before. Providing a set of questions to prepare with or answer in lieu of an interview could serve as a different qualitative approach to reduce interviewer influence and allow more space for participants to provide more insight.

Because our study was limited in its participant demographics (female young adults), a future direction would be to expand the study to intentionally recruit and include other groups of individuals. Our study involved females, aged 18–26 years, who had been in monogamous relationships with men in a Western sociocultural context. No participants, for example, identified as being devoutly religious or as having relationship structures or arrangements other than a traditional monogamous framework. A future direction for the present research would be to look at groups of different ages, sexual orientations, cultural affiliations, and relationship arrangements. Expanding the study to include diverse demographic groupings might provide a more genealogical perspective on how discourses around sex and relationships morph or are sustained throughout time and cultural spaces.

Practice Implications

Sexual health educators could use the findings from this study to inform curriculum development and delivery. When asked to identify sexual health topics about which they wanted to learn more, Toronto teens listed healthy relationships and pleasure among their top 3 items (Flicker et al., 2009). Our article speaks to both of these interests and information gaps. Educators could use our article to facilitate discussion with young women and men about sexual decision-making, agency pleasure, and desire in the context of relationships. Our article emphasizes the complicated nature of the purported sexual liberation and freedoms afforded to contemporary young women. It could be used to facilitate discussion about what sexual agency means to women and to explore the various factors that both facilitate and impinge upon their sense of agency. In addition, our article raises questions about sexual consent and speaks to the ways in which young women may decide to engage in sex that is simultaneously consensual *and* unwanted or undesirable. Our findings may facilitate conversations with young women about the many factors that can impact a woman’s decision to have sex in the absence of subjective

sexual desire. As our participants reveal, there are many complicated factors that serve to shape, facilitate, and restrict their sexual expression and desire, even in this supposed age of sexual liberation and female empowerment.

Conclusions

Our article explored the accounts of 39 young Canadian women discussing sexuality in the context of romantic relationships with men. We presented three interpretive repertoires that emerged within interviews, namely, Sex as Relationship Hygiene, Sex as Exercise-esque, and Sex as Economy Exchange. Participants spoke in concrete terms about the purposes and perks of having sex. They yoked sexual activity to the health of their relationships, to their own physical well-being, and to a variety of desirable non-sexual dividends. Although desire was present in their accounts, it was channeled in particular postfeminist ways. Participants spoke about engaging in sex for desired outcomes, thus positioning themselves as strategic and agentic in the sense that they gave sex to get relationship harmony, physical well-being, and material goods. Desire was guided toward the pursuit of particular goals and aims. Largely absent was a discourse of participants' own subjective sexual desire, fantasy or pleasure when it comes to sex.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Funding for this work was provided by the following awards: Ryerson Faculty of Arts SRC Fund and the Ryerson Research Assistant Program.

Notes

1. This interpretive repertoire overlaps with sex as exercise in that sex becomes a form of body discipline and a health-promoting behavior—something that is done to keep one's body in shape and to ensure that one's body maintains good market value.
2. In her essay on the sexualization of cancer survivorship, Segal (2012, p. 369) examines “how sex (and especially, hetero-, penetrative sex) is advertised as health itself and how difficult it is for individuals, especially women, in the face of a coherent and consistent, and even scientific, public discourse, to resist a narrative in which sex is health restored or renewed and absence of sex is the opposite.” Although our study's context is outside of cancer, the perpetual sexual performance imperative is pervasive at a broader cultural level, and our participants adopt this discourse of performance.

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