

‘I know what I like’: is raunch culture ruinous for young women’s sex lives?

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Abstract

Women’s sex practices have been depicted in varied and contradictory ways: as seductive and predatory, as receptive and lacking drive. More recently, young women’s sex practices are described by social commentators as ‘raunchy’, ‘pornified’ and ‘performed’ for men’s pleasure. These are narrow, generalised representations which move us away from gaining meaningful insight into contemporary young women’s interpretations of their sex practices. This paper draws on interview data, specifically a narrative analysis of a group of young people’s stories of sexual risk. To highlight shortfalls in the ‘raunch culture literature’ I focus only on the women’s accounts. Findings show that multiple and competing gender/sexuality discourses are available to contemporary young women, who interpret and respond to these differently as they attribute meaning to their sex lives. I argue that much of the recent popular commentary on young women’s sex practices is patriarchal, condescending and fails to recognise women as active agents of their own desire.

Keywords: gender, women, youth, sex, risk, raunch.

Introduction

Young women's sex lives have long been under intense social gaze within both academic and popular realms. My paper both critiques, and in part reflects, this preoccupation. Feminist analyses of how gender and patriarchy shape women's sex practices, desires and health outcomes are prodigious and discordant. Most famously, the divisive 'sex wars' (see, for example, Ferguson et al 1984). My aim here is not to catalogue these variations. Rather, my concern is with the recent explosion of media: magazine, ezine and newspaper articles, blogs, websites, television programs, monographs and other social commentary technologies¹ that discusses the apparent 'pornification' (see Kolehmainen 2010) of young women. Specifically, my focus is on the positioning of young women within this discourse as conforming *en masse* to the male prescripts of 'raunch culture' (Levy 2006) and as disconnected from their sexual desires.

While usually found in abundance, some feminists argue that there remains a lack of scholarly or peer-reviewed feminist engagement with this particular phenomenon (McRobbie 2008: 234; Summers 2010). There is so much to be said about this issue and this paper is only a prelude to a more comprehensive article I am currently preparing. It is therefore a modest and introductory attempt to respond to this scarcity. The paper draws on data from research I conducted into young people's narratives of sexual risk-taking. Each participant told one of four narratives and while both men and women told the same basic storyline, gender was nonetheless implicated in their accounts. To pursue my argument—that recent accounts of young women's sex practices are too narrow and ignore their sexual desires—I focus only on excerpts from the women's stories. Findings show that some of the young women: (i) contest and avoid 'raunchy' attitudes and behaviour and (ii) can articulate their sexual desires and choose to actively pursue these through monogamous and/or casual sex.

My aim is to highlight that young women respond differently to the gender images and discourses available to them. They adopt, challenge or reinterpret these to guide and make sense of their sex practices. My analysis thus reflects third wave ideologies (see Walker 2001; Henry 2004), which recognise the impact of socio-cultural structures, but are also pluralistic, avoid judgment and highlight the need to recognise that women interpret similar experiences differently. In pursuing this aim I argue that recent representations of young women are narrow, condescending and threaten to move us away from gaining insights into

young people's sex lives. Such insights are important for ensuring that young women are able to enjoy safe and pleasurable sex lives.

Young women and sexual desire

Journalists, social commentators and bloggers have recently swarmed to lament the influence on young people of our 'hypersexualised' climate (McRobbie 2008) where both pornography and previously marginal and vulgar sex behaviours with multiple casual partners have apparently become 'mainstream' (Levy 2006; Tankard Reist 2010; Walter 2010: 4). A series of sensational metaphors have emerged: 'generation sex' (Souter 2006), 'generation SLUTS' (sexually liberated urban teens) (Beckerman 2004), 'raunch culture' (Levy 2006) and the 'porn generation' (see Shapiro 2005; Paul 2006). According to Walter, 'the messages and values of this revitalised sex industry have reached deep into the hearts of many young men and women' (2010: 4). However, reflecting the endurance of patriarchy, it is young women that commentators are most disturbed by.

Panic over the 'new' sexualisation of girls² (Levin & Kilbourne 2009; Tankard Reist 2010) and the concomitant rise of 'oversexed' (Hamilton 2008), 'waxed-vagina flashing' (Levy 2006), 'living dolls' (Walter 2010) is at fever pitch. According to Levy (2006: 34), 'We don't even think about it anymore, we just expect to see women flashing and stripping and groaning everywhere we look'. Such conclusions are not reached via systematic observation or submitted to leaders in the field for scrutiny prior to publication. They are judgmental and nonetheless potent representations which inculcate the popular imagination.

Importantly, though unsurprisingly, engagement with the complexities of feminist theories, specifically the structure/agency nexus, is scarce within these accounts. Within the 'raunch culture' literature young women are frequently positioned as passive 'cultural dopes' (Davis 2003: 13) who are particularly vulnerable to the influence of sexist media and advertising and to pornographic images where male pleasure is privileged and women's role is 'pleasure-object', not 'pleasure-seeker'. Women are considered so deeply influenced by these images, that they cannot see that their raunchy sex acts are actually 'performances' which they undertake for men's pleasure, not their own (Levy 2006, Walter 2010). Because of their ongoing exposure to mainstream 'sex entertainment' (McRobbie 2008), young women are

also considered to have lost sight of their ‘instinctive’³ (Levy 2006: 162) sexual desires. A more informed discussion of women’s agency—their ability to identify stereotype, negotiate competing gender discourses and genuinely desire and enjoy raunchy sex behaviours⁴—is required.

To support their claims, some of the authors referenced above draw on empirical research, such as Tolman’s *Dilemmas of Desire* (2002) (see also Tolman 1994; Fine 1993; Fine & McClelland 2006). However, in doing so, Levy (2006: 162) misses the nuances of Tolman’s (2002) argument: that rather than being *unable* to identify or articulate their sexual desires, the young women in her sample found it *hard to talk* about them, as they lacked the linguistic repertoire and feared the possible negative ramifications of doing so. Based on her ‘discussions’ with a small number of young women, Maguire (2010) reports that they spoke only of the sex acts they ‘do to’ boys, not what they enjoyed being ‘done to’ them. She hastily reaches a conclusion—common throughout the ‘raunch culture’ literature—that while perceiving themselves as sexually liberated, young women are actually satisfying men’s desires, rather than pursuing their own.

Methods and methodology

Much empirical data on young people’s sex practices and perceptions is gleaned from survey-based studies. However to better understand their actions and interpretations we need research that moves beyond objectivist, often psychometric paradigms. I utilised an interpretivist, narrative mode of inquiry and analysis (see Riessman 1993, 2002; Elliot 2005) to identify a group of thirty-one young (18-25 year old) rural Tasmanians’ stories of sexual risk (17 women and 14 men). Narrative data is important (see Silverman 2001; Riessman 2002; Chase 2005). The way people position and story themselves when they discuss their experiences and ideas tells us about both their personal lives and understandings and the nature of the contemporary socio-cultural world. In short, it provides us information on the intersection between the personal and the social.

Participants were accessed through gatekeepers and chain-referral sampling techniques (Penrod et al. 2003). I collected data through semi-structured interviews where my aim was to discover how participants make sense of the risks they have faced (and may still face) in their sex lives. I prioritised the ‘good qualitative research’ ethos—to work reflexively throughout

the research process and seek to balance power inequalities (see Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach 2009). Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The study was designed to elicit in-depth stories from a particular youth sub-population. Generalisability is a limitation; the findings discussed are suggestive of wider social patterns only.

Findings: the prudent and the hedonists

My key research finding was that the young participants were influenced by the moralisation of both sex and risk (see Hunt 2003) and thus avoided presenting themselves as ‘real’ risk takers (see Bishop, 2008). While secondary, their accounts of gender are important and best illuminate my argument here. According to Levy (2006: 200; see also Walter 2010), most young women now can and do engage in a variety of ‘raunchy’ sex behaviours. However, my findings suggest that despite detraditionalisation and degendering (see Beck 1992a, 1992b; Giddens 1994) we do not live in a world where traditional sexual (and other) morals and values have been completely abandoned and where ‘anything goes’ (Lyon 2001: 384). Data from the participants telling the *prudent narrative* (one of four narratives identified in this study) suggest that even within our ‘hypersexualised’ landscape, notions of what constitutes proper femininity continue to shape the choices some women make regarding their sex practices.

I don’t want to sleep around

For Levy (2006: 200), young women have adopted, ‘a new norm, a new role to play: lusty, busty exhibitionist’. However, Saffron’s account below suggests that this is not necessarily the norm. Some women do not embrace ‘raunchy’ behaviours and actively avoid presenting a ‘lusty’ self. Saffron illustrates this:

I mean I know it sounds bad, sort of thing, but I didn’t and I don’t, want to go around looking like - like, I would just, sleep with anyone kind of thing. Like I mean that’s not a good look. You know what I mean... Like, I didn’t want to get a reputation, either. Like, that was important to me, because I did know some people who—like. But really, I just personally really don’t like the idea of just sleeping with people for the hell of it! Like, in a one-night stand.

Saffron recognises that in contemporary Australia, women are not yet as sexually free as men. They are constrained in a number of ways, in particular because they risk gaining a ‘slutty’ reputation (see Hillier, Harrison & Warr 1998; Attwood 2007). However, she also maintains that her avoidance of casual sex is not only about reputation and interprets it as chiefly her own decision; a reflection of her personal preferences. It is important to both respect her interpretation and to challenge recent depictions of contemporary young women as all vying for a spot on *Girls Gone Wild* (as per Levy 2006 and Walter 2010).

Lucy (below) draws on multiple gender discourses throughout her narrative, for instance the sexually empowered and the sexually conservative female—which are not of course, mutually exclusive or necessarily competing. While asserting that she has sexual desires and that she makes sure to satisfy these: “I love sex, like don’t get me wrong”, Lucy also confines sex to relationships only:

The idea of sleeping with lots of people just doesn’t appeal to me. Like, I don’t want to look back and go, ‘oh, well—God! I’ve slept with fifteen people’. Like why would you? What’s the point?... And I mean like, I don’t think that other people would find out or anything. But, it’s more like it’s something, for myself. Um, like, I want to be able to keep myself, from—that. I want to be able to respect myself. And I don’t want to sleep around. Na.

Lucy’s excerpt illustrates that the traditional discourse that young women who enjoy sex with multiple partners have no claim to self-respect (see Abrams et al. 1990: 49) continues to mould our ‘moral imaginations’ (Lindemann Nelson 2001: 6). However Lucy is also shaped by (and actively re-shapes) more contemporary gender discourses. Like many other women in the study, she also describes enjoying and prioritising the physical aspects of sex: ‘I don’t think it always has to be all romantic and about sharing love or whatever’. She articulates sexual desire: her ‘right to orgasm’. However, I argue that most important here is that Lucy perceives herself as cognisant of different gender/sexuality discourses and as having personally chosen these particular sexual ethics.

I know what I like

For some of the women in this study, participating in raunchy sex behaviours such as playing ‘strip cards’, flashing their breasts and having casual sex with different partners, is desired.

The extent to which this desire, or desire *per se* is socially constructed is debateable but it is judgmental and disrespectful to overlook women's claims that they actively seek out these practices because they enjoy them; because they are sexually gratifying. Discussing her experiences of casual sex Alice states that: "It was sex purely for the physical exploration and gratification... I felt like I deserved to have sex and enjoy it... I love that moment just before you come [orgasm] and you look into each other's eyes. I'm like, *yeah*".

Charlotte too discusses her hedonism. She understands her sexual desires: "I know what I like; what gets me off... like what positions and that, but like it all depends on my mood too, sort of thing [ha ha]". In pursuit of sexual pleasure Charlotte has engaged in casual sex, both with the same partner on several occasions and in one-night stands. Here she discusses the latter:

There's no waiting around for guys to make the move! You know, I could walk into a room and go, 'Oh yeah, you're hot, I wanna root you'.... I was rejecting the idea of the woman being, the sort of passive, um, taking it. So I just went out there, and wanted to get it for myself. And just got what I could get, sort of thing!.... I mean I'm still like that now. Like I love sexy men; sexy people [ha ha]. I love sex. It's awesome!

Charlotte's account coheres in part with raunch culture critics (and the manifold feminists before them)—that despite 'liberation' and the greater visibility and acceptability of sexually active and assertive women, femininity remains predominantly constructed as passive and receptive. However, Charlotte is not conforming to 'someone more powerful's distorted notion of what you [women] represent' (Levy 2006: 106). She does not wait, or want, to become a 'pleasure object'. She instigates the partnership and derives pleasure and enjoyment from the experience. Whether she was submissive or 'porn-like' at points in the encounter is irrelevant. Rather, it is important to recognise that Charlotte can articulate what she wants and for her, sex is not just a performance for men. It is much more than this.

Conclusions and Implications

Public commentators argue that a 'mainstreaming of the sex industry' (Walter 2010: 6) has occurred—and that this is ruinous for young women's sex lives. They insist that young

women are especially vulnerable to what is in vogue and have thus assumed the idea that their worth lies in being sexually attractive for men and satisfying men's sexual preferences (Walter 2010: 4). Apparently, women in droves have strayed so far from the 'feminist project' that they now laugh alongside male chauvinists at 'macho, cartoonish stereotypes of female sexuality' (Levy 2006: 93). However, according to these commentators, the joke is on us (women). We are 'doing raunch' but not on our own terms. Women have given in to men's, and marketers, dreams and desires.

The research findings discussed here have highlighted some of the problems with these homogenous appraisals of contemporary young women. Not all women 'laugh along', or perform a raunchy self. In fact, due to the durable sexual double standard, some women actively position themselves against this image. Furthermore, some young women (regardless of whether they perform a raunchy self or not) can 'tap into', articulate and actively pursue their sexual desires. I have argued through the paper that these recent, popular representations of young women are condescending. They do not show 'a deep respect for pluralism' (Snyder-Hall 2010: 255) or for women's capacity to think critically about, discard and reshape competing gender images and discourses and to interweave these into a concordant self-narrative (see Ezzy 1998).

It is worth reiterating here that this surge in commentary highlights some important trends, for example that women (and men) are increasingly performing expensive and risky procedures in pursuit of the body beautiful (see Levy 2006; Maguire 2010; Walter 2010); that sexual empowerment is not gender equality—that the feminist project is incomplete. However, these important messages are smothered by the lack of empiricism and specificity and the tendency to equate raunch behaviour with self-objectification and submission to male desire, which is not necessarily the case. I am not suggesting that the *Sex and the City* cast are fabulous feminist role models for young people. On the contrary I agree here with Tankard Reist (2010) that they are symbolic of the myopic media representations of what constitutes a 'sexy' woman. I do however emphasise that in order to move feminism and equality forward we should avoid judging women for their sex practices

In contrast, a tone of judgment and blame is apparent in the commentary. The media and marketing companies are to blame. Women are to blame—for not challenging sexist images, languages and practices, for 'pornifying' themselves, for propping up patriarchy (Snyder-Hall

2010: 255), for ‘wearing their skirts so short’. Women have been blamed and shamed enough. It is vital to continue working to reveal the socio-cultural shaping of what often appear (subjectively or otherwise) to be personally inspired, free and constructive choices. However, if we want to find out more about the meanings young women make of their sex lives (to assist them to keep these as safe, healthy and enjoyable as possible), we must avoid judging them, respect their interpretations and abilities and critically analyse gender commentary, even when it ostensibly aims to ‘protect’ and assist young women. The raunch culture literature effectively reifies the taboo around women talking openly about, prioritising and enjoying sex. Researchers must continue to undertake rigorous, theoretically informed investigations, to ensure that our knowledge reflects the changing experiences and subjectivities of young people’s sex lives.

Notes

¹ For a list of over 70 newspaper and magazine articles, blog entries, television shows and reports see: http://womensforumaustralia.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=59&Itemid=69.

² The sexualisation and commercialisation of young *girls* and the impact of raunch culture on young *women*’s sex practices is frequently conflated in popular debate. I argue in the companion article to this paper that a much clearer distinction between these related issues is required.

³ This assumption of a ‘real’, instinctive’ desire is problematic and also explored within the companion article.

⁴ Feminist analyses of women’s eroticisation of male dominance and their desire for and enjoyment of objectification (see, for example Snyder-Hall 2010) offer useful insights on this, however this is not the focus the findings or argument presented in this paper.

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