The Capitalization of Female Sexuality in Postmodernity

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Abstract
This essay examines the evolution of female sexuality in postmodernity, and how it has been reconceptualized and capitalized in the industries of advertising, pornography, fitness pole-dancing, and sex toys. I argue that a postmodern framework allows for spaces in which previously hegemonic paradigms of femininity and sexuality can be challenged, subverted, appropriated, or rejected. The growth of women in the workforce, along with their increasing expendable incomes, education, and feminist cognizance create demands for market products that reconceive and tailor to forms of female sexuality that are politically progressive, female positive, and ultimately, empowering. I discuss how female sexuality in particular is reconfigured within postmodern conceptions of sexuality, and use this discussion as a platform to analyze the capitalization of female sexuality in the industries of advertising, pornography, pole-dancing, and sex toys. I critically interrogate the ways in which femininity and sexuality are presented, and explore the ways in which this capitalization can affect women in problematic, often contradictory ways. I follow this by examining male sexuality as developed in postmodernity, and in relation to female sexuality. I conclude by arguing that spaces for the queering of sexuality and gender, especially with females, are arising and expanding in postmodern societies, and this is directly connected to new forms of apperception and capitalization of female sexuality.

In postmodern Western society, female sexuality is being capitalized in a manner as it has never before been. Continental scholars have explored this topic most prominently in recent years. They examine how this greatly affects the gender identity and sexuality of both females and males, as it is beginning to dictate new forms of femininity and sexuality to mass culture. These capitalizations influence how we perceive, understand, and experience our gendered bodies. This essay examines the evolution of female sexuality in postmodernity, and how it has been reconceptualized and capitalized in the industries of advertising, pornography, fitness pole-dancing, and sex toys.

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These new forms of female sexual commodification are complex, involving many different layers that can contain both positive and problematic aspects. However, despite inconsistencies and contradictions, I argue that a postmodern framework allows for spaces in which previously hegemonic paradigms of femininity and sexuality can be challenged, subverted, appropriated, or rejected. The growth of women in the workforce, along with their increasing expendable incomes, education, and feminist cognizance create demands for market products that reconceive and tailor to forms of female sexuality that are politically progressive, female positive, and ultimately, empowering.

Modernity and postmodernity are two terms used to describe historical conditions related to specific time periods, values, discourses, and cultural movements (Irvine, 2009). Modernity refers to a time period in the Western world that began anywhere from 1436 to 1789, and extending to the 1970’s or later (“Modernity”, 2009). There are many contested views of modernity, but for the purposes of this essay, there are several distinguishing characteristics that are generally associated with this historical period. Modernism tends to be affiliated with master narratives and metanarratives of history, culture and national identity, along with faith in scientific and empirical “grand theories” to explain phenomena. Modernity espouses a unified sense of identity, hierarchy, order, centralized control, faith and personal investment in large Nation-state and party politics, as well as mass culture, consumption, and marketing.

Postmodernity literally means “after modernity” (“Postmodernity”, 2009). The term is specifically used to describe the condition of society that is said to exist after modernity, and sometimes characterizes intentional responses to it. In postmodern frameworks, there are tendencies to reject master narratives of history and culture in
preference for discourses of local narratives and ironic subversion of master narratives. This may include a rejection of totalizing theories in pursuit of local and conditional theories. Postmodernity embraces social and cultural pluralism, and ambiguous bases for social/cultural/national unity. Instead of conceptualizing a cohesive identity, postmodern thought sees identities as multiple, shifting, and in constant fragmented negotiation. Proliferated is a confidence in micropolitics, identity politics, local politics, and institutional power struggles (Irvine, 2009). The middle-class earnestness of modernity is replaced with irony, play, subversion and challenge to paradigmatic seriousness.

Postmodern art and artistic movements utilize hyper-reality, appropriation, and simulacra as having as much, or more, power as the ‘original’. Art is seen as a process and performance, involving many different layers and interwoven themes. The postmodern aesthetic often incorporates nostalgia and retro styles, representing history through nostalgic images of pop culture. The authority of high culture is severed by popular culture and the valuation of hybrid cultural forms; instead of mass marketing, there is niche marketing aimed towards smaller group identities (Ibid.). The advent of the Internet heralds information that is immediate, partial, interactive, digital, individualized, and dispersed. These developments have important consequences for how sexuality is shaped.

Sexuality is configured within this framework in many complex ways. In modernity, the traditional nuclear family was seen as the central system of social order, whereas in postmodernity there is a proliferation and cultural acceptance of alternative family units, such as homosexual parents, single-parents, dual-income families, and multiple self-chosen and individually negotiated identities for coupling and child-rearing
The heterosexual norms of modernity have been challenged by the growing visibility and acceptance of alternate non-normative sexual identities, such as homosexuality, bisexuality, asexuality, polysexualities, and gender and sexual ambiguity.

Gabriel Bianchi, in “Public Sexuality and the Intimate Public (Postmodern Reflections on Sexuality)” discusses one prominent cultural shift in sexuality since modernity. Bianchi suggests that sexuality is moving from the private to the public, and what is becoming private - and indeed, growing - is intimacy (Ibid). For sexuality, the borders between the public and the private are being blurred and contested, and individuals must choose a personally appropriate border between the two.

Bianchi argues that one major factor in this transition is the dissolution of universal morality in society. Sex, as portrayed in mainstream culture and experienced by current generations growing up in postmodernity, has been de-moralized, and is now becoming political, plural, and individual (Bianchi, 60-61). This process of de-moralization results in a sexuality that is dictated by the individual and free from moral constraints. Morality is now seen as relative, and personalized to the needs and desires of individual preferences. However, this de-moralization is by no means universal, and reactionary sex panics against it have frequently arisen (Irvine, 2008). The views of sexuality in society remain deeply contested and fractured, with the majority of people in society born into modern, moral conceptions of sexuality (Irvine, 4-5). Parents of postmodern children raise their children to view sex as moral and emotional, with sexual actions as creators of moral or immoral identities. Hence, postmodern amoral sexual acts are idealistic for many; sometimes being experienced, while often times remaining laden with social, historical, and personal moral values. This contradiction between the
postmodern values of contemporary society and the modern values of past generations creates a difficult situation for sexual decision-making among young adults. While mainstream media encourages them to be sexually promiscuous, their own smaller communities usually hold to a different moral code.

Giddens, in “The Transformation of Intimacy” discusses the emerging realities of “plastic sexuality” and the “pure relationship”. “Plastic sexuality” is a sexuality that is freed from reproduction, ideals, and typical, normative frameworks of desire and behaviour (Giddens, 1992). One way in which plastic sexuality manifests itself is in the “pure relationship.” This is a relationship that is dictated only by the people in it, composed only by what they put into it themselves, without omnipresent societal constraints. It lasts as long as the partners involved wish it to, and has the potential to take a multitude of different forms. This can often be a challenge, as this relationship is now without conventional societal pressures to remain intact, and must rely solely upon the commitment of the participants (Bianchi, 63). This relationship is conceptually egalitarian and primarily composed of intimacy. This intimacy is often of a “disclosing” nature, in which partners share personal thoughts and feelings and develop a trusting bond through free and open communication. However, this can be extremely demanding, as it relies on individuals choosing, creating, and controlling their own romantic relationships.

Bianchi argues that what is in fact occurring is the democratization of intimacy. Sexuality is being removed from a realm of taboo and sin, and progressively being seen as an important, positive aspect of a person’s life (Bianchi, 69). This move is characteristic of a sexual citizenship, in which the sexuality of a person includes rights
and choices over gender, feelings, body, identity, and imagery, among other factors (Bianchi, 71).

The emergence of Queer Theory is one major development in postmodernity. Queer Theory is a field of critical theory that emerged in the early 1990’s. Heavily influenced by postmodern thought, and the radical, emancipatory direction in which gay and lesbian politics were moving, queer theory argues for a deconstruction of categories, discourse, and exclusions in discussions of sexuality (Plummer, 2007). It posits a social constructionist framework of understanding sexuality, and argues for diversity, plurality, and the radical subversion of desires, identities, and actions. Queer Theory, and the Queer Nation political movement that accompanied it, heralds the opening of sexual doors, and the challenge and disturbance of existing frameworks, especially those concerning normalcy (Ibid, 522). This leads to the discussion, acceptance, and celebration of “queer” sexualities, such as sadomasochistic desires, fetishes, gender-play, group sex, different bodies and definitions of beauty, polyamoury and polysexuality.

Asexuality and the asexuality movement is one of the most exemplary forms of postmodern queer sexuality. Asexuality, according to the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), is defined as ‘a person who does not experience sexual attraction’ (Scherrer, 2008). However, definitions are varied among individuals, and the term can be used to indicate a wide variety of emotions, actions, and lifestyles. Unlike celibacy, which is a choice, asexuality is seen as a sexual orientation that broadly encompasses individuals who do not desire sexual contact with others. Asexuals are often heavily marginalized (including within queer theory, movements, and communities), and need to work hard to assert an identity that “reject[s] a widely held cultural ideology of
sexuality as biologically based and ubiquitous” (Ibid.). They are also rejecting the mass cultural encouragement and valorization of a hedonistic, experimental, polymorphous, explicit sexuality. Asexuality discourse can only exist within a postmodern framework in which sexual identity multiplicity is seen as legitimate, justified, and ultimately, positive, even if it includes different levels of the rejection of sexuality itself (Ibid).

In postmodern sexual discourse, there is a strong argument for the elimination of strict sexual identities altogether, in favour of the acceptance of sexual and gender fluidity. Hennessy argues that non-heteronormative sexual identities are *reactive* identities, and as such, identity politics can take the form of moral reproach and punishment against heteronormative (or white, affluent, or otherwise privileged) people. The reactive positioning of this political approach is exclusionary by nature, and can lead to the discrimination of certain sexualities (Hennessy, 2000). She argues that acceptance of diversity, without the desire and need for limiting identity categories, is where society needs to shift its conceptual understandings, in order to achieve an inclusive and egalitarian paradigm wherein individuals can feel safe to explore and enjoy their sexuality.

While some of these shifts are beginning to occur, they are by no means universal, and are often contested. Lynn Jamieson argues that despite the growing equity and intimacy within heterosexual relationships, many aspects of personal life continue to be structured by inequalities (Jamieson, 1982). She argues that this ideology of individualism can go too far, sometimes ignoring or de-contextualizing itself from the larger social forces at play (Ibid, 480). Furthermore, transformations in gender equality are by no means exhaustive; change in one aspect of social life does not necessarily
Empirical studies indicate that men think about sex more than women, masturbate more often, have more partners, experience a wider variety of partners and sexual activities, and are more likely to experience orgasm during intercourse (Ibid, 483). This expressed how males in general have a larger, more diverse and pleasurable experience of sexuality. Exhaustive studies concede that both men and women by and large still view heterosexual sex as something “men do to women” (Ibid, 484). Men continue to possess more power in relationships; for example, by having more choice over housework and childcare, and controlling finances. However, intimacy, care, and egalitarian affection are created in spite of these inequalities. The desire and drive for the “pure relationship” based on intimacy often inspires couples to negotiate a close emotional bond within frameworks of persistent gender inequalities. Jamieson argues that, while changes in gendered relations are occurring, it is not happening nearly as quickly as changes in ideologies; thus, we cannot let our theories run ahead of our lives, lest we risk ignoring persisting personal and structural issues that continue to influence us.

In the same vein, Plummer argues we should not be overly encouraged by postmodern ideals. He argues that this postmodernism is only the world of a privileged few. In fact, “Modernity is not abruptly coming to an end. In most parts of the globe, modernization remains the chief social goal” (Plummer, 521). He questions how much postmodern sexual discourses actually play themselves out in real lived experiences. “Radical theorizing” abstracts from the deeply engrained and pervasive structure of gender. Though gender can change over time and is contingent upon social context, changes almost never happen at the speed that ideas do. In reality, most social actions
still contain strictly-normative gender and sexual structures (Plummer, 525).

Furthermore, postmodern sexual rhetoric ignores the body, and the embodiment inherent in lived sexual experiences. Sex is a “lusty, bodily, fleshy affair”, and leaving emotions and the body out of abstract intellectual discourse omits such inherent and crucial aspects of sexuality. The gendered body has been the subject of much discussion, but the sexualized or eroticized body much less so. Plummer argues that we need to bring the body into sexuality studies by “doing body work around sex”, and exploring new body technologies (Plummer, 526).

In postmodernity, sexuality has, by and large, moved from the private to the public realm, and this is especially true with female sexuality. In general, there is indeed a shrinking gap in gender inequalities, and a greater tolerance of diversity in sexual practices (Jamieson, 483). Active sexuality and sexual desire is recognized and encouraged in mainstream media, but these messages are often mixed, challenging some existing structures while upholding others. These shifts have significant consequences for the reconceptualization and reconstruction of female sexuality. With the growing number of single women in the workforce and dual-income households, women now have a lot more personal expendable income than they ever have before. This increasing amount of female-controlled capital, along with the development of a cultural consciousness of feminism, female sexual empowerment, and a more pervasive, celebratory ethos regarding sexuality, has sparked the interest of many industrious entrepreneurs. There are four major industries I will discuss in which female sexuality in the postmodern era has been capitalized upon; the advertising industry, the pornography industry, the pole-dancing/fitness industry, and the sex toy industry. Each of these industries markets
products designed to capitalize on new types of discourses around female sexuality, including the notion of feminist emancipation, agency, empowerment, publicization of sexuality, and a celebration of sexual pleasure.

Female Sexuality in Advertising

Feminist scholarship on advertising in the 1970’s and 80’s offered a powerful analysis and critique of the portrayal of women in advertising. Content analytic studies showed exhaustive ubiquitous portrayal of women in crass, degrading, frivolous and passive stereotypes, such as the dumb blonde, the brainless housewife, and the sex object (Gill, 2006). Women were depicted in the household, in docile roles, and as objects existing only to be beautiful without any voice or agency. They were portrayed in non-verbal subordinate images; “lower or smaller than men, lying down, using bashful knee bends, canting postures or deferential smiles” (Ibid, 95). The pervasive use of cropping images of female bodies into individual parts, each with their own problem, render the female body simply a set of “dismembered ‘bits’…each requiring a product solution” (Ibid, 96). On the other hand, men were depicted in various occupational settings, as being intelligent, independent, and objective (Ibid, 98). Processes of bodily objectification came to be understood as the underlying force of male violence against women.

However, since the mid 1990’s, there has been a dramatic shift in the portrayal of women in mainstream advertising. Rosalind Gill documents how young women have been increasingly portrayed “not as passive sex objects, but as active, desiring sexual subjects, who seem to participate enthusiastically in practices and forms of self-presentation that earlier generations regarded as connected to subordination” (Ibid). This
shift arguably began with the 1994 Wonderbra ad of Eva Herzigova, shown looking at her own elevated breasts alongside the slogan “Hello Boys” (Ibid). Since then, there has been a significant pattern of women depicted in advertising as active, assertive subjects consciously using and enjoying their sexual power. Over the past 15 years, this has developed into the current hyper-proliferation of extremely sexualized images in mainstream media; a ‘porn chic’ that dominates current contemporary advertising.

Robert Goldman argues that this occurred primarily due to three factors (Goldman, 1992). Firstly, advertisers had to respond to “sign fatigue”, whereby people were growing weary of the constant oversaturation of advertising in consumer culture. Secondly, advertisers were confronted by a new generation of media-savvy consumers, many of whom were suspicious of conventional advertising. Lastly, advertisers needed to respond to feminist critiques of advertising, which resulted in what he terms “commodity feminism” (Ibid, 130). This describes how advertisers

“appropriate feminism, [and] cook it to distill out a residue—an object: a look, a style. Sign-objects are thus made to stand for, and made equivalent to, feminist goals of independence and professional success. Personality can be represented, relationships achieved and resources acquired through personal consumer choices” (Ibid, 131).

Advertisers try to commodify feminist ideas such as emancipation, independence, and agency. They also strive to tie together the notions of “femininity” and “feminism”, in order to appeal to their consumers.

Thus, the creation of what Gill refers to as the “midriff” - a type of woman who is defined by her fashion preferences, and has a particular set of attitudes about her body
and sexuality - as “a young, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is forever ‘up for it’” (Gill, 98). This type of “midriff advertising” employs four main discourses: an emphasis on the body, a shift from objectification to sexual subjectification, a pronounced discourse of choice and autonomy, and an emphasis upon empowerment (Ibid). This type of advertising focuses on the centrality of the body as a woman’s primary source of capital. Rather than assessing a woman’s value based on her role as a mother or her achievement in the household (as was the case in the 1950’s), now a woman’s value has been solely placed upon the surface of her body (Ibid, 98-99).

Previous female sexual passivity has been reconstructed - females are depicted as active, sexually-desiring subjects who exert agency over their own pleasure by purchasing certain products. A woman’s body is framed as her source of power and control over men. Because this power is situated solely in the body, women are told at length to purchase products to scent, moisturize, tone, pluck, remove, condition, and otherwise alter their own bodies in order to gain power. Gill describes how the issue with, “the obsessional preoccupation with the body and the shift from objectification to sexual subjectification is that this is framed in advertising through a discourse of playfulness, freedom, and, above all, choice. Women are presented as not seeking men’s approval but as pleasing themselves, and, in so doing, they just happen to win men's admiration” (Gill, 101). What is interesting is how much the desires of this female subject identically mirror that of males. The conflation between “me” and “men” is how this rhetoric is achieved (Ibid). Women are taught that there is absolutely no difference between what they want and what men want of them. Additionally, this notion of “pleasing one’s self” is tied to
the idea of female *empowerment*; purchasing a product will *empower* specific areas of your body, and as such, a woman’s self-esteem, confidence, status, pleasure, and power can be purchased through the goods that modify her body.

**Postmodern Pornography and Gender**

This phenomenon is also occurring in pornography. Many images of pornography have been utilized in mainstream advertisements, but now utilizing the discourse of female agency. What was once considered strictly sexual fantasy in pornography is now seeping into mainstream media and becoming recast as a reality that females desire and choose to perform. Simon Hardy, in “The New Pornographies: Representation or Reality?” describes how the current cultural saturation of pornographic images and narratives have successfully blurred the lines between representation and reality, to the point of being indistinguishable from each other (Hardy, 2006).

This has occurred in the emerging pornography genres of gonzo, amateur, and sexblogs.¹ These new types of pornography are mostly heterosexual and mainstream. Hardy describes how these pornographies have developed as a result of new media (e.g. the advent of the internet), and reflect the expansive processes of sexualization in contemporary culture. Pornography has always been constituted by an arresting gender asymmetry. It is made by men, for men, portraying women as the sexual objects of male pleasure (Hardy, 3). Men have always tried to mask this by creating artificial mediums of female perspectives, for example, in letters written to porn magazines “by women” that are actually written by the magazine itself.

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¹ Gonzo pornography is a style of filmmaking that attempts to place the viewer directly into the scene, using close-up shots of hardcore material. Amateur pornography is just that – non-professional actors at their homes recording themselves and their partners having sex. Sexblogs are blogs entirely devoted to sex, and often the writer’s own sex life.
As a result of the cultural hyper-saturation of female sexuality in mass media, there has been immense growth in the interest of women’s sexual experiences - from books to memoirs, from films to magazines, from new media such as sexblogs to traditional television shows. Now, female sexuality has been thrust into the mainstream, in a more explicit and graphic manner than ever before (Ibid, 6-8). Gonzo, amateur, and sexblogs all get to the ‘truth’ of sex that viewers desire; that is, the private brought out into the public for display and enjoyment. However, this ‘truth’ is still overwhelmingly heterosexual, featuring stereotypical images of femininity, ideas of female bodies, and female subordination and humiliation. The only change is that now, women are depicted as agents who choose to perform and enjoy these roles (Gill, 102)!

Maddison argues that there have been numerous new spaces that have opened up for females to express their sexuality from their own perspective. Women are involved in every level of the porn industry, and many see it as a potentially feminist, female-centered endeavour. Due to the growing number of women in the workforce and encouragement of female sexuality in mainstream culture, more women have entered the porn industry as consumers. As women begin to comprise a major component of the audience, narratives such as rape have progressively become taboo (Maddison, 43).

The porn industry has certainly become bigger, broader, and arguably, less androcentric. However, this is perhaps not directly related to feminist activism around pornography, but is more so a result of women entering the market as consumers.² This type of “postfeminist” consumption values an “individual rather than collective empowerment...where pleasure is not a function of political struggle, but of consumer

² Just a few months ago, the slogan of pornhub.com, an extremely popular porn clip site was “It makes your dick bigger”. It has very recently just been changed to “It makes your dick bigger & gets your pussy wet”, acknowledging it’s growth of female viewers. www.pornhub.com
choice‖ (Ibid). This reflects a similar phenomenon in advertising through which female empowerment becomes a function of product consumption, rather than a political restructuring of gender equality. Maddison argues that this form of postfeminism abandons the political components of feminism and precludes challenging gender inequities, by “displacing a collective political movement with individual and competitive instances of consumer power” (Ibid, 44). Furthermore, this female claim for “right” to pleasure nearly ubiquitously manifests itself in heterosexual, stereotypically-feminine ways. Female sexualized characters such as Bridget Jones in *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and the women of *Sex and the City* display a prioritization of heterosexual relationship success, and the valorization of cuteness and ditziness above economic or occupational accomplishment.

**Fitness Pole Dancing**

Another industry that has very recently emerged to capitalize on the notion of female sexual empowerment is that of pole-dancing. Pole-dancing began as a form of erotic performance that incorporates striptease and has generally been associated with sex work. In the last 5-10 years, it has developed into a popular form of exercise for women (Holland and Attwood, 2006). Pole-dancing for fitness is marketed as a fun and flirty way to celebrate your body, thrill your man, and increase your fitness. It also offers emotional benefits, such as feeling sexy, building confidence, and fostering positive female space.

The mainstreaming of pole-dancing is an aspect of the wider sexualization of mass culture, and has become very noticeable in mainstream media. Movies such as *Striptease* (1996) ushered in the shift from strippers as exploited victims, to sassy, autonomous women (Ibid, 167-69). The growing popularity of pole-dancing, striptease,
lapdancing, and neo-burlesque classes focus on sexualization as a form of transformation; the idea that women gain power through sexual display (Ibid). Marketing for pole-dancing often expresses the pursuit of femininity and fun, selling the notion of being both subject and object while using one’s sexuality to gain power over men. Pole-dancing is a significant indication of contemporary women’s engagement with raunch culture, a culture saturated with explicit sexuality.

Holland and Attwood (2006) conducted a study of women in a popular pole-dancing class in the UK. Women in these classes describe growing self-confidence over their body and self-esteem from accomplishing a difficult dance move. Many of these women also commented on ‘feeling sexy’, being in control, “feeling powerful”, and admiring pole-dancing as a challenging athletic skill as well as an art form (Ibid, 175-76).

Indeed, these women’s perceptions of pole-dancing as a strong, exhilarating and confidence-boosting activity shows that pole-dancing can be much more than solely for heterosexual male arousal. However, there are many contradictions inherent in the views expressed by these women that indicate some problematic aspects of this form of empowerment. Women opposed the sexual connotations of pole-dancing and disputed the notion of objectification. Meanwhile, they described pole-dancers as “a thing of beauty…swans with all the beauty on top…balletic.” These descriptions simultaneously compare the dancers to objects and animals, along with associating them with “a tradition of women’s strength being concealed or controlled rather than displayed - a feature of performances associated with women” (Ibid, 176-77). This contradiction points at the complicated relationship women have with the definitions and performativities of femininity. In “Alternative Femininities”, Holland describes how women who choose
“alternative” femininities (often involving subculture fashion, and body modifications such as tattoos, piercings, and extensive hair colouring) often still engage in many practices of mainstream femininities, utilizing images such as ‘the fairy’, long, meticulously processed hair, and dresses (Holland, 2004). However, they will take these conventional images of “delicate, acceptable, [and] complicit” femininity and subvert or add other dimensions to them, such as army boots or dark goth makeup (Holland, 58). This indicates both the adoption and rejection of femininities as they are marketed towards women, as well as the contemporary woman’s constant negotiation of them.

Sex Toy Parties

Utilizing the same empowerment discourse, the female sex toy industry has exploded in the past decade. McCaughey and French (2001) document how the phenomenon of in-home sex toy parties has become popularized in cities as well as rural areas in North America, from college sororities to suburban homes. Using participant observation, they described how these parties bear a striking resemblance to Tupperware parties in the 1950’s, in terms of marketing strategies directed towards women (McCaughey and French, 2001).

Sex toy parties feature a host showing a group of women a wide variety of sex toys in their homes. These toys are presented in a sexy, fun, humorous, and sex-positive manner. Men’s sexuality is poked fun at, and there is a whole repertoire of products made for male bodies; in effect “Technology is presented as the answer to absent, insensitive, or otherwise inadequate male sex partners” (Ibid, 81). Women share stories about the incompetence of the males in their life, discuss their sexuality, and bond with their group
of friends.

McCaughey and French illustrate how starkly the sex toy parties parallel Tupperware parties. Tupperware was marketed as a product that would organize and empower women’s lifestyles, having them to focus on their own individual way of living rather than the social inequities of the time. They also celebrate feminine issues through games and the creation of woman-only spaces - in effect, creating intimacy. The sex toys are represented as “technologies of power” – products that will allow women control over their own body, control over their partners’, better erotic experiences, and more self-confidence (Ibid, 85-86).

McCaughey and French are critical of the extent that the emancipatory claims of these products are valid. They assert that sex toys market a “life politics” rather than an “emancipatory politics”. Emancipatory politics are “political efforts in which groups attempt to overcome a structural form of oppression, or overcome the oppressive restrictions of traditional customs, while life politics “presume (a certain level of) emancipation and thus focuses more on life decisions, self-identity, and lifestyle” (Ibid, 87). Life politics are often focused directly on the individual and impede collective, social-movement avenues.

It is important to distinguish in-home sex toy parties from consciously feminist sex-toy stores such as the local Good For Her, or Come as You Are. Consciously feminist sex toy stores have explicit goals of liberating women through education and access to sexual resources. They support sexual diversity and carefully consider their products in line with their feminist activism (Ibid). Sex-toy parties, on the other hand, are bereft of explicit feminist goals, often utilizing euphemisms to describe genital parts and assuming
heterosexuality. They also assume male androcentricity, with women working around that instead of changing it (Ibid, 93). However, these parties can offer implicit feminist goals, such as broadening women’s awareness of sex, their body, and the issues involved with heterosexual sex (Ibid, 89). The women that sex toy parties reach are often ones that may not have so easily walked into a feminist sex toy store. They allow women to bond with one another in a “safe space”, and can encourage women to discuss issues of sexuality outside of the party, thus containing a radical potential for social and sexual consciousness (Ibid).

So what are we to make of these forms of capitalization of female sexuality in postmodernity? How are these shifts occurring in postmodernity affecting women’s sexuality, agency and gender power distributions? Gill argues that the way women are presented in advertising does not open the doors to more accessible, egalitarian gender relations. In reality, she asserts, contemporary mainstream advertising “re-sexualizes women’s bodies, with the alibi of a feisty, empowered postfeminist discourse that makes it very difficult to critique” (Gill, 104). This is due to several factors. Firstly, it excludes all women outside of the framework of the busty, beautiful, young, and sexually desirable women depicted. This advertising is ubiquitously heterosexual and heteronormative in its portrayal of women, sexuality, and gender relations. The parallel growth of a “queer chic” or a “bisexual chic” (especially, if not entirely, of women) seems to be more closely associated with homosexual fashion rather than an actual queer sexuality (Ibid). The phenomenon of hyper-sexualized, hyper-feminine “lesbians” or “bisexuals”, as seen in heterosexual pornography and advertising, are always presented with an assumption of a male gaze; women perform for the desire of a male audience. Women who are also
excluded from this discourse of empowerment include the elderly, the disabled, the overweight, and others who do not fit into the extremely narrow standards of sexual attractiveness.

Thus, the sexual subjectification presented is “a highly specific and exclusionary practice, and sexual pleasure is actually irrelevant here; it is the power of sexual attractiveness that is important” (Gill, 105). This result in women performing countless acts of control and consumption over the bodies, many of which are physically and psychologically harmful, such as self-starvation or artificial tanning. These adverts ignore and eliminate the physical pain, stress, cost, low self-esteem, and often, violence that their products contain. The agency that is offered to women is strictly bound to the aesthetic policing of their bodies, with that policing existing entirely through their consumerism. The literal “choice” to perform these acts may be in the hands of the women themselves, but these choices exist in conditions that are not dictated by them. In effect, women are just as objectified as they have ever been, “but through sexual subjectification in…advertising they must also now understand their own objectification as pleasurable and self-chosen” (Ibid, 107).

Maddison, Gill, McCaughey and French all agree that this narrow notion of agency, and the limited choices that it offers, succeeds because it decontextualizes this ‘agency’ from its social, historical, and political context. The forms of femininity available in mainstream culture are atrociously strict, and not challenging these standards, or at least offering alternatives, keeps nearly all women chained to the consumer goods they must purchase to attain it. Presenting these consumption and lifestyle choices as “empowering” keeps critical consideration at bay; at once, it appeases traditional feminist criticism of
direct external oppression, and simultaneously operates as an internal oppression, one that women are told is their ‘choice’.

So, is there female agency of a broader and more democratic sort? And if so, where? Holland and Attwood say there are some forms of it, in pole-dancing at least. Women in the pole-dancing classes, over time, began to become much more comfortable with their bodies, wearing more revealing clothing and thinking of their bodies more confidently, regardless of what shape they took. The ultimate success in this exercise is not dependent on physical attractiveness, but rather, in mastery of the activities (Holland and Attwood, 179-80). This form of fitness does entail problematic aspects, such as its valorization of traditional forms of femininity, but there are indeed spaces in which it can encourage a woman to embrace her body, and enjoy it with confidence and attitude.

Similarly, McCaughey and French see sex toy parties and sex toys in general as creating space for feminist consciousness and gender power redistribution. The women who attend these parties are often ones who may not have the inclination or ability to enter a female-positive sex store. For some women, it offers a first step into a sex-positive politic that is not too radical for them. It also offers women the opportunity to explore some aspects of their sexuality in the privacy of their own homes, along with their friends. The capitalist motivation of the companies behind these products drive it forward, but so do the capitalist motivations of feminist sex-stores (McCaughey and French, 87-88).

The existence of feminist sex stores, and their increase in popularity and number, is an indication of rapid, radical societal change in the manner of women and their sexuality. More women are entering the consumer market with more capital, and
sexually educated interests in gender egalitarianism. As feminist economist Deirdre McClosky argues, capitalism drives development and social progression, and women participating as consumers creates critical political change (McClosky, 2000). Women in the Western, postmodern world now have much more education, and many more options as to where and how they spend their increasing expendable income. Where there are markets, there will be suppliers. Thus, we see the beginning and growth of establishments such as feminist sex stores, women-run book stores, female health clinics, and the like.

Traditional notions of femininity are being challenged every day, and studies indicate that contemporary, media-savvy women are beginning to “understand femininity as far more complex than media representations suggest…draw[ing] on particular elements of traditional femininity and rework[ing]…them with other signs…in order to connote new and more positive ways of being a woman” (Holland and Attwood, 177). It is the broader social shifts seen in postmodernity that allow this to occur, such as cultural plurality, relationship democratization, and individual diversification of traditional ideals and norms.

In the realm of pornography, Maddison asserts that changes in the egalitarianism of mainstream porn are taking place. This happens gradually, but it is happening, and in an incredibly significant way. The mere growth of interest in female sexual narratives indicates that women’s voices are being discussed, consumed, and valued. Furthermore, new genres of pornography that challenge the heteronormative, heterosexist, and androcentric bases of much mainstream porn are being created, with much success. There are many new avenues of alternative porn, queer porn, s/m porn, and feminist porn that contain explicit political goals and diversify consumer options. One major example is the
Feminist Porn Awards that occur in Toronto, Canada. Established in 1996, and the first and only award of its kind, they showcase, promote, and celebrate all kinds of pornography that includes “a woman…in the production, writing, direction, etc. of the work, [a depiction of] genuine female pleasure, [and expansion of] the boundaries of sexual representation on film and challenges stereotypes that are often found in mainstream porn” (Feminist Porn Awards, 2009).

It should be noted, however, that these arenas for a progressive, boundary-challenging capitalization of female sexuality are realities that generally exist only for a privileged group of women. Access to these spaces are usually attained by women who are educated, are in the socioeconomic condition to purchase these commodities, are in the company of like-minded peers, and who live in the urban, culturally progressive areas that contain these spaces. Once you exit these relatively unique postmodern territories, sexuality for most remain rigidly defined and ascribed.

Female sexuality cannot be discussed without some attention to male sexuality. I argue that male sexuality in postmodernity is mirroring the development of female sexuality in several significant ways. In contemporary mainstream media, heterosexual male sexuality in presented very similarly to females’; men are seen as aggressive, desiring social agents who are constantly after their own pleasure. In an analysis of numerous British soft-core pornographic and lifestyle men’s magazine, Attwood discusses how the male body is presented, its relation to sexual pleasure, and the ways in which these magazines portray sex and sexuality (Attwood, 2005). She argues that representations of masculinity have shifted from a “masterful, silent, strong man, through the ‘sensitive, nurturing, caring portrayals of the 1980s, to the “new lad” of the 1990s”
(Ibid, 85). This “new lad” is the figure portrayed in these lifestyle magazines; a celebration of “bachelor hedonism”, soft-core pornographic images, explicit sexual content, and a hedonistic consumer fantasy. Masculinity is presented as vulgar, bawdy, fun, and humorous. However, this form of sexuality relies on “the female body to represent male sexual pleasure while the male body has remained largely invisible” (Ibid, 87). The absence of the male body indicates a problematic standard for female sexuality, whereby male desire is seen as an act of work, and pleasure is expressed through the female. Women embody sexuality, and they remain the bearers of sex. For males, sexual experiences have been reconstructed as individual forms of commodity, with a hedonistic lifestyle that is purchased. Both female and male sexuality are conceived and portrayed “in terms of recreation, narcissism, hedonism and auto-eroticism” (Ibid, 98). Both women and men are “up for it”, sexually desiring, and participating in a hyper-sexualized, porn-chic lifestyle.

There is a growing contradictory presentation of sexuality, as a fashionable, chic, explicit identity expression on one hand, and as an essential, natural act on the other. Philaretou and Allen argue that postmodern men need to individually negotiate between this contradiction, just like postmodern women (G., Andreas, and Katherine R, 2001). They argue that the essentialist characterization of male sexuality as performance leads to much anxiety and feelings of sexual inadequacy. Male sexuality should continue developing along postmodern ideals, including those of gender and sexual orientation ambiguity, multiplicity, and diversity. However, there are fewer spaces for a postmodern male sexuality than there are for postmodern female sexuality. While female sexual exploration, experimentation, and identification is encouraged in consumer culture, male
sexuality continues to be portrayed much more rigidly. Deconstructing and reconstructing masculinity as a fluid act that can be valuable in many different forms requires a loosening of male sexual scripts and changes that begin with the individual (Philaretou and Allen, 316-17). In this sense, mainstream female sexuality has developed into more of a postmodern form than for males. Spaces for postmodern male sexuality remain extremely limited, and those that do exist are often tangents of female spaces (e.g. workshops in feminist sex stores that are directed to females and males, or males only).

Yet, spaces for a postmodern queering of sexuality are emerging and growing like never before. Matthew Wettlaufer describes how the Queer Nation movement developed along with shifts in postmodernity, and as a reaction to social issues such as AIDS, and the cruel treatment of non-heterosexuals all over the world (Wettlaufer, 2005). The Queer Nation movement sought to rupture societal structures of patriarchal heteronormativity and heterosexism “through irony, contradiction, and the deferment of the meaning of normality… Queer Nation sought through its presence to uproot and sabotage the hegemonic primacy of heterosexual assumptions of normality and power” (Ibid, 291). It seeks to create social, cultural, and political change with witty, ironic, and subversive actions that utilize postmodern discourses of sexuality as ‘play’, ‘recreation’, and humour. Wettlaufer argues that this presents a challenge to capitalism, which seeks to create heterosexual homogenous normality through product purchases (Ibid, 296-97). But as Deirdre McClosky argues, this challenge is not necessarily a contradiction, and new markets, consumers, and demands in postmodernity can be, and are becoming, more feminist, queer, diverse, and inclusive. She argues that a feminist, queer economy needs to be reconceptualized to take into account “what motivates people… all sorts of different
people, from cloistered nun to bond salesman, and variations within these, with all sorts of different reasons for coming to market” (McClosky, 35). As we are seeing in the emerging and evolving industries of advertising, pornography, sex toys, and pole dancing, female sexuality is beginning to be capitalized in new forms that challenge normative standards of femininity and sexuality, and offer women more product choices, identity potentials, and the opportunities to gain power and self actualization in society.

Negotiating individual sexuality within our larger cultural scope is indeed very challenging, complex and problematic. It can lead to bodily destruction, and the subsumption of female sexual agency into that of male objectification and directorial desire. However, negotiating with one’s society always contains many layers and perspectives, and postmodernity allows for a framework within which challenge, diversity, open dialogue, and sexuality are encouraged - all ingredients that allow for cultural critique and structural change to occur. Capitalist markets (and the entering of women into these markets) create the demand for capitalizations of female sexuality that are positive, fulfilling, and very empowering. While this phenomenon is complex, available only to a privileged few, and by no means exhaustive, patterns of growth in these markets are moving at a fast speed, and more women are beginning to have new avenues in which to create, express, and command space for their sexuality.
References


< http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodernity>

