



“We’re like the sex CPR dummies”: Young women’s understandings of (hetero)sexual pleasure in university accommodation

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the discourses that affect young women’s experiences of (hetero)sexual pleasure, drawing on data from focus groups with young women and young men who lived within a university residential setting in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Here we focus on the gendered understandings among the participants that prioritise men’s sexual pleasure and largely position women as the means of achieving that pleasure. The young women spoke of multiple barriers to gaining equality during (hetero)sexual experiences, with key issues being the coital imperative and women’s supposed sexual passivity. In challenging these barriers, the young women described various tactics used to resist their subordinate position. However, the women often placed the onus of responsibility for dismantling these barriers on themselves, thus bearing the burden of responsibility for not only young men’s sexual pleasure but also their own.

Keywords

(hetero)sex, sexual pleasure, campus accommodation, undergraduate students, sexual discourses, thematic analysis, coital imperative, gender and power

Introduction

Assumptions about the gendered nature of heterosex (heterosexual sexual activity) are now well rehearsed. Through most of the 20th century mainstream, and often theoretical, understandings of heterosex have been frequently influenced

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by evolutionary perspectives of sexuality and reproduction (Rutter & Schwartz, 2012). The theory that men are “genetically programmed” to produce as many children as possible has resulted in the “male sex drive” discourse (Hollway, 1984a; Rutter & Schwartz, 2012) – the assumption that men have a natural and “healthy” sex drive that urges them to have sex with women. Wendy Hollway (1984b) contrasts this with the “have/hold” discourse that permeates understandings of women’s sexuality which, she argues, involves conforming to men’s ideals as a means of keeping them in a relationship. This notion is clearly aligned with the evolutionary psychology theory that women seek men who will provide for them and their children (Rutter & Schwartz, 2012). These binarily gendered discourses then legitimate the “sexual double standard”, in which sexually active women are negatively labelled “sluts”, while sexually active men are more positively labelled “studs” (Smith, Mysak, & Michael, 2008; Zaikman & Marks, 2014). While research regularly demonstrates that the ways in which men and women of various ages approach and understand sex is actually much more complex than these discourses suggest (e.g. Allen, 2003; Warner, Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2011), the normative conceptualisation of women as sexually passive and men as sexually aggressive remains influential, with heterosexual relations often conceptualised as a “chase”, in which women eventually “submit” to men (Jackson, 1984; Seabrook, Ward, Cortina, Giaccardi, & Lippman, 2017).

The supposition that women are sexually passive means that men’s sexual pleasure is normalised and prioritised during sexual activity, while women’s sexual pleasure often seems to be positioned as “irrelevant” or, at best, a secondary consideration in heterosexual encounters (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2012; Kalish & Kimmel, 2011; Lovejoy, 2015). This is particularly true for casual heterosexual, which tends to be a more selfish act for men than recurrent sexual activity with the same partner (Armstrong et al., 2012; Kimmel, 2008; Sweeney, 2010). The prioritisation of men’s sexual pleasure is also in part related to what is termed the “coital imperative”, the notion that “real sex” necessarily constitutes intercourse, with other sexual activity considered either preliminary (i.e. “foreplay”), or a lesser substitute (Jackson, 1984; McPhillips, Braun, & Gavey, 2001). In heterosexual, intercourse is also the sexual act most likely to result in orgasm for men, whereas women are more likely to orgasm from sexual acts other than coitus (Braun, Gavey, & McPhillips, 2003). The emphasis placed on coitus thus privileges men’s pleasure above women’s. This is exacerbated by the fact that the male orgasm is almost an “obligatory” part of heterosexual encounters (unlike the female orgasm, which is somewhat “optional”), and that men’s orgasms are usually the end point of sexual activity (Braun et al., 2003; Opperman, Braun, Clarke, & Rogers, 2014). Sexual enjoyment still occurs for young women when they do not experience an orgasm during heterosexual, but there is a significant positive relationship between women having an orgasm and enjoying their sexual experience (Armstrong et al., 2012).

Recent decades have seen the emergence of alternative understandings of gendered heterosexual and it is now more common to position women as active sexual

agents who are entitled to sexual pleasure. Popular culture is replete with texts depicting women “having sex like men”, such as *Sex and the City*, and “successful” heterosex is now at least partially premised on both partners being sexually fulfilled in a reciprocal exchange of pleasure (Markle, 2008; Opperman et al., 2014). The idea of reciprocity during sexual activity is primarily linked to exchanging orgasms, rather than reciprocating general sexual enjoyment (Braun et al., 2003; McPhillips et al., 2001). “Ideal reciprocity” (Braun et al., 2003, p. 245) is when both partners orgasm simultaneously. Although this notion of reciprocity would seem to indicate a more egalitarian approach to heterosex, it appears that it is operationalised in a way that (again) prioritises men’s pleasure and masculine identities. Men’s orgasms are still considered a normative occurrence, whereas women often need to “assert themselves” and ask for a reciprocal orgasm (Braun et al., 2003). If men feel like they “give” their partners an orgasm, but do not “get” one in return, their female partner may be seen as “manipulative” or “selfish” (Braun et al., 2003).

Women who are more autonomous during casual sex (compared to engaging in sex with a lack of agency) are more likely to report enjoying their casual sex experiences (Beres & Farvid, 2010). While exercising autonomy obviously helps women ensure that they have satisfying experiences, suggesting that women “should” take more responsibility for their sexual pleasure reduces men’s accountability for a mutually pleasurable experience. This is particularly relevant when considering that women are often also “responsible” for men’s pleasure during sexual activity (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2009; Armstrong et al., 2012; Braun et al., 2003). Hence, although contemporary discourses are more encouraging of women’s sexual autonomy, there is still the expectation that women will pay greater attention to men’s sexual desires than their own (Harvey & Gill, 2011).

Furthermore, while emergent sexual practices such as “hooking up” may provide young women with greater sexual freedom, the “stud/slut” dichotomy remains, although it is complicated by the fact that in these “sex positive” contexts young women are expected to engage in *some* sexual activity – just not “too much” (Farvid, Braun, & Rowney, 2016).

Laina Bay-Cheng (2015) draws on a range of recent research on young women’s sexuality to demonstrate that in contemporary Western contexts, the social evaluation of young women’s sexual behaviour no longer reflects a simple virgin–slut binary. Instead, a neoliberal logic, which privileges individual freedom and responsibility, also operates. According to this logic, young women who are seen as being in control of their sexual behaviour – and this may include abstinence – are evaluated positively while those who are seen as victims or out of control are evaluated negatively (Bay-Cheng, 2015). This privileging of agency means that young women are judged not so much on the basis of how much sex they have, but rather on whether they actively choose their sexual encounters. The “appropriateness” of young women’s sexual activities is assessed on the basis of self-interest and their own desire and pleasure, and the level of responsibility they take for any consequences (Farvid et al., 2016).

In this paper, we discuss young men and women's understandings of (hetero)sex within a New Zealand university residential setting. Specifically, we focus on how the young men and women participants in this research framed sexual pleasure. Our intention as researchers was to understand the normative constructions and discourses of (hetero)sexual pleasure within the residential environment, as explained by residents. While at times participants – and particularly the young men – followed gendered discourses of sexuality, the young women often showed resistance to such constricting discourses. Despite this, the responsibility was often placed on young women to advocate and challenge such discourses.

Method and procedure

The findings reported here are part of an investigation of first-year students' readiness for life in university halls, specifically in respect of sexuality. Following high school – and arguably inadequate sexual education – many young New Zealanders go on to attend university, some living in on-campus accommodation during their first year of study. At the university where this research was conducted, this accommodation comprises single occupant rooms. Compared to living in the family home, students have minimal supervision and are subject to few rules: they are essentially treated as adults, albeit in an institutional setting. Thus, the halls of residence (or just “halls”) can be considered a liminal space (Neumann, 2012), a transition between the usually close supervision of family life, and the autonomous context of flatting (sharing a private dwelling with a small group). In the liminal space of the halls, large numbers of young people live in close proximity, forming communities which are likely to have an influence on their understandings of sexuality, amongst other things (Warner et al., 2011).

Following university ethical approval, we collected two sets of data. The first comprised interviews with key informants (residential staff members), which we are not discussing in this article. The second source was two single-gender focus groups with current students, one for women ($n=5$) and one for men ($n=4$). These participants were primarily Pākehā (New Zealand European), with two participants identifying as both Māori and Pākehā. All were 18 or 19 years old. They came from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and from various regions in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Because of our research aims, we recruited exclusively heterosexual students who had moved directly from their family home to the residential setting and had come straight from high school to university. The first author, a graduate student close in age to the student participants, conducted both the focus groups.

The purpose of the focus groups was to gain understandings of student perspectives, knowledges, experiences, and concerns regarding sexuality. To help make the participants feel more comfortable discussing issues of sexual behaviour, the focus groups began with a customised sexuality and gender-related “icebreaker” (Calder-Dawe, 2014). The focus groups were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim (including relevant non-verbal utterances, e.g. laughter).

Data analysis

Using the focus group transcripts, the first author identified key themes and made preliminary interpretive summaries of these. The participants received a summary of the key points that were generated from their focus groups, and had the opportunity to give feedback within two weeks, as a respondent validation process (Bryman, 2008). There were no responses from participants, and it was thus assumed the summary of points was accepted by the participants as a valid interpretation of the focus group conversations.

Thematic analysis was used to code the transcribed data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data were coded manually, with an inductive, “data-driven” approach being used (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved writing short marginal notes in transcripts and working towards separating segments of data into different, distinct codes – all related to sexuality in halls of residence as the overarching research topic. Some of the key themes found were lack of beneficial sexuality education, sexual violence and victimization, alcohol, and the liminality of halls of residence. For this article, the data were subsequently re-analysed with a focus on how the participants talked about women’s sexual pleasure as a “latent theme” (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

We have elected to not use pseudonyms to refer to the participants. This is because there are specific narratives that could identify a speaker when all quotes from that person were read together. However, to assist the reader in understanding how the conversations developed, in each quote involving several speakers, we have labelled the first speaker “A”, the second “B” and so on. Thus, it is made clear what contributions each makes to that particular conversation while minimising the risk of making anyone identifiable.

Although we are aware that we need to be cautious in generalising from such a small sample, we argue that these findings give some insights into both how young women perceive their sexual pleasure and how young men understand it (or fail to understand it). The findings also provide insights into how the context of university halls has particular consequences for young women’s experiences and understandings of sexual pleasure.

Analysis and discussion

Awareness/understandings of pleasure

Residents spoke of the halls as a place to experiment with sexuality. One of the young women described it as “an accessibility thing, coz like it’s so easy for people to find other people to do things with. . .like it happened because they’re in such close proximity.” In one respect, then, the liminal space of the halls, and the fairly ready availability of sexual partners, is for many a positive experience – a relatively safe environment in which they can experiment and learn from experience. However, the focus group with the women students also revealed some less positive

experiences. In many instances, this related to the lack of consideration of female sexual pleasure on the part of their male partners. The understanding that women are entitled to sexual pleasure is evident in the following conversation, specifically in the reactions of other young women in the focus group to one participant's disclosure that she had never had an orgasm:

A: I found that. . .that's one of the few things I've found out at uni, that girls (orgasm-ing) was a rare thing and I'm like that shouldn't. . .no.

B: I've never (orgasmed) before.

A: Really?

B: Yeah, never.

A: That's so upsetting for me.

B: I know, I find it so upsetting.

C: Have you tried it yourself?

B: Yeah, I find it so upsetting.

(Young women)

The main objective in the young women's pursuit of pleasure appeared to be achieving an orgasm, which is not an uncommon goal in heterosex, and not unsurprising given that women are more likely to report enjoying sexual experiences when they achieve orgasm (Armstrong et al., 2012; Braun et al., 2003). Although sexual acts with a male partner were considered the "optimum" means of achieving orgasm, the young women were also open to the idea of using self-stimulation to achieve this goal:

A: When I first started sexual experiences, I couldn't [orgasm]. It really frustrated me to the point that I think I cried with one of my ex-boyfriends and I was like I can't finish, something's wrong with me type thing. And basically I just spent like a good two or three days just sorting myself out by myself and then-

B: You got your stuff going.

A: -I got my stuff, and now I know what works for me.

(Young women)

In media portrayals, women's masturbation is often represented as part of the process of practising for sexual activity with a partner (particularly casual heterosex) rather than for one's personal pleasure (Farvid & Braun, 2014). Similarly, in the young women's focus group, orgasms achieved through self-stimulation were seen as less *satisfactory* than those achieved through coitus. However, many of the young women's sexual experiences confirmed that men's sexual pleasure is normalised and prioritised during sexual activity (Lovejoy, 2015), and they suggested that men do not seem interested in understanding women's pleasure:

Interviewer: So do you think pleasure's another thing that's not talked about or-?

A: I feel like nobody really gives a shit about the girl.

B: Yeah.

A: . . .Boys always get to finish (orgasm), and when they're done it's done.

[Agreement]

C: . . .They asked [my boyfriend] if he had a good night and then they just made noises at me.

D: Like you're a tool.

C: Yeah.

A: It's like being a walking fleshlight.¹

(Young women)

The young women were quite clear that mainstream discourses attributed an entitlement to sexual pleasure to men, while women were passive participants in the event (Hird & Jackson, 2001; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1998; Seabrook et al., 2017), echoing recent research which found that young men often discuss men's sexuality in terms of agency, whereas women's sexuality is described as passive (Allen, 2007). Male pleasure is considered normative, and therefore sexual behaviour that prioritises male pleasure is also considered normative. Moreover, the above exchange suggests that male pleasure is seen as worthy of "public" interest within the "sexual arena" of the campus (Bogle, 2008) – the boyfriend was asked if he had "had a good night", while his girlfriend is dehumanised ("they just made noises at me"), and reduced to a passive tool ("fleshlight") that is used for male sexual pleasure.

While the young men did consider the possibility of female pleasure, they were, at best, ambivalent about it:

Interviewer: So is the girl's pleasure important? Or?

A: Yeah I think so.

[Long silence]

[Laughter]

A: Yeah I think it is. Yea I hate it, feeling like you didn't do enough to make them happy as well. Like I kind of don't like just going bang, and then being done and saying goodbye. Like I think that's kind of ratshit. Try do other stuff aye.

B: Yeah.

C: I dunno.

Interviewer: What do you [other] guys think?

C: Yeah.

B: Aw yeah.

[Laughter]

B: Bang and goodbye. Another perspective.

C: Tap and gap.

(Young men)

In this discussion, the first young man was explicit in affirming that women's pleasure is important. However, the other young men are much more ambivalent. The muted agreement ("Yeah") and uncomfortable laughter suggest that they are not unaware that women's pleasure is a legitimate part of heterosex. However, by characterising

sex as “bang and goodbye” or “tap and gap” – that is, satisfying themselves and then leaving – they appear to be complicit in the discourse that women’s pleasure is irrelevant. Their responses tend to confirm that selfish pleasure is the main imperative for men in relation to casual sex (Armstrong et al., 2012; Sweeney, 2010).

Despite lack of consideration of young women’s *pleasure*, there was discussion by the young men regarding the desirability of the active *involvement* of their female partners in sexual activity:

Interviewer: When you get with a girl, do you have any expectations other than the boobs?

[Laughter]

A: I guess just to expect that they kinda know what they’re doing a little bit as well as yourself I guess.

B: Yeah.

A: Like if, and hoping that they’re not like a lazy sex if that makes... I dunno there was a rumour back in school about a girl who just, I dunno they called her a limp fish kind of, she just like, it sounds real bad and I didn’t, never used to like hearing the rumour but she used to. They said she just lay there and just like ‘yo sex me’.

[Laughter]

(Young men)

This discussion suggests that the young men expected their female sexual partners to be actively involved in maximising male pleasure. That is, women are expected to exercise a certain level of agency, but primarily to serve men’s interests (Armstrong et al., 2009, 2012; Braun et al., 2003). In contrast, the men rarely portrayed a feeling of responsibility for ensuring women’s enjoyment.

A slightly less pessimistic view is that young men’s disregard for women’s pleasure may reflect not indifference but ignorance. This more charitable reading is evident in the following exchange in the women’s group:

A: Boys think that it’s all just jackhammer [during coitus]. It’s like, it’s not. That’s not how it works.

[agreement]

B: They think that their dick is the best thing on earth.

C: Or the faster they go the better it is.

(Young women)

These young women seem to suggest that “jackhammering” on the part of young men is the result of a genuine belief that this constitutes “good sex”. Extending this line of thinking, the ways in which the young women reflected on their experiences suggested that the halls may be a place in which young men can begin to learn a more reciprocal approach to sex:

A: I feel like for a lot of the guys here, we’re like the test dummies - you know, like when you learn to do CPR on a dummy? We’re like the sex CPR dummies because

they don't know how to do anything with their fingers, or whatever, and they're like 'I'll just figure it out on you coz uni is the time to experiment', but it's like 'ow'.

[Agreement and laughter]

B: I had someone like that, I'm like 'no, no, that's not how you do that. Don't put that there'.

[Laughter]

A: [Give me] a chart, and I'll show you the female anatomy.

C: Like 'No, no, no, no, stop, down'.

[Laughter]

(Young women)

Young men were described as attempting to figure out the "right" way to engage in sexual activity, although, as the above conversation makes clear, this was often at the expense of the young women's immediate enjoyment. Nevertheless, the women demonstrated a degree of sexual agency, asserting their right to informed and enjoyable sexual encounters, confirming previous findings of a positive link between women's agency and their sexual pleasure (Beres & Farvid, 2010; Braun et al., 2003). However, our analysis suggests that the young women's assertions of their equal right to sexual pleasure were not without problems.

Barriers to sexual pleasure for women

As well as the general lack of knowledge and understanding on the part of many of their young male sexual partners, the young women's discussions revealed a number of other barriers to attaining sexual agency and sexual pleasure. Here, traditionally gendered understandings of masculine and feminine sexuality and the influence of pornography were prominent themes.

Traditional understandings of gendered sexuality. The focus group discussions showed that certain asymmetries persist in the way men's and women's sexual behaviour is regarded. An example of this is the following discussion of gossip about casual sexual activity:

A: Because I feel like with guys yea (the gossip) eases after a few days and everyone kinda goes 'Oh yeah they fucked some person and it doesn't really matter' but yeah, everyone will be adding up the people that (women have) been sleeping with.

B: It defines you.

C: It's not good.

A: And being judged your worth on how many people you've fucked, and it's like the more the girl has, the less you are, and the more a guy has the more he is.

(Young women)

Clearly, the narrative that heterosexual activity increases men's status and decreases women's status still has traction (Smith et al., 2008; Zaikman & Marks, 2014). Young women's sexuality continues to be constructed as

problematic, whether young women themselves view it as problematic or not (Powell, 2010). This is particularly relevant in a residential setting, where close proximity means that an individual's sexual activity is available for public consumption and judgement to a far greater extent than in other social contexts (Bogle, 2008). This not only affects the ways in which women are expected to engage in sexual activity but also how they should talk about it:

A: Guys you know, (they) can talk about sex in public and stuff, but girls it's like you have to talk about it behind closed doors with your best girlfriends.

B: You're just taught to shame yourself. Like everything is wrong. Like you're not allowed to go and do what you want or be happy or whatever because that's what guys do.

(Young women)

While it is normative for young men to celebrate their sexual encounters, young women's behaviour and pleasure is constructed as not worthy of, or appropriate for, public discussion. Equally persistent is the "have/hold" discourse that holds that for women, engaging in heterosex is normative only within a romantic context and then only as passive participants (Hird & Jackson, 2001; Hollway, 1984a; Holland et al., 1998; Seabrook et al., 2017). This was demonstrated in the following narrative from one of the young men:

Coz I also remember my cousin... she was saying how she hated being with a guy and then when they tried to cuddle her for some reason, she just didn't want to be cuddled. And she'd been [single] for so long she kinda just wanted to get up and go sleep on the couch by herself... I just told her, 'You need a boyfriend. You need someone who can love you coz they (other guys) just gonna fuck you and you're going to be lonely all the time.' She kinda just told me to shut up.

(Young man)

While the young man's advice may have been well intended, it reveals a belief that women should ideally be sexual only within the context of a romantic relationship, and that women need such relationships to protect them from the unrestrained sexual behaviour of men.

Pornography. There are contradictory findings regarding the effects of pornography on young people's experiences and understandings of sexuality (Short, Black, Smith, Wetterneck, & Wells, 2012). While some research suggests that exposure to pornography does not result in youth engaging in risky sexual behaviour (Luder et al., 2011; Short et al., 2012), other research points to some men coercing their partner to imitate activities seen in pornography (Rothman & Adhia, 2015).

The topic of pornography arose spontaneously during the women's focus group, when one young woman asked the others about its influence. It is notable that all the young women in the focus group contributed to this discussion. Although the

women were not expressly opposed to pornography (and one young woman mentioned watching it herself), they did suggest that it has an impact on how some young men enact heterosex:

A: Do you guys feel like porn's influenced-

B: Oh yes.

A:-all the way that boys try and-

C: Like I watch porn so-

A: You know how in porn the guy always [ejaculates] all over the girl, all over her body or her face and shit like that. And just the way that they're like in and out (during coitus).

D: How they never wear condoms.

E: When you're sucking them off and they grab the back of your head

And they're like 'Uh uh', and it's like 'No'.

(Young women)

The young women's talk suggests that pornography does have an effect on some young men's sexual behaviour (e.g. "How they never wear condoms" or "grab the back of your head"). Further discussion in both groups revealed a consensus that "some" people know the difference between pornography and real life, and "some" people do not. Porn sex was articulated by the participants as "fantasy" designed to facilitate masturbation, porn's presumed "actual purpose". This was contrasted with "real sex and pleasure":

A: I feel like some guys know that porn is fake and there literally for them to jerk off to. And then other guys really believe it. So I think it depends on the guy.

[Agreement]

B: One of the guys that I'm quite good friends with, has been like 'Okay, so how do I make my girlfriend squirt everywhere?'

[Laughter]

B: He's like, 'That's what I want. That's all I want her to do'. And I'm like 'Okay...'

A:...That's so funny that guy's like 'I just want my girlfriend to squirt everywhere.'

B: No he's like, 'She's never come before but she can squirt right?' And I was just like...I don't know what fucking source you have been researching on.

C: Porn Hub.

B: Yeah Porn Hub.

[Laughter]

D:...If she's never come before, how is she gonna come from a normal orgasm to like a squirting orgasm?

[Laughter]

D: There's a step he's got to get to first.

A: It's like jumping between buildings.

D: That's even rarer than girls coming in the first place.

(Young women)

The young man discussed here appears unconcerned about the fact that his girlfriend is not achieving orgasm, and yet he wants her to “s squirt”, a phenomenon which is increasingly common in pornography. The growing popularity of “squirting” is likely linked to the visual evidence it (theoretically) provides of female sexual pleasure, thus “proving” the man’s sexual skill. Louisa Allen (2006) has highlighted how the lack of erotic aspects in sexuality education in New Zealand high schools means that young men sometimes rely on pornography to gain an understanding of “real” bodies and sexual pleasure. However, both this discussion and various conversations in the young men’s focus group suggest that the men are not overly concerned with women experiencing *actual* sexual pleasure. Rather, masculine identity here seems to rest on the *appearance* of pleasure, which Allen (2006) refers to as a “male trophy” – where the woman’s pleasure is proof of the man’s sexual prowess.

Young women resisting dominant discourses of heterosex

The above discussion demonstrates that the young women interviewed for this project were aware that there are various reasons they were not consistently experiencing the sexual pleasure to which they felt entitled. These young women were openly critical of, and resistant to, dominant discourses in which their sexual pleasure and agency was positioned as a secondary to men’s. For example, traditional discourses seem to dictate that sexual activity finishes with male orgasm:

A: I think you’re expected to give a lot more than you receive, like why does sex always end when the guy finishes?

[Agreement]

A: For reals though.

[Laughter]

B: It’s so true.

(Young women)

Here the young women clearly challenged dominant understandings that male orgasm is the marker of a “successful” sexual encounter, and the appropriate end point (Braun et al., 2003; Opperman et al., 2014). When young women try to actively resist this prioritising of male sexual pleasure by attempting to frame their own orgasm as the “goal” and subsequent endpoint of a sexual encounter, this was cast as neither normative nor appropriate:

A: I think I’m like that one girl ever that when I’ve (orgasmed), I’ve been like okay that’s enough (coitus). And I’ve been like okay I’m good. And then I’ve told people and they’ve been like ‘that’s so mean’. I’m like ‘fuck you.’

B: But the guy does that!

(Young women)

As both this discussion regarding the normative endpoint of heterosexual encounters, and earlier discussions regarding the prioritising of men’s sexual pleasure

demonstrate, the young women in this research are often not experiencing the sexual pleasure they want. Not unreasonably, this can result in a lack of engagement for these women, which could also be used as a form of resistance to the men's lack of knowledge about, or concern for, their female partners' pleasure:

A: My friend does this thing, she's had more experience (sexually) than myself and most people I know. She's so funny, she's like 'Yeah, sometimes if I'm in bed with a guy and he's just being really boring, jackhammering me, I do this thing where I go limp and I see if they've noticed.'

[Laughter]

A: And sees if they've noticed that she's pretending to have had a stroke or something. She said she's done it eleven times, and no one has even stopped and been like 'Are you okay?' Because they were just like (sex noise).

[Laughter]

B: I did that once because I wanted to see if they would do anything and they actually asked if I was okay.

A: Aw that's good.

[Agreement]

C: Keen to try it now.

[Laughter]

(Young women)

While the lack of interest some men have in women's pleasure was clearly dissatisfying, young women resist capitulation to this ideological positioning as passive by making incongruent humour out of such an interaction and laughing at women's responses to the normalisation of male pleasure (Watson, 2015). This excerpt suggests that not *all* young men demonstrate this disinterest in women's sexual pleasure, but the laughter of the young women at the original story and their desire to test the "game" themselves indicates a commonly shared experience (Hay, 2000).

One of the young women recounted actively communicating her right to sexual pleasure with a past partner, presumably inspired by the notion that women are entitled to reciprocal orgasms:

I had a boyfriend once in high school and he didn't last very long (during coitus)... I remember my friend had a boyfriend at the time and she's like 'Oh no I tell my boyfriend when I need to continue or I put his hand down there and he finds it really sexy.' I was like okay, maybe I can try something like that. Bad idea, he was so offended. He was so hurt that the 30 seconds (of coitus) was not enough. He was really, really upset and I was like okay I'm never going to do that again.

Here again, masculine identity is intertwined with specific norms of heterosex, such that this young man seemed genuinely upset that the short period of time it took him to orgasm was not also adequate for his partner. Notably, the young woman's statement, "I'm never going to do that again", suggests that she found it easier and

possibly more appropriate to prioritise her male partner's pleasure and sense of masculine identity above her right to sexual pleasure, which is not uncommon in heterosexual (Allen, 2003).

The young women also shared their thoughts on how young men perceive women's engagement in sex, again illustrating the dominant understanding that women's sexuality is motivated by romance (Hird & Jackson, 2001; Holland et al., 1998; Powell, 2010):

It's like they don't take into account that it's our choice to do it. They're like 'aw (a woman) got romanced by this guy' and I'm like... [you can] actually make a conscious decision, like 'I want to do this'.

The young women's response demonstrates a rejection of this societal norm and represents young women as active sexual agents. In addition to having to negotiate gendered expectations and their supposed sexual passivity (Hird & Jackson, 2001; Holland et al., 1998; Powell, 2010), it seems that young women still have to worry about being defined by their engagement with casual sex, with potentially negative consequences if this is deemed to be "too much" (Farvid et al., 2016). However, the young women in this research were adamant that they were entitled to sexual agency:

A: Should justify [your sexual behaviour] by being like because I like to have sex.

B: Yeah.

A: Justification is all the justification you need.

B: Yeah, rather than trying to talk shit about me.

The ways in which these young women talked aligned with contemporary neoliberal discourses of sexual agency identified by Bay-Cheng (2015): they suggested taking ownership of, and personal responsibility for, their sexual behaviour, while being aware that this would have likely consequences and require justification. Despite the barriers that the young women discussed, the advice they would give to themselves (if they could) before living in halls is:

A: Don't be afraid to do it (sexual activity) if you genuinely want to do it. Like you're gonna get shamed but if you feel like you can own it then just be like 'Yeah I slept with him, so what? I wanted to' and don't let that hold you back.

B: Don't over think it.

A: Yeah.

B: Don't overthink it once you've done it.

C: Just enjoy it.

Overall, the young women highlighted multiple tactics that they, and other women, have used to resist the barriers that women face when trying to gain sexual pleasure. Although these modes of resistance presented their own issues and were not

always successful, it is notable that the young women remained resolute in their belief in their entitlement to sexual pleasure and sexual agency.

Yet still shouldering the responsibility

Despite the young women's stated commitment to achieving sexual pleasure, their narratives revealed that, at times, they also feel responsible for the young men's pleasure, even though this was not reciprocated:

A: And girls don't expect [oral sex] of guys anyway.

[agreement]

B: Like there's no way that I would push a guy's head between my legs but they do it to girls all the time.

C: Just like sexual acts in general.

(Young women)

This quote demonstrates that it is still considered entirely appropriate for men to be in control of sexual encounters. While women are encouraged to be "engaged", this is in a way that prioritises men's pleasure (Allen, 2007; Hird & Jackson, 2001; Holland et al., 1998). Moreover, while these young women resisted discourses of sexual passivity, here they revealed that they still felt unable to be as assertive as their male sexual partners. However, their resistance did not necessarily mean that they expected their sexual partners to take any responsibility for ensuring their (women's) sexual pleasure:

Interviewer: So do you think (coitus) finishes when the guy finishes (orgasming) because they just don't know any better or-?

[Agreement]

A: Either that, or they don't realise that it needs to continue for the girl.

B: But then again some girls aren't very...they don't voice what's happening for them.

And you can see what happens when a guy comes, whereas if a girl comes, it's like

'Well how the fuck was I supposed to know? You sounded like you were enjoying it.'

It is notable that here the young women placed at least part of the onus of lack of enjoyment on young women themselves, suggesting that if they want more sexual pleasure, they need to specifically *ask* for it (Armstrong et al., 2012; Beres & Farvid, 2010; Braun et al., 2003). Although women are more likely to enjoy sexual activity when they have autonomy (Beres & Farvid, 2010), this assertion that women should be more explicit in stating their sexual desires places the accountability on women, rather than expecting men to take responsibility for their lack of interest or expertise in ensuring women experience sexual pleasure. Yet women are often expected to also be responsible for men's pleasure, frequently prioritising this above their own enjoyment (Allen, 2003; Armstrong et al., 2009, 2012; Braun et al., 2003). Thus, women take all the responsibility for ensuring sexual pleasure,

and men take almost none. This extended to the ultimate goal of heterosex, the orgasm, with the suggestion that, as a woman, if you do not receive pleasure from your partner, even after asking for it, you take care of it yourself:

A: It just baffles me, because my (orgasm) to having sex ratio is probably 90%, so I'm pretty good.

B: What the fuck?

C: But I don't know if it's just because I'm extremely comfortable with myself and so I'm like, well if you're not doing it (giving me an orgasm), I'm doing it.

This young woman clearly suggests that her "success" in sexual encounters is due to taking responsibility for this herself, rather than relying on her sexual partner. Research indicates that women have more than double the chance of experiencing an orgasm during heterosex when they engage in self-stimulation (Armstrong et al., 2012). If women who are more autonomous during casual sex (compared to engaging in sex with a lack of agency) are more likely to report enjoying their casual sex experiences (Beres & Farvid, 2010), masturbation could be argued to be the ultimate autonomous sexual act. This could be considered an act of neoliberal self-determination, the disregard of the coital imperative and male sexual entitlement clearly demonstrating female sexual agency (Bay-Cheng, 2015). However, the implication that women "should" take more responsibility for their sexual pleasure to the point of self-stimulation, even during partnered encounters, places almost no accountability for a mutually pleasurable experience on young men.

Conclusion

In this article, we highlight the discourses that affect young women's (hetero)sexual pleasure. The university residential setting provided an environment for experimenting with sexuality, but this experimentation was strongly influenced by persistently gendered discourses about women's sexuality, with orgasms and the coital imperative being the focal point of conversation and experience. Young women faced multiple barriers to gaining equality in heterosex and asserting their right to agency. Traditional understandings of sexuality – that is, men's pleasure being prioritised as normative and expected – clearly still influence how young people engage in and understand sexual experiences, with men generally considering women as passive participants. Young women highlighted the marginalisation of women's sexual pleasure, with reciprocity of pleasure not occurring unless explicitly requested by the young women. Multiple narratives were shared by the young women about how they resisted such discourses of sexuality, but there appear to be negative repercussions for stepping outside of the typical construction of women's sexuality. When young women enacted their right to engage in sexual activity, the sexual double standard was often perpetuated, particularly when the women concerned were perceived to lack autonomy and neoliberal agency. The young women also spoke about how it is women themselves who need to resist the barriers to sexual equality, suggesting that the responsibility for their lack of sexual pleasure

lay with young women who do not actively express their agency by making explicit sexual requests. This echoes literature that calls for women to voice their sexual desires in order to achieve their desired outcomes (Armstrong et al., 2009, 2012; Braun et al., 2003). Although potentially true, this position disregards the privileges that young men receive from normative heterosex and places the onus on young women to be responsible for their own pleasure *and* men's pleasure.

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Note

1. Masturbatory aid for men.

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