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**EMBODYING SEXY: NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO
FEMALE SEXUALITY AND CONSUMER CULTURE**

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Abstract

This research investigates female sexuality and consumer culture. It focuses on *sexy* as a form of expressing sexuality. The main objectives of this research were to understand what sexy meant to a group of young women and how they were socialised into their meaning through the consumer culture they live in.

A narrative inquiry is used to understand these women's embodied experience using collective biography and digital storytelling methods. A group of seven women participated in three group meetings to collectively research sexy. Collective biography and digital storytelling were layered upon one another to understand these women's experiences of sexy and to enable collaborative analysis. Through the meetings the women progressed through the meetings in their comprehension of their own and the collective's meaning of sexy. They did so through the creation of memory and digital stories.

The research highlighted sexy as complex, contradictory, consequential, and dynamic for these women. Sexy was complex because it was embodied as multisensory. It was also contradictory because the images of sexy presented in consumer culture are not consistent with these women's beliefs. The contrary nature of sexy resulted in envy, low self-esteem, and objectification. Sexy was also dynamic because it changed as the women matured.

Sexy is embodied. It requires more than simply achieving just *the look*. It is experienced as multisensory. These women's experiences and images of sexy differ from those presented in consumer culture. The research challenges the assumption that adult women can and do act on their knowledge that adverts are fantasy. It provides a new insight by highlighting transformation through the collaborative research process. These women were able to understand how they had been socialised into their meaning of sexy and make better informed choices. The research also highlighted the fine line these women walk between *slutty* and *sexy* due to the virgin/whore dichotomy. This research contributes in two ways: by suggesting future directions for the sexual education of adolescent girls and more research on young adult women, their experiences of sexuality, and the influences from consumer culture.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This research began with a burning desire to understand how, and if, consumer culture affects female sexuality. I wanted not only to understand how young women are socialised into consumer culture but to share their story. I wanted to uncover the full, unedited version that laid raw the emotion and turmoil these young women encountered in living their sexuality in a consumer culture.

In 2008, I witnessed two teenage girls, surrounded by a group of guys who cheered them on in a night club, kissing. It appeared to me they were engaging in this act for male attention. I wanted to understand what influenced them to act like this in public. I wanted to know why this was thought to be acceptable and perhaps considered sexy. After being confronted with a disturbing advert by Burger King on television I started to think about my questions in relation to advertising. The advert panned out to reveal three women in lingerie in bed with one another, caressing. The advert asked “What is better than three beef patties?” then a picture of their burger was displayed. The message was clear. Burger King was telling us a burger with three patties was the best thing and a sexual act involving three women was the next best thing. I felt that what I had seen in the night club was most likely a response to young girls believing this behaviour is what men want. The advertisement suggests that women are the next best thing to a burger if they take part in the implied sexual conduct. We are made to believe this exhibitionism is female empowerment. I could not let this story go untold.

Sex has been mainstreamed in the media (Durham, 2008; Levy, 2006; Reichert, 2007; Reichert, Lambiase, Morgan, Carstarphen, & Zavoina, 1999; Walter, 2010) and this has helped create social norms of sexuality (Gamson & Moon, 2004; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002; Reichert & Lambiase, 2003; Schroeder & Zwick, 2004; Stevens & Maclaran, 2008; Zhang, Miller, & Harrison, 2008). Female sexuality is commonly displayed in consumer culture in a damaging light and undressing is often promoted as female empowerment (Durham, 2008; Levy, 2006; Walter, 2010; Wolf, 1997). Advertising and the media provide images of a submissive, physically attractive sex object which can have serious consequences for women (Hall & Crum, 1994; Martin & Gentry, 1997; Martin & Kennedy, 1993; Reichert & Lambiase, 2003; Yao, Mahood, &

Linz, 2010). This portrayal of female sexuality as objectified, submissive and narrowly defined can cause women to engage in damaging behaviour such as eating disorders, cosmetic surgery and low self-esteem (Kilbourne, 1994; Martin & Gentry, 1997; Sarwer et al., 2005; Stice & Shaw, 1994). Women are exhibiting signs of imitating these images which suggests the pictures women are exposed to influence their sexuality.

In the academic marketing, literature, consumer culture has contributed little to women's experiences of female sexuality. More importantly however, marketers and consumers need to be made aware of the dire consequences these experiences can have for girls and women in order to allow change. The American Psychological Association Task Force Sexualisation of Girls Report (2007) suggests girls' aspirations can be influenced by learning *sexy* too soon because they may see sexy as the only avenue to self-worth and value. This finding implies that consumer culture teaches us sexy, but it also raises the question of whether marketers are doing everything they can to protect girls and women from harmful consequences. It is imperative to explore the story of female sexuality as I do not believe the intense damage consumer culture can inflict on young women is truly understood. I question whether women are empowered through consumer culture's version of sexy. Therefore, this research is important as it aims to give power to women living their sexuality. Through this research, I wanted young women to have a voice and to tell their experiences so that maybe a social change could begin. At the very least, let it heal the women who shared their experiences if they had gone through emotional pain as I had in the past.

It was important for me to be heard on this topic of female sexuality. I needed to tell my story with all the emotion it involved because I had really struggled with my own sexuality. I based my behaviour and dress on what I had learned from the media was "sexy". I had been one of those girls once, behaving and dressing to get male attention, imitating the Burger King ad. I had ended up emotionally damaged from some of the events that occurred while I tried to figure out how sexuality worked. I knew how deep these wounds could go. I also knew you could not restrict this research to facts and figures alone. You would not understand how women live the effects of consumer culture's influence on their sexuality if it did.

Therefore, I decided I would participate in the research and share my story with other women and learn from their stories.

The purpose of this research is to understand female sexuality and socialisation by exploring young women's experiences of sexy and to find out how the images in consumer culture contribute to their understandings of sexy. I chose to focus my research on sexy to understand female sexuality because sexy is often displayed as sexuality in the media. Courtney and Whipple (1983) define sexual appeal in advertising as "sexuality in the form of nudity, sexual imagery, innuendo and double entendre" (p. 103). The majority of people are exposed to these images of sexuality through the media and advertising and therefore sexuality in this form will be easily recognised by the participants in this study. Sexual images in advertising and throughout the media, define what is sexy and who is sexy (Kilbourne, 2003). These images define desirability in others and ourselves. The sexy images are used in the media as a form of expressing sexuality through skin, body, sexual imagery, physical contact, and innuendo. Presenting images of women as sexy in consumer culture is often a way of representing female sexuality and can create assumptions such as how "easy" she is or how she should act in the bedroom for her man. For example, according to Millsted and Firth (2003), large breasted women believed they faced a stereotype of having loose sexual morals because large breasted women in the media were presented this way. This finding suggests sexy is part of female sexuality, and so the term is the focus of this research.

The research is motivated by social change. It aims to help young women to understand impositions on their sexuality, to make informed choices, and to assist in the avoidance of emotional trauma. The research also contributes to academic knowledge on female sexuality in consumer culture and adds value to the literature by collecting rich data using innovative methods: collective biography and digital storytelling. These methods have not been commonly employed in this subject area.

The method gains deep insight into female sexuality. The intertwining of collective biography and digital storytelling allowed me to feel the young

women's experiences, as well as hear these women's voices. It gave the women freedom to express themselves as they desired.

Sexuality is felt through the body. It must be felt and embodied to be understood fully. As Gannon (2008) explains, "our bodies are connected with other bodies and they exist and acquire meaning in a social space" (p. 65). We gain meaning as individuals and as a whole from them. The research focuses on the young women's experiences of embodying sexy by sharing a memory when they experienced sexy. Going back to that time in the memory and remembering how they felt enabled them to paint an intense picture of how they embodied sexy, and, through sexy, their sexuality. Furthermore the women were able to understand how they are socialised into their meaning of sexy by sharing and listening to each other's embodied experience. The women then created digital stories of their embodied experience to further create a rich insight into the meaning of sexy and how they have been socialised. This approach, in turn, allows the audience to live the participant's memory story, which is important to in grasping what sexy means to these women and how consumer culture has influenced them.

The thesis starts with a literature review that outlines what we currently know about consumer culture and female sexuality. It provides a starting point for this research as it outlines the gaps in the academic literature. The literature review discusses some of the issues surrounding female sexuality in relation to consumer culture, advertising (the common marketing communication), research, and embodiment. Next the thesis describes in detail the methods of collective biography and digital storytelling, and the narrative inquiry approach. The research scope and ethical considerations are also addressed. After the research method, the findings are presented using the life story narrative technique that allows the intertwining of my interpretation with the voice of the women. In addition, the main findings are outlined in this section. Next the thesis discusses how the findings support, extend, challenge, the literature and provide new insight. The findings consider the areas of physical appearance, male approval, embodiment, contradictions, consumption, consequences, fantasy vs. reality, dynamism and transformation. The thesis ends by drawing conclusions and pointing to the implications of the research, as well as suggesting future directions for social change and highlighting the need for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter investigates the current literature on female sexuality in relation to consumer culture, advertising (the common marketing communication), research, and embodiment. It outlines what is already known on the topic and highlights gaps in the literature which this research will attempt to fill.

Female Sexuality and Consumer Culture

Women's sexuality is being influenced by consumer culture. Sexual socialisation suggests that examples of sexual interactions in the media containing information about sexuality guide people in the construction of their perceptions about sexual relationships as well as gender roles (Zhang et al., 2008). Cultivation theory also provides evidence of the media influences on sexuality. According to this theory, exposure to television's distorted images gradually shapes beliefs and attitudes about reality, so that our perceptions then reflect those of the media (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2008). Our sexual morality becomes joined to the moral vision of the market (Gamson & Moon, 2004).

The idea that media content responds only to demand and reflects culture ignores the fact that it also contributes to culture. The idea that the market is responding only to what people want disregards the ways in which television shows like *Girls of the Playboy Mansion* and *Girls Gone Wild* actually influence society by encouraging embracement of a culture that is displayed as popular (Tyson, 2006). The mainstream media influences female sexuality by depicting women in a sexualising manner (American Psychological Association, 2007). "Sexual meanings, identities and categories were intersubjectively negotiated social and historical products – that sexuality was, in a word, constructed" (Epstein, 1996, p. 145).

Females are sexualised and objectified in consumer culture. However, this sexualisation and objectification has been cleverly disguised as empowerment. Walter (2010) talks about the ruse that female empowerment comes in the form of glamour modelling, stripping, pornography and prostitution. The sex industry and society have supposedly given power to women to take their clothes off and to do what they want with their bodies. However, to explain such behaviour as choice seems too easy and Walter (2010) describes doing so as a tactic that silences

female sexuality. It appears not to be an informed choice but a choice where there has been pressure applied through consumer culture to embrace this “female empowerment”.

The mainstreaming of sex in the media has socialised women into thinking undressing is empowerment (Durham, 2008; Levy, 2006; Walter, 2010). The highly sex driven culture (Levy, 2006; McNair, 2002; Walter, 2010) women navigate influences our understanding of sexuality. Women have become suppressed not liberated by consumer culture. They are encouraged to view their bodies as the only passport to success. Take for example the *Nuts* magazine competition Walter (2010) describes in her book. Hundreds of young women arrive at different nightclubs across the UK to compete for a photo spread in a men’s magazine. They strip down to their underwear and writhe around on the stage in front of hundreds of leering men capturing every piece of flesh with their phone cameras. They are encouraged to show more and more flesh and some girls, against their judgement Walter (2010) suggests, go along with the heavily breathed male audience chants to “get the tits out for the boys”. Breasts are exposed and the girls are encouraged by the host to grind on one another for their chance at being one of *Nuts*’ sexiest women displayed almost naked in their magazine. This display is completely normal in our society and commended (Durham, 2008; McRobbie, 2008). These girls have exposed themselves in front of strangers in a nightclub all for the male judgement of being deemed sexy enough to have a photo spread in *Nuts* magazine. This is considered an achievement and something women should aim to do to feel sexy and empowered (McRobbie, 2008).

Consumer culture seems to encourage women to be submissive and adhere to the version of female sexuality presented. The sexualisation and objectification of women we see in our culture is a result of sexism. It is still a very unequal society: to be valued and to be equal is to be thought of as sexy and desired (Walter, 2010). Women are told participating in stripping, glamour modelling or whatever promoted sexual behaviour it may be, is empowerment (Durham, 2008; Levy, 2006; Walter, 2010). Empowerment becomes the right to be sexual, just as men have always been (Tyson, 2006). Therefore, empowerment is the right to act like men which extends to sexual behaviour and attitudes. This pressure for females to

ape male behaviour highlights gender inequality because the suggestion is that feminine is inferior to masculine. Women are told they should be attaining the right to be just like men rather than feminine (Tyson, 2006). Women may well not be aware that they are socialised into thinking this masculine behaviour is the way you express your sexuality. Women are still living in a male dominated world that tells them “getting your kit off” is sexy. They learn from consumer culture’s images that, no matter how assertive they may be in the world, their controllable submission is what makes them desirable (Wolf, 1997).

Female sexuality in consumer culture is shown in the male gaze (Durham, 2008; Levy, 2006; Ussher, 1997; Walter, 2010; Wolf, 1997). This “hypersexual” culture (Walter, 2010, p. 33) encourages women to engage in sexy acts purely for male pleasure. Women are sexualised to be nothing more than boobs and arse and available for male pleasure. Levy (2006) refers to this culture as “raunch culture” (p. 7). Raunch culture does not enable women to express their own sexual identity but ultimately to hold male pleasure as the main focus of their sexuality (Levy, 2006).

Female Sexuality and Advertising

Sexual imagery in advertising influences female sexuality. The constant exposure to more and more sexual images could influence perceptions of what is sexy. Advertising discourse both reflects and creates social norms. It influences cultural and individual conceptions of identity and must be understood as the result of changing social and cultural practices (Schroeder & Zwick, 2004). Advertisements are a mirror, reflecting the beliefs and values of the wider socio-cultural context within which they are situated, reiterating and sustaining the norms and values of a culture (Stevens & Maclaran, 2008). Sexual images in advertising and throughout the media define what is sexy and who is sexy (Kilbourne, 2003). These images define desirability in others and ourselves.

Sexuality is commonly displayed in advertising. Sexualised images are being, implicitly and explicitly, used as common place to promote almost any product or service and have been described as a staple in advertising’s diet (Reichert et al., 1999). One-fifth of magazines and web adverts and one-tenth of television ads contain sexual content (Reichert, 2007). Sexual appeal can be promoted in a

number of ways; some examples include double entendre, sexual attractiveness, nudity, and suggestiveness (Biswas, Olsen, & Carlet, 1992). It can also be more explicit or more implicit. The more explicit the sex in advertising, the more it focuses on nudity, male/female contact and suggestions of sexual intercourse (Severn, Belch, & Belch, 1990). There are varying degrees of implicit and explicit sexual appeal and a clear framework that categorizes these adverts is yet to be examined in the literature.

Sexual imagery in advertising is increasing, and becoming more explicit. According to Reichert and Carpenter (2004), sexual information has become more graphic and intense over time in an attempt to evoke the same degree of attention and arousal that it did initially, an approach explained as the concept of habituation. Audiences may have become habituated to sexually provocative advertising. Therefore, initial reactions diminish after frequent exposure and advertisers must continue to “push the boundary” to provoke attention (Reichert & Carpenter, 2004). This habituation could potentially mean it is even harder to resist advertising’s influence as sexual images become more frequent and extreme.

Women are shown more frequently than men in sexually explicit advertising. The majority of sexual images in advertising use women in partially nude or in suggestive poses (Reichert & Lambiase, 2003; Reichert et al., 1999; Soley & Kurzbard, 1986). Women were also found to be three times more likely to be portrayed explicitly than male models in advertising (Reichert et al., 1999) and were shown in a sexual manner half the time in magazine adverts (Reichert & Carpenter, 2004). Female celebrities are sexualised more than male celebrities. A female celebrity will use sexuality to promote her public image and wear this sexuality like a uniform (Lambiase, 2003). British and Canadian law interprets obscenity as presence of an erect penis not vulvas and breasts (Wolf, 1997). This double standard for women and men’s nakedness bolsters power inequalities and once again masculine reigns supreme.

Women are often shown advertising in line with the sexual stereotype of being submissive and weak. Men and women displayed in sexually explicit advertising are masculinised and feminised where men are given the active role in physical contact and women are given the passive role (Reichert et al., 1999). Women are

also shown through the male gaze in advertising. They are promoted in a male dominated light (Reichert & Lambiase, 2003). This approach encourages women to think they are vulnerable sexually and, no doubt, has a large influence on the way women perceive and express their sexuality. Both men and women are encouraged to believe man as active and woman as passive is the perfect partnership (Cohan, 2001).

Advertising often creates a lot of negative consequences for women. Stice and Shaw (1994), for example, discovered that young women exposed to extremely thin models in advertising and magazines became depressed, insecure and dissatisfied with their own bodies. Martin and Gentry (1997) found that young women's self-perceptions and self-esteem can be negatively affected by advertisements. The representation of women in advertising is affecting society's view of women and how women perceive and embody their sexuality. Women are displayed in these adverts not as a living, breathing female but as a beautiful object. They are depicted as body parts disconnected from the real, intimate person inside. Women's partially-clad body parts were the sole focus in beer commercials and Hall and Crum (1994) labelled this technique "body-isms". Body parts are focused on and are disjointed from the live female who possesses them. The consequence of body-isms is that women tend to view themselves as objects and to see their beauty as the tool by which others judge their value (Cohan, 2001; Martin & Gentry, 1997). The notion that sexiness comes from without rather than within is one of advertising's damaging messages (Reichert & Lambiase, 2003). This damage is illustrated in a study that looks at women undergoing breast augmentation surgery. The women loathed themselves because they did not measure up to the "ideal" and used cruel remarks to describe their bodies, "Oh they're awful, can't you see?", "I hated them", "A pair of sagging knockers" and one woman explained her reflection as "ugliness" (Davis, 1995). The women in the study saw their bodies as obstacles to their happiness and saw themselves as the problem. They saw only their 'problem' and emotional pain and did not question the cultural 'norms' that inflicted this self-loathing. Consumer culture promotes an aesthetic and ignores the fact that the women were sexy and unique before without the pain of surgery.

Female Sexuality and Research

Female sexuality has not been largely studied in marketing research. Sexuality is a rich and debated area of consumer culture that has never been fully addressed in advertising (Reichert & Lambiase, 2003). The journal *Marketing Theory* and the Association for Consumer Research conference: Gender, Marketing and Consumer Research called for further feminist research in consumer and marketing research (Bettany, Dobscha, O'Malley, & Prothero, 2010) because there are still significant gaps and areas for future development within the field. This area of study greatly needs theoretical input. Without the presence of critical thinking the field of feminist media and cultural studies is fatally weakened and is diplomatically compromised through a lack of research that challenges new forms of constraint and regulation that emerge in disguise as female “freedoms” (McRobbie, 2008). The appeal of these female “freedoms” is enhanced by the presence of values borrowed from feminist literature. McRobbie (2008), therefore, suggests we need to be fully attentive to the implementation of feminism as a source of innovation and direction for consumer culture.

The Association for Consumer Research conference: Gender, Marketing and Consumer Research called for more gender research. The association believes gender research challenges sex differences and creates a political agenda for social and cultural change (Bettany et al., 2010). Bettany et al. (2010) point out that significant inequalities between genders still remain and need to be researched to bring about change. There is a need for research to understand the influence our sexualised culture has on women and girls and to identify ways to promote positive alternatives to protect them (American Psychological Association, 2007).

This research attempts to answer this call assist in the promotion of positive change and confront predefined structures of female sexuality in consumer culture by entering this critical discussion and using a collaborative method. This research is important to the wellbeing of women and girls.

Female Sexuality and Embodiment

The embodied experience allows the lived encounter of women’s sexuality to be understood in depth. We experience phenomenon through our bodies which have been shaped by social, cultural and political meanings. This is the process of

embodiment (Davis, 1995; Millsted & Frith, 2003). A woman is said to live her gender through her body which is shaped through the social world (Lee, 1997). The embodied identity results from comprehending the outcome of an individual's interaction with her body and through her body with the world around her (Davis, 1995). Bodies, although physical, are primarily social constructs and the biological body cannot be separated from these social meanings. They are intertwined in complex ways (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1994). Female sexuality encompasses both the physical body and the social construct. Therefore, it needs to be researched from the perspective of embodiment to understand all its facets and complexity fully.

I have observed that marketing research literature is still very quantitative, focusing on facts and figures. It appears that studies that investigate sexuality and the media are often quantitative. For example, Zhang et al. (2008) in the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* looked at music videos' influence on sexual attitudes using a questionnaire and quantitative analysis. Hennessy, Bleakley, Fishbein and Jordan (2009) in the *Journal of Sex Research* studied the association between sexual media content and sexual behaviour using a web based survey and statistical analysis. This predominance of quantitative studies highlights a need for research using a rich qualitative approach, such as embodiment, as it provides deep insight.

There is also a call in the consumer research field for more embodied research (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The Consumer Culture Theory contends that consumers are embodied interpretative negotiators and engage in embodied experiences (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). However, this area has been under researched. Research in this area will enable enrichment in consumer culture by allowing different consumer behaviour discourses and providing more valuable knowledge in the field (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This research adds value to the literature by using the embodied experience to provide a rich understanding of female sexuality. The Association for Consumer Research conference: Gender, Marketing and Consumer Research has also called for a more qualitative approach using feminist research in consumer studies. They believe this type of research could offer new insights, theories, and approaches in the field (Bettany et al., 2010). The current study has a strong qualitative focus and uses narrative inquiry

to add to marketing research. The research does not exclude the emotion from these women's experiences, and more importantly, it allows a full picture of female sexuality to emerge.

Summary

The literature has highlighted a need for women to gain power in living their sexuality. It is clear from the literature that female sexuality is negatively presented and is influencing women in a harmful way. The literature also highlights the need for an embodied approach that critically evaluates female sexuality within consumer culture. This research aims to empower women and assist them to embody their sexuality by using a strong qualitative approach. The research also aspires to add knowledge to the area of female sexuality and consumer culture as well as to promote social change using a collective method.

This research sets out to answer the following questions in order to provide valuable input into the marketing literature in relation to female sexuality and consumer culture: What does sexy mean to the young women in this study and how are they socialised into their meaning of sexy?

Chapter 3: Research Method

My Reflection

When I started my Masters research I told a male friend that I wanted to understand how media images impacted young women's embodied experiences of their sexuality. He looked at me, laughed, and noted in a mocking tone, as if I should be ashamed, "You're a feminist!". At first, I felt embarrassed, as if women's sexuality should not be debated. I felt like the "ugly feminist" caricature because I was challenging the "hypersexual" media culture. Later, I began to think, "So what! Call me whatever you like, I am not embarrassed that my research challenges the world we live in and attempts to make a difference in society."

My passion and emotional engagement with the topic of sexuality led to my decision to research the area. I wanted to understand how young women experienced their sexuality. I wanted to feel their experiences of sexuality and I wanted them to feel mine. I had something to share and I longed to be heard on the topic. I wanted to come together in a collective of young women to investigate the role consumer culture plays in forming our sexual identity.

I approached my research from a qualitative stance, with the freedom, flexibility and the need to deconstruct the social world to make it readable in order to provide insight into the topic. Qualitative research meant I did not have to detach myself from a topic close to my heart (Dupuis, 1999), nor use cold numerical figures to describe a charged subject. Qualitative research is flexible, not rigid like quantitative research. Inconsistencies do not have to be eradicated. Rather they can be used to produce meaning. I could let the women speak and hear their stories that shaped their lives.

I focused my research on what it means to be sexy as a form of expressing, and understanding female sexuality. The media and advertising often present sexy images of women as a representation of female sexuality. The images express sexuality through skin, body, sexual imagery, physical contact, and innuendo (Courtney & Whipple, 1983). I believe these sexy images can create assumptions about a woman's sexuality such as how "easy" she is or how she should act in the

bedroom for her man. This concept of sexy is part of female sexuality and therefore, it is the focus of this research.

I used the narrative methodologies of collective bibliography (Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault, & Benton, 1992; Davies, 2008; Gannon, 2008) and digital story telling (Benmayor, 2008; Couldry, 2008; Lambert, 2006) to collect, discuss, and understand my own and other young women's stories of what it means to be sexy; to understand how we are socialised via consumer culture into these meanings; and to illustrate how these meanings impact our lives. We shared how we live and embody being sexy through collective biography and digital storytelling. Moreover, this research used individual and collective reflection with the aim to bring about individual and social change through the understanding of our sexuality.

Theoretical Perspective

In this section I discuss the theory, analysis and representation of the research perspective: narrative inquiry. I then discuss the theory of the narrative methods used in the research: collective biography and digital storytelling.

Narrative Inquiry Theory

Narrative inquiry is used in research to describe narratives held by individuals and groups. It is also used to explain, through narrative, why something happened (Polkinghorne, 1988). The first kind of narrative research aims to make meaning from individuals' or groups' narrative description. Meaning is created through the interaction with our social world which we express in language (Riessman, 1993). The latter aims to construct a narrative account to explain why a situation or event happened (Polkinghorne, 1988).

Narrative inquiry places emphasis on the importance of people's lives and their stories rather than on just outcomes or data (Sinclair Bell, 2002). It goes beyond simply telling stories to analysing underlying insights and assumptions that the story highlights (Sinclair Bell, 2002). Individuals construct stories to support their own view of themselves, missing out experiences and events that undermine who they believe they are. However, narrative inquiry allows a deeper self-knowledge to surface that the storyteller had perhaps not realised (Sinclair Bell, 2002). This

insight benefits not only the research but the participants as it aims to bring about transformation by allowing awareness.

Hearing and deconstructing people's retold experiences can help us understand how people are socialised into their understanding of a phenomenon. We gain meaning not only from an individual perspective through the event and the individual's personal feelings surrounding the memory, but also holistically through the changes that happened as a result of the experience and the meaning people make out of what occurred (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry explores and deeply probes the cultural assumptions that shaped the story (Sinclair Bell, 2002). The stories are a window into people's beliefs and experiences (Sinclair Bell, 2002) and give a rich understanding and a deeper knowledge of the participants' lived experiences.

Narrative Inquiry Analysis

The narrative inquiry perspective offers a unique approach to analysing the data. Narrative analysis uses the whole to understand the participants experiences (Riessman, 1993). The researcher looks for common thematic connections by studying the data as a whole to understand the experiences. The researcher also considers the whole during the interpretation of the findings. The full picture is then considered in the explanation of outcomes.

Riessman (1993) outlines three approaches to analysing narrative research: a life story, linked stories and meaning in conversation, and poetic structures and meaning. I will focus on life story narrative analysis. This narrative analysis technique means the researcher searches for similarities and differences among the data and the narrative stories by looking at the essence of the story. The focus is on summarising the core of what the participants have said (Riessman, 1993). Meaning is created from the essence of the stories and data are then expanded outward, thinking about underlying intentions and things that perhaps the participants took for granted, or things that were implied. The whole is used to derive conclusions.

The life story narrative analysis also guides how the findings are represented in narrative form. The text used to represent the findings is a mixture of direct quotes,

longer summaries of the content of speech, the researcher's statements about theoretical issues, and key themes that are present across the data (Riessman, 1993). The quotes from the data provide evidence for the interpretation of the stories. The researcher's voice and interpretation weave the elements together and determine how the reader will understand the participants experiences (Riessman, 1993).

Narrative Inquiry Representation

Narrative is a powerful and effective way to express knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It allows researchers to present their findings in a way that means the participants are heard, and to portray the findings in a way that does not leave out the emotion of a lived experience. Presenting the findings as a narrative is natural as we use this approach in our everyday lives. This approach makes it easier for the reader to experience and understand (Riessman, 1993). It enables the researcher to take the reader on a journey. The reader is able to follow the stories of the participants and know them as the researcher has come to know them.

Narrative Method – Collective Biography

Collective biography involves collective analysis of the participants' written memories on a specific topic. First, participants verbally share a story of their past experience in their own words on a trigger statement to generate new insights into a specific topic chosen by the researcher (Davies, 2008). The trigger statement is generated from the research topic and aims to spark memories for the participants to write on. Next, the participants go away and write their shared past experiences according to set guidelines. Participants write about a particular episode, action or event using the trigger as a prompt, write in the third person, write in as much detail as possible even when it might seem trivial, and describe the experience but do not impose an interpretation or judgement on the event (Haug, 1987). Next, the individuals come together in a group discussion to share their written stories and to listen to the other group members' past experiences. The participants ask questions in order to understand and experience each individual's memory. The group then meets on another occasion, after rewriting their stories to encompass the previous discussion, and each participant shares his or her rewritten story. Lastly, the group analyses the narratives by reflecting on similarities and differences and comes to a joint understanding of the specific topic.

Collective biography is a narrative method because it uses stories of past experiences. It allows participants to put their stories in their own words to reveal the *why* behind their experience. This method gives voice to the participants. The researcher is able to hear **their** stories told **their** way and to gain more than cold statistics to understand the significance within the stories. In addition, this method provides rich data that is deep in description and meaning. Collective biography as a narrative method acknowledges that current events stand in the past experiences and provide direction for the future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This method creates a joint journey of self-discovery through understanding others and oneself within the group and provides change for the future by comprehending how the collective stories represent society.

Collective biography opens up a relationship between the individual and the collective. The individual is no longer clearly separate from the group. This method focuses on the movement from the individual's memory story to an understanding of the story within the group and society (Davies, 2008). The participants share within the group similar and different experiences through their stories and this add to the understanding of those experiences. According to Davies (2008), we see each other within one another through the collaborative analysis of listening and telling each other's stories. We search for understanding of the social world through the meaning and creation of our personal interpretations of our past experience. By looking at the memories as a collective, we trace the formation of our own understandings, seeing the movement and flow of desires and thoughts on us, in us, and how they might be another way (Gannon, 2008). The collective process allows an interactional approach within the research where the researched are the researchers.

Collective biography also empowers the individuals through the collective process. It allows them to reflect and gain power individually by asking themselves questions to gain understanding of the moment. It opens up different ways of seeing and thinking and enables a readjustment between the author, the piece of writing, and rest of the group. This process is done through experimentation with themselves and writing by reflecting on a particular moment of being and movement toward new possibilities of both seeing and being (Davies, 2008). Memories are no longer told and heard as just an individual's story, but open

knowledge up to others that previously belonged to the individuals as their identity. This method of sharing our lived memories allows us to become richer in knowing ourselves and becoming ourselves (Davies, 2008).

Telling and hearing stories allow the participants to come to a truth as the moment was lived. It does so through an embodied sense of being in the instance and understanding oneself in that moment (Davies, 2008). It is not a truth about a stagnant pre-existing reality. There is no real world truth to be uncovered. In fact the knowledge memory provides enables a closer understanding of what the research topic means. The understanding is an interpretation that represents our “selves” at particular points in time and place (Gannon, 2008). The knowledge is developed through telling and listening (Davies, 2008). The data is honest, not corrupted by an imposed “truth”.

Narrative Method – Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling involves the process and creation of a digital story from a personal narrative experience. First, the participant is either given a topic or comes up with an idea to create a digital story. There are several kinds of stories that occur in people’s lives that can be created as multimedia pieces, for example, a story about someone important, a story about an event in one’s life, a story about a place in your life, a story about what the person does and other personal stories (Lambert, 2006). Next, the participants write a story on their chosen or given topic. They then meet in a group called a story circle (Lambert, 2006) with other storytellers and share their narratives. The group provides feedback on how to improve and work the story into digital form. Group members also question the individual to expose insights not previously considered. Each individual can use this input to create his or her story using music, text, sound, voice, video, images, effects, and transitions. Lastly, the multimedia pieces are shared with the story circle.

Digital storytelling is a narrative method as participants are able to tell their story and explore meaning through the creation of a multimedia narrative. The method also involves a collaborative approach both in the creation and sharing of the digital story. The social process of the story circle involves the witnessing and sharing of people’s stories. These may be a part of their lives they have never

shared before (Bliss & Fisher, 2010). This personal interpretation provides the researcher with a very full piece of data that paints an intense picture of the participant's experience. Digital storytelling allows us to feel the story and know it through living it (Lambert, 2006). It also allows much more to be said than words could do alone. The music, voice over, images, and video clips create a layered meaning. Each element brings a new understanding to the story (Lambert, 2006).

Digital storytelling allows people to explore their gift of voice (Bliss & Fisher, 2010). Digital stories are an expression of ordinary voices through the use of their personal perspectives in their stories (Bliss & Fisher, 2010). **Their** stories are told **their** way. Their stories embody their experiences (Benmayor, 2008). Moreover, digital storytelling firmly promotes democratisation of voice by giving voice to the voiceless and empowering marginalised groups (Bliss & Fisher, 2010). Individuals experience self-empowerment by sharing their voice in digital form with an audience (Benmayor, 2008).

Digital storytelling encourages social change through the transformation of the storytellers as they gain understanding of their experience through the process of telling their stories and hearing others'. Digital storytelling also allows a social understanding of the story as participants use their "situated knowledge", through discussing, analysing and reflecting on their lived experience, to produce a digital interpretation that represents a new social and cultural perspective (Benmayor, 2008). It is a self-reflective and empowering process that enables people to take a transforming journey. It resembles a type of therapy (Benmayor, 2008).

Combining Collective Biography and Digital Storytelling as Method

My research combined two methods to achieve greater benefits. My research methods built on one another through three group meetings. The first group meeting focused on introducing the women, stimulating discussion on a sensitive topic, and obtaining a trigger statement to write a memory story from the discussion. The second meeting built on the first through the participants' sharing, listening, and reflecting on their memory stories and discussion to shape their past experience into a digital story. The final group meeting focused on showing the

participants' multimedia pieces and discussing and reflecting on the process and end-product.

Collective biography and digital storytelling are very similar methods. They both follow a collaborative approach and result in a personal narrative. However, I used digital storytelling to extend collective biography to gain insight into female sexuality in consumer culture. Digital storytelling allowed the memory story created through the collective biography method to become visual and show the depth of each woman's story. The digital aspects used to create a multimedia piece combine to provide a powerful experience the viewers live and feel as they watch it (Lambert, 2006). Digital storytelling provides a thick data that paint an intense picture of what sexuality means to these women.

Female sexuality is a taboo subject for women to discuss and young women are powerless to express how they feel about it. These combined methods give women, often a marginalised group, a voice to communicate their sexuality and allow them to talk about it their way. Collective biography and digital storytelling also permit an interactional style and, therefore, allowed the researcher, to become involved not only as the researcher but also as a participant. The participants were coresearchers coming together as a group with me to research consumer culture and female sexuality. The research was a joint effort and the findings are a result of this collaboration.

The method provides rich and deep data on a charged topic, enabling a closer understanding of what sexy means in a manner which is free of any predefined "truth". Collective biography and digital storytelling are about shared control. This approach allows the meaning of female sexuality and consumer culture to be seen from the view point of these women both as individuals and as a shared unit. The researcher and coresearchers bonded as they shared their personal stories and explored female sexuality as a collective. Doing so helped us to transform ourselves and gain a deep understanding of sexuality and how we are socialised into our identity.

Coresearchers

The coresearchers responded via email to a flyer about the research (See Appendix 1.) posted in several areas around the Waikato city of Hamilton. I made the flyer eye-catching to young women and posted copies of it in areas young women would frequent. I put the flyers up in the staffrooms of several local companies and on noticeboards at community locations such as the local polytechnic, shopping malls, and gyms. My criteria for the coresearchers were: women aged between 20-30, interested in the topic of female sexuality, talkative, creative, and computer literate. These criteria were chosen to ensure the women fitted the research definition of young women who would stay committed until the end of the research and provide valuable insights into the topic. Each potential participant contacted me via email and reassured me she was computer literate. Through email I got a feel for how interested in the topic and committed to the research each woman was. I provided a detailed information sheet (See Appendix 2.) about the research to each individual who enquired about the project. The women who agreed to participate were interested in the topic of female sexuality and viewed themselves as being creative. I met with three of the women prior to the first group meeting and was assured they were talkative individuals who would stimulate group discussion.

Seven women, including myself, participated in this research as co-researchers. Our code names are Chloe, Greta, Midge, Tara, Mel, Jenny, and Kate. Kate participated in the first group meeting only and Jenny was unable to complete her digital story. We are all aged between 20-30 years and live in the Waikato region of New Zealand.

The first time we met...

The first group meeting was designed to introduce the women to one another, familiarise them with the topic, provide a space they felt comfortable in to discuss the taboo topic of sexuality, help me and the group understand what sexy meant, and to obtain a trigger statement from the group discussion to write our memory story.

I asked everyone to bring to the first group meeting images that represented to them what made a young woman sexy. They could bring as many images as they

liked from any source. I used images in the initial meeting. First, I did so to stimulate conversation on the subject of sexy by providing a point of focus especially when the topic could be considered taboo. Secondly, I wanted to provide information beyond a verbal explanation because visual communication is not restricted by text and can express emotion as well as facts (Lester, 2000). Thirdly, I wanted to provide multidimensional layers of understanding because images reveal meaning in why we chose them and later in pouring over them (Sunderland & Denny, 2007). We discussed the images we brought to understand what sexy meant to us. We then chose a trigger topic from the discussion to act as a prompt to write a memory in the form of a story for the next meeting. The memory story would give us a deeper understanding of sexy both individually and as a collective.

We met for the first time as a group at 5.30pm on the 25th August 2010. All seven of us arrived at the University of Waikato Management School clutching our images. The air was filled with excitement, doubt and nervousness, but everyone relaxed as I went through the introduction to the research and the focus of the group session. Munching on chips and nuts, we filled in our alias name cards to protect our identities. We had great fun thinking about our fantasy names and laughed together at our choices. "Right, let's get started". We began the group meeting with some warm up questions before getting down to the "nitty gritty". The first question was, "What is a word you associate with *sexy*?". Words were hesitantly offered. "What did you first think when I asked you to participate in this research?". Statements started to be made. "Thinking back over the past few months, can you tell us about a place you have been where *sexy* has been present?". Now everyone was starting to comment on others' opinions and the floor was open to move into the more critical questioning. I asked everyone to pull out the images they had brought with them to represent what makes a young woman sexy. I then asked them to choose one image that most represented sexy to them and told them we would discuss our other images as the night went on. After five minutes spent choosing an image, I asked, "Who would like to talk about their image first". Midge, without hesitation, spoke very clearly. "I would.". "Great! First of all we will all look at Midge's image and write down the first thing that comes into our heads - thoughts, feelings, whatever you think when you see the picture. Midge will write a caption about why she chose it. Then after we

discuss how the image represents sexiness, we will stick these first impression notes to it". Everyone looked intently at the image and scribbled away on their pads projecting a somewhat unsure feeling. We talked about Midge's picture which was a seductive image of the famous Kim Kardashian (See Appendix 3.). I probed Midge on how the image represented sexiness to her and invited everyone to comment and question. Most of the group were forthcoming, immediately offering their opinions and commenting on other people's ideas. When it seemed there was nothing new to say about the image, we went back to our first impression notes. We discussed how our first thoughts about the picture had been similar or different from what had been talked about and we noted what this meant in terms of to be sexy or not. We followed this process for the first four women's photos until the women started to integrate their first impressions into conversation and the process changed naturally. We did not have time to discuss the rest of the images the women had brought. However, two women pulled out additional pictures that were relevant to the discussion. At the end of the allotted 3 hour session, we summarised what sexy meant to us.

The final stage of the first group session was to pick a trigger topic from the night's discussion that everyone could write a memory story on for the second meeting. I explained these stories would help us understand how we have been socialised into our meaning of sexy. The group looked confused. I clarified that a trigger topic was a prompt that we would use to write a memory in the form of a story. We discussed the common themes to arise in the group and ended up with the trigger topic: "a time when I changed my mind about what was sexy". The group meeting finished with the handing out of an information sheet to guide us on writing our memory in the form of a story (See Appendix 4.). I walked the women to the door and shut it behind them. I took advantage of the silence to write down my observations and summarise the main points of the meeting's discussion. We had agreed to email each other with questions, so, several email conversations later, the group members grasped how to write a story about an experience based on the trigger topic selected.

I remember when...

The second group meeting focused on our written memory stories, on discussion on digital storytelling, and on how to shape our memory story into a multimedia

piece. We came together as a group to read, listen, question, and discuss our stories about an experience of a time when we changed our mind about what was sexy. We used the memory stories to clarify what sexy means, to help us understand how we have been socialised into our meaning of sexy, and to grasp how this process of socialisation influences our identity.

The second time we met as a group was the 2nd September 2010. We met in a different meeting room on the University of Waikato campus. The room was smaller, but more comfortable than the last room. Because everyone had already met, they happily entered the room and started chatting and nibbling. They commented on their stories, worried that they would not be good enough. Midge started off the group again. I passed a copy of her story to everyone and as she read her memory aloud we followed along. I asked questions and encouraged the group to ask as many questions as necessary to experience their memory. They, however, mostly offered comments and opinions. As the meeting progressed, they started to ask more questions to understand the stories. After each member read her story, we compared it with the previous stories and the group questioned and commented on them, we collectively analysed the stories for similarities and differences. We asked “What are the common experiences across all the stories?”. “Fantasy versus reality.”, Tara offered. Next we questioned, “What messages are inherent in all the stories?”. “We stop placing emphasis on fitting into the media’s mould as we get older.”, Midge suggested as we all hummed in agreement. “How do the stories differ?” we queried. “Well, Greta’s story is about learning by doing whereas Midge’s story was seeing sexy to learn.”, Chloe proposed. Lastly, we started to question sexy in relation to the social context. “How did culture influence the experiences?”. “The media provides mixed messages. It shows us almost naked women and tells us that is sexy, but then says wait! Personality is the most important thing.”, Jenny says annoyed. Sharing and discussing our memory in the group was paramount in creating our awareness of our story in consumer culture. We began to see common connections between the stories and discussed these in relation to consumer culture. This collective analysis enabled us to understand how we had been socialised into our meaning of sexy and comprehend the impact consumer culture had on our identities.

The collective analysis allowed us to move on to create our story in digital form. We were ready to transform this experience into a multimedia piece which would display our cultural and personal story. The digital version of our experience would be thick with meaning and portray the story in such a way the rest of the group would live our experience and know its consequences.

After our almost 3 hour discussion, the session closed with discussion on what digital storytelling was and how to create our experiences into digital stories. We did so because the women in the group were interested in creating a digital story and had not created one before. I gave everyone a guide on how to create a digital story as well as helpful tips (See Appendix 5.), when we finished our meeting after 3 hours. The guide focused on using personal voice, rewriting our stories, using images, music and effects, and storyboarding. We agreed to meet in smaller groups to help each other create our digital stories.

Next, we came together in small groups to talk about how we would rewrite our stories and make use of music, sound, images, text, voice, effects, and transitions to develop our digital stories. We offered suggestions that others had not considered. At this point the women's faces lit up and excitement began to stir as the possibilities began to emerge.

Lights, camera, action...

The third and final group meeting was designed to share our digital stories with the group, discuss them, and reflect on both the multimedia piece and the research process. Digital storytelling allowed extension of the collective biography method by providing a visual interpretation of our experience that was not restricted by text and had the power to enable the viewer to feel and live it.

The final meeting was on, 7th of October 2010 and I could not believe it had arrived! We met in the room we had first met in, where it had all started. Tara, Midge and Greta showed up at 6.30pm. Mel gave Greta her digital story as she could not attend. We all buzzed with excitement and laughter. Everyone was excited about the prospect of watching the others' stories and seeing the end result come together. Tara led the way and showed her story first. It was so raw it cut straight to the heart of the anger she felt about how we were socialised into the

meaning of sexy by displaying women as “pieces of meat”. Everyone applauded. Tara commented on how she had come to her final concept of displaying women as meat. We shared our opinions on her use of her images to represent her experience and what we had learned from her story. Midge went next. Again another fantastic story was told with great insight by using puppets and Barbie dolls to represent the influence consumer culture has on our identity. We reflected on Midge’s digital story and talked about how her chosen song *Stupid Girl* had created her intended meaning. One by one each of the digital stories was shown. They were really impressive. As each story ended we clapped and cheered and reflected on it.

We reflected on the stories by making comments. We talked about how everyone’s use of images, and sometimes music, had made us feel as if we were living their story. We also discussed what we learned from each story. We talked about the essence of each story and the message it shared. After all the stories had been shown, we talked about what sexy meant, how we had been socialised into our understanding, and what role the media played in socialisation. We agreed we had a clearer picture of how we were socialised into our meaning of sexy and how this influenced our identities.

Over bubbles and cake to celebrate our journey, we discussed how this research had impacted our lives. We reflected on the process of the research and how our knowledge and our stories had changed during the meetings. We agreed the journey had been amazing because we had learned so much about ourselves and transformed as a result. It was sad to say goodbye. I thanked them for sharing pieces of themselves. In return, they thanked me for providing them with an opportunity to do so.

Analysis

I expanded on what the collective had analysed during the group meetings to gain a more defined and clearer picture of what sexy meant, how we were socialised into our meaning of sexy, and how this influenced our identities. After the completion of the research, I transcribed the meetings verbatim and began the analysis using the life story narrative technique. The life story narrative method studies the essence of the story to look for similarities and differences. This

method allowed me to consider the data as a whole in order to understand experiences and create common thematic connections. This technique also allowed me to present the findings in such a way as to offer the reader a deeper understanding of what being sexy means, how it is experienced, and how it impacted on the lives of these women. The findings present a mixture of my voice and interpretation that guides the reader's understanding, along with the women's stories and direct quotes from discussions, to provide evidence for the analysis.

I read the transcripts and highlighted commonalities and statements that seemed insightful. I also made notes in the margin of links to previous accounts, and my observations or statements, that were different from those of the collective, that might provide insight into this complex topic. From the common connections, I identified I was able to produce a brief outline of what sexy meant. I reread the transcripts, and listened to parts of the group meetings again, and rewrote the outline as I reworked the common connections to gain more understanding of meaning and socialisation. Then I read the women's stories and watched their digital stories several times to gain a deeper knowledge of them. I began to create a brief flow diagram of what sexy meant, how we were socialised into our meaning of sexy, how this influenced our identities and how these all linked together. I was beginning to see how all the pieces of the puzzle fitted together. I wrote another outline of the findings. I reworked the summary by rearranging the text in light of the discoveries. This process deepened my understanding of what was happening in the data and brought me to my conclusions.

Limitations

The methods I used in this research demanded time as each engagement was lengthy and additional work was expected outside of the meetings for all involved. Due to the intensity of the task of sense-making, there was often not enough time to complete all the tasks set out or fully discuss some ideas related to a deep understanding of female sexuality and consumer culture. As a result, some issues were not explored as fully as I would have liked.

Ethical Considerations

My role as researcher and participant enabled the women to feel at ease about sharing on a personal topic as I too was delving into private experiences. Davies

(2008) talks about the mutual vulnerability the participants share during collective biography, a vulnerability which is true of this research. Each person has shared and heard others tell personal insights bringing us together. Therefore, no one needs to feel exposed because we are all in the same situation.

Each woman signed a consent form (See Appendix 6.) to allow me to use her pictures, written story, and discussion comments. The form also assured the young women in this study that I would keep everything confidential that was discussed within our group meetings. I reminded the women about these conditions at each meeting so they would feel comfortable opening up on a sensitive subject. Each woman chose an alias which I used throughout this research thesis to protect her identity and ensure she felt safe.

Digital stories are private pieces of work because they are powerful visual and audial representations of a personal story. The images, sound, voice and effects have been carefully picked to express our experience and together create a digital story that displays our inner vulnerable self to the audience. As Benmayor (2008) points out, our digital stories embody our experiences. Digital stories have more emotional impact than written words and for that reason need to be respected. For this reason, I provided the women with a consent form (See Appendix 7.) which allowed them to exercise their choice to how their story was used. They could choose to have only their story used for the purpose of my Masters thesis or they could agree for it to be used for future academic purposes. I also agreed I would not use their digital story for any other publication or presentation without prior approval by them. These ethical assurances were given to protect the women's stories and to respect them as individuals.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter provides insight into the collective meaning of sexy by answering the questions: How do we embody sexy? How are we socialised into our meaning of sexy? I use the most appropriate stories and quotes to illustrate these objectives.

The data highlight sexy as complex, contradictory, consequential, and dynamic. As shown through how we embody sexy, have been socialised into our understanding of sexy, and construct our meaning of sexy. These perspectives change over time and lead to consequences.

The Women

I would like to introduce you to each of the women who participated in the research so you can feel and understand each person's experience of sexy.

Chloe is 28 years old and studying for a university postgraduate degree. She does not have any children and is of Caucasian ethnicity. She has travelled extensively to places such as Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. She is from a middle-class family and is in a long-term relationship with a man. She has had several long-term relationships and dated during high school.

Greta is 27 years old and works full-time in a professional role in the graphic design industry. She does not have any children and is of Caucasian ethnicity. She has travelled internationally to places such as Europe and Australia. She is from a separated family and is in a long-term relationship with a man. She has had several relationships and was actively interested in dating during high school.

Jenny is 27 years old and works full time in a professional role in the communications industry. She does not have any children and is of Caucasian ethnicity. She has travelled internationally visiting places such as Europe and is in a long-term relationship with a man. She actively dated in high school and has had several relationships.

Kate is 24 years old and is studying for a university degree in science and will continue on to do postgraduate study. She does not have any children and is Maori.

She is recently single from a long-term relationship with a man and has had several relationships.

Midge is 27 years old and has a degree in the area of marketing/communications. She is considering postgraduate study in the future. She now works full-time in a professional role in the education industry teaching advertising. She does not have any children and is of Caucasian ethnicity. She has travelled internationally, to places such as Europe and Australia, and is currently in a serious long distance relationship with a man. She is from a rural family and has not been an extremely active dater due to a damaging encounter during her adolescent years. This experience meant she did not seek a romantic relationship with a man until her early twenties.

Mel is 25 years old and has a degree in communications. She now works full-time in a professional role in the communications industry and does not have any children. She is of Caucasian ethnicity and has travelled significantly, spending a period of many months in Europe. She is engaged to her long-term male partner and did not date during high school nor have previous long-term relationships.

Tara is 25 years old and has a social work degree. She now works full-time as a social worker for the Ministry of Social Development. She does not have any children and is of Caucasian ethnicity. She has not yet travelled internationally although she wishes to do so in the future. She is engaged to her long-term male partner. She has had several long-term relationships and dated in high school.

Embodying Sexy

This section discusses how individual women in this study embodied sexy to gain insight into how the collective embodied sexy.

Mel's Memory Story

Mel's story illustrates how she embodied sexy as multisensory. She also embodied sexy through the confidence she attained from her physical appearance.

“Mel was getting ready for her first ‘official’ date with someone she’d been friends with for a while. Let’s call him Bob. She’d never have imagined the two of them would ever be together and suddenly there she was, getting ready with

butterflies in her stomach.

She stood in her room looking in the mirror admiring her tight, skinny-leg jeans, black top and black high heels. She felt pretty great! It felt different somehow from getting ready for any other date. Getting ready for that first date with Bob was so exciting and she knew that no matter what she wore, he'd think she looked amazing. Of course she'd dress up for him anyway. She was wearing her favourite perfume and it made her think of sunshine. She could smell her hair product too, sweet and yummy.

It was a dark and cold evening, middle of July, so she was sure to grab her jacket. Putting it on it felt warm and reassuring. Chatting excitedly to her flatmate, Mel soon heard Bob's car pull up the driveway. As the headlights went past the window her heart was beating quickly. This was it! She was full of excitement and anticipation. All dressed up for such an important evening. Mel felt so invigorated, empowered and amazing.” (Mel)

Mel embodied sexy in several ways. She experienced sexy through the physiological sensation of the “butterflies in her stomach” and the sensory of smell. Her perfume was likened to sunshine which is hot and vibrant. Spraying on her perfume suggests her sexual energy is intensified through the heat. Her hair product was “sweet and yummy” as if she was good enough to be sexually devoured. She reached for her jacket because it was “warm and reassuring” as if to lock in all the heat of her sexual energy and contain it to share with Bob when she revealed herself later. All of these senses, smell, temperature, physiology and taste, seemed to come together to create her sexual feeling. The intense embodied feelings she experienced through her senses suggests she was aroused before the evening had even begun.

Mel embodied sexy through confidence. She outlined this idea during group discussion of her memory, “. . . I felt sexy you know I felt confident so I felt sexy.” Her confidence was created through physical appearance via consumption. The evidence is the “tight skinny-leg jeans” that hugged her slender shape and followed the line of her leg all the way up. The “black high heels” that gave her long slim legs and the black outfit, a colour often thought to be sexual. As she

admired her carefully put together outfit, she felt “pretty great”. She also felt confident in Bob as her date. She told the group she had known Bob as a friend first and because of this she felt confident that he would respect her and think she looked amazing regardless of what she wore. This idea boosted her confidence because she knew he would think she was sexy. This factor implies male judgment played a role in her experience of sexy because, although she knew he would think she looked good, his opinion still contributed to her confidence.

Greta’s Memory Story

Greta’s story illustrates how she too embodied sexy as multisensory. She also embodied sexy through being feminine and through the confidence she attained from her physical appearance and others’ judgements.

“Greta’s partner, who works in the fashion industry, often comes home with clothes for her to try on and one day he brought her the most beautiful dress home. It was full length, slim fitting, ivory and made from silk, satin and hand beaded from head to toe. It had a gorgeous cowl neck and with thin ribbon zig-zagging across her back, which was low cut in style. He told her it was worth close to \$1,000 and a brand often worn by celebrities! Greta was dying for an opportunity to wear it, it was something she’d never normally choose for herself, often opting for clothes that would show off her cleavage or legs in order to feel sexy, even if it came across as a little slutty.

Greta finally had an opportunity to wear it after six months of it seemingly going to waste in her wardrobe. After a full day of helping her sister prepare for her engagement party, it was time to go home and get ready – what a thrill! She had already applied her fake tan that morning then spent a full two hours carefully working on her makeup and making her hair beautiful. She slipped on a pair of strappy heels, painted her toe nails and put on a diamond looking choker with matching earrings, ring and bracelet. She took one final look in her mirror to see how it had all come together, and what was looking back at her was an incredibly classy, stunning lady. It didn’t show her breasts or legs off, but the shape, design and quality of it made her feel amazingly special. When her partner saw her, he nearly ripped it off her! It was the sexiest thing he’d ever seen her in.

As they walked towards the party, they could hear the upbeat music from outside the venue which got her heart racing! The entrance was filled with dangling helium balloons with ribbon which tickled her naked arms as she walked through. She felt the entrance perfectly matched the occasion and the dress she was wearing. Just before walking in, her partner softly pulled her back and kissed her passionately and whispered, “You look gorgeous baby.”. This gave Greta a huge burst of confidence, happiness and love for her man. As they rounded the corner, the smells of the party wafted towards them...wine, cocktails, balloons, party food and a mixture of perfumes and colognes – it got her even more excited!

The reception she received was very complimentary from the ladies, and very respectful from the men, something she realised she’d never got from either gender. [It had always been either judgmental or jealous behaviour from females and disrespect or sleaziness from men]. Towards the end of the night she was speaking with a cousin who she thought had never really liked her who then casually blurted out, “Oh Greta, she’s the gorgeous one of the family.”. What an amazing compliment, no one in her family had ever said anything so lovely to her, and for the first time, she truly felt it - gorgeous, beautiful, sexy and a lady.”
(Greta)

Greta embodied sexy through confidence in several areas. Greta gained confidence in public from others through their positive judgment about her dress. The evidence is in her description of people’s reactions. The ladies were “complimentary”, the men were “respectful”, her cousin stated she was “the gorgeous one of the family”, and her partner was turned on by her in the dress because he thought it was the “sexiest thing he’d ever seen her in”. Greta’s confidence increased as a result of the reactions. The approval she received from her partner gave her a “huge burst of confidence” and her cousin’s statement was thought to be the nicest thing she had heard. Greta also gained confidence through her physical appearance via consumption. She consumed to embody sexy. She “applied her fake tan”, she worked on “her makeup and making her hair beautiful”, she put on “strappy heels” and “painted her toe nails”. This consumption created the “stunning lady” that was looking back at her from the mirror and raised her confidence.

Greta also embodied sexy by accentuating her womanliness without coming across as slutty. Slutty was described during group discussion as exposure of too much flesh in public. Greta embodied sexy through femininity by expressing herself as a woman without appearing slutty. This impression was displayed in the description of her dress. The dress was ivory which suggests purity rather than a sexual colour like black. Purity is often associated with wedding dresses and implies an innocence rather than promiscuity. The cowl neck of the dress alluded to her breasts without exposing them and the thin delicate ribbon that zigzagged across her back exposed skin alluding to nakedness without being bare. The shape, design and quality of the dress made her feel “amazingly special” which suggests the cut of the dress hugged her body showing off her womanly curves without exposing her “breasts or legs”.

Greta experienced sexy through physiological sensations, smell, and touch. The physiological senses were displayed in her story when she described the racing of her heart as she neared the party and how excited she became as the smells wafted from the event. The sensations of smell and touch aroused Greta further as she explains the sensuality of the helium balloons tickling her naked arms and the smells of perfume, cologne, food and wine that got her “even more excited”.

Chloe’s Memory Story

Chloe’s story illustrates how she embodied sexy as multisensory. She also embodied sexy through the confidence she attained from her physical appearance and male judgement.

“Chloe at 17 looked at herself in the mirror for the umpteenth time. Yip, she was sure she looked hot, hot enough to make him want her. She had saved up and bought a boob tube top that ended in a point at the front baring the flesh of her slender developing curves along the side of her body. It shimmered in the light, almost purple, but wait also blue. It was so pretty, she thought and bound to turn him on. She couldn't wear a bra with it because it was strapless. She thought about this and decided it would probably make this outfit even hotter to him. The skirt she had also bought with weeks of pocket money and cash from her part time job at the bakery, serving customers and scraping the discarded flour off the lino floor. It was white and fitted tightly over her butt and hugged her thighs. It also

went into an angled point at the front past her knees. The slits up the side of the skirt made it seem adult-like.

Finally he arrived to pick her up, he was late again as usual and she had been ready for ages. She had taken a lot of time and care to blow dry her hair into its style, apply a thick layer of foundation over her pimpled forehead and paint eyeshadow onto her eyes to look beautiful for him. But she did not mention the time he had made her wait or the anxiety she had felt watching the clock. She let it all melt away because nothing seemed as important as being with him. She got into his car and they sped away. Chloe breathed in his presence and chatted with him enjoying his company.” (Chloe)

Chloe embodied sexy through confidence. She created confidence through physical appearance via consumption. The top she purchased exposed the flesh of her curves and the skirt hugged her body tightly to allude to a womanly physique. The clothes made her feel sure “she looked hot”. Chloe covered her pimpled forehead with foundation to allude to unblemished skin and took time to do her hair and makeup. She felt confidence through looking physically attractive. Chloe also pinned her confidence on the judgment from the male in the story. Everything she did was to please him. She had to look “hot enough to make him want her”; she had to “turn him on” and look “beautiful for him”. His reaction would give her confidence and, therefore, she would embody sexy.

Chloe additionally experienced sexy through her senses. The physiological sensation of anxiety she felt as she watched the clock built the sexual energy. In addition the sense of smell she experienced as she “breathed in his presence” suggests the sensations of his aroma and the surroundings develop the feeling of sexy.

The Collective Embodiment of Sexy

Mel, Greta and Chloe’s stories illustrate how we embody sexy. We develop our sexual energy through sensations. This process was shown across the three stories. Mel, Greta and Chloe embodied sexy as multisensory. They experienced sexy through smell, touch, sight and physiological reactions which implies we embody sexy through a slow building of sensory elements. Our arousal is heightened

through the multiple senses and increases our feeling of being sexy. Sexy is not just a look. It is more complex than that because it is a lived experience through which we embody sensations.

We also embody sexy through confidence. Mel, Greta and Chloe embodied sexy via confidence in two ways. They created confidence through physical appearance using consumption. They spent time and money to create a desirable look to feel sexy. This behaviour suggests we embody sexy through physical attractiveness. We need products to create this appearance. Mel, Greta and Chloe also embodied sexy through confidence that was gained from validation by others. Male approval was common across all of their stories. Mel's confidence was boosted when she thought Bob would think she looked good. Greta embodied sexy through the positive judgment from her male partner and others. Chloe placed importance on the male's opinion in her story and carefully created outcomes she thought he would like. These factors suggest we look to others, especially the men in our lives, for endorsement to embody sexy. We feel sexy when we are told we are sexy.

Mel, Greta and Chloe's stories suggest we embrace femininity to embody sexy. All three stories used clothing to accentuate the body and allude to body parts underneath without exposure. This idea implies we embody sexy by looking womanly without appearing slutty. However, we refer to our womanly body parts such as, breasts, curves and genitals, without exposure of flesh, to embody sexy. This suggestion is done through the use of clothing such as the tight skirt that hugged Chloe's bottom, the cowl neck dress that alluded to Greta's breasts or Mel's tight skinny leg jeans that accentuate the line of her leg stopping at her genitals. This reference to the body beneath the clothing indicates we walk a fine line between living sexy and being slutty.

Socialisation of Sexy

This section discusses how individual women in this study were socialised into their meaning of sexy in order to gain insight into how the collective's members have been socialised into their understanding of sexy.

Midge's Memory Story

Midge's story illustrates how she was socialised into her meaning of sexy. She was socialised to believe a certain look was sexy and this was framed within the male gaze.

“When Midge was about 22 years old, she was at a friend's place in Auckland watching the E channel on Sky. It was a rainy day, and her [sic] and her friend were having breakfast. Scrambled eggs on toast in their pyjamas while watching TV.

They were watching an episode of the “Girls of the Playboy Mansion”. This was when it had just started to become popular and more common on this channel. As she watched the programme, she realised how these girls were dressing and acting for Hugh Hefner, and the cameras. She observed the way they dressed, posed and acted on camera, and this really surprised her. She had seen sexy looking girls on posters in her brother's rooms, but as she watched them go from 2D to 3D, and talking and interacting with each other, something seemed very different.

Firstly, in her mind, girls dressed like that had always been the ultimate “sexy girls”. The way they dressed was very revealing, with most of their assets bulging out of their smalls, their white blonde hair was very common amongst the girls and the cute high pitch when they talk. All these things were associated as being the ultimate sex symbol in Midge's mind due to her experience with being exposed to similar 2D images growing up. Secondly, while the camera was interviewing them, they really didn't seem that real when they spoke. They were quite unaware of life outside the mansion and how people interact with each other with regular clothes on, and regular conversation.

After the episode, Midge talked with her friend who watched the show with her. They both agreed that the girls looked and acted ridiculous. She felt quite silly that she had watched the programme, but for some reason was drawn in to watch these girls live in this house and what they would do each day. Midge still continues to be drawn in by these reality shows about these girls dressed up beyond what the girls surrounding her do day to day.” (Midge)

Midge had been socialised from a young age to believe women who were young like “girls”, had blonde hair, wore little clothing exposing maximum flesh, had large breasts and were submissive by talking in a “cute high pitch”, were the “ultimate sexy girl”. As Midge viewed her older brothers’ posters she was led to believe that these ‘girls’ were the pinnacle of being sexy.

Midge realised how absurd it was to be one of these “ultimate sexy girls” as she watched the women react and move in a 3D form. However, she is still drawn in to watch them on the *Girls of the Playboy Mansion* television show. This appeal that, suggests while Midge knows the “ultimate sexy girl” is not a reality to real everyday women, she still sees them as the pinup girl for sexy. Her understanding of what is sexy has been influenced by the blonde, large breasted, submissive girl with not much clothing on.

Growing up, Midge was exposed to posters in her older brother’s room which may have shaped her perception of what men find sexy. This line of thought would suggest that Midge has been socialised to believe these “ultimate sexy girls” are what men want. It also implies she should seek validation from men by being thought of as an “ultimate sexy girl”.

Midge’s observation of how the girls on the television “dressed, posed and acted” for both Hugh Hefner and the cameras suggests sexy women are submissive. It suggests women should do as they are told to please the dominate male. Their cute high pitched voice also provides evidence for the submissive nature of these “girls”. This positions women as the inferior sex by insinuating they have nothing important to say. This model could result in women being socialised to believe they are not equal and should pose, act and dress according to what men want irrespective of their own desires.

Jenny’s Memory Story

Jenny’s story illustrates how she was socialised into her meaning of sexy. She was socialised to believe a certain look was sexy and this was framed within the male gaze. She was socialised to place importance on male judgement.

“ . . . My friends and I never really looked at sexy being the way you hold your body or more is more. Long sleeve tops weren't really that sexy – you had to show some arm to give off your attractive charm. I can honestly say we thought less was more . . . Developing into women was high on the agenda so much so we tried to do it years ahead of ourselves but we never really had our own idea of what sexiness was mainly due to age . . .

. . . I can actually pinpoint “that older boy” who took my breath away the summer of 1997. Three years older, no zits, surfed and had a car! Much more advanced than me in every way possible. He put a whole new spin on what I thought was sexy by commenting on a girl strutting down the main beach. Tummy tucked tightly in, long strides gliding her along the sand almost like a conveyer belt, tall spine almost like the flat of a table, head upright and he said “There's nothing sexier than a girl with great posture.” I think that was my first prompt in my change of view of sexy. It's more than the label, the brown skin and the whole package – it's the way you as a woman carry yourself. Great posture really does stand as a physical front saying I'm confident and I can walk proud and tall. Not saying that it's everything but it does add to appeal and the boys like it too! Unfortunately as much as I liked him I didn't jump off a bridge for him and improve my posture just like the girl on the beach back then but now every time I think of him I do suck in my tummy and stick out my boobs for a brief moment.”
(Jenny)

Jenny was socialised into her meaning of sexy through male influence. The male who contributed to her understanding could be viewed as fitting the mould of what makes a man sexy. He had “no zits” which suggests unblemished and pure skin; he surfed which implies he is athletic in build, and he owned a car which could be viewed as masculine independence. Jenny may have been influenced by the male's opinion because she believed he was sexy. She described him as “taking her breath away”.

Jenny described the girl on the beach as having her tummy tucked in tightly. This comment suggests the girl appeared slim. Jenny also supported this idea during the group discussion when she elaborated on the girl. “She just took long strides, she looked like a super model almost . . . she was quite tall and skinny and

everything else . . . ”. The girl was also described in the discussion as appearing tall like a giraffe. It implies Jenny was socialised to believe she would be sexy if she appeared slim and tall through standing up straight and tucking in her tummy. She had likened the girl to a “supermodel” providing further suggestion that tall and slim is important in being sexy. Jenny also mentioned during discussion that the girl on the beach was in a bikini. This exposure of flesh may also have resulted in the girl being thought of as sexy.

Jenny noted how magazines had influenced her idea of sexy when she was younger. She referred to these during her discussion. She stated that sexy was more than the “clothing labels” and the “brown skin”, she and her friends envied in the magazines. She had been socialised as a teenager to believe the information on what was sexy was provided through consumer culture, for example, in magazines or peer influence. These ideas may have resulted in Jenny searching for the meaning of sexy outside of herself.

Walking straight was said to add “appeal” and the “boys like it”. These comments suggest women should express sexy in a way that is pleasing to society and men. Jenny changed her behaviour after the incident with the girl on the beach. She now “sucks in” her tummy and “sticks out” her boobs. She alludes to being slim and having large breasts through her new behaviour. This point suggests she is creating an image to please others because she has been socialised through her interaction to believe this look appeals to men. Jenny describes good posture. “It’s kind of like the outside of more to come . . . it’s like I know I’m sexy . . . ”. This quote from group discussion illustrates the belief that behaviour is for other people. It is about luring someone in with “more to come” and while “strutting” as if “I know I’m sexy”.

Tara’s Memory Story

Tara’s story illustrates how she was socialised into her meaning of sexy. She observed that the socialisation of sexy was framed within the male gaze and to fit a certain look.

“As she walked into the bar all she saw was a room full of males and females mostly dancing and having a good time. As she examined the females closely she

noticed the presence of their smooth skin, plump with youth and shimmering under the lights. Not a hair was out of place on their heads and faces were creations of make up to pull off the illusion of perfect beauty.

But one huge difference was clear, the males were fully dressed in dress shirts and pants yet the females had as little clothes as possible on. As this difference dawned on the girl she examined them some more. Most of the females had small dresses on or short shorts/skirts and a skimpy top.

The women's legs, all the way up to their thighs, were showing. They were also showing their arms, upper back and breasts pushed up and out to look luscious and full. The males in the room were examining the females choosing which ones were appealing to them or which ones based on their lack of clothes were the easiest to get a one-night stand out of." (Tara)

Tara's story is an observation of socialisation. She mentions that on the surface the men and women look like they are just "having a good time" but on closer inspection she sees something different. This difference is suggestive of consumer culture's influence on female sexuality. On the surface the images look like just a bit of fun. An example may be an image of a sexy woman washing a car, having a good time as water sprays over her clothes in a magazine advert. To look at the image is pleasing to the eye. She is attractive, toned, tanned and the idea of sprayed water on a hot day is fun. However, going deeper may reveal the low self-esteem this image creates for women readers or the objectification they receive when they walk into a bar holding a wet t-shirt competition.

Tara notes the women's faces are "creations of make-up to pull off the illusion of perfect beauty" and their youthful skin is unblemished "shimmering" under the lights. At face value, this implies these women are attractive and well groomed. However, a closer look outlines the inequality between man and woman. Tara points out the women have little clothing on, baring "all the way up to their thighs" and showing "breasts pushed up and out to look luscious and full". On the other hand, the men are completely covered with shirts and jeans. One could think these women have been socialised through consumer culture to dress provocatively by projecting large breasts and exposing maximum flesh. This interpretation would

suggest a certain look is deemed sexy within consumer culture and that these women imitate it to feel sexy.

The unequal dress standard also suggests women have been socialised to accept the submissive role in this display of sexy. It is almost as if they have dressed to please men and are awaiting male judgement on whether they are considered sexy. Tara supports this idea in her statement as she describes how the men judged and then chose the women according to how appealing they were to them.

The Collective Socialisation of Sexy

Midge, Jenny and Tara's stories illustrate how we, the collective, are socialised into our meaning of sexy. Their stories suggest that we must create a certain physical appearance in order to be sexy. The evidence for this suggestion is in Midge, Jenny and Tara's stories. Midge explains how youth, blonde hair, large breasts and exposed flesh make up the "ultimate sexy girl". Jenny outlines good posture as sexy as it creates an appearance of being slim, tall and having large breasts. The girl Jenny observes walking straight is also bare fleshed, in a bikini. Tara notes how the women in the nightclub expose maximum flesh, are youthful, are well groomed and project large breasts in order to be sexy. The commonalities between the stories imply we are socialised to fit a certain physical mould in order to be sexy. In particular it appears our meaning of sexy is influenced to encompass large breasts, the exposure of flesh, and a youthful appearance.

Male acceptance is another commonality among the three stories. Midge's meaning of sexy may have been influenced by the "ultimate sexy girl" look because she learned through her brothers' posters that this is what men want. Jenny changed her behaviour and improved her posture because it was appealing and the boy she liked, liked it. She also mentioned during the discussion it was a teaser, a promise of more to come, almost a come-on act to lure someone. Tara's story illustrated male validation. The women in Tara's memory were judged and then chosen on their attractiveness and sexual availability. These stories imply our, the collective's, meaning of sexy is influenced by male approval. We are socialised to seek male acceptance in order to feel sexy.

Female submission too was present across the stories. Midge explained the women on the *Girls of the Playboy Mansion* television show as talking in cute high-pitched voices and posing, dressing, and acting for Hugh Hefner and the camera. They were taking on a submissive role by doing what others found pleasing and it was insinuated they had nothing important to say. Jenny's story implied submission through participating in behaviour to please men. Tara's story illustrated female submission through the disparity in dress standard. The women in her story had maximum flesh exposed whereas the men were covered in jeans and shirts. It appears we are socialised to embrace the role of submissive female who seeks male approval and aims to please males through clothing and behaviour.

The Meaning of Sexy

This section discusses how we, the collective, constructed its meaning of sexy to understand what sexy meant to us and how we have been socialised into our meaning. The meaning of sexy incorporated confidence, physical appearance, and authenticity.

Confidence

In the first group meeting we constructed sexy as confidence. The images we brought that most represented what made a young woman sexy were chosen because they symbolised confidence. Confidence meant being comfortable in your own skin and having the freedom to be yourself without judgement. When we felt comfortable in our own body or felt free to be ourselves through our body we felt sexy. Mel best describes it when she talks about why her image of a woman on a beach who is "throwing caution to the wind" with her back uncovered is sexy. "I think just feeling comfortable in your own skin kind of is part of it and I definitely have felt that at times just to be able to yeah prance around and not feel like you don't have to hide yourself and just feeling comfortable with who you are and let the air touch you . . .".

Physical Appearance

We did not directly attribute physical appearance to sexy. However, through the images we brought to the first meeting it became apparent that physical appearance was involved in our meaning of sexy. The images we brought to represent sexiness eerily echoed the consumer culture emphasis on physical

attributes. The pictures were of women who were attractive, young, slim, toned, tanned, possessed unblemished skin, has groomed hair and make-up and long hair. This choice implies consumer culture does influence our meaning of sexy.

Authenticity

We also constructed sexy as authentic through our group discussion about the images. This concept of authenticity meant anyone can embody sexy. It is not restricted to the elite, beautiful people in the media because it is real and natural. Therefore, everyone can experience it. Kate describes why her picture of Jennifer Lopez with a bare back is sexy. “I think it represents being sexy for me because it looks feminine without showing boobs or butt like it’s just her back and everyone has got backs and I think that’s what makes it kind of real. You know everyone has got a back, everyone can take their shirt off and kind of look over their shoulder at their boyfriend . . . ”. Midge and Tara support this idea of sexy as authentic.

“ . . . if it’s an image of a model in a bikini I don’t think that’s sexy but if it’s a scene that looks more natural and looks less staged . . . that is sexy I think because it feels more real rather than staged.” (*Midge*)

“ . . . she’s [the woman in Mel’s picture] surrendering to nature and being herself . . . I thought it was quite sexy because if you look at her shorts they’re not riding up her bum, they’re baggy like real causal like natural not trying to make this a sexy photo sort of rubbish. It’s just sexy on its own.” (*Tara*)

The images we brought were compromised of elite celebrities and beautiful people. The physical appearance in these pictures is not easily achievable by standard women. The celebrities and models in magazines often have personal make-up artists and personal stylists to create the desired look using hair, clothing, and make-up. In addition these types of images have been known to be retouched using digital technology to make the women appear slimmer or diminish “imperfections” such as those exposed on Dove’s real women campaign that showed the making of a billboard advert. This process makes it very hard for the average woman to get the same results. It implies sexy cannot be experienced by just anyone and suggests physical attributes must be obtained before you are sexy.

This image insinuates sexy is not authentic, although that is how we constructed it. Therefore, consumer culture contributed to our meaning of sexy.

The Women's Images

The images we brought were mostly celebrities and came from magazine, web and advert pictures. We could have brought images from any source or even used personal photographs to represent sexy. However, we all chose to bring some form of media image. This decision suggests we are socialised by consumer culture, specifically the media in this instance.



Figure 1: Kim Kardashian

This image of the American celebrity Kim Kardashian was chosen by Midge to represent sexy through confidence because she has a large bottom but is displaying it anyway. She is comfortable with her body. However, we found contrasting thoughts when we compared our first impression notes to the image. Greta labelled her as having a come hither look almost as if to say, as Greta put it, “take me from behind”. This comment constructs Kim Kardashian as a submissive female which does not suggest confidence. The consensus was that we had initially felt the image was like something out of a men’s magazine and verged on slutty. However, when we heard Midge’s explanation for choosing the picture, we agreed that under that circumstance we could accept the image as portraying sexy.

When Midge was asked how sexiness was portrayed in this picture she responded by saying, “Camera work, make-up, how she’s sitting, you can see most of her bottom, red underwear . . . red is kind of firey, sexy . . . all the, you know, skin . . .”. This interpretation suggests the image represented being sexy not only

because she was a confident woman but also because of her physical appearance. Kim's physical appearance had initially come across as that of a submissive female, however, it also made her sexy.

Kim Kardashian has little clothing on and her bottom is half exposed as if to tease the viewer into wanting to see more. She is also toned with tanned, unblemished skin and has long hair that is sexily swept back off her sultrily made-up face. These elements of physical appearance appear to be emphasised in consumer culture as equating to sexy. Therefore this image implies we have been socialised into consumer culture's meaning of sexy.



Figure 2: Angelina Jolie

Figure 2 presents an image of the American actress, Angelina Jolie. Jenny informed us she chose this image because Jolie is walking tall and this posture exudes confidence. However, as Jenny discussed her picture, she went on to say. "She's showing off a really long nice sexy leg . . . she just looks gorgeous, like looks like, she takes care of herself which I think is important and sexy . . . she's all in black with really high heel shoes which I think is quite sexy . . .". Angelina Jolie is well groomed with perfect hair and make-up. Her exposed leg is toned and unblemished and she is in black, a colour often considered sexual. She is also wearing high heels to elongate the leg and appear slimmer and taller. The emphasis again is on aspects supported in consumer culture as sexy. Jenny also provides evidence of this cultural contribution as she notes her long sexy leg, how

gorgeous she looks and how well groomed she appears. These ideas imply physical appearance contributes our meaning of sexy.



Figure 3: Advert image

The image in Figure 3 is an advert Mel found in a magazine which advertised a new fitness method. She chose this image to represent the carefree freedom confidence provides. This is shown through the exposure of the individual who is throwing her shirt to the sky. The advert displays a slim and toned woman. This choice is likely due to the intended message, which is to inform the reader that this fitness method will reshape you into looking like her. The advert implies we should want to look like her. She is tanned, toned, slim, has unblemished skin, and long hair. These traits, it is implied, are what the reader should aspire to achieve.

The woman in the image has her shirt flung over her head as if waving a white surrender flag. We discussed this act as representative of surrendering to nature and letting go of inhibitions to become free to be herself. We also talked about the white shirt being a virginal colour. This could suggest purity or innocence which implies femininity without being slutty.

Mel was asked how her image represented sexiness to her, and while she pointed out confidence she also commented on the physical attributes, “. . . it’s so much skin but at the same time . . . you don’t even know what the front of her body looks like, that to me just looks really sexy, really skin [sic], it’s golden. I quite like the whole dark skin kind of thing . . . toned body . . .”. The emphasis on physical attributes does imply our meaning of sexy has been learned.



Figure 4: Web image

Tara’s picture was sourced from the web. She pointed out that she chose the image to focus on the girl in white. Tara had printed it in black and white but the girl in the white dress had bright blue leggings on with orange shoes. She chose this image to represent confidence by having the freedom to be you. This self-confidence was displayed by the girl wearing very bright funky colours that were not traditional. However, on closer inspection the girl in white has long blonde hair, a slim physique, is made up with make-up and is exposing some flesh. This suggests that physical attributes are involved in our meaning of sexy.

The girl’s dress is white which could imply purity or innocence which could represent femininity. Her exposed legs are also covered by leggings which could further support the concept of femininity. However, Mel suggested that white could also be considered erotic because it can be see through. The image also suggests competition as Mel pointed out. The traditional male fantasy of ‘cat fight’ may also be present in this picture. However, Tara explained the image was chosen solely because of the girl in white and that no attention should be given to the other woman or the situation.



Figure 5: Magazine Image

Greta selected her image of a model from a magazine. The picture represented sexy to her because although she wouldn't wear the short clothing, the pictured woman represented confidence by wearing it because she was comfortable in her own body. Greta stated during discussion of why the image was sexy. "I think I'd like to look like that . . .". She also described her image, ". . . I think she's got a beautiful figure and a nice tan and a lovely face as well like she's probably one of those perfect models . . . I also like the dress that she's wearing her legs look amazing . . .". This description suggests the appearance of the model in the image does contribute to Greta's meaning of sexy. The long hair, the toned, tanned, slim, unblemished body the model sported and the appearance of long legs through the use of high heels are physical attributes that represented sexy to us.



Figure 6: Jennifer Lopez

Kate picked her image of the American celebrity Jennifer Lopez because she felt a back signified being feminine without being slutty. She also mentioned that she could put herself in that time or place and it could be anyone of us because the situation was natural. We could all feel confident to expose our back to our boyfriend because a back was something we all had. However, Kate does note that the image contains an appearance aspect. “. . . it [the picture] looks quite natural but it kind of fits a lot of other sexy stereotypes like if you have long hair and be tanned honey colour and have like bedroom eyes on [you are sexy] . . . ”. Jennifer Lopez appears to be displaying the physical attributes emphasised in consumer culture. She has the long hair, toned, tanned, unblemished skin and her face is made up with make-up to accentuate her features. This interpretation implies consumer culture contributes to our meaning of sexy.

Contradictions

The images we brought to represent what sexy meant to us and our constructed meaning of sexy were contradictory. We believed sexy was being confident and authentic. However, the images suggested the physical appearance displayed in consumer culture is what makes us sexy. This dichotomy provided contradiction because we could not feel confident without having the desired physical appearance. Our meaning of sexy as authentic was also contradicted because not all females could experience sexy unless they fit the physical mould emphasised by consumer culture. This conclusion meant sexy was not authentic and natural. Instead our images implied sexy was staged and unachievable by “ordinary” women.

Consumer culture shows us images of sexy and they nearly all fit a certain physical mould. The images we brought highlighted many aspects of this physical stereotype including being attractive, youthful, slim, toned, tanned, with unblemished skin, coifed hair and make-up, and long hair. This revelation implies consumer culture contributes to our meaning of sexy. We learn from society if we do not fit this norm then we are not deemed as sexy. Midge’s memory story outlines the “ultimate sexy girl” which is portrayed as the physical form we are expected to obtain in order to be sexy. Midge explained the pressure she felt when

growing up to achieve this norm because she thought she should aim to look like the posters of the “ultimate sexy girl” in her brothers’ rooms.

The contradiction between physical appearance and confidence and authenticity created by consumer culture means that we need a certain physical appearance to experience sexy. Therefore, we needed to create confidence by using products and services to achieve the look presented by consumer culture to ensure we felt sexy. This idea also clashed with our view of sexy as authentic because we constructed sexy as something everyone could achieve since it is natural. However, we are trying to obtain an unattainable look that is staged. The desired look is created through air brushing and styling using professional make-up artists and stylists. This process is illustrated in Dove’s real women campaign and by the many celebrity stylists that discuss professional grooming on programmes such as E! Entertainment. This look is hard for the average woman to attain and is not authentic in the sense of “natural” because it is created artificially. We try to gain confidence by consuming products and services to reach an “ultimate sexy girl” image that is almost impossible to achieve. Chloe expresses this inner turmoil thus “ . . . I find a contradiction and it’s a conflict in my head between what society tells me is sexy or like Midge was saying the ultimate sexy girl [playboy bunny type] and what I actually am . . . it’s a real kind of conflict ‘cause as much as I don’t agree with it [strippers] I feel this pressure to almost look like one, I mean to like have the aspects like the long hair, like I’m trying to grow my hair out I want the long hair, I mean I went and got implants, the bigger breasts.” Greta also explains how she needs to look a certain way to feel confident. “You know I have had times when I felt confident in my body like I’ve had a spray tan and I’m all trim and taut for summer and I feel like I want to just get my clothes off or wear a bikini and flounce around kind of thing you know. It doesn’t happen that often but when it does happen you feel really good about yourself and that’s a bit of a confidence boost.”.

We attempt to combat these contradictions by creating circumstances around certain inconsistencies that let us digest and counteract the contradiction to some degree. After examining the group discussion it became clear we were creating circumstances around exposure of flesh because our meaning of sexy differed from our socialised meaning. We constructed sexy as being covered because we

deemed high exposure of skin as slutty and believed sexy should be attainable to everyone through being authentic. Unblemished, toned and tanned skin is not achievable by everyone to expose. However, many of the images we brought to represent what makes a young woman sexy did expose flesh which implies we are socialised to believe high exposure of flesh is sexy. So, we formed a category to make sense of the inconsistency. We decided exposing a lot of skin or being uncovered in public was slutty but it was sexy to be uncovered in private. Midge explains the categories. “I think in that sense I think that’s [dressing in a sexy slip for your boyfriend in private] OK. I don’t think going to clubs wearing two belts [is OK] but you know if it’s in a setting that’s private then that’s OK.”.

We constructed sexy as being *covered in public* and *uncovered in private* to balance our constructed meaning of sexy and the meaning we have been socialised into. However, we also suggested confidence was represented through baring skin because the exposed women in the images were free to do what they wanted and appeared to be comfortable within themselves. Although, this is not authentic because not everyone can achieve the unblemished, toned and tanned skin in the images to feel sexy through the confidence of exposing perfect flesh. This creates a contradiction between our constructed meaning of sexy and the meaning we are socialised into. So, we created another circumstance to deal with the inconsistency. We deemed covered in public to be sexy, which is consistent with our constructed meaning, but we alluded to being uncovered through clothing choice to incorporate our socialised meaning of sexy. Mel illustrates this point, “. . . it’s kind of like a cheeky photo not nothing to do with boobs, it’s kind of like hey look what I’ve got, get to know me and you might see the rest.”. Greta’s memory story provides further evidence for this viewpoint because she appeared sexy by accentuating her breasts via the cowl neck without exposure and suggested the uncovered body by exposing her back through ribboning but did not expose a lot of flesh. She alluded to the body parts to feel sexy without being slutty in public.

Our category of uncovered in public also functioned in a 2D and 3D subsection. We deemed being *uncovered in 2D, static form in public* as sexy but in 3D form it was slutty. Greta illustrates this point. “Like if you saw that [2D image of a girl in short dress] in real life you’d probably be like oh she’s going to the Outback [bar],

[she is] easy. It's like put a skirt on! But in a magazine she just looks amazing but I suppose there's not the fear of her bending over and you see everything cause she's static." Midge's memory story framed the 2D poster "ultimate sexy girls" as sexy but as they came to life in *Girls of the Playboy Mansion* they did not seem real nor as sexy as was first thought. We grouped uncovered into 2D and 3D to make sense of the contradiction between the highly exposed images we brought to represent sexy and our constructed meaning of sexy as covered.

The complex nature of sexy meant we had to constantly create situations and categories to ensure we could understand sexy with all the contradictions involved. One example of the complexity was the discussion surrounding breasts. We expressed the idea that having an ample bosom represented being a female and made us feel more feminine. Tara mentioned she did not feel like a woman when her breasts shrunk to an A cup after weight loss. Large breasts were also pointed out as being a staple requirement for the "ultimate sexy girl". However, not one of the images brought to the first meeting to represent sexy contained breasts or cleavage (Cleavage was present on Figure 4; however, the focus was on the girl in white in the image who did not have any cleavage exposed). Mel even went as far as to point out why she felt more respect for the woman in Figure 1. "I think so many images of sexy women, especially those targeted at guys, are all about boobs, such a big part of it, so it's like because she's not [showing her breasts] she almost gets a bit more of my respect." Kate's choice of image was also explained as being specifically chosen because it did not display breasts. This position could perhaps suggest that, because breasts are sexualised by consumer culture, these women categorise breasts as feminine not sexy. Kate stated her choice of image represented something that anyone could achieve because everyone had a back. This choice suggests the large breasts that are the "sexy girl" norm may not be attainable by everyone and, therefore, they were not considered sexy in terms of authenticity. We also constructed sexy as confidence which implies you should be comfortable in your own body, irrespective of having large breasts as not everyone has them. Our constructed meaning of sexy may have influenced our decision to categorise breasts as feminine.

Conclusion

We constructed sexy as confidence and authentic. However, these constructions conflicted with our socialised meaning of sexy as physical appearance. We created circumstances to try and deal with the contradiction which meant we categorised *uncovered as sexy as a 3D form in private* and *sexy as a 2D form in public* to make sense of our socialised belief that sexy is exposed flesh. We also classified covered as sexy as long as it alluded to being uncovered. We categorised breasts as feminine not sexy to align breasts with our constructed meaning of sexy. The creation of categories helped us to reconcile the contradiction between our meaning of sexy and our socialised meaning.

Consequences of Socialisation

This section deals with the consequences that we believe arise from being socialised into our meaning of sexy through consumer culture.

The contradiction between what we ourselves construct to be sexy and what we have been socialised to believe is sexy creates consequences for us. Some of these consequences are emotionally damaging and hard to navigate through. The fine line we must walk between covered and uncovered is one aspect that causes consequences. We cannot be too uncovered because that is slutty but we must allude to our uncovered body to be sexy. This line is hard to balance and inflicts pressure on us to emphasize our body and flesh. Chloe's memory story expresses the pain she felt when she realised dressing sexy to achieve consumer culture's norm only got her sex.

“ . . . She waited for him to say something, to notice her new outfit. But nothing was said. They pulled up in a gravel area out the way of prying eyes and the dark night surrounded the car. He lit a cigarette and so did she. They sat in the dim listening to the music as smoke filled the space and soon conversation turned sexual.

He started to make suggestion that they should do what they did mostly on their meetings, the end result being sex. She was adamant she would not be the one to kiss him this time. She always kissed him. Yes he kissed her back but he seemed more interested in the activities than the intimate kissing. So she resolved to

herself she was going to see if he kissed her. She was going to let the things happen she knew were about to unfold but she would not kiss him, not even once. She wanted to see if he kissed her.

He was facing her, looking at her. She longed for him to care about her the way she did him. She asked him if he liked her new outfit." Yeah I do, easy access", he murmured as he leaned an arm across and eased the top of her boob tube down to reveal her breasts, his eyes glazing over with sexual desire. She did not argue or cry, instead she went along with what he wanted and went through foreplay and sex without any kiss to touch her lips.

He dropped her off later that night and she got into bed and cried. She felt cheap and not wanted; hot tears soaked her pillow until she fell asleep. With the morning started her pit of despair and when her mother came into her room to rouse her and make sure she was getting ready for school, new tears started. Chloe sat on her bed and sobbed into her hands while her mother put her arm around her girly flannette pajamas. In between the racking sobs she formed the words to her mother. "He didn't even say I looked nice in my new clothes", another deep inhale choked by tears, "he just, he just", more tears, "said he liked it because it was easy access". And on that last note Chloe heaved into body shaking crying that made her feel as if her heart would break." (Chloe)

Chloe dressed to allude to body parts to achieve sexy because consumer culture promotes the uncovered body as sexy. However, she was devastated when she discovered dressing as consumer culture's version of sexy would result in sex rather than affection. Chloe experienced feeling cheap, used and not wanted because she adhered to this socialised meaning of sexy. The clothing that she had saved up to buy to look "hot" for him made her "easy access" instead. Chloe experienced objectification by pursuing consumer culture's version of sexy. She was "easy" and "accessible" to the man in this story and he took what he wanted from the situation because he thought it was acceptable. This behaviour implies he was socialised to believe the way Chloe looked equated with sex.

Chloe was seen as an object by the guy she was trying to impress because she imitated the sexualised images in consumer culture which often promote women

as submissive and exposed for male pleasure. Chloe is not alone. Greta shared a story of her emotional distress when she was bullied at high school because she followed consumer culture's version of sexy in the hopes of being liked, “. . . once I grew boobs and stuff I started getting their [male] attention and I thought oh if I dress like this [slutty] I'm going to get their attention, cool. So I did that then realised that it was actually disrespectful attention and it actually put me in a worse place . . . ”.

Tara's memory story illustrates the consequences of objectification often caused through consumer culture's sexualised images of women.

“ . . . [In the nightclub] the girl observed the usual approach into the courting process as bumping and grinding with little conversation.

It dawned on the girl as she looked around that she was just another piece of meat on show. No one was interested in her true self only the image she presented. She felt sick at this moment and disillusioned with what she had been socialised to believe was the process to meet a partner. At that moment a guy came up behind her and grabbed her bum, confirming her thoughts and filling her with rage.”
(Tara)

Tara was angered that she had been just an object. Tara described the women in the nightclub as wearing little clothing and made up to achieve “perfect beauty”. The men in the story had judged the women to see which one appealed to them most for a one night stand. The men treated Tara and the others as if they were sex objects. She used images in her digital story of a blood-stained woman wrapped like a piece of meat and graphics of cows being judged by men. She showed the rawness of what happened that night in the nightclub. It came down to women being treated as cows, meat, to be chosen and “milked”.

This perspective implies that if you dress to achieve consumer culture's standard of sexy you will be objectified. This objectification may result from the sexualised images of women in consumer culture that often display women as submissive and for male pleasure. Mel described Figure 5 as “safe”. She said, “No guy is going to come up and grab her arse or call her names or no one is going to give her a hard time for what she's wearing or do anything rude or inappropriate.”. It

is horrible to think women are going through this emotional torture. They are influenced to believe “less is more” through consumer culture so they attempt to recreate the image. However, the result is they are treated by others like an object they can abuse and use. Consumer culture tells us there is more to a person than looks but does not support this message with its images. The mixed signals add further to our inner turmoil. We constantly receive conflicting meanings as Jenny points out. “It’s mixed messages and I think that’s just reflective over the whole of society . . . it’s kind of like everything is disjointed and people are saying no you don’t need to show your boobs or expose yourself . . . but then they’ll move over on the next programme or on TVNZ web page it’s like, then in gossip, Megan Fox strips down to her bikini on the beach . . .”. We are struggling to experience sexy because we are torn between two contradictory versions. Jenny and Tara pointed women are the gender mostly sexualised in society which only heightens the objectification women face. Jenny and Tara told stories of the University bars in town having “wet T-shirt competitions” and “topless nights”. Tara said the competitions they held were “always females getting naked in some degree . . . very rarely males.”. Midge, Chloe and Tara’s memory stories illustrated female as submissive which leads to further evidence that consumer culture promotes objectification of women through the images it produces.

The heightened sexualised imagery in consumer culture thrusts pressures on us. We discussed in our group how sex is everywhere nowadays. It appears female submission is often encouraged in these depictions of sex. Chloe pointed out you could not turn on the radio without sex being blared in your face with words like “I want to have sex with that bitch” in songs. Tara indicated a concern for the amount of sex on the internet. She expressed worry over how much mainstream pornography shows up on the internet as if it is normal, even when you Google search something innocent. This sex-driven culture impacts us by creating pressure to conform and embrace the concept of females as submissive. Chloe points out the strain she feels to be OK with her boyfriend going to strip clubs because culture has normalised it, “. . . it’s [sex] become an accepted part of society . . . I feel that I’m like maybe a prude because if I say to my boyfriend I’m not happy about you going to strip clubs with your mates, I don’t feel good about it, I don’t want you to do it.”. Tara talked about anal sex and how through pornography this has become normal. She battles against the pressure to accept

this act as normal, “. . . maybe I don’t want to try that with you sexually . . . anal sex has become the norm, porn has made it like a norm and well for me it’s not a norm . . . I’m alright for giving stuff a go but you know I just don’t think that it is a norm . . . it’s not OK to put pressure on people.”. The pressures we face often encourage us to perform for male pleasure because we are the submissive sex. Strippers and pornography often promote women as sexual objects for male pleasure. In addition, the competitions Tara and Jenny pointed out that encourage only female nudity provide further evidence we are encouraged to embrace our sexuality as submissive. The sex-driven culture also promotes promiscuity and a tension for us to follow suit. Greta notes that relationship longevity has gone “out the window” and that relationships are all about “the next bit of fun”.

The contradiction between needing physical appearance and needing confidence creates emotional consequences. We experience envy and low self-esteem because we cannot obtain the perfect physical appearance. Although we believe sexy should be authentic, we still attempt to achieve the culturally favoured physical attributes to feel sexy. This standard of appearance is not achievable by everyone and is almost impossible to obtain. We are left feeling unsatisfied and negative about ourselves because we are unable to look like the media images without personal stylists and make-up artists and image retouching. Midge displayed an image of Bridget Jones in her flanelle pajamas on the couch with her hair a mess in her digital story to describe feeling frumpy after watching these “ultimate sexy girls” on T.V. The consumer culture images of sexy do not make us feel good about ourselves. We feel “frumpy” just as Midge illustrated because, no matter what we do, we do not look like the images consumer culture tell us are sexy. Therefore, we envy the traits that are displayed in consumer culture as sexy and desire to obtain them. Kate wished she could get breast implants because she felt women who had ample breasts had an “enviable confidence”. Greta also admitted that, although she would never wear a dress that short, she would like to look like the image of a woman in a short dress she brought to represent sexy.

Greta discussed European women and noted that they embraced their bodies as part of their culture through nudity. She talked about how they sunbathed topless and all different shapes and sizes participated. They were real people getting naked and appeared to have high self-confidence unlike us who wished we could

only look better naked just like the consumer culture images. Only then might we consider exposing ourselves to sunbathe topless. Chloe suggests why we feel as if we never measure up. “I wonder if that is an issue in society that the people we do have to compare ourselves to unfortunately are these amazing sculptured images in the media, or pornography, that have outrageously large breasts and tiny waists . . . but maybe if we were like let’s embrace our bodies and walk around naked and you saw all different shapes and sizes, maybe you’d not look at yourself to this critical point where you think I need a breast augmentation or I need this or I need that to be beautiful or sexy.”.

Conclusion

Consumer culture’s version of sexy creates consequences for us. We experience objectification, pressure to conform and embrace submission, and low self-esteem and envy. We are socialised to believe we are sexy if we imitate the images in consumer culture; however, they cause emotional distress because we are objectified. We are also afflicted with low self-confidence and envy of others because we can never truly achieve the image consumer culture presents as sexy.

Sexy is Dynamic

This section discusses how sexy is dynamic for us as a collective and outlines how our meaning of sexy is a rite of passage. It also discusses the transformational journey this research encouraged.

The group decided on the trigger topic we would write our memories on, as a time when I changed my mind about what was sexy. This topic was chosen from the group discussion of sexy and suggests that, from the outset, our idea of sexy changed over time. However, it was not clear at that point just how dynamic the journey of sexy was until we explored each of our memory stories.

Greta felt sexy without being slutty for the first time when she dressed in an elegant full length gown for her sister’s engagement party. As her digital story panned up to reveal an ivory beaded gown and a glowing Greta you could feel how great she felt about herself. Greta’s story illustrates that idea that there is a shift in the meaning of sexy with age. When we are teenagers our definition of sexy is purely what we learn from a consumer culture that also places a strong emphasis on the male gaze. As teenagers, we are dressing sexy for the male gaze

and to the standard of sexy set by consumer culture. However, as young women aged between twenty and thirty we understood sexy to be a mixture of our male partner's definition and our own definition. Our own definition, as discussed, is still influenced by the physical attributes promoted in consumer culture as we attempt to attain the look. This transitioning suggests, while we are moving to our definition, we are still creating our own version of the norm. As we mature, we may move further from the norm to our own idea of sexy.

Midge illustrates the change in emphasis from consumer culture's definition to our own understanding of sexy when she says, "I think what has occurred to me was that's [the playboy type ultimate sexy girl] ridiculous, you know. I don't know if you get to an age or there's a moment in your life that you realise that that's totally rubbish and I think most girls go through it when they start interacting with guys more and realising what they want and what they think is sexy . . . ". Consumer culture also tells us from a young age that we need validation from the male gaze to know we are sexy and this culture produces an image that we are told is sexy to males. As Mel points out, ". . . it's like you [men] would look at this, therefore, you would find this sexy so, therefore, I'll dress like that and you'll think I'm sexy before we've even asked them [men] . . . you spent all this time getting ready thinking yip I'm sure he's going to love this 'cause this is what he wants 'cause this is what society tells me he wants . . . ". Chloe's story provides further evidence of this thinking as she dresses in a way consumer culture promotes to gain approval from the man in the story. However, she realises she did not get what she wanted by dressing as she did.

In our search for understanding, we are attempting to shift the validation away from the overall male gaze and society's judgement. However, we still continue to give power to our male partners to deem us sexy. As Midge also pointed out in one of the meetings, we still place importance on whether other people find us sexy. ". . . I think reassurance in how you look or whatever will make me feel more or less sexy, if someone said "Oh!" or didn't comment on me if I'd dressed up then you'd think oh well maybe I'm not you know [sexy]". Over time, our desire for affirmation shifted focus from the male gaze in general to receiving approbation from one selected individual – our partner. The emphasis we placed on our male partners' judgement also meant they influenced our understanding of

sexy, just as in Greta's story when she changed her way of dressing after her partner's positive reaction. Jenny's memory story also illustrates this shift as she realised there was more to sexy than the images she looked at in the magazines as a teenager when a boy she had a crush on pointed out a girl striding down the beach with straight posture. We struggled to realise we can be empowered and feel sexy without any reassurance from others. I hope when we move into our next life stage as older women we release the power within ourselves to own our sexy.

The journey we went through to discover our meaning of sexy appears to be a rite of passage. We all had to go through imitating the "ultimate sexy girl" and placing importance on the male gaze to start to construct our own understanding of sexy. As Midge illustrates, each girl needs to go through the hard times to reflect on her understanding of how she lives sexy, ". . . at my old church I ran a girl's group. Each week we'd meet and talk about this [sexuality] . . . and it used to really sadden me 'cause you'd hear about girls choosing to do something and then regretting it straightaway but still continuing to do it. But you can't tell them because again they've got to go through it and then reflect on it . . . ". Greta supports this comment by saying, ". . . when you're so young you have no idea about this [understanding sexuality] and it's almost exciting so I don't think you'll appreciate [being told about sexuality] . . . it's almost something you have to go through it to appreciate and understand like we all respect that because maybe we've been there in some regard.". However, we did point out some form of change needed to occur to try and protect adolescent girls from harm. Tara suggested schools should teach what a "healthy relationship looks like" and Jenny pointed out that teenage girls need someone they can talk to because a lot of the time the only people they feel comfortable turning to are their friends who do not know what is right or wrong either.

The research provided us with a self-reflection process that helped us to move past some of our emotional issues surrounding sexuality and assisted us in our journey to understanding sexy within ourselves. Midge called the research a "healing process" and Greta called it "closure". Greta explains how this research has enabled her to change. ". . . this group it's been so amazing for me. It's been like a form of therapy for me. I've learned so much and learned so much about

myself, and females and sexuality. I actually am feeling like I'm getting past some of these issues now and so I wasn't afraid to show him [boyfriend] the story whereas before I was a little hesitant, reluctant to. I'm quite open about it now . . . ”.

This research has also changed me and helped me move closer to gaining the power to live sexy through my body unashamedly. I underwent breast augmentation surgery just prior to the first group meeting a fact, which I shared with the other women in the group. Discussing my surgery with these women allowed me to begin to mentally move past some of the obstacles that affected how I felt about myself. I had never felt sexy with small breasts because I did not have the body shape of the “ultimate sexy girl” displayed in men's magazines like *FHM*. I thought that was what men found sexy because that is what they looked at and that was not me. So while the surgery “fixed” the physical issue, I had low self-confidence and thought I had to achieve the “ultimate sexy girl” look to finally feel sexy. This research has taught me I do not have to be someone else to be sexy. It has given me more confidence in myself and my body. The process meant I was able to take a photo of myself that I needed for my digital story in my underwear! I thought you know what, why not, I am a sexy woman. I would never have considered doing it or been as empowered within myself to do it prior to these meetings. I had also felt the pressure to embrace strippers and pornography as a normal part of my relationship with my partner. Consumer culture has normalised the sex industry through the use of sexually explicit images and now that this imagery is a part of society, we as women are expected to be OK with. The research has helped me to feel empowered to say I am not OK with strippers and pornography. I am now not worried others will label me a prude. This group study has shown me that there are other women battling to feel sexy against the norm. I am so lucky to have been part of this collective research that has helped us all in our journey of self-discovery.

Conclusion

Our meaning of sexy changes with age. As we get older, we construct our own meaning of sexy which encompasses our male partners' judgement and is still partly influenced by consumer culture. We begin to seek approval from important people such as our partners rather than finding validation in society's male gaze.

This journey to discovering sexy is a rite of passage that every woman goes through in order to move into the next phase. This research influenced our journey and encouraged individual change which provides evidence that while it is a rite of passage, it can also be shaped through other avenues such as learning through research.

Summary

As a collective, we have found sexy to be complex, contradictory, consequential and dynamic.

It is complex because our understanding of sexy is made up of our embodied experience that involves emotions and senses not just a look. It is further complex because sexy is made up of our socialised knowledge and our own constructed meaning. These pieces do not fit together neatly which leaves us with a complicated picture of sexy. We embody sexy through multisensory feelings, confidence which is influenced by physical appearance and validation from others, and femininity. Our socialised knowledge is derived from consumer culture and influences our understanding of sexy through the taught aspects of physical appearance, male acceptance and female submission. Our own constructed meaning of sexy equates to sexy as confidence and authentic.

Sexy is also contradictory for us because our socialised knowledge does not support our constructed meaning of sexy. We consume to create the socialised physical appearance which gives us confidence and allows us to experience sexy. Additionally our socialised knowledge conflicts with our constructed meaning of sexy as authentic. This contradiction arises because not everyone can achieve the idealised physical appearance; however, we believed anyone could experience sexy because it was natural. These contradictions led us to create circumstances to make sense of the differences. We created categories for uncovered and covered flesh because consumer culture promoted exposure of flesh which conflicted with our embodiment of sexy as feminine. Uncovered was deemed sexy in private and was only sexy in public in the 2D form. Covered was deemed sexy in all situations; however, we had to allude to being uncovered in order to be sexy.

Consumer culture influenced our meaning of sexy which led to consequences. Our socialised understanding of sexy created objectification, female submission, pressure to conform, low self-esteem, and envy because of the mixed signals present in consumer culture. We were socialised to believe a certain image was sexy. However, when we imitated this image, we endured negative consequences. We were objectified by others because consumer culture encourages a view that female sexuality is submissive. We felt pressure to embrace consumer culture's image of sexy and female submission. The physical appearance promoted in consumer culture was impossible for us to achieve even through consumption. Therefore we experienced low self-esteem and envied the physical traits we could not acquire.

Sexy is dynamic because our meaning of sexy changed over age. We moved away from an understanding of sexy based solely on consumer culture to our own meaning which was influenced from our male partner and partly consumer culture. We also stopped placing emphasis on society's male gaze and only looked for validation from important people, mainly our male partner. This journey was a rite of passage. However, this research had been transformational for us and stimulated individual change which suggests we can contribute to our journey into our meaning of sexy.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings in relation to the current literature. It notes how this research supports, extends, challenges, and provides new insight into the literature in the key areas of physical appearance, male approval, embodiment, contradictions, consumption, consequences, fantasy vs. reality, dynamism, and transformation.

Physical Appearance

The findings regarding socialisation in to a certain physical appearance are similar to the literature. The images the young women in this study brought to represent sexy all echoed a physical image which included attractiveness, youthfulness, a toned and slender physique, tanned and unblemished skin, long hair, and perfect hair and make-up. These attributes are commonly promoted in consumer culture and women feel pressured to adopt a particular physical appearance in order to feel sexy (Chow, 2004; Durham, 2008; Levy, 2006; McMahan, Shoop, & Luther, 2008; Ussher, 1997; Walter, 2010; Wolf, 1997).

The physical appearance that made up the women's meaning of sexy is consistent with the physical 'mould' presented in consumer culture and the literature. Participants in a study investigating sexually orientated appeals in advertising constructed characteristics of sexy adverts. The most frequently mentioned category was physical features of models (clothing, physique and general attractiveness) (Reichert & Ramirez, 2000). Images of physical attractiveness deemed important in consumer culture involve clear smooth skin, slimness, a large bust and beautiful hair (Chow, 2004; McMahan et al., 2008). Youth was also displayed as sexy (Ussher, 1997). One example of this is a *Rollingstone* magazine photo shoot where pop singer Britney Spears, then a teenager, was displayed as sexy in her undies holding a teddy (Durham, 2008). Older women are also made up to look younger to demonstrate sexy (Durham, 2008). For example the Very Sexy Victoria Secret lingerie line depicts adult models in a childlike light using bows in their hair, imitation lollipops as well as ringlet curls (Siergiej, 2009). The media defines what is desirable (Reichert & Lambiase, 2003). If women do not possess these physical traits they are not desirable, not sexy. For example, photos taken of large breasted nude women could not be used if the models' skin was not beautiful enough even though they possessed the desired ample bosom (Takahashi

& Kai, 2005). Thus the media creates pressure for women to achieve “the look” to be sexy.

The images of physical attractiveness influenced the women’s meaning of sexy, which is consistent with the literature. Society positively evaluates a certain look (Millsted & Frith, 2003) which influences what women think is sexy. The “ideal” female body is stripped down and on display for women to measure themselves against (Wolf, 1997) which provides further pressure to engage in behaviour to reach for perfection. Beauty practices, fashion, fitness regimes and cosmetic surgery shows how the female body has been continually deconstructed and re-constructed, moulded and shaped, in order to try to achieve the norm in physical appearance (Stevens & Maclaran, 2008).

When Durham (2008) asked a group of twelve year old girls what the perfect girl would look like comments such as “long hair” and “thin” were offered. One girl said “She would look like Barbie” (Durham, 2008, p. 95). Barbie is young and slim with defined areas such as her abdominals, which would suggest she is toned. She has long hair, unblemished and tanned skin and is made up with make-up. This physical form is consistent with the women’s images of sexy. Barbie also implies socialisation begins from a young age when dolls are idols, an idea which could suggest women are deeply acculturated into the look as it has been constantly reinforced from a very young age.

The young women in this research attempted to create their own definition of sexy (confident and authentic). Consumer culture, however, played an underlying role in their meaning of sexy. These young women were socialised into their meanings of sexy through the media representations of sexy. This finding could suggest the women still tried to create their own version of the norm because the physical appearance had been embedded in them consistently from an early age.

Male Approval

The research finding supports current literature by highlighting the women’s socialised need for male approval. Women are encouraged in consumer culture to place emphasis on the male gaze and are urged to see their value as an object for male pleasure. Women are promoted as sexual objects in the media and their

beauty is promoted as a tool by which others judge their value (Cohan, 2001; Durham, 2008; Martin & Gentry, 1997; Ussher, 1997; Walter, 2010; Wolf, 1997).

Girls internalise the male gaze and learn to see themselves as they think men would see them (Durham, 2008). This process also discourages women from having a sexual voice. Girls' sexual desire is frequently absent or not relevant in their sexual relationships. They are encouraged to be silent and instead place emphasis on pleasuring the man's desires (Tolman, 1994). For example, magazines teach women from a young age to place importance on what to do to "get the guy" or "pleasure your man" and women are expected to modify their behaviour in a desirable way in order to be a "great date" for a male (Chow, 2004). Gill (2009) labels this drive to please men promoted in women's magazines as "menology" (p. 354). This concept suggests women are socialised to require male approval, just as the young women in the research were.

Love and attraction are one way streets in the media. Men are not told what to do to please girls (Durham, 2008). Instead, men are represented in girls' magazines as the users or controllers within society. Women on the other hand, are characterised as negotiators of their own use but they do not have control (Garner, Sterk, & Adams, 1998). The emphasis on the male gaze creates a need for male appreciation, an idea which was highlighted in the findings. Even fairy tales teach us beauty, goodness and passivity are rewarded by male attention (Ussher, 1997). Women are taught to be an object of 'perfection' for men to gaze upon (Ussher, 1997). Women place value on themselves as objects of male desire and, therefore need the man's stamp of approval to validate their object status. This objectification leads to intense self-scrutiny which is motivated by the male orientated gaze consumer culture conjured up to fulfil male fantasies and pay obsessive attention to male needs (Durham, 2008).

The focus on male validation, and women as objects for male pleasure, also encourages female submission. This notion is consistent with the findings as the women were the passive sex influenced by male desires. Magazines rely on reports written in boys' voices which provide suggestions on how to get male approval and how girls should behave in relationships (Garner et al., 1998). Such articles may lead to a passive, accepting female response to male authority.

Friedan (1971) discussed the notion of female submission when she talked about the pressure to conform to the “happy housewife” image and to do right by your husband. While women have gained many more rights to equality since her time, we still live in a world where men dominate and women are encouraged to be the submissive sex. This imbalance is achieved by placing importance on the male gaze and seeking to fulfil male desires, as the stories in this study illustrate. Much of the advertising literature highlights the stereotypical sex roles the media promotes where man is dominant and woman is submissive (Cohan, 2001; McMahan et al., 2008; Reichert & Lambiase, 2003; Wolin, 2003). Advertising encourages both men and women to think that women are vulnerable and the perfect female partner is submissive (Martin & Gentry, 1997) and instils the message into women that they should remain passive, not embodying their sexuality on their own terms.

Embodiment

The use of embodiment to understand sexy extends the literature because of the complex nature of sexy. The current marketing literature focuses on a two-dimensional, detached sexy depicted in the media. But the stories highlighted sexy as multisensory. Being sexy involves smell, touch, physiological reactions and emotion, as well as achieving the look. The detached version of sexy in consumer culture does not equate with the complex, lived experience of sexy illustrated in the research. Sexy adverts are often only measured in the literature on their physical attributes, external settings, nudity, and camera work (Reichert & Carpenter, 2004; Reichert & Ramirez, 2000; Soley & Kurzbard, 1986). Women’s bodies in the media are shown as erotic and dismembered and are portrayed as sexually desirable through physical attributes. They, however, are carefully polished and groomed and rendered quite unsexy in everyday human terms (Kilbourne, 2003). Sexy in the media is devoid of all intimacy and emotion and is often dehumanising (Kilbourne, 2003). Dissociation is normalised, glorified and eroticised in the media. Human emotion is ignored.

Much of the research on female sexuality and consumer culture uses interviews and observations to understand the topic (Durham, 2008; Friedan, 1971; Levy, 2006; Ussher, 1997; Walter, 2010; Wolf, 1997). However, understanding sexy through embodiment provides a deeper picture of how we live sexy, by

appreciating the sensations and emotions that occur. The knowledge acquired offers a more personal view than do observations and direct questioning as it exposes the complexity of sexy. This richness arises because identity needs to be treated as embodied, by comprehending the outcome of an individual's interaction with her body and, through her body, with the world around her (Davis, 1995). Sexuality was defined in one study as an experience that encompassed an individual's body " . . . It's everything I am...it's the physical, it's the spiritual, it's emotional, everything . . ." (Richards, Tepper, Whipple, & Komisaruk, 1997, p. 275). Many of the studies that have used embodiment to understand female sexuality (Holland et al., 1994; Koch, Kralik, & Eastwood, 2002; Millsted & Frith, 2003; Richards et al., 1997) did not focus on consumer culture. Haug (1987) studies women's embodied memories to understand female sexualisation and deals with the influence of consumer culture on sexuality. However, using embodiment to understand consumer culture's contribution to female sexuality has not widely researched. Most, if not all, of the marketing and consumer research literature does not address how embodiment contributes to women's meanings of being sexy. This research illustrates how embodiment is an important aspect in understanding how young women live sexy and, thus, the meaning of sexy to them.

The detached version of sexy in promoted consumer culture can lead to a damaging consequence: disembodied sexuality. Kilbourne (2003) outlines an example of an advert that displays a beautiful young woman with her legs spread apart saying, "You have the right to remain sexy". However, as Kilbourne (2003) points out, the underlying message is "only if you look like her". She goes on to question how normal women can feel sexy if they are worried their thighs are too heavy and their stomach is not like the model's flat tummy. The objectified bodies of women make it hard for women to safely embody their sexuality. This insecurity leads to detachment because the widely used explicit sexual images are likely to lead to disconnection rather than connection (Kilbourne, 2003). The concept of disembodied female sexuality suggests the body is absent and interrupts idealised relationships. It is disentanglement from sensuality and alienation from the material body (Holland et al., 1994). The body is passive rather than actively embodied. It is always managed in sex, hair removed, fluid controlled, body cleaned, deodorised, shaped and groomed (Holland et al., 1994).

The body is an experiencing agent but women are in danger of objectifying their bodies as things devoid of intentionality and intersubjectivity because of the disconnection promoted in consumer culture (Holland et al., 1994). The body is a tool with which humans shape their world and the substance out of which the human world is shaped. Therefore, embodiment is important to female sexuality because disconnection from our body can result in loss of equality and power as we try and manage our body and detach from our experience of sexy.

Contradictions

The friction between the women's constructed meaning of sexy and their socialised meaning of sexy caused contradictions. The constructed meaning as authentic and confident conflicted with the socialised ideal physical appearance of the look. Sexuality, as a contradictory phenomenon, is supported in the literature; however, the phenomenon is not widely studied. The body within society is complicated and creates contradictions in our understanding of it. "The material body and its social construction are entwined in complex and contradictory ways which are extremely difficult to disentangle in practice" (Holland et al., 1994, p. 21). This assertion is consistent with the young women's embodied experience of sexy in this study. These young women struggled to separate their socialised meaning from their own constructed meaning. This struggle was illustrated in their stories as they could not embody confidence without the socialised look.

Consumer culture is also a contradictory location for exploring sexuality because the media is not only where sexualisation occurs but is also where it is discussed, usually as a matter of concern. Consequently, an article against sexualisation can co-exist in the same newspaper that displays topless women and advertises for sex lines (Gill, 2009). Such inconsistency is sending mixed messages to women and, because consumer culture influences the understanding of sexy, conflicts arise. For example, conflict was found between adolescent girls' strong embodied sexual feelings for sexual desire and their perceptions of how those feelings are problematic within society because women should not have power nor desire in society (Tolman, 1994). The results discuss how consumer culture often confuses the women as they are told it is not important how a person looks but are provided with contradictory images that do not support the claim. The findings also highlighted female submission encouraged by consumer culture's version of sexy.

Women are told they are empowered through this “hypersexualised culture” (Walter, 2010). On the other hand, the promoted female submission implies women should not have power.

The women embodied sexy through being feminine which meant they were womanly and covered without being slutty. The women also brought images with high exposure of flesh although they deemed these as slutty. This tension meant the women needed to stay covered while alluding to nakedness. Femininity can be defined as what it is to be a woman by embracing our gender role, to be the antithesis of a man (Ussher, 1997). Ussher (1997) believes you cannot separate women from sex within consumer culture. Therefore, femininity has become an avenue of expressing sex. This concept implies contradiction as sex and femininity were displayed in this research as opposing the ideas slutty and sexy. Femininity as an expression of sex also poses the question if women cannot separate sex from femininity within their social world how do they embody sexy without being slutty? The findings highlighted this conflict.

We learn our scripts of femininity through consumer culture such as within marketing imagery (Schroeder & Zwick, 2004; Ussher, 1997). The images women are exposed to promote mixed messages: We are empowered but should not act empowered. “Don’t get angry. But do take charge. Be nice. But not too nice. Speak up. But don’t seem like you talk too much. Never, ever dress sexy.” (Belkin, 2007, p. 1). This point implies we walk a line between feminine and sexy which is consistent with the findings. We must allude to sexy without being slutty. Just as suggested, women should take charge but stay submissive. The contradictory “line” also links to the concept of the virgin/whore dichotomy found in the literature. This concept is prevalent in the literature although it has been called different things or discussed in different lights (Gottschall, Allison, De Rosa, & Klockeman, 2006; Lees, 1986; Tanenbaum, 2000; Welldon, 1988; Wolf, 1997). The virgin/whore dichotomy also bolsters the sexual double standard that is also present in the literature (Tanenbaum, 2000; Wolf, 1997; Zhang et al., 2008). This concept defines women who engage in sex with various sexual partners as “sluts” whereas men are “studs” if they behave in the same way. Again, women should be sexually empowered but not act sexually empowered, it would seem.

Women are entrapped by this double standard which takes shape in the virgin/whore dichotomy (Lees, 1986). Society divides women into two groups: the virgin or the whore. The virgin is considered nurturing, “good” and one who expresses her sexuality within culturally accepted boundaries such as marriage or a monogamous union. The women who fail to follow this ideal are whores. They are considered “immoral” and “lustful” (Gottschall et al., 2006). Robert Wright (1995) introduces the virgin/whore dichotomy as an evolutionary concept. He believes it stems from the biological fact that when a child is born the woman is certain it is her offspring; however, a man can never be certain if the child is his (Wright, 1995). Therefore, for a woman to have sex with more than one partner is untoward as the man cannot be sure it is his baby. A study that investigated the word “slag” found a clear double standard operating against girls, where a traditional virgin/whore division was present. Participants explained they faced a dilemma when wanting to appear sexy without looking like a slag. They had to get the balance just right. It was like walking on a knife edge. The line between acceptable femininity and unacceptable “sluttiness” was easily crossed. The participants perceived that everyday femininity came perilously close to “tartiness” (Kitzinger, 1995). Socially constructed femininity must combine the allure necessary for attracting and holding a male partner, with concern for sexual reputation (Kitzinger, 1995). The findings support this claim by highlighting the fine line the women negotiated between slutty and sexy. The women tried to remain covered or feminine while alluding to being uncovered in line with the consumer culture slutty version of sexy they had been socialised into.

Consumption

The findings showed a link between consuming and achieving physical appearance which then gave us confidence to feel sexy. This finding support for the current literature as consumption has been found to boost women’s confidence and self-esteem when their physical appearance was improved by products (Siergiej, 2009). This idea suggests sexy is a commodity that can be bought which is consistent with the result that the women experienced sexy through consumption. Levy (2006) argues sex requires shopping: you need to buy plastic surgery, peroxide, a manicure. All you need is a mall! If you remove the human factor from sex and make it about stuff like fake boobs, bleached hair, long nails and thongs – it can be sold! Women are consumers and women are things to be

consumed, sex is a commodity (Levy, 2006). The magazines produce sexuality as both thinkable and recognisable through consumption such as fashion items like crop tops, thongs, low-rider jeans, tiny bikinis and provocative T-shirts (McRobbie, 2008). The women used items such as tight, skinny-leg jeans to represent sexy through physical appearance. Young people are building a popular culture with a sexuality constructed from representations associated with their favourite consumer products (Elliott, Jones, Benfield, & Barlow, 1995). For example the *Playboy* logo was once a symbol of sexually knowing men. Now it is used to decorate the pencil cases and erasers of young girls (Walter, 2010). In addition, the brand Little Miss Naughty sells sexy to preteens through push up bras and lacy briefs (Durham, 2008). This trend raises the question where does marketable sex stop? Should sexy only be sold to adult women? Should sexy be a sold commodity at all?

The advertising literature provides evidence that the human factor is being extracted from sexy adverts which leads to sexy being sold in the form of products. Hall and Crum (1994) discuss 'body-isms' in beer commercials. Women are portrayed as disconnected body parts in these adverts. A woman's body morphs into the product she is selling and promotes consuming instead of connecting (Kilbourne, 2003). The sexiness in advertising is devoid of all the things that make up intimacy and our own sexy experiences such as personal histories or quirky things (Kilbourne, 2003). This advertising dissolves the human factor and we are left with cold and passionless sex. It is about desire and arousal and searching for these but never about commitment and intimacy (Kilbourne, 2003). The absence of humanity here encourages sexy to be sold as a commodity. "When sexual jokes are used to sell everything from rice to roach-killer, from cars to carpets, it's hard to remember that sex can unite two souls and inspire awe" (Kilbourne, 2003, p. 176).

We are also advised in consumer culture how we can achieve the images of beautiful, thin and toned models via consumption (Markula, 2001). Teen magazines suggest what girls should wear to be sexually desirable through ads and articles on sexy outfits (Garner et al., 1998). Girls are taught to train to be desired. This training is done through learning how to get "good looking hair, beautiful clothes and thin bodies" (Garner et al., 1998, p. 66). Women are led to

believe they can transform through the mask of beauty. We are given detailed instruction on make-up, clothes and regimes for the perfect figure that will transform us into an idealised state of glamour and beauty (Ussher, 1997). Women are constantly told they can achieve these ideals via regimes and consumption; it is merely a matter of personal effort (Hurd, 2000). Consumption offers the promise of satisfaction. However, the promise of satisfaction puts young women under pressure to shape their physical bodies into a particular mould which is illustrated externally through their bodies, through such skills as dressing, make-up and dietary regimes. This behaviour creates disembodiment in the sense of detachment from their sexuality and alienation from their bodies (Holland et al., 1994).

It is suggested that individuals have freedom through consumption to create their identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Elliott & Ritson, 1995). The young women in this study used consumption to create an identity of sexy. Women come to know themselves as consumers by participating in creating an identity through consumption which leads to recognising themselves and recognition by others as the means of this “political economy of subjectification” (McRobbie, 2008). Advertising plays a strong role in prescribing sexual identities which we attempt to achieve through consumption. Adverts do not merely express identity, they play a central role in forming conceptions of identity, for example, transforming them into the more “typical” person (Schroeder & Zwick, 2004). The interactions of identity, consumption and representation signify contemporary consumer culture which women navigate. Consumer culture encourages women to consume in order to gain a sexual identity. Advertising’s images promote identity through a vast array of products to a growing range of consumers (Schroeder & Zwick, 2004). However, consuming to create the promoted sexual identity does not appear to encourage women to embody their sexuality in their own way. The consumed identity of sexy the young women created can have negative consequences: “The sexual images people produce and absorb, the money people spend to get or imagine sex, and most of all and always, the suffering and joy in the name of sexuality” (Gamson & Moon, 2004, p. 60).

Consequences

The socialised meaning of sexy created consequences for the women. These were low self-esteem, envy, and objectification, findings which are consistent with the literature.

The young women encountered low self-esteem and envy due to not being able to achieve the promoted physical appearance. This sense of failure arises because the images women as shown in consumer culture are unattainable. Fashion label Ralph Lauren released an advert that had been retouched drastically so that the model's head was bigger than her pelvis. This shape is by no means possible to achieve in nature which led the French government to consider having health warnings on images of models that have been altered just as the Ralph Lauren ad was (New Zealand Herald, 2009). As Kilbourne (1994) points out, the ideal body type expressed in the media would be unattainable by most women even if they starved themselves. Advertising displays an ideal attractiveness that is impossible to reach without professional help such as make-up artists and retouching. As a result, women end up feeling frustrated because they do not achieve the ideal regardless of what they buy (Cohan, 2001). This frustration can lead women to consider drastic behaviour such as cosmetic surgery in an attempt to accomplish the internalised images of beauty presented in the media (Sarwer et al., 2005).

The young women attempted to create the physical mould seen in consumer culture but when they fell short they experienced low self-esteem and envy for the desired appearance. Women felt inadequate when bombarded with images of Victoria Secret models with their 'perfect bodies'. They labelled the experience as seeing images of what they were not (Siergiej, 2009). Young women were found to compare their attractiveness and body image against the models in advertisements which could lead to negative self-perceptions and self-esteem (Martin & Gentry, 1997; Martin & Kennedy, 1993). Another study discovered young women who were exposed to extremely thin models in advertising and magazines became depressed, insecure and dissatisfied with their own bodies (Stice & Shaw, 1994). The strong cultural influence which positions women outside their bodies to observe women alone as sexual objects (Wolf, 1997) causes women to self-objectify and leads to body dissatisfaction (Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005).

Magazines promote the message of perfection by portraying models with perfect eyes, teeth and bodies and provide ideals of thinness which are presented in a seemingly attainable fashion (Chow, 2004). These images are discussed in words of envy by individuals because they provoke reflection about the relationship of one's body in comparison with the commercial ideal. For example, women resent *Playboy* because they resent feeling ugly in sex. Normal naked women are now thought of as images of bad porn (Wolf, 1997). Women are socialised to strive for the perfection that lures them but is always beyond reach (Chow, 2004). This leads to envy of what we are not. The women discussed being more confident when they felt they were closest to the "ideal" but this was not often. Suggesting most of the time women feel inadequate and long to be something else.

As the findings highlighted, women are unable to achieve the "ideal". Women need to realise these images of perfection are not a reality. "Young women are told they must lose weight, learn about sexual techniques, apply makeup well, dress in a sexy manner and engage in self-analysis when (not if) their real world does not fit with the world depicted." (Garner et al., 1998, p. 74). It is near impossible to reach the physical "ideal" because it is a contradictory vision of feminine sexuality, "what we see is not always what we are or what we get" (Ussher, 1997, p. 6). The physical mould promoted in consumer culture is riddled with paradoxes. Women are required to have a firm but shapely, fit but sexy, strong but thin physique while maintaining a large bust (Durham, 2008; Hurd, 2000; Markula, 2001; Ussher, 1997). These unreachable aspects are an agent of oppression (Wolf, 1997) because it is a narrowly defined beauty we must achieve through certain activities in order to be fit the "ideal". However, the "ideal" can never actually be attained by most women no matter whatever they do (Markula, 2001). Women are trapped. They attempt to achieve the beautiful image presented to them; however, they are tortured inside just like the "iron maiden" (Wolf, 1997, p. 17).

The findings also highlighted the objectification we experience as part of our socialised meaning of sexy. The literature draws attention to the objectification consumer culture's version of sexy encourages. Both men and women objectified women more than they objectified men because they are encouraged by consumer

culture to believe it is more important for women than men to look good in order to be valued (Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005). Participants playing sexually oriented video games were also found to have an increased likelihood that they would see females as sex objects and engage in inappropriate sexual advances due to the portrayal of women throughout the video games (Yao et al., 2010).

The research found objectification occurred when the women embraced the image of sexy promoted in consumer culture. However, the women faced pressure to conform to consumer culture's version of sexy because they had been socialised into this meaning. The feminist literature highlights how consumer culture's version of sexy has been relabelled as "female empowerment" (Durham, 2008; Levy, 2006; Walter, 2010). Advertising uses this type of "empowered" woman to sell. She is a young, attractive woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is always "up for sex" (Gill, 2009). Consequently, women need to engage in this behaviour to be considered an equal gender by being just like men. Sexual objectification and undressing has been repackaged as empowerment (Durham, 2008; Levy, 2006; Walter, 2010). This conception creates pressure for women to conform because it is presented as female power. The findings highlighted the pressure the women faced to embrace promoted sexual behaviours such as anal sex and promiscuity. Young women experience social pressures to construct their bodies as passive and fragmented sexual objects. These can become eroticized but this is within a masculine appropriation of desire in a society that renders desire as power (Holland et al., 1994). Women learn that their controlled submission is what makes them desirable (Wolf, 1997). This view suggests women are encouraged to accept their sexuality in the way consumer culture promotes it, which is as powerless.

Messages are reworked in consumer culture to ironically convey girl power. For example girls, wanting to be lap dancers is considered positive (Durham, 2008). It is OK for women to present themselves in an objectified manner because it suits their supposedly liberated interests. Liberation is now being promiscuous. Empowerment is having sex like men with emotional detachment (Walter, 2010). These ideas suggest women will be considered equal when they learn to be men. McRobbie (2008) points out the t-shirts women are wearing that have "men's talk" slogans such as "unbelievable knockers" which implies a denunciation of

feminism. The woman is showing that she is “up for it” by distancing herself from what she considers are out-dated feminist views. Young women are either congratulated for having achieved equality with their male counterparts on the foundation of “empowerment” or they are encouraged to take further steps to achieve this goal (McRobbie, 2008). If women are going to have sexual freedom, “they better learn to fuck like men” (Wolf, 1997, p.134). This comment implies freedom is acting like a man which does not give power to being feminine. Women face pressure to conform to consumer culture’s sexualised image by tricking them into thinking it is empowerment. This poses the question, if women are told by consumer culture empowerment is sexual objectification in a man’s world, then are they able to make informed choices about their sexuality devoid of pressure? Are women pressured to embrace consumer culture’s version of sexy because it is seen as equality, and does this pressure allow women to make informed decisions? It may take away their choice by restricting them to culturally constructed ideals.

Fantasy vs. Reality

The findings challenge the present literature that assumes adult women can and do act on their knowledge that adverts are fantasy. It appears that women are struggling to separate the fantasy of advertising from the reality when they embody sexy. The research findings provide evidence that the young women are unable to discount advertising’s images and reframe what they see to fit their meaning of sexy. The women aspired to recreate the unattainable physical appearance represented in consumer culture to experience sexy even though the women believed sexy should be confidence and authentic.

The results conflict with the literature that suggests women are able to separate the fantasy presented in the media from their real lives. It is believed women negotiate and resist narrow boundaries of femininity presented to them in the media and can actively reframe what it is to be woman within a female gaze (Ussher, 1997). Women can reinterpret or resist much of what they see and can use some presented messages from consumer culture to advance in a positive, feminist way (McNair, 2002; Ussher, 1997). Women are supposedly aware that advertising’s images are not a reality and let it wash over them, not taking it seriously. An advert may have a negative sexualised portrayal but is immediately

discounted because of the scepticism held about advertising. People expect that advertisers will use stereotypes or sex to sell and so are not offended nor take it as reality (Dickinson & Gill, 2009).

There has been much debate in the literature about at what age children can grasp advertising's intent and understand what is real and what is fake (Mc Neal, 1979; Nairn & Fine, 2008; Turk, 1979; Wright, Friestad, & Boush, 2005). However, it appears once we are adults the literature assumes we are capable of separating the fantasy world of commercials from the reality of life. The literature suggests children aged eight years old can understand the persuasive intent of adverts and twelve year old children can understand adverts as deceptive and as biased (Roedder John, 1999). The line of argument here suggests adults are capable of grasping advertising as persuasive, deceptive and biased. However, the results challenge this claim. They imply adult women are struggling to comprehend advertising as deceptive and biased even if they realise the advert's purpose is to persuade them to buy. The women in the research attempted to imitate the unattainable images to achieve sexy, even when they supposedly should realise these advert representations are unrealistic, deceptive and created to sell because they are biased. Women should realise they cannot achieve the depicted image as it is a fantasy not a reality. Nairn and Fine (2008) point out there is no "magic age" at which children can understand advertising's selling content and, therefore, are fair game. They argue that modern marketing methods make it near impossible for children to realise the magnitude of advertising's persuasive effects. This idea poses a question. Do we ever truly reach an age when we are suddenly capable to grasp advertising as being a selling tool, to ignore its persuasive intent, and to truly separate advertising's fantasy world from the real one?

This research provides evidence that women are struggling to separate fantasy from reality. Lippke (1995) suggests that our perception and conception of life, the social world, the alternative we see as being open to us, and standards we use to judge ourselves and others are shaped by advertising, perhaps without us ever being consciously aware of it (Lippke, 1995). This thought suggests advertising may influence women's views of reality without their consciously making the decision that what they view is fantasy used solely to sell products. The advertising and psychology literature provides some evidence that suggests

advertisements function at an unconscious level. Social psychologists have demonstrated that many attitudes and beliefs operate at least in part on an implicit or unconscious and automatic level (Bargh & Ferguson, 2000; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). It has also been found that consumers are unable to resist latent meaning transfer from the look of the people in the ad, their image, lifestyle, and physical appearance, onto the product, and we make highly abstract connections between models, lifestyle and the brand (Schroeder & Zwick, 2004; Williamson, 1978). Women are mulling over the model's physical appearance without perhaps being aware of doing so. The emotion-evoking nature of sexy adverts also means they are particularly effective at piercing consumers' perceptual fields so that they get noticed (Reichert & Carpenter, 2004). This process could mean our understanding of sexy is likely to be influenced because our normal cognitive defences are rendered inactive by the emotional stimulation. Sexual appeal used in advertising makes it even harder for women to separate the sexy images they are shown from reality. Sexy adverts evoke more elaboration by the audience which leads to positive associations because it often taps into fantasies. These advertisements play on a person's existing fantasy, which is usually a pleasurable experience (Reichert, 2007). Therefore, women are more involved in the advert which makes it harder for them to separate themselves from the fantasy images which could lead to fantasy becoming reality.

The literature also makes reference to the difference between men's and women's information processing which can affect women's ability to separate fantasy from reality. One study by Stern (1993) looked into the contrast between female and male readers to gain understanding of how they processed advertising, which is a form of discourse. Female readers participated more than men in narrative stories. They engaged in the story and experienced, felt, and empathised. They interpreted the meaning of the text as its meaning to them and filled in any gaps. Women were more motivated than men to be involved in the story rather than just understanding the "point" of the story. Men were more likely to be detached and judge the story from an unbiased point of view (Stern, 1993). This claim suggests the story becomes a reality for women and they are less likely to make impartial judgements which allow them to distinguish fantasy and persuasion. This possibility is supported elsewhere in the literature as women are found to be comprehensive processors and to elaborate on both subjective and objective

advertising claims whereas men are selective processors and focus on objective claims (Chang, 2007; Darley & Smith, 1995; Meyers-Levy, 1989). Women also responded to subtle cues in adverts (Darley & Smith, 1995) and had low elaboration thresholds, unlike men who do not elaborate on every advert (Chang, 2007). This finding implies women are more likely than men to process adverts, therefore, cognitively taking in more images of the physical norm that support their influenced meaning of sexy. In addition, because women do not make detached judgement, the advert becomes the real standard by which to measure oneself and to aim for.

It has been shown that the media, including advertising, plays a powerful role in society by persuading and even convincing people how they should look, act, strive to be. It also defines femininity and masculinity, what is sexy and the standard we should judge and be judged from as desirable (Gerbner et al., 2002; McMahan et al., 2008; Schroeder & Zwick, 2004; Zhang et al., 2008). Sexual images in advertising, and through the media, define what is sexy and more importantly who is sexy. Images define desirability, both our own and others. The Gods have sex and we are left to judge and measure ourselves against our imperfect sex lives (Kilbourne, 2003). This comment highlights a blurred line between reality and fantasy and implies the images in advertising influence the women's meaning of sexy greatly. If women know the images in the adverts are unrealistic, then why are they influenced, and why do they struggle to determine what is real from what is fake?

The results of this research also pose another question. If young adult women are socialised into a damaging meaning of sexy, what chance do teenage girls stand in developing a more realistic image of sexy? Selman (1980) suggests adolescents between twelve and fifteen years old are developing the ability to understand another person's perspective as it relates to the social system in which they operate (Selman, 1980). This point implies adolescent girls are still figuring out their own meaning of sexy from the socially promoted version. In addition, adolescents were still developing knowledge about advertiser tactics during this life stage although they were sceptical about adverts (Boush, Friestad, & Rose, 1994). Scepticism was defined as disbelief in advertiser claims and mistrust of advertiser motives. One possible reason for this scepticism is because the

adolescents were socialised into scepticism of advertising through peers and family before they had fully understood the cognitive basis of advertising (Boush et al., 1994). While teenage girls may realise advertising is selling products to make a profit they are still taken in by the advertisers' tactics. They cognitively are unaware that the fantasy images with which they are presented are an advertising tactic used to sell. Keating (1990) suggests there are small developmental changes that happen in cognitive development between fourteen years old and adulthood. This finding suggests adolescent girls are even more vulnerable than adult women at being influenced by advertising because they are still cognitively developing and unaware of advertiser tactics. Therefore, adolescent girls may also struggle to separate the fantasy images from reality.

Dynamism

The findings extend the current literature on the dynamic aspect to sexy by going deeper. The literature touches on generations growing up sexy in consumer culture and provides concern for the effects on younger women and girls (American Psychological Association, 2007; Durham, 2008; Levy, 2006; Walter, 2010). This literature assumes girls are more vulnerable than adult women and implies sexuality changes with age. However, the literature does not go deeper in understanding how young women's perceptions and opinions of sexuality are influenced as they mature. The literature makes reference to aspects of sexy as dynamic but this research outlines change resulting from maturity.

Self-sexualisation and self-objectification by adult women are suggested to be less common in women as they age (Roberts, 2004). Roberts (2004) also claims physical appearance became less important to their sense of self-worth. As women age, they placed more emphasis on health than physical attractiveness, moving from seeing their body as an object to a process (Hurd, 2000). This finding could suggest older women stop seeing their body as a sexual object and stop placing emphasis on the traits promoted in the media images as sexy. This idea implies sexy becomes less about the physical and more about them as a person as they get older. This position was supported in the findings of this study as the young women attempted to move away from society's physical definition of sexy into their own constructed meaning.

Female sexuality has been considered as a transformation of power, as power is exercised not possessed, and therefore social relations are shifting and dynamic (Caudwell, 2002). This view presents sexy as a social construct that transforms over time as women begin to take power in their own judgement and give less power to society to deem them sexy. This claim is consistent with the findings of the research as the women stopped placing emphasis on society's judgement and started emphasising their own and their male partner's judgement. However, the women were still influenced by consumer culture as illustrated by their socialised physical appearance. The women tried to construct their own version of the "norm look".

Transformation

The collaborative process of the method allowed individual transformation to happen. The research acted as a type of therapy and promoted change. This finding adds new insight to the literature. This insight encourages positive, individual and social change by laying female sexuality bare so women can make informed choices and become empowered. "Talking about what women do to their bodies and what is done to their bodies exposes and threatens the careful social construction of disembodied sexuality." (Holland et al., 1994, p. 24).

Walter (2010) in her book outlines a letter she received from a reader who thanked her profusely as she had almost given up hope that there were any other women out there that had not bought into this "hypersexualised culture". The reader had said she thought it was time to be silent while friends put on a porno and grunted about the latest blonde plastic model in the *Nuts* men's magazine. She told Walter she had given her the strength not to give up and to have faith she was not a prude. It appears consumer culture decides you are either for its version of sexy or against it. There is no middle ground. Therefore, if you engage in any critical analysis of sexual representation in consumer culture, this behaviour instantly implies that you are in favour of censorship and opposed to sex in general. Women are forced to choose between Christian singer Joyce Meyers or pop singer Britney Spears for sexual guideposts within the media. It appears women cannot be in-between these extremes (Durham, 2008). Women either buy into the "raunch culture" or are considered embarrassed by their sexuality. You are a prude if you show a distaste for "raunch culture" (Levy, 2006). However,

this research opened up the narrow boundaries imposed by consumer culture on female sexuality and provided women with a place in which to critically evaluate sexy without judgement. This allowed the women to transform their meaning of sexy in a positive way and work through any emotional issues related to consequences and contradictions created from their socialised meaning of sexy.

Sexy was found to be a rite of passage. The women created their own meaning of sexy from experience with consumer culture's version of sexy. However, the collective group process enabled individual growth. The idea that emerges here is that a positive change can occur even though sexy is a rite of passage. It also suggests there is hope in protecting adolescent girls from the harmful version of sexy. Adolescent girls are prematurely, even inappropriately due to sexual activity laws, appearing sexual because they are shown a baby-faced, scantily clad sexual girl in the media which provides damaging consequences (Durham, 2008; Ussher, 1997). Teens use media to seek out information regarding sexuality as they are often embarrassed to go to parents (Durham, 2008). This notion is troublesome because as this research has highlighted, the version of sexy the media promotes has negative outcomes.

While the literature raises the restricted choices women have in regards to sexy, this research highlights how women can overcome the limited options to make new decisions they can be proud about. This discovery provides a valuable direction for positive future social change. When women are able to take control of their sexuality in an active femininity, they can bring the social shaping of their material bodies into consciousness and empower their own sexuality (Holland et al., 1994).

Summary

The findings supported the current literature in four areas: the specific promoted physical appearance the women need to experience sexy; the male approval they require to feel sexy, which leads to female submission; the consumption the women are obliged to engage in in order to achieve the physical appearance; and the consequences of low self-esteem, envy and objectification they are subjected to when they embrace the socialised meaning of sexy.

The results extended the literature by using embodiment to understand female sexuality. The research uses the deep insight of the embodied experience to comprehend sexuality and consumer culture. Embodiment is not widely used in the literature. It is important to understand sexy as embodied as the detached version of sexy presented in the literature and the media does not illustrate the complex nature of sexy.

The research supports and extends the present literature on sexy as contradictory because to date the concept has not been extensively studied. The women walked a fine line between slutty and sexy as they tried to embody sexy as feminine. This balancing act highlighted the virgin/whore dichotomy concept present in the literature. Using this point of view the research was able to add to the literature surrounding female sexuality as contradictory.

The research challenges present literature that implies adult women discount advertising as being real and are able to reframe what they see to fit with their meaning of sexy. It suggests women are struggling to separate fantasy from reality in advertising, which affects their meaning of sexy. The findings imply women are socialised through advertising to achieve a particular physical form in an attempt to experience sexy. However, they struggle to realise these images are unrealistic and unattainable. The fantasies presented in advertising have been embedded in the women's real lives.

Sexy as dynamic was also referred to in the literature. However, this idea has not been broadly examined and does not map out how sexy changes over age. Therefore, this research extends the literature by providing more insight into sexy as dynamic through maturing and as a rite of passage. The women moved away from consumer culture's definition and judgement of sexy to their own definition which was affected by their partner's judgement.

The collaborative method allowed individual change to occur. This method provided a new insight into the marketing literature by highlighting the transformational journey involved in unpacking sexuality and positive individual growth.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Implications

For the young women in this study, the meaning of sexy is very complex. These women constructed sexy as being confident and authentic, but illustrated sexy as being the look created by consumer culture and described it as an embodied experience for the male gaze and male approval. Confident meant being comfortable in your own skin and having the freedom to be yourself. Authentic meant sexy was natural and attainable by anyone. However, the women embodied confidence through their socialised meaning of physical appearance. The physical appearance incorporated being attractive, young, slim, toned, tanned, unblemished, long haired, coifed and made-up.

The meaning of sexy created contradictions and consequences for these young women. The women believed sexy should be confident and authentic; however, their socialised meaning did not correspond and this lack of correspondence created tension. The socialised physical appearance was not obtainable by everyone as it was a narrowly defined sexy look. The look also meant the women could not embody confidence without having that physical appearance. This disparity created low self-esteem because they did not measure up to the ideal and created envy. The women were socialised to seek male validation through their appearance yet this socialisation conflicted with their constructed meaning of confidence. They embodied confidence through male approval. This quest for approval encouraged the women to be submissive and did not promote an empowered sexuality. The women also walked a fine line between slutty and sexy which created tension for these women. They embodied sexy through being feminine which meant they were womanly without being slutty as in the virgin/whore dichotomy. However, their socialised understanding meant they needed to allude to being uncovered to be sexy. The women experienced objectification when they crossed the line into slutty.

The meaning of sexy is dynamic. These young women's stories illustrate how sexy changed as they matured and through this research project. As the women aged, they moved away from consumer culture's version of sexy to their own constructed understanding. However, consumer culture still contributed to the women's meaning. Sexy was found to be a rite of passage. This change meant the

women began to construct their own definition of sexy after they had experienced consumer culture's definition of sexy. The collaborative group process resulted in individual change through self-reflection and collective analysis. The women were able to work through emotional issues created from the consequences and contradictions of consumer culture's version of sexy. This process allowed them to progress further on the journey to their own constructed meaning of sexy.

Transformation through the group process suggests the journey to a personal constructed meaning of sexy, although considered a rite of passage, can be shaped by taking a similar direction to the research. This possibility could assist adolescent girls as it highlights a need to advance the sexual health curriculum. Teenage girls need to understand not just the basics of sexually transmitted diseases, a common focus of sex education in high schools, but also the emotional consequences and meaning of sexy in order to make informed choices. The goal would be to use a similar approach to the one used in the research to help prevent girls from experiencing emotional pain in their journey to experiencing sexy.

Sexual health education should be in the form of community groups that girls can attend as part of the school curriculum either during or outside school hours. These groups could use a similar approach to the research method. They could use images, discussion, shared stories and the creation of digital stories to help inform and transform adolescent girls through their own exploration of sexy. The research reinforces the American Psychological Association Task Force on Sexualisation of Girls Report (2007) that states there is a need for a comprehensive sex education curriculum or girl empowerment groups. The community group could also benefit by using individuals who are not these girls' parents or teachers. The use of someone who is close to their age group could result in a more comfortable environment for the girls. However, the group leader would need to facilitate interpretation. She should assist in the analysis that highlights insights for the girls, such as the contradiction between confidence, authenticity and physical appearance.

The women shaped their own understanding of sexy as they aged. However, they still created their own version of the norm. This idea suggests a direction for potential research. Future studies could map consumer culture against female

sexuality as women age in an attempt to see if there is a diminishing effect or how strongly consumer culture holds its sway over time. In addition, it would be interesting to see what role factors such as long term partnership or family upbringing play.

The results challenge the assumptions that adult women can and do separate the fantasy of advertising from their real lives. They posed the possibility that fantasy and reality battle for the young women's attention in understanding their own sexuality. This possibility suggests further research is needed to understand how advertising impacts adult women and their sexuality.

The struggle to separate fantasy from reality and the negative consequences a consumer culture version of sexy inflicts suggests that adolescent girls need time to discover sexy and construct their own meaning for it. The findings reinforce the American Psychological Association Task Force on Sexualisation of Girls Report (2007). That report suggests girls' aspirations can be influenced by learning sexy too soon. Learned too soon, they may see sexy as the only avenue to self-worth and value. This knowledge could lead them to seek out a sexy image rather than a university education or a good job. If sexy becomes their focus everything else becomes less important which could produce a damaging lifestyle. Advertisers and the media need to adjust their images of sexy to prevent their damaging influence, especially when their target market is adolescent girls. There is a need for alternative marketing to prevent harmful messages to young girls and women, as this research has highlighted.

The findings emphasise the need for more research that understands the embodied experience of female sexuality. The current marketing and consumer culture literature promote sexuality as detached and focus on the look. This focus does not reflect all the full complexity of sexy, as revealed through the prism of embodiment. The research could also create a positive social change by providing valuable information to government agencies and marketers.

The research has highlighted the necessity for women to exercise power over their sexuality. Currently, consumer culture continues to contribute to the young women's meaning of sexy. Male approval and submission still played a role in the

young women's embodied experience of sexy in this study. Women need a positive example of empowered sexuality to follow so they can escape the need for male validation and stop being framed within a submissive male gaze. Advertisers and marketers need to take responsibility and stop producing objectified bodies of women and start promoting an empowered female sexuality. Women need to be given the right to find power in femininity not through masculinity. Therefore, further research is encouraged to stimulate debate in the area and provide further evidence for social change.

This research started with my own desire to understand female sexuality and to give myself and other women a voice. Now it has ended with a story that I hope inspires women, young and old, to take control of their embodied sexuality and live as they choose, free from consumer culture's suppression.

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Appendix 1: Participant Recruitment Flyer

CONSUMER CULTURE & FEMALE SEXUALITY

Body secrets? 12 ways you're accidentally sexy?



I bet I would never look that sexy wearing that...

Come be a part of my Marketing Masters research and learn a lot about yourself!!!

If your interested in learning more about what the research entails please contact me.

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Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

Consumer Culture and Female Sexuality

This research is part of my University of Waikato Marketing Masters Thesis. The purpose of this research is to understand how the images in the media contribute to women's identity, how they see themselves and how women experience their sexuality.

People associated with this research:

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ccostley@mngt.waikato.ac.nz

If you agree to participate in this study by signing the consent form you will be asked to bring **images that represent what you consider makes a young woman sexy** and in a group of 5-8 women we will discuss the images.

From this discussion a **trigger topic that represents how we use our socialized knowledge to represent our sexuality and identity** will be decided upon within the group. This will then be used to guide the second group meeting in which we will share memories in relation to the trigger topic.

These memories will be discussed in the group and then **each woman will create a digital story** for their memory which will be made with images and music.

These stories will be presented at a third group meeting where we will discuss why certain images, music and layout were chosen. Then we will **further discuss the stories and analyze them.**

I will be participating in this method and therefore will be a participant as well as a researcher.

The research in total will approximately take eight hours.

What happens to the collected information?

You will remain confidential in this research which will mean you are unidentifiable in any publications. In addition each participant will sign an agreement to ensure any information shared within the group environment is confidential outside of this research.

The information collected from the research will be used for my Masters Thesis and will be in a report form as well as digital story form that each person will create. My supervisors and graders of my thesis will view the collected information. The published thesis not the digital stories will be available at the University of Waikato Library resources section where all other Masters Thesis and PHD Thesis are accessible. The information collected from this study may also result in future academic publications or presentations but your digital story will not be used unless you have provided consent for it to be used.

If at any stage you would like to opt out of this research please send me an email outlining this no later than 31/08/2010.

If you require any further information in regards to this research please contact me via the above means and I will be happy to provide further information.

If you would like to gain access to a summary of the findings from this study please contact me to make a request and I will email this to you after the research has completely concluded.

Thank you for your participation in this study, it's greatly appreciated and I look forward to working with you.

Appendix 3: Kim Kardashian Participant Image



Appendix 4: Memory Story Participant Hand-out

Guidelines for writing a memory

Write a story about a memory, triggered by the topic decided in the first group meeting.

Guidelines:

- Choose a specific real experience (of your own) that relates to the trigger. If you have several memories related to the trigger topic choose the most vivid memory to write on.
- Write your memory in the third person. Use your chosen alias name. Tell the experience as if it happened to another person. This allows more description and allows you to detach from the moment. (If you feel your story should be in first person, please do what you think is best)
- Be descriptive. Write what you said, felt, saw, heard, smelled, tasted, and what happened. Use as much detail as possible. Include emotions, actions, and thoughts.
- Write the memory without interpretation or explanation. That is, don't analyse, justify, or explain. Just tell it like it was.

The trigger topic we will be writing our stories on from our memories is:

We will meet again to discuss our stories.

Date: _____

Time: _____

Place: _____

Send me your story before our next meeting and I will provide copies for everyone. cet9@waikato.ac.nz

Appendix 5: Digital Storytelling Participant Hand-out

Digital Storytelling Guide

Digital Storytelling

Digital Storytelling is the practice of using computer-based tools to tell stories. Digital stories usually contain some mixture of computer-based images, text, recorded audio narration, video clips and/or music. Digital stories can vary in length, but typically last two to three minutes. Most computers will have a Moviemaker program already installed. If you do not have access to a computer we can arrange a solution.

Personal Voice

Writers/participants work on first person, personal stories. Whether the stories are reflections on a particular event or a larger issue, they should reflect firsthand experience. The subject matter generally encourages thoughtful, meaningful writing and a high emotional commitment of the participant. As observed by anyone involved in therapeutic processes, the dynamics of a group of people sharing life experiences in story have a special magic. This simply does not happen when the approach is an expository essay or business presentation on a general subject with little connection to the author. Even when the goal of participation is to develop stories related to subjects outside ones direct experience, finding one's own voice is invaluable.

Rewrite Story

Rewrite your story for digital presentation. Focus on one critical moment, rather than a long sequence of events. You may tell the remembered event. Add the details brought out in discussion. Fill in the gaps. Write it so a viewer can step into the experience, feel it, smell it, taste it, think it, hear it, etc. It should not be more than one typed page, double-spaced.

Look for Images, Music and Effects

Look for images that define the memory. They do not have to be literal. In fact, they may be better when metaphorical. Create or customize your own photos or

use un-copyrighted images from public domains. Use images that stimulate imagination and move people. Keep the number of images to a minimum. Use music and silence to elicit emotion. Consider transitions between images – fade out, side-swipe. Simple is better.

Storyboarding

Use PowerPoint or just a large piece of paper.

Lay out your images in sequence.

Underneath each image, write:

- 1) Any titles to appear on the screen,
- 2) The corresponding script (just the first few words) from the story,
- 3) Music track, volume, fade in/out,
- 4) Image effects, and
- 5) Image transitions.

If you would like to meet in sub-groups or as individuals, we could arrange times. We can work together on creating our digital stories.

Individual Highlights:

Use personal voice.

Rewrite your story.

Look for images and music.

Appendix 6: Participant Verbal Consent Form

Consumer culture and female sexuality.

Verbal Information Consent Form for Participants

I have read the Information Sheet for Participants for this study and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I also understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, or to decline to answer any particular questions in the study. I agree to provide information to the researchers under the conditions of confidentiality set out on the Information Sheet.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet form and will respect the other participants by keeping any information disclosed in the group meetings as confidential.

Each participant will be given an alias name to ensure your identity is kept confidential please provide an alias name below you wish me to use to represent you.

Alias Name: _____

Signed: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's Name and contact information:

Courtney Travis 021 102 4649 cet9@students.waikato.ac.nz

Supervisor's Name and contact information:

A.Prof Lorraine Friend	8384275	ext	8982
lfriend@mngt.waikato.ac.nz			
A.Prof Carolyn Costley	8384275	ext	8648
ccostley@mngt.waikato.ac.nz			

Appendix 7: Participant Digital Story Consent Form

Consumer culture and female sexuality.

Digital Story Consent Form for Participants

This consent form is to give consent for use of your digital story you have created during this research.

I had been made aware by the researcher prior to creating my digital story that other individuals involved in this research may see my digital story. I also understand my digital story will not be made public and will only be used for academic publications or presentations with my consent.

Tick One

I give permission to only use my digital story in the Masters Thesis research.

I give permission to use my digital story in the Masters Thesis research and future academic publications or presentations upon approval by me at the time.

Signed: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's Name and contact information:

Courtney Travis 021 102 4649 cet9@students.waikato.ac.nz

Supervisor's Name and contact information:

A.Prof Lorraine Friend	8384275	ext	8982
lfriend@mngt.waikato.ac.nz			
A.Prof Carolyn Costley	8384275	ext	8648
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