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Citation: Favaro, L. (2018). Postfeminist sexpertise on the “porn and men issue”: A transnational perspective. In: Harrison, K. & Ogden, C. (Eds.), *Pornographies: Critical Positions*. (pp. 70-96). Chester: University of Chester Press. ISBN 9781908258328

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Postfeminist sexpertise on the “porn and men issue”: A transnational perspective

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DRAFT Chapter prepared for:

Pornographies: Critical Positions (Issues in the Social Sciences 10)

Edited by Katherine Harrison and Cassandra A. Ogden

University of Chester Press.

Introduction

Focusing on women's online magazines produced between 2012 and 2014 in the UK and in Spain, this chapter examines peer responses to women feeling distressed about their male partners' consumption of pornographies, in addition to editorial content around the subject. Moving beyond 'for and against' positions, and driven by a social justice agenda, the chapter utilises this commentary about hetero-male-oriented pornographies as a point of analytical entry into the kinds of gendered and sexual pleasures, bodies, subjectivities and intimate relational possibilities contemporary (new) media and public sex and relationship advice bring into being and render (un)intelligible. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to feminist interrogations of the politics of mediated intimacy and pornification under neoliberalism and postfeminism, incorporating a much-needed transnational perspective.

Background: Mediated intimacy, pornification, and postfeminism

To an unprecedented degree intimacy penetrates the media and intimate lives are mediated. Especially in the global North, intimate relationality is increasingly constructed, negotiated and lived in and through media and communication technologies. More and more digital platforms are used to build, maintain and discuss intimate relationships, as well as engage in sexual practices. Many others create and disseminate personal intimate material, notably sexually explicit content, as part of a convergence culture of fluid boundaries between the public and the private, content and connectivity, consumption and production. Representations of intimacies—particularly concerning sex—dominate the media, arguably now the central site for defining regimes of sexual desire and conduct. Alongside the multiplication of well-established genres such as sex and relationship advice books and magazine problem pages¹, newer forms of 'sexpertise' (expertise in sex) have rapidly proliferated – spanning from 'celebsexpert' media (Harvey & Gill, 2011), the seduction or pickup community-industry (O'Neill, 2015), to peer-to-peer online communications, as explored in this chapter. Notwithstanding differences, they all share a number of features characterising the terrain of mediated sex/uality in the contemporary postfeminist neoliberal climate. This includes ties to corporate culture, commodification and recreationalisation, in addition to an obsessive concern with 'great (hetero)sex' – as vividly expressed by exhortations in women's magazines like: "Don't just be good in bed, be GREAT!"(*sofeminine.co.uk*). Depicted as the

¹ For recent shifts, including the sexualisation of advisors, see Boynton (2009).

“‘truth’ of subjectivity and the cement of relationships” (Harvey & Gill, 2011, p. 491), and emerging as normative imperative, ‘great sex’ broadly refers to consistently high amounts of sex, skilful performance, and the constant introduction of novelty. In this sense, and despite the current abundance of information, commercial pornography has surfaced as *the* source of knowledge and new techniques across sex advice media (Farvid & Braun, 2014).

A related and much debated shift pertaining to the media more generally concerns the blurred lines between pornographic and mainstream representations of bodies, sex and sexuality. This has been associated with a broader contemporary Western phenomenon often referred to as ‘pornification’ (also ‘pornographication’ and ‘sexualisation’, see Gill, 2012). Such a term indicates the perception of societies as saturated by sexual imagery and discourse (as well as products and services), and more specifically of culture as transformed by an increasingly influential and porous commercial sex industry – particularly pornography (García-Favaro & Gill, 2016). Pornographic and strip culture aesthetics, scripts and values have entered the everyday, reconfiguring sexual sensibilities, identities and practices. Porno or stripper chic has become a dominant representational practice across the media, and fashion style across the high street. Many porn stars and sex workers have emerged as celebrities, bestselling authors, sex advisors, and more generally often icons of empowered female sexuality. Further, practices once associated with commercial sex are repackaged as leisure and corporate entertainment—largely for men—as well as recreational and fitness pursuits – predominantly for women: for example, ‘stripperercise’, ‘stiletto strength’, burlesque, lap- and pole-dancing classes. The participation of women in these activities together with their consumption of pornographic material is situated within a neoliberal politics of individualism, consumerism, and choice – and in particular celebrated through postfeminist discourses of personal sexual liberation, entitlement and empowerment (McRobbie, 2008).

According to Rosalind Gill (2007, p. 255), at the centre of the postfeminist cultural sensibility is a shift from objectification to the “*sexual subjectification*” of (some) women. Here sexual objectification is (re-)presented as the freely chosen wish of active, autonomous, confident, desiring female subjects; thus constituting a new, more pernicious and distinctively neoliberal disciplinary regime where power “constructs our very subjectivity” (Gill, 2007, p. 258). In the 1990s, Hilary Radner (1993, p. 59) observed the cultural pervasiveness—ignited by Helen Gurley Brown’s *Cosmopolitan* magazine—of a new, ‘modernised’ mode of femininity that had replaced virginity, goodness, innocence or virtue as women’s value/object of

exchange in the heterosexual contract with a “technology of sexiness” organised around the body, sexual expertise and consumer display. More recently authors have underscored the centrality of *psychological transformation* to this technology of the self, which now demands a female subject who is compulsorily sexy and sexual, sexually agentic and confident, as well as knowledgeable and skilled in an ever-expanding variety of practices (Evans & Riley, 2014; Harvey & Gill, 2011; Gill, 2007, 2009). Building on the Foucaultian-inspired concepts of “technologies of sexiness” (Radner 1993, p. 59) and “sexual subjectification” (Gill, 2007, p. 255), Laura Harvey and Rosalind Gill (2011, p. 52) have developed the notion of “sexual entrepreneurship” to capture this new postfeminist neoliberal feminine subject. The “sexual entrepreneur”, Harvey & Gill (2011, p. 56, 64) observe, “is interpellated through discourses in which sex is work that requires constant labour and reskilling (as well as a budget capable of stretching to a wardrobe full of sexy outfits and drawers stuffed with sex toys)” and “made intelligible through discourses of sex produced by the mainstream self-help genre”.

But what about the newer user-led spaces of mediated intimacy? How does the sexpertise elaborated by members of the public relate to that disseminated in the edited content of experienced advisors like ‘agony aunts’? Also, what happens if women fail or refuse to undergo the adjustments demanded by postfeminist sex/ual/ised culture? What are the consequences of failing to provide the sense of female consent and enthusiastic participation that is so fundamental to it? This chapter begins to deal with these broad questions by zooming in on a moment of ‘postfeminist disorder’, namely women struggling with the presence of pornography in their everyday intimate lives.

The study: Technologies of gender and mediated intimacy

Despite the ongoing proliferation of new media forms, the women’s magazine remains an inescapable feature of the dominant cultural landscape of femininity in contemporary Western societies and a prevailing locus of ideas about gender, sex, sexuality and intimate relationality. However, printed publications are fast being displaced by online versions. These offer free of charge editorial content and significantly greater opportunities for interaction, including forums or discussion boards. This chapter is part of a larger research project examining producer interviews, editorial content and forum discussions in four such publications targeting millennial women: the UK-based *cosmopolitan.co.uk* and *femalefirst.co.uk*, and the

Spain-based *elle.es* and *enfemenino.com*². These popular sites cross national borders, respectively having users from the USA and India, and several Latin American countries, among others. I therefore consider them transnational technologies of gender and mediated intimacy (De Lauretis, 1987; Foucault, 1988).

In this chapter, I explore a recurrent thread in the forums: (self-identified) young women expressing confusion, concern, disappointment, hurt and/or self-doubt, and asking for advice, upon discovering that their male partners consume various pornographies. This primarily encompasses mainstream soft and hardcore pornography targeting heterosexual men, but also online live chats and shows. The following are illustrative of such thread-initiating messages.³

Subject: Your boyfriend watching porn

Hello, is it normal for your partner (in this case a guy) to watch porn and to comment with his friends photos that they send each other of women showing their boobs etc... [...] he says it's for fun, but I tell him that it bothers me (not because I'm jealous) but because I don't like him commenting "what a pair of tits, she is so hot"... and he says there is nothing wrong with it (*enfemenino.com*, 2013)

Subject: Boyfriends and Porn!

Ok, so this thread has kinda come from a lot of comments on other threads concerning boyfriends or husbands watching porn.

I commented on one saying I didn't think my OH [other half] watches porn. I was wrong. [...]

Now - first point first, I have NO problem with my OH masturbating and that is not the point of this thread; I do it too.

Second of all - I KNOW from previous threads that it's entirely normal for him to watch porn and that it is genuinely something we girls have to accept. And that it does not mean they like the girl in the porn more than us.

However - although I know I shouldn't, I do feel a tiny bit bothered by it (*cosmopolitan.co.uk*, 2014)

As this chapter will show, both posts are responding to dominant discourses on the subject of pornography circulating these sites ("not because I'm jealous", "I know [...] it's entirely normal for him to watch porn"). Echoing my own position, a *cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum user wrote in 2014: "I find this topic interesting as it seems to be something that comes up time and time again". It was so recurrent that some women even apologised for starting yet another thread on the topic: "OH & Porn -

² In 2014, both *cosmopolitan.co.uk* and *elle.es* permanently closed their forums. I examine this diminishing interest in the forum platform by women's online magazines in García-Favaro 2016.

³ Throughout the chapter, I present direct quotations from interactive websites exactly as they appeared in the original sources. The data was gathered only from publicly accessible forums where pseudonyms were used; here removed for further de-identification. Translations from Spanish are mine.

AGAIN! Sorry! Right, I know this topic has been talked about to death!, but [...]”(*cosmopolitan.co.uk*). Moreover, whilst the (relative) anonymity of the Internet facilitates the release of inhibitions and this often means that online discussion forums are highly affectively charged spaces, this specific topic provoked a particularly intense response. This was even noted by forum users, who for instance spoke about “the porn watching topics” as “explosive threads” (*cosmopolitan.co.uk*). All this suggested the need for a close feminist inquiry.

To this end, I gathered a substantial but manageable sample comprising 102 threads about “the porn & men issue” (*cosmopolitan.co.uk*), which resulted in 2,096 peer-to-peer messages posted between the years 2012-2014. A second dataset consisted of 32 editorial features, including ‘agony aunt’ texts, published in the same period⁴ and discussing the same scenario, or pornographies more generally. The collected material was uploaded to NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Aiming to ascertain the diversity of discussion, I used an inductive coding method. This involved several close readings of the whole corpus and various reorganisations of data-driven codes before I identified a stable set of patterned themes.

There are certain contrasts between the editorially-authored and user-generated content, and the websites hosted in the UK and in Spain. Especially in the Spanish forums, the pathologising discourse of (male) (cyber)porn/sex addiction is occasionally mobilised. Contrastingly, also shaping the contours of the debate across the Spain-based sites is a critique of women as upholding conservative and archaic views, at times associated with the influence of religion. Pornography is championed as exemplifying sexual liberation, modernity, and freedom from old taboos and religious indoctrination. In the UK data, this seems to stand as a commonsensical understanding unwarranting explicit verbalization. Here there is instead great preoccupation with the notion of men’s privacy having been invaded. Women are figured as psychologically disturbed and shamefully untrustworthy individuals for looking through their partner’s belongings (principally computers and phones), and as somehow deserving their distress for “asking for trouble” (*cosmopolitan.co.uk*).

Drawing on a feminist discursive approach informed by poststructuralism (e.g. Gill, 2009), in what follows I unpack three interrelated ideological formations permeating *all datasets*: first, the articulation of ‘postfeminist biologism’, promoting a

⁴ One exception is the *cosmopolitan.co.uk* article “Why do men... Watch porn?”, which was published in 2009, remaining however on the website during the data gathering period. This article played an important role in positioning the magazine with respect to the topic, and was widely discussed in the forums. An excerpt is quoted on page x?

sexual regime based on male immutability and female adaptation; then, in turn, the motifs I have labelled ‘toxic insecurity’⁵ and ‘porn(nified) upgrade’. These fundamentally revolve around positioning women as the problem and self-transformation as the solution. They thus clearly exemplify the tendency across my data to turn the critical gaze away from men’s pornography consumption and toward the women starting the thread. The identified discursive landscape is theorised in relation to the (trans)cultural penetration of postfeminist and neoliberal rationalities, technologies of governmentality and modalities of sexism.

Analysis: On the “porn and men issue”

Postfeminist biologism

Throughout the datasets, pornography is represented as *intrinsic* to male sexuality through pseudo-technoscientific discourses and figurations of body-subjects. These are intertwined with postfeminist discursive formations and genres of argumentation, including: the heteronormative ‘Mars and Venus’ framework⁶, which purportedly advocates a ‘no-blame’ approach to tensions and conflicts between women and men, positioned as—innately and thus rightly and valuably—‘different but equal’; a related ‘cruel but true’ credos, which acknowledges some forms of gender-based inequities, but renders these asocial and so non-ideological; an assumed pastness of sexism, and an attendant “overing” of feminist critique (Ahmed, 2012, p. 179). I see the concrete articulation of such ideological elements at the current conjuncture as giving rise to a highly ideological and pernicious sex/gender power/knowledge regime: ‘postfeminist biologism’.

The data is *littered* with high modality statements establishing an intimate link between pornography and men. Examples from the *cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum include: “ALL men have stashes of porn, it’s a fact of life” and “Men look at porn period”. Often forum users expressed a sense of frustration and/or exhaustion regarding this discussion. For instance: “It is Normal, how much longer is it going to take until women understand that all men watch porn on a daily basis” (*enfemenino.com* forum). These claims to ‘porn debate fatigue’ work to silence women and police what are legitimate topics for the forums and, arguably, public conversation about sex and sexuality more generally. Furthermore, in a distinctly

⁵ Thanks to Rosalind Gill for suggesting this phrase to me.

⁶ This was popularised by John Gray’s (e.g. 1992) hugely successful self-help literature/industry, whose perspectives on gender relations and heterosex have become central to postfeminist media culture and have strongly influenced other popular genres, notably women’s magazines (Gill, 2007).

postfeminist manner, they operate to render obsolete and disenfranchise any critique of pornography, and with that associated feminist vocabularies and imaginaries.

Rather than collective politicised consideration, for those experiencing 'porn debate fatigue' all that is required to solve the "porn problem" (*cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum) is women assuming the 'truth' of pornography consumption as *inherent* to male sexuality, ultimately so that women can: "get over it!" (*elle.es* and *female.first.co.uk* forums). This reflects the postfeminist 'double move' permeating the data, namely the repudiation of sexual *politics* and simultaneous reassertion of sexual *difference*, grounded in a heteronormative framing of gender complementarity (Gill, 2007). Certainly, many contributors drew on postfeminist (media) culture's favourite metaphor of difference: "they are men and are driven by entirely different forces than us girls. [...] its a mars venus thing" (*cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum).

Repeatedly, the forum users of women's magazines pathologised and attacked women for ignoring or overlooking gender differences and thus the allegedly natural connection between pornography and male sexuality. Epitomising the widely unempathetic and at times vicious peer-to-peer responses that this particular topic attracted, a self-identified woman wrote: "Girl, you're not well, men's nature is different to ours [...] please, what planet are you from?"; and a self-identified man said: 'You are an idiot or inexpert. ALL MEN [WE] WATCH PORN' (both *enfemenino.com*). Due to the perceived gravity of ignoring or feeling affected by what was perceived as a simple but fundamental 'fact of life', women were often (re)directed to the expert tutelage of psychology. For example, one *femalefirst.co.uk* forum user wrote: "get over it. men watch porn. if you're going to be hurt by a simple fact of life, you probably have some bigger issues going on that need some looking into. i suggest counselling". The women posting their concerns received a similar response in the Spain-based sites: "So the problem is you, look for psychological help to be guided regarding the reality of life" (*enfemenino.com*). These posts reflect the omnipresence of psychological (highly selected) knowledges, techniques and practitioners across popular sex and relationship advice media, including women's magazines. They likewise speak to the significance of psychology under neoliberalism, and the centrality of practices of subjectification through technologies of self-regulation in the constitution of femininity.

Most forum contributors additionally took it upon themselves to instruct women about 'the reality of life', that is, purportedly natural sexual differences as explanation to why "men need porn" (*cosmopolitan.co.uk*). A pervading theme involves the well-rehearsed socio-biological idea that: "Men are turned on by the visual, Women by the emotional" (*femalefirst.co.uk*); dichotomous psychosexualities

which were straightforwardly correlated to media consumption: “Watching porn is for men like watching rom coms is for women” (*cosmopolitan.co.uk*). Another instance is this ‘agony aunt’ explanation:

Men are very visual creatures and so porn is a great way for them to get themselves off - whereas women need more of an emotional connection. This is not his fault, simply a part of his biology. It may be difficult for him to understand how you feel, given that we are programmed differently to each other. (*femalefirst.co.uk*)

Therefore, discursive closure on the subject is orchestrated through claims to biologically determined—and thus immutable and unaccountable—masculinity. Note also how women are expected to undergo the *non-reciprocal* emotional work of understanding men. Indeed, the heterosexual contract promoted in the data rests upon a profoundly unequal distribution of labour, lack of mutuality and consensus building. This is again suggested by repeated messages both in the UK- and Spain-hosted forums to women like: “EVERY man will watch it, [...] and EVERY (straight) man will find other women attractive. It’s something you just have to grin and bare!”(*cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum) and “learn to resign yourself” (*enfemenino.com* forum).

As I discuss elsewhere (García-Favaro, 2015), postfeminist biologism is deeply informed by the logics and narratives of evolutionary psychology. Briefly, this involves the association of female sexuality with a greater desire for emotionally close, committed relationships; and emphasis upon the “deeply visual nature of male sexuality” (in order to identify “mate value”) (Salmon, 2012, p. 154). As a result of such male ancestral adaptation to maximise reproductive success, male-oriented “modern pornography is exactly what should be expected” (Salmon, 2004, p. 226). Evolutionary psychologists additionally maintain that hard-core pornography caters to “what’s at the root of male psychology”, namely “to have mating access to endless women” (Saad 2013, p. 68) and “low cost, impersonal sex” (Salmon, 2012, p. 154). Again, these ideas are closely reproduced throughout my data. For example, in the following forum posts men’s desire-need for pornography is naturalized through a connection to polygamy as male biological imperative to ensure genetic legacy: “Males in nature are programmed to spread their seed, their genes. [...] men are polygamous” (*cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum) and “That’s the way life is. Men are polygamous by nature and need to contain all that sexual charge somehow” (*enfemenino.com* forum). It is troubling that a key aspect of the ‘cultural scaffolding of rape’ (Gavey 2005), namely the construction of male sexuality as voracious and emotionally detached, is still pervasive and reproduced so boldly across the datasets,

as well as in some scholarly work (e.g. Salmon, 2004, 2012; Saad, 2013).

In the data, men are constructed as innately potential cheaters and pornography is advanced as a technology of male infidelity prevention. Women are thus explicitly encouraged to see their partners' consumption in a positive light: "be glad he's satisfying himself that way rather than cheating" (*cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum). Suggesting the powerful influence of this media, another forum user of *cosmopolitan.co.uk* wrote: "i cant stand the idea of porn! never could. [...] but i read an issue of cosmo which said lads who have a healthy porn habit are less likely to cheat!!" Somewhat differently but similarly calling for a 'rational' cost-benefit approach, others exhort women to welcome such activity "If you want a man that is any good in the sack" (*femalefirst.co.uk* forum). This relates to the current status of pornography as the best source of sexual knowledge, alongside the continued association of masculine sexual subjectivity with physical performance, technique, efficiency, prowess, control/leadership and stamina. The following *cosmopolitan.co.uk* editorial combines both narratives:

Far from getting bothered by it, you should try to realise that your fella watching porn is actually a good thing (bear with me here). One: it could stop him cheating. By alleviating his sexual curiosity and satisfying his erotic appetite, porn will make him less likely to play away. Two: by watching porn, your man will be able to learn all kinds of new positions and techniques that he'd never even know existed otherwise. Think of it as a how-to guide, but with moving images. And three: male porn-stars have incredible stamina. He'll see this and want to emulate them, so will work on becoming a more tireless lover.

The widespread naturalisation of male promiscuity seen in the data can produce feelings of insecurity and construct men's (potential) cheating as a normative concern for all heterosexual women. It additionally functions to position women in competition against each other for men's attention and (lasting) affection and to legitimise the demand for women to relentlessly work on their sexual appeal and practice (see below). Overall, this analysis section has shown that while men's consumption of pornography is established as that which is strictly not open for debate, women are expected to promptly abandon their negative feelings about pornography—plus their partner's lying—through a recognition that men are "biologically programmed" to consume such material (or cheat) *and* to reconstruct themselves as wiser, better-adapted, porn-embracing postfeminist subjects. This is discussed further in the remainder of the chapter.

Toxic insecurities

As seen above, respondents to the “porn trouble” (*cosmopolitan.co.uk*) threads repeatedly position women as ‘the problem’. This often involves exhortations to surveil, work on and transform their ‘inner’ selves. Women’s hesitant or negative feelings toward their partners’ pornography use are depicted as rooted in *individual psycho-affective faults* such as ignorance about or inability to deal with ‘reality’ (i.e. ‘natural’ sexual difference). Another perceived female deficiency is irrationally: “it’s your problem. you need to get over it. Deal with why it bothers you. [...] your feelings are irrational” (*femalefirst.co.uk* forum). Forum users also consider that the women posting their concerns demonstrate immaturity: “you need to look for the solution: IN YOURSELF. And in your maturity” (*enfemenino.com* forum). Therefore, what is a socio-political issue is translated into narratives of *women’s* individual psychological maladaptation, pathology or failing.

Self-reflexivity, management and adaptation are advanced as the only intelligible responses for women, thereby conjuring gendered neoliberal logics and modes of regulation. Neoliberalism is structured by an ethos of autonomous individualism and self-determination that replaces—renders unthinkable even—any notion of social/external pressures, constraints or influences. Individuals are interpellated as self-reliant and self-regulating, freely choosing, perpetually transformative, adaptive and entrepreneurial actors who are accountable for their life biographies, and whose value is largely measured by their capacity to self-care and self-improve (Gill, 2007; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). Again reproducing neoliberal logics, people posting depict women as responsible for their feelings of vulnerability: “You yourself, position yourself as a victim” (*enfemenino.com*). A second, remarkably unempathetic and disciplining example is:

I'M SORRY, BUT THAT 'OOHH IT UNDERMINES MY SELF-ESTEEM'...
[...] YOU CHOOSE HOW TO TAKE THE SITUATION, WHAT AFFECTS
YOU AND WHAT DOESN'T... ONE HAS TO BE RESPONSIBLE FOR
WHAT ONE FEELS/DOES WITH RESPECT TO A SITUATION, NOT SEE
ONESELF AS A VICTIM OF SITUATIONS... (*enfemenino.com* forum)

Informing these claims is the neoliberal (re)configuration and elevation of ‘freedom’, ‘choice’ and ‘agency’ as indisputably and straightforwardly defining contemporary existence, and the related association of notions of vulnerability or victimhood with “self-pity, insufficient personal drive and a lack of personal responsibility for one’s own life” (Baker, 2010, p. 190). In the data, experiencing a sense of fragile self-esteem, helplessness or victimisation is coded in strictly individualised terms as a personal attitude or behaviour, rather than a relational—let alone structural—

situation. It is reprehended as something the individual woman actively *chooses*, with the concurrent implication that she can also simply choose to feel better or even good about herself or her situation. As such these peer-to-peer communications reproduce the ideas promulgated by the commercial ‘love your body’ (LYB) discourses that have been increasingly targeting women over the last decade with seemingly affirmative messages about bodies (Gill & Elias, 2014). Women’s magazines are at the centre of this market for female self-esteem (Banet-Weiser, 2013), whose preoccupations are a guiding feature of the sexpertise under my analytic gaze.

Regardless of the nature of their posts women are persistently told that the reason why they do not appreciate their partner’s consumption of pornography is because they are insecure or, moreover, as one commenter from *enfemenino.com* put it: “something is wrong with your self-esteem”. Illustrative peer-to-peer posts from both contexts are: “The emotions you perceive are only the result of your insecurities, otherwise you would not care about that” (*enfemenino.com*); and: “If this bothers you, you need to improve your own self esteem, thats the issue here [...] So improve your self confidence and porn wont seem like an issue anymore”(*cosmopolitan.co.uk*). In addition to this deceptively simple panacea, respondents urge women to work on their self-esteem through an ideological discourse of ‘toxic insecurity’. Here women are not only blamed for feeling unconfident, but also for putting the relationships at risk, and unjustly affecting their male partners. Rather than to accomplish greater personal well-being and happiness, women’s labour of self-confidence is presented as crucial relationship preservation work. Two examples from forums are: “If you don’t resolve your insecurity problems your relationship is going to end BADLY” (*enfemenino.com*) and “Insecurities are recipes for disaster and it is NEVER OK to inflict them on others” (*cosmopolitan.co.uk*). For some forum users, women’s insecurities are toxic to the extent of incompatibility with a heterosexual relationship: “If such a little thing has ‘knocked your confidence’ then you shouldn’t be in a relationship, you need to work on your insecurities instead of offloading them on your poor boyfriend” (*cosmopolitan.co.uk*).

In their thread-initiating posts, some women do speak of feeling inadequate and/or unconfident about their own bodies (“It makes me feel ugly, inadequate and just not good enough”) in light of the material their partners enjoy (usually “websites with naked ladies with huge boobs” and “perfect bodies”) (both *cosmopolitan.co.uk*). Respondents often translate this into notions of jealousy, which is again rendered the exclusive responsibility of the individual woman and pathologised as evidence of

toxic low self-esteem. Likewise, to fail to be immune and emotionally detached from media representations is put forward as symptomatic of a personal psychological disturbance requiring individualised self-work: “i would say that the problem lies with the person who is jealous of a picture, rather than the person looking at a picture” (*femalefirst.co.uk* forum). Another illustration is: “Girls who feel insecure and freak out on their boyfriends because they compare themselves to airbrushed women in magazines need their head checked. I mean seriously, get a grip - those women are entertainment only” (*cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum). This recurrent response suggests a surfaced normativity of certain articulations of ‘media literacy’, and how this can operate in the service of the neoliberal programme, rendering each individual consumer responsible for their own engagements with texts, and silencing all those important, complex questions about subjectivity and representation (Gill, 2012).

Another reviled form of emotional vulnerability to external factors concerns women’s self-esteem depending on their partner’s acts, validation, or appreciation. Once more, in line with neoliberal logics, women are expected to be hyper-autonomous rational subjects of ‘choice’. And, again, their insecurities are often derided and portrayed as a threat to the relationship. For example: “Really, that the self-esteem of a person should depend on someone else or what someone else does... [...] instead of enjoying the relationship, you come with silly complexes. It’s as if you don’t want to enjoy it and want your relationship to fail” (*enfemenino.com* forum). Particularly in the magazines’ editorial advice, this idea is also conveyed by drawing on the rhetoric and language of LYB. For example, in response to the reader letter “He has pictures of other women on his phone!”, which includes the comment “All I ever find on his laptop is porn and photos of women’s bodies, mostly porn stars”, *femalefirst.co.uk* advises: “work to build your self-esteem so you don’t need your partner’s validation to know how sexy you look”.

The data reflects how in the current postfeminist climate the regulatory work that women are required to undergo includes the disciplining of subjectivity through a ‘madeover’ ethical relationship to the self (Gill, 2009), with self-confidence becoming an increasingly crucial part of this intensified incursion of the operation of power into the psychic (Gill & Elias, 2014). The emergent gendered technology of neoliberal governmentality I have elsewhere called ‘confidence chic’ (Favaro, 2016) interpellates a hyper-autonomous, deeply individuated woman who can thereby more effectively meet the demands emanating from patriarchal capitalism, not least by re-conducting the desire for change toward the self. Against this backdrop, the diagnosis of ‘lacking self-confidence’ can be seen as a responsive effect of power to deviance or resistance.

'Confidence chic' (re-)presents women's insecurities as individual—or at times intrinsically female—maladies, instead of a socio-political issue deserving collective anger at both old and new realms of injury and injustice, including a media culture obsessed with women's bodies — bodies that are simultaneously a source of power *and* always already unruly (Gill, 2007). Indeed, the practice of female governmentality through confidence also accomplishes the important ideological work of obfuscating the continued hostile surveillance and judgment of women's bodies, and, increasingly, sexual practice. It is to this last theme that I now turn.

Porn(ified) upgrade

In addition to the psychic makeover women are expected to undergo, and coexisting alongside calls to confident femininity, the sexperts in the online spaces under scrutiny here construct a female subject whose sexual appeal and practice is failing or lacking and needs (ongoing) scrutiny, discipline and work. This operates through the portrayal of men's consumption of pornography as a response to inadequate lust stimulus: "do you maintain your sex appeal for your husband?" (*enfemenino.com* forum). Also blamed is women's supposedly unsatisfactory sexual upkeep: "it is very probable that he is sexually unsatisfied" (*enfemenino.com* forum). This obligatory labour involves providing men good enough sex both in terms of *quantity* and *quality*, for example: "in a healthy relationship you should be having enough sex that he doesn't need to watch t every day" (*cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum), and "maybe you are falling short in bed, find out what he likes" (*enfemenino.com* forum).

On the basis of the premise that men watch pornography because they are sexually unsatisfied, women are exhorted to engage with a narrow repertoire of commodified sexual practices to regain men's interest and ensure their satisfaction. This feminine labour entails "visual stimulation" by wearing make-up, and "keeping in shape, wearing nice clothes/high heels around him" (*femalefirst.co.uk* forum), besides practices now considered compulsory for women in relationships, such as "surprising him with a bj" (blow job) and "doing a sexy striptease", as well as constantly working to "expand your sexual repertoire" (all *cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum). In this sense, users of the *cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum recommend creating "topless selfies" and to "try something new in the bedroom like some more kinkiness" as "showing a more adventurous side to yourself can really turn a man on". The advice in these sites thereby props up the feminine 'sexual entrepreneur' (Harvey & Gill, 2011), including her newer—post-*Fifty Shades Of Grey* (James 2011)—'kinky chic' or 'bondage babe' element. As a neoliberal subject, this inhabitant of a strictly policed and delimited sexual matrix is incited to relentlessly self-improve and

renovate through entrepreneurialism and “consuming the self into being” (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 227). A link between sexuality and commodity culture suffuses both the editorial and user-generated content, as in: “You could suggest dressing up for him or introducing some sex toys into your sexual play to make things more exciting” (editorial, *femalefirst.co.uk*), “you could try and spice your sex life up a bit, next time your in town casually take him into Ann Summers [retailer of sex toys and underwear]”, and “Get some sexy lingerie like a baby doll and stockings” (both *cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum). The first quotation clearly testifies to the commercial imperative of the sites: *femalefirst.co.uk* has a lingerie shopping section, and is littered with advertorials and links to retail websites for sex toys and costumes. Concerning the widespread reproduction of such consumerist discourses in the forums, this adds as yet another form of free immaterial labour performed by digital media users benefiting corporations (Campbell, 2011). Ultimately, it points to the commercial conquest of the sphere of sexuality.

In these transnational spaces, being sexually compliant to men’s sexual desires, regardless of personal views or wants, is normalised as what women in love *do*. Furthermore, a number of forum contributors advance this as a *requirement* to prevent men from leaving. In addition to such a threat, the post below also suggests the casual normalization of women’s incorporation of commercial sex aesthetics and activities to satisfy men while in (and for the good of) committed heterosexual relationships:

You will lose him being like this. I am not telling you to like what he likes [...] if he likes porn so much, lose your inhibitions, stimulate his visual sexuality by buying a really sexy lingerie set and doing for him a phenomenal striptease as if you were a true porn actress (*enfemenino.com* forum)

No other feminine subject weaves together more perniciously aesthetic, sexual and psychic labour than the ‘sexual entrepreneur’ (Harvey & Gill, 2011). In the data, her ‘technology of sexiness’ (Radner, 1993) also entails being ‘confident’ and ‘cool’ with (men’s) pornography. Two illustrations from the *cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum are: “a woman who is confident with regards to porn is sexy” and “women who are cool about these kind of things are considered very sexy by a lot of men, whereas ‘needy’ behaviour like freaking over things like this just pushes them further away”.

It is remarkable how unequally distributed care and empathy are. While any sign of female emotional fragility or dependency is resolutely not tolerated, cast as pathological, indisputably repulsive and toxic for relationships, women are expected to be permanently attentive and responsive to—even anticipatory of—men’s needs,

desires and insecurities. Moreover, women's wishes or anxieties are rendered invisible through an emphasis on those *potentially* experienced by men (as projected by respondents). The *femalefirst.co.uk* editorial response to the reader letter "He's having live chat sex with other women!" includes: "Perhaps he is craving for something new from you in the bedroom but too shy to ask?" In a similar manner, the peer-to-peer messages both in Spanish and in English offer the following advice: "ask him if he would want to treat you like a porn star, maybe he's just imagining That which he is too afraid to ask" (*cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum), and "Maybe he wants to realise a fantasy and is shy to tell you, watch porn with him" (*enfemenino.com* forum).

Indeed, there is an overwhelming consensus both in the editorial and user-generated content in the Spain and UK-based websites that *the* solution to women's dilemma is to watch pornography with their partner. This is variously depicted as normatively demanded instrumental behaviour to satisfy men and for the benefit of the relationship, and, to a lesser extent, as an empowering and pleasurable activity. In this sense, some self-defined women point to their own use and enjoyment of pornography: "I love watching porn!" (*cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum). Others draw on a hedonistic discourse of shared playfulness and pleasure, for example: "see how much fun you can have with each other" and "its such a turn on we always end up having great sex" (both *cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum). These messages thus make a strong gesture to the 'Fun, Fearless Female' of the global *Cosmopolitan* brand, to the playful, feisty, pleasure-seeking and sexually desiring version of femininity of much postfeminist media and advertising.

More recurrently, however, "watching porn with your OH" (*cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum) is depicted in instrumental terms as sex-life enhancing. One instance of this pervasive piece of advice is the following from the *cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum: "Why don't you watch porn with him. [...] Watching it together and commenting on it (dirty talk) can enhance your sex life". The editorial content of this women's magazine equally suggests: "Instead of losing sleep over it, why not join him? Watching porn together can be a great way to expand your sexual repertoire". Women are also encouraged to—enthusiastically and actively—engage in this activity simply because, as an article in *elle.es* explains: "to watch a porn film with a girl is the fantasy of many men". Namely, as an act of love: "He will love you for it" (*cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum), and "If you care about your boyfriend, you can show interest in a pleasant way in his virtual pastimes" (*enfemenino.com* forum).

In addition to embracing pornography consumption as a pleasure producing device or, more recurrently, in instrumental ways to spice up sex and please (to

keep) men, women are advised to fashion *themselves* according to the pornographic aesthetics from, and to engage in the sexual acts depicted in, the material their partners enjoy. For example, the ‘agony aunt’ in *female.first.co.uk* suggests: “maybe have a sneaky look at the girls in the porn films to see what they are wearing and try and match it”, and “Why not try to get more involved with it- watch it together or play out one the fantasies in the recording?” The forum users of this publication equally advise: “Does he look at any particular genre? If so, pay attention to those, and try to work them into your bedroom activities”. This chapter hence provides further evidence that pornography consumption, along with sex industry aesthetics and practices, are being normalized as part of a modern (particularly young) woman’s sexual repertoire (Gill, 2009), showing that this is not limited to Anglo-American media, but is very much part of the sexpertise circulating online in women’s journalism as well as peer networks across and beyond national contexts.

Conclusion: Postfeminist sexpertise

Focussing upon commentary about the “porn and men issue” in online women’s magazines, this chapter has unpacked three interrelated ideological formations—‘postfeminist biologism’, ‘toxic insecurity’, and ‘porn(nified) upgrade’—crossing conventional boundaries of authorship and genre, language and nation-state. The identified (re-)mediations of gender and intimacy advance a depoliticised, individualized interpretation of women’s situation and discontents, built according to, and mystified by, neoliberalism and postfeminism. In this context, much like sex and gender relations, pornography is becoming increasingly unknowable as a political or feminist issue. Such a manoeuvre works to disarticulate the potential for solidarity and politicised collectivity among women, which are further discouraged by the attack on social empathy nourished by the neoliberal ethos, and are rather rechanneled into technologies of self-governance through confidence and entrepreneurship.

The identified sexpertise operates to discipline female bodies, affect and thought into deeply injurious and unjust psycho-social arrangements. While men are deemed as entitled to more understanding, the female user is expected to adopt a position of compliance, to resign herself to the biological inevitability of male sexuality. Further, she is expected to subjugate her feelings, views and needs—which are stringently policed, pathologised, ridiculed and cast as toxic—and instead adapt and respond to her partner’s. Positioned as failed subject-objects of desire-consumption, working on constructing an upgraded—pornified—selfhood is advanced as women’s only intelligible response to male consumption of

pornography. These critical readings do not negate the potential pleasures enjoyed by those who give and take up the advice, but rather respond to my aspiration for our mediated intimacies to place compassion, consensus and consent at the *centre* of relationships, along with a sexual liberation grounded on erotic justice for *all*.

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