

# Bare'ing it all for the Camera: Women's Experience of Having Erotic Photographs Taken

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**Abstract** One area in which a change in women's sexual behavior has been observed is in the growing number of women who are having erotic photographs taken of themselves by professional photographers. The current research is an attempt to learn more about this unstudied phenomenon. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 women who have had erotic photographs taken by a professional photographer. The interviews were subjected to thematic analysis. The women described the erotic photography experience as having positive implications, such as increased body esteem and feelings of empowerment, as well as giving the women the ability to see themselves as sexual and an opportunity to celebrate their bodies. Having erotic photos taken also provided women with the opportunity to create a sexual image in a photograph on their own terms. The findings provide insight into the changing nature of attitudes about women's sexuality.

**Keywords** Erotic photography · Erotica · Women · Sexuality · Thematic analysis

## Introduction

In recent years, researchers have challenged the "traditional" stereotypes that women are not sexually adventurous or do not find sex as important as men (Blumberg 2003; Mikach and Bailey 1999; Sloggett and Herold 1996; Weaver and Herold 2000). Haavio-Mannila and Kontula (1997) document changes in how women's sexuality is viewed and cite increased education and financial

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independence for women as partially responsible. Women have also embraced behaviors once thought of as appropriate only for men, such as discussing sex or holding more liberal views toward sex outside the context of a committed relationship (Winstead et al. 1997). As well, popular media portrayals of women have changed. Blumberg's (2003) participants suggested that the mass media is responsible for how society views and labels highly sexual women. The popular media are more open today about portraying women who are sexually adventurous as seen in the highly popular television program *Sex and the City*.

A recent article in the Canadian news magazine *Maclean's* featured women who had erotic photographs of themselves taken by professional photographers (Latimer 2007). The *Maclean's* article highlighted the experiences of several suburban women who described participating in erotic photography to surprise their husbands, to feel sexy again, and to add an element of fun and fantasy to their lives as working wives and mothers. According to the article, these erotic photo sessions generally involved a makeover and dressing up in lingerie or fantasy outfits, such as "Naughty Nurses" or "Sexy Santas," to have sexual pictures taken and retouched by the photographer. Our research exploring this phenomenon from the perspective of erotic photographers suggests that this experience may contribute to positive sexuality by increasing women's body and sexual esteem (Wentland and Muise 2010). However, this initial study did not explore the perspective of clients who have erotic photos taken by professional photographers. Therefore, the objective of the current research is to study the motivations and feelings women have regarding their participation in erotic photography.

## Literature Review

Erotic photography has been gaining popularity in recent years (Latimer 2007) and research in this area is important in helping to understand changing social patterns of women's sexuality. Most theorists on female sexuality have argued that women's sexuality has been heavily regulated in society (Harris 2005; McCormick 1994), preventing women from expressing their sexuality. Studying the motives and emotions of women who have had erotic photographs taken may offer insight into a change that is occurring in the role of women in Western society.

For this study, erotic photography refers to types of professionally taken photographs that are sexual or suggestive in nature. In these cases, the participants pay the photographer to have their photos taken. We will use the definition of erotic photography from the previous study conducted with erotic photographers, which is "photography with the intent to arouse or titillate" (Wentland and Muise 2010, p. 4). The photographers in this study described various types of erotic photographs including boudoir, artistic nudes, or intimate portraiture. Boudoir photographs were described as less explicit and more likely to involve lingerie style clothing, whereas in other erotic photos the participant was nude and/or engaging in actual or implied sexual activity. Women may pursue these various "types" of erotic photos in the same photo shoot (Wentland and Muise 2010).

The goal of the current study is to learn about women's motivations and reactions to their own erotic photographs taken by a professional photographer. The interview

article in *Maclean's* magazine suggests that many women have erotic photos taken to “spice up” sexual encounters with a long-term partner (Latimer 2007). Tunarui and Reavey (2003) found the notion of “boring sex” has been constructed as an inevitable part of a long-term monogamous relationship. Sexual boredom is relevant as it is often cited as a reason for sexual infidelity and for the breakdown of relationships (Shackelford and Buss 1997a, b) and some individuals may be looking for options to increase the excitement in their long-term relationships. Baron and Byrne (1991) suggest that romantic partners experience sexual boredom because they “have exhausted their skills for generating novel stimulation in the relationship” (p. 296). Thus, one motivation for erotic photography may be to engage in a novel experience that is intended to ignite sexual interest between partners.

Having erotic photos taken may also provide a fantasy experience and a chance to explore a role outside of those usually experienced. In their study of consumer consumption of women’s lingerie, Jantzen et al. (2006) discussed the power of lingerie to transform a woman from boring to attractive and daring. In this study, women described using lingerie to produce sensual experiences for themselves, to feel feminine, and as a means of exploring other sides of their personality. Erotic photos may provide the same appeal. Traditionally women’s undergarments have been used to mould the female body into the ideals of a male-dominated society. However, modern women are using lingerie to heighten their own sense of femininity and increase self-arousal (Jantzen et al. 2006). Erotic and sexually explicit materials have been perceived as catering to men’s sexual desires and as being potentially degrading or disempowering to women. However, as with the use of lingerie, modern women may be using erotic photos to challenge these notions and create a sexual image on their own terms.

Women who have high sexual self-esteem report using a variety of sexually explicit materials to heighten sexual pleasure (Morrison et al. 2004). Women with high sexual esteem have a high positive regard and confidence in their sexuality that facilitates satisfying and pleasurable sexual experiences (Snell and Papini 1989). Perhaps high sexual self-esteem and comfort with sexually explicit materials in general allow highly sexual women to engage in an erotic photography experience. Wentland et al. (2010) distinguished between highly sexual women and less sexual women and found that highly sexual women had higher sexual self-esteem, higher sex drives, more comfortable attitudes toward casual sex, masturbation and sexually explicit materials, were more sexually adventurous and had higher body image than women who were less sexual. Women with a positive body image report greater comfort in getting undressed in front of their partner, having sex with the lights on, and engaging in new sexual behaviours than those with a negative body image (Ackard et al. 2000). These findings suggest that highly sexual women would be more likely to have erotic photographs taken.

The increased popularity of erotic photography can be seen as one aspect of the changing nature of women’s sexuality. Today, activities that were once only the purview of sex workers have become mainstream. Erotic novels and films are being produced for women by women and women are experiencing new forms of eroticism (Hardy 2001). Also, growing numbers of women are participating in striptease aerobics and pole dancing classes (Killingbeck and Powell 2009). Pole

dancing fitness classes have been shown to empower women participants because these classes provide women with a sense of control over their own sexuality (Whitehead and Kurz 2009), give women permission to be sexy, reconnect them with their sexual identity, and facilitate sexual confidence (Hamilton et al. 2009). In addition, erotic photographers suggest that women who participate in erotic photography are diverse in terms of age, body size, and motivations. Women are having these photos taken not just as a gift for a partner but also for personal empowerment due to these changes in women's sexuality (Wentland and Muise 2010).

Kleinplatz (1996) suggests that sexologists have generally overlooked the role of eroticism in sexuality research and therapy. According to Kleinplatz, "eroticism involves the intent to arouse another, but goes beyond sexual activity or sexual pleasure" (1992, p. 133). However, erotic behaviors such as wearing lingerie, pole dancing, and having erotic photos taken have received little attention in the sexuality research. The objective of our research was to learn more about the unstudied behavior of having professionally taken erotic photographs from the perspective of women clients. Specifically, we explored women's motivations for having erotic photos taken, the experience of an erotic photo shoot from the client's perspective, and women's perceptions of how this experience influenced their sexuality.

## Method

The current study was guided by phenomenological research methods (Polkinghorne 1989) as the goal was to illuminate the lived experiences of participants. This approach provides a general description of the investigated and emergent themes associated with the phenomenon under study. The process of this research involves in-depth interviews with participants who can inform a particular experience, in this case, women who have had erotic photographs taken by a professional photographer. Phenomenological research involves immersion in the data, with the researcher reading the transcripts from the interviews several times. Relevant statements are identified and thematized in order to capture recurrent and key elements of the experience. The excerpts and themes are then used to develop an overall description of the phenomenon. The shared thematic structure will express the common or general aspects of the phenomenon that are experienced by participants (Hein and Austin 2001).

### Participants

Participants in the current study were 16 women who had erotic photographs taken with a female professional photographer. All participants were recruited through one specific female photographer who specializes in erotic photography. Participants were women over the age of 18 who had erotic photos taken for personal, not commercial reasons (i.e., for escort services). At the request of the researchers, the photographer sent out an email to female clients meeting these criteria who had

erotic photos taken in the last 12 months. She provided them with information about the study and asked them to contact the primary researcher if they were interested in learning more about the study. The photographer sent out the email to approximately 25 women. Of these, 16 women contacted the researcher and all participated in the study, resulting in a response rate of 64%.

The participants ranged in age from 25 to 61 ( $M = 37$  years) and were all living in the Southern Ontario at the time of the interview. Two of the participants identified as bisexual while the remaining 14 identified as heterosexual. The majority of the participants ( $N = 13$ ) were in a serious relationship with one person. Of these, four were married and two were living with their partner but not married. The remaining participants were single and defined their relationship status as either casually dating one or more persons or divorced. Eight of the women had children. Participants had a diversity of occupations and their annual income ranged from \$24,000 to \$400,000 ( $M = \$86,000$ ) a year. See Table 1 for the demographic breakdown of participants.

### Procedure

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted at a location of the participant's choice, which was often at the participant's home. Participants were given a detailed information sheet about the study and provided with information as to how their identity would be protected. If participants were still interested, both the participant and the interviewer signed the consent form and participants completed a brief paper and pencil survey regarding demographic information and descriptive information about the participant's erotic photography experiences (i.e., the timing of their photo shoot and the number of times they had participated in an erotic photo shoot with a professional photographer). The primary researcher, a female doctoral candidate, then conducted the interview.

The interview included questions about participants' motivations for having erotic photographs taken, the experience of the photo shoot, their feelings after the photo shoot, the people they told about the photos, and what they did with the photos after receiving them. The participants were also asked questions regarding how this experience affected themselves and their relationships. Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 min and were recorded on a digital voice recorder. The digital voice files were transferred into electronic audio files at which point they were transcribed and then analyzed by two female researchers.

### Analysis

The interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six steps for conducting thematic analysis of a data set: (1) transcribe data, re-read data, and note initial ideas; (2) generate initial codes; (3) search for specific themes; (4) review themes; (5) define and name themes; and (6) select key extracts and analyze these extracts related to the research question. The primary researcher coded the data and the codes were organized into seven

**Table 1** Demographic breakdown of participants

Pseudonym	Age at interview	Number of erotic photo shoots	Sexual orientation	Relationship status	Number of children	Annual income
Mona	26	12+	Heterosexual	Seriously dating one person	–	\$25,000
Carla	38	10–15	Heterosexual	Divorced	2	\$65,000
Julia	39	1	Heterosexual	Seriously dating one person	2	\$41,000
Carmen	25	5	Heterosexual	Seriously dating one person	–	Did not report
Suzanne	39	3	Bisexual	Married	3	\$400,000
Marcia	36	1	Heterosexual	Married	2	\$130,000
Katherine	37	4	Heterosexual	Casually dating	–	\$50,000
Mirna	39	1	Bisexual	Seriously dating one person	3	\$24,000
Sabrina	31	1	Heterosexual	Casually dating	–	\$48,000
Allie	25	1	Heterosexual	Married	–	\$50,000
Cindy	42	1	Heterosexual	Married	2	\$140,000
Sandra	53	2	Heterosexual	Seriously dating one person	2	\$85,000
Evelyn	36	2	Heterosexual	Married	–	\$100,000
Yvonne	26	1	Heterosexual	Living with partner	–	\$49,000
Jane	28	1	Heterosexual	Living with partner	–	\$50,000
Natasha	61	2	Heterosexual	Seriously dating one person	2	\$60,000

themes. An independent researcher who was not otherwise involved in the study analyzed the transcripts using these themes and demonstrated very good interrater reliability (Cohen's  $\kappa = 0.95$ ).

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that in order to conduct a rigorous thematic analysis, several decisions about the analysis must be made and explicated. The goal of the current analysis was to provide broad information of the entire data set, as opposed to focusing on one specific aspect. Because women's participation in erotic photography is a new area of research, the entire data set was coded to get a sense of the predominant and important themes. Additionally the analysis was inductive, in that the themes were strongly linked to the data and did not fit into a pre-existing theoretical framework. A semantic approach was taken to the analysis and the data was organized to show patterns in semantic content and interpreted based on broader meanings and implications.

## Results

### Descriptive

When the women were asked about their experience with erotic photos taken by a professional photographer, one-half reported having had one erotic photo shoot in their lifetime ( $N = 8$ ), and the other half reported multiple experiences (2–15 photo shoots). The majority of the participants were photographed alone ( $N = 11$ ) and five of the women reported taking photographs with a partner or another person(s) on one or more occasion(s). The majority of participants ( $N = 11$ ) had engaged in recreational erotic photography with a partner before having a photo shoot with a professional photographer. Of the six participants who had not had previous experiences with recreational erotic photography, two reported engaging in this at home with their partner following the professional photo shoot. All of the participants had had their erotic photo shoot with the professional photographer within 8 months of the interview.

### Thematic Analysis

Seven themes were identified reflecting women's motivations to have erotic photos taken and their experiences of having the photos taken: (1) Who were the photos for?; (2) Gender dynamics; (3) Documentation; (4) Identity; (5) Sexual nature of the experience (subthemes: sexual arousal, sexual self-image); (6); Body esteem; and (7) Empowerment. The themes are discussed in more detail below and excerpts from the participants are included to further explicate each theme.

#### *Who Were the Photos for?*

Media reports about erotic photography suggest that a main motivation for women to have erotic photos taken is as a gift for their partner (Latimer 2007). However the participants in the current sample suggest that this is only partially true. The

majority of the participants ( $N = 11$ ) suggested that they had photos taken with the intention of giving them as a gift to their partner.

You just like want your partner to have sexy pics of you, whatever. So, I did a boudoir series of photos for my former boyfriend's birthday. They were hidden in a scavenger hunt, like birthday gifts, so each one had a different nudie with a different layer taken off, like a photo strip tease (Mona).

It was just the right time and I wanted to do it to surprise my husband. It was a complete surprise for him, he had no idea (Marcia).

However, some participants discussed that this was not their main motivation for having the photos taken. One participant said, "I mean, I think it was, the first time, more for me. It was more of an after thought to give him some photos as a gift" (Evelyn). And others suggested that although the photos were originally pursued as a gift for their partner, the experience turned out to be more for themselves. One participant said, "Even though I thought it was a gift for him, it really was a gift for me" (Cindy). Another participant mirrored this sentiment, "at first I was doing it as a Christmas present for him, but as I went through the process I realized that it was actually probably more for me" (Marcia). This idea was also endorsed by photographers who participate in erotic photo shoots (Wentland and Muise 2010). Some women also expressed that while some aspects of their sex life are pursued with their partner in mind, the photos were something they did for themselves. Here is one example:

I have like worn [lingerie] for other people...I have some kilts and things like that, you know the school girl request is always out there. It is something I would do for them, but not for myself. Whereas the photos are something that I did for myself (Katherine).

### *Gender Dynamics*

In the current sample, the same female photographer photographed all of the participants on at least one occasion. For the majority of participants ( $N = 11$ ), this was the only photographer who had taken erotic photographs of them. However, five of the participants had been photographed by a male photographer on another occasion. All of the participants discussed the role that the gender of the photographer had in their experience. Some women felt that having a female photographer allowed them to be more comfortable during the photo shoot than they would have been with a male photographer.

It might have been a completely different experience if the photographer had been a male. I had originally wanted to pursue a male photographer in town, but I shyed away from that because he was a guy and I would have been less free (Sandra).

I didn't really feel self-conscious with her, no not at all for some reason. And if it had been a man, I don't know (Natasha).

Other participants were opened to having an erotic photo shoot with a male photographer, but choose to have a woman for other reasons. The gender of the



photographer was very important to some women, but to other participants, there were other factors that were more important to their comfort level.

I probably would have had a male photograph me, but I was happy to choose a woman who understood my motivations. But now, if we had the opportunity and it was a man, I would probably be okay with it (Evelyn).

I have been photographed by a man before and he was just so formal, and like he had his wife there, I think for a comfort factor for me. But it was so formal that I felt way more uncomfortable because I think if you are shooting nudes you have to be really professional and respectful of people's space, like not go and take a hair off their face without telling them that you are coming in, but you also can't be so professional that your subject feels that they can't become loose and get into the experience. So I think you have to be a little bit more relaxed, whether you are a man or a woman (Mona).

In some cases, how others perceived the influence of photographer's gender on the experience was discussed. One participant highlighted a conversation she had with her 5-year old son after having the photos taken.

My son's biggest concern was whether it was a man or a woman who took the pictures. Because if it was a man that would be a problem for him apparently, like in terms of another man seeing my body. But because it was a woman he said, "oh that is okay then" (Cindy).

### *Documentation*

Women described the photographs as having the ability to provide documentation or evidence of something important to them. This included documenting themselves at a certain age, body shape, time in their life, or in a particular relationship. The idea of documentation was discussed as both a motivation for having the photographs taken and an after effect. The photos were something that could be kept to reflect back on as the participants aged.

So 30 years from now I can look back and go "yeah this is what I looked like and why." It is really telling a story more or less (Carla).

Now they are a keepsake, something I wanted from this stage of my life. When I am 70 or 80 I can look back and say I am glad I did that (Marcia).

Women also described the photos as being evidence that they looked a certain way. It seemed that having this image could provide confirmation of their physical appearance. One participant, Katherine, said "And looking at the photos, it is concrete evidence that I am attractive." As discussed earlier, although some of the women were having the photos taken as a gift for their partner, they all described the photos as at least being somewhat for themselves.

Documenting themselves and their bodies was also important because the women felt the photos provide a realistic image of women's bodies and sexuality that is not often seen. The women felt that the images of women's bodies that are provided in the media are not realistic, did not represent real women, and were not created on

women's own terms. Similar to the idea of the photos as documentation, participants felt that their erotic photos contributed to realistic images of women, and, that it was important to have more images of real women. Katherine said, "Even though I am not a perfect model body, I still feel really good about the way I look. We need more images like that!" Carla described:

You almost feel like you shouldn't be allowed to be nude in front of a camera because you don't look like the media images we see of nude women, like Playboy and Maxim. But the thing is that we need more images of real women, like the Dove beauty ads...those pictures show that it doesn't matter how old you are or what you look like, you are a beautiful person.

Interestingly the participants also specifically mentioned that these images were something they wanted their children, particularly their daughters, to see and understand in order to give their daughters a more realistic image of a woman who is confident and comfortable in her own skin. The women felt that photos such as these could be used to teach lessons about self and body esteem. Marcia said, "I think that there is a good lesson here. Be proud of who you are. I think it is a good lesson to teach your kids." Julia said:

The one person I really want to understand is my daughter. It is really important that I have these to show her so she can see that her mother had the confidence to do this and is comfortable with her own body. I don't want my girls to grow up the way I did with the inhibitions and lack of confidence.

Six of the women who were interviewed had children under the age of 18 living in the home. Of these, three women discussed showing the photos to their children, and one woman, who had a 5-year old daughter, had plans to do this in the future. These participants discussed the photos as an opportunity to talk to their children about body image. Cindy described sharing the pictures with her 8-year old daughter, which started a conversation about being "strong and healthy." She presented the photos as "a celebration of the body" and it opened up a great dialogue about being a girl and feeling good about your body.

### *Identity*

A number of women referred to aspects of their identity in the photos. Some women suggested that the person in picture was an alter ego or a secret identity or a part of themselves that they only revealed to a small number of people. Having these photos taken allowed the women an opportunity to express or get in touch with a side of themselves that they did not often explore. Carmen said, "It was surreal, it was another part of me, something I didn't even know existed." And Katherine said, "In the photos it feels like another person, like my secret identity."

In some instances, women described losing a part of their sexual identity to a long-term relationship, to motherhood, or to other aspects of their busy lives. The photographs were an opportunity for women to get back in touch with this sexual aspect of their identity. Getting in touch with this part of identity had positive consequences for their romantic relationships.

I think that it helped turn things around in our relationship because it was very very out of character for me. I think he maybe started to see me in a different way (Cindy).

Although having erotic photos taken was not always described as being out of character for the women in their personal lives, at times it was described as being perceived as out of character by other people in their lives.

People looking in would say she has it all together, she is a business woman, conservative. But, no it is not out of character for me privately. For sure other people would be surprised (Suzanne).

People really think that I am miss goody two shoes, I don't do this, I don't do that. I clearly don't swear or anything like that. They think I would never even think of doing something like this (Marcia).

This demonstrates that women can feel that aspects of their sexual identity are perceived as being in conflict with other roles they take on. Having erotic photos taken was a way that women expressed a sexual identity, even if others may perceive it as contradictory to their image as a professional, a mother, a wife, or a member of the community.

#### *Sexual Nature of the Experience. Sexual Arousal*

While some women described being more focused on the outcome of the photos during the shoot than the process of having the photos taken, there was a sexual element to this experience. Though this was not described as a central motive for having the photos taken, it was often something that the women realized after the photo shoot. Many women described feeling a “high” or an adrenaline rush after the photo shoot; some likened this to the feelings they would get after having great sex. Julia enthusiastically stated: “Afterwards I had to go out and buy a pack of cigarettes. It was like having sex! It was that great!”

All the women agreed that the photo shoot had sexual elements and described feelings of sexiness and confidence. However, women differed on whether this was a sexually arousing experience.

Oh was I totally aroused, because I was totally thinking of Mr. England [her long distance partner]. There was times when [the photographer] would ask me to think about who these photos are for and think about when he comes to Canada what you want to do and stuff like that. So that was very arousing (Julia).

Whereas the women who were photographed with their partner or another person were more likely to discuss feeling aroused at some point during the photo shoot, most women who were photographed alone did not feel strong sexual arousal during the photo shoot.

I would say I did not really [feel sexually aroused] because it was freezing. I was just trying to get it done, and have the pictures come out good (Marcia).

No I don't think I [felt sexually aroused]. I was more just excited about the surprise (Cindy).

Umm, being fully exposed and lying on your back makes you think about sex. So definitely I was somewhat aroused, but not as much as being in the pictures with someone else (Sabrina).

Not when I was with myself, but when I was with my partner. He was more afraid of that than me because obviously that would show more (Evelyn).

Although women who were photographed alone were less likely to describe feeling aroused during the shoot, the women described it as more arousing to look at the photographs after and/or share them with a partner. Suzanne talked how she felt after showing the photos to her partner: "I have to be honest, the sexual arousal was much more seeing the photos after. Seeing them after, with your partner, is very arousing." Marcia said, "Yeah I think we have used the photos for sexual arousal. That night it did for sure. The photos and I was telling him about the experience."

### *Sexual Self-Image*

Although there were diverse experiences of sexual arousal during and after the photo shoot, all of the women described the experience having an effect on their sexual image of themselves. Many women expressed that having erotic photographs taken provided them with the opportunity to see themselves as sexual. Women described the photos as giving them a new sexual image of themselves and their bodies.

It is hard to see yourself sexually, especially if you are not so confident, and also because you are only looking down at your body or seeing yourself in the mirror. In the pictures you are able to see your likeness and can be like, 'yeah I am that!'

I think it is really important for everybody to be able to see themselves sexually. Nude pictures of yourself can give you that. I think it is a really important thing, especially for women (Mona).

It was important for women to see themselves as sexual in this context because it allowed them to celebrate their sexuality without feeling objectified. Women felt as though they were active participants in their own sexuality.

[The photos] are not just passive, being gazed at, and it is not necessarily voyeuristic. You can create these images to be what you want them to be, and they can still be extremely sexual without having you feel exploited (Allie).

Participants also described being surprised after seeing the photos and not recognizing themselves in the pictures. It gave some women a new image of themselves that they had not seen before.

To be honest when I first saw them I didn't really think they were me because I didn't think I looked like that. It was a different image than I had in my head (Brenda).

### *Body Esteem*

One main outcome of participating in an erotic photo shoot that all the women agreed on was that it had positive consequences for their body esteem and confidence. Women strongly linked the experience of having erotic photos to improving their body image and self-esteem. Yvonne described: "I think my body image has improved big time through this. I am way less concerned about that stuff." Sabrina expressed that, "The photos gave me self-esteem and made me feel good about myself." This gave participants more confidence and at times enhanced their sexual relationships or relationship with their partner. One participant said, "I gained more confidence from it. And because of that it enhanced our sexual relationship for sure" (Jane). Some participants discussed being able to have sex with the lights on following the photo shoot, something that they were not able to do before.

I never used to want to have sex with the lights on. I just didn't want my partner to see my body in that much detail. I didn't want that to make me more inhibited during sex. But since having the photos taken, I am way more comfortable with the lights on. I realized that I actually do look good and my body is sexy. Having the photos taken really changed my image of how I look and this has made a big difference in my sexual relationship (Yvonne).

Interestingly, women did not have the photos taken because they thought it would make them feel better about their bodies. In fact, it was the opposite. Prior to having the photos taken, women described being nervous because they would see everything in the photos that they did not like about their bodies. However, increased body esteem was an unexpected consequence of having an erotic photo shoot.

So after doing the photo shoot I have noticed that I am far more confident naked than I was prior to the shoot, and you would think it would be the reverse. You know that you would be more self-conscious because you would see all of your flaws, but you don't see your flaws at all (Carla).

I was worried that I was going to see everything in the photos that I didn't like about my body, you know the stretch marks and stuff like that. But when I looked at the photos I liked the way I looked and saw things about my body that I do like (Marcia).

One of the most powerful anecdotes related to this theme came from Julia when she was recounting her reasons for having these photos taken. She had just ended a long-term relationship with a partner who had frequently made derogatory comments about the way she looked. At one point in their relationship she asked him why he never complimented her. She had put on some weight over the course of their relationship and he told her that he did not compliment her because he did not want her to become complacent about the way she looked. She described having the photos taken as restoring her ability to see herself as beautiful and sexy. It also gave her the strength to avoid relationships that had a negative impact on her body and self-esteem.

## *Empowerment*

As evidenced from the previous themes, this experience provided women with a sexual image of themselves which often had positive consequences for their self-esteem and sexual relationships. However, all of the women also described the photo shoot as an experience that went beyond a sexual experience. Many women used the word empowering to describe their experiences.

I think overall it gives you empowerment over that fact that I am woman and I am beautiful and I have an imperfect body that is perfect to everybody else that sees the pictures (Carla).

For so many years I had the imagination that I wanted to be a certain way but couldn't and then seeing myself in these photos and realizing this is who I wanted to be, that this is who I have been all along. I was sort of able to free that. And opening the door to that, I find very empowering (Julia).

Women expressed that the pictures captured something beyond the physical and while there may have been some sexual elements, there was an aspect to this experience that went beyond the sexual and related to feelings of acceptance and empowerment.

She was able to bring something out that I had completely lost. I lost it through my marriage, I lost it through other relationships. It was the most lifting and empowering experience I have had (Julia).

I think it is not just about the pictures themselves, it is a whole mindset that you go through. There is acceptance after you do something like this, both physically and emotionally (Mirna).

If I was going to end up on my own that would be okay, I am strong and I can do this. That was more what I got out of it. I am strong and healthy and I can take on the world. It was very empowering (Cindy).

## **Discussion**

Women's participation in erotic photography is important to explore because it can be seen as one aspect of the changing nature of women's sexual behavior and attitudes about women's sexuality. Erotic photographers suggest that having professional erotic photographs taken has become an increasingly popular activity for women of diverse ages, sizes and stages of life, and the photographers perceive positive consequences from this experience for women's body esteem and sexuality (Wentland and Muise 2010). To gain more insight into this experience, the current study explored erotic photography from the perspective of the female client.

Kleinplatz (1992) suggested that, eroticism "goes beyond sexual activity or sexual pleasure" (Kleinplatz, p. 133). This idea was reflected in how women spoke about their experiences of having erotic photographs taken. In some ways, the erotic photo shoot was a sexual experience, but it went beyond that in many instances. Anecdotal accounts of women's participation in erotic photography suggest that

women pursue this experience as a gift to their male partner and perhaps as fun way to feel sexy again (Latimer 2007). While several of the women in the current study shared their photos with a partner and described fun and sexy elements of the photo shoot, there were additional elements to this experience that were not reflected in popular media reports. The unexpected consequences of participating in an erotic photo shoot included increased body esteem, self-esteem and feelings of empowerment. Although the majority of the participants indicated that the erotic photographs were given as a gift to their partner, they also explained that after the photo shoot they realized that it was really a gift for themselves. At the extreme, participants described the experience as having a profound impact on the way they saw and felt about their bodies. As highlighted in the analysis, this changed some of the participants' sexual and relational behaviors. Some women had sex with the lights on for the first time after the erotic photo shoot and others gained the confidence to leave relationships that were having a negative impact on their self-esteem.

It has been demonstrated that women with high sexual self-esteem are more comfortable being naked in front of their partner and having sex with the lights on than women who have lower sexual esteem (Ackard et al. 2000; Wentland et al. 2010). It may be that in general women with higher self esteem are more likely to participate in erotic photographs, however in the current sample women discussed the ability of this experience to enhance sexual and body esteem. Higher sexual esteem has been linked to more pleasurable and satisfying sexual experiences (Snell and Papini 1989). As such participation in erotic photograph may enhance women's sex lives by improving their sexual self-esteem. Erotica has been used in sex therapy to facilitate positive sexual experiences (Striar and Bartlik 1999) and the current research indicates that other erotic behaviors, such as erotic photography, may have positive implications for one's sex life.

Erotic photographers who have participated in photo shoots with women have also noted these positive implications. The increased body and sexual esteem that the female clients described was evident to the photographers during the photo shoots and while viewing the photos. In a related study from the perspective of the photographer, the photographers indicated that clients are diverse in terms of age, body size, relationship status and motivations, but that all of their clients appeared more self-confident as the shoot progressed and displayed very positive reactions when viewing the photos of themselves (Wentland and Muise 2010).

Throughout all the themes, it is evident that women felt that having erotic photos taken provided them with an opportunity to create a sexual image on their own terms. The experience of having erotic photographs taken was described as a means for women to reclaim aspects of their sexuality. Whitehead and Kurz (2009) suggest that women gain empowerment from participation in pole dancing classes because it gives them control over their sexuality and provides a way to resist traditional, passive notions of women's sexuality. Modern women are also using lingerie to manage femininity by resisting traditional conceptions of women's undergarments that molded the female body into the ideals of a male-dominated society (Jantzen et al. 2006). Similarly, sexually explicit materials such as pornography have been perceived as catering to men's sexual desires and objectifying women. Like the use

of lingerie and participation in pole dancing classes, modern women may be using erotic photos as way to create a sexual image on their own terms and reclaim their sexuality. On an episode of the *The Oprah Winfrey show* in 2009, Violet Blue, a sexuality columnist and author, discussed that women's increased participation in erotic activities can be likened to their increased ability to be involved in the creation of erotica and have control over their erotic ventures.

The current study suggests that for some women, participation in erotic photos has positive consequences. The most notable was an increase in body esteem and sexual confidence. Women described having these photos taken as allowing them to be feel more positive about their bodies. Previous research suggests that how a woman feels about her body is more important for her sexual functioning than how her body actually looks (Weaver and Byers 2006) and that body awareness can increase women's subjective sexual arousal even if she has low body esteem (Seal and Meston 2007).

Women also felt that by contributing to realistic images of women's sexuality, they were challenging media portrayals that perpetuate a false ideal of women's beauty. One of the most interesting, and perhaps surprising elements of the women's descriptions was their desire to share the photos with their daughters. This most aptly highlights the positive impact of this experience for the female participants. It also demonstrates that when a woman feels positive about her sexuality, she will attempt to inspire this in other women, particularly her daughters. This is important as research shows that a young woman who receives positive messages about her sexuality is more sexually agentic and has a greater ability to make responsible, self-affirming sexual decisions (Welles 2005). The changing nature of women's sexuality is evidenced by the influx of women participating in activities such as erotic photography, but also by the idea that these activities can now be associated with women's empowerment and sexual agency.

One aspect of the changing nature of sexuality in society is that practices that were once hidden or limited to a few participants have now become mainstream. It is important to study women who participate in these activities because they are challenging traditional social norms that have negatively labeled highly sexual women. In light of this, women who choose to have erotic photos taken may be different from women who do not. The purpose of the current research was to learn more about this unstudied phenomenon from the perspective of female participants. One limitation is that all the participants were recruited through one female photographer. The results may not be generalizable to all women who participate in erotic photography and more research is needed to learn about the broader implications of this experience.

The current research was the first investigation of women's experience of having erotic photos taken and as such, illuminated several areas for future research. The majority of the participants reported experiences with recreational erotic photography, where a sexual partner had photographed them during a sexual encounter or as a prelude to a sexual encounter. At the present time, there is no research on this aspect of sexuality. Further, many of the participants discussed positive consequences for their sexual relationships following an erotic photo shoot. They suggested that the experience had increased their sexual self-esteem, which



ultimately enhanced their relationships. In 2009, we presented these findings at a sexuality conference, and the audience suggested that there are important implications for couples who are seeking sex therapy. As such, the relational consequences of this experience may be a noteworthy avenue for future research.

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