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Abstract

Since Michelle Fine's (1988) paper on the 'missing discourse of desire' in sexuality education, researchers have been investigating where and how women talk about their desire. Online weblogs have become a popular forum for the discussion of sexuality, particularly among women, and have been identified as one potential 'safe space' for the discussion of sexual desire. In this article, I use thematic analysis to explore how women write about their sexual desire in online weblogs. In this brief report, I present excerpts from one of the identified themes: women's desire as active and embodied. The findings are considered in terms of masculine and feminine sexualities and postfeminism.

Keywords

blogs, discourse, heterosexual desire, postfeminism, women

Introduction

It is more than 20 years since Michelle Fine's paper on the missing discourse of desire in school-based sex education programs (Fine, 1988). Since this time, researchers have been interested in how women describe and experience their sexual desire (e.g. Tolman, 2002). Traditionally, reference to women's sexual desire has been absent from school-based sex education curriculum and instead women's sexuality has been framed within discourses of victimization, disease, and morality (Fine, 1988). Fine and McClelland (2006) argue that a discourse on women's sexual desire is emerging, but that this rarely comes from women

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themselves: 'we can "google" for information about the average young women's age of "sexual debut," if she used a condom, got pregnant, the number of partners she had... However, we don't know if she enjoyed it, wanted it, or if she was violently coerced' (p. 300). Where, then, do we find women's own talk about their sexual desire?

It has been suggested that online blogs and zines are one place where women can develop vocabularies of sexual desire, reduce shame around sex, and build communities to share experiences and information (Harris, 2005; Wood, 2008). Blogs provide a forum for expression that can be anonymous and flexible and a virtual space that allows individuals to explore their sexuality beyond social prescriptions (e.g. Ross, 2005). Blogs have also been described as one potential 'safe space' for women to articulate missing discourses (Harris, 2005: 39) and a place where women can engage in a 'process of regaining control over information about sexuality' (Wood, 2008: 480). The current study considers women's writing on sexual desire in online blogs in relation to conventional heterosexual discourses of sexuality.

Discourses of heterosexual desire

It is commonly held by both researchers and the general public that men exhibit greater sexual interest than do women (see Baumeister et al., 2001). In their recent meta-analysis of gender differences in sexuality, Peterson and Hyde (2010) found that, although most gender differences were small, men reported slightly more sexual behavior and permissive attitudes about sexuality, particularly for pornography use, masturbation, and casual sex. Gender differences in sexual desire have been associated with the greater emphasis that women are thought to place on relational factors in shaping their desire (see Peplau, 2003). In survey research women more often report engaging in sex to enhance closeness or express love (Impett et al., 2005), whereas men are more likely to emphasize the physical pleasure associated with sex (Regan and Berscheid, 1999). Women also report lower levels of sexual desire than men (Laumann et al., 1999) and perceive themselves as having less desire than men (Regan and Berscheid, 1995).

Researchers have found that dominant discourses of heterosexuality are relatively stable, although they can be challenged or reconfigured. Allen (2003), for instance, found that young men and women both draw upon and resist dominant discourses of heterosexuality when discussing their sexuality. Some women discussed their sexual experiences in terms of relational aspects, while others claimed the term 'slut' as a positive identity and legitimized their experiences of casual sex. Men discussed being sexually assertive and emotionally detached, but at times also decentralized the importance of sex and discussed the value of love in relationships. In Allen's (2007) focus group study, she provided additional support for the stability of dominant discourses of heterosexuality by identifying masculine constructions of romance. The young men she interviewed were able to perform a romantic

identity with little departure from conventional notions of heterosexual relationships where men are active and women are passive. In fact, in some cases men's participation in romance served to reinforce hegemonic masculinity through its association with sexual prowess. In this way, the dominant discourse was arguably reconfigured to allow men to express romance without the stigma of being 'overly sensitive or effeminate.'

Research on women's sexual experiences in later life has identified accounts of sexual desire that challenge dominant discourses of women's sexuality. [Vares et al. \(2007\)](#) analyzed interviews with women who described changes in their sexual desire over their lifespan and with their partners' use of Viagra. Some women in their sample used a decline narrative to discuss changes to their sexual desire, whereas other women reported experiencing increases in sexual desire and pleasure with age. Such findings challenge conventional heterosexual discourses and highlight the importance of exploring the various ways people talk or write about their sexuality. Similarly, [Farvid \(2010\)](#) discussed how the research context influenced the discourses that participants drew upon in her study of casual sex, and the stories that can be told through the analyses. In framing subsequent studies of casual sex in different ways, she obtained a different picture of women's experiences. [Allen \(2003\)](#) also emphasizes the importance of context in how people construct sexual subjectivities. The way people discuss their sexuality may vary considerably in a relational context, among a same-sex peer-group, in a research interview, or online. In the current study we explore how women write about their sexual desire in the context of online weblogs.

Method and results

'Sexual' weblogs posted between 2003 and 2006 were located by searching 'sex' and 'sexuality' within blogsites. The search resulted in 26 weblogs from 14 different authors. The criteria for inclusion were that the weblog author identified as a woman, and the blogs reflected the author's personal experiences, rather than social or political commentary. The selected blogs were constructed like personal diaries and generally appeared in reverse-chronological order and were dated or titled by entry. All blogs were openly posted and publicly available on the internet. The current analysis draws on text data that the researcher observed and did not involve interaction with the blog authors. For observation of publicly available cyber-material of this kind my institution's Research Ethics Board advised that approval was not necessary.

A thematic analysis was conducted, and several themes related to sexual desire were identified including *desire as embodied*, *desire as located within a discourse of romantic*, and *desire as a separate identity*. In this brief report I focus on an analysis of those extracts in which women write about their desire as active and embodied. Exemplary quotes are provided below.

Excerpt 1:

What is happening to me? Suddenly, I found myself reading blog upon blog about D/S, BDSM, Taken in Hand, and other alternative sexual pursuits. I am fascinated by the woman's perspective and experiences in these kind of consensual, loving marriages. I find myself drawn to these women and their stories. I find myself walking around with this warm, excited feeling between my legs. (Hey, 2005)

Excerpt 2:

Yesterday morning, I woke up with a wet pussy in an empty bed and dusted off my favorite dildo to pleasure myself until Ted was available. (Cumwhore, 2005)

In the excerpts above, both authors describe their sexual desire as embodied (i.e. 'this warm, exciting feeling between my legs' and 'wet pussy'), in a way that is more sexual than found by researchers conducting interview-based research with women (e.g. [Allen, 2007](#); [Vares et al., 2007](#)). Representations of sexual desire as active and embodied are usually associated with conventional male sexuality ([Allen, 2003, 2007](#); [Holland et al., 1994](#)). In excerpt 2, the author discusses her embodied desire in relation to masturbation and self-pleasure, which has been limited in women's talk in other contexts. In interviews, [Jackson \(2005\)](#) found that young women's talk about sex often remained within the coital imperative discussing few pleasurable alternatives to penetrative sex. Also in contrast with women's discussions of embodied desire in past research ([Tolman, 2002](#)), this author names her genitals when describing her sexual desire. This more sexual description is not uncommon in other internet discussion forums or zines where women write candidly about their sexuality, such as *Thunderpussy*, *Cuntzilla*, and *ClitRocket* ([Harris, 2005](#)). In the second excerpt the author positions herself as active and her male partner as the servicer of her needs. This entitlement to sexual pleasure seems consistent with a masculinized version of sexuality.

Excerpt 3:

I can't recall how long it had been since I had a romp with JM but it finally happened last night. (Thank You!). It was kind of odd as I wasn't really expecting it but did have a brief moment of thought through out my day how it would be so nice to just get laid without all the formalities. Without even trying for it or hinting about it. He, did in fact, take the initiative and I got my wish. He touched me more than usual. He kissed more than usual. He even worked on me a little longer than usual, bringing me very close to the point of no return and back down again. As he [sic] making the attempt to

bring me up one more time, I reached around him and grabbed him by his backside, wanting him inside me... NOW-NOW-NOW. He obliged, of course and within minutes I had the first of three wave-pounding, earth shattering, thunder crashing orgasms. After that, I took control and climbed on top. Here comes another one from waaaaay deep within me. So much so, I shook and writhed uncontrollably. He braced me from my own collapse and while doing that, he had his mouth feverishly all over my breasts. His heavy breathing was like fire on my breasts, my shoulders, my face... he was clearly out of control as well. It was such a magnificent turn on to see him actually enjoying himself while he completely devoured my upper body! He finally flipped me back onto my back and took his position as the pilot in his cock pit. Slowly he worked himself within me, pinning my wrists down, arching his back upward so he could watch his show. The occasional nibbling at my breasts, his heavy breath in my ear and the sporadic speeds of thrusts and stops brought me to my finale. He timed it with great skill as he came with me, releasing those ever so sexy grunts and gasps that come from his throat. God, I love that! (Anonymous, 2006)

In this excerpt, the author positions both herself and her male partner as actively desiring sex. Dominant discourses of heterosexuality suggest that women are sexually passive, experience less desire, are less easily pleased than men, and value relational aspects of sex over physical aspects. Thus, the author adopts a more masculine construction of sexual desire when she rejects relational aspects of sex, asserting her desire to 'get laid without all the formalities,' and focuses on her physical responses. Although her male partner initiates, this is constructed as something that she wants and responds to eagerly. In focus groups with young couples, Allen (2003) identified a reversal of conventional heterosexuality where some of the couples she interviewed discussed the female partner as having stronger desire for sex than the male partner in the relationship. Conventional notions of 'male' desire also suggest that men have a normal, natural need for sexual activity (Hollway, 1984). Vares et al. (2007) identified a similar experience in their sample of women in later life who discussed the importance of penetrative sex and the desire for a partner who can meet their sexual needs.

Except 4:

I like to keep the sweet-and-tender for the guys I have sweet-and-tender feelings for; not the ones from whom I just want a (not too) quick toss. (Jen, 2005)

Although weblogs authors linked love and sexual desire in some instances, in other instances sex was distanced from love. In interviews with women who identify as having engaged in casual sex, Farvid (2010) found that the participants predominantly discussed positive accounts and drew upon 'liberal' or 'permissive' discourses. These women were also likely to describe casual sex as emotionless and having 'no strings attached', as the author has done in this excerpt. Women may

discuss non-relational sex in this way to legitimize participation in casual sex and offer alternatives to monogamous, committed relationships that are often not part of conventional heterosexuality (Stewart, 1999). The author discusses that although she has romantic relationships, there are some men with whom she just wants sex, without the romantic elements. Her reference to a 'quick toss' can be seen as active, non-emotional, pleasure-seeking sex that has been described as more reflective of conventional masculine sexuality (Holland et al., 1994).

Discussion

It has been suggested that there are few safe spaces for women to discuss their sexual desire (Fine, 1988), and as such researchers have often found it difficult to obtain rich accounts from women about their sexual desire. In this paper, I have presented examples of some more fulsome accounts of women's sexual desires that challenge conventional heterosexual discourses of sexuality. Previous researchers have characterized blogs as one marginal space for women to express their sexual desire (Harris, 2005; Wood, 2008). Although we may no longer be able to consider blogs 'marginal spaces', they are a virtually unstudied forum where we can find women's writings about sexual desire. In previous research, women have both adopted and resisted notions of conventional feminine sexuality (e.g. Stewart et al., 2000); a finding consistent with the current study. I will focus the discussion here on women's adoption of masculinized versions of sexuality given there has been relatively limited consideration of this in previous research.

The location of women's sexual desire within masculinized versions of sexuality serves to position authors as active in their desire, as they resist the sexual passivity that characterizes traditional feminine discourses (Holland et al., 1994). This notion of rejecting traditional feminine language and behaviour, while pursuing individual pleasures, may also be seen as fitting in with postfeminist ideals. Postfeminism has been described as 'power feminism' and can reflect a focus on the independent (and perhaps sexually liberated) woman who is equal to men and can make her own choices (see Braithwaite, 2002). In traditional heterosexuality, men have been afforded more sexual freedoms by virtue of their sexuality being depicted as 'uncontrollable.' Perhaps the online blog environment is one space for women to step outside the constraints of conventional feminine sexuality. This is not to suggest that this can only be done in virtual spaces, but this online forum does appear to allow women to discuss more active forms of desire than are suggested within more conventional representations.

It seems that positioning female sexual desire within a masculinized version of sexuality is one way for women to resist conventional femininity. Nevertheless, positioning women's sexual desire within a conventional masculine discourse is not unproblematic. If women frame their sexuality within a conventionally feminine version, women's desire is passive and within the context of a loving

relationship; if framed within a masculinized version of sexuality, their desire is determined by physical responses, and relational, social, and cultural factors are not accounted for. Further, conventional discourses of masculine sexuality position male desire as active and men as dispositionally ready for sex at any time, which does not include the option of declining sex or account for experiences of sexual victimization. Hollway (1995) argued that there is no way of conceptualizing women's sexual desire in heterosexual sex that is consistent with the principles of women's liberation. That is, women may not have the freedom to express desire that challenges conventional heterosexuality without sacrificing their safety or risking judgment.

One criticism of postfeminism is that it assumes that equality between men and women has been achieved and therefore does not address the underlying social landscape. Thus, any barriers that women face in the pursuit of their goals are constructed as individual problems (Budgeon, 2001). Recently Baker (2010) discussed that women who adopt postfeminist ideals deny the challenges they face and reject any type of victim status. In terms of sexuality, young women often present the choice between their desire and their safety or reputation as a personal dilemma they must solve, rather than a dilemma based on the social constructions that are prescribed for them as women (Tolman, 2002). Hollway (1995) calls for a feminist discourse on heterosexuality that accounts for the full range of women's experiences, from disempowerment to accounts of sexual agency, from the eroticizing of power difference to the experience of sexual pleasure and equality at the same time, from experiences of victimization to active sexual desire, and one that includes physical, relational, emotional, social, and cultural influences on sexuality.

The representations of women's sexual desire in online blogs can be seen as authentic inasmuch as the women themselves are spontaneously producing the blog entries. The authors of the blogs used in this analysis did not volunteer to be part of a research project and were not discussing these topics face-to-face with another person. Instead, they were pursuing a personal venture and sharing their ideas and feelings at the time of the entry in an online environment where their identity is flexible (i.e. blog authors most commonly have an online persona or write anonymously). Unfortunately, the information provided cannot be contextualized by age, family and relationship factors, or cultural background as the women did not consistently indicate this information in their entries. Nevertheless the current findings raise new questions for research around the role of context in women's discussion of sexual desire.

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