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# THE “SASSY WOMAN” AND THE “PERFORMING MAN”: HETEROSEXUAL CASUAL SEX ADVICE AND THE (RE)CONSTITUTION OF GENDERED SUBJECTIVITIES

Panteá Farvid and Virginia Braun

Media forums that provide “sex advice” are a rich source of (sexual) information for heterosexual individuals and have been critically examined for the ways in which they construct heterosexuality (and sexual subjectivities). The representations of (heterosexual) casual sex are also prevalent across the mass media. This paper uses a Foucauldian/poststructuralist mode of discourse analysis to explore how casual sex “advice” in three self-help books (two aimed at women, one aimed at men), and online advice articles, constituted casual sex and masculine and feminine heterosexual subjectivities. Four main (profoundly gendered) subject positions were identified in the texts: the “strategic man”; the “performing man”; the “sassy woman”; and the “vulnerable woman.” It is argued that although some alternative ways of constituting heterosexual identities were provided (particularly for women), gender difference was not only implicated in such advice but also, at times, crudely exaggerated. The implications of these representations are discussed in relation to contemporary heterosexualities, heterosexual sexual identities, and heterosexual power relations.

KEYWORDS casual sex; heterosexuality; gender; sex advice; subjectivity

Self-help techniques are an apparatus . . . through which external “psy” authorities are able to prescribe . . . avenues for individual self-management . . . [and] encourage some ways of life and living over others. (Rimke 2000, 73)

## Introduction

Media representations of sex and sexuality (re)produce particular versions of sex and undoubtedly influence what is considered normative sexual practice, as well as what sexual activities people desire and engage in. As Tiefer (2004, 26) notes, “mass media shape popular consciousness by providing language, experts, information, and fictional scripts.” Although representations of gender and sexuality within the media have been widely examined by feminists and critical theorists, virtually no analytic focus has been given to the plethora of advice regarding heterosexual casual sex. Contemporary heterosexual casual sex is predicated on a (supposedly) gender-neutral permissive discourse (Hollway 1989) where both men and women are seen as having a potential desire for, and a right to have, casual sex. What renders a sexual encounter “casual” is the supposed lack of romantic commitment individuals have to each other at the time the sex takes place and a supposed lack of investment in the future of the relationship. Casual sex is positioned both negatively (e.g., as risky, irresponsible, morally suspect) and positively (as fun and pleasurable) within contemporary Western society (Farvid 2011). Based on an enduring sexual double standard (Crawford and Popp 2003), women’s casual sex is often represented as more problematic and

“damaging” than men’s casual sex (Powley 2011; Shadwell 2011). Such representations also evoke other “risks” of casual sex for women that reflect still-gendered distributions of power in, and the personal and social organisation of, Western cultures. Women are understood to be at “risk” in two main ways: through greater vulnerability to physical and/or sexual assault from men (Gavey 2005); and through greater responsibility in childrearing that might ensue from any unplanned pregnancy (Jackson and Scott 1996). In this paper, we focus on the analysis of “advice” literature in online forums and in self-help books pertaining to heterosexual casual sex. Both of these arenas position themselves as having “authority” on matters related to casual sex and draw on the same ideological frameworks in constructing their advice. Our analysis of this “advice” explores the way in which varying forms of (gendered) masculine and feminine subjectivities were fashioned and mobilised and in many ways promoted an even “cruder” gender polarisation than is typically seen in general sex advice. We first review the current literature on gender/sexuality and sex advice in parts of the mass media, and then outline the details of the current study. We then present our analysis and discussion of the data material.

## “Sex Advice” in Magazines and Self-Help Literature

Sex “advice” in women’s magazines (Gill 2009; Gupta, Zimmerman, and Fruhauf 2008; Me´nard and Kleinplatz 2008; Wilbraham 1996) and in self-help literature aimed at the heterosexual market has recently been subjected to critical and feminist analyses (Boynton 2003; Connell and Hunt 2006; Crawford 2004; Potts 1998; Sothorn 2007; Zimmerman et al. 2002; Zimmerman, Haddock, and McGeorge 2001; Zimmerman, Holm, and Haddock 2001; Zimmerman, Holm, and Starrels 2001) as have the relatively newly available men’s lifestyle magazines (Alexander 2006; Boni 2002; Krassas, Blauwkamp, and Wesselink 2003; Stevenson, Jackson, and Brooks 2000, 2001, 2003; Taylor 2005, 2006; Vigorito and Curry 1998). There are some common themes we have identified across these three genres of research on sex information and advice. Accounts are predicated on the assumption that sex/sexuality is biologically determined, that men and women are naturally different in their desires and preferences in/for sex, and that this is “normal” and indeed “healthy” (Crawford 2004; Gill 2009; Potts 1998). Men and women are positioned within a “discourse of essential difference” (Crawford 2004); as poles apart in every facet or aspect of life—such as communication style, response to stress, and desire for intimacy (Potts 1998; Zimmerman, Haddock, and McGeorge 2001).

Self-help books and women’s magazines tend to prioritise men’s desires over women’s (Gill 2009; Tyler 2008; Me´nard and Kleinplatz 2008). Advice in five self-help books aimed at women and men emphasised sex as highly important to a relationship and women were counselled into “choosing” to have more sex or risk losing their marriages. Women were often encouraged to overlook their own discomfort and engage in sexual acts that may be painful or unpleasant, if their male partner expressed an interest in such sexual practices (e.g., anal sex, “deep throat” oral sex). Tyler (2008) has argued that women were encouraged to not only take part in sex and sexual practices that they may not desire, but to do so “actively,” willingly, and in an emotionally engaged manner. Analysis of advice on “great sex” in women’s and men’s lifestyle magazines has noted how women’s enticement into sexual variety was done so as to please men: “tips on how to introduce sexual variety were framed in ways that showcased their appeal to the male partner” (Menard and Kleinplatz 2008, 13). In her discursive analysis of the women’s magazine *Glamour*, Gill has noted that women’s interests and supposed passions were “required to be entirely subjugated” as they were urged to “construct themselves as a fantasy partner for the men” (2009, 355). These analyses indicate a strong emphasis in advice materials on men’s sexual satisfaction and pleasure, positioning women as needing to engage in both sexual and relational “labour” to maintain such relationships. For example, in an analysis of sex advice columns in *Femina* magazine, Wilbraham (1996) has noted

that women were positioned as the ones maintaining relationships by talking about it, seeking advice, and by becoming sexually skilled.

Men's magazines are quite different to women's magazines and self-help books in their representations of sex and relationships. "Advice" per se in relation to sex/relationships has not been analysed; however, analysis of the general content of men's magazines has indicated that men's magazines "continue to reflect and reaffirm traditional, hegemonic, notions of masculinity" (Vigorito and Curry 1998, 150) and offer little in the way of sexual information that is different from the broad, dominant perceptions of sex as "andocentric" and men's sexuality as focused on "variety" (Taylor 2005, 162; see also Krassas, Blauwkamp, and Wesselink 2003). By the turn of the twenty-first century, "upmarket" UK glossy magazines (GQ, Esquire, Arena) were becoming more like "down-market lads magazines" (FHM, Maxim, Loaded), in their increased depictions of "babes and boobs" (Stevenson, Jackson, and Brooks 2000, 373). Women were depicted as objects of sexual desire and a means to an end in terms of sexual gratification (Krassas, Blauwkamp, and Wesselink 2003; Taylor 2005) and magazines and self-help books promoted the idea that the more sex and sexual partners men are able to attain the better, with much of the advice directed towards getting "more sex" (Krassas, Blauwkamp, and Wesselink 2003, 114).

In one sex advice book produced for men (The New Male Sexuality), readers were given instructions on how to "coax" a woman into sex, when she was "not in the mood" (Tyler 2008, 370). Men were advised against using "guilt" as a strategy, but not due to this form of sexual coercion being unacceptable, rather because such guilt-coerced sex was depicted as less enjoyable for the man, resulting in "hardly ecstatic sex" (Zilbergeld 1999, cited in Tyler 2008, 370). Women's pleasure was discussed differently to the advice about men's pleasure in women's magazines. In "lads" magazines pleasing the women partners sexually was depicted as important, however, this was not for the sake of the women's pleasure but so that the women would in turn provide the men with more sex (Krassas, Blauwkamp, and Wesselink 2003). One of the most powerful messages identified in men's magazines was that "the modern man should be able to act in any way he pleases, free of feelings of guilt, depression, anxiety, doubt or ethical complexity" (Stevenson, Jackson, and Brooks 2000, 378). Masculine subjectivity was thus constituted as carefree, careless, and uncomplicated.

We seek to further such analyses by examining how sexual "advice" about heterosexual casual sex is framed within mediums such as the Internet and self-help books and the implications such representations could have for the construction of male and female subjectivities and heterosexual power relations.

## Method

The data analysed here come from a larger project examining the social construction of heterosexual casual sex (Farvid 2011) and were analysed in order to decipher the messages they impart about heterosexual casual sex.

## Data

The Internet data were collected through identical web searches using a number of Google search engines: Google New Zealand ([www.google.co.nz](http://www.google.co.nz)); Google Australia ([www.google.au.com](http://www.google.au.com)); Google Unites States ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com)); and Google United Kingdom ([www.google.co.uk](http://www.google.co.uk)). The following phrases, all various forms of "casual sex" terminology (Farvid 2011), were used as phrases in each search engine: casual sex; hookup(s); friends with benefits; one night stand(s); booty call; and fuck buddy. The Internet searches were carried out on October 13 and 14, 2009 in Auckland, New Zealand. Of the results yielded by the searches, certain web pages were excluded (definitional entries/ dictionary entries, books, book reviews, classified advertisements, and online dating sites) whilst those pertaining to "advice" (blogs, opinion pieces, online magazines) were retained. The first

ten "hits" generated by each of the searches matching the selection criteria were retained and the content copied and pasted into an electronic document. Such an approach generated resources that lay persons are most likely to encounter if they consult the Internet for information about casual sex and allowed us to gather such material across a selection of Western countries (rather than solely carrying out a Google.com search which might mainly yield data from the U.S.). The data consisted of 678 pages which were all coded for how they depicted male and female sexual subjectivities. Illustrative examples are used from the data cohort in our analysis and discussion below. When data extracts are presented, they are identified by article code denoting the country of origin and article number (e.g., NZ2), the name of the piece, web address, and the intended audience (i.e., men or women).

Three casual sex advice books were also selected for analysis, out of a possible pool of seven,<sup>1</sup> based on their popularity as indicated by sales rankings on Amazon.com. Two of these are *The Happy Hook-Up: A Single Girl's Guide to Casual Sex* (Sherman and Tocantins 2004) and *Brief Encounters: The Woman's Guide to Casual Sex* (Dubberley 2005). Both were written for a general audience of (middle-class heterosexual) women. The third book, *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists* (Strauss 2005) is written as an investigative tale and pickup guide for (middle-class heterosexual) men and is by far the most popular publication. When using data extracts from these books, we refer to them by the shortened book title (i.e., *Happy Hook-Up*; *Brief Encounters*; *The Game*) and cite the page number from which the quote is taken.

## Analytic Approach

The data were analysed using a form of discourse analysis derived from Foucauldian and feminist poststructuralist theorising around language and representation (Weedon 1997). Feminist poststructuralism is interested in the social and cultural practices that "constitute, reproduce and contest gender power relations" (Weedon 1997, vi) and is useful for analysing the varying ways social life is constructed around gender, race, and class hierarchies. From this perspective, women's subjugation is theorised as being perpetuated by providing women with limited versions of femininity, compromised in terms of agency and power (Gavey 1989). Subjectivities constructed through systems of knowledge production (e.g., medicine, science) and disseminated (e.g., via mass media) often perpetuate a gendered understanding of male and female sexuality which position femininity and women as subordinate to masculinity and men. Discourse analysis conducted from this perspective is interested in identifying broad constitutive systems of meaning (Sunderland 2004), is concerned with how discourses constitute social life, bodies, and subjectivities (Mills 2004; Sunderland 2004), and link such analyses to relations of power and domination (Fairclough 2003). The purpose of this analysis is to decipher how (heterosexual) desires and practices are constructed and to make visible the (invisible) operation of power within discourse to illustrate the ways in which they allow for and/or constrain particular ways of being women and men. We seek to map the ways in which differing modes of (gendered) subjectivities are mobilised and the implications this has for contemporary power relations, heterosexuality, and heterosexual practice.

## Analysis and Discussion

Casual sex was constructed as a profoundly gendered act in this advice literature, with distinctive and differing masculine and feminine sexual subjectivities on offer. Advice aimed at women was generally framed as a "guide" to casual sex (i.e., how to do it "correctly") or how to "survive" a casual sex encounter (e.g., without getting emotionally hurt), with an emphasis on personal safety, beauty regimes (see Farvid, Forthcoming), and psychological readiness. When the advice was directed at men, the emphasis was primarily about how to obtain casual sex. There was a

burgeoning of advice on how to "pick up" women for casual sex (usually a one-night stand) with very specific instructions on how to "select" a partner and how to steer the evening's proceedings towards a casual sexual encounter. Although at first glance, both men and women were positioned as sexually desiring subjects, an in-depth analysis identified that the desire for casual sex itself was represented as a gendered fact: men were framed as always "up for it"; women as more "picky" and cautious. Finding a willing casual sex partner was depicted as easier for women than for men. We start our analysis with a discussion of the subjectivities offered men.

### The "Strategic" Man

To succeed in casual sex, men needed to be strategic: advice directed at them typically involved providing a list of strategies on how to secure/obtain casual sex or "how to manipulate a social situation to meet and attract women" (The Game, 15). The advice given was about getting someone's attention and/or contact details in pursuit of (casual) sex. A set formula for acquiring casual sex was provided and men were advised if they followed this formula, they were guaranteed success. In the most detailed example, The Game offered a linear pickup method premised on "find, meet, attract, close" (20). "Picking up" was itself referred to as an "art" and a set of skills to be learned and perfected by any man, with no specific talent required, just the ability to learn, practise, and implement the right strategy:

*Within minutes . . . our professor of pickup was at the bar, making out with a loud, tipsy girl . . . he used the exact same openers, routines, and lines—and got a phone number or a tongue down nearly every time. (The Game, 32)*

*I'd turned a new corner in my game. Once I'd gotten the number of a woman, it was easy to meet and have sex with her. (The Game, 212)*

With regards to selecting a potential partner for casual sex, men were told to subtly "size up" a woman's appearance, assessing its sexual attractiveness, whilst "avoiding creepy guy status" (NZ9, A Gentleman's Guide to the One Night Stand, mensdomain.com, men). Men were presented as "in charge" of the process of contact: they were expected to approach a woman (based upon their evaluation of her appearance). A process of objectification was thus evident where women's bodies were examined for their sexual appeal (Travis, Meginnis, and Bardari 2000) worthy of approaching for casual sex. The domain of casual sex was in many ways premised on (traditional) gendered scripts of men as the "hunters" and women as the targets of their actions. Based on their looks, women were (still) portrayed as the "object and prey" (de Beauvoir 1953, 642), but now explicitly in relation to casual sex (rather than sex/dating).

The strategic man was also instructed on how to increase their chances of a "hook up" with particular types of women:

*The beauty is that these days, even nice girls will sleep with you for one night . . . Try to find girls who've just been dumped, or just dumped the boyfriend. Probably better to find the one who's just dumped the boyfriend and wants revenge. Any girl who's celebrating something—a birthday, a wedding. Girls whose friends are getting married, they're very desperate to have sex, because they're very depressed. They'll latch onto the first thing they can find while they're drunk. Girls who're having a birthday, just turned 30—also very depressed and thinking that their life's going nowhere. (AU6, Gent's Guide to the One-Night Stand, asylum.com, men)*

Although relayed in a jocular fashion, this author draws on widely available commonsense constructions of heterosexual femininity (fragile, marriage-focused, wary of aging, and "depressed" if not heterosexually partnered), in advising men to target women who are in some way emotionally vulnerable. Krassas, Blauwkamp, and Wesselink (2003) identified similar advice in "lads" magazines: vulnerable women were positioned as easier "targets" for sex. As such, accounts instruct men to approach women who are less likely to deny their (casual) sexual advances, due to impairments in their emotional/psychological stability or resiliency. Such "advice" promotes an unethical sexual exchange that is not based on mutuality or an ethics of self-care and care for the other (Beres and Farvid 2010; Carmody 2003, 2005). Hence, the subjectivity offered to men is one where getting sex is more important than being a morally "good" human being.

In moments like this, the supposedly gender-neutral permissive discourse that positions casual sex as an egalitarian, fun, and free endeavour is revealed as only partial. The notion of "consent" itself was rarely (if ever) discussed and there was a (fallacious) taken-for-granted assumption that the negotiation of sexual desire was an easy task, not marred by unequal power relations within heterosexuality (Gavey 2005). Moreover, and echoing concerns about ethical behaviour just discussed, while men were encouraged to embody a confident demeanour, they were given advice on how to decrease a woman's self-esteem and confidence, in order to increase their likelihood of "scoring" sex:

*Don't compliment her looks. Rather, compliment her dancing, for example. Use a negative hit to throw her off balance. (AU9, How to Land a One-Night Stand, askmen.com, men)*

*Neither compliment or insult, a neg is something in between—an accidental insult or back handed compliment. The purpose of a neg is to lower a woman's self-esteem while actively displaying a lack of interest in her—by telling her she has lipstick on her teeth for example, or offering her a piece of gum after she speaks. (The Game, 21)*

Detailed more thoroughly in *The Game*, this technique was (paradoxically) reported to render the woman as more interested in the man, sexually. Advising the use of the "neg" as a valid strategy for attracting women reinforces the notion that a strategic man is somehow justified in deploying such (manipulative) techniques to acquire casual sex (with an attractive woman) at almost any cost. This advice also seems to rely on a positioning of women's confidence as inherently fragile and suspect, and very easily able to be shaken or undermined. It also positions the woman as vulnerable to such tactics, an unknowing victim to the manipulation of her psyche and emotions. She is an unknowing recipient of his manipulation.

The strategic man was the dominant position offered to men within the data. He was constructed as always interested in having sex and as using a variety of tactical methods in approaching women to "secure" casual sex with them. Men were constituted as rational beings who could overcome their supposed "natural" tendency to seem desperate for sex, by strategically deploying said tactics that offered "fool-proof" ways of securing casual sex with (m)any woman. Obtaining casual sex in this manner offered men a position of status and respect among other men.

## **The "Performing" Man**

Sex is an arena where men could experience vulnerability in terms of "letting go" and/or losing control (Edley and Wetherell 1995). In response to this, sex has become a set of achievements for men (Seidler 1989), a means by which men perform masculinity and heterosexuality (Connell 2005; Segal 2007). Within the advice, much more emphasis was placed on men's sexual "performance" during a casual sex encounter than on women's. A "good" performance by a man in a

one-night stand was rarely encouraged for the sake of the woman's pleasure (whatever that pleasure may be), but for what it brings to the man: a positive identity and the potential for "more sex":

*Have sex. Make sure that it is good sex, because a one-night stand could lead to a "friends with benefits" arrangement. Think of this as an audition, or an un-dressed rehearsal. If it has been a while and you are concerned about blowing it, take your time. Foreplay is strongly encouraged, and she'll appreciate it . . . after you've brought her to climax enough times to wake all neighbours, your work is done. (NZ9, A Gentleman's Guide to the One Night Stand, mensdomain.com, men)*

Here, the man is depicted as the agent within the sexual exchange (e.g., "make sure it is good sex"; "after you've brought her to climax . . ."). His performance "effort" is depicted as a form of sexual labour (Jackson and Scott 2001; Roberts et al. 1995), which if done "well" may lead to more casual sex with the woman in the future; hence it is sexual labour in the service of sexual goals. Her pleasure is not constructed as intrinsically positive for its own sake or (just) for his identity (Braun, Gavey, and McPhillips 2003); rather, it is an achievement and a means by which to (hopefully) obtain more sex (Krassas, Blauwkamp, and Wesselink 2003).

Advice columns never actually explicated what "good sex" (or indeed "foreplay," a component of "good sex") actually entailed, suggesting an assumed shared collective cultural understanding (among readers) of the parameters of "good sex." "Good sex" was positioned as universally achievable by all or any man with all or any woman. Moreover, a very strong orgasm imperative (Heath 1982; Potts 2000) informed the accounts alongside an expectation that women should and would experience (multiple) orgasms during casual sex. Men were also sometimes encouraged to broaden a casual sex partner's "sexual horizon":

*Foreplay is important even if it may be the last time you ever see her (depending on how good it is, of course). Even if all you want to do is penetrate her into oblivion, remember that this is your chance to be creative and make her delve into kinky aspects of herself that she never knew existed. (AU8, Be Prepared For a One-Night Stand, askmen.com, men)*

Here, the man is positioned as the agent; almost a "Casanova" who introduces a sexual diversity the woman is inherently depicted as not knowing (but as potentially possessing). He is portrayed as broadening her sexual repertoire by educating her. Men are positioned as inherently more sexual (and sexually knowledgeable) than women; women are positioned as less knowledgeable, even when it comes to their own bodies and sexuality. The phrase "even if all you want to do is penetrate her into oblivion," based on a coital imperative (McPhillips, Braun, and Gavey 2001), constructs men as sexually aggressive and only ("really") interested in the penetrative part of sex and presumably in their own pleasure (see also Me´nard and Kleinplatz 2008).

The advice regarding performance reinforces the traditional construction of masculinity and sexuality: with men as the agents within, and in control of, (casual) sex. Dually, the advice relayed here itself had a mode of performativity to it, where the (male) authors performed masculinity for the (male) readership, in the style of knowledge and advice they relayed.<sup>2</sup> This advice contrasted strongly with the advice relayed to women: women were encouraged to be sexually knowledgeable, skilled and adventurous, but to let men take the lead in initiating both the sexual activity and the "shape" of sex that ensued. Women's part was much more of a "gatekeeper" in what she "allowed" to happen. This depiction is very reminiscent of traditional heteronormative sexual scripts where men "try their luck," and women set the boundaries in terms of how far they "allow" the sexual encounter to progress (Holland et al. 1998). Even if the terms of negotiation may have shifted, men are offered a very traditional masculine sexual subjectivity as agentic, rational, performative, and

knowledgeable about sex and women are offered a very traditional feminine subjectivity as responsive. We now turn to discuss the subjectivities offered women.

### The "Sassy" Woman

Women were encouraged to embody a "sassy" sexual subjectivity in relation to casual sex and beyond. Sassiness involved being assertive, independent, sexually "liberated," (hetero)sexually attractive, and knowledgeable about sex and sexual safety. Our reading of the "sassy" women locates it as a uniquely feminine subjectivity that combines feminist, postfeminist, and at times traditional discourses to devise a "liberated" womanhood that is still pleasingly feminine in many aspects. At first glance, the ways in which this identity was represented appeared to be "empowering" for women:

*The important thing is to make sure that you're the one calling the shots—or, at least, it's a mutual thing. Do not let any guy decide he's scored you—it should always be completely equal on both sides. (Happy Hook-Up, 30)*

This emphasis on women's agency and control in casual sex encounters was often encouraged, including an egalitarianism which men were never advised on (as discussed, quite the opposite message was promoted to them). Such accounts are based on postfeminist and permissive notions that sexual equality has been gained and the negotiation of casual sex is carried out between rational and "free" sexual agents who are not constrained by unequal power relations within heterosex (Gavey 2005). However, as well-demonstrated by research, heterosex continues to be governed by unequal gendered power relations which compromise such an egalitarian ideal (see Gavey 2005). Casual sex does not exist outside the asymmetrical constitution of heterosexuality, particularly as casual sex is (also) governed by discourses of gender difference. Hence, such advice espouses a version of casual sex to women that is rooted in a utopian notion of "ideal" casual sex, rather than what shape casual sex may take in "practice."

The "sassy" woman was depicted as capable of doing and getting whatever she wants. She was often encouraged to stand up for herself and fight for her rights as a person in a sexual setting and beyond:

*Don't put up with any crap. Just because you're only having casual sex, that doesn't mean the dude can treat you badly. He should arrive when he says he's going to; he should respond promptly to your communications; he should be working to hold on to the awesome gig you've given him, as your part-time temporary lover. He is SOO lucky that he gets to have no-strings-attached sex with you. (US2, 6 Tips for How to Have Casual Sex, marieclaire.com, women)*

Underlying this account is the idea that men are more eager, and have a more insatiable desire, for (casual) sex than women. This positions casual sex ("no strings sex") as something that a man is lucky to "get" and a woman is "giving away." The "sassy" subjectivity offered to women entails contradictory facets: women were depicted as independent, sexually active/desiring, but as inherently less sexual than men. Contradictions of this kind do "ideological work" (Gill 2009), and in this instance function to sway "sassiness" away from being a real threat to masculinity and women occupying a position of "full" or "unfettered" sexual agency. Women were advised how to "discover" their sexuality and "hone in on" their sexual preferences:

*Before you have a casual encounter, get to know your body. Masturbate. Maybe even watch pornography. Know what turns you on and what doesn't. Figure out what you want from a*

*sexual encounter and what you don't. Above all, understand that your body is capable of amazing things and can be a source of tremendous pleasure for yourself and for someone else. (Happy Hook-Up, 30)*

Women's "turn-ons" are depicted as singular, pure, abstracted, and decontextualised. Masturbation is encouraged not for its own sake, but as part of preparing for casual sex (with men) by "discovering" one's own capacity for sexual pleasure. Agency on the part of the women is encouraged, but the form that agency takes is in consulting pornography to acquire sexual knowledge. Pornography occupied an unquestioned expert status in relation to providing knowledge about "good sex" as though the bedrock of pleasurable sex must be found in this forum. Although a contested topic (e.g., Segal 1998; Segal and McIntosh 1993), mainstream heterosexual pornography has been critiqued for providing a limited version of sexuality and masculinity/femininity (e.g., Weitzer 2009; Whisnant and Stark 2004), and its positioning here as "the" fountain of knowledge regarding "sexy sex" is highly problematic.

The sassy woman was also encouraged to be "well-equipped" sexually:

*Ladies, start your engines, because now we're getting to the nuts and bolts of the deed itself. We all know that casual sex is about getting off—and there are a lot of things you can do to not only score but make sure it's a full on grand slam for you and him. Regardless of how many sparks have been flying up until now, if you've loaded up your sexual bag o' tricks with certain skills, you will not only be able to woo him but will, in turn, make him want to wow you . . . Let's run through some of the techniques you might want to explore/or have in your erotic arsenal. (Happy Hook-Up, 203–4)*

This extract uses artillery and machinery metaphors to constitute sex as "mechanistic and technical" (Gilfoyle, Wilson, and Own 1992, 222) requiring specific knowledge that is applicable to all/any bodies. Here, knowing "what to do" in a casual sexual encounter is about impressing the man, so that he will in turn "please" her, rather than the woman taking charge of her own pleasure. Discussions about technique, traditionally typical of men's talk about sex and male sexuality (e.g., Gilfoyle, Wilson, and Own 1992; Roberts et al. 1995), are now being applied to women and with regards to female sexuality. In the advice there was a dismembering of mind and body in relation to sex (Barker 1998), the bolstering of a (masculine) hydraulic version of mechanical sexuality (Potts 2002), and a reduction of sex to particular sex "acts"—representations that offer a very limited scope for what constitutes heterosexual and female sexuality.

Women were given information on men's erogenous zones as well as tips, tricks, and techniques regarding "advanced" sexual practices:

*You've perfected your pump-action and can blow him away with your oral skills, now's the time to start showing off. If you want a guy to leave your bed believing you're the best lover in the world, try incorporating something a bit special into your love action; a sex toy show, dressing up, striptease, anal sex or even fisting . . . Don't ever do something that you feel uncomfortable with, and never go for any activity that requires trust unless it's someone you genuinely trust; anal sex and fisting aren't things to try with strangers. And don't feel obligated to do any of these things. Men are grateful enough if they get laid, and incredibly satisfied if they get a blow-job too, so you won't be disappointing them if you don't pull out any porn star tricks. (Brief Encounters, 169)*

Oral sex (fellatio), "hand-jobs," and coitus are constituted as givens within heterosexual (casual) sex; as possessing routine status. The extract notes that women should not feel obligated to engage in any of the "advanced" sexual practices (as though they should feel obligated to engage in the

mundane ones!). Moreover, with the caveat of not engaging in anal sex/fisting with strangers, introducing any of these “porn star” techniques is depicted as attaining the status of “world’s best lover,” as something men would enjoy, and as ultimately desirable. This belies the disclaimer that women should not feel obliged to engage in these less “routine” sexual practices and readers are subtly encouraged to “choose” advanced sex acts to obtain the positive sexual subjectivity that it offers.

Although women were often provided explicit knowledge about sexual practices, the sex acts portrayed were heavily influenced by very predictable pornographic sexual scripts. So women were offered agency in “knowing” about a variety of sexual practices, but when what is “taught” is within a limited framework, it can have contradictory implications:

*[T]he multiplication of pornochic discourses opens up possibilities for radical re-workings of female sexual subjectivities, however, these may be recuperated . . . to re-produce dominant discourses that objectify women and limit those who can participate . . . [based on] class, ethnicity, age, embodiment and sexuality. (Evans, Riley, and Shankar 2010, 127)*

The sassy woman possessed an array of personal qualities that depicted her as independent, assertive, in charge of herself, her body, and her sexual desires, but also as inherently feminine and “naturally” different to men. She was knowledgeable about sex and sexual safety—but this was within a limited framework of what that sex/sexuality could (or should) entail. This subjectivity positioned women as learning and doing certain sexual practices for men or men’s approval to garner a positive sexual identity. The “sassy woman” makes available to women a desiring female subjectivity that not only mimics a masculine model of heterosexuality, but suits a pleasure-and-variety-focused (male) sexuality. The sassy woman is not a “threat” to the dominant heterosexual and gender order, but reinforces gender difference whilst rearranging some of the boundaries within that difference. This reshuffling can (cleverly) seem like it offers women a new and “empowered” sexual identity, but a detailed analysis demonstrates that it ultimately fails to do so.

### **The “Vulnerable” Woman**

Pleasure and danger (Vance 1984) existed as parallel possibilities for women who engage in casual sex. Risk in particular was a common construction and all articles geared towards women advised that “safety” in many forms was the first thing to consider in relation to casual sex. The articles and books engaged in cautionary talk, framing casual sex as always a potential site of risk for women, particularly in relation to physical safety:

*Safety first. If you’re planning a night of pure carnal filth with some unknown lothario, then let a friend know where you’re going, when you’ll be back and have a check in time. Because alongside the studs of the world there are plenty of weirdoes too. (UK1, Top One Night Stand Tips, femalefirst.co.uk, women)*

Planning a night of “carnal filth” (whatever that may entail) also requires women to be on guard for potential (sexual) victimisation. This construction works to bolster the traditional notion of women as “vulnerable” in heterosex (Allen 2003; Holland et al. 1998; Vance 1984), but expanded it to a domain of “apparent” sexual agency in relation to casual sex. Such “risk” can produce a subjectivity that is hyper-vigilant and on the lookout for signs of potential danger or dangerous persons—a potential (constant) state of fear and anxiety (Brownmiller 1975).

Alongside a portrayal of ubiquitous (physical/sexual) danger, women’s psychological and emotional well-being was depicted as vulnerable when it came to casual sex:

*Repeat to yourself before, after and during sex: this is not about love, nor will it ever be. Remind yourself that all the pleasure and happiness you are feeling is a CHEMICAL response. You are not special to the person who you are shagging, and he is not special to you. The two of you do not have some huge personal connection. What you're doing is not related to "happily ever after." (It may not even last a full three months.) It's simply about sex, purely a physical release, and there's no real future in it. (US2, 6 Tips for How to Have Casual Sex, marieclaire.com, women)*

Here the "risk" for women is forming any emotional attachment to her casual sex partner. This extract draws on biological reductionism regarding the "release" of particular hormones during sex, which ostensibly emotionally "bonds" women to men, after sex. This advice constructed this emotional response as simultaneously natural but unreal—a "false" chemical response (to which women were more vulnerable than men). Women were advised to fight against their "natural" urges to develop romantic feeling for men they have casual sex with, constructing feminine sexuality as "naturally" more relational and prone to romance, and masculine sexuality as more sexual. Women were encouraged to retrain themselves to suit the emotion-free ideal of casual sex to avoid this risk.

In a combination of vulnerable and sassy subjectivities, women were also encouraged to always ensure condom use:

*No glove, no love: if a guy refuses to wear a condom, say, "If you won't cover your wang, we don't bang!" (Happy Hook-Up, 45)*

Condom use is often situated as a necessary part of responsible casual sex (Beres and Farvid 2010). However, as noted by Beres and Farvid (2010), women's assertive (and/or sassy) "limit-setting" in relation to condom use is nothing more than "a contemporary version of female sexual 'gate-keeping,' where such accounts represent women as the enforcers of safer (casual) sex" (382), and depict men as careless and carefree when it comes to sexual safety.

The "vulnerable" woman is a subjectivity that is reactive to what "may" happen during a casual sex encounter. She must be educated about, and prepared for, all possible (dangerous) outcomes that could come her way during a night of casual sex. This subjectivity is caught in a double-bind. Although "risks" and "dangers" of casual sex may be things that women require information and advice about, this information also constructs the realm of casual sex for women as fraught with such risks and dangers—requiring hypervigilant self-surveillance and the surveillance of others in order to keep oneself "safe." A woman's safety is positioned as her own individual responsibility and there is no wider critique of the social conditions that position her at such ubiquitous risk (Gavey 2005).

## Conclusions

The advice analysed here produced vastly gendered and sexed beings in relation to casual sex. Yet, for both men and women, "ideal" casual sex was something that did not come completely "naturally" and both were advised to fight against their supposed "natural" dispositions (women: getting emotionally involved; men: seeming desperate for sex) and to approach casual sex in very specific ways (women: well-equipped emotionally, physically, psychologically; men: strategic, practised). So, although heterosexual casual sex was depicted as "work" for both men and women, women had to work a lot harder to become casual sex-ready. Our analysis supports Gill's contention regarding advice offered to women in *Glamour* magazine: women were encouraged to "remodel their interior lives in order to construct a desirable subjectivity" (Gill 2009, 345). This was not limited to changing their bodies and sexual practices but also their "psychic" lives in order "to become

confident and adventurous sexual subjects" (351). This moulding of the interior ("self") was evident within the casual sex advice literature in ways that did not apply to men. Men were "rational" agents applying "strategies" to garner casual sex versus changing their interior selves to "suit" casual encounters; it was their approach to women that needed altering rather than their internal psyche. Women were enticed to embody a variety-focused and "porno-chic" (Evans, Riley, and Shankar 2010) sexuality in ways that mimicked and complemented men's supposed sexual desires and fantasies (see also Gill 2009; McRobbie 2009). Our analysis supports and extends other work (e.g., Evans, Riley, and Shankar 2010; Gill 2009) which argues that women's agency and desirous sexuality need to be analysed in terms of the broader context within which such desires are produced. In particular, the narrow array of sexual bodies, sexual personas and sexual practices that are currently promoted as "sexy" in mass media need to be subjected to further analysis and critique. Further research also needs to examine the "uptake" of such material, and how men and women digest, resist, take on board, and/or (re)formulate such advice.

## NOTES

1. The additional book aimed at women was *The Hookup Handbook: A Single Girl's Guide to Living it Up* (Lavinthal and Rozler 2005). Other books aimed at men included: *The Mystery Method: How to Get Beautiful Women Into Bed* ("Mystery" 2007); *Dr Z. on Scoring: How to Pickup, Seduce, and Hookup with Women* (Zdrok 2008); and *Undercover Sex Signals: A Pickup Guide for Guys* (Lowndes 2001/2006).
2. We would like to thank the second anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to our attention.

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