Feminists who flaunt it: exploring the enjoyment of sexualization among young feminist women

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Abstract
The phenomenon of women enjoying sexualized male attention has recently been operationalized and found to be related to primarily traditional and sexist beliefs, but some argue that enjoying sexiness can be a feminist act. This study assessed the extent to which 326 self-identified heterosexual feminist women reported that they enjoyed sexualization and how this related to beliefs about the need for social change. Results indicated that enjoying sexualization was related to a mix of feminist and traditional beliefs. Paradoxically, feminists who enjoyed sexualization felt empowered but were less likely to notice personal social injustice or continued gender inequity. Whether embracing empowered sexuality is related to a more general gender empowerment is discussed.

A great deal of recent research has pointed to the negative effects of sexualization (e.g., American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007; Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; Hurt et al., 2007; Moradi & Huang, 2008). Sexualization occurs when people are valued through their sexuality, attractiveness is conflated with sexiness, or people are considered to be sex objects (American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007). Despite the considerable literature on the negative effects of sexualization, some have argued that researchers have failed to consider the fact that many women report a sense of empowerment associated with embracing their sexuality (Lerum & Dworkin, 2009). The traditional discourse of female desire positions women as being passive recipients of men’s desire, leading to what has been called a “missing discourse of desire” for young women (Fine, 1988, 2005). To counter this, scholars and feminists have advocated for a normalization of women as active sexual agents and have called for women to embrace and accept their sexuality. Unfortunately, the lines between empowered female sexuality and objectified female sexuality are often blurred, as many young women report feeling empowered through being objectified (Lamb, 2010; Peterson, 2010). Research has suggested that many young women engage in behaviors designed to actively sexualize themselves and to court the male gaze (Nowatzki & Morry, 2009). Research has also suggested that, even when young women do not engage in blatantly sexual behaviors, many report enjoying feeling sexy and gaining sexualized male attention (Liss, Erchull, & Ramsey, 2011). The question remains whether “feeling empowered and being empowered are the same thing” (Lamb, 2010, p. 301).

Feminism is a social movement with a central goal to empower women (Davis, 1991; Rosen, 2000). While the issues targeted by feminists at any given point in time have varied, some third-wave feminists have focused on embracing an empowered sexuality as a means of empowering women more generally (e.g., Baumgardner & Richards, 2004; Levy, 2005). When women express their sexuality in more active ways, they are violating traditional sexual scripts and gender norms, and this may therefore encourage women to behave in less traditional ways in other life domains (Attwood, 2007; Stoller, 1999). Young women may see the desire to be sexy as a sign of their liberation and view it as a personal choice (McRobbie, 2004). This has been manifested by the rise of “raunch culture” and its acceptance among some young feminist women (Levy, 2005). As Debbie Stoller, editor of the feminist magazine Bust, proclaimed:

Unlike our feminist foremothers ... we're positively pro-choice when it comes to matters of feminine display ... In our fuck-me dresses and don't-fuck-with-me shoes, we are ready to come out of the closet as the absolutely fabulous females we know we are ... To us, it's fun, it's feminine and, in the particular way we flaunt it, it's definitely feminist. (Stoller, 1999, p. 47, emphasis in original)
Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether the phenomenon of young women embracing sexualization, even in the guise of feminist empowerment, represents false or true empowerment (Attwood, 2007; Evans, Riley, & Shankar, 2010; Lamb, 2010). Theorists have argued that the sexualized femininity associated with third-wave feminism does not represent a challenge to patriarchal discourse (e.g., Levy, 2005; Munford, 2004). This worldview emphasizes individual expression and empowerment over societal change and may be related to the idea that equality has been achieved and that, consequently, it is no longer necessary to fight politically for social change (Keller, 2011; Munford, 2004; Taft, 2004).

Only a small body of literature has directly investigated young women who report that they feel empowered through displaying their sexuality. In one recent study, the construct of enjoying sexualization was operationalized as the Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale (ESS; Liss et al., 2011). This scale measured the extent to which young women reported that they enjoyed and felt empowered by gaining positive male sexualized attention. Individuals who scored high on the ESS were more likely to endorse sexist beliefs such as hostile and benevolent sexism. Furthermore, young women who enjoyed sexualization also endorsed some traditional feminine norms such as the importance of being nice and the importance of romantic relationships. This indicated that, in a general sample of women, enjoying sexualized male attention was not related to less traditional views about gender overall. However, enjoying sexualization was related to less traditional attitudes about sexuality; women who enjoyed sexualization found it less important to be sexually faithful and found it more acceptable to have multiple sexual partners.

The present study investigated the relationship between the enjoyment of sexualization and attitudes related to feminism, specifically the recognition of gender inequality and the need for social change, among a group of young self-identified feminist women. Feminists who enjoy sexualization may be less likely to endorse more radical feminist beliefs that focus on systemic, patriarchal oppression of women. The relationship between enjoying sexualization and more liberal ideologies focusing on equal rights is less clear. One might argue that the focus on equal rights and free choice implicit in liberal feminist ideologies may extend to the right to be sexy as this may be seen as a choice that women can make for themselves (McRobbie, 2004). On the other hand, enjoying sexualization may be related to more traditional beliefs about women’s roles; therefore, liberal feminism may be negatively related to enjoying sexualized male attention. Given this, it is also important to explore the relationship between reported enjoyment of sexualized male attention and various types of feminist ideologies (Henley, Meng, O’Brien, McCarthy, & Sockloskie, 1998).

Enjoying sexualization may be related to a belief in individual free choice and a focus on the self rather than on collective issues and social change (McRobbie, 2004). Thus, feminists who enjoy sexualization may be focused more on individual empowerment than social change to allow for the empowerment of women more generally. One manifestation of this belief could be that feminists who enjoy sexualization may not be particularly concerned about widespread gender inequity. Specifically, they may be more likely to believe that the current gender system is acceptable (Gender System Justification [GSJ]; Jost & Kay, 2005). Recent research has suggested that self-objectification is a consequence of sexist ideologies that allow for the continuation of the gender status quo (Calogero & Jost, 2011). Enjoying sexualization and self-sexualizing may function in a similar way. Women who self-sexualize may be rewarded for adhering to traditional norms of beauty and sexiness and, thus, may perceive these rewards as being empowering. Therefore, they may be less likely to notice the extent to which the gender system remains inequitable. At a more general level, feminists who enjoy sexualization might be more likely to believe that the world and their experiences in the world are fair and just (belief in a just world; Dalbert, 1999). If this is the case, then young feminists who enjoy sexualization may be less likely to see the necessity for working together with other women in order to affect social change and may be less likely to actually engage in collective action on behalf of women.

Another set of variables of interest, given the focus on self-identified feminist women in the present study, is the five-stage Downing and Roush (1985) feminist identity development model. This model proposes that women move through five stages as they develop a feminist identity and become active in the women’s movement. Women are thought to start in passive acceptance where they hold traditional gender ideals and do not notice gender inequity. Through experiences of sexism, women are thought to move into the stage of revelation where they feel anger at the gender system. Next, women surround themselves with other women in a stage called embeddedness-emancipation before moving into the stage of synthesis where they integrate their feminine qualities with their sense of themselves as individuals. Finally, they move into the stage of active commitment where they engage in social activism on behalf of women.

Young women who enjoy sexualization may be more likely to endorse beliefs associated with earlier stages of the feminist identity development model, such as passive acceptance in which individuals accept the gender status quo. One would not expect self-identified feminists to strongly endorse beliefs associated with passive acceptance, but feminists who report enjoying sexualization may be more likely to endorse these beliefs than feminists who do not. Additionally, recent work on the penultimate stage of the feminist identity development model, synthesis, has suggested that this highly endorsed
stage involves both a sense of empowerment and a comfort with one’s own femininity (Liss & Erchull, 2010). Young women high in synthesis felt empowered but generally saw the current gender system as fair and were unaware of the need for continued social change (Liss & Erchull, 2010). Furthermore, in this study, synthesis was actually positively correlated with passive acceptance indicating that the empowerment associated with synthesis was accompanied by an ignorance about the need for continued social change. Enjoying feeling sexy may also be related to perceptions of empowerment accompanied by less awareness of the need for social change. Thus, feminists high in synthesis may report that they enjoy sexualization.

We had three specific goals for this study. First, we sought to determine the extent to which feminists reported that they enjoyed sexualization. Although the present investigation did not directly compare feminist and nonfeminist women, we hypothesized (1) that the feminist women in the present sample would show a range of scores on the ESS similar to that found with a general sample in the original investigation (Liss et al., 2011). However, we believed that the mean score would be lower among feminists than it was in the original investigation.

Our second goal was largely exploratory given that little empirical work has explored these questions. We hoped to determine what constructs related to acknowledging the need for social change and activism would be correlated with ESS scores. We hypothesized that ESS scores would be related to (2) higher scores in passive acceptance and GSJ and (3) lower scores in radical/socialist feminist beliefs. We also hypothesized that this belief structure may generalize, such that (4) young feminists high in ESS would be more likely to see the world as just, both in general and in regard to their own experiences. Given that we expected enjoying sexualization to be related to accepting the gender status quo, we also believed that it would (5) be negatively related to the active commitment stage of the feminist identity development model, general beliefs about the importance of women working together to change society, and collective action on behalf of women. Furthermore, we hypothesized that enjoying sexualization would (6) be positively related to the synthesis stage of the feminist identity development model as previous research has suggested that this stage may be related to a sense of feeling empowered but being unaware of continued gender inequity (Liss & Erchull, 2010). We did not have specific hypotheses about the relationship between ESS scores and liberal feminist beliefs or the other stages of the feminist identity development model.

Our final goal was to predict ESS scores using the measured variables. Although we did not expect to explain a large proportion of the variance in ESS scores using this set of variables, we hoped to gain a clearer picture of which of the investigated constructs best predicted ESS scores.

Method

Participants

Participants completed these measures as part of a larger online study. Women aged 18–30 who self-identified as heterosexual feminists were selected for the current study. This resulted in a sample of 326 women. The women had an average age of 23.05 years (SD = 3.04). Of the 322 women who chose to disclose their race, the majority identified themselves as White/Caucasian (86.3%); 6.2% identified as multi-racial, and 4.3% identified as Asian/Pacific Islander. The remaining 3.2% identified themselves as African American, Latina, or “other.” The vast majority of the women identified themselves as either middle class (53.2%) or upper middle class (25.8%). An additional 18.8% of the participants identified themselves as working class, and 1% classified themselves as being in poverty. Only 1.2% classified themselves as wealthy. The sample was largely highly educated; 57.6% of the sample had at least a college degree, and 15% of the sample held a masters or doctoral degree. An additional 24.8% had some college experience or an associate’s degree.

Procedure

Participants were recruited in one of two ways. Twenty-seven participants were recruited through an on-campus subject pool and received partial course credit in exchange for their participation. The remaining 299 women were recruited through blogs, discussion boards, and listservs targeting feminists. These participants received no compensation for their participation.

Participants recruited on campus completed the survey in on-campus computer labs. Privacy was ensured through the use of dividers placed between each computer terminal. Participants recruited via the Internet followed a link to the online survey and completed it at their convenience. All participants read an online informed consent page and then provided a valid e-mail address to which a unique link to the survey could be sent. E-mail addresses were stored in a separate database from participants’ data to ensure anonymity. After completing the questionnaire, which took less than 30 minutes, participants read an online debriefing page.

Measures

Demographics

Participants were asked to provide basic demographic information about age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, level of education, and socioeconomic status. They were also asked whether they considered themselves to be a feminist with dichotomous (i.e., yes/no) response options. Only those...
women who indicated yes to this forced choice question were included in the analyses.

**ESS**

This 8-item scale was designed to measure the extent to which women reported that they enjoy receiving positive male sexual attention (e.g., “I feel proud when men compliment the way I look”; Liss et al., 2011). Participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 6 (agree strongly). A mean score was calculated such that higher scores reflected greater enjoyment of sexualization. Cronbach’s alpha from the original investigation was .85, and it was .82 in the current study.

**Attitudes Toward Women Scale (ATW)**

Liberal gender attitudes were assessed using the 25-item short form of the ATW (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973). Participants rated their agreement with statements on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 4 (agree strongly) with higher mean scores indicating more liberal gender attitudes. A sample item is “Women should assume their rightful place in business and all the professions along with men.” Cronbach’s alpha from the original investigation was not reported; a Cronbach’s alpha from prior research was .79 (Swim & Cohen, 1997). Cronbach’s alpha in the current investigation was .77.

**Radical/socialist feminism**

The short form of the Feminist Perspective Scale was used in order to examine attitudes associated with more radical forms of feminism (Henley, Spalding, & Kosta, 2000). The 5-item radical (e.g., “The workplace is organized around men’s physical, economic, and sexual repression of women”) and 5-item socialist (e.g., “It is the capitalist system which forces women to be responsible for child care”) subscales were combined into a single measure as has been done in prior research (Liss & Erchull, 2010). Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with the ten statements on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Mean scores were calculated, and higher scores indicated greater endorsement of radical/socialist feminist attitudes. Cronbach’s alpha for this combined scale was .91 in a prior investigation (Liss & Erchull, 2010) and was .87 in the current investigation.

**GSJ**

This 8-item measure was used to assess whether or not individuals viewed the current gender system as fair and just (e.g., “In general, relations between men and women are fair”; Jost & Kay, 2005). Participants respond to items on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree). Higher mean scores indicated greater agreement that the current gender system is just. The Cronbach’s alpha in the original investigation was .65; it was .75 in the current investigation.

**Belief in a just world**

We assessed the extent to which participants believed the world was a just and fair place using the 6-item General Belief in a Just World Scale (GBJW; e.g., “I think basically the world is a just place”) and the 7-item Personal Belief in a Just World Scale (PBJW; e.g., “I believe that, by and large, I deserve what happens to me”; Dalbert, 1999). Participants responded to both measures using a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Mean scores were calculated, and higher scores indicated greater belief in a just world. In the original investigation, Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were .65 for the GBJW scale and .79 for the PBJW scale. In the current investigation, Cronbach’s alphas were .82 and .88 for the GBJW and the PBJW scales, respectively.

**Gender Collectivity Scale**

This measure was used to assess women’s beliefs about the need to work together with other women in order to achieve goals (e.g., “Women need to work together in order to create an equal society”; Liss, O’Connor, Morosky, & Crawford, 2001). Participants responded to 11 items on a scale ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 7 (agree strongly). Higher mean scores indicated greater belief in gender collectivity. In the original investigation, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was .81; it was .82 in the current investigation.

**Collective action**

This measure was used to assess the extent to which participants have previously engaged in 11 types of collective action on behalf of women (Liss, Crawford, & Popp, 2004). Items asked about varied activities including “I have added my name to an e-mail petition on a women’s issue” and “I have participated in a rally or movement for women’s rights.” Responses were provided on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (more than 5 times). Sum scores were calculated with higher scores indicating greater participation in collective action. Cronbach’s alpha from the original investigation was not reported. Cronbach’s alpha from a previous study (Nelson et al., 2008) was .83; Cronbach’s alpha in the current investigation was .78.

**Feminist Identity Composite (FIC)**

This measure was used to assess the five stages of the Downing and Roush (1985) feminist identity development model (Fischer et al., 2000). It includes subscales for passive acceptance (7-item, e.g., “I think that men and women had it better in the 1950s when married women were housewives and their
husbands supported them”), revelation (8-item, e.g., “I feel angry when I think about how I’m treated by men and boys”), embeddedness-emanation (4-item, e.g., “I am very interested in women musicians”), synthesis (5-item, e.g., “I am proud to be a competent woman”), and active commitment (9-item, e.g., “It is very satisfying to me to be able to use my talents and skills in my work in the women’s movement”). All items were assessed on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 5 (agree strongly), and mean scores indicated greater endorsement of attitudes associated with that stage. In the original investigation, Cronbach’s alphas were .75 for the passive acceptance items, .80 for the revelation items, .84 for the embeddedness-emanation items, .68 for the synthesis items, and .77 for the active commitment items. In the present study, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were .73 for the passive acceptance items, .64 for the revelation items, .72 for the embeddedness-emanation items, .62 for the synthesis items, and .80 for the active commitment items.

## Results

In order to determine the extent to which self-identified feminists reported enjoying sexualization, we calculated the mean ESS score. Our feminist sample had a mean score of 3.25 (SD = .87) on a 6-point scale with individual scores ranging from 1 to 5.50. The average score was just below the midpoint of the scale indicating that feminists did not completely dislike the experience of receiving sexualized attention from men. It should also be noted that the range of scores covered nearly the entire possible range of the scale indicating individual differences in the extent to which feminists endorsed this set of beliefs. In support of Hypothesis 1, the mean score for these self-identified feminist participants was significantly lower than the means reported from general samples in the original investigation of this measure (Liss et al., 2011), t(325) = −11.79, p < .001 for the mean of 3.82 from Study 1 and t(325) = −16.15, p < .001 for the mean of 4.03 from Study 2. Descriptive statistics for all study variables are provided in Table 1.

Our second goal was to investigate the extent to which constructs associated with traditional beliefs about gender and the perceived need for continued social change were related to enjoying sexualization. All correlations are provided in Table 2. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, ESS scores were positively correlated with passive acceptance and GSJ. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, ESS scores were negatively correlated with radical/socialist beliefs. In partial support of Hypothesis 4, ESS scores were positively correlated with personal belief in a just world, but there was no significant relationship between ESS scores and general beliefs in a just world. Hypothesis 5 was not supported; there were no significant relationships between the ESS and collective action, gender collectivity, and active commitment. Hypothesis 6 was supported as there was a significant positive relationship between the ESS and synthesis. We had no specific hypotheses about the relationships between the ESS and liberal feminism as well as the other developmental stages on the FIC; there were no significant relationships between the ESS and these variables.

Regression analysis was undertaken to determine which of the measured variables best predicted ESS scores. The regression equation predicted 13.3% of the variance in ESS scores, F(12, 304) = 3.90, p < .001. ESS scores were significantly predicted by higher scores on measures of gender collectivity, passive acceptance, synthesis, and personal belief in a just world. ESS scores were also significantly predicted by lower levels of endorsement of general belief in a just world (see Table 3 for regression coefficients and significance levels).

### Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Possible range</th>
<th>Actual range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ESS</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>1-6</td>
<td>1-5.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATW</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>2.68-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical/socialist</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>1-6.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GSJ</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>1-9</td>
<td>1-7.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GBJW</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>1-6</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GBJW</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>1-6</td>
<td>1-6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender collectivity</td>
<td>5.78</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>3.42-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective action</td>
<td>22.46</td>
<td>7.31</td>
<td>11-55</td>
<td>11-55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive acceptance</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>1-4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revelation</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>1-5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embeddedness-emanation</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>1.75-5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Synthesis</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>2.2-5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Active commitment</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>2.44-5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ATW = Attitudes toward Women Scale; ESS = Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale; GBJW = General Belief in a Just World; GSJ = Gender System Justification; PBJW = Personal Belief in a Just World.
Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the extent to which young heterosexual self-identified feminist women reported enjoying sexualized male attention and the extent to which enjoying sexualization was related to beliefs about the need for social change and activism. Our data indicated that self-identified feminists varied in the extent to which they reported enjoying sexualized male attention. The mean ESS score in this sample was significantly lower than that from the general samples used in the original investigation (Liss et al., 2011). Participants in the original studies were recruited without regard to feminist self-identification, and research indicates that self-identified feminists generally constitute 25% or less of a nonselective sample (e.g., CBS News Monthly Poll, 2005, 2006). However, the samples from the original study were largely similar to the sample in the current investigation in terms of other demographic variables such as age, education, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. Thus, the feminists in our sample did report that they enjoyed the experience of receiving sexualized male attention to some extent, although at a lower rate than was true for a general sample of women.

Our data indicated that, among this group of young feminists, enjoying sexualization was related to traditional attitudes and acceptance of the gender status quo. This is consistent with the findings from the original investigation (Liss et al., 2011). Feminists who reported that they enjoyed sexualized male attention scored higher on measures of passive acceptance, GSJ, and personal beliefs in a just world. They also scored lower on the measures of radical/socialist feminism. As such, feminists who reported greater enjoyment of sexualization were more likely to see the current gender system as fair, to be unaware of continued gender inequity,

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Correlation Coefficient</th>
<th>p</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ESS</td>
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<td>2. ATW</td>
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<td>3. Radical/socialist</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. GSJ</td>
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<td>0.20</td>
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<td>5. GBJW</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. PBJW</td>
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</tr>
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<td>7. Gender collectivity</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Collective action</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Passive acceptance</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Revelation</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Embeddedness-emanation</td>
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<td>12. Synthesis</td>
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<td>0.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Active commitment</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Note. n = 317.

ATW = Attitudes toward Women Scale; GBJW = General Belief in a Just World; GSJ = Gender System Justification; PBJW = Personal Belief in a Just World.

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Variable</th>
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<tr>
<td>ATW</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
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<td>Radical/socialist</td>
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</tbody>
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and to believe that they, personally, received fair treatment. These women were also less likely to hold beliefs consistent with more radical forms of feminism. In general, the feminists in the sample had low passive acceptance and GSJ scores, but there was variability among respondents. Overall, our sample scored above the midpoint on the measures of personal beliefs in a just world and radical/socialist beliefs; again, there were a range of scores among our respondents. Thus, there were very real differences among self-identified feminists, and those feminists who reported enjoying sexualization held more traditional attitudes and were more accepting of the gender status quo.

At the bivariate level, our hypotheses about the relationships between enjoying sexualization and variables related to collective action and activism were not supported. The ESS was not significantly correlated with belief in gender collectivity, women’s engagement in collective action, or the measure of attitudes associated with the active commitment stage of the feminist identity development model. However, our hypothesis about the positive bivariate relationship between synthesis and enjoying sexualization was supported.

Though the correlates of enjoying sexualization were primarily conservative at the bivariate level, the regression analysis presented a more nuanced picture. In the regression, enjoying sexualization was predicted by higher scores on measures of personal belief in a just world, gender collectivity, passive acceptance, and synthesis as well as lower scores on general belief in a just world. Thus, when all variables were considered simultaneously, enjoying sexualization appeared to represent a paradox of both empowering and oppressive views toward women. On the one hand, it was related to greater gender collectivity and synthesis. Feminist women who enjoyed sexualization felt individually empowered and believed that they should work together with other women to create change. Furthermore, they were more likely to perceive the world as being unjust, in a general sense. At the same time, they perceived the treatment that they received as individuals to be fair and just and were more likely to hold more traditional views about the roles of women.

It is of note that enjoying sexualization was simultaneously predicted by both higher passive acceptance and higher synthesis scores on the feminist identity development model. Theoretically, these constructs should be negatively related to each other; passive acceptance represents the beginning of feminist identity development while synthesis was proposed to be the stage wherein one’s feminist identity was solidified (Downing & Roush, 1985). However, in our sample, passive acceptance was positively correlated with synthesis (see Table 2). Furthermore, the juxtaposition of high synthesis scores combined with high passive acceptance scores has been seen in prior research (Liss & Erchull, 2010; Liss et al., 2001) and has been hypothesized to represent a pattern of empowered ignorance wherein young women feel empowered but remain ignorant of continued gender inequity. The measurement of the construct of synthesis has been problematic (Moradi & Subich, 2002), and, while many of the items reflect being empowered, other items reflect a comfort with one’s femininity that may be related to endorsement of more traditional roles for women. It makes sense that the combination of feeling empowered while embracing traditional aspects of femininity would be related to ESS scores as enjoying sexualization involves reporting feeling empowered through embracing a culturally accepted ideal of sexiness.

Another seemingly paradoxical juxtaposition of predictors was that feminist women who enjoyed sexualization were more likely to believe that they, personally, received fair and just treatment in the world but were simultaneously more likely to see the world, as a whole, as unjust. This does make some sense as women who enjoy sexualization likely receive some benefits from conforming to societal norms of beauty and sexiness (Calogero & Jost, 2011). The positive reinforcement they receive from exhibiting their sexuality may allow them to feel as though they receive fair treatment while simultaneously allowing them to acknowledge that not everyone else does so.

It also interesting to note that enjoying sexualization was predicted by beliefs in the importance of gender collectivity. This measure assesses the extent to which women believe they need to work together with other women in order to achieve life goals. One could consider gender collectivity to be an operationalization of the notion of “girl power.” The idea of “girl power” has been linked with third-wave feminism, and third-wave feminism is often linked with an embracing of sexualized expression as a component of one’s feminism (Baumgardner & Richards, 2004; Levy, 2005). On the other hand, enjoying sexualization was not significantly related to actual action on behalf of women, both in the bivariate correlations and in the regression analysis. This presents yet another paradox in the beliefs of young feminists who enjoy sexualization. While they valued women working together with other women, their engagement in collective action did not differ from that of the feminists who did not enjoy sexualization.

To summarize, the feminists who reported that they enjoyed sexualization understood themselves as strong, independent, powerful women, but they also accepted certain traditional gender roles. One traditional role for women is the role of an attractive companion for men. Feminists who enjoy sexualization may not see themselves as passive arm candy but, rather, as active participants in gaining and enjoying sexualized male attention. These women may, in part, be focusing their sense of freedom and power on the freedom to be sexy. Levy (2005) has specifically critiqued the “nouvelle raunch feminist” (p. 76) who flaunts her sexuality as a statement of her empowerment. The feminists in our sample who enjoy sexualization may represent this group of women.
This investigation should be contextualized in light of several limitations. The feminist sample was demographically limited in that they were predominately white, well educated, and middle to upper middle class. Given this, the results should be generalized cautiously to more diverse groups of feminist women. Additionally, we selected only heterosexual participants because we felt that the construct of enjoying sexualized male attention would work differently among bisexual and lesbian women; the extent to which nonheterosexual-identified women may or may not report that they enjoy such attention would be a topic for future research. Furthermore, the present study did not seek to directly compare self-identified feminists and nonfeminists on the ESS but to better understand the role of enjoying sexualized male attention among feminist women, a group who should be more interested in social change and collective action on behalf of women. Finally, the goal of this research was to understand whether feminists who reported greater enjoyment of sexualization held more conservative beliefs about gender roles. Given this, we did not include variables that have been shown to best predict ESS scores, including objectification variables such as surveillance and body shame (Liss et al., 2011). To this end, a smaller proportion of variance in the final regression model was explained than might normally be expected.

Our research suggests that embracing an empowered sexuality does not clearly appear to be a path toward greater engagement in social change and activism. At the bivariate level, enjoying sexualization was clearly related to more conservative and traditional beliefs among feminist-identified women. In the regression analysis, the relationships were more complex. The ESS was predicted by a mix of both an acceptance of certain aspects of traditionality as well as an acknowledgment that there is a need for continued change in some domains and that women should work together to create that change. Some young feminist writers have contended that appearing sexy to others can be a feminist act (Baumgardner & Richards, 2004; Kipnis & Reeder, 1997) and is part of the third wave of feminism that rejects the restrictive (and ugly) stereotypes associated with their mothers’ second-wave feminism (Attwood, 2007; Baumgardner & Richards, 2004). Many women report feeling truly empowered through flaunting their sexuality (Peterson, 2010); however, flaunting one's sexuality can be considered a narrow form of power and may not be related to power in other domains (Lamb, 2010). The empowerment that women might derive from self-sexualization and enjoying sexualization can be problematic because it can be easily retracted as it is largely dependent on approval from others. It is a short-term way to find a sense of empowerment as most women cannot meet societal standards for beauty and sexiness throughout their lives. Feminists who report enjoying sexualization may be simultaneously empowered and restrained by this belief. As Erica Jong, a famous sex-positive feminist, said:

But I would be happier if my daughter and her friends were crashing through the glass ceiling instead of the sexual ceiling . . . Being able to have an orgasm with a man you don’t love or having Sex and the City, well, the problem is: You’re not going to elect Carrie to the Senate or to run your company. Let’s see the Senate fifty percent female; let’s see women in decision making positions—that’s power. Sexual freedom can be a smokescreen for how far we haven’t come. (Levy, 2005, p. 195)

References


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