

MPC MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

Let's talk sex: Expertise in women's online sex communities

Elizabeth Northup

Supervisor: John Shiga

The Major Research Paper is submitted
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Professional Communication

Ryerson University
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

September 4, 2015

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION FOR ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION OF A MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this Major Research Paper and the accompanying Research Poster. This is a true copy of the MRP and the research poster, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I authorize Ryerson University to lend this major research paper and/or poster to other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

I further authorize Ryerson University to reproduce this MRP and/or poster by photocopying or by other means, in total or in part, at the request of other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

I understand that my MRP and/or my MRP research poster may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

As a result of failures in the healthcare profession, and perhaps also in sexual health education, women are facing barriers when attempting to express, control, and explore their own sexuality. In response to the constraints of medical and educational discourses of sexuality and the disregard of female perspectives in traditional forms of health communication, some women are seeking out alternative sites for communicating about sexuality. This major research paper focuses on the expression of knowledge and experience regarding women's sexuality, sexual practices, and sexual health in online spaces. To evaluate the potentially beneficial and damaging effects of exchanging knowledge online, the construction, negotiation, and legitimization of expertise will be considered through a theoretical lens focused on sexual storytelling and dominant feminist and health discourses.

This study provides an inductive qualitative discourse analysis of three publicly available websites: girlonthenet.com, carasutra.co.uk, and sluttygirlproblems.com. The discourses of both authors and readers are analyzed through a coding scheme derived from a number of sources from the relevant literature. The broader categories of coding allow for an understanding of how expertise is constructed, while the subcategories within these headings enable analysis of the ways in which expertise is legitimized, enforced, and policed between experts and non-experts. This particular categorization of expertise is considered through a perspective that prioritizes the personal sexual narrative as a valid form of sexual knowledge exchange, while assessing the validity, value, and influence of this knowledge on women and their individual sexuality, sexual practices, and sexual health.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. John Shiga, for his support and feedback, and my second reader, Dr. Jessica Mudry, for additional notes and encouragement.

Table of Contents

Author's Declaration.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	4
Defining expertise.....	4
Feminist approaches to sexual discourses.....	7
Discursive constructions of sexuality.....	13
Research Questions.....	18
Methodology.....	20
Findings.....	24
Research question 1.....	24
Research question 2.....	35
Research question 3.....	43
Discussion.....	48
Conclusion.....	58
Endnotes.....	65
References.....	67

List of Appendices

Appendix A.....	63
-----------------	----

Introduction

Feona Attwood (2009) asserts that “blogging about sex is dominated heavily by women” (p. 6). My initial search for sex blogs without gender specification aligns with Atwood’s assertion, as it produced lists of sex blogs, websites, and communities primarily written and curated by women. Attwood’s assertion also aligns with my previous research on the lack of dialogue between female patients and their healthcare practitioners. Women are facing barriers when attempting to express, control, and explore their own sexuality in part because of failures in the healthcare profession, and perhaps also in sexual health education. First among these failures may be that women’s perspectives of sexuality and sexual health continue to be devalued in healthcare settings. This suggests that the constraints of medical and educational discourses of sexuality and the disregard for female perspectives in traditional forms of communication may have led some women to seek out alternative sites for communicating about sexuality. Women are using these sites to obtain what they have been denied in medical or educational environments:

“validation...from communicating in public” (Attwood, 2009, p. 6). Second among these failures may be the promotion of dominant discourses of sexuality that define sexuality within a male centered model that requires a woman to devote herself to “learning to understand, please and reassure men” (Gill, 2009, p. 354). Gill (2009) defines this as *men-ology*, which “[emphasizes]...studying and learning” and “[focuses] upon educating women to understand men, to learn to please them, and to take responsibility for the emotional management of relationships with them” (p. 354). To confront both failures, I have chosen to focus on the expression of knowledge and experience regarding women’s sexuality, sexual practices, and sexual health in online spaces. The aim of this

project is to investigate whether or not these spaces challenge women's silence by allowing them to express their perspectives and knowledge of their own sexual practices. If the growing prevalence of online sex communities is challenging the marginalization of women in discourses of sexuality, it is important to take a closer look at the knowledge that women are producing and receiving in these spaces.

To explore the manner in which knowledge becomes valued and influential in these spaces, this MRP explores the construction of expertise in online forums discussing sex advice, sexual practices, and sexual health. I explore two key constructions of expertise in these spaces: (1) evidence-based expertise, which draws from scientific and medical discourses, and; (2) experience-based expertise, which uses personal narrative "in which women emerge as confident agents and narrators" (Attwood, 2009, p. 11). Subsequently, I explore the ways in which each type of expertise empowers or disempowers women to express their sexuality.

As discussed in the literature review, opening up the role of the sexuality expert to those formerly excluded from it has the potential to empower women. Within the context of women's sexuality, the expert may offer the non-expert knowledge gained through formal or informal education, personal experiences, and professional experiences, which offer insights into women's sexual wellbeing. Consequently, the expert should have an understanding of the biological aspects of women's sexuality, but through a feminist lens, an understanding of the cultural expectations, dominant discourses, and the oppressive and restrictive norms focused on women's sexuality and sexual dysfunction are also important aspects of sexual expertise. This expansive knowledge on the issues women face when advocating for their sexual health and sexual preferences allows the expert to

guide women in their own explorations of their sexual experiences and preferences, and encourage them to establish and strengthen their own personal sexual expertise. An expert in the context of sexual health and wellbeing can also help women identify and understand the cultural and social barriers that they face as women. This in turn helps to establish a respectful relationship between expert and non-expert, in which each person's insight is heard and respected. Lastly, the expert can also help form positive attitudes towards sexuality in which the importance of safe and consensual sex is indisputable. Thus expertise can be shared in an open, caring, and tolerant way in which the expert is appreciative of conflicting views and is willing to admit to their own lack of knowledge or experience.

This MRP is informed by the literature reviewed below on feminist and postfeminist understandings and critiques of female sexuality, sexual storytelling, and notions of expertise within a sexuality framework. An examination of these areas of research provides a theoretical framework for exploring and analyzing the way bloggers establish their expertise while engaging in various practices of knowledge exchange. Through an inductive qualitative discourse analysis of three sex blogs written by women, I seek to understand the processes that bloggers and readers engage in to establish expertise. My analysis identifies the most prevalent themes, patterns, and practices that shape the way bloggers and readers exchange sexual information and construct, negotiate, and promote sex positive expertise.

Literature Review

This literature review explores several strands of research on communication and women's sexuality, focusing on concepts of expertise that will inform my analysis of sex blogs. Therefore, I have organized this literature review according to the following themes: defining expertise; feminist critique; and discursive constructions of sexuality.

Defining expertise

Although the literature reviewed above provides limited insight into how women affect expertise, the literature does provide a range of definitions of expertise useful for this MRP. Based on the bodies of literature discussed above, I have developed five definitions of expertise that will be used in my analysis of sex blogs.

The researcher

The clinical trial researcher has become a critical contributor to the establishment and legitimization of male and female sexual dysfunction drugs "by making them publicly acceptable and by legitimizing their clinical uses" (Fishman, 2004, p.188). As such, this allows the researcher to necessitate their role in both pharmaceutical and lay contexts, which identifies their particular contribution to our cultural understanding of the expert. As Fishman (2004) states: "In addition to mediating relationships between the pharmaceutical industry and clinicians, many sexual dysfunction researchers also engage directly and indirectly with the 'lay public'. Commodifying themselves as experts, such researchers promote themselves and the drugs they research to a consuming public" (p. 201).

The female expert as suspect

Historically, female experts in the domain of sexuality have tended to be treated with suspicion: “Cathy McClive has argued that while women may have been considered the best equipped ‘to understand and to read the complex, deceitful, misleading signs of the [female] human body’, at the same time, there was ‘the perception that this knowledge might be easily misused, that solidarity with the female victim, rather than professionalism would prevail, [which] often meant that the female medical expert was also a figure of suspicion’” (as cited in Blumenthal, 2014, p. 519). This suspicion of the female expert is also evident in feminist critiques of female sexual narration, which sometimes dismiss such narration “as simply ventriloquizing men’s fantasies about female sexuality” (Attwood, 2009, p. 7). Both considerations of the female expert rob her of her capacity to articulate her own knowledge or experience without bias.

The sex expert as gatekeeper

A consideration of the way the role of the expert is constructed and performed in particular media is essential for this analysis as notions of expertise shape the exchange of knowledge and experience. The sex expert in these online communities acts not only the curator of these stories, but also as the gatekeeper who controls access to particular expressions of sexual knowledge and to the forum in which that knowledge is expressed. As Mary Ellen Zuckerman notes in her study of women’s magazines, the editors of these magazines “fostered an air of intimacy, making readers feel that by purchasing the *Ladies' Home Journal* or *Women's Home Companion* they were privy to exclusive information, that they had entered a special circle” (as cited in Bashford & Strange, 2004,

p. 84). Similarly, the readers in these online communities have been given the opportunity to enter into a space in which they can share the sexual secrets, experiences, and perspectives that they have been unable to disclose elsewhere. However, it is important to consider the risk involved with one sex expert becoming the gatekeeper. Despite their intention to create an inclusive environment, my analysis shows that there are instances in which the blogger's (or gatekeeper) biases influence the sexual advice distributed in these spaces.

An example of the sex expert as gatekeeper is the medical professional whose role as an expert on both the male and female sexual experience has increased through the process of medicalization. This is especially undeniable in the growing prevalence of the medicalization of female sexual dysfunction. This emphasis on biological reductionism can also be traced back to the role of the sexual dysfunction researcher as an expert. Caplan and Cosgrove (2004) state that, as a result, "the prestige of the medical voice in the current atmosphere inevitably sidelines and marginalizes competing points of view" (as cited in Tiefer, 2012, p. 312).

The sex educator

The sex blogger may also be regarded as a "sexpert" or "agony aunt" who may be influential among certain social groups despite having "little formalized training in sexuality" (Zamboni, 2009, p. 134). This supports the claims of Boyton (2006), Taylor (2011), and Muise (2011) who note the wide range of credentials necessary for working in the sexual health industry as well as Tiefer's suggestion that researchers explore the role of "professionals, other than mainstream health professionals, who offer sexuality

advice and treatment” and who seek a professional status (Tiefer, 2012, p. 313). In this more inclusive notion of expertise, individuals who work as prostitutes or porn stars may in certain contexts act as sexual experts: “Maier (2009) described how St. Louis prostitutes were initially sought out as sex educators...because of their presumed knowledge of techniques of stimulation” (Tiefer, 2012, p. 313).

Feminist approaches to sexual discourses

Feminism serves as an introduction to women’s sex blogs and notions of expertise in these spaces, and as a tool for discussing why “blogs have...been described as one potential ‘safe space’ for women to articulate missing discourses” (Muisse, 2011, p. 412). Feminist literature provides the foundation for my analysis of the way female bloggers and female audiences engage in pro-woman or anti-woman language, themes, or attitudes in personal sex narratives or sex advice. Through a feminist lens, sex blogs can be understood as having the potential to act as safe spaces for women to resist dominant discourses, redefine their sexual lifestyles, and gain sexual agency. At the same time, feminism acts as guide for understanding how supportive or destructive sentiments toward female sexuality are established, negotiated, and maintained as expert knowledge. I have organized the feminist literature into the following categories: women and technology; muted group theory; dominant discourses of sexuality; authenticity; and postfeminism.

Muted group theory.

Kramarae's (1981) muted group theory has been a foundational theoretical resource for this MRP because it investigates women's expression of their experiences, knowledge, and perspectives. Kramarae asserts that "women are a 'muted group' in that some of their perceptions cannot be stated, or at least not easily expressed, in the idiom of the dominant structure" (Kramarae, 1981, p. 2). Kramarae's evaluation of women's muted voices in the dominant system of language is dependent on the negation of women's voices and experiences. Recognizing the ways language and modes of expression have muted women's voices, especially in the public sphere, is useful for better understanding how women have worked against suppressing norms. Working against these norms has enabled women to express their own knowledge, experiences, and perspectives, while gaining the knowledge, experiences, and perspectives of others.

It is important to understand why "blogging about sex is dominated heavily by women," if one is to understand why women have permitted online bloggers, who often write under pseudonyms, to offer guidance and advice similar and dissimilar to that which they would receive by medical professionals (Attwood, 2009, p. 6). Kramarae (1994) notes that women are muted because "the tools of expression have been shaped by men" (p. 5). This may help to explain why women have turned to online spaces to confess, narrate, and discuss their most intimate moments. Informed by Spender's (1984) investigation of women's knowledge as "negated, absent, or noted in a derogative or negative manner," one can begin to understand that women have turned to these blogs so that they may, as Musie (2011) puts it, "engage in a 'process of regaining control over information about sexuality'" (Spender, p. 196; Muise, p.12). Kramarae and Spender's focus on the formation, structure, and use of language provides a necessary foundation

for understanding the role that language plays in establishing power relations through the prioritization of certain types of knowledge. Muted group theory suggests that the use of certain types of language or discourse in sex blogs likely affects the way expertise is legitimized, maintained, and negotiated in the dialogue between the blogger and the reader, as their relationship negotiates its own set of expectations regarding power, control, and expertise.

Dominant discourses of sexuality

Dominant discourse about female sexuality is examined in literature that analyzes communication between women and medical professionals, advice columnists, and bloggers. This research can be placed within the interests of feminism as it investigates how women receive information, whether this information aligns with a dominant discourse that may narrow the scope of women's sexuality, and whether women are able to challenge these dialogues. It is not only sexual health education in schools that is anti-feminist, restricted, or practically absent; the literature also suggests that patient-practitioner communication about sexuality is not always as open and informative as it could be. According to the literature, there are two main reasons to be skeptical of the benefits of sexual health discourses in schools and other institutions. First, as Fine's (1988) study suggests, sex education contributes to the silencing of women's experiences. "Despite substantial evidence on the success of both high school-based health clinics and access to sexuality information, the majority of public schools do not sanction or provide such information," which primarily affects young women (p. 29). Fine's research, which

in part discusses the role of sex education as intellectual empowerment, may begin to validate women's practice of seeking information online as a form of empowerment.

Second, many health-care professionals feel unprepared and unsure of themselves and of their own training and expertise in discussing sex and sexuality with patients (Wendt, 2007, p. 540). According to the literature these problems stem from the fact that "the majority of health professionals believe that they have insufficient education, feel poorly prepared or are unwilling to discuss sexual issues with their patients" (Wendt et al, 2007, p. 540). This research provides useful insight into the boundaries that prevent access to knowledge and into the reasons that medical and nonmedical professionals perceive expertise differently.

The restricted nature of knowledge exchange permeates much of the literature focused on the dissemination of sexual health information. It is often united with the analysis of dominant discourses that are found in dialogues on sex. Boynton (2006a) suggests that there is a cause and effect relationship between the diversity of authors and the quality of information when she asserts that an inadequate system of vetting advice columnists or "Agony Aunts" maintains a "lack of critical thinking, political will, and feminist agency behind media advice giving" (p. 542). More specifically, the process of vetting advice columnists in traditional media, prioritizes fame over experience, and requires no accountability and no specific or consistent credentials on part of the advisor (Boynton, 2006, p. 543).

Overall, this literature expresses similar beliefs about power and communication as it places the author in a role that allows her to control and manipulate knowledge. That is, "blogs provide a...space that allows individuals to explore their sexuality beyond

social prescriptions” (Muise, 2011, p. 412). Taylor’s (2011) research complements this claim, as she emphasizes that, “user-generated content is providing the opportunity for [women] to contest dominant narratives” (80). The evaluation of the role of the author in distributing knowledge and their relationship to the validity of this knowledge is useful in understanding the responsibilities inherent in their role. However, the latter researchers and some bloggers have disregarded the role of the medical doctor by focusing only on the legitimacy of the authentic female voice promoting pro-woman rhetoric. While these varying opinions may offer a more inclusive distribution of knowledge by bloggers and a more inclusive evaluation by scholars, they do not authenticate the information. A better understanding of how expertise is constructed by users, not by the researcher’s interpretations, may offer insight into how expertise is legitimized.

The authentic female voice.

The creation of an author’s authentic female voice is a recurring theme in the literature on self-narrated blogs. Its creation is investigated in relation to feminist and postfeminist views, identity formation, and the role of the confession. For this MRP, it is necessary to consider the stance that post feminism takes toward female sexuality as a broad representation of the gendered sexual expectations of women. My understanding of postfeminism, and its possible role in the blogs I wish to research, aligns with the explanation that Gill (2009) sets forth: I see postfeminism as a sensibility characterized by a number of elements: a taking for granted of feminist ideas alongside a fierce repudiation of feminism; an emphasis upon choice, freedom and individual

empowerment; a pre-occupation with the body and sexuality as the locus of femininity... the importance placed upon self-surveillance and monitoring as modes of power; and a thoroughgoing commitment to ideas of self-transformation, that is, a make-over paradigm” (p. 346). It is for these same reasons, most of which contradict feminist objectives, that postfeminists are critiqued for their perspective on female sexuality. It must also be noted that the postfeminist consideration of female sexuality has been critiqued by feminists for its prioritization of the individual and its lacking interest in sexual equality (Attwood, 2009, p. 9). In her comparison of two self-narrated sex blogs, Attwood (2009) investigates the relationship between authenticity and postfeminist sentiments in the bloggers’ telling of sexual stories. I consider the authentic female voice or the authentic experience as one in which the female author describes or shares her lived experiences of sex. She discloses her most intimate thoughts, reactions, and emotions as she has experienced and interpreted them. She takes ownership of this lived experience, defining it in terms of the female sexual experience, not the male fantasy. I want to consider the relationship between the female author and her reader in a similar way as Sonnet (1999) outlines in her critical consideration of pornography: “the connection between female authorship, authorial intention, the kind of specifically ‘feminine’ sexual fantasies produced and the meanings of those fantasies for the readership assumes that there is an untroubled passage of meaning and understanding between women simply by the fact of being women” (p. 175). Although I consider authentic storytelling a necessary tool for effective knowledge exchange between women, it is essential to keep in mind Sonnet’s critique of the assumption that women relate to each other only because they are women. This assumption of the untroubled passage of

meaning between female author and female reader enforces an essentialist view of female identity.

While postfeminist writing has been critiqued for “simply ventriloquizing men’s fantasies about female sexuality,” Attwood (2009) confirms that, in postfeminist writing, “characters’ sex talk ‘challenges prohibitions and breaks the silence, so that women can begin to tell their stories and speak about sex differently’” (p. 11). This literature shows that there is considerable debate about the relationship between authorship, authenticity and feminist beliefs. However, the existing literature offers less consideration of the readers of blogs. If these observations were to consider how the author in her personal narration together with the reader in her own feminist beliefs work to negotiate the discourse, one could begin to understand how both roles contribute to the process of identity formation and constructions of expertise in these online interactions.

Discursive constructions of sexuality

In addition to the literature on feminist critique, this MRP draws from critical studies of sexology, sexual storytelling, and the medicalization of sexuality, which highlight the manner in which knowledge about sexuality is controlled and manipulated and by whom.

Sexual storytelling

Foucault (1978) and Plummer (1995) provide useful and detailed literature for understanding how sexuality is shaped by storytelling. Foucault’s (1978) analysis of sexual discourse incorporates notions of power and works to illustrate the ways in which

power intersects with discourse on sex: “power’s hold on sex is maintained through language, or rather through the act of discourse that creates, from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law. It speaks, and that is the rule” (p. 83). Through a Foucauldian lens, an investigation of the ways in which individuals in these online spaces talk about sex, both positively and negatively, is necessary for understanding how truths about sexuality are produced in contemporary discourse. Furthermore, by considering Foucault’s assertion in relation to the ever-growing number of self-narrated sex blogs, whose authors regularly aim to carefully and concisely articulate their sexual acts, emotions, and fantasies, it becomes critical to question what proclamations about sexual activity are being articulated into rules. Are readers digesting these stories as expert advice?

These key questions also arise when considering Plummer’s (1995) book, which discusses sexual discourse as sexual storytelling. Throughout his discussion of the validity in storytelling and the authenticity of the author’s voice or experience, Plummer (1995) insists that “story telling and story reading are indeed social inventions, fictions, fabrications. They cannot be otherwise. None of this means that people are lying, deceiving, cheating (though of course they can be!): for at the moment a story is told or read we may come to ‘own’ it” (Plummer, 1995, p. 168) Here, too, the reader’s role in consuming these stories must be questioned. If readers interpret stories as both “true and as “fabrication,” what does this suggest about their negotiation of the author’s role as expert? The difficult task of deciphering truth in varying and conflicting narratives becomes even more complicated in Foucault’s framework wherein truth is the product of discourse. Nevertheless, these scholarly works on sexual discourses provide essential

information for understanding how authors and readers interpret stories of sexual experience, sexual knowledge, and sexual confusion.

Medicalization of sexuality

The process of “medicalization consists of defining a problem in medical terms, using medical language to describe a problem, adopting a medical framework to understand a problem, or using a medical intervention to ‘treat’ it” (Conrad, 1992, p. 211). By treating ‘it,’ medical discourses of sexuality focus on objects rather than on the subject. Thus the medicalization of sexuality inevitably calls for the expertise of a medical professional. Consequently, “by emphasizing the biological aspects of sexual experience, experts bias the public’s understanding of sexuality and underestimate the role of social conditions and expectations in constructing sexual experience” (Tiefer, 2012, p.312).

Tiefer (1994a) also discusses sexuality in the context of knowledge construction and legitimacy. Most relevant is her analysis of the medicalization of sexuality, which introduces a challenge to sexology and to women attempting to express their sexual experiences independent from medicalization. Tiefer (1994a) states, “medicalization represents a crisis for sexology because it is a bold attempt to replace [sexology’s] multidimensional perspective with biological reductionism and thus medical privilege” (p. 371). Tiefer’s analysis suggests that medicalization narratives have entered self-reflective and non-medical discourses.

In order to better understand the significance of the presence of medical narratives in self-narrated sex blogs, an exploration of medicalization is necessary. “Professional

dominance and monopolization have certainly had a significant role in giving medicine the jurisdiction over virtually anything to which the label ‘health’ or ‘illness’ could be attached” (Conrad, 1992, 214). Furthermore, “the increased prestige and power of the medical profession” contributes to the legitimization of medicalization (Conrad, 1992, 213). Unfortunately, “only a minority of... [health-care professionals]... have vocational training in sexology,” the study of human sexuality and relationships (Wendt, 270, p. 540). In relation to the impact of new media on medicalization, Nye (2003) argues that “in the modern Internet information age medical knowledge has helped undermine medical authority,” (p. 124) while Tiefer (2012c) suggests that the Internet has diversified access to sexual knowledge. Both have led to “blurred lines between different types of expertise and different sources of information” (Tiefer, 2012c, p. 317). These conclusions suggest that individuals without formal training in medicine may now have a stronger voice in the debate over the legitimacy of medical and nonmedical advice.

Media and sexuality.

Analyzing the discourse on sexuality promoted by media is pivotal for understanding the grasp that it holds over the dissemination of sexual knowledge. Boynton (2009b) suggests that although research has been conducted on the role of media messages, less research has been concerned with the audience’s response, appreciation, or actual acceptance of the advice they are given. Brown (2002) concurs and suggests that scholars focus on “how audiences select, interpret, and apply sexual content” since “members of an audience also will not see or interpret the same messages in the same way” (Brown, 2002, p. 43). Boynton (2006a) points out that the audience does not always

receive qualified advice: “a number of cases of qualified sex educators, researchers, and therapists have been dropped from magazines and replaced by ‘sexperts’ or their ghost-writers” (p. 544). Although Boynton praises the growth of advice giving in online spaces because it “presents us with opportunities to subvert the idea of only ‘experts’ giving advice,” she acknowledges that many of these online spaces are also interested in economic gain (p. 124). This addresses several important issues in the negotiation of authenticity and expertise online, such as how readers differentiate between genuine attempts to provide advice and advice that is provided for economic gain.

Research Questions

The literature reviewed above suggests that concepts of expertise are changing as a result of the intersection of feminism, sexuality, and media with narrations, reflections, and discussions of women's sexuality. In order to understand how women's silence has been maintained or challenged in online spaces, an exploration of these intersections is necessary. Despite the multitude of issues, questions, and contradictions that are found within the research, it is evident that women are sharing their knowledge and experiences in online blogs. In order to gain more understanding of how these women interpret expertise online, my analysis of sex blogs focuses on the research questions listed below, as well as a set of guiding questions which enabled me to address different facets of each research question within the context of women's sexual health and sex communities. These guiding questions also assisted in the construction of a series of subcategories that help to better define the parameters of the initial categories. These guiding questions are included in my codebook (Appendix A).

RQ1: How do websites that discuss sex advice, sexual practices, and sexual health construct or define expertise?

Guiding questions:

- (a) How do the authors establish authenticity? Much of the literature attests to the belief that authenticity and trust are connected. Trust is essential to the legitimization of expertise, thus it may offer an understanding of how different perceptions of authenticity are validated in online spaces.

RQ2: How is expertise legitimized, enforced, or policed between bloggers and readers?

Guiding questions:

- (a) Are external sources, experts, or studies incorporated into the bloggers' stories, perspectives, or knowledge? Does this work to validate the online space? How often does this happen and under what circumstances? This may illustrate how medical narratives manifest in everyday discourse.
- (b) In self-narrated sex blogs, does the author respond to, encourage, reflect upon, validate, or discredit reader comments? This will offer insight into how the expert, presumably the author, may control the forum by permitting or rejecting readers' perspectives and knowledge.

RQ3: How are supportive or destructive sentiments toward female sexuality established, negotiated, and maintained as expert knowledge?

Guiding questions:

- (a) How do pro or anti feminist sentiments present themselves in these discourses?

Methodology

Data Collection

I collected textual data from three publicly available websites that contain personal narratives, advice and educational posts, sex toy reviews, and commentary on women's sexuality, sexual health, and sexual practices. These websites are girlonthenet.com (GOTN), a self-narrated blog; carasutra.co.uk (Cara), a website with one primary author; and sluttygirlproblems.com (SGP), a website with several authors continuously contributing content. Advice giving and self-narrated guidance establish an expectation of expertise as they serve to guide readers in a multitude of ways. Further analysis will work to discover the methods in which they construct, maintain, and negotiate this expertise. The purpose of guiding readers creates an online community dependent on trust in which bloggers and readers are encouraged to establish an inclusive discourse amongst members. As such, I will refer to these spaces as communities rather than websites for the remainder of this major research project.

The data was collected manually from March 1, 2015 to March 31, 2015. Comments from readers were also collected, as their insights and their interactions with the author help to understand how expertise is constructed, policed or enforced, and legitimized. Additionally, sex toy reviews were collected in order to understand the role that consumerism has in establishing expertise. Data was collected over one month because it allowed me to gather sufficiently diverse data on different topics, as the websites are updated almost daily.

The communities were located by searching for 'sex blogs' and 'women's sex blogs' on Google search. In order to be included the community needed to be presented

as either self-narrated or as an informational forum, and had to encourage reader involvement. Reader involvement was a requirement for inclusion since this is pertinent to understanding how hierarchies are enforced or policed between experts and non-experts. However, encouragement of reader involvement and/or reader credibility did not have to be explicitly articulated to be considered for inclusion.

Thematically the communities focus on sexual desire, sexual practice, and women's role in their own sexuality. If an entry deviated from these major themes, for example, entries on external erotic authors, it was not included in the analysis. Blog entries, guest blogs, and comments by authors who identify as female, male, or transgender were collected.

Method of analysis

I have conducted an inductive qualitative discourse analysis, as my primary purpose in this major research project is to contribute to the development of “a model or theory about the underlying structure of experiences or processes that are evident in the text data” (Thomas, 2006, p. 238.) More specifically, I am seeking to understand the process through which women establish expertise in these online spaces through the ways in which they produce and exchange this knowledge, while gaining insight into their positive or destructive sexual experiences. Furthermore, these research objectives align with Thomas' (2006) assertion that “inductive analysis refers to approaches that primarily use detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data by an evaluator or researcher” (p. 238).

As critical frameworks for understanding how particular voices become dominant or come to be considered as expert in women's sex blogs and communities, feminist literature on sexuality and sexual storytelling guide the discourse analysis performed in this major research project. As such, I first considered the data through these critical lenses in order to better understand how the members of these communities, both bloggers and readers, may incorporate discursive strategies highlighted in the literature review. This also offered some insight into the underlying processes of knowledge exchange in these spaces. This initial analysis of the communities also produced a set of guiding questions, as discussed above.

Next, I consulted three major studies in order to create an effective codebook for analyzing the broader components of my research questions—the construction of expertise, the negotiation of expertise between bloggers and readers, and supportive or destructive sentiments toward female sexuality in women's online sex communities. These three studies consider various components of advice giving and sexual narration, which may or may not intersect with gender. They are “The ‘sassy woman’ and the ‘performing man’: Heterosexual casual sex advice and the (re)constitution of gendered subjectivities” (Panteà & Braun, 2014), “Predicting receptiveness to advice: Characteristics of the problem, the advice-giver, and the recipient” (Feng & MacGeorge, 2006), and “Intimate adventures: Sex blogs, sex ‘blooks’ and women's sexual narration” (Attwood, 2009). This first step produced the broad coding categories in the codebook (Appendix A). These codes are categorized under six distinct sections—authenticity, blogger's expertise, reader engagement, positive or destructive sentiments toward female

sexuality, and external or dominant narratives. These broader categories of coding allow for an understanding of how expertise may be constructed.

The definitions of expertise discussed in the final section of the literature review will be incorporated into my analysis of the blogs as popular notions of expertise. This typology was developed through both my research and my understanding of the relevant literature. However, these definitions were not used as constraining categories that insist on the manipulation or reframing of the discourse in order to produce models that align with particular interpretations of expertise. Instead, they were used to outline the various representations of the female sexuality expert in a greater cultural context and to provide an understanding of the scientific and medical expert as a cultural figure.

It is important to note that new categories and subcategories were added to the codebook as my research progressed in order to stay true to the process of inductive discourse analysis. The inclusion of new categories permits the research to follow “the primary purpose of the inductive approach [which] is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies” (Thomas, 2006, p. 238).

Findings

The analysis identified interesting commonalities between the three online communities, despite the differences in how bloggers and readers share their sexual experiences, exchange knowledge, and offer guidance on each website. These commonalities point to themes and processes that provide insight into the construction and negotiation of expertise. Although the application of similar techniques in the construction of expertise by both the bloggers and the readers were pervasive in my findings, there were also important differences in the bloggers' experiences, sexual niches or preferences and in the manner in which these are communicated in blog entries. The bloggers' individual commitments to producing authentic representations of themselves will be discussed further in the discussion section of this paper.

I will now answer the three research questions through a discussion of the recurring themes and persistent differences and exceptions in the processes that women use in the exchange of sexual knowledge and stories.

RQ1: How is expertise constructed or defined?

The analysis yielded six common devices that are used to construct expertise, which I have termed *history of influence*, *personal experience*, *self-validation*, *storytelling*, *explicit knowledge (or advice giving)*, *resources*, and *professional credentials*. Rather than constructing expertise through the home page of the website, these devices were applied in almost every blog entry. Although these were the primary methods of constructing a blogger's expertise, the ways in which they were embedded

within blog entries varies. Therefore, I will discuss the different, but most common, processes through which the bloggers use these devices.

History of influence

“History of influence” refers to the blogger’s inclusion of earlier writings that speak to the topic being discussed in the present blog post, which suggests that the blogger has been an influential figure in the online community. These earlier writings, which include sex toy reviews, sexual narratives, and informational pieces, are indicated by a link embedded in the present blog post, which allows the reader to access the earlier work. When coded, history of influence produced four main constructions: (1) as links to previous or current sexual stories that relate to the current topic; (2) as proof of the blogger’s participation in a specific activity, usually sexual, being discussed in the present blog; (3) as proof or validation of her knowledge implied by a current statement or expressed feeling about a sexual activity or sexual injustice; (4) as a link to additional information, resources, or statements on the topic discussed in the present blog entry. These four constructions were only found in Girl on the net and Cara Sutra, because they write all the blog entries in their online communities, with the exception of guest bloggers. As such, they are the main influencers in their online communities.

The following excerpt is taken from Girl on the Net (GOTN), and exemplifies her use of the third construction of history of influence. She uses it as proof and validation of her current statement about her boyfriend flirting with other women and to show that her thoughts on the topic have evolved.

I used to hate the idea of other people flirting with ‘my’ dude (<http://www.girlonthenet.com/2012/06/13/on-jealousy/>). Every sideways glance and giggle felt like a calculated gesture to steal him away – as if I had some kind of ownership. Like I’d pissed round him in a circle and anyone who stepped into that circle was a fair target. I’d scowl and worry, feeling like every nice interaction with someone else was somehow a minus point to me. As if flirting with someone else is the next step in something significant rather than a fun way to pass the time. (March 15, 2015)

I have chosen to use the word “evolve” rather than “change” because of the tone and construction of this passage. Rather than justifying the way she acted, GOTN describes her irrational behavior in the given situation. By critically reflecting on her previous knowledge and feelings about this type of situation, she acknowledges that expertise will evolve to align more closely with one’s own changing sexual practices. In this way, the blogger constructs her expertise as authentic in the sense that it is coupled with real experiences. Self-criticism and the emotional growth implied by such criticism allows for an articulation of authenticity in this example.

Slutty Girl Problems (SGP) does incorporate the use of history of influence, although less frequently as its contributors have not necessarily written for the blog before. Serving as the exception, however, is SGP’s use of the history of influence when describing other sex professionals or in contributor bios. For example, in the blog entry “How to have a good one night stand,” the author’s bio states: “She is also the editor and curator of EroticScribes.com (March 11, 2015).

Personal experience

Personal experience is the blogger's articulation of their personal and intimate experiences that affect her sexually; in some instances it overlaps with other authenticating strategies, such as stories grounded in experience and the appearance of confession. It does not necessarily incorporate storytelling; instead, the blogger references experiences in order to provide more proof for why they are entitled to discuss or offer guidance on a particular topic. Both GOTN and Cara incorporate these lived experiences into sex toy reviews. In her review of the butt plug sex toy, Cara incorporates personal experiences from both solo and shared sex time: "When the Stainless Steel Jewelled Butt Plug is inside me and I'm having sex with my partner the added weight thrusting back and forth gives additional stimulation in turn – which feels amazing. I've also found it to be a brilliant butt plug to insert before using vaginally penetrative sex toys and clitoral vibrators in my masturbation sessions" (March 10, 2015).

Additionally, personal experience invites identification with the reader, turning an individual experience into a joint experience. This is evident in the following excerpt from the SGP entry, "Phone sex tips from a pro operator." "Start exactly how you would actually start in the bedroom: teasing. Run your fingers down his chest. Play with his thighs. Brush your fingers across his cock, then dance them away. Gradually build up to slowly start jerking him off" (March 4, 2015). Mistress Layla, the pro phone sex operator, constructs her expertise for the reader by describing the intimate details of the reader's sexual bedroom experience. Mistress Layla knows the intimate actions the reader takes in the bedroom, she knows how the male partner will respond, and she knows how to guide the reader through it, because she has "been there." Turning this into a joint experience

also allows the reader to construct their own expertise through their own personal experiences, just as Mistress Layla has done by empowering the reader to claim their own expertise based on experience.

All three blogs also encourage open communication between sexual partners. This suggests that the reader is responsible for sharing knowledge about their own preferences with their partner. Trying new things, talking with their partner, or sharing insight into what they like or dislike encourages the reader to share sexual knowledge grounded in experience. This also creates a discourse in which they can gain knowledge through experience.

Self-Validation

Like “history of influence” and “personal experience,” “self-validation” refers to a discursive construction of authenticity. I define it here as an instance in which the author comments on her own credibility, the reliability of the information she is giving, or her commitment to providing genuine guidance to the reader. Self-validation is used to construct expertise in all three communities in two main ways: (1) in statements regarding truth, trust, and honesty; and (2) in the blogger’s validation of her own thoughts, which places her in a position of knowing or of expertise. In the first instance, the blogger simply uses statements such as, “Trust me, it’s worth it” (Slutty girl problems, March 10, 2015). In the second instance, the blogger unites experience, self-validation, and opinion, as demonstrated by the following statement: “However as an anal sex toys veteran this steel butt plug is verging on perfection” (Cara Sutra, March 10, 2015). In the process of coding the data for these two forms of self-validation in SGP, a

third form emerged whereby the blogger positions herself in the reader's life as a non-judgmental person or influence. "I don't care if you join OkCupid or Tinder. I don't care if you even pay for an eHarmony account or if you sign up for FetLife" (March 19, 2015). It is evident from this passage that SGP not only positions herself in the reader's life as a guide but as someone who is in a position to judge the reader. This is the only instance in the analysis in which the blogger took on such a domineering role in the reader's life, so it is difficult to understand the intention the blogger may have had beyond self-validation.

Storytelling

In this context "storytelling" is when people tell stories about their sexual experience. I coded blog posts as "storytelling" when the entire blog was written through a first person narrative that incorporated the blogger's sexual story to inform or guide the reader. It differs from "personal experience" because the author does not draw on several brief experiences to support a point or give evidence. Instead the guidance or information is given support through the actual fact that it has happened—the story is the blog. Storytelling is primarily used in GOTN and Cara as way to construct expertise as it allows the bloggers to unite their actual experiences with the reader's experiences or to demonstrate knowledge of particular sexual activities or lifestyles. Similarly, storytelling allows for identification with the reader and encourages a sense of closeness from sharing experiences. GOTN's sex toy reviews are written in the form of first-person storytelling, which situates the toy within a narrative of sexual experience. That is, GOTN couples the review with the experience of using the sex toy. She also does this when she offers advice

on how to perform particular sex positions. In this excerpt from the entry “Tight fucking, and my favourite sex position,” GOTN describes not only how she and her partner position themselves, but also how she feels, the position she prefers her partner in, and the actions she would like him to perform.

Face down. Head buried in the pillow. Heat that borders on claustrophobia. Legs straight, and slightly parted. He kneels above me, ideally holding his dick in one hand, using the other to squash and pinch and slap my arse. There’s a vulnerable feeling – being exposed and examined and used. (March 18, 2015).

Additionally, Cara incorporates fantasies told by Penny, her “male slave,” as part of a project called Fetish Friday. Although it is not specified whether or not these stories are about Cara, the implication is made when she introduces him as her “male slave” and describes these fantasies as ones that he has shared with her. By incorporating stories told by other people, Cara allows Penny to construct her expertise as a “Female Dominant” (FemDom) in the BDSM scene. GOTN and Cara use storytelling to bolster the authenticity associated with personal experience.

Informing the reader

I identify “explicit knowledge or advice giving” through several codes, which may also reveal some of the author’s beliefs or biases about expertise. The codes include “how to” lists or guides, information for women encouraging them to go to other individuals or to consult other resources for information or guidance, and instances in which the author directly engages the reader. The explicit giving of knowledge or advice to the reader is found in all three communities. This places the blogger in a position of

advisor or expert and the reader as recipient or perhaps patient. For Cara, this is primarily done through knowledge sharing. For example, she tells readers how to keep their anal sex toys clean and how to optimize comfort. In the following example, Cara not only offers advice to the reader, but also gives an explanation for why she is advising the reader to use lubricant when enjoying anal sex toys. “When using anal sex toys or having anal sex it is always advisable to use sex lubricant. This is because the anal area does not produce its own natural lubricant through stimulation like the vagina does” (March 10, 2015). Additionally, she shares with readers a variety of ways that they can enjoy solo or consensual and enjoyable sex with their partner.

GOTN, on the other hand, offers knowledge in the form of definitions of sexual activities, which subsequently works to validate particular sexual activities, such as “edging.” Edging is a sexual activity in which an individual brings his or herself “to the brink of orgasm before stopping” (GOTN, March 8, 2015). When she explains this process in the entry entitled, “The hotness of edging, and the moment it ends,” GOTN also justifies the experience for a specific reader, who then replies, “First, I had no idea this had a name. Second, now that it has a name, I feel much better about the fact that I do this all the time.” Slutty girl problems offers a wide variety of knowledge and advice giving, with each individual blogger supplementing the construction of their expertise in varying ways. This includes advice on sex positions, phone sex, period sex, and surviving a dry spell.

Similarly, all three communities offer advice and solutions to systemic problems that affect women’s sexual health, sexual practices, and sexual knowledge. This broadens their expertise as it offers opinions on the injustices that affect women’s sexual health. It

is these injustices that undoubtedly affect the more intimate moments that women experience in their sexual experiences, and should thus be touched upon by any sexual expert. For SGP the systemic problem is in sex education and the lack of sex positivity. SGP discusses the lack of positive sexual dialogue in both private contexts and in schools and other public contexts. In the blog “Transforming sex positive sex education,” the author explains that discussions of sexuality in America exist in two categories: “Sex is either a tool used to objectify (mostly women) and to sell myriad things, or it’s used as a tool to shame and guilt people into not having real conversations” (March 26, 2015). She suggests that this is taught at home, in the media, and in sex education at school. These systemic problems begin to overlap each other in such a way that people are unable to access sex positive discourse through main stream resources.

For GOTN it is the negative construction of sexual practices, such as BDSM or porn, which encourage false justifications for negative actions. For Cara, it is the double standards in sexual freedoms for men and women, such as female genital mutilation and slut shaming (a form of sexual discrimination imposed on women for their sexual choices). Cara provides an excellent description of slut shaming: “I will not tolerate having the word ‘slut’ spat at me as an insult, by those who attempt to shame a woman for either her sexual choices or by assigning incorrect moral values to her with incorrect, outdate terminology” (March 18, 2015).

The remaining three devices are used primarily by SGP. I have included them because they are critical to how the bloggers in this community construct their expertise. Additionally, they may also serve to draw a contrast between the different ways that these bloggers’ constructions of expertise conform to or deviate from already established

understandings of medical and sexual expertise, which will be discussed in the discussion and sections of this paper.

Resources

In my codebook, “resources” refers to a subcategory of *external credit and external resources* wherein bloggers refer to other websites, guest bloggers, and medical and/or scientific evidence or narratives (Appendix A). Primarily, SGP uses scientific research or medical discourses to justify sexual practices, give proof to sexual statistics, or to explain bodily processes. In the first instance, SGP uses a scientific study to justify the normalization of BDSM. The following excerpt is taken from the article “Is BDSM weird? Science says no!” The title alone suggests that science will be the type of expertise that the author, “A,” will be including and crediting in her article.

According to science (yay, science!), people that engage in BDSM tend to be more extraverted, open to new experiences, more conscientious and less neurotic. These facts were pulled out of a couple different studies... One in Australia and one in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine*, which should essentially clear us of any guilt or shame in practicing it...safely, of course. (A, March 2, 2015).

A has incorporated science as a factual justification for particular sexual practices rather than promoting a woman’s role in her own sexuality and her awareness of what sexual practices satisfy her. Thus, her knowledge and the reader’s knowledge become dependent on scientific research.

Professional credentials

The codes relevant to professional credentials are credentials of the author, identification of author's professional or educational experience, and reference to other work the author is involved in that relates to women's sexuality. Professional credentials are incorporated into author bios as well as the blog entry itself. This is evident in three blog entries on SGP. These professionals are sex workers, including a phone sex operator, a sex coach, a sex educator, a sex therapist, and a stripper. Maya Jordan, a contributing writer on SGP, works in two of these professions and emphasizes her personal experience. Her biography states,

Maya Jordan is a former stripper turned psychotherapist. She specializes in dating and relationship advice for women and men, having dated some of the most successful businessmen, politicians, celebrities, and professional athletes in the world. This experience, combined with her degree in mental health, equip her to be one of the hottest and capable dating coaches in the world. Suffice it to say, the name "Maya Jordan" is a pen name ... Maya is actually a living and breathing therapist with a thriving practice in the Midwest. (March 23, 2015)

There is no discrimination between the types of work, but rather a promotion of their expertise and commitment to sex positivity. This specifically works to validate the definition of the sex worker as expert, as discussed in the methodology section of this paper. The sex workers writing on Slutty girl problems can also be grouped with the "professionals, other than mainstream health professionals, who offer sexuality advice and treatment" (Tiefer, 2012, p. 313).

Research question 2: How is expertise legitimized, enforced, negotiated, or policed between bloggers and readers?

I will divide the analysis for research question number two into its corresponding parts: legitimation, enforcement, negotiation, and policing. The analysis yielded several different methods of achieving these actions amongst the three different communities, and even amongst the blog entries within one community. As such, I will discuss the commonalities within each category as well as the recurring differences.

Legitimation

Legitimation is the process through which the blogger applies knowledge that offers the blogger's story added truth or validity. It is coded under reader engagement, reader identification with the bloggers, and the blogger's application of external credit. In the analysis I looked for ways that the blogger may legitimize her own or the reader's expertise, experiences, and perspectives. I also looked for ways that the reader may legitimize their own or the blogger's expertise, experiences, and perspectives. In all three communities, the blogger explicitly validated their readers. Similar legitimation strategies were used in SGP and GOTN. In these two communities the bloggers validated the reader through engagement, which was achieved most frequently by the blogger directly addressing the reader in a blog entry. In the entry "The grapefruit blowjob" on SGP, the author directly asks the reader what she thinks about the grapefruit technique. She asks, "*What do YOU think about the grapefruit blowjob technique? Would you give it a go with your guy? Have you already? Does it live up to the hype? Let us know in the comments!*" (March 7, 2015, emphasis in original). Additionally, GOTN and bloggers from SGP

would express their interest in readers by asking them for their comments or thoughts on the topic being discussed in that entry. In one entry, GOTN explicitly states her appreciation of her readers and online commenters. “Sniffy bloggers like me don’t have a monopoly on opinions, and frequently the contribution of thoughtful, awesome people adds loads to a topic...” (March 1, 2015). All three communities also validate their readers by inviting them to write for the site or to become guest bloggers. Readers also validate the bloggers in all three communities. This is done in reader commentary when a reader praises the blogger on Cara, encourages GOTN to write another book, and asks explicitly for advice on SGP.

Bloggers legitimize themselves and their entries by inviting the reader to identify with the blogger, which offers the reader a sense of shared experience, thus creating a safe space and a sense of community. A common way that this is achieved in GOTN and Cara is through storytelling. Cara tells the story of her interaction with another woman concerning the word “slut” in her entry “The consensual slut project: Why I am proud to be called a ‘slut’” (March 18, 2015). The primary purpose of telling this story, in which the other woman tells Cara that she should never consent to being called a slut, is Cara defending her right to be called a slut when it is consensual. Cara invites identification from both sides of the discussion. First she states her own perspective on being called a slut:

This project is simple; right now it consists of me being a consenting and consensual slut, and enjoying my sex life however I damn well please (with other adults who consent). I wonder how many other women feel the same way and will out themselves as consensual sluts? The word slut, used in a consensual, sexual,

bedroom situation...or in a consensual, kinky, BDSM situation empowers me.”

She then includes the alternative perspective: “I do not expect all women to enjoy the word slut, either using it or being called it in any situation. I respect your right to not be called a slut if you don’t want to be. (March 18, 2015)

A second way that bloggers legitimize their own expertise is through the application of external credit. A blogger applies external credit by including resources such as other websites and medical references, or by referring to guest bloggers who have no affiliation with the blogger or the blog. SGP does this most consistently. As discussed in the analysis for the first research question, bloggers on SGP use scientific and medical discourses as proof or justification for sentiments expressed in their blog entries. SGP also implies that problems are solvable by their contributors, legitimizing the guidance that they offer. Moreover, and as discussed above, many of the blog entries collected from the SGP community are guides on sex positions, phone sex, or becoming more sex positive.

Enforcement

Enforcement refers to the way in which bloggers justify, bolster or insist on the legitimacy of their knowledge or perspective. There is surely not an unbiased way for the blogger to enforce their legitimacy. All three sites have one enforcement strategy in common: the personal experiences of the blogger, which were also used in the construction of expertise, are also used as a device for enforcing the validity of the blogger’s knowledge or perspective over others. The bloggers insist that they share these stories and offer this knowledge because this material is based on lived experience.

Beyond this one commonality, the three online communities differ in how they enforce their expertise.

SGP's bloggers put more effort into enforcing their knowledge of sex and sex positivity. There are two instances in which bloggers at SGP enforce not only their perspectives on a given subject, but also their biases and beliefs. In the first instance this is done in the entry "Phone sex tips from a pro operator." In this entry, the blogger states, "Start exactly how you would actually start in the bedroom: teasing," and then goes on to describe an intimate moment between a couple (March 4, 2015). This description of how a woman would actually start in the bedroom allows only for the blogger's perspective, thus implying that there is only one way to instigate sexual activity in the bedroom.

This happens a second time when the blogger rejects the hesitations of the reader, insisting that they should try online dating regardless of their discomfort (Slutty girl problems, March 19, 2015). This expectation that women she disregard their personal discomfort in the interest of trying something new aligns with Gill's (2009) discussion of the demand for women to become sexual adventurers (p. 16). In these examples, SGP enforces the beliefs of their bloggers, while preventing the opportunity for negotiation, as the reader is unable to discover, explore, or define their own sexual preferences. When negotiation is removed from the interaction, the limits of the blogger's apparent open-minded outlook toward sexuality are highlighted. As a result, the reader begins to engage with a dominant discourse. Gill's (2009) discussion of the sexual adventurer furthers this observation concerning dominant discourse, especially a dominant discourse that demands the satisfaction of heterosexual norms. She concludes, "these things are promoted as positive goods in their own right, less for the pleasure that they will bring,

than for the intrinsic value of endlessly updating one's sexual skills and knowledge, propounding variety, and pushing at the boundaries of what is possible, so long as it primarily involves heterosexual penetrative intercourse" (p. 361).

Fortunately, SGP also enforces their expertise in more flexible and tolerant ways. These include external sources that align with the opinions expressed in their blog entries and the persistent encouragement to keep talking about sex positivity, which suggests that talking more about a subject will enforce that belief system. Lastly, they establish SGP as the "go-to" for honest answers about sex. "Slutty Girl Problems, for starters, is a go-to place for many young women who have questions about sex that maybe aren't as honestly answered in any other places" (March 26, 2015). In this statement they also encourage a comparison, which creates a division between *us*, the sex positive, and *them*, who encourage the taboo nature of sex.

Negotiation

Negotiation refers to the construction of expertise in a way that aligns the sources, credentials, and experiences valued by bloggers and readers. In my coding scheme, negotiation was placed within the categories of reader and author engagement and the expression of experience and beliefs by readers and guest bloggers (even if they differ from the blogger's). Negotiation is expressed in all three communities in a number of ways outlined below.

Different opinions, those of the blogger and various readers, are expressed and legitimized. In GOTN, these expressions may even be rejected. She rejects the opinion of the same reader twice in an exchange discussing her blog entry, "BDSM made me do it"

(March 31, 2015). First GOTN responds to the reader in a non-confrontational manner: “Why on earth are you comparing this to child abuse? In this context, that’s a really weird comparison.” The second time, however, GOTN no longer wants to engage with the reader. Instead she wishes to reject the reader and her commentary entirely, “Did you just say that women who are beaten by their partners are actually consenting to abuse if they stay? Please fuck off. You have literally no understanding of consent, as was kinda coming through in your previous messages, but is now much clearer.” GOTN, along with the other bloggers, are tolerant of varying sexual lifestyles and preferences; however, oppressive or destructive sentiments toward women are adamantly refuted. The tolerance for different sexual lifestyles creates a safe space in which both bloggers and readers can ask questions, discuss sexual injustices, and explore sexuality in an encouraging, open, and authentic community. The bloggers communicate their openness to difference through their interactions with readers. Both openness and inclusiveness can be expressed (as discussed above) by the blogger encouraging sexual exploration, asking about reader thoughts or experiences, and by validating readers’ personal sexual preferences, especially when they deviate from the norm.

The inclusion of stories by guest bloggers is another way that expertise is negotiated between the blogger and readers, allowing both beginner and advanced bloggers to express their experiences. It is important to note that although bloggers and readers are encouraged to stay true to their own sexual preferences, safety and sex positivity are insisted upon in all three communities.

Policing

The analysis showed that all three communities policed the knowledge that was expressed within the blog, as well as external information, resources, or discussions on topics relevant to those discussed in the community. The three aspects that were policed were negative commentary, other sources, and the character of the author. Most importantly, the policing of negative commentary was done in order to remain faithful to the purpose of each of these communities—to openly and safely discuss women’s sexuality, sexual lifestyles, and sexual health. Thus, all three insisted that there should be no judgment or negative labeling of individuals and their personal sexual preferences. GOTN believes so strongly in this that she writes an entire blog post on negative commentary about porn. She admits, “to be honest, while I don’t delete negative comments, I’m often far less likely to reply if they’re straight-up ‘I hate this’” (March 1, 2015).

As a way of policing external sources, all three communities evaluate external sources, which range from porn to academic articles. GOTN and Cara work to evaluate sources that discuss sexual injustices or that encourage dominant and oppressive discourses. For GOTN this appears in discussions of porn and scientific studies. Cara focuses on laws and cultural practices that discriminate against or harm women, such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and slut shaming.¹ Additionally, GOTN and SGP both discuss the limitations of popular literature and media. SGP also places emphasis on the quality of sex tips or sex information found online and in sex education. As discussed previously, however, SGP does not discuss scientific or medical discourses in a critical manner and uses them instead to legitimate their claims.

Consumerism

Although consumerism was not initially included in RQ2, the analysis yielded results that identified consumerism as a contributing factor in how bloggers and readers establish expertise together. Consumerism was identified through the following codes: advertisements, the blogger's consumerist ventures (such as books), sex toy reviews, popular literature, and site sponsors.

Consumerism was visible in all three communities on the home page of the website. It was also found, and promoted, in sex toy reviews and entries on sex positivity. In all instances wherein consumerism promoted the sexual health and well being of its consumers, it was celebrated (e.g., when products are made of non-harmful ingredients or when the organization supports sex positivity). The author of the SGP entry "Transforming sex positive sex education" mentions several organizations that contributed to this effort, including Good Clean Love.

Good Clean Love has perfected the art of creating sexual aids like lubricants and aphrodisiacs that don't contribute to the rise of the very common Bacterial Vaginosis (an effect of using petrochemical based lubricants). There are many other brands out there that strive to do similar things, because it's high time we start talking about what goes in our bodies when we're engaged in sexual activity.
(March 26, 2015)

Both GOTN and Cara provided links to retailers selling the toys. Cara also offers her readers the ability to buy products directly from her website. There are differences between the communities as well. Cara, for example, also uses consumerism as a form of legitimization. In the following instance the retailer of a toy she reviewed legitimizes

Cara's opinion. Her review is not merely applauded, but is recognized for being honest and fair. She tells her readers at the beginning of a sex review, "Here's another sex toy sent to me free of charge in exchange for a fair and honest review, by the lovely folk over at Forbidden Obsession (<http://www.forbiddenobsession.co.uk>)" (March 2, 2015).

GOTN uses consumerism as a form of legitimization but in a different manner than Cara: she offers a discount code for particular toys. SGP uses consumerism as legitimization of healthy sex toys and products, while approving the retailers who sell them. Rather than just talking about these products, the bloggers provide links to the websites and in this way encourage purchases. As for commonalities, all three communities post advertisements for sex toys, current discounts or deals on sex toys, and they promote their sponsors.

Research question 3: How are supportive or destructive sentiments toward female sexuality established, negotiated, and maintained as expert knowledge?

²All three communities advocated and validated individualism in their female readers' sexuality, and this was evident even in advice on how to pleasure men through the women's sexual efforts. This promotion of sexual individualism manifested itself in several ways. First, the reader is encouraged to be true to herself, that is, to her comfort level, her preferences, her desires and needs. Coupled with this is the proclamation that being true to one's own desires means allowing others to be true to theirs. Therefore, one should not judge or tell others how to enjoy their sexuality. Cara emphasizes a women's need to be true to herself as she customizes her blog entries to include tips for all levels of experience and encourages solo or shared sexual activities. In her review of the sex toy

Candy Cane Glass Dildo, she offers the reader options: “Another fun aspect of glass dildos is temperature play. You can cool the dildo down in the fridge or cold water before use for guaranteed tingles and goosebumps. You can also warm it up in warm (not boiling) water if you want to get a head-start on some solo or shared hot and passionate sexy time” (March 2, 2015).

As discussed in relation to the previous research question, a great deal of effort is put into policing destructive comments and judgments about other people’s sexual lifestyles. Cara and SGP do this more obviously than GOTN. Cara discusses slut shaming as a specific form of negative sexual labeling. SGP focuses on several instances of sexual shaming, which include period sex, double standards, slut shaming, and male expectations of their female counterparts. When discussing these issues, SGP bloggers describe personal experiences in which they, too, experience the above forms of sexual discrimination. In the post on period sex, for example, the blogger discusses this issue much like GOTN does in her discussion on flirting. The blogger from SGP describes how she evolved from a woman unwilling to stand up for herself against her judgmental and demanding boyfriend, to a woman who expects sexual equality in her relationships.³ Primarily, these bloggers position themselves as women advocating for sexual equality.

There is also a focus in all three communities on the necessity of enjoying the sexual experience. This encourages similar sentiments as those discussed in the previous two expressions of promoting supportive sentiments toward female sexuality. These positive sentiments include promoting sexual individualism and sex positive discourses. Enjoying the sexual experience is a predominant theme that is found in GOTN personal narratives, as she herself is sharing with her readers the ways in which she enjoys her

own sexual experiences in a variety of contexts. Cara encourages her readers to find comfort in their sexual experiences. She does this in tips on customizing sex toys, in her encouragement of solo and shared sexual activities, and in promoting sex positive consumerism that makes an effort to offer tailored stimulation. Cara even states in a review of a sex toy described as a “Candy cane glass red swirl G spot dildo,” “I have heard many women say that they are afraid of using glass dildos or glass sex toys simply because of the connotations of the material in everyday use. There’s really nothing to be afraid of...” (March 2, 2015). SGP celebrates the achievement of a sexually enjoyable experience as a way of gaining more knowledge about sex positivity, about the reader’s self, and about her partner. The bloggers at SGP also focus on positive wellbeing and good mental state as fundamentals to enjoying a positive sexual experience. In the blog entry “How to have a good one night stand,” the SGP author states, “The best kinds of one night stands occur when you’re in a good mental space and are in full control of your choices, and are sound to make reasonable ones” (March 11, 2015). Lastly, and similarly to Cara, SGP promotes solo and shared sexual activities.

Finally, all three communities encourage sexual equality, which is evident in the recurring theme of safe and consensual sex. This is a non-negotiable issue in each of the communities. GOTN and SGP encourage negotiation and communication between partners in order to achieve the optimal sexual situation. Sexual inequality is considered on both micro and macro levels. As such, advocating for female sexual rights and the abolition of destructive dominant discourses is found in equality discourses as well. Cara analyzes the destructive dominant discourse surrounding female genital piercings, arguing that the recent change in UK law that classifies “vaginal piercings as FGM is an

unacceptable mutilation of women's freedom" (March 20, 2015). She argues that this minimizes the actual female genital mutilation that occurs within her own country as well as internationally. Her discussion speaks, too, of the sexual inequalities inherent in this kind of law: "Even though it's not illegal to have a genital piercing there is an element of prejudice if you do choose to have one. If you're a woman at least – let's not forget that men who have or choose to have genital piercings do not suffer the same indignity as women..." (March 20, 2015).

My analysis identified two instances in SGP that do not work toward promoting positive sentiments toward female sexuality. Both instances prioritize the role of men in discourses on female sexuality. One offers advice on all the activities that the reader can engage in now that she is single. The author claims, "it's time to get to know yourself and to do all those things you can't do when you're tied down. So go on. Explore life and get to know yourself!" (March 19, 2015). The implication is that the reader receiving this advice could not commit to these activities whilst in a relationship. In addition to the generally unsupportive nature of this entry, the eighth suggestion on the list, "Think about what you want," suggests that while in a relationship the woman places her entire focus on what her man wants. The author writes, "Now's the time to consider the who, what, where, when, and why about what you want when it comes to your relationships, sex life, and more" (March 19, 2015). This assumption that the woman had no time for this while in a relationship affirms Gill's (2009) assertion that within the discourse of men-ology, "it seems that women's own interests and passions are required to be entirely subjugated, as they are exhorted to construct themselves as a fantasy partner for the man" (p. 355). The implication of SGP's postings on this issue is that the woman has no time to spend

on her own interests and passions because she is occupied not only with her partner's interests, but also with being part of an "us." A related entry is entitled "5 Q&A's from a guys point of view," in which "the guys" discuss their perspectives on slut shaming, feminism, and double standards. Although this includes men in a discussion of female sexuality, it places a great emphasis on the need to know what men think, which to some extent undermines the positive sentiments about female individualism in other postings.

Discussion

Discursive constructions of expertise anticipated by my broader theoretical framework along with the more intricate conceptual aspects that comprise it are evidenced in my research findings. A consideration of the presence and influence of themes that I developed from my theoretical frameworks is necessary to fully understand both the potentially beneficial and damaging effects of exchanging knowledge regarding sex, sexuality and sexual health online. Additionally, my analysis confirmed the influence of certain notions of expertise in sex blogging, as outlined in the methodology section.

Sexual storytelling

Sexual storytelling is the most predominant theme and method of expression found across all three blogs. More than just a way of describing how these online communities communicate and engage with their readers, sexual storytelling should be understood as a device that allows the reader and the blogger to form a relationship dependent on their willingness to disclose or confess both their sexual triumphs and their sexual defeats. Thus it can be considered as an essential experience-based component of these online communities as it is woven in to most entries. I categorize it as experience-based because it allows the readers and bloggers to immerse themselves in their own stories and in the stories of others. As a result, the bloggers and readers are able to share fulfillments and struggles, creating a bond or sense of belonging that these women may be seeking. GOTN and Cara both incorporate stories about their sexual experiences with the sex toys that they review. When GOTN does this in her review “Blue motion nex 1 panty vibrator: A dirty little secret” she allows the reader to experience not only the

biological stimulation of the vibrator, but also the stimulation of the entire sexual experience. Their personal experiences drive more than just the biological aspects of stimulation and sexual satisfaction. Rather, they encompass unexpected aspects of the emotional or psychological responses a woman has in a sexual experience.⁴

Interestingly, GOTN explores sexual storytelling in her blog entry “Sex stories, lie and memory.” In this entry she admits that her memory does not allow her to remember every detail of every story exactly as it happened. She insists, however, that her memory prevents her only from remembering the unnecessary details, such as exactly what she said. She may also choose to change or neglect specific details because they are too identifying of herself or other characters in her anecdotes. However, this is not the intent of this entry. GOTN seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of sexual storytelling. Thus, she asks, “does it matter if a sex story is true?” (March 25, 2015). A simplistic understanding of her answer would be yes, it does matter. However, this analysis and an understanding of the intricacies of sexual storytelling demand a more complex understanding of her answer. First, she insists that non-fiction sexual storytelling allows for a telling of the imperfect parts of sexual experiences. For example, “that bit where you fell off the bed, or things went on for too long, or you just got a different reaction to the one you’d expected” (March 25, 2015). This is what makes non-fiction so arousing for her. Her answer to this question brings focus to Foucault’s (1978) claim that “power’s hold on sex is maintained through language, or rather through the act of discourse that creates, from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law. It speaks, and that is the rule” (p. 83). The inclusion of these imperfect moments in a sexual storytelling allows women to identify with a story that does not demand their sexual perfection.

Understood in relation to Foucault's claim, this allows for the normalization and the expectation of imperfection in one's own sexuality and in their sexual experiences. By admitting the flawed moments in her own stories, GOTN constructs a form of expertise that does not demand the need to be all knowing. Instead, it requires the individual telling the story to understand the effects of sharing or confessing knowledge. Most importantly, the storyteller must consider how the reader's identification with the story or with the storyteller aligns with Foucault's suggestion that truth is the product of discourse. That is, the storyteller understands that her reader may interpret these stories as truth through her own identification with the story and/or the author. This may offer the reader a sense of relief as she begins to discover a new truth about female sexuality through understanding a different way of telling sexual stories that does not require her perfection.

GOTN further explores the effects of non-fiction sexual storytelling in an exploration of the relationship between reader and author that aligns with Plummer's (1995) assertion that "at the moment a story is told or read we may come to 'own' it" (p. 168). GOTN states, "there's a kind of camaraderie [*sic*] that comes when you read non-fiction. The shared closeness of experience – the opportunity to go 'oh hey me too'" (March 25, 2015). It is this shared experience that the readers of each online community gain access to when they become a member. It is this experience, too, that is so often absent in the interaction between a health-care provider and the patient. The patient, made up of her stories, experiences, triumphs, and failures, is not permitted in an interaction with the medical doctor who focuses on only the biological components of sex and sexuality.

Authenticity

The themes of authenticity and sex positivity were as prominent as storytelling in the data, which may be due to an underlying relationship between these themes; storytelling allows readers and bloggers to share their lived experiences and both are in turn able to communicate their authentic (i.e., experience-based) perspective of their sexuality and their own ways of incorporating sex positivity into their lives. The authentic voice and the authentic female sexual experience are not discussed explicitly as forms of expression within any of the online communities. However, sentiments that emphasize the authentic sexual experience are commonplace considering the use of personal experiences, confession, and storytelling to share knowledge.

This commitment to the authentic experience is also articulated through discourse on sex positivity, a vision that each blogger promotes and indeed requires in their online communities. Committed to their desire to encourage sex positive conversations regarding their own sexuality, the bloggers in these online communities encourage their readers to embrace their own sexuality much the same way. This encouragement of authenticity is presented in two prominent ways. First, readers are encouraged to explore their sexuality, with or without a partner, to understand what and why they fetishize or enjoy particular sexual practices, and to stop judging or telling others what they should do with their own sexuality and sexual practices. The emphasis on authenticity allows readers to inject their own personal preferences, and guides readers through personal experiences, learned preferences, and the development of expertise about their own bodies that offers women the opportunity to explore their bodies without shame or self judgment. Secondly, authenticity is encouraged in lists that explain how to perform a

sexual activity, survive a dry spell, or become more sex positive. Within these lists or helpful hints there is the promotion of personal adaptation and the offering of multiple options, which allow the reader to personalize these blogs. Readers are not expected to mimic the experiences of the blogger; instead, they are expected to authenticate the experience when they have incorporated it into their lives.

These online communities also work against the notion that women are simply ventriloquizing male fantasies. Instead, pleasure is for both and never at the expense of either partner. Sex blog discourse also seems to conflict with Esther Sonnet's (1999) argument that "the contemporary post-feminist texts emphasize sexual openness, empowerment, and pleasure, not as a means to sexual equality but as an individual matter" (Attwood, 2009, p. 9). These online communities emphasize both sexual equality and the individual experience, by weaving these two aspects of sexual exploration together. The battle for sexual equality permits the individual to experience their sexuality in a respectful manner with a like-minded partner.⁵

Dominant discourses

All of the blogs frequently question dominant discourses, a tendency that is intertwined with the promotion of authentic experience and sex positivity. In my analysis of these online communities, it became clear that for all of the bloggers, a woman does not necessarily have a sexual lifestyle that aligns with the sexual practices that dominant discourses expect from her. As discussed in the findings section of this paper, policing the information from within the blog as well as external sources of information is a common practice in all three communities. The bloggers' discussion of external sources

provides insight into the dominant discourses that the bloggers seek to challenge.

Therefore, this section will explore the creation of new dominant discourses, or as they are referred to within many of the blogs, mainstream discourses. Despite the need to normalize sexuality that does not reside within a heteronormative framework, Cara and SGP approach the process of normalization in drastically different ways.

Cara expresses her own perspective while acknowledging the perspective of her opposition.⁶ SGP, on the other hand, approaches the process of mainstreaming alternative sexual practices in a manner that does not permit a negotiation of perspective. I will focus on one instance of this as it also allows for an understanding of the way that this online community has interjected scientific research as a justification for sexual lifestyle choices. In the article “Is BDSM weird? Science says no!” the title alone suggests that science will be the type of expertise that the Author, A, will be including and crediting in her article.⁷ In this article, the author begins by discrediting a specific audience, “those who are just doing plain ol’ missionary all the time,” as a defense of those who practice BDSM. Her discrediting of a group of individuals and potential readership silences their perspective and their knowledge for the sake of creating a dominant discourse that promotes BDSM as the most psychologically healthy form of sexual practice. Here it is necessary to consider Muise’s (2011) research of how women are challenging dominant discourses through the writing of their own sexual desires and preferences. In this article, however, the author challenges dominant discourse that suggests that BDSM is practiced by psychologically unhealthy individuals in such a way that claims it as a new dominant discourse.

Similarly, A's use of science as an external source of validation is important for understanding the limitations of SGP's challenge to dominant discourses of sexuality. The author incorporated scientific facts as a way of justifying particular sexual practices rather than promoting a woman's role in her own sexuality and her awareness of what sexual practices satisfy her. In her efforts to contest dominant narratives, the SGP blogger prioritizes the dominant narrative of positivism, which contributes to the silencing of a woman's own perspective and knowledge.

Muted group theory

The promotion of a new dominant narrative at the expense of the individual's perspective and knowledge can be further understood within the theoretical framework of muted group theory. In the context of sexuality, the dominant narrative, which is created and maintained by men, silences the perspectives and knowledge of women as they are unable to articulate themselves within the dominant narrative's constraints. The prioritization of one perspective over another is present in more than one blog entry by more than one author on SGP. In addition to the entry "Is BDSM weird? Science says no!" the female perspective is minimized or altogether rejected in two other blog entries including the entry "Five Q&As from a guy's point of view," which I discussed in the findings section of this paper.⁸ In this instance the silencing of women cannot be blamed on men, but on the women who have suggested that women are dependent on the perspectives of men so much so that they struggle with it on a daily basis.

GOTN, however, actively works against the silencing of the female perspective in the following excerpt. It is taken from a discussion between GOTN and a reader, Blue

Romantic, in which they are discussing how individuals negatively and offensively comment on porn that they do not like. This exchange offers an understanding of how women have internalized the rejection or denial of their experiences. GOTN (March 1, 2015) encourages readers who disagree with her to express their opinions on her site.

Blue Romantic: “Spot on, maybe this a different subject, but the kind of people that interfere in stuff that’s nothing to do with them, like the feminists* that don’t approve of consenting adults doing BDSM are what spring to mind too. *Not all feminists

GOTN: “I think that’s quite a different kettle of fish altogether.

Blue Romantic: “Soz”

GOTN: “No need to be sorry, we just disagree =)

This form of negotiation allows for an open, inclusive, and non-judgmental exchange of knowledge. Although GOTN is consistent in her assessment of the subject of commentary on porn, Blue Romantic is apologetic for her differing perspective. A consideration of the muted group theory is useful in the assessment of Blue Romantic’s retraction. In her prompt apology for her opinion, Blue Romantic may be expecting that her knowledge will be “negated...or noted in a derogative or negative manner” (Spender, 1984, p. 196). However, this is not what occurs. Although Kramarae (1981) suggests that “women are a ‘muted group’ in that some of their perceptions cannot be stated, or at least not easily expressed, in the idiom of the dominant structure,” GOTN works against this notion in both her blog entry and her comments to Blue Romantic (p. 2)

Consumerism

I would like to consider the promotion of consumerism within a postfeminist framework. As was outlined earlier in this paper, postfeminism is founded on a belief in female individual empowerment, an aspect which is evidenced throughout many aspects of my analysis of these online communities. Found frequently in sentiments focused on female sexual satisfaction, sexual self-exploration, and sex positivity, the female reader and blogger is positioned as an empowered individual devoted to achieving sexual satisfaction. This goal of obtaining sexual gratification, both independently and within a partnership, is further promoted in sex toy reviews. Beyond simply reviewing the features and capabilities of the sex toys, the reviews explain to the reader how the toy can help them satisfy their sexual needs by customizing the toy to align with their personal preferences. Women are encouraged to consume toys, products, how to lists, sexual stories, and new sex positions to broaden, strengthen, and vary their sexual performance. Sonnet's argument about the mass market press may apply equally well to sex blogs:

the ways in which mass market press invokes discourses around female sexuality, feminism, and the pleasures of reading sex in order to imbricate both 'power' and 'knowledge' in a specific formation of contemporary (hetero)sexuality rest, above all, upon a conception of the post-feminist female reader as self-empowered *consumer*. (Sonnet, 1999, p.171)

Consumerism is found not only in explicit advertisements or in sex toy reviews, but also more subtly in other types of blog entries. These more subtle examples are found in entries that encourage the reader to try online dating, buy a new vibrator, or to use alternative forms of birth control that are less well known. Embedded in entries that

encourage women to be sexual adventurers, sex blog promotionalism and consumerism aligns with “current notions of post-feminist women’s ‘personal empowerment’ and of sexual pleasure as a form of capitalist consumer ‘entitlement’” (Sonnet, 1999, p. 171).

Consumerism is naturalized as part of the reader’s sexuality and is used as tool used to discover her own sexual identity through an exploration of preference, fetish, and fantasy that these toys allow her to experience. The reader’s purchases begin to define her sexual lifestyle and determine her level of expertise. One guest blogger on Cara is particularly forthcoming about the relationship between sex blogging and consumerism:

A few months later, after a particularly expensive sex-toy shopping splurge, my partner suggested that, if I was going to spend all that money, I may as well do something creative with my purchases. I took one hour to think about it then set out to buy a domain name. That shopping splurge gave me material for the first couple of weeks of my blog (March 19, 2015).

As a result, readers may come to associate an authentic sexual self-exploration with consumerism, which evidently contributes to the construction of their sexual expertise.

Conclusion

This major research paper illustrates the growing influence and impact that online sexual communities have on the exchange of expert sexual knowledge between women.

Prioritizing experience-based evidence in the form of storytelling and, at times, the confessional, these online communities have opened a space for women in which their perspectives, knowledge, and experiences are not merely voiced, but are validated as a necessary form of expertise that should be shared. This works toward the elimination, or at the least, the overcoming of institutional barriers that women face with regard to experiencing and exploring their sexuality.

Initially, I had an enthusiastic response to the blogs' encouragement of readers to achieve sexual gratification. However, a closer examination of this advocacy for sexual self-exploration presented troubling conflicts that align with feminist critiques of postfeminism. The insistent demand that women push their sexual boundaries can be found in how-to lists, sex toy reviews, and in the instances of storytelling in which there seems to be no alternative agenda other than to share one's own experience. These blog entries that encourage sexual exploration have introduced new personal barriers that women must engage with in order to achieve full sexual gratification. This critique is one of the key outcomes of my research; the blogs construct sexuality in terms of self-improvement, which the reader is encouraged to accept as necessary if she is to become an expert on her own sexuality. This perpetuates a "pre-occupation with the body and sexuality as the locus of femininity...and a thoroughgoing commitment to ideas of self-transformation," which are embedded in narratives on sexual exploration and sexual expertise (Gill, 2009, p. 346). This contributes to a new dominant discourse that chastises

women who haven't explored their sexuality or taken advantage of their right to choice, personal empowerment, and individual sexual gratification.

Sexual exploration is also promoted in consumerist sentiments evidenced through all three online communities. Although this research paper did allow for some insight into the role of consumerism in constructing expertise, there was not enough space to fully understand what kind of knowledge or message the blogger intended to communicate to the reader through consumerism. There are many instances in which the blogger or reader articulate sexuality through consumerism: Cara mentions her reception of free merchandise for a fair and honest review; bloggers put the direct links to purchase website; readers encourage Girl on the Net to write another book, and she offers a discount coupon code. These interactions with consumerism appear to be straightforward: all three blogs are to some extent engaged in selling, purchasing, and advising on quality and usability. However, an exploration of other possible meanings of consumerist discourse in this context was beyond the scope of this paper. Further research may allow for the opportunity to understand commodified sexuality as “align[ing] with current notions of post-feminist women's ‘personal empowerment’ and of sexual pleasure as a form of capitalist consumer ‘entitlement’” (Sonnet, 1999, p. 171).

I do not think, however, that this disempowerment of women is the intention of the bloggers presented in this research paper. While the bloggers align their knowledge and perspectives with the postfeminist sentiment of individual sexual empowerment, this is not at the expense of sexual equality, as Attwood argues (2009). Rather, it is as a necessary component of advancing the movement for sex positivity and personal sexual expertise. Sexual exploration broadens a women's sexual understanding not only of her

preferences, but it also advocates for a greater and more tolerant understanding of the sexual preferences of others. Exchanging knowledge, sharing new discourses, and exploring new sexual experiences encourages a union between sex positivity, sexual equality, and personal sexual awareness. These bloggers and their readers do not necessarily identify “sexuality as the locus of femininity,” but rather consider the female exploration of sexuality the locus of sex positivity (Gill, 2009, p. 246). This intention to popularize sex positivity through women is fuelled by the desire of these female bloggers to identify proudly with her sexuality, and to encourage this same sense of pride with the women who have been silenced for so long. I believe it is this desire to lay claim to their own sexuality that moves these women not so much toward a disavowal of feminism, but rather toward an understanding of their own sexuality in relation to new postfeminist understandings of female sexuality and sex positivity. This becomes evident in the bloggers’ insistent demand for consensual and safe sex, which seems to be at the core of every blog post.

Although the communication of safe and consensual sex was neither discussed in the literature review nor considered within the context of expertise, it has emerged as a dominant theme, particularly in discussions of sex positivity. Advocating for safe and consensual sex aligns with many of the principles that are fundamental to these online communities. In the SGP entry “Eleven ways to be sex positive everyday,” the author asserts the necessity of safe and consensual sex: “Consent isn’t just sexy. It’s necessary...Be aware and understanding of your partner, their behavior, their wants and their needs during sex and always expect the same from those you have sex with (March 20, 2015). This theme is also incorporated into discourse on safe sex, on sexual labeling,

and in arguments for sexual equality. Based on the data I have collected, it is unclear as to whether this discourse offers a form of sexual education (e.g., by promoting knowledge that may help minimize health risks) or merely a more open-minded and tolerant conversation that includes the promotion of safe and consensual sex. What is clear is that these communities are dedicated to fostering a conversation that ensures that their readers are educated about their own sexual rights, while insisting that readers are in control of their own sexual practices.

This advocacy for individualism, which is so often critiqued by feminists, does not necessarily prioritize interests and needs of the individual woman or those of women as a social group, but is instead used as a starting point for adopting sex positivity in a woman's private life and as a greater movement. Rather than being governed by men and dictated by popular media or biased sentiments in sexual education, the woman becomes an independent agent in complete control of her sexuality because she has become intimate with it in a way that allows her to understand how it has been formed, validated, critiqued, and silenced. Individual sexual empowerment becomes a means through which women advocate for the sexual empowerment of other women, for sex positivity, and for safe and consensual sex.

Yes, these women may be mislabeling their advice, experiences, or personal feelings toward female sexuality as "feminist." However, this is not an affront to feminism and might be more productively understood as a tribute to feminism. These women are seeking expertise in female sexuality, sex positivism, and in feminism through an experienced-based exploration of their individual sexuality and the promotion of sex positivity. This is a reflection of the current cultural climate in which women feel

that they must explore and identify with their sexuality in such a way that they determine what is right for them, rather than being criticized for their sexual preferences and apparent sexual dysfunctions by experts loyal to positivism, influenced by dominant social constructions of female sexuality, and motivated by personal advancement. In the end, these online sexual communities have taken on the overwhelming task of empowering women to gain sexual knowledge from each other and for each other in order for all women to gain power over their sexuality. In this sense, the blogs analyzed here have considerable potential to enable women to become consenting and active participants in their own sexuality.

Appendix A

Codebook

Research question 1: How do websites that discuss sex advice, sexual practices, and sexual health construct or define expertise?

Target Audience	Categorization
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Sexual orientation -Age -Perceived dominant discourses/ beliefs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The author -The audience -Number of categories -Category names
Blogger's Expertise	Authenticity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -History of influence (in own blog) -Life experience -Application or knowledge of external information -Validation by external sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Appearance of confession -Invites identification and confession from readers -Stories grounded in experience -Pseudonyms -Self validation -Personal stories/ Sexual story telling

Research question 2: How is expertise legitimized, enforced, or policed between bloggers and readers?

External Credit	Author/Reader Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Reference to other websites -Guest bloggers -Medical references -Where are women encouraged to seek more guidance? -Allow for other viewpoints? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Author to reader/ Reader to author -Respond -Encourage -Discredit -Validate -Reject
Identification	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -How do readers identify themselves? -How do authors identify themselves? 	
External Resources	Consumerism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Medical narratives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -dominant/secondary/criticized -Scientific narratives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -dominant/secondary/criticized 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Advertisements -The blogger herself -Toy reviews -Popular literature -Sponsors

Research question 3: How are supportive or destructive sentiments toward female sexuality established, negotiated, and maintained as expert knowledge? Are these sentiments enforced or policed between bloggers and readers?

Mission/Values	Whose needs are prioritized?
-Entire website -Specific entry -Acceptance of other viewpoints?	-Women -Men -Men through women -Women through men -Both partners
Sentiments toward female sexuality	Gender expectations
-Supportive -Destructive	-Types of women -Types of men
Labeling	
-Positive -Negative	

Endnotes

¹ In her post entitled, “Classifying vaginal piercings as FGM is an unacceptable mutilation of women’s freedom,” Cara exclaims, “Then yesterday I heard the shocking, bizarre, insulting news. New NHS rules mean women with genital piercings will be recorded as suffering female genital mutilation. What? This is **not** my experience. This is NOT what genital piercings carried out by professional piercers to consenting adult women is about. This is entirely **wrong**” (March 20, 2015).

² The analysis primarily produced evidence of positive sentiments toward female sexuality. However, SGP showed evidence of supporting attitudes toward female sexuality that do not fit within a positive framework, nor do they fit within a negative one. As such, I will consider them to exceptions, as SGP supported attitudes of supportive sentiment toward female sexuality in all of the other blog entries that I analyzed.

³ “For years, I thought period sex was not an option, because all of the guys I was with refused to have sex with me when I was on my period. They ALSO expected that because we weren’t having sex for at least a few days, that that whole week I would be giving them free blow jobs just for bleeding. Like, what?! Looking back on it I realize two things. One – I clearly was not dating men, but boys. Two – They were reaping the benefits of me being in the worst pain of the month, because I was bleeding?! Any guy worth your time realizes that your sexual appeal does NOT go away when you’re bloated and crampy and bleeding” (Surfing the crimson wave: Your guide to period sex, March 10, 2015).

⁴ Cara Sutra also incorporates stories about experiences that affect her sexuality as a woman. Rather than only listing facts or citing laws, she shares her lived experiences as proof. Her need to express her personal experiences, to share with her reader the reasons why she makes sexual proclamations on her website is evidenced in her discussion of sexual injustices against women. Personal preferences, and the constant demand that women stay true to their personal sexual preferences is insisted upon in this specific entry as well as in the broader mission and purpose of each online community. The insistence that the reader stay true to their personal sexual preferences remains present even in discourses that encourage the reader to try new things or to be sexually adventurous. For example, the author of the SGP’s blog on period sex states, “First thing’s first... you should only give it a go is you WANT to have sex on your period. If you think it’s gross or you just don’t feel good, then that is totally okay and no one should make you have sex during Bloody Sunday (or ever)” (March 10, 2015).

⁵ This is evidenced in the SGP entry “Six sex positions to increase intimacy.” The author discusses the exchange of pleasure between the reader and her partner: “Girl on top lets you play with your nipples, run your fingers through your hair, grab your ass, fondle his balls, kiss his chest; all manner of things intimate and special in the moment.” This suggests that the authentic sexual experience can entail pleasuring your partner and yourself. This does not insist on the articulation of the male fantasy merely because male

pleasure is included. Instead, it allows for both partners to receive and give pleasure without a hierarchical framework.

⁶ For example, in her blog entry, “The consensual slut project: Why I am proud to be a ‘slut,’” she recognizes the reasons that some women refuse to identify with the term “slut.” She states, “I do not expect all women to enjoy the word slut, either using it or being called it in any situation. I respect your right to not be called a slut if you don’t want to be. But I am not going to surrender my right and freedom to be called a slut and enjoy it.” Cara is not expecting to override one dominant discourse, slut shaming, with another dominant discourse, criticizing those who wish not to be called a slut.

⁷ Turns out that people who indulge in some form of BDSM are actually psychologically healthier than those who are just doing **plain ol’ missionary** all the time. According to science (yay, science!), people that engage in BDSM tend to be more extraverted, open to new experiences, more conscientious and less neurotic. These facts were pulled out of a couple different studies... One in **Australia** and one in the **Journal of Sexual Medicine**, which should essentially clear us of any guilt or shame in practicing it... **safely**, of course. (A, March 2, 2015).

⁸ Although the post makes a number of questionable assumptions (e.g., that a male perspective is necessary because it can give women more insight into the inequalities, judgments, and accusations of misconduct that women themselves experience), this entry in a general sense does not promote any negative sentiments toward female sexuality. However, the post begins with the statement “Finding out what a guy thinks is probably one of the most frustrating and irritatingly hard things girls go through everyday” (March 16, 2015). While the entry discusses obstacles or “hard things” such as slut shaming and society’s impossible standards for women, the introductory sentence places these problems in the same category as the trivial.

References

- Attwood, F. (2009). Intimate adventures: Sex blogs, sex 'blooks' and women's sexual narration. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12(1), 5-20.
- Bashford, A. & Strange, C. (2004). Public Pedagogy: Sex Education and Mass Communication in the Mid-Twentieth Century. *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 13(1), 71-99. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3704689>
- Benston, Margaret L. (1988). Women's voices/men's voices: Technology as language. In B.H. Kramarae, C. (Ed.), *Technology and Women's Voices: Keeping in Touch* (pp.15-28). New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Inc.
- Blumenthal, D. (2014). Domestic medicine: slaves, servants and female medical expertise in late medieval Valencia. *The Society for Renaissance Studies and John Wiley & Sons Ltd.*, 28(4), 515-532.
- Bolander, B. (2013). *Language and power in blogs: Interaction, disagreements and agreements*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Boynton, P. (2006a). ENOUGH WITH TIPS AND ADVICE AND THANGS: The experience of a critically reflexive, evidence-based Agony Aunt. *Feminist Media Studies*, 6(4), 541-546.
- Boynton, P. (2009b). Whatever happened to Cathy and Claire?: Sex, advice and the role of Agony Aunt. In F. Attwood (Ed.), *Mainstreaming sex: The sexualization of western culture* (111-125). New York: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd.
- Bragg, Sara and David Buckingham. "Too Much Too Young? Young People,

- Sexual Media, and Learning.” *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*. Ed. Feona Attwood. New York: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2009. 111-125. Print.
- Brown, J. D. (2002). Mass media influences on sexuality. *The Journal of Sex Research, 39(1)*, 42-45.
- Conrad, P. (1992). Medicalization and social control. *Annual Review of Sociology, 18*, 209-232. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2083452>
- Dean, J. (2010). *Blog theory*. Cambridge, Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Downing, L. (2012). Reading Bitchy Jones’s diary: Sex blogging, community building and feminism(s). *Psychology & Sexuality, 3(1)*, 5-11.
- Farvid, P. & Braun, V. (2014). “The sassy woman” and “the performing man”: Heterosexual causal sex advice and the (re)constitution of gendered subjectives. *Feminist Media Studies, 14(1)*, 118-134.
- Feng, B. & MacGeorge, E. (2006). Predicting receptiveness to advice: Characteristics of the problem, the advice-giver, and the recipient. *Southern Communication Journal, 71(1)*, 67-85.
- Fine, M. (1988). Sexuality, schooling, and adolescent Females: The missing discourse of desire. *Harvard Educational Review, 58(1)*, 29-53.
<http://ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/212286954?accountid=13631>
- Fishman, J. R. (2004). Manufacturing Desire: The Commodification of Female Sexual Dysfunction. *Social Studies of Science, 34(2)*, 187-218.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality volume 1: An introduction*. New

- York: Random House.
- Gill, R. (2007). *Gender and the media*. Cambridge, Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Gill, R. (2009). Mediated intimacy and postfeminism: A discourse analytic examination of sex and relationship advice in a woman's magazine. *Discourse and Communication*, 3(4), 345-369.
- Gold, J., Pedrana, A. E., Sacks-Davis, R., Hellard, M. E., Chang, S., Howard, S...
Stoove, M. A. (2011). A systematic examination of the use of online social networking sites for sexual health promotion. *BMC Public Health*, 11(583), 1-9. <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/11/583>
- Handyside, F. (2012). Authenticity, confession and female sexuality: From Bridget to bitchy. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 3(1), 41-53.
- Kramarae, C. (1981). Women as a muted group. In C. Kramarae (ed.), *Women and men speaking: Frameworks for analysis* (1-33). Rowely, MA: Newbury House Publishers.
- Livingstone, S. M., & Lunt, P. (1994). *Talk on television: Audience participation and public debates*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Muise, A. (2011). Women's sex blogs: Challenging dominant discourses of heterosexual desire. *Feminism & Psychology*, 21(3), 411-419.
- Nye, R. A. (2003). The evolution of the concept of medicalization in the late twentieth century. *Journal of History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 39(2), 115-129.
- Plummer, K. (1995). *Telling sexual stories: Power, change and social worlds*. London: Routledge.

- Plummer, Q. (2014, November 9). Twitter is going WAM to curb online harassment against women. *Tech Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.techtimes.com/articles/19819/20141109/twitter-is-going-wam-to-curb-online-harrassment-against-women.htm>
- Pujol, J., & Montenegro, M. (2015). Technology and feminism: A strange couple. *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, 51, 173-185.
- Sillence, E. (2010). Seeking out *very* like-minded others: Exploring trust and advice issues in an online health support group. *International Journal of Web Based Communities*, 6(4), 376-394.
- Sonnet, E. (1999). 'Erotic fiction by women for women': The pleasures of post-feminist heterosexuality. *Sexualities*, 2(2), 167-187.
- Spender, D. (1984). Defining reality: A powerful tool. In C. Kramarae, M. Schulz, & W. M. O'Barr (eds.), *Language and Power* (194-205). Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Taylor, A. (2011). Blogging solo: New media, 'old' politics. *Feminist Review*, 99, 9-97.
- Thomas, D. R. (2006) A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27(2), 237-246.
- Tiefer, L. (1994). Three crises facing sexology. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 23(4), 361-374. <http://ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/61388653?accountid=13631>
- Tiefer, L. (2000). The medicalization of women's sexuality. *The American Journal of Nursing*, 100(12), 11. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.ryerson>.

ca/stable/3522171?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

Tiefer, L. (2012) Medicalizations and demedicalizations of sexuality therapies.

The Journal of Sex Research, 49(4), 311-318.

Veale, H. J., Sacks-Davis, R., Weaver, E., Pedrana, A. E., Stooove, M. A., &

Hellard, M. E. (2015). The use of social networking platforms for

Sexual health promotion: Identifying key strategies for successful user

Engagement. *BMC Public Health, 15(85)*, 1-11.

Wendt, E., Hildingh, C., Lidell, E., Westerstahl, A., Baigi, A., & Marklund, B.

(2007). Young women's sexual health and their views on

dialogue with health professionals. *Acta Obstetricia et Gynecologica*

Scandinavica, 86(5), 590–595.

Wood, E. A. (2008) Consciousness-raising 2.0: Blogging and the Creation of

a Feminist Sex Commons. *Feminism & Psychology, 18(4)*, 480-487.

Zamboni, B. (2009). Identity, Training, and Expertise Among Sexual Health

Professionals. *International Journal of Sexual Health, 21(2)*, 132-144.