

The self-improved and sexually empowered ‘self’: Women’s experiences of casual sex and sexual wellbeing

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Background: Casual sex is often depicted in popular media, such as HBO series *Sex and the City*, as glamorous, liberating and sexually satisfying for women. However, casual sex is a site where women’s participation is simultaneously encouraged and problematised. Women are expected to display sexual agency, confidence, and pleasure, yet are vulnerable to judgment if they are “too sexual” or have “too much” sex. This can have significant consequences, including being seen as partially responsible for harmful encounters or sexual assault. Women must continually manage physical safety and social reputation, often at the expense of sexual pleasure. This paper examines how this tension shapes women’s sexual wellbeing through their experiences of casual sex with men.

Methods: This paper draws on qualitative interviews with 18 women aged 18-35, living in Australia. Women described their casual sexual experiences, including how they navigated consent, pleasure and sexual wellbeing. Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, drawing on feminist and post-feminist theory.

Results: Casual sex was often described as a site for personal transformation, with participants using ‘self-improvement’ narratives to express this. Women described “trying on” new identities, sexual practices, and boundaries, and framed this as a key benefit. For many, casual sex provided a way to view themselves as empowered, independent, and sexually assertive. This identity work was often what women described as the “pleasure” of casual sex, rather than physical or embodied pleasure. However, women also reported self-judgment when they did not meet these ideals, including feeling insecure, self-conscious, or emotionally attached.

Conclusion: For women in this study, sexual pleasure was largely understood through a neoliberal, post-feminist lens of self-improvement rather than embodied experience. While casual sex offered opportunities for exploration, it also created pressure to perform “correct” forms of sexual agency. Sexual wellbeing was often disconnected from desire and physical pleasure.

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