In the Margins: The Impact of Sexualised Images on the Mental Health of Ageing Women

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Abstract This paper describes key findings of a study exploring how a cohort of 16 rural Australian women aged over 60 years think, feel and respond to the prevalence of sexualised imagery in the media. The qualitative research framework was informed by Feminist Standpoint Theory. Participants in three focus groups responded to semi-structured questions and prompts, interspersed with viewing examples of sexualised images. Five strong thematic categories emerged: concern for the harmful impacts of sexualised images on the vulnerable, the media's portrayal of sexual content with a focus on physical appearance and youth, descriptions of the impact of viewing sexualised images, moderators of the impact of sexualised images on well-being, and marginalisation of women in the media. Findings from this research indicate that sexualised images in the media do have an impact on older women's self image and mental health in numerous ways and in a range of situations. Emotional impacts included sadness, anger, concern, envy, desensitisation, marginalisation, and discomfort that their appearance was being judged by others. A strong sense of self apart from appearance, feeling valued by family and community, ignoring or overlooking media content, and being aware that media images are not real and attainable helped buffer the link between sexualised images and well-being. Another important finding is that the impact is variable: women may experience different responses to similar sexualised content depending on a range of social, health and lifestyle factors affecting them at any given time.

Introduction

Rapid advances in information and communications technology have meant that media content disseminated via widely diverse mediums is now more accessible to Australian audiences than ever before (Boyle 2005; Gill 2007; Tebbel 2000). One feature of this media content is a proliferation of sexualised images: images that present the subject in a style suggestive of their sexual availability (Baldwin 2006). The prevalence of sexualised images, predominantly of women, in mainstream Westernised media content and advertising has been recognized as a gender issue that has serious impacts on various factors associated with the mental health and well-being of women and girls (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Gill 2007; Kilbourne 2005; Tiggemann 1996). This research investigated the impact of sexualised media content on the mental health of women aged over 60 years, through the use of semi-structured questions to explore participants' thoughts, feelings and responses to such content. While there is an abundance of literature exploring the relationship between mental health outcomes and sexualised media images for adolescents, studies using older women as subjects are comparatively scarce (Augustus-Horvath and Tylka 2009; Kearney-Cooke 2004).

The view that older women are likely to be less vulnerable to the effects of idealized images of the female body on their mental health is voiced in literature emanating from the USA, England and Australia (Roberts and Waters 2004; Ussher 1997; Victorian Government

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Family and Community Development Committee 2005). One rationale offered for this view is that women post-midlife, "within a culture that equates ageing with decreased sexual desirability, are more willing and able to step outside the objectification limelight" (Roberts and Waters 2004, p. 8).

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) have developed objectification theory to understand how women are affected by cultures that objectify the female body. This theory defines the process of self-objectification, whereby individuals assume an observer's perspective of their body and place undue emphasis on their appearance. Roberts and Waters (2004) assert that self-objectification stems from sexual objectification and that it leads to negative emotional responses for women including anxiety and shame. Sexual objectification can result from exposure to mass media as well as interpersonal comments or actions focused on women's bodies. Valuing physical appearance above all other attributes and perceiving that one's attractiveness does not measure up to the societal idealised image are believed to contribute to the development of eating disorders, sexual dysfunction and depression (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Roberts and Waters 2004). The concept of self-objectification has been applied to numerous subsequent studies (e.g., Augustus-Horvath and Tylka 2009; Baldwin 2006; Roberts and Waters 2004; Rosewarne 2005; Scott and Derry 2005), most using relatively homogenous cohorts of young women.

Sexualised content exists in a plethora of media contexts that permeate the broader social environment. For men immersed in this culture there develops a sense of entitlement (Boyle 2005) which emerges from the fact that the female body is displayed predominantly for male gratification, as it is portrayed in sexualised ways in accessible locations so frequently. Women and men learn to assume that females will be continuously observed and evaluated; this assumption becomes normative, which encourages women to equate their worth with their appearance (Augustus-Horvath and Tylka 2009). These processes are unsupportive of the development of healthy and equal relationships between men and women (Malamuth et al. 2000). Older women are significantly under-represented and asexualised in the media generally, and negative portrayals of women can exacerbate the stereotypes that exist in society because audience members develop 'para-social relationships' with characters featured in programs and generalise the fictional character's life experiences and skills to real life situations (Grant and Hundley 2007).

Sexual objectification is also associated with gender roles, and sexual objectification's impact on the socially constructed roles of men and women is believed to be complex and gendered (Zurbriggen and Morgan 2006; Zurbriggen and Sherman 2007). Cultivation theory suggests that the amount of time spent viewing prime time television (thus exposure to sexualised media images) correlates positively with women's endorsement of traditional gender roles (Zurbriggen and Morgan 2006). For example, women who are exposed to sexualised images may be more likely to believe stereotypical gender based dichotomies that portray women as sexual objects and assume men are sex-driven. Gill (2007) describes a process very similar to self-objectification, 'subjectification' which "entails a move from an external male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze. In this sense it represents a more 'advanced' or pernicious form of exploitation…because the objectifying male gaze is internalised to form a new disciplinary regime" (p. 11). Gill (2007) additionally claims that this form of self-evaluation is more difficult to critique as it is deceptively couched in the language of female choice and empowerment, an assertion supported by Levy (2005).

How dominant values of youth and beauty perpetuated in the media are associated with older women's mental health and well-being has not been comprehensively researched in Australia. However the issues have been considered by a number of international theorists (Arthurs and Grimshaw 1999; Augustus-Horvath and Tylka 2009; Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Ussher 1989; Wolfe 1990). It is suggested that continually viewing sexualised images of a distorted youthful ideal that is labelled 'beautiful' may have its own impact on women's mental health (Baldwin 2006; Groesz et al. 2002). It is also possible that older women's exclusion from the media realm contributes to more generalised exclusion that diminishes the value attributed to their broader social role (Gergen 1990). Older women constitute a growing population in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007b) with higher proportions of older people living in rural and regional locations than metropolitan areas (Victorian Government Department of Human Services 2009). Ageing women are being diagnosed with anxiety and depression at an increasing rate, and burden of disease data reveal depression is the leading cause of disability amongst Victorian women across the lifespan (Victorian Government Department for Victorian Communities 2006). The influence of the media environment as a determinant of mental health has been inadequately explored, despite government policy focus on reducing isolation and building social inclusion (Victorian Government Department of Human Services 2009). The views and experiences of older women have not been adequately sourced to illuminate the issues associated with sexualised media images and mental health of older women.

This study explored how 16 women residing in rural/regional Australia described their thoughts, feelings and responses to sexualised images in the media via focus

group discussions. The qualitative research framework was informed by Feminist Standpoint Theory (Harding 1991, 1993, 2004). This study considered the intersection between age, gender, culture, class and mental health outcomes, including body image. The cohort of rural women aged over 60 is recognised as one significantly marginalised within public discourse, especially in the domains of both body image and the media.

The study took place within a regional Australian context. Particular features of the Australian social, political and economic environment may differ when compared to other locations, influencing results. The media industry in Australia is largely self-regulating, with voluntary mechanisms overseen by a statutory authority. The Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice (Free TV Australia 2004) is intended to regulate television content and make provisions for managing consumer complaints. The code includes an advisory note on the portrayal of women and men which addresses issues of gender and representation such as avoiding stereotypical gender portrayals, utilising women and men as experts and authorities and being conscious of particular sensitivities around reporting of sexual assault. The Victorian State Government, in recognition of the detrimental health impact of media content on young people, has introduced a Voluntary Media Code of Conduct on Body Image (Victorian Government Department of Sport, Recreation and Youth Affairs 2008). The code encourages media producers to consider such actions as disclosing when images have been altered or enhanced, promoting a diversity of body shapes and sizes, avoiding glamorising underweight models, and giving consideration to the editorial context of diet, exercise and cosmetic surgery advertising (Victorian Government Department of Sport, Recreation and Youth Affairs 2008). The voluntary and reactive nature of these mechanisms is a considerable limitation to their efficacy.

The Australian media landscape contains inherent tensions between the interests of private enterprise and public, and it is argued that the private and individual solitary mode of television consumption distorts and divides the power of the consumer to exert any control over media content as there is little sense of collective opportunity for action or connectedness (Craik et al. 1995). The historical development of the Australian Federal Government policy context has enabled the sovereignty of media owners to dominate over the interests of the public by creating a climate whereby the onus has been increasingly placed on individual members of the public to respond to media content only after it has aired. Even then, Craik et al. (1995) asserted that consumers are quite powerless within the relatively small Australian media market to bring about significant change in content, in part due to the ineffective powers invested in national media

regulating bodies. Australian media has been criticized for perpetuating body image issues of viewers by presenting women with a "constant barrage of idealized images of extremely thin women" (Tiggemann 1996; as cited in Kausman 1998, p. 128), who do not represent the diversity of physical appearance evident in the Australian community. Particular groups that are almost invisible in the media and are rarely portrayed positively are people with disabilities, Aboriginal women and men, older women and same sex attracted women and men. These persistent omissions constitute a particular type of disparity and systemic discrimination in the messages conveyed about the low value attributed to these groups as both subjects and consumers.

The rural setting of this study meant that participants have less access to a diversity of media content than their metropolitan counterparts as there are fewer television and radio stations, and less access to a range of film content. Nevertheless, in southwestern Victoria, as in most other rural and regional areas of Australia, residents have access to an array of media sources including television, newspapers, magazines, popular mainstream film, radio and the Internet. At the time of this study, three free-to-air television commercial stations were available plus two public broadcasters. Digital options became broadly available following the data collection phase of this study. Across Australia a growing number of households (21% in 2002) additionally purchase Pay TV (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007a), although reliable data are not available on the percentage of southwest Victorian households that access Pay TV. While quotas around Australian content are stipulated through national Government policy, the majority of television content is internationally produced, predominantly originating in either the United States or the United Kingdom.

As a phenomenological qualitative study, the aims of this research were exploratory (Sarantakos 1993); specifically, to consider from the perspective of ageing women themselves how sexualised media images impact their self image, including body image. As an important concept for this study, self image was defined as the mental image one has of oneself. The complex interaction between self image, self confidence, self efficacy, body image and mental health has been described by quantities of literature too plentiful to cite (see for example Baldwin 2006; Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Kausman 1998; Ussher 1989). Subjective appraisal of physical appearance is one major component of self image (Scott and Derry 2005). Wilton (1999) describes self image as "a conversation between the body and the social, in which the 'matter' of the conversation is continually created and recreated in the dynamic, temporally located, interlocution" (p. 57). Other theorists also describe the development of self image as an evolving

narrative (Ussher 1989). Both descriptions capture the ever-changing nature of self image, and its malleability within a social and cultural context.

Informed by qualitative feminist methodology, the voices of a cohort of older women who are the primary focus of the investigation have been obtained, embodying in the research process feminist principles of empowerment, validation and inclusion (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). The primary research question '*What is the impact of sexualised media images on the mental health of ageing women?*' was operationalised through the development of three subsidiary research questions:

1. How does a cohort of ageing women perceive sexualised images as presented in the media?
2. How does a cohort of ageing women perceive the effect of sexualised media images on their self image and body image?
3. If women within this cohort perceive their self image to be effected by sexualised media images, do they believe that effect impacts their mental health?

Method

Design

The research was a qualitative phenomenological study, informed by a Feminist Standpoint Framework (Harding 1991, 1993, 2004). As this study is placed within the context of the patriarchal domain of the mass media, Feminist Standpoint Theory is relevant as it articulates a rationale for challenging the claimed 'value neutrality' and 'objectivity' of knowledge that is based within the historical and political context of white male privilege. Consideration of the critical elements of gender and equity makes it a useful theory to enhance the methodological approach of this study (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002).

Anastas (2004) and Curtain and Fossey (2007) have developed guiding principles for assessing trustworthiness in qualitative research and evaluation; the common themes of these two papers in distinguishing quality were addressed within the study. Specifically, the study was guided by inclusion of a clear research question; thick description of the research outcomes (through procedures of data collection and analysis that took account of group discussion and dynamics and the socio-political context of participants rather than considering the data in isolation) and a trail of documentation including participant details, audio recordings and full transcriptions of the data, details of the process and outcomes of data coding and analysis, and the author's reflective journal. The entire research process was overseen by three researchers engaged in

critical reflective discourse regarding all research decisions. This discourse took place through regular face to face and telephone discussions where the research team identified and resolved emerging issues, challenged one another on conclusions, and made explicit the potential of the researchers' own values or assumptions to impact the study. Investigation and relevant use of prior theory and previous research were instigated via the conducting of a comprehensive literature review. Member checking was undertaken to substantiate the reliability of the data collection and analysis. This step provided the opportunity for participants to alert the researcher to any misinterpretations, inconsistencies or omissions from their recollections of the focus group discussions.

Research Team

The research was conducted primarily by the author: an Anglo-Australian 34-year-old female Master of Social Work student under the supervision of two PhD social work academics, both with substantial qualitative research experience. The supervisors were an Anglo-Australian female, and an Anglo-Australian male, both aged in their late fifties, both affiliated with La Trobe University.

Participants

A total of 16 women aged between 60 and 82 years ($M=$ 65.87, $SD=$5.41) were recruited to the study via purposive sampling. Advertisements were placed in four regional newspapers with the intention of attracting women from both regional centres and more rural locations.

Participants with mental health problems were assertively targeted, as a mechanism to broaden the scope of the study and provide insight into a particular section of the target group who may be especially marginalised and vulnerable, congruent with Feminist research principles (Harding 1991, 2004; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). One woman who disclosed having experienced general anxiety, panic and depression was recruited through the local psychiatric disability support service. Seven additional women who were recruited through advertisements in local newspapers also disclosed having experienced mental health problems they described as depression and anxiety. Prospective participants telephoned the author for information about the study, then if they wished to proceed, participated in a brief interview conducted face to face where research information sheets were distributed and written consent was obtained. All participants identified as Anglo-Australian. Five participants were single, eight were married or partnered, while three were widowed. Half (eight) lived in a regional centre (population of approximately 30,000), seven lived in small

townships (populations of 500–1,000) and one woman lived on a farm in a rural location.

Procedure

The research process involved data collection in tandem with continuous monitoring and reflection as it progressed through media content selection, sample selection and recruitment, focus group preparation, focus group implementation and finally data analysis (media content, focus group content, dynamics and discourse). The initial phase of the research process entailed selection of media content. The purpose of this phase was the gathering of authentic images to use as tools in the focus groups. The method of conducting the media content selection was informed by Altheide's (1996) approach to qualitative media analysis. An inclusion/exclusion process was utilised in order to identify media content likely to generate maximum discussion within focus groups. Baldwin's (2006) study was also influential in defining what constituted a sexualised image. Sexualised images were defined as those that present the subject of the image in such a way as to give the impression that they are sexually available. This may be achieved by the use of specific types of clothing; the position, pose, context or props used; or the facial expression of the subject. Baldwin (2006) describes how she selected images with exaggerated sexuality for a similar study using the following criteria: "showing cleavage, viewing breasts or nipples through clothing, very short skirts, overall increase in skin/body exposure, and/or the presence of sexually suggestive posing, such as having legs spread apart" (Baldwin 2006, p. 72).

Altheide's (1996) method can be summarized by the following steps (Altheide 1996, p. 23):

1. Identifying and accessing the documents - this entailed accessing selected newspapers, magazines and television programs over a one-week period during February 2007. A convenience sample was selected, highlighting samples from media sources accessible to women living in southwest Victoria. During the one-week period, 1 hr of television was recorded each day from different channels and during varied time slots. Programs were recorded primarily during 'prime viewing time' (6:30 pm–9:30 pm).
2. Selecting the stimulus materials from the documents - sexualised images were collected from the documents listed above by the author in discussion with the research team, according to the definition of sexualised images developed for the study. A total of 123 sexualised images were collected from the print media from the publications listed above, and 32 different

clips from television amounting to 5 min 35 s of total recorded time were also gathered.
3. Organising the stimulus material - this involved selection of the particular images to be used as tools to prompt focus group responses. Twenty-four two dimensional images from magazines or newspapers were selected, and a 5 min DVD of television images was created. Decisions made on inclusion of particular images as tools were based on an assessment of their value in prompting rich discussion within focus groups. Images selected were all very clear in focus and definition and were highly sexualised (Baldwin 2006).

Following the media content selection, women were recruited to the study via purposive sampling. Research information kits (containing contact details of researchers, aims of the study, study procedure, possible risks and benefits of the study, confidentiality information, security of the data and the right to withdraw) were distributed to women who indicated their interest in participating by initiating contact with the researcher. These kits were distributed and discussed at a preliminary interview conducted by the researcher in person with each prospective participant of approximately 20 min duration. The purpose of this interview was to impart the relevant information regarding the study to each woman to enable her to make an informed choice about participation in the study. Ethics approval was granted in January 2006 from the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee and via an internal committee of the psychiatric disability service that supported the study.

Focus groups were purposefully selected as a 'researcher-provoked' data collection method (Morgan 1997) to enable the gathering of data on a topic that is typically silenced in the public domain (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Friedan 1993; Levy 2005). Although individual interviews would also have constituted a valid data collection technique, it was considered that the broad discussion created by interaction between participants within the focus groups would result in a greater depth of data. This decision was informed by Feminist Standpoint Theory (Harding 1993) as it is gender sensitive and specific, seeking to engage with women in a conversational style that is informal and non-threatening (Schiller 2000). It is a method that enables women to describe their responses in their own language and from their distinct perspective, informed by their social, environmental and political context (Harding 1993).

Women's accounts of their experiences were collected through dialogue facilitated in three separate focus groups. Participants selected the focus group time and location that best suited them, resulting in two groups of six participants

and one group of four. The style of group facilitation undertaken was informed by Bloor et al. (2001) and Madriz (2003) and utilized a diverse range of the researcher's group leadership experience and skills. A balance was struck in the researcher's role between remaining in the 'background', allowing group processes and dynamics to emerge, and undertaking facilitating tasks such as encouraging quieter group members to voice opinions, clarifying responses and validating expressions of difference, thus reducing the risk of 'group think' and the domination of the group by one individual. The four focus group questions that participants responded to were:

1. Women are featured in many different ways in the media- on television, radio, film, on the internet and in newspapers and different types of magazines. I am interested in learning more about the main ways women are presented. How do you see women portrayed in the media?

2. *Sexualised Images* are defined as those that present the subject of the image in such a way as to give the impression that they are sexually available. This may be achieved by the use of specific types of clothing, the position or pose, or the expression of the subject. Are you aware of sexualised images of women (such as the images we have just viewed) in the media?

3. Self image can be literally interpreted as the mental image one has of oneself. Do sexualised media images affect your self image? If so, can you describe how?

4. Does viewing sexualised media images impact your mental health? If so, can you describe how?

Data Coding and Analysis

Data analysis and interpretation took place continually throughout the research process (Sarantakos 1993; Wadsworth 1998). Focus group discussions were audio-recorded to facilitate accurate and rigorous data analysis (Silverman 2003). The audio recordings were then fully transcribed, and the data were categorised according to the themes that emerged initially based on the content of the discussions. The process of thematic categorization was conducted by identifying responses that fit within the thematic frames that occurred and recurred (Bloor et al. 2001; Sarantakos 1993). New data were moved into electronic documents with transcript that shared similar emerging themes, or if they did not fit, new categories were created. The data were further reduced and refined through continuing this process until coherent themes emerged and saturation was reached as no new data were forthcoming. Active discourse between the primary researcher and two supervisors ensured this process was rigorous and critical. The raw data were again reviewed once consistent themes had been identified.

A summary of the themes was then sent to all participants for member checking. Participants were invited to contact the author to provide feedback on the preliminary data analysis outcomes. No further data were forthcoming from participants at this stage and two participants confirmed in writing their agreement with the themes identified; therefore themes were consolidated through discussion between the research team members, and conclusions were developed. Participants were not able to be contacted for final verification of the conclusions, however they each reviewed a copy of the summary of the thesis.

Results

Question 1: How Do You See Women Being Portrayed in the Media?

Participants stated that they had observed a high proportion of images in the media that focus on the appearance of women rather than portraying other aspects of women's lives and experience such as their skills, abilities or knowledge. In all three focus groups women described having noticed a prevalence of images of young women who fit within what they believed to be a narrowly defined ideal of "beauty."

One participant expressed frustration that the images she saw were overwhelmingly derogatory towards women, portraying them in a range of ways that maintain traditional gendered stereotypes such as "slut/bimbo," "mother/ nurturer," "bitch" and "senile/helpless." Comments were made by one participant regarding the objectification of women in sport, and five participants commented on the disparity between the ways in which older women and older men were portrayed in a range of media formats. Participants shared observations that when women's sports were reported on, sportswomen were often attired in revealing clothing or filmed in seductive poses rather than being portrayed in images depicting them engaged in the sport in which they excel.

Six women felt that the ways in which women are portrayed in the media are improving with a greater range of roles for women particularly on publicly funded television stations. One participant conveyed her support for and pleasure in viewing images that are perceived to be glamorous and beautiful, defending the portrayal of attractive images as entirely appropriate, desirable and effective. All participants agreed that there was an absence of images in the media that reflected the type of women familiar to them in their family and community environments. Three participants expressed that the "ordinary" women they encounter in their lives do not appear in the

media and that women "like me" are absent entirely due to prejudices regarding age, body shape and general physical appearance.

Question 2: Are You Aware of Sexualised Images of Women in the Media?

All 16 women were aware of sexualised images in the media. Six women in two of the three focus groups spoke of censoring what they and others in their family (especially children and adolescents) watched to avoid sexualised content.

Question 3: Do Sexualised Images Affect Your Self Image?

This question generated a significant response with many diverse views expressed on the relationship between sexualised images and self image. Responses to this question illustrated the fluid nature of self image and its dependence on many factors including environment and mood. Nine women stated that the images had a negative impact on their self image; however, the extent of this impact was varied. Four women denied its influence on them personally altogether.

Responses indicated that participants felt that certain individuals and groups may be more vulnerable to the effects of sexualised imagery. In addition to concern about younger women, it was observed that those with a childhood history of abuse, young people placed in care outside their immediate families or women experiencing low mood or other depressive symptoms ("increased sensitivity or even having a 'bad day'") may be more susceptible to the negative impact of sexualised images on their self image. Three participants conceded that this had been the experience for them at times.

Emotional impacts women described experiencing personally included sadness, anger, marginalisation and feeling judged by others in relation to physical appearance. The four participants who denied that media images had an impact on their self image explained that having a broad, independent and balanced self image based on their skills, knowledge and abilities and their value to family and friends, supported their resilience and the development of healthy self esteem and self image that protected them from the possible adverse affects of sexualised media images.

One woman repeatedly expressed her belief that there is nothing inherently wrong with the images, that they are simply displaying visually appealing images of young women. Parts of the discussion normalised the images, with three participants relating stories about similar clothing they themselves had have worn as young people, and other examples of popular culture, past and present, that they considered equally or more provocative.

Question 4: How Do Sexualised Images Impact Your Mental Health?

The initial response when this question was posed in each of the focus groups was "no;" the first speaker to respond in each instance clearly articulating that she did not believe sexualised media images affected her own mental health. This was followed in one focus group with conversation not directly related to the question at all, thus distracting from or avoiding the topic. However, in each case, further discussion teased out ambiguities suggestive of a more complex reality in the participants' experience of the relationship between the images and their mental health. Nine women on a total of 34 occasions named emotional responses they had experienced when viewing sexualised media content. Language used to describe the material included disgusting, derogatory, scary and offensive. Women reported experiencing strong emotions in response and these were named: anger, depression, desensitisation, discomfort, concern, envy and stress.

In analysing the data from the focus group discussions five strong thematic categories emerged. These themes collectively comprised 75% of the discussion.

"And It's Destroying Them": Concern for the Harmful Impact of Sexualised Images on the Vulnerable

This theme comprised 25% of the total discussion making it the strongest theme. Women voiced concerns that sexualised media images could have a detrimental effect on the mental health and well-being of individuals in society who may be vulnerable to such impacts. Those groups identified as more susceptible included children, young women, people who have experienced past trauma such as family breakdown or sexual abuse, and those experiencing emotional difficulties or mental illness. This concern was powerful enough to be expressed as fear for those with less life experience or social skills. The most commonly voiced concern was that these images could actually cause harm and contribute to the development of negative self image, potentially manifesting in the development of eating disorders or unhealthy relationships: "It also comes down to young girls feeling inadequate and it can cause a lot of them to be anorexic."

Participants who had granddaughters were most likely to express their concern for young girls and adolescents in a personalised way, repeatedly citing examples from their own lives that demonstrated the impact that they had observed or experienced. "It is scary; it is scary when you've got young ones coming up in the family. You do worry about that." They worried that in the absence of adequate life experience young girls and adolescents may

not recognize sexualised media images as being unrealistic or manufactured. Concern was evident that young women may use television characters or celebrities as role models, thus allowing the subjects of the images to influence their own dress and behaviour in a way that would make young women increasingly vulnerable to sexual assault, sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancy. It was noted that these potential consequences of sexualised behaviour and attire are not often portrayed in the media. "This sort of behaviour which is portrayed to young people as glamorous, they don't show the kids what the consequences can be."

Concern was further expressed that young women may absorb the dominant message that women's bodies are to be valued for their appearance rather than their health and function, leading to a narrow perception of appropriate activities to engage in. This could then impact fundamental life choices that may have an effect on education, employment, social and emotional opportunities across the lifespan of women. Two participants identified that some older women may be more susceptible to this content and provided examples of how they had found themselves to be vulnerable at certain times. It was asserted that women who are experiencing emotional or mental health difficulties or challenging life situations may be less immune to the effects on their mental health than might be evident at other times.

Sexualisation of children in advertising images was another aspect that was found to be disturbing to participants. Six women had observed advertisements targeting pre-teen girls and in some instances pre-schoolers, with sexual themes and styles in underwear and other revealing clothing being popular: "…and then when they're bringing in this sexy underwear for little tiny kids." Seven participants repeatedly expressed concerns that the cumulative impact of sexualised images would be devastating for young people growing up immersed in this media landscape such as "and how will they grow up with all that," "well it's desensitising them," and "it's destroying them."

Although it was recognized that some of the themes and images were not new, and were in fact comparable to images that were prevalent when some of the participants were themselves growing up, there was general agreement that young people today have greater access to an increasing range of media modalities, with less supervision or censorship from parents. This was explained as being due to the changing nature of families and different roles of parents which have in turn been influenced by more women engaging in the paid workforce, "…we have the media for young people to see it so often and so explicitly; it's a scary thing. Its very frightening and you're frightened for the young people."

"You've Got To Look Sexy": The Media's Portrayal of Sexual Content with a Focus on Physical Appearance and Youth

Participants consistently (representing 17% of all discussion) stated that a great deal of media content portrays women in sexual ways, across a range of genres including magazine advertising and content and on television in news, current affairs and sports coverage, 'reality' TV, drama and comedy programs. Images perceived as 'sleazy' or 'sexy' were characterised in a number of specific ways by all 16 participants and were associated with the clothing, make up and hair styles of the subject, the position in which they were filmed or photographed and the overall context of the program. Hair was described as usually being long, often blonde, and make up "glamorous," particularly for women appearing on evening television programs. The clothing was described as "low cut" to reveal breasts and skimpy to show thighs and other areas of the body thought to be of erotic appeal. One participant commented on how women were filmed or photographed in poses that further exposed their sexual characteristics such as bending forwards to accentuate cleavage. "Telling them to, you know, flaunt it all, how to sit to make the best exposure or hopefully attract - I don't know who they think they're attracting the attention of."

Comparisons were made between current media content and content recalled from past decades, and six participants stated that they believed the sexualised nature of much media content today had gone "too far," citing examples of explicit sex scenes in films and costumes worn and dance movements performed in television dance programs. It was noted that the sexualisation of women in images is often periphery or unrelated to the media context, experienced as unnecessary and distasteful, and at times it was perceived by participants to be offensive. "They're not happy unless they're really sleazy, I don't know, I just think it's a shame they don't leave much to the imagination anymore. And, I just don't think it's good." Participants noted a lack of images portraying the diverse women they see in their own lives. Eight participants felt that in the majority of instances the sexual attractiveness of women who appear in the media is given precedence over their other skills, attributes, abilities or knowledge. This was observed to extend to women in sport and politics, where undue media attention was drawn to what women were wearing rather than focusing the content on their area of specialisation or expertise.

Participants in two focus groups agreed that physical appearance plays a significant component in the selection of women for various roles in front of the camera. Two participants were able to relate examples of women presenters being forced to change their physical appearance

by cosmetic surgery in order to keep their jobs. Another woman offered an example of ageing female presenters being retrenched or not having contracts renewed. Participants noted that some women utilised their sexual prowess to their advantage in securing further media work: "She's got that come hither look in her eye." While three participants felt that possessing an attractive physical appearance is an essential requirement for women in the media, four others viewed this as discriminatory and unfair. Five participants felt that the quantity of sexualised images in the media is increasing and two women felt that society has come to accept and expect this increase, particularly younger audience members who may tend to perceive it as "normal."

"I Felt Bloomin' Awful All the Time": Descriptions of the Impact of Viewing Sexualised Images

Sixteen percent of the content of focus group discussion focussed on this theme. Women described their emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual responses to sexualised media images. Five participants used descriptions of their emotions to speak about the effects and they reported having felt angry, sad, depressed, ill, desensitised, uncomfortable, concerned, envious and stressed. The following quotes represent the range of emotional responses: "I think I'd feel a bit of anger," "that one just makes me feel ill," and "it makes me feel sad."

Two participants felt the severity of the effects of sexualised media images on their self image and mental health was dependent on other factors such as mood, environment and life events. The impact was described as more significant and detrimental when one was "having a bad day." Viewing the sexualised images brought about an instant comparison between the physical attributes of the subject/s in the image and participants' own subjective judgments of their own bodies: "I'm sadly lacking in the bosom department I'm afraid."

While some of the comments were made in a humorous context, the intensity of emotion was evident in other parts of the discourse when women shared examples of their reaction to particular media content that portrayed images they felt were completely unattainable. Two participants spoke of feeling pressured to conform to a standard of physical appearance that was clearly identified as unrealistic for them, but nonetheless, not being able to conform to this imposed 'norm' created a sense of personal failure and irrelevance: "Yes of course you feel old you feel fat you feel wrinkled you feel… I don't know, like you're past your used-by date."

In analysing their own responses and that of one another, women in the focus groups were able to identify personal qualities and strengths that were completely independent of

their physical appearance. They acknowledged unique personal traits and characteristics that were of significant value to themselves and important others such as family. Yet even this insight failed to provide immunity from the perceived critical scrutiny of others that was described as an internalisation of the values of appearance and beauty enshrined in the abundance of sexualised media images.

> A bit judged, yes, and … on a bad day – I don't know what you call a bad day—if you're feeling a little vulnerable perhaps and you don't feel you're valued: from the others, not particularly from your family because your family know who you are and what you are and everything, but from outside. Because you don't see too many people like you see around the streets at our age doing something important on TV, you know, in the media. Occasionally you do and it's always good to see.

On both an intellectual and a spiritual level some women found the sexualised material to be profoundly offensive. One woman described needing to be very selective with what she viewed so as to protect herself from powerful responses to the sexualised content that she found difficult to manage.

> I just can't watch; I've never been able to watch commercial television for years and years because of their advertising which involves a lot of that sort of stuff you're showing today and, like you can let it wash over you but I don't, I can't let it wash over me because it sort of offends my spirit.

"I Think We Can Overlook a Lot": Moderators of the Impact of Sexualised Images on Well-being

Nine participants (11% of discussion) spoke of not being personally affected by viewing sexualised images. One part of the rationale provided was age and experience, the belief that women over 60 years of age generally have sufficiently broad life experience to avoid becoming overly concerned about their own physical appearance. Discussion focused on personal values and beliefs as women described how having a strong sense of their own skills and attributes and feeling valued by family and community protected them from the negative impact of sexualised images. "I really do think you get to a stage where you accept the way you look and the way you are." Women related feeling accepted and acceptable for whom they are rather than how they appear, and they felt this neutralised the possible impact of sexualised images: "If you don't like me, well…too bad."

Developing a perspective that included viewing television or magazines as escapism and recognising that many images in the media are not 'real' but manufactured for a

particular purpose were additionally cited as reasons for the lack of impact of the images on participants' mental health and well-being. "So long as you know that's what it is … it's not real, and you can't judge it on your experience." Once again participants acknowledged that although the images may not affect them, they were aware of their impact on younger people: "…it doesn't affect me so much but I'm certainly aware of how it affects kids." One woman concluded the images had no impact on her as she was not aware of having a physical or emotional reaction: "I mean I don't feel stressed." Another indicated that she felt liberated by her age and pleased not to have others expect her to behave or appear as the women in the media images did, as she felt that young women may feel pressured to aspire to those images, "Well I would hate to have to go and dance like that and I'd much rather lovely ballroom dancing than the shimmy shake. I certainly have no desire to dance that way."

Other comments suggested a conscious decision to either ignore or accept content that may be incongruent with personal taste or values: "I think we can overlook a lot." Some of the media images viewed in the focus groups were described as 'beautiful' or 'gorgeous' and two women spoke of deriving pleasure from seeing such images. It was thought that these images were largely harmless and that they actually prompted an aesthetic appreciation and admiration relating to the body and the clothing displayed.

"You Just Don't See People Like Me": Marginalisation of Women in the Media

Half of the participants (eight) made a total of over 40 comments about feeling marginalised in relation to the media, both as subjects and as an audience, representing 6% of the content. "I think women of my age and shape are pretty much invisible in the media." It was observed that there are not many older women seen in the media, and when they do appear they are often presented as deviant, ill, or as representing a health or social problem. Two participants identified that women of any age were not often seen in powerful roles and it was felt that this media situation was not reflective of society where women increasingly do hold roles of leadership and expertise in a wide range of fields worthy of media attention. "What I do watch on television, women are absent. In the news, when there's decisions, on an international level and conferences being shown it's all men in suits… you don't see the women."

It was observed that the few older women who do appear in the media are very "well preserved" or have had cosmetic surgery, reinforcing negative stereotypes about ageing and the need to maintain a youthful appearance. Furthermore, it was felt that the older women who appeared in the media were not reflective of women in the community in which participants live, creating a sense of disengagement or disconnection from the content.

Participants also felt that they were not the target audience for much of the sexualised content, that: "It's still aimed at a man." They felt decisions about selection of media content were founded on the premise that older women are not perceived as a valued or lucrative market by media producers.

> I guess it's to do with feeling a bit marginalised, that the pitch wasn't at us in any of that. The pitch might be at our husbands or something perhaps maybe but it wasn't at us. We're not the, we're on the edge of it, we're not the focus of these images.

Some comments indicated that participants believed the media fail to reflect the diversity in age that is evident in society. "Even the ones who are older are as you said, very well preserved. And you just don't see people like me, which is a shame really." Although participants consistently and articulately identified that viewing sexualised media images left them feeling as though they were on the margins, there were equally regular expressions of denial that marginalisation created a negative impact on their self image and mental health. "No I'm not intimidated by that sort of thing I just feel the word I used before, marginalised. It's not about me." One participant however felt that messages conveyed within the media surrounding age and beauty constituted a form of external judgment and criticism of them personally and their physical appearance:

> It's partly age and it's also partly shape I think, you're allowed to be aged these days if you age 'appropriately', you're not supposed to be fat …you are so downtrodden by the media, you are a slob if you're fat, you know "you can really do something about exercise can't you" … the media is really down on people like us.

Women articulated that the portrayal of women and men in the media, including sexualised images, are politically motivated. One participant concluded: "I think it's hierarchical, I think it's because we're in a patriarchal society. I don't think women's views are valued."

Discussion

The findings from this study suggest that women over 60 perceived sexualised media images as pervasive and demonstrated that self image continues to change and develop across the lifespan and in response to environmental contexts. Women who participated in the study clearly articulated responses to viewing sexualised images that

related to themes surrounding dissatisfaction with their bodies and the effects of objectification and self-objectification upon themselves and on younger women. The finding that older women are also affected by sexualised images challenges assumptions that post-midlife, women are invulnerable to the effects of objectification and associated impacts upon their body image.

The study's finding that older women experience a range of responses (including anger, fear, sadness, marginalisation) to a varied extent as a result of viewing sexualised images raises a number of issues relevant to the promotion of the mental health of ageing women. The findings were examined through a gendered lens in relation to the relevant literature surrounding the influence of traditional gender roles, self objectification, sexual objectification, media influence on self image, and sexualised media images on mental health and well-being.

The Influence of Traditional Gender Roles

A strong feature of the data emergent from this study is participants' descriptions of the problem with sexualised images. They were fundamentally concerned with the impact of sexualised images on others, particularly others with whom they have a relationship and/or a caring role. The tendency to deny or minimise the impact on themselves was also prevalent. This finding is consistent with Jack's (1991) research which has identified the inclination of many women to undermine and subordinate their own needs. Lafrance and Stoppard (2006) describe how women often feel a compulsion to justify and redress any deviation they may perceive they have taken from the 'good woman' role in relation to prioritising self, gaining emotional strength or allowing housework standards to lapse. This pattern may facilitate the understanding of participants' tendency to emphasise the effects of sexualised images on others perceived to be more vulnerable, and to understate the impact on them: "It doesn't affect me so much but I'm certainly aware of how it affects the kids."

The literature indicates that a dominant cultural expectation may exist that subverts women's desire to name and describe the impact of sexualised images on their self image (Levy 2005; Rosewarne 2005; Stark and Whisnant 2004). Feminist writers have explained the proliferation of sexualized content through developing an understanding of how feminist imperatives have been suppressed by new methods of patriarchal manipulation (Stark and Whisnant 2004). The reluctance of older women to fully describe the impact of sexualised images on their self image may be understood as another response that conforms to the dominant cultural expectations. It is possible that this tendency results from older women's recognition that they no longer fit within the defined youthful, 'beautiful' ideal

of what is sexually appealing. Cultural expectations of older women as caregivers and nurturers emphasise and validate the expression of concern for the health and well-being of younger women, while discouraging expression of social and psychological impacts on their own self image. Themes around this concern for those more vulnerable were prevalent within the data collected from the focus group discussions. The very nature of society's devaluing of knowledge and opinions of older women (Friedan 1993) makes these concerns easily dismissed within public discourse.

Sexual Objectification and Self-Objectification

Participants drew attention to many instances of sexualisation similar to examples provided within contemporary research (American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls 2007; Baldwin 2006; Gill 2007; Zurbriggen and Morgan 2006). Also expressed were observations around the adoption by mainstream media of techniques used to give the impression that children are sexually available and knowledgeable, labelled in the literature 'sexualisation' (Australian Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian 2008; Galician and Merskin 2007; Malamuth et al. 2000; Reichart & Lambiase, 2006). These findings reinforce concerns raised by Malamuth et al. (2000) that sexualised images are associated with more unhealthy interpersonal and sexual relationships between men and women by influencing the expectations men and women have of what constitutes a 'normal' relationship. Participants' responses also relate to Stark and Wisnant's (2004) arguments around how sexual objectification of some women impacts the oppression of all women, through the media perpetuating as a norm the impression that women are sexual objects, primarily for the gratification of men.

In this study, women demonstrated an understanding of the financial and political rationale for the use of sexualised images and awareness that the sexualised images they were viewing had been digitally enhanced and were unrealistic and unrepresentative. Women described personal value systems that prioritised more varied and diverse qualities and attributes than physical appearance and were able to demonstrate resilience in other areas of life including a consciousness of their own skills, attributes and value as a person. Participants stated that they had years of diverse life experience, skill development and opportunity for reflection on the development of sexualised media images. Notwithstanding these factors, women described continuing to seek to alter their own appearance in order to conform to sexualised images portrayed in the media. This finding suggests that older women are also subjected to processes of self-objectification, comparing themselves to the sex-

ualised images that proliferate and judging themselves as they imagine an 'other' might. The data would suggest self-objectification may occur in some individuals exposed to sexualised media content (who may be confronted with other co-existing risk factors) in spite of their possession of a complex understanding of the multiple social, financial and political issues surrounding their use, and despite the development of a range of intellectual and psychological strategies to moderate this.

This finding challenges assumptions that as women age they become increasingly immune to the effects of sexualised images on their self image and mental health. Implications are also apparent for the development of strategies to prevent and minimise the potentially harmful influence of sexualised images in the media on mental health risk factors for women. It would appear that women are already aware of the prevalence of sexualised images in the media and possess an understanding of how the proliferation of those images operates to maintain the power and control of dominant white male culture. This raises issues for the rationale, implementation and efficacy of community education and awareness campaigns targeting women, because the mental health problems associated with viewing sexualised images may not be due to lack of awareness, but to broader issues surrounding gender inequity and marginalisation.

Media Influence on Self Image

A significant finding was that participants recognised the disproportionate quantity of portrayals in the media of unrealistic, unrepresentative sexualised images of young women, emulating a narrow perception of what constitutes 'beauty'. The often documented lack of diversity in visual representations of women (Baldwin 2006; Boyle 2005; Douglas 1994; Galician & Merskin, 2004; Gill 2007; Koivula 1999; Reichert and Lambiase 2006; Stark and Whisnant 2004; Tebbel 2000; Tiggemann and Slater 2004) and in particular, the marginalisation of older women in media content (Friedan 1993) may warrant a substantial government and media sector response to rectify.

A diversity of views were expressed by participants relating to how media content influences their own perception of themselves: physically, socially and emotionally. This finding is mirrored by the literature associated with media influence and the competing views surrounding the relationship between media content and media consumer. Cultivation theory highlights the potential vulnerability of media consumers, suggesting that an accumulation of media content accessed regularly and frequently with a consistent message has the potential to influence values and attitudes (Zurbriggen and Morgan 2006). Participants spoke of developing strategies to avoid particular content,

suggesting that they attempt to minimise the impact of sexualised images on their mental health by limiting their consumption of the type of media that may contain sexualisation.

Meanwhile, advocates of gratification theory propose that media consumers develop a more active filtering system, emphasising the particular gratification need the consumer is seeking to fulfil (Johnson 2007). This view was also expressed by participants who claimed that women can "overlook a lot". In defining the target audience for this particular subject matter, participants related examples of interpersonal exchanges that suggested men in their lives did not view the sexualised content as provocative or problematic. These comments support the contention that women are more likely than men to view sexualised media content as concerning or offensive, which was one finding of a review conducted by the Australian Federal Government Office for Women (2000). It suggests that sexualised imagery may be defined as one form of objectionable content for this cohort of ageing women.

Gendered social conditioning may compound other barriers to accessing opportunities to provide feedback to media sources on women's experiences, thoughts and feelings regarding sexualised media content. Therefore women may develop a sense of disempowerment in seeking to influence media content (Craik et al. 1995), hence the development of other strategies for self preservation described by participants, such as turning the television off or "finding little jobs" to do around the house to alleviate the effects of an awareness that "women have a used by date as far as age goes." Participants were acutely aware of the issue of their marginalisation within the media as both subjects and consumers. The impact of this marginalisation on women's self esteem and perception of their social roles as healthy, active, contributing members of society was described as being significant.

The Impact of Sexualised Media Images on Mental Health and Well-being

Findings of this study suggest the existence of a relationship between viewing of sexualised media images and mental health risk factors for ageing women. Sexualised images are of course one of a multitude of factors that influence women's thoughts, feelings, experiences and behaviour that in turn shape how they perceive themselves. Self image, including body image, as well as thoughts and feelings about a range of aspects including how ageing women are valued (or devalued) by others may influence their mental health either as a protective or a hindering factor.

Media content that contains persistently negative messages about older women through portrayals that are unrealistic, unrepresentative and thereby negate the knowl-
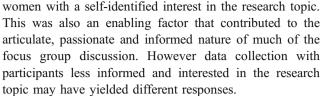
edge and experience of older women may contribute to a sense of marginalisation and social isolation. Women described the impact of sexualised media images as contributing to a devaluing of their self worth and some expressed feeling marginalized and invisible. No definitive link can be established to demonstrate that sexualised media images have a negative impact on the mental health and well-being of ageing women, and risk factors for the development of mental health problems are extremely complex (Victorian Government Department of Human Services 2009). There are, however illustrations in the findings that support the contention that for women who are particularly vulnerable due to a range of other physical, psychological and lifestyle and life stage factors, sexualised images may compound negative thoughts and feelings relating to body image and self image. Poor self image has been identified as a contributing factor towards mental disorders such as depression and anxiety (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Roberts and Waters 2004).

This study found that sexualised images in the media appear to impact the mental health and well-being of at least some older women. This was substantiated through participants' disclosures of feelings of depression, self loathing and dissatisfaction. It was highlighted in women's comparisons and appraisals of their own physical appearance when compared with those that feature in the sexualised media images. Examples of self-objectification were evident, with participants judging their bodies as unworthy, and a source of embarrassment and shame.

It was also found that some older women describe the negative impact of sexualised images on their mental health as minimal; instead their socio-emotional response seems to be at times positive. These women spoke of finding pleasure in viewing sexualised media content. The study has additionally highlighted the resilience of older women in contending with an increasing prevalence of sexualised images. Women's substantial knowledge, skills and resourcefulness in processing the images and overcoming their self described marginalisation were illuminated. The results of this and other existing studies have found that for young women and for ageing women, sexualised images in the media have a mental health impact.

Limitations and Implications for Further Research

This research was restricted by its size and scope, being a small qualitative study comprising a cohort of 16 participants. The study took place in a rural/regional location and so while the themes may resonate with other groups of women, the findings may not necessarily be generalised more broadly. The participant recruitment process resulted in capturing the thoughts feelings and experiences of women with a self-identified interest in the research topic. This was also an enabling factor that contributed to the articulate, passionate and informed nature of much of the focus group discussion. However data collection with participants less informed and interested in the research topic may have yielded different responses.

While some diversity was evident in relation to where participants resided, their socio-economic status, work experience, marital status and experience of mental health problems; the study did not attract women representing diverse cultural groups, women with disabilities, or Indigenous women. The lack of diversity in relation to cultural background, sexual identity and disability has had a significant impact on the findings. Issues surrounding cultural representation in media content and the portrayal of women with disabilities were not raised in a substantial way and the data reflected the personal preferences, assumptions and biases of the participants who were present. Issues of sexuality and particularly same-sex attraction were also absent from the data. Given that the vast majority of sexualized images portray heterosexuality as the norm, the impact on the mental health of lesbian women may differ from that found in this study. Sexual diversity in rural areas of Australia remains an underresearched topic generally. Conservative attitudes (actual, and perceptions of these) mean that issues surrounding same-sex attraction are often silenced in rural areas, creating an environment that may be hostile to same sex couples resulting in negative implications for mental health and well-being (Hillier et al. 2005). Media images that normalise heterosexuality and portray homosexuality as deviant may act to reinforce negative community attitudes towards same sex couples. These dimensions were not addressed within this study.

The findings from this study need to be tested more broadly with larger cohorts of women. They need to be confirmed in settings with different population groups who were not represented as participants within this particular study. The findings of such studies then need to be considered in the development of government and media industry policy and practice. Mainstream promotion of research surrounding the impact of sexualised images on women's mental health and the associated relationship with the prevalence of violence against women needs to be implemented in order to combat the illusion perpetuated by the media and advertisers of the benign nature of sexualisation.

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