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**A Sexual Masquerade:
The Performance of Desire and Femininity in a
Fifty Shades of Grey Era**

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For my sister, Olivia... and all other young women negotiating their sexualities during this Fifty Shades of Fucked up era...

...May you find your voice of desire amongst the chaos.

Abstract

Within a neoliberal Western society, sex is more visible than ever, infiltrating our digital world, media, popular culture and talk. As women are assumed to have achieved sexual ‘liberation’ and ‘equality’, there has been a shift in disciplined femininity, with women now expected to maintain positions of hypersexuality in an effort to flaunt their newfound ‘empowerment’. Research literature suggests that women’s efforts in ‘doing’ or fulfilling their sexual desires remain confined by gendered performativity, being more about looking desirable or performing desire over feeling it. This research aimed to explore how young women, sex therapists and women seeking sex therapy talk about desire. Nine young women (aged 21-25), five sex therapists (trained through Sex Therapy New Zealand) and two women seeking sex therapy engaged in semi-structured interviews. A feminist discourse analysis was applied to participants’ talk, which attended to how the women and sex therapists both reproduced and resisted a heteronormative sexual script and whether women’s sexual empowerment enabled sexually desiring subjectivities. While there were points of resistance, sex was continually reconstituted through hegemonic discourses, with women’s desire remaining a gendered performance that served men’s desires and pleasures. Any assertions of women’s desire were less about their own felt experience and more about being the ‘right kind of woman’, with women who ‘failed’ femininity positioned through ‘deficit’ or ‘disorder’. Therefore, while neoliberal ideologies emphasise ‘liberation’ and ‘agency’, these appear to be a façade, instead bringing women’s bodies and sexual desire under further regulation and oppression. While the sex therapists continually attempted to attend to gendered social power relations, they too were limited through the knowledge and practices of psy-discourse that uphold a pervasive heteronormative sexual script. This research provides an understanding of the constraints placed upon the women’s sexual bodies through unequal social power relations that regulate their expressions of desire or pleasure. It therefore opens a space to reflect on these ongoing issues and emphasises the importance of practitioners attending to heteronormativity and gender social power relations as an ethical response to women’s potential as sexually desiring subjects.

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