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Situated Desires: Negotiating Sexual Subjectivity, Agency, and Pleasure in Aotearoa New
Zealand

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Abstract

This thesis aims to explore young women's experiences in making sense of their sexual subjectivities in Aotearoa, New Zealand (NZ). Young women's sexual subjectivities are often conceptualised through reductive binaries that position them as either empowered and agentic, or constrained and vulnerable. Such framings risk obscuring the complex, contradictory, on-going, embodied ways women come to understand themselves as sexual beings. This thesis then, explores how eight young women narrate and make meaning of their sexual subjectivities through both the symbolic (e.g., dominant discourses, cultural norms, sexual scripts) and embodied (e.g., sexual experiences, learning through doing). Rather than conceptualising sexual subjectivity as a fixed state, this thesis understands it as an ongoing process that is continuously learned, negotiated, embodied resisted and (re) negotiated.

The findings challenge dominant representations of young women as passive sexual objects or as wholly autonomous agents. Instead, the participants' narratives demonstrate sexual subjectivities that are complex and fluid – often characterised by tension and contradiction. Here, women are both agentic and influenced by various dominant discourses surrounding pleasure, safety, culture and sex, while simultaneously exercising agency in ways that are learnt, context dependent and relational.

By centering young women's voices and embodied experiences this thesis contributes to feminist scholarship on sexuality by extending on more nuanced conceptualisations of sexual subjectivity – centering complexity and contradiction as fundamental features of young women's sexual selves. In doing so, this thesis offers an insight into how sexual subjectivity may be produced within the context of Aotearoa NZ and thus, identifies implications for sexuality education, public discourse, women's health and future research.

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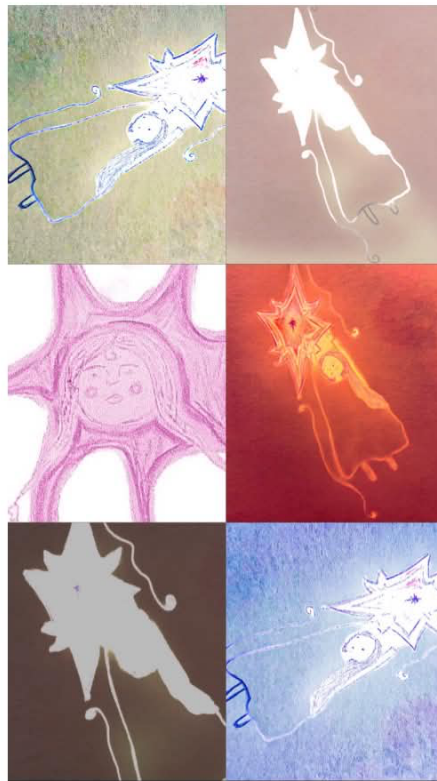




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Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis seeks to explore how young women in Aotearoa New Zealand narrate and make meaning of their sexual subjectivities within the cultural and discursive conditions that shape, constrain and enable their experiences. I am interested in how women can be further understood as both agentic subjects, and as swayed and influenced by forces outside of themselves. I adopt Fahs and McClelland's (2016) definition of sexual subjectivity:

"...how people narrate and make meaning around their own subjective experiences of sexuality" (p. 398).

This thesis '*Situated Desires*' makes way for the grey, murky areas of women's sexual selves by engaging with eight women's narratives in a way that reconceptualises sexual subjectivity as ongoing, ambiguous, contradictory and embodied. Instead of perceiving women as one way or the other, I make room for a more layered understanding of the complex, largely unexplored space women exist. Instead of either/or, I want to explore the "*both and*" (Townsend, 2019, p. 25), examining how and why women might, for example, participate in sex they do not desire without this explicitly negating their agency. Much of the work on sexual subjectivities lays at the crux of assumption, imposing on women sexual and social scripts, leaving out entire courses of stories, identities, and perspectives (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Gill, 2008a; Townsend, 2019).

This thesis contributes to the critical feminist scholarship by challenging dominant understandings of sexual subjectivity. I seek to advance a more nuanced account of sexual subjectivity – one that holds tension, inconsistency and contradiction as fundamental rather than problematic. By putting forth a more critical lens when examining sexual subjectivities, organising my practice from a bottom-up methodology, I argue that more complex conceptualisation of sexual identities will thus emerge (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). By centring these narratives within the specific cultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand, I will trace and explore how norms, values and discourses shape the conditions through which these eight women's sexual subjectivities are produced.

Aotearoa New Zealand

As this thesis focuses on the development of young women's sexual subjectivities within the context of Aotearoa¹ it is important to discuss context briefly as this informs the sexual culture of our young women. Aotearoa's history is grounded in Māori as Indigenous people, followed by colonisation by primarily white British settlers (Aspin & Hutchings, 2007; Bell et al., 2017; Csako et al., 2022; Simmonds, 2009). Colonialism, missionary as well as capitalist influences shaped Aotearoa's gendered culture. By normalising the division of women and men's labour into both private and public spheres these measures attempted to reconceptualise Māori cultural and social norms (Aspins & Hutchings, 2007; Bell et al., 2007; Csako et al., 2022; Simmonds, 2009; Jackson & Weatherall, 2010).

Modern Aotearoa scholars describe Aotearoa as relatively conservative and traditional around the likes of sex - normalising and accepting dominant discourses such as female sexuality being passive and male sexuality being active (Allen, 2003, 2005; Aspin & Hutchings, 2007; Brady, 2012; Braun, 2008; Csako et al., 2022). Bev James and Kay Saville-Smith (1994) describe Aotearoa society as being particularly organised by the separation of gender. According to these scholars, masculinity and femininity inequalities are an integral part of Aotearoa's culture, with a unique hegemonic perception of gendered norms. This normalisation of binary, dominant discourses ultimately was informed by colonisation (Aspin & Hutchings, 2007) and contributes to adverse health outcomes for both men and women, specifically, Māori (Bell et al., 2017; Sheridan et al., 2024). Political coverage bolsters the nation to be seen as equally bicultural, however, this is largely a myth (Bell et al., 2017; Jackson & Weatherall, 2010).

Further, Aotearoa was the first country to afford women the right to vote and has had multiple female prime ministers (Liu et al., 1999; Tyner & Jalalzai, 2022) and thus, as a nation, is, at a glance, known for gender equality (Bell et al., 2017). However, a closer examination of national statistics complicates Aotearoa's reputation for gender equality. For example, one in three women experience sexual assault in their lifetime, with wāhine Māori disproportionately affected (Ministry of Justice, 2023). Further, intimate partner violence is similarly widespread with over half of women reporting experiences of partnered abuse (Fanslow et al., 2023). These patterns suggest that despite the dominant discourses of

¹ From this point I will use Aotearoa

equality, gendered relations continue to shape Aotearoa women's experiences in unequal ways.

In Virginia Braun's qualitative (2008) study based upon Aotearoa's national identity she uncovers various themes such as:

New Zealanders as poor communicators; New Zealanders as conservative but highly sexual; and the laid back Kiwi persona (Kiwi is a colloquial term for New Zealander) with a 'she'll be right' (everything will be ok) attitude, meaning we do not worry about things that can or do go wrong. (2008, p. 1819)

Within these themes, Braun unpacks that the 'New Zealand' character as predominantly stoic, lacking communication skills, even saying that while this 'character' is strongly gendered as masculine, this type of masculine communication is not limited to men (Braun, 2008). This account supports the majority of Aotearoa based scholarship (e.g. Brady, 2012; Brickell, 2009; Couper, 2022) highlighting that there seems to be a reoccurring theme about poor communication.

Some scholars argue that gender equality may be regressing due to increasing exposure to overtly misogynistic narratives popularised within online "manosphere" communities (Renström & Bäck, 2024). The manosphere promotes toxic masculinity norms, where men believe that feminism and women is a direct threat to their masculinity and status (Renström & Bäck, 2024). These narratives often reinforce narrow gender hierarchies, openly positioning women as objects of male desire while simultaneously holding them responsible for maintaining that desirability through the optimisation of beauty standards through practices such as diets, plastic surgery, and exercise. As such, young women are required to navigate a complex and often contradictory terrain, in which they are encouraged to be sexually confident and self-determining, while also being disciplined by intensified surveillance, comparison, and expectations of perfection (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Evans & Riley, 2014; Gavey, 2019). This digital landscape both expands and constrains possibilities for sexual subjectivity, producing new forms of pressure, self-regulation, and negotiation that are deeply entangled with existing cultural norms in Aotearoa.

Aotearoa Sexual Health Statistics

Braun's (2008) findings that Aotearoa's national identity is conservative yet *highly sexual* was based in all the participants claiming that sex is a very casual thing, and that they were all willing to engage in sex early in the relationship. Braun states that this 'casual' approach to sex fits within the broader cultural casualness where, for example, a visitor may arrive at a "house without prior warning and be welcomed" (2008, p. 1821). Further, Braun concludes that young people in Aotearoa are having sex frequently, and casually, but not necessarily openly, lacking good communication with their partners. Statistics vary but it is estimated from different survey's that almost half (46%-50%) of New Zealand adults had had sex by the time they were 17 years old (Adams, 2016). One in 40 women said they were forced the first time they had sex and Māori women were twice as likely to experience sexual violence (Ministry of Health, 2019). Ellis and Atkin (2020) found that penis-in-vagina sex was the most common and that there was inconsistent use of condoms. Further, Measor and colleagues (2012) found that in Aotearoa, young women disclosed they felt significant pressure to agree to coital intercourse with their boyfriends. Other research has shown that access to women's health services remain inequitable, fragmented and lacking a cohesive focus (McGinn & Wise, 2024).

While it is difficult to make definitive claims, Aotearoa is characterised by poor sexual health statistics, rates of STI's, devastating domestic violence statistics (Braun, 2008), an infamous binge drinking culture, (Campbell et al., 2019) and a very prominent rape culture (Gavey, 2019). In her book *Just Sex?* Gavey (2019) quotes a prominent New Zealand judge who said that "the world would be a much less exciting place to live...if every man stopped the first time a woman said no" (p. 23). Additionally, gynaecologist Dr. Makary describes young women's sexual behaviour as paddock mating and in 2011, called for an anti-promiscuity campaign which aimed to discourage young women engaging in sex and instead a return to traditional values (Wright, 2012). Taken together, these findings point to a complex sexual landscape that young women are having to navigate.

There is a constant biomedicalisation of sexual health situated in discourses of risk, and for women, a focus on reproductive health (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013). The biomedical focus on sexual wellbeing has the impact of privileging cis-gender (a person who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth) bodies and sex organs and leaves little room for intersex, trans, asexual or other expressions of gender or sexual orientation (Mann

& Bertotti 2024). Sexual subjectivities, on the other hand, disrupt this narrow framing by centring sexuality as a site of personal meaning-making, the rearticulation of power, and ongoing negotiation. Rather than reducing sexual experience to risk, dysfunction, or reproduction, this lens attends to how individuals navigate desire, consent, pleasure, and coercion—processes that are both enabled and constrained within the cultural conditions of Aotearoa.

Sexuality Education in Aotearoa Schools

Young people explore sex, sexuality and their identities through several sources including health education in school, friends and family, and media, including social media (Allen, 2003, 2005). I focus specifically on education in this section as it is the main source of formal education for young people and because sex education functions as a powerful institution and a microcosm of wider society where dominant discourses and gendered norms are produced, reinforced and made (Quinn, 2025). Additionally, education and the sex education curriculum is a good example of how the intersections of neoliberalism (Trotter-Simons, 2018), colonialism (Jackson & Weatherall, 2010), and conservative views on sex, gender and pleasure (Quinn, 2025) play out.

Curriculum development is overseen by the Ministry of Education (MOE) (for more detail pertaining to the curriculum see Fitzpatrick et al., 2022), which develops the national curriculum and provides guidance to schools. While sexuality education is mandatory in Aotearoa, the way in which it is implemented varies greatly between schools (Garland-Levett, 2017; Graham et al., 2022). This is due in part to school governance system in which individual schools and board of trustees have significant autonomy in enacting certain curriculum (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Garland-Levett, 2017).

While the curriculum has been reviewed as progressive: emphasising inclusion and diversity and recognising that sex can be a fun and positive sexual expression (Jackson & Weatherall, 2010), it still sidelines pleasure, desire and subscribes to heteronormative and restrictive discourses such as neoliberal rhetoric (Graham et al., 2022; McGlashan & Allen, 2024; Quinn, 2025). The distribution of knowledge appears to be largely based on practicing safe heterosexual sex and discussions on heterosexual consent void of pleasure or ‘hands on’ pedagogy; resulting in significant knowledge gaps (Allen, 2005; Graham et al., 2022; Jackson & Weatherall, 2010; McGlashan & Allen, 2024; Quinn, 2025).

Neoliberalism, healthism and risk

Sexuality education in Aotearoa is underpinned by neoliberal rhetoric that promotes self-responsibility while reinforcing heteronormative discourses surrounding young women (Allen & Carmody, 2012). Sexuality education can be understood as a key site in the production of young women's sexual subjectivities. Through its emphasis on risk, individual responsibility, and heteronormative scripts, it not only transmits knowledge but actively shapes how young women come to understand themselves as sexual subjects (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013).

Neoliberalism is commonly understood as a philosophical and political framework advocating for a strongly liberalised market economy, characterised by capitalism, constitutionally constrained democracy and a limited welfare state (Barnett & Bagshaw, 2020; Evans & Riley, 2014). In Aotearoa, neoliberalism has significantly shaped health and social policy since 1984 when a Labour government adopted a comprehensive programme of neoliberal reform (Barnett & Bagshaw, 2020). Neoliberal frameworks prioritise monetary policies and privatisation of state services, alongside a general withdrawal from welfare and well-being aids. While it is challenging to attribute specific outcomes to neoliberalism alone, two significant outcomes have been widely identified: rising income inequality and the deterioration of public services, both contributing to widening social disparities (Evans & Riley, 2014; Barnett & Bagshaw, 2020).

In terms of health, the link between socio-economic inequality and poor health outcomes is well-cited, with these effects disproportionately impacting Māori and Pacific communities, compounded by ongoing experiences of colonisation and structural racism (Aspin & Hutchings, 2007; Bell et al., 2017). Within the social sphere, neoliberalism promotes the idea that individuals are consistently able to make the most optimal choices for themselves, thus, framing state intervention as overly paternalistic (Barnett & Bagshaw, 2020; Evans & Riley, 2014). Consequently, health promotion strategies appear to have lurched in this individualistic direction, despite substantial evidence that education alone may be insufficient to address societal issues such as alcohol use, smoking, injury prevention and nutrition. This shift has contributed to what Robert Crawford (1980) terms "healthism" wherein health is constructed by a moral responsibility of the individual. In this way, structural determinants of health are obscured and those who experience poor health are frequently stigmatised and blamed for their conditions. In relation to sexual subjectivity,

neoliberalism and healthism position women as a moral venture concerning issues of self-responsibility and self-improvement (Cairns & Johnston, 2015).

Sexual education largely privileges a risk-based curriculum of individual responsibility for sexual health that foregrounds the potential harms of sex for young women, including unintended pregnancy and sexual violence (Allen, 2003, 2005; Garland-Levett, 2017; Quinn, 2025). Within this framework, young women are positioned to manage and mitigate these risks by protecting themselves from men, thus reinforcing postfeminist notions of individual responsibility (Garland-Levett, 2017; Jackson & Weatherall, 2010). This framing aligns with a post-feminist sensibility that construct young women as responsible for managing risks, autonomous, rational subjects who are expected to make the right choices whereby, for example, the outcome of unplanned pregnancy may be understood as a personal failure, or the wrong decision (Garland-Levett, 2017; Gavey, 2019; Jackson & Weatherall, 2010).

Within this postfeminist and neoliberal framework emerges the “up for it” subject position, where young women are constructed as freely choosing, sexually agentic, and highly self-sufficient, a concept discussed further below (Braun & Farvid, 2014; Gavey, 2019). This individualised logic obscures the structural conditions that shape one’s sexual subjectivity, including dominant discourses that position male sexuality as active and agentic while positioning women as passive and requiring regulation. This framing positions women’s sexuality as something to be managed, contained and protected, rather than actively expressed thus reinforcing the idea that female sexual desire is either repressed or secondary to a man’s (Tappin et al., 2024). Jackson and Weatherall (2010) identified neoliberal discourses present in the early 2000’s edition of Aotearoa sexuality education guidelines where one of the main policies were to instil young people with the capacity to experience personal success through careful decision making – emphasising the risks of unprotected sex and unwanted pregnancy. In this way, post feminism works in tandem with neoliberal and healthism discourses to position sexual health and safety as matters of individual responsibility rather than collective or structural concern.

Research Aims

This research is a narrative exploration into eight women’s sexual subjectivities. The aim of this research was to gain understanding of how the participants’ subjectivity is negotiated through lived experience, culture, relationships, discourses, and personal meaning-

making. In other words, this research explores how women understand and experiences themselves as sexual beings. Through the young women's narratives, I aim to trace and explore the various forms of 'becoming', noting the myriad ways women produce, negotiate, resist, articulate and re-articulate their sexual subjectivities.

Thesis Overview

Chapter One introduced the Aotearoa, New Zealand context including sexual education in schools, some key theories such as neoliberalism and healthism and I outlined the aims of my research.

Chapter Two outlines my theoretical framework that informs my research. I discuss the poststructuralist subject, outlining its significance for understanding power, agency and sexual subjectivity. I also examine a range of definitions of sexual subjectivity and sexual agency.

Chapter Three contains the literature review beginning with foundational scholarship on sexual subjectivity, with particular attention to how agency and desire are theorised. Chapter Four outlines the methodological approach. Firstly, I outline the post structuralist epistemological position informing the research design, data collection, and data analysis. Secondly, I discuss the use of narrative inquiry.

Chapters Five and Six contain my findings. Chapter Five unpacks the learning of sexual selves. Chapter Six turns into the "embodied" learning wherein women narrate their experiences of virginity loss, casual sex, romantic relationships, unwanted sex, learning consent and learning pleasure.

Chapter Seven is the discussion of the research in relation to sexual subjectivities and the postfeminist subject. The discussion also has implications and finishes with strengths and limitations, and future research.

Chapter 2: Post-Structuralist Subject

This thesis understands sexual subjectivity through a poststructuralist lens (Gavey, 1989; Gill, 2008a; Townsend, 2019). A poststructuralist approach understands one's subjective formation to be dynamic, contradictory, changing over time and crucially, emerging from within the subject (Gavey, 1989, 2019; Gill, 2008a, 2008b; Davies & Gannon, 2005). For feminist post-structuralists, sexual subjectivity is a product of discourse and how one negotiates, is determined by and is agentic within those discourses (Gavey, 2019; Gill, 2008a, 2008b). Here, individuals can take up contradictory and multiple positions (Allen, 2005). From a Foucauldian perspective, sexuality is not biological or fixed, but a product of culturally and socially located discourses (Allen, 2003, 2008; Blackman et al., 2008; Gill, 2007). Discourses are ways of establishing knowledge bound and informed by social practices and power relations (Weedon, 1987).

Sexual Subjectivity: Positionality and Framework

As I considered this topic of sexual subjectivity and discussed my research with my supervisors, I reflected on my own journey and how this informs my research approach, positionality, and the framework that I have adopted. My fascination with sexual subjectivity stems from a refusal to accept the rigid and reductive ways women's sexuality is predominantly understood. As a teenager, I experienced the gap between lived complexity and the narrow cultural narratives available to understand myself. This thesis emerges from this tension: a desire to illuminate how young women's sexual subjectivity exceeds dichotomies and how one's sexual journey is an ongoing one, shaped through contradiction, negotiation and relational meaning-making (Gill, 2008a).

Existing literature regarding sexual subjectivity is largely situated within stagnant, heteronormative and dichotomous understandings of women and in turn, a dated depiction of women's sexuality and sexual subjectivity (Townsend, 2019). Over a decade ago, Gill (2008a) observed the nature of sexuality research and explained that scholarship was missing how culture and discourse related to one's sexual subjectivity and their lived experiences. Gill (2008a) suggested that the absence of culture is reflected in the superficial emphasis of choice and agency within contemporary accounts of women's sexualities. Gill's (2008a) call to action for researchers was to lend less focus on the autonomous subject and instead connect with the dense ways in which one is emmeshed in "relation between culture and

subjectivity” (Gill, 2008a, p. 443). Similarly, Butler (Reddy & Butler, 2004) conceptualises subject formation as the embodied repetition of cultural norms. Building on these perspectives, this thesis argues that sexual subjectivity is not simply expressed through individual choice but is instead shaped through culture norms that structure both agency and sexual decision making. Agency, as it relates to sexual subjectivity, will be further explored later in this chapter.

Throughout my academic journey, I have found myself becoming convinced of dichotomous understandings about myself and women generally, even humouring the familiar ‘men are from Mars, women are from Venus’ discourse. These binary, dominant understandings of sexuality are challenging to escape as they are historically grounded, largely favoured and thus, accessible (Blackman et al., 2008). Despite these understandings, I want to highlight the narratives of becoming that I know not only I relate too, but all the women in my life relate too. Highlighting this messiness, I took Joy Townsends ‘*Becoming Her Sexual Self*’ (2019) thesis where she describes her participants as having “messy stories” to heart. This is reminiscent of sociologist Arthur Frank’s (1995) chaos narratives. In nature, chaos narratives reject Western comfortabilities in which a story has a beginning, middle, and end. Frank (1995) suggests chaos stories are important antidotes to modern research where “remedy, progress and professionalism cracks to reveal vulnerability, futility and impotence” (p. 97).

The way sexual subjectivity is conceptualised and defined rests at the foundation of the problematic literature itself. The definition of sexual subjectivity has remained relatively stagnant over its lifetime – establishing an understanding that one either has sexual subjectivity, or they do not (Townsend, 2019). A reliance on these stationary frameworks forgets and fails to account for the restraints that might hinder one’s agency even in the presence of one’s sexual subjectivity (Gill, 2008a).

Sexual Subjectivity: Changing Definitions

Sexual subjectivities are diverse, fragmented and complex, shaped by intricate variables such as culture and discourse, which resist standardisation, categorisation and top-down operationalisation (Allen, 2003, 2005; Bryant & Schofield, 2007; Gill, 2007, 2008a; Townsend, 2019). One’s sexual subjectivity is a crucial aspect of one’s identity and can be best thought of as the sense of self associated with the sexual self and body – “one’s most private or most true self” (Fahs & McClelland, 2016, p. 398). However, when studied

empirically, sexual subjectivity is often researched in ways that lack complexity – largely due to how sexual subjectivity has been conceptualised, defined and researched (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Gill, 2008a; Lamb, 2010; Townsend, 2019). Herein the tension lies: as a significant portion of the literature stands, (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006; Martin, 1996; Montemurro, 2014; Tolman, 2002a) scholars have tended to dodge the multifariousness of the human experience and relied on definitions that are inadequate for capturing the complexity of sexual subjectivity (Fahs & McClelland, 2016) or rather, relied on narrow definitions that position women as either lacking, losing or having sexual subjectivity (Martin, 1996; Tolman, 2002a, Tolman et al., 2005).

Sociologist Karin Martin (1996) defined sexual subjectivity as congruent with agency. That is, one's sexual self affects one's ability to make agentic choices in the world, emphasising that there is a strong tie between agency, the body and sexuality. Building on Martins (1996) work, Deborah Tolman (2002a) correspondingly suggests that a women's experience of her sexual self is founded in feeling entitled to her own sexual pleasure and sexual safety, making sexual choices that are agentially her own. Tolman's (2002a, 2006) work focuses heavily on desire, equating a *healthy* sexual subjectivity with when a woman can feel desire and then act on it (e.g., entitlement to pleasure). Within the last decade, Montemurro (2014) defines sexual subjectivity as the ability to garner agency in sexual situations, being both willing and eager to give and receive pleasure in said sexual interactions and having the confidence to make purposeful decisions (e.g., communicating desires, refusing sex).

These above definitions rely heavily on women having abundant access to agency, desire and pleasure. Further, they tend towards an idealised, rational self rather than a subjective definition of the actual concept, sexual subjectivity (Gill, 2007; Townsend, 2019). These definitions solely focus on the practice of enacting agency, desire and entitlement to sexual pleasure. While these are positive variables of one's sexual self, they are consistent with culturally specific Western, neoliberal measures of sexual subjectivity wherein one is their best, coherent self (Fahs et al., 2018; Fahs & McClelland, 2016, Townsend, 2019). Instead of the women's meaning making informing what their own sexual subjectivity is, these definitions map out a checklist where participants either mark high, or mark low. This standpoint assumes that all women experience the world in the same way, devoid of discourse surrounding social norms, policies, race or culture (Gavey, 2019; Gill, 2007, 2008a, 2008b). This logic implies that if desire is felt but not enacted (i.e. being agentic), this

individual has an unhealthy sexual subjectivity or lacks it altogether. To assume a direct link between one's desire and one's ability to act on it, we fail to account for variables that hinder one's agency – even in the presence of one's sexual subjectivity (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Gill, 2007; Townsend, 2019).

Throughout this thesis, I will adopt Fahs and McClelland's (2016) definition of sexual subjectivity: "...how people narrate and make meaning around their own subjective experiences of sexuality" (p. 398). This definition may be critiqued for its breadth; however, I intentionally chose a vast definition to reject the assumption that one's sexual self is presupposed. By applying an expansive definition to sexual subjectivity, it is possible to regard one's sexual subjectivity as a site through which relational meaning-making is actively and continually negotiated and produced.

Defining Sexual Agency

As previously discussed, the term agency is often used to support definitions of sexual subjectivity (Martin, 1996; Montemurro, 2014; Tolman, 2002a). However, positioning agency as a direct correlate of one's sexual subjectivity, or even proof of, mistakenly assumes all individuals as equally placed in making empowered, agentic decisions (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). Further, agency has been conceptualised as feminist or antifeminist and/or conservative versus progressive (Fahs et al., 2018). This dichotomous understanding of either having agency or lacking agency, flattens the already uneven social and cultural conditions under which sexual decisions are made (Gill, 2007; Opperman et al., 2014; Powell, 2010).

Having agency has largely been equated to seeking one's own pleasure, sexually asserting oneself, insisting on condom use, resisting unwanted sex, and feeling comfortable communicating one's needs, wants and desires in sexual situations (Bryant & Schofield, 2007; Fahs et al., 2018; Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Townsend, 2019). In this way, sexual agency has been framed as a protective factor in some sexuality studies scholarship (Fahs et al., 2018; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006; Martin, 1996; Montemurro, 2014). By treating sexual agency as synonymous with sexual subjectivity, women who do not, or cannot advocate for themselves are at risk of being understood as passive or disempowered.

Critical sexuality researchers explain that this emphasis on the need to have sexual agency results in the unfair individualisation of responsibility where the burden of sexual

safety and pleasure is shifted onto young women (Fahs et al., 2018; Gavey, 2019; Gill, 2007; Townsend, 2019). This framing supports the unjust inference that negative outcomes (e.g., coercive sex, sexually transmitted infections, unpleasurable sex) are interpreted as evidence that a young women failed to act with agency (Fahs et al., 2018). This logic then, subtly erases structural constraints that shape how women negotiate their sexual encounters such as gendered power relations, heteropatriarchal scripts, and violence (Gill, 2007; Masters et al., 2013). Fahs and McClelland (2016) concisely articulate their understanding of agency across two axes: The first axis defines agency through the perception of one having power and choice in one's sexual choices (e.g., partner selection, sexual activities and refusal for sex). The second axis articulates agency by how young women navigate and negotiate sexual norms. This axis recognises agency as less about one's personal capacity and is more sympathetic to and critiques how young women are expected to be empowered even in light of disempowering structures.

In this thesis, I draw on both axes in my conceptualisation of agency as it relates to sexual subjectivity. I treat agency as both an experienced capacity to agentically act and as a construct produced through discourse. For the first axis, I employ Weeks (2011) definition of agency which suggests that all individuals have the capacity to act in the world freely and as "self-determined actors" (p. 6). I am equally, if not more agreeing of the second axis which conceptualises sexual agency as shaped by cultural norms such as post-feminism or neoliberalism (Gill, 2008a; Townsend, 2019). As discussed, these frameworks position young women as appearing agentic whilst also being limited in how far they take that agency.

I approach agency critically, by ultimately challenging the neoliberal autonomous, self-determining person. While neoliberal and post-feminist discourses situate women as empowered (Gill, 2007, 2008a; Townsend, 2019), this disguises or at least, quiets the social conditions that ultimately influence women's sexual subjectivities in Aotearoa. So, rather than assuming women are either free or constrained, I consider how young women navigate tensions between their perceived autonomy and cultural expectations and how, in turn, these women produce their sexual selves in complex and sometimes contradictory ways (Townsend, 2019). By this way, agency is not understood as a stable construct but as something that emerges relationally, through ongoing negotiations within power rather than as a one-dimensional reflection of one's ability to act agentically at all times (Gill, 2007, 2008b; Townsend, 2019).

Power, Foucault and Technologies of Self

Within radical feminist theory, patriarchy is identified as the fundamental source of women's oppression (Powell, 2010; Rowland & Klein, 1996). While this framing reflects important historical truths, it also constrains the possibilities of understanding women's sexual subjectivity as agentic, active, or even dominant (Evans & Riley, 2014; Gill, 2007, 2008a; Townsend, 2019). By engaging with Michael Foucault's (1978) theorisation of power, the understanding of women's sexual subjectivities is afforded a productive alternative. Foucault's articulation of power is described as "unstable and changeable" (McNay, 1992, p. 67). Further, Foucault argues that power does not only repress, but it also navigates and generates 'things' such as inducing pleasure, different types of knowledge and produces discourses (McNay, 1992, 2000). In this way then, rather than viewing structures of power (e.g., patriarchy) as only repressive, we can reenvision women's interaction with these structures as relational and productive (Fahs et al., 2018; Powell, 2010).

Foucault's understanding of power also comprehends the way/s in which young women may discipline themselves into complying with interactions that are not wanted (Powell, 2010; Townsend, 2019). For example, rather than women being seen as disempowered when complying with unwanted sex, this is reconceptualised as an agentic response to women engaging with a discourse that states it is not womanly to behave assertively (Gill & Orgad, 2017; Powell, 2010). Crucially, this is not to say that there is not a very valid issue of direct coercion by some men towards young women. Rather, this understanding counts for the more subtle level of societal and cultural pressure that operates through discourse (Powell, 2010). Acknowledging that Foucault's articulation of power is welcome to change, even going as far as transmitting it, allows the understanding of sexual subjectivity to be a productive and changeable site (McNay, 1992; Townsend, 2019). Foucauldian theory understands relations of power to be "an always-present structural feature of human societies" (Weedon, 1987, p. 111). That is, subjectivity should not be understood solely as the effect of power relations, but rather as the site where power is continuously enacted and negotiated. This framing is useful as it shifts the focus to how individuals are actively engaging with and make sense of power in the formation of their subjectivities.

Foucault was criticised about his conceptualisation of power/discourse and how it relates to agency (Powell, 2010). Critics claim that his understanding of power and discourse lacked an understanding of agency in that individuals were thought of as docile, passive and

disciplined subjects (Gill & Orgad, 2017; Townsend, 2019) upon which social and cultural discourses were simply adorned (Powell, 2010). Partly to address these critiques Foucault's (1988) later work moved to developing the concept of technologies of subjectivity and technologies of self. Technologies of subjectivity refer to the broader ways of meaning-making whereas technologies of self refer to the ways in which these technologies of subjectivity are practically applied and thus, made personal (Evans et al., 2010; Evans & Riley, 2014; Townsend, 2019). The introduction of technologies of the self, was a key conceptual tool for understanding subjects as produced by discourses and regimes of truth whilst not denying one's ability to be agentic and live creatively (Evans et al., 2010; Gill & Orgad, 2017; Powell, 2010; Townsend, 2019; Weedon, 1987). Technologies of self also refers to the agentic, deliberate efforts one employs to better themselves while still holding together the previous work on power and agency (Evans et al., 2010; McNay, 1992; Powell, 2010). Individuals are positioned as subjects within external forces (not of their own making) and are also themselves actively engaged in the process of self-formation (Gill & Orgad, 2017).

A term derived from technology of self, is the 'technology of sexiness' (Evans et al., 2010; Evans & Riley, 2014; Gill, 2007). This term accounts for women's engagement with both symbolic and material dominant discourses in the pursuit of hetero (*sexy*) subjectivity (Evans et al., 2010; Gill & Orgad, 2017). Here, sexiness is not an innate quality but a practiced and learned performance, informed by both neoliberal and post-feminist discourses (Evans et al., 2010; Gill & Orgad, 2017). These 'technologies' ranging from makeup and beauty practices to mediated sexual scripts, offer women a sense of agency and pleasure in constructing themselves as sexually knowledgeable subjects (Gill, 2007, 2008a). People do not just get shaped – they also actively work on themselves in pursuit of 'self-improvement' (Evans & Riley, 2014). Judith Butler built on Foucault's work and offers a more explicit account of how agency operates within cultural constraints (Evans et al., 2010; Evans & Riley, 2014; Gill & Orgad, 2017; Powell, 2010; Rome & Lambert, 2020). While Foucault suggests that agency arises from individuals' ability to interact and work within available discourses, Butler extends this with her emphasis on performativity (Gill, 2007; Gill & Orgad, 2017; Townsend, 2010). Butler argues that through the concept of performativity, identities are not fixed, and thus, extends the notion of agency to one's ability for personal alterations of the available discourses – even within power structures (Evans et al., 2010; Gill & Orgad, 2017). Butler contends that all gender is performative, meaning there is no

singular or authentic femininity that precedes its enactment. Instead, gender identity is performed through the imitation of an 'original' that has been historically and discursively constituted, rendering it inherently unstable (Reddy & Butler, 2004).

When an individual performs the 'norm', they are not replicating the perfect original because, there is *no* perfect original (Evans et al., 2010; Evans & Riley, 2014; Gill & Orgad, 2017). In this way, each performance involves a gap between the norm and its enactment. That gap then, is where Butler argues agency resides (Evans & Riley, 2014; Evans et al., 2010; Reddy & Butler, 2004). Agency, therefore, does not consist of total freedom from norms, but in one's capacity to slightly alter, reinterpret or negotiate it (e.g., being sexy in a way that centres your own pleasure or performing what you think is femininity but exaggerating it, softening it, resisting parts of it) (Evans & Riley, 2014). Change happens not outside power systems, but through it. Repetition of norms is thus both constraining and enabling whereby each performance creates the possibility for variation, reinterpretation and subtle changes.

From this perspective then, dominant discourses should not be understood as monolithic (Bryant & Schofield, 2007; Evans et al., 2010; Evans & Riley, 2014; Gill, 2007). Instead, they are composed of varying elements which shift in meaning, and produce various knowledge - simultaneously, making new discourses at the same time (Bryant & Schofield, 2007; Impett et al., 2002; Powell, 2010). For example, there are multiple discourses within the up for it subject. Such multiplicity is identified by various scholars (Evans et al., 2010; Gill, 2007, 2008a; Gill & Orgad, 2017) whereby, for example, within the up for it, post-feminist sensibility a woman may enjoy sex that societal norms deem as male centred but at the same time, refuses to wax her pubic hair (Gill, 2007). Here, the two differing behaviours are contradicting each other, highlighting the realistic experience of the human experience and the agency that is negotiated and produced *through* these tensions.

Feminist Sexual Subjectivity as a Generative Project: An Embodied Project, a Praxis in Time

Critical sexuality scholars argue that subject positions do not exist in isolation. Rather, they are intertwined - existing together fluidly and complexly (Townsend, 2019). Sometimes, one position may be compelling another position(s) (Gavey, 2019; Townsend, 2019). For example, it may be the case for a woman to feel a strong sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure when engaging in sex and at the same time, value and have interest in sex congruous

with male-centred pornography where women may be portrayed as sexual objects (Townsend, 2019). This speaks to the ambiguity young women often face when negotiating their sexual subjectivity — specifically, the tension between *being* sexual and *being* sexualised, for example, the neoliberal informed, postfeminist subject position. These positions can overlap or be experienced simultaneously, blurring the line between agency and objectification. As Feona Attwood argues, the sexualisation of women is “profoundly contradictory” (2009, p. xviii) blending emancipatory and oppressive meanings of sexuality and gender.

Accounting for this complexity, Bryant and Schofield (2007) frame female sexual subjectivity as a “generative project” (2007, p. 336), a process that unfolds over time through lived and reflexive experiences. However, the value of time is not to be understood as chronological temporality but rather a reflexive accumulation of events, behaviours and actions across time; this process is not linear but instead dynamic (Bryant & Schofield, 2007). One’s sexual subjectivity is informed by past actions that then inform present actions and understandings in dynamic and unpredictable ways.

In contrast to Bryant and Schofield’s (2007) embodied project, Beth Montemurro’s (2014) study *Deserving Desire* documented the development of heterosexual women’s sexual subjectivity over their life course. Whilst this study is extensive, Montemurro defines sexual subjectivity as a developmental achievement; something you gain, lose or never develop. Montemurro proposes that women achieve sexual subjectivity cumulatively across one’s lifetime, adopting a life-course approach to sexuality². Montemurro developed a framework that identifies five transitional periods that a woman develops her sexual subjectivity through. For example, women begin at *developing a stance* where young girls are said to be observing the world, and thus, developing a stance on their internal thoughts on sex and sexuality. Montemurro explains that formative heterosexual relationships are instrumental in a woman’s ability to understand her sexual self. Here, she explains that for women to feel like sexual subjects and not objects, they often look to their male counterparts to confirm they are entitled to sexual pleasure. Montemurro goes on to say that these specific stages/episodes in women’s life’s mediate or suppress the development of sexual subjectivity e.g., sexual abuse, waning desire, dissolution of relationships are all said to confound the process of

² For more information, see Carpenter and DeLamater’s 2012 Gendered Sexuality Over the Life Course framework

developing sexual subjectivity and explains why some women have more or less agency as they age.

Čierna and Bianchi's (2024) stress emphasis on the "importance of reflection and interpretation of events and occasions that contribute to an individual's sexual trajectory" (p. 32). Their findings support the notion of an embodied, relational process where sexual subjectivity is continuously being reinterpreted and redeveloped. Čierna and Bianchi (2024) argue that individuals experience life at different speeds and that the events and experiences that occur in the subject's life do so in varying order, overlap and sometimes, do not occur at all. These findings also support Gavey's (2019) argument that individuals are not passive dupes of discourse and culture. More realistically then, individuals pull back at the same time they are being pulled forward (Gavey, 2019; Gill, 2007). In this sense, women's sexual subjectivities are influenced and shaped by dominant discourses while simultaneously being actively reworked and renegotiated through everyday experiences (Bryant & Schofield, 2007; Townsend, 2019).

Bryant and Schofield (2007) caution against understanding sexual subjectivity as purely discursive and argue that we extend to address the body. Understanding sexual subjectivity strictly through discourse risks relying on an overly mechanical and deterministic relationship between discourse and doing (Bryant & Schofield, 2007; Mirtz, 2019). To extend on how active agents interact with and interpret the 'symbolic' discourses available to them, we must also acknowledge bodily practice. To this point, it is through the embodied doing - the bodily practice of *doing* sex - that the symbolism of discourse is made to mean something and to become a real-life experience (Bryant & Schofield, 2007; Čierna & Bianchi, 2024; Gavey, 2019; Gill, 2007, 2008a). This understanding is critical as it advances the understanding of women's sexuality as an active entity, rather than a responsive thing. This line of thinking suggests that the body is in action and is a dynamic force in generating sexual subjectivities. Here, the scripts and discourse influence our ideas which thus determine our actions (Bryant & Schofield, 2007). Crucially, reliance on discourse is not rendered insignificant and significantly assists my understanding of sexual subjectivity, but the role it plays may be symbolic over deterministic. From this perspective, the body is lived in or embodied (Bryant & Schofield, 2007).

Extending on the significance of embodiment, Bryant and Scholfield's (2007) argue that it is the doing of sex that allows the subject to engage, negotiate and make sense of

discursive meanings. In this way, through embodiment, women are not discursive objects but are reflexive beings who actively interact with available sexual discourses in the making of their sexual subjectivities (Bryant & Schofield, 2007). The authors describe a participant who explained her experience with saying no when a man asked her to have sex. After this encounter, her successive sexual encounters saw her embrace her right to sexual self-determination which resulted in an altered sexual subjectivity (Bryant & Schofield, 2007). Bryant and Schofield draw on McNay (2000), claiming that the body seems to be a “mutable and dynamic frontier” (p. 338). McNay (2000) argues that the journey of gaining selfhood is dependent on participation. Here, symbolic knowledge is incorporated and lived in the body through embodied doing (McNay, 2000). In this way, embodied ‘doing’ is crucial in the development of one's sexual subjectivity journey and can be also recognised in this thesis as “learning through doing” (Montemurro, 2014, p. 28).

Chapter Summary

These poststructuralist theorisations are helpful in grounding my research, paving the way for sexual subjectivity to be understood as active *over* passive and confirming the fluid nature of sexual subjectivity in which I have been articulating. Adding ‘complication’ to the journey of sexual subjectivity is exciting and shows the dynamic nature of *becoming* is both material and symbolic (Allen, 2005; Bryant & Schofield, 2007; Gill, 2008a).

Chapter Three: Literature review

This literature review begins with a brief review on foundational sexual subjectivity scholarship, then moves to outlining these differing dominant discourses and before lastly, exploring consent, sexual violence and unwanted sex and how this affects women's sexual subjectivity, ending with consent reimaged through more holistic models (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Durie, 2004; Pineau, 1989). The literature review then becomes specifically situated within the context of Aotearoa and sexuality.

Central to the literature review is an interrogation of dominant discourses, particularly post-feminism as shaped by neoliberal rationalities (Evans & Riley, 2014). These discourses operate as pervasive cultural norms that position women in specific ways, shaping how they understand, regulate, and perform their sexual subjectivities (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Muise, 2011). Women therefore do not simply engage with these discourses but are required to navigate them in the natural process of becoming sexually subjective beings.

Foundational Sexual Subjectivity Scholarship

Sexual subjectivity scholarship was initially founded in examining healthy sexuality in adolescent girls (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Townsend, 2019). These foundational scholars tend to approach their studies from a psychoanalytic understanding (e.g. Holland et al., 1998; Martin, 1996; Phillips, 2000; Tolman, 2002a). The essential difference between a psychoanalytic and poststructuralist understanding is that for psychoanalysts, subjectivity emerges through internal psychic processes and early relational formations whereas, poststructuralist approaches understand subjectivity as produced through discourse, language and power (Townsend, 2019).

Tolman and colleagues (2005) reviewed foundational studies and found that adolescent girls and women do not easily develop sexual subjectivity due to discourses such as gender inequality, sexual double standards, and gendered scripts. For example, Martin's (1996) study identified the "it just happened" narrative. This narrative refers to a reoccurring description identified in Martin's research where women described sexual encounters as unplanned, or unfolding without their deliberate consent or desire. Tolman et al. (2005) suggests that this it just happened description of one's participation in sexual intercourse deliberately distances their role from being an active subject in a sexual situation, evidence they suggest, of a loss of sexual subjectivity. They suggest that this bereavement of sexual

subjectivity is founded in the women's difficulty to portray themselves as sexually entitled to pleasure and instead, position their sexual desires in response to men's desires (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Muise, 2011). Women have also communicated that they would participate in unwanted sex, in fear that if they did not, their partner would abandon them (Tolman et al., 2005; Townsend, 2019).

Martin (1996) suggested that women's difficulty obtaining sexual subjectivity is a product of women's sexual oppression under a patriarchal society. Extending on this patriarchal guise, Tolman (2002a) articulates that at the crux of her research on boys' and girls' sexuality lie the significantly engrained ideas about male sexual desire as empowered and women as passive. Tolman (2002a) suggests that girls are consistently discouraged from knowing how to act on their own sexual desire, positioning youth sexual subjectivities within a binary of a natural healthy male desire, and a bad female desire (Allen, 2005). These findings centre heteropatriarchal discourses that position women's sexual subjectivity within binaries where their sexual subjectivity is either passive, or active, empowered, or disempowered (Attwood, 2006). Within these studies, when women do exercise agency it is framed as exceptional, rather than natural (Townsend, 2019). This framing individualizes the problem of 'disempowerment' or a 'lack' of agency by suggesting that vulnerability stems from a girl's lack of sexual subjectivity rather than highlighting the broader discourses that shape such encounters (e.g., dominant discourses, culture, societal norms) (Gavey, 2019). This framework also produces a responsibility for girls to develop a 'correct' or 'right' sexual subjectivity, or it is merely, lost (Allen, 2005; Townsend, 2019).

While this literature (Holland et al., 1998; Martin, 1996; Phillips, 2000; Tolman, 2002a) is monumental in the development of sexual subjectivity research, it is reductive in framing. By relying on the patriarchy as the primary explanatory framework, women's sexual subjectivities are rendered fragile or easily lost (Evans & Riley, 2014; Townsend, 2019). This understanding risks positioning women as hopeless victims of heterosexual dynamics rather than active subjects who negotiate, resist and sometimes, comply with dominant norms (Gavey, 2019). Although majority of the literature positions women as lacking or unable to obtain sexual subjectivity, some of these same studies highlight narratives of young women who express "clarity, comfort, confidence and entitlement regarding their sexuality" (Tolman et al., 2005, p. 12). Feminist researchers like Martin (1996) and Holland et al. (1992) describe women who did experience desire, and pleasure. According to Martin (1996) These participants were able to "subvert, reconstruct and modify these socio-cultural influences" (p.

107). Further, Holland et al. (1992) describes women to be making active choices for their own sexual safety and pleasure (e.g., the use of condoms), who were able to resist dominant sexual scripts and take on educative roles in heterosexual encounters (e.g., advocate for their own pleasure).

The aim of my research is not to collapse understandings of sexuality into binaries but to embrace the complexities of sexual subjectivities (Gill, 2008a; Townsend, 2019). Women who resist dominant sexual scripts should not be framed as unusual, but rather, recognisable as there is nothing exceptional about women feeling desire, being agentic or feeling confident (Gavey, 2019; Townsend, 2019). This research argues that sexual subjectivity is not a binary between empowerment and oppression but rather, it is lived through negotiation, contradiction and shifting subject positions (Townsend, 2019). In effect, women are not just at the mercy of heteropatriarchal norms nor are they empowered rebels, but both, at the same time (Gavey, 2019; Schalet, 2009).

Dominant Discourses: Traditional (hetero) Sexuality, Subject Positions, and the Impact on Women's Sexual Subjectivity

Women's sexual subjectivity is a complex phenomenon that relies on biological, psychological, and socio-cultural frameworks (Scappini & Fioravanti, 2022). As discussed, a broadly accepted poststructuralist understanding of sexuality is one that is understood through discourse (Gavey, 2019). In the way of agency and acting *agentially*, it is important to ground our understanding of the subject as both constrained and influenced by discourse (Evans & Riley, 2014; Townsend, 2019). However, while sexual subjectivity is discursively produced, it does not mean women are completely discursively determined in a mechanical fashion (Bryant & Schofield, 2007; Gill, 2008a). This indicates that choice and agency cannot be reduced to the accumulation of dominant discourses but instead they ascend through a fluid and complex process of sexual subjectivity, even among constraining discourses (Gill, 2007). In this way, we should consider the process of sexual subjectivity and its relation to culture as, transient.

Much of the dominant discourse's literature (e.g., Allen, 2003, 2005; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Rome & Lambert, 2020; Satinsky & Joskowski, 2015; Scappini & Fioravanti, 2022) were conceptualised by Holloway's early work (1984) on gender relations. Here, she proposed three dominant discourses that provide a template of how heterosexual dynamics are organised: male sex drive discourse, the have/hold discourse, and the permissive

discourse (Hollway, 1984, 1989). Similarly, there is the heterosexual script which positions two mutually yet unequal roles for men and women wherein men attract women with their resource and power, and women are expected to sexually pleasure men, be attractive and make ‘sacrifices’ for the sake of the relationship (McPhillips et al., 2001). As will be discussed, Gavey (2019) argues that the heterosexual script is the cultural scaffolding for unwanted sex and inequitable dynamics, positioning women as socially obliged to engage in sex no matter their own desires.

Sexual scripts are salient in the way of how men and women behave sexually, yielding varied outcomes amongst the sexes (Masters et al., 2013; Scappini & Fioravanti, 2022). Previous literature suggests that as a result of exposure to multiple heteronormative sexual scripts and dominant discourses, young women may struggle to develop positive representations of their sexual selves such as decreased sexual assertiveness, sexual satisfaction and sexual desire – all variables, that serve one’s sexual subjectivity (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Heine, 2022; Scappini & Fioravanti, 2022; Schalet, 2010). In this way, the examination of how dominant discourse influence women’s sexual experiences are at the crux of sexual subjectivity studies.

Biological Discourse

The biological discourse has two main purposes. Firstly, sexual functioning focusing on typical function, hormones, and reproduction. Secondly, the imperative of desire in relation to men’s standards (Tappin, 2025). These work together to position desire as innate and physiological. Feminist scholars have argued physiologically focussed models of sexual desire contribute to a construction of male’s desire as the standard upon which women’s desire is based (Tolman & Diamond, 2001; Wood et al., 2006). This has the effect of stigmatising views, marginalising women’s sexual experiences and seeing female sexuality as deficient.

Male sex drive

The male sex drive discourse suggests that men hold a higher desire for sex than women, expect sex more readily and will go to great lengths to have sex (Gavey, 2019). The power of this discourse is apparent within popular culture (e.g., TV shows, movies, advertisements), standing in as a predominant framework within societies understanding of heterosexual dynamics (Kettrey, 2018). Within the terms of the male sex drive narrative, it is

a woman's role to receive or reject a man's advances (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Kettrey, 2018). Tied to this discourse, is the transactionary dynamic where women give up sex in return for something such as validation, security or relational stability and men take the sex up, in return for little beyond the satisfaction of their own desire (Gavey, 2019).

This uneven territory is apparent in much literature and deeply informs heterosexual or bisexual women's sexual subjectivity (Attwood, 2006, Gill, 2007, 2008a; Gill & Orgad, 2017). To place such tremendous importance on a man's sex drive – even going as far as to say it is crucial to their physical and emotional wellbeing (Du Plessis, 2015; Gavey, 2019), positions women in an uneven bind. Discourses such as the male sex drive also influence penetrative sex being the gold standard of sex (Gavey, 2019; Rome & Lambert, 2020). This norm is titled the coital imperative wherein 'real' heteronormative sex is measured by penile-vaginal sex with the goal being male ejaculation inside of the vagina (Gavey, 2019). Women often report that they feel pressure to 'gift' their male partner an orgasm, even if this means sacrificing their own personal pleasure (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Heine, 2025).

Have/hold Discourse

Within the have/hold discourse, women's sexual desire is situated within (heterosexual) marriage, supported by essentialist/biological gender notions of sex being "natural" between men and women (Hollway, 1984; Tappin, 2025). This discourse links clearly to broader heteronormative expectations that reinforce marriage and monogamy as the ultimate goals for women. This restricts agency and sex outside marriage as deviant. This discourse links to wider heteronormative understandings that reinforce marriage and monogamy as the ultimate goal for women (Tappin, 2025).

Although this discourse was conceptualised in the early 1980's, broader societal shifts have since reframed marriage as less rigid. Nevertheless, elements of this discourse persist within contemporary research and modern society. In particular, expectations surrounding women's sexual availability remain significant in intimate relationships. For example, Fahs and colleagues (2020) found that women frequently reported feeling obligated to engage in sex with their male partners. In the discussion, the authors link this outcome to dynamics of coercion, arguing that these heterosexual expectations mirror broader patterns observed in sexual violence. Specifically, the normalisation of women's minimised sexual voice which becomes embedded within the routines of everyday sexual life.

Permissive

The permissive discourse is described by Hollway (1984) as “the offspring of the male sexual drive discourse”, but “essentially genderblind” (p. 231). This permissive discourse suggests sexuality is an individual pursuit rather than relational or social. In contrast to the have/hold discourse, the permissive discourse situates women as autonomous agents capable of having “sex like a man” (Markle, 2008, p. 56). However, despite its emphasis on sexual autonomy and liberation, the permissive discourse remains deeply entangled within heterosexual and gendered norms that continue to constrain women’s sexual subjectivities. Beres and Farvid (2010) found that women negotiating casual sex encounters balanced the permissive discourse of sexual liberation with the persistent sexual double standard. So, while women were rewarded for being sexually available, they were also judged for being too sexual. The permissive discourse showcases freedom but continues to position women within contradictory and gendered expectations of desire (Tappin, 2025). This discourse relies on the assumption of individuals being rational actors who are unconstrained by power differences when engaging in sexual encounters (Gavey, 2019). However, this is unrealistic as it overlooks how power operates through discourse (Foucault, 1978).

Within the permissive discourse, claims to sexual freedom are therefore shaped by enduring gendered sexual scripts. A central feature of these scripts is the construction of men’s sexuality as active and women’s sexuality as passive (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). This binary gives rise to multiple sexual subject positions, including the ‘desexualised’, ‘good girl’, and Madonna/Whore dichotomy, all of which encourage women to distance themselves from sexual desire on the basis that it is risky, excessive, or socially inappropriate (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Gavey, 2019). The ‘good girl’ discourse, in particular, positions women as valuing relational intimacy and reproductive capacity while actively disavowing sexual desire (Townsend, 2019). At the same time, women who refuse sex with male partners may face punitive consequences, reflected in the language used to stigmatise women who assert sexual boundaries, such as ‘frigid,’ ‘cockteaser,’ or ‘prude’ (Gavey, 2019). Together, these subject positions highlight the contradictory demands placed on women within the permissive discourse, wherein sexual availability is encouraged but sexual refusal is sanctioned. The permissive discourse provides a conceptual bridge to postfeminist and neoliberal understandings of sexuality, where sexual freedom is reframed in terms of individual choice, and empowerment (Tappin, 2025).

Up for it

A subject position that challenges this passivity of women is that of the post-feminist, up for it, subject (Attwood, 2009; Evans & Riley, 2014; Gill, 2007; Rome & Lambert, 2020). As briefly discussed in Chapter One, this particular subject incorporates neoliberal constructs such as autonomy, choice and individualism by rejecting the latter passive objectified woman and instead embracing the postfeminist subject who is, supposedly, no longer constrained by heterosexual scripts and instead enjoys her sexuality on her own terms (Evans & Riley, 2014; Gill, 2008a). For example, a women may adopt this subject position by openly articulating their sexual desires, initiating sex, or requesting specific sex acts, framing such behaviours as evidence of confidence, empowerment, and sexual liberation.

Western culture imagines young women as inhabiting too much or too little sexual subjectivity (Townsend, 2019). A consequence of having no sexual subjectivity means you lack sexual desire, sexual confidence and are deficit in feeling entitlement to pleasure (Townsend, 2019). Contrastingly, the up for it post-feminist woman is sexually knowing, experienced, understands her sexual worth and feels entitled to her sexual pleasure – she is individualism, she is agency, and she is free choice (Evans & Riley, 2014; Gill, 2008a). Regarding sexual subjectivity, this up for it femininity aligns with neoliberal ideals such as self-surveillance, self-management, and personal responsibility for one's success or failures (Bryant & Schofield, 2007; Gill, 2007, 2008a; Evans & Riley, 2014). Gill (2007) argues that in resistance to traditional discourses that conceptualise women as sexual objects, postfeminist discourses offer women the opportunity for women to be sexually empowered. Here, agency is an obligatory characteristic where women are expected to confidently narrate their sexual selves, pleasures, and desires (Gill, 2008a). A prototypical up for it subject is a woman who has lots of sex with men, it always willing to have sex and is easily knowledgeable and experienced (Evans & Riley, 2014). This up for it subject position is what is considered a 'healthy' sexual subjectivity in modern society (Attwood, 2009; Gill, 2008a).

Within this framework, women are discursively constructed as unconstrained by gender inequality and as exercising choice in the sexualisation of their bodies, embracing hypersexualised images that are reframed as empowering despite their historical association with objectification (Rome & Lambert, 2020). For example, this post-feminist sensibility encourages women to love themselves (e.g., have sex for their pleasure, get bikini waxes

because it makes them feel sexy) and know their worth but also actively acknowledge they are amendable to reinvention and constant transformation (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Jackson & Weatherall, 2010). This contradictory logic positions women under unfair scrutiny and self-surveillance where landing the ‘right’ type of sexy/sexuality must be carefully considered (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008). Women must be sexually confident but not more than a man, sexy but not too overt, and agentic but tastefully in line with heterosexual expectations (Gavey, 2019). Those who fail risk being labelled harshly such as ‘slut’ or ‘trying too hard’ – rendering the boundaries of an acceptable femininity as highly regulated despite the narrative of choice and empowerment (Gavey, 2019). Post feminism celebrates sexual confidence rather than sexual passivity and introduces and reinforces a competitive market between women regarding who is the sexiest and most sexually knowing (Powell, 2010). In this way, sexiness has become a consumer good, packaged to women through discourses such as choice and liberation (Evans & Riley, 2014). Essentially, this postfeminist subject position assumes sex is easy, fashionable, and indicative of how self-assured one-self is (Evans et al., 2010).

Powell (2010) argues that as woman navigate this postfeminist sexuality, there is a distinct uneven distribution in that there is very rarely sexual pleasure for women within these sexual dynamics. Thus, women are positioned as responsible for navigating and performing their sexual desires in ways that align with post-feminist ideals of empowerment. If one fails to meet these norms it is seen as an individual shortcoming (Evans & Riley, 2014). This framing hides the socio-cultural constraints that shape and limit what choices are available. As a result, choice exists paradoxically, operating less as freedom and more as a subtle injunction to conform to normative expressions of sexual desire. Crucially, this labour (e.g., physical, and emotional) is understood as liberating for women precisely because it is framed as a matter of choice (Tappin, 2025).

Desire and Pleasure

Fine (1988) identified that women’s sexuality was consistently articulated within the context of risk, victimisation, and morality and that overall, a discourse of genuine desire for women, was absent. Two decades on, she asserted that the desire was still missing in mainstream discourse (Fine & McClelland, 2006). Sex-positive discourses produce pressures for women to position themselves as desiring and pleasure-seeking subjects (e.g., up for it,

permissive). While this does not deny the value that pleasure and desire have to women (Csako et al., 2022; Čierna & Bianchi, 2024) it is important to acknowledge that pleasure does not always equate to orgasm, nor does sexual agency (e.g., ‘entitlement to pleasure’) involve the visible performance of desire (Fahs & Plante, 2017). Tappin and colleagues’ (2024) analysis suggested that dominant discourses of women’s desire may not be completely missing, but they are restrained. In their study, the subject positions they identified (e.g., working on it woman, sexual connoisseur) all welcomed female sexual desire and agency yet, even in the presence of women enjoying sex, women’s pleasure was consistently positioned as secondary to men. The authors conclude that these accessible, dominant discourses enable sexist productions of women’s desire and sexual subjectivity (Tappin et al., 2024). This narrow depiction creates a rigid culture for women to develop their sexual subjectivities, limiting the range of discourses available to women and privileging those that align with confidence, agency, physical pleasure, and sexual availability (Gavey, 2019).

In contrast, Fahs and Plante (2017) findings suggest women experience happy, joyous, and pleasurable sex when they have control over the scripts. For example, female participants described good sex as free from feelings of obligation or pressure from their male partners. A sense of acceptance from both casual and serious partners significantly changed women’s experiences “I ended up taking him home...he was hysterical...cracking jokes...making fun of my curtains...I was not worried about ‘do my thighs jiggle?’” (Fahs & Plante, 2017, p. 40). Additionally, Opperman and colleagues (2014) found that their participants were less likely to experience pleasure and climax during casual sex as compared to relationship sex attributing this phenomenon to being less spiritually understood and less physically comfortable. In Fahs and Plante’s (2017) study, even when the sexual encounter was not technically ‘pleasurable’ (e.g., ending in orgasm or climax), when laughter and lightness were present in the dynamics, women felt this encompassed good sex. Fahs and Plante’s (2017) findings shift more towards emotional connection, comfort, and control over scripts within sexual encounters and their significance to women’s sexual satisfaction. Crucially, the entitlement to pleasure aspect of sex employed a very minor role suggesting that the highly clinical emphasis on women’s ‘entitlement’ to sex and pleasure may be slightly misguided in importance (Fahs & Plante, 2017). Conclusively, good sex and ‘high’ sexual functioning, according to the authors, related directly to women’s ability to resist gendered sexual scripts and instead, replacing these scripts with reciprocity, equality, and connection (Fahs & Plante, 2017; Opperman et al., 2014).

Dominant discourses constrain women's sexual subjectivity by conceptualising good, healthy, and equitable sex in narrow, coital, phallogentric terms. It may be that women's lived experiences suggest that women's sexual subjectivity is more meaningfully realised through relational dynamics (Bryant & Schofield, 2007). These findings suggest that sexual subjectivity is less about the pleasure obtained through 'coital' sex and perhaps more about the conditions under which women experience themselves as genuinely agentic and uncoerced (Čierna & Bianchi, 2024; Evans et al., 2010; Fahs & Plante, 2017; Townsend, 2019).

Navigating Sexual Scripts and Dominant Discourses

Schalet (2010) examined how cultural differences shaped young women's experiences of their sexual subjectivity to emphasise the importance of social structures and their influence on young women. These findings demonstrated differences between Dutch and American girls, revealing that Dutch girls experience more agency and pleasure in sexual experiences than their American counterparts (Schalet, 2010). This research suggests that cultural norms and dominant discourses have significant impacts on young women's sexual subjectivities and thus suggests scholars must attend to culture and discourse as well as gender inequality when studying sexual subjectivity (Allen, 2005; Masters et al., 2013; Scappini & Fioravanti, 2022; Townsend, 2019).

Satinsky and Jozkowski's (2015) study articulate a relationship between sexual subjectivity and dominant discourses. Their research indicates that women's entitlement to sexual pleasure does not necessarily equate to the active ability to act on their pleasure and desires. For example, a women's willingness to request oral sex was more significantly dictated by confidence and communication rather than the internal 'feeling' of entitlement alone. This finding suggests that women's relationship to their own entitlement is not just merely internal, but relational and contingent in nature. Interpreting this through a poststructuralist lens suggests that sexual subjectivity is negotiated within interpersonal contexts where desire, agency and entitlement are enabled or constrained through specific interactions rather than existing as stable *internal* properties (Fahs & McClelland, 2017; Townsend, 2019). Additionally, this outcome pairs with other findings that show in longer-term partnerships, discourses of trust, safety and mutual understanding may make certain agentic subject positions more available to women. That is, women felt more comfortable

communicating their sexual desires in longer-term partnerships as opposed to casual encounters (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Mallory et al., 2019).

Scappini and Fioravanti's research (2022) highlights how sexual scripts operate in practice and how they relate to sexual subjectivity processes as shaped through interaction between internal beliefs, external gendered scripts, and relational processes. While the authors initially hypothesised that stronger endorsement of heterosexual scripts would be directly associated with poorer sexual functioning and sexual subjectivity, they instead found indirect relationships. Specifically, the endorsement of heteropatriarchal scripts (e.g., women prioritising men's pleasure, positioning their desire as responsive to men's) was indirectly associated with poorer sexual functioning in women through two differing pathways. The first pathway showed that the greater a woman internalised heterosexual scripts, the lower her levels of sexual subjectivity; characterised by a reduced sense of entitlement to her desire and pleasure which in turn, predicted poorer sexual functioning. Secondly, endorsement of these scripts was associated with increased perceptions of sexual pressure, increasing the likelihood to comply with unwanted sex. Here, complying with unwanted sex did not predict a reduced sexual functioning but when sexual compliance is associated with the pressure to engage in gendered sexual scripts, it may increase women's risk of experiencing sexual difficulties (Scappini & Fioravanti, 2022). While these findings highlight how scripts operate at the interpersonal level, broader cultural contexts also shape which subject positions are available and intelligible to women.

Rome and Lambert (2020) found that women interacted with post-feminist discourse in a way that made them *feel* sexually empowered whilst at the same time, their sexual experiences ultimately remained structured by heteropatriarchal norms. For example, the participants narratives displayed women reconceptualising and reinterpreting disempowering or unwanted sex as freely chosen (Gill, 2007; Rome & Lambert, 2020). Namely, participant Lauren describes unwillingly receiving oral sex saying, "I really regret things like that...the next day I was like what the hell did I just do?" (Rome & Lambert, 2020, p, 512). Here, the authors highlight Lauren retrospectively takes responsibility for her compliance to unwanted oral sex, suggesting she was actively trying to maintain an agentic position in the encounters, upholding post-feminist notions of empowerment in the wake of a disempowering encounter (Rome & Lambert, 2020). This study highlights that rather than functioning as sites of mutual exchange, sexual relationships operate as disciplinary contexts that foster ongoing self-scrutiny and regulation of sexual behaviour. Instead of this 'empowered' sexuality that

suggests ample room for sexual openness, there is more accurately, a right way for a woman to be sexual under this neoliberal guise (Evans & Riley, 2014; Rome & Lambert, 2020).

A key limitation of this postfeminist sensibility (Gavey, 2019) is the shift to faux empowerment, framing women as freely choosing their sexual identities through resistance to heteronormative scripts, despite their continued regulation within patriarchal norms. As will be explored, a common implication of this post-feminist sensibility is the blurred lines between consent, desire, and control (Rome and Lambert, 2020). In essence, the construction of one's sexual subjectivity in a neoliberal sphere does not dismantle patriarchal relations but instead strengthens and repackages them as choice, liberation and agency (Allen, 2003, 2005; Gill, 2007; Mirtz, 2019) — fundamentally, a reimagining of sexual disempowerment (Bryant & Schofield, 2007).

Bryant and Schofield (2007) found that although dominant discourses influenced the women's sexual subjectivities they were not so binarily enacted in their lives. The authors suggest that “discourses of sexuality established parameters of possibility and, as such, provided the symbolic resources required in the making of their sexual subjectivity” (Bryant & Schofield, 2007, p. 329). Discourse of feminine sexuality operate in women's lives and sexual practices to generate embodied identities – this takes places over time and in relation to multiple discourses (Bryant & Schofield, 2007). These specific subject positions can both enable and disable certain sexual behaviours and thoughts.

Allen (2003) found that the young women in her study navigated dominant discourses with complexity and significantly diverged from the trope of young men desiring sex and young women desiring love. Allen (2003, 2005) says this process of taking up positions is not an artless cognitive feat but rather a complex process that involves being subjected *to* discourses and subjects *of* discourse (Allen, 2003). One of Allens participants, Shona, spoke about her experience with the sexual double standard and how she both resisted and accommodated the subject position of slut “I’m one of them...nah I’m not at the moment though [Shona was about to have a baby in 3 weeks’ time]” (Allen, 2003, p. 221). Allen suggests that Shona's use of the term slut, followed by her qualification that she is not one *at the moment* signals the possibility of returning to the identity in the future. By this way, Shona maintains sexual agency by positioning her sexual activity as something she can leave and re-enter at will – clearly, reminiscent of Butlers take on performativity and agency

(Powell, 2010). Allen suggests that there is both uptake and resistance of “the subject position slut” (2003, p. 221).

Further, the subject position of the ‘pornified subject’ said to be a direct product of raunch culture where the belief that an overtly hyper sexualised culture has emerged in the last twenty years (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Levy, 2006) paints women as promiscuous and conforming to porn – “image of a tanned, waxed young girl with large breasts” – typically a ‘position’ reserved for porn-stars (Walter, 2010. p. 37, as cited in Bishop, 2012). Bishop (2012) qualitative study researching the validity of young women “conforming en masse to soft-porn imagery and practices (raunch culture) and in doing so, have lost touch with their own desires” (p. 821). Bishop (2012) is critical, that dominant discourse such as ranch culture and the pornified woman have so deeply permeated women’s beliefs that they have lost sight of their own instincts of how they decide to experience the world. Bishop (2012) findings show that rather than passively and involuntary imbibing up raunch culture and dominant discourses, young women are actively choosing varying elements of multiple subject positions and sometimes even completely resisting them.

Collectively, dominant discourses not only shape what women believe about sex but, structure the conditions about how their sexual subjectivity is produced, negotiated and enacted (Allen, 2005; Bryant & Schofield, 2007). Across the discussed literature thus far, sexual scripts position women’s desire in relation to male desire which actively constraints women’s sense of entitlement to pleasure whilst concurrently normalising sexual compliance (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008). While women are sexual beings who feel entitled to pleasure and desire, this does not necessarily translate into the ability to enact that agency in practice (Fahs et al., 2020). This finding highlights the gap between internal sexual subjectivity and one’s lived sexual experience (Townsend, 2019). This *gap* is not incidental but is actively produced through dominant discourses that encourage women to feel agentic while simultaneously constraining the conditions under which that agency can be enacted. As such, women’s sexual subjectivity emerges not as fixed or always fully agentic, but as relational, negotiated process shaped by ongoing tensions between dominant scripts and women’s attempts to assert their desires in a culture that ultimately shames them from their own sexuality (Allen, 2003, 2005; Fahs & Plante, 2017; Fahs & McClelland, 2016). Young women are thus exposed to multiple, sometimes contradictory discourses and are active social agents in navigating these discourses (Bishop, 2012; Townsend, 2019).

Unwanted Sex, Violence and Consent

Experiences of sexual violence (e.g., ‘physical’ force, coercion, pressured or unwanted sex) have direct implications on women’s sexual health and thus, women’s sexual subjectivities (Impett & Peplau, 2002; Powell, 2010). Generally, unwanted sex can be defined as a partnered sexual encounter to which one party consents to sex, but the sex is not necessarily desired (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008). Gavey (2019) argues that heterosexual discourses of sex and gender produce forms of heterosex that lay the foundations for the “cultural scaffolding of rape” (p. 3). Here, women describe feeling pressured by sexual partners even in the absence of physical force. In some cases, encounters were not initially experienced as coercive but became unwanted once the sex began, when women no longer desired the interaction, yet felt unable to stop it from transpiring (Gavey, 2019). These responses complicate dominant understandings of consent – highlighting the disjuncture that can occur between one’s internal experience and outward behaviour. In this way, consent cannot be seen as simple but rather something negotiated within the constraints of embodied, emotional and social conditions (Gavey, 2019).

Consensual and nonconsensual sex

Closer attention to the study of unwanted sex reveals the ambiguity and complexity within the domain of consent (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Gavey, 2019). Existing scholarship documents a widespread sexual experience in which women refrain from labelling an encounter as rape or sexual assault (Gavey, 2019; Powell, 2010; Townsend, 2019). Crucially, it is important to recognise embodied and affective dimensions of sexual violence whereby women may respond to trauma, not by fight or flight but by freeze or fawn (Schiewe, 2019). Trauma responses like freeze or fawn, although equally appropriate as fight or flight, have been said to not hold up in a court of law as they are not considered reasonable reactions if a woman does not desire the sex (Schiewe, 2019). This problem only amplified if a sexual encounter was not physically ‘violent’ (Schiewe, 2019). These responses complicate dominant understandings of consent – highlighting the disjuncture that can occur between one’s internal experience and outward behaviour. In this way, consent cannot be seen as simple but rather something negotiated within the constraints of embodied, emotional and social conditions (Gavey, 2019).

Discourse surrounding consent and sex is typically broken down into two categories – consensual and nonconsensual (e.g., rape, sexual assault) (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Townsend, 2019). However, this dichotomy presumes that all consensual sex is in fact, desired (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Mirtz, 2019). This understanding fails to account for other experiences of sexual encounters that do not fall within the binary categories of sexual activity. For example, Powell's (2010) study found that young women commonly experience unwanted sex, explaining that even though it is a common occurrence, it does not fit within the legal frame of sexual assault – rendering this space of sexual activity, a grey area (Gavey, 2019; Gunnarsson, 2018). As discussed, women's sexual subjectivities are predominantly understood in a dichotomous fashion and in relation to men's sexuality. Gavey (2019) argues that the line between just sex and sexual violence are because of the normalisation of the male sex drive; endorsed by a man's sexual arousal reaching a point of 'no return' (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008). Various literature supports the notion that women may 'consent' to at least partially unwanted sex because of various gendered norms (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Gavey, 2019; Powell, 2010).

Dominant Discourses and Unwanted Sex

Scholars argue that many sexual assaults are extensions of traditional heterosexual exchanges in which the dominant discourses of a man and a woman's sexuality are so normalised that sexual assault becomes both familiar and permitted (Gunnarsson, 2018). Following this logic, unwanted sex is frequently situated within ongoing and serious relationships where expectations of care and intimacy complicate the definition of consent (Gavey, 2019; Gunnarsson, 2018; Impett & Peplau, 2002). Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras(2008) found that unwanted sex is more frequent amongst ongoing and serious relationships over casual ones, highlighting how consent is shaped by both cultural contexts and relational dynamics. Crucially too, it is important and necessary to acknowledge that women's experiences of consent and sexual violence is not universal and are too shaped by intersecting variables such as race, class, sexuality and cultural context. This thesis aligns with an intersectional approach whereby I acknowledge the ways in which people experience various, multiple and overlapping structural inequalities which have implications for various experiences and consequent requirement for support (Carastathis, 2014).

As mentioned, these well-established prescriptions of a passive and pleasing female sexuality operate simultaneously with oppositional expectations that women portray

themselves as outwardly hypersexual (Beres & Farvid, 2010; Bishop, 2012) and up for it (Attwood, 2009; Gavey, 2019). This postfeminist, neoliberal faux empowerment that I previously explored is too situated at the base of unwanted sex. Previous research has identified relationships between unwanted sex and neoliberal feminism whereby feelings of self-determination and personal responsibility promote the ‘rational’ subject to take full responsibility of consequences to their actions, no matter how significant the consequence (Fine & McClelland, 2006). Namely, Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras (2008) found that their participants felt obliged to satisfy their male partners sexual needs regardless of their own sexual interests. Further, participants made sense of their unwanted sexual experiences through minimising their negative effect by reconceptualising them as learning experiences or even taking the blame on themselves (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008). By assuming the role of the up for it woman, participants were able to thwart feeling like the victim and instead asserted themselves as agentic neoliberal sexual agents (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). The authors suggest that neoliberal values manage unwanted sex by obstructing social critique and thus, enabling gender norms that lay the foundation for unwanted sex (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008). By this sense, the canons of neoliberalism, victimisation and agency are considered mutually exclusive. Such a binary understanding renders young women with the impossible choice of being helpless, yet still responsible victims or embracing the role of the ideal neoliberal agent who is in complete control and even when undesirable things happen, the neoliberal, post-feminist actor can take comfort knowing that with self-improvement - things can positively develop for next time (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Gavey, 2005). According to a neoliberal logic, being a victim is not the result of violation from others, or societal injustice but rather, a manifestation of one’s failure as an active agent (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). Conclusively, Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras (2008) study shone light on the way gender norms significantly influence unwanted sex and that gendered norms relating to neoliberal discourse emerged in the young women’s narratives of how they made sense of the unwanted sex, after the fact.

Consent Reconsidered

The ambiguity that surrounds consent is best understood through Liz Kelly’s foundational work where she proposes the Continuum of Sexual Violence (1987). I employ this framework to make room for unwanted sex; sex that doesn’t fall under the legal frame of

sexual violence. Kelly (1987) produced a conceptual space in which ambivalent and/or coercive encounters can be explored without explicitly defining one as rape or nonconsensual sex. This framework makes clear that women do not have to experience physical force to experience sexual violence, and that coercion and pressure should be understood as the same behaviour as a violent physical assault.

Further, in the late 80's, feminist legal philosopher Lois Pineau wrote an article titled "Date Rape: A Feminist Analysis". In this path-breaking piece, she argues for "a reformulation of the criterion of consent" (Pineau, 1989, p. 221). Before breaking into her new model of consent, she first dismantles the reasoning underlying the criterion of consent at the time being the 'contractual model' in which she describes sexual assault as commonly conflated with seduction and "submission with enjoyment" (Pineau, 1989, p. 222). Pineau argues that consent needs to be reimagined as an ongoing cooperation, drawing parallels to two people having a pleasant and comfortable conversation. Pineau's communicative model reflects the outcomes of other studies whereby participants claim that they just knew when their sexual partner was or was not interested through not only their emotional communication, but through their physical cues (e.g., if the sexual mood was escalating, eye contact, laughter etc.) (Powell, 2010).

Instead of seeking evidence of resistance as proof of non-consent, a communicative model seeks evidence of pleasure as proof of consent. Pineau's (1989) model relies on engaging with each other as friends or trusted allies, rather than two people who are undertaking a soulless exchange – two people who don't owe each other the things we would afford our friends such as kindness, respect, humility, intuition and sympathy. Pineau (1989) uses the example of how a good conversationalist prime concern is for the mutuality of discussion just as a good sexual partner engaged "in communicative sexuality will be concerned with more than achieving coitus" (Pineau, 1989, p. 236). Central to this model is the understanding that consent is not a one-time agreement but something that is ongoing and responsive to change within a sexual encounter. In this way, this framework challenges the well-known assumption that initial 'agreement' implies a continued, unwavering willingness, recognizing that desire can fluctuate or completely disappear all at once (Powell, 2010).

Aotearoa New Zealand Research

Couper's research with women from Aotearoa (2022) found that the women in her study spoke about their sexual selves and pleasure in a way that significantly prioritised

humility. This pressure to perform humility and “self-effacement has given rise to what is known as New Zealand’s tall poppy syndrome where touting personal success is heavily discouraged” (Couper, 2022, p. 24). When talking about receiving pleasure, the women underplayed or made fun of themselves suggesting that talk of good sex might be seen as boastful or up yourself. This orientation toward self-responsibility and self-surveillance is echoed in Allen’s (2003) study, in which women consistently shaped their narratives to reflect the idealised self-managing subject, revealing how firmly this version of femininity is recognised as desirable within Aotearoa.

Broadly, Aotearoa's ‘sexual culture’ translates similarly to worldwide Western literature (Allen, 2005). In both we see themes of the have/hold discourse, slut-shaming of women, and men’s active/women’s passive sexual subject positions. This thesis does not rely on these caricatured traits about the people of Aotearoa but acknowledges that young women in Aotearoa come to understand and negotiate their sexual subjectivities within social contexts and cultures.

Aotearoa Sexuality Education

As covered in the introduction Aotearoa sexuality education largely seems to focus on risk. Jackson and Weatherall (2010) found that Aotearoa education aims to produce a self-regulating, morally responsible girl who has been given the tools to achieve a “positive sexual well-being” (Jackson & Weatherall, 2010, p. 50), reminiscent of my arguments on the problem of what constitutes a ‘healthy’ sexual subjectivity (Tolman et al., 2005). These limitations of education are further illuminated through what Allen (2003, 2005) coins knowledge/practice gaps. This gap entails the concern about how much knowledge young people really absorb from their sexuality education programmes. Some research suggests that despite pupils gaining knowledge about how to avoid sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancy, many young people are still left unsure about the practical, hands-on knowledge about sex. Allen (2003, 2005) highlights that sexuality education tends to prioritise risk-based information while excluding a discourse of erotic's (desire, pleasure and the embodied realities of sex).

Scholars argue that this focus on risk-based education is due to societies unwillingness to accept teenagers as sexual beings (Allen, 2001, 2008, 2005; Quinn, 2025). Byron (2014) extends on this arguing that young people's accounts are primarily used to assess their level of sexual risk, rather than to recognise their expertise. Within this

framework, young people's knowledge is measured against medical standards and is often deemed inadequate. As a result, young people are positioned as deficient subjects in need of ongoing support from 'expert' educators (Byron, 2014). In Aotearoa specifically, this influence is prevalent with notions of conservatism overshadowing what should be considered appropriate for children – largely missing the point that topics such as healthy communication in sex is widely important in raising capable, present adults (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Quinn, 2025).

Allen's (2005) study found that sexuality education did not capture the attention of young people through its de-eroticised content, denial of the students as sexual beings and narrow gendered and heteronormative understandings of sex. Allen (2005) argues that the inclusion of desire and pleasure might allow for young women to see themselves and sexual beings and equally, for young men to operationalise themselves beyond the active male or predatory male. As a result from this aversion to the discourse of erotic's, the knowledge provided in the education curriculum can feel disconnected and even irrelevant from young peoples lived experiences.

A recent study conducted by Claire Meehan (2025) explored Aotearoa NZ's stance on applying pornography to sexuality education. Meehan argues that effective sexuality education has the capacity to positively transform young people's worlds. For this to be successful, sexuality education must be re-written to add contextual and relatable value in terms of age and lived experience. The notion that young people lack agency due to age is an inadequate justification for the continuation of a curriculum void of pleasure, desire and bodies (Meehan, 2025). Meehan found in a survey of 2071 young people in Aotearoa that 93% of boys watched porn and 50% of girls watched porn for pleasure, out of boredom, or to educate themselves. Institutionally, porn use is frowned upon, and porn addiction is recognised as a public health crisis. Meehan (2025) argues that to veer away from the unhelpful biological model, porn may provide a source of information that young people use to develop and understand themselves, especially when literature shows that young people believe their current sex education lacks value. Meehan (2025) claims there is a missed opportunity to integrate porn into formal sexual education as teenagers are already engaging with it in a significant way, and its use could be utilised as a cultural resource whereby youth construct and expand their sexual subjectivities. Given the explicit focus on the dangers of sex and its outcomes (e.g., STI's and pregnancy) the curriculum highlights heteronormative views of sex and relationships such as the coital imperative and hegemony of heterosexuality

(see McPhillips et al., 2001). Further, overemphasising danger runs the risk of making talk about pleasure and the emotional aspects of sex and relationships as shameful – embedding female sexuality in a cloud of shame and isolation (Jackson & Weatherall, 2010). Concerns about the dangers of sex function to erase sexual pleasure, highlight personal culpability and narrowly define sex within a coital imperative.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed literature that conceptualises sexual subjectivity as discursively produced and shaped through the intersection of culture, the body, and relationality. This chapter traced foundational sexual subjectivity scholarship, illuminating how early psychoanalytic approaches framed women's sexual subjectivities as fragile or lacking. Further, this review critically examined dominant discourses, particularly, heteronormative sexual scripts and postfeminist, neoliberal ideals such as the up for it subject, highlighting how women are positioned within contradictory expectations of pleasure, consent, and unwanted sex. This review ultimately argues that sexual subjectivity is not fixed, nor binary but instead, emerges through ongoing negotiation within relational and cultural contexts.

Chapter Four: Methodology

The first section of this chapter outlines feminist poststructuralism, establishing how the key concepts align with the aim of the thesis (Gavey, 1989). This is followed by an exploration of narrative inquiry as the methodological approach, highlighting its harmony with a feminist post-structuralist approach when examining sexual subjectivities. I then detail the process of the experiences with the participants, from recruitment to the interview process and ethical considerations. Lastly, I explore how I analysed the participants narratives and how I eventually ended up with various themes and findings.

Feminist Poststructuralism

This research assumes that the human experience is subjective; there is no single truth ‘waiting’ to be uncovered (Townsend, 2019). Feminist poststructuralism is conceptualised by Weedon (1987) as an approach that mobilises theories of language, subjectivity and social structures to critically examine power relations and identify possibilities for change. Crucially, this framework positions one’s subjectivity as historically and discursively produced, meaning that in essence it is fluid, contingent and constantly reconstituted through changing social and cultural contexts. Our sense of self is therefore inseparable from the contexts in which we live. Phillips (2000) sums up the importance of discourse by stating “not only are our identities impacted by our social contexts, but also, we construct our identities from those contexts and competing discourses that circle within them...” (p. 15). Here, individuals exist at the intersection of multiple discursive modes. The subject is never fixed at any one point and as discussed, power moves through these flexible points. Power is not a characteristic of one specific gender – instead, its maneuverers are always unstable (Davies & Gannon, 2005).

Post structuralism allows this research to explore constructions of power revealed through discourses, showing how these relations of power are constructed and then maintained by granting normality (i.e., men have more agency because of regurgitated narratives and dominant discourses). Post-structuralism also seeks to move beyond what we already know (Davies, 1991; Davies & Gannon, 2005; Macdonald, 2025). As explored in the literature review, much of the research to date has relied upon dichotomous, binary understandings of women’s sexuality – conceptualising their definitions within radical feminism wherein power is structurally defined by patriarchy, consequently, leaving little

room for women to exercise their sexuality as active (Davies & Gannon, 2005). As such, a feminist poststructuralist approach is well-suited to this research as it opens the possibility of new understandings of sex and gender by introducing contradiction, messiness and thus, highlights personal meaning making (Davies & Gannon, 2005; Townsend, 2019). This emphasis on meaning making and embodied aligns with narrative inquiry which provides an open framework for accessing and analysing the ways young women narrate their sexual subjectivities and experience their embodied sexual selves.

Narrative Inquiry

To examine the ambiguity and embodied nature of women's sexual subjectivities, this research employs a narrative inquiry approach. As Clandinin and Caine (2013) argue, narrative analysis is well suited in exploring the "...phenomena of people's experiences ... intimate study of individuals experiences over time and in context..." (p. 166). This was important for this research as sexual subjectivities are not static and change over time. Within narrative analysis, the focus shifts to the subject's construction of narratives and how these narratives play a role in the social construction of identity. Here, uncovering the truth is not the objective of analysis but instead we seek to know the how and the why (Earthy & Cronin, 2008). As poststructuralism seeks to expand on what we already know (Davies & Gannon, 2005; Gavey, 1989), narrative inquiry aids this by foregrounding the multiple, shifting and socially situated stories through which participants make sense of their experiences (Gavidia & Adu, 2022).

This research aims to talk with young women about their diverse intimate understandings of their human experience. The strength of a narrative approach is the ability to capture both context and temporality. However, much like Bryant and Scholfield's (2007) qualitative study - where a 'storied' approach was taken - as much as I intend to capture temporality, this will not rely on a tidy story with a beginning, middle and end. So, while it is temporality I am interested in "it is the generative nature of practice that is foundational in understanding human identity. It is precisely because this process is generative that it necessarily involved and invokes the concept of time" (Bryant & Schofield, 2007, p. 336). This approach will allow for the honouring of participants lived experiences as experts in their own worlds.

I also drew inspiration from Arthur Frank's (1995) work "*The Wounded Storyteller*" where he introduced chaos narratives. Frank's approach to narrative inquiry complemented

the feminist poststructuralist approach in the way that he describes these types of stories as “chaotic in their absence of narrative order. Events are told as the storyteller experiences life: without sequence of discernible causality...chaos is the opposite of restitution” (1995, p. 97). Further, Frank (2010) articulates that as a researcher undertaking narrative inquiry, you must let the stories breathe. Meaning, we need to let them sit in the open to interpret them. This research approach views women as storytellers and opens space for their personal meaning making, understanding that everyone has their own meaningful story to share (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Narrative inquiry is not without critiques. Some scholarship argue that narrative inquiry is too illuminating of the researcher themselves (Bell, 2002; Butina, 2015). Thus, when researchers take individuals stories and organise them into a larger narrative, they are inadvertently placing meaning on the participants embodied experience. Although good practice combats this substantially, Bell (2002) argues that researchers are never free from this limitation within narrative inquiry. This limitation does carry ethical weight as there is a risk of misinterpretation or oversimplification of the participants lived realities and has too been critiqued for being potentially self-indulgent (Townsend, 2019). However, rather than viewing this limitation as something to eliminate, I approached it as an inherent feature of this research.

My Positionality

I am a young Pākehā woman from Aotearoa. Early on in life, I became attuned to the idea that sexuality was something one could perform, negotiate and experiment with. I am not saying I have the luxury to pick and choose subject positions as if it was laid out to me on an à la carte menu. Rather, I became aware that certain ways of being produced different responses, different forms of desirability, constraint, power and that at the same time, these often existed in contradiction to the other. While I feel the complexity of a woman’s sexuality so innately, I felt frustrated that the media, and literature I came across in my personal and academic life lacked nuance. These stories, these findings lacked what my friends and I speak about when we unpack our personal lives’ during everyday conversations. In this way, I wanted to highlight these stories – the stories that were like the stories of the women I know. It is through my – albeit - short lived experience, that I can confidently say that one’s sexual subjectivity is a project; a praxis in time (Bryant & Schofield, 2007). And, while I will never be free from this rat race of ‘position’, like the women in this study articulate so well, sexual

subjectivity is something continually negotiated — never fully settled. What drew me to this research was the constant negotiation I feel as a woman between feeling powerful and in the same breath, feeling determined by external structures.

Sara Ahmed (2017) suggests that theory becomes more powerful the closer it is to embodied experience and that is where this thesis emerges from – “sweaty concepts” (p. 12). This idea highlights that ideas/knowledge do not emerge from detached observation but instead arise from within; through the effort of trying to articulate something complex that is not fully understood. In this way, rather than neatly formed ideas produced from a distance, the ideas that emerge are grounded in the messiness of lived experience. Ahmed (2017) argues that these sweaty concepts require the researcher to stay with and inside of the ideas rather than submitting to the academic tendency to smooth it over and present the ideas as polished and/or resolved. Ahmed’s idea was comforting to me during a time where I was obsessively trying to fit the findings into neatly themed boxes. To my surprise, no amount of reworking was able to capture the process of one’s sexual subjectivity into segments.

Procedure

Participant Recruitment

Participant recruitment occurred through the social media platform Facebook, on a women’s group called Welly Gal Pals alongside various Massey University post graduate groups. The advertisement fliers (Appendix A) included a brief description of the project and my contact details. I also used the snowballing method (Dragan & Isaic-Maniu, 2013) wherein potential participants, friends and family were invited to share the details of the project with their friends, inviting them to contact me. Recruitment of the participants happened relatively quickly, having recruited all my participants within two months of advertisement. The sampling criteria was as follows: Participants needed to self-identify as a woman and be between the ages 18-30. The women in the study had to live in Aotearoa NZ and have undergone secondary education (intermediate and high school) within Aotearoa. Lastly, due to the nature of the research, participants had to self-identify as being comfortable taking about sex, sexuality and relationships.

The process worked as follows: The interested women contacted me, and I sent them an information sheet (Appendix B). If they were interested, we then set up the first interview. The final sample of women consisted of eight women between 22 – 29, mostly Wellington

based with one woman living in Dunedin. The eight women were predominantly Pākehā and were either university educated, employed or self-employed.

Introducing the Participants

Violet (27). Loves hikes, dancing, Pilates and moving her body. She is learning to grow into her high sex drive and loves chatting sex, sexuality and relationships. Violet has recently started dating a man for the first time.

Jane (27). Loves drawing, painting and has always felt connected to creativity. She is recently separated from her husband and is currently training to become a teacher. She has always had an interest in her sexuality and has recently discovered she identifies as bisexual

Ava (28). A writer and creative curator. Identifying as polyamorous and hypersexual since her teens, she has navigated complex intimate relationships, particularly as a public-facing artist. She now channels this experience into online sex work, which helps support her creative career.

Ella (22). A writer and Master's student in neuroscience. Understands sex as something to be enjoyed when it is safe, respectful, and consensual, qualities she has not always encountered in her own experiences. Ella spends most of her time studying, working, and making her way through an ever-growing stack of books.

Julia (30). She considers herself to be a very sexual person who has a strong, healthy relationship with her sexuality, despite past physical health issues that limited her sexual expression. She is recently married and has been with her husband for 8 years.

Lily (26). She is currently single, and would describe herself as a very social, outgoing person. She spends her spare time with friends and family, or getting out and about in nature, or swimming. She has had a few relationships in the past but never anything super serious or long term.

Zoe (28). A Senior Executive in the Software Industry. She loves movies, cooking and gaming. She's in a long-term hetero relationship and just recently purchased her first home with her best friend.

Isla (27). Loves swimming, walking and laughing the most that she can. Feels protective of her sexuality and nurtures it through self-love.

The Interview Process

Two interviews were conducted with each participant. Three of the interviews were conducted in person, and four interviews were conducted via Zoom at times convenient to the participants. Consent to take part was sought at the start of both interviews verbally but signed in the first interview (consent form is in Appendix C). Both interviews, first and second, ranged from 60 minutes to 120 minutes. At the first interview, a Koha (gift) of \$50 was given to each participant to thank them for your time and agreeing to be involved in the interview process.

The interview schedule developed for ethics approval was used a basis for the interviews but in practice the interviews were much more fluid and conversational (see Appendix D for interview schedule). In line with a narrative inquiry methodology, the first interview was conducted in a semi-unstructured format. This approach allowed participants to share their experiences in their own words, with minimal direction from me, supporting the generation of rich, detailed narratives (Frank, 2010). This loose technique of questioning was favourable as it did not impose specific order and welcomed more chaotic stories to unfold (Riessman, 2008). However, said with humility, my lack of interview experience may have resulted in more of a structured interview than I initially thought. In hindsight, this was a product of anxiety and a desire to not have the participants feel awkward or unguided.

After the first interview was completed, I listened and transcribed the audio to text; studying and picking out parts of each participant's interview I wanted to learn more about. In this way, the first interview captured the 'macro-material' with participants typically sharing broader, bigger-picture accounts. I then used these initial insights to inform the second interview, where I asked more specific questions to further develop the material generated in the first interview. Here, the second interview captured more 'micro-material' (Townsend, 2019) allowing me to further develop the insights gained from the first interview. The second interview was semi-structured in the way that I had prepared questions based on the first interview. For example, I would ask questions such as: "in the first interview, you mentioned a sexual encounter you describe as safe. What were the conditions that made that interaction feel safe? Or "in the first interview, you said you reject casual sex now, can elaborate on that for me?". At the end of the second interview, I also included a five-to-ten-minute reflection exercise with questions like "where do you see your sexual self in 5 years, compared to five years ago? Or "how would you describe your sexual journey in a sentence?". Having two

interviews was a beneficial way to gain deeper knowledge about each participant. At the conclusion of the second interview, I checked in with each participant regarding their wellbeing and reiterated my availability for follow-up questions and explained that their transcripts would be emailed to them once I had completed my audio to transcript process.

The interviews were transcribed, sent to the participants to read and review. These were deidentified when I returned them. No edits were suggested by the participants. At the conclusion of the research, I sent them a summary of research findings.

Engaging with Participants

I entered the engagement with my participants significantly aware of the dynamic at hand: researcher and research participant. Informing this dynamic was the nature of the information that was going to be subsequently shared with me, that is, information that is sensitive and emotionally intimate. I fell within the parameters of my own sample (e.g., I am a woman, aged between 18-30, comfortable talking about sex and was raised within Aotearoa). While being an insider is advantageous, I wanted to be very mindful of the tension this produces. As the researcher, there is an inherent power imbalance embedded within the interview process (Townsend, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2013) my answers, support, and reaction, actively contribute and co-produce the data.

To combat this ‘hierarchical’ dynamic, I made an active effort to share my personal identity too in hopes of actively constructing a meaningful relationship and rapport (Hodgetts et al., 2022). Typically, the first 15 minutes of the first interview were spent getting to know the women and connecting on common ground e.g., if we both watched the same show, our hobbies, our shared thoughts on sexuality, relationships and feminism and what it means to us both. This approach reflects my commitment to relational ethics whereby the research encounter is understood as interpersonal and a part of an ethically charged space, requiring attentiveness to power, mutuality and care (Ellis, 2007; Hodgetts et al., 2022). During the interviews, I was constantly guided by being a generous listener. Tippet (2016, p. 39) sums up generous listening as involving “a kind of vulnerability – a willingness to be surprised, to let go of assumptions and take in ambiguity”. My intention was to engage with participants from a position of humility. I was intentional in resisting any assumption of expertise attached to my role as the researcher, understanding that asking the questions did not equate to knowing more about life than the participants themselves.

Ethical Considerations

In preparation for ethics, I considered the Massey Code of Human Ethics (2017) and the Te Ara Tika guidelines. I had multiple conversations with my supervisors about procedural ethics, relational and cultural ethics. Full ethics was gained at Ohu Matatika 2 at their meeting held on Thursday, 22 May 2025 (OM2 25/31).

The main procedural considerations I had for this research were informed consent, cultural considerations, privacy and confidentiality and potential for distress. All participants were informed about the nature of the research. Participants were consistently reminded they were able to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty. Consent was obtained through a written consent form (Appendix C), and participants had the opportunity to ask questions before agreeing to take part. After the interviews took place, participants had the opportunity to review and edit their transcripts. This was intentional and beneficial in pursuit of safeguarding the participants stories, making sure that I had the correct information and that no mistakes were made in the transcription process.

To combat potential harm or stress I elected to meet in places that were comfortable for the participants. For example, I booked private rooms at Massey's Wellington library or was welcomed into the participants home where I would contribute tea and snacks for their hospitality. I also let my supervisors know when and where the interviews will take place, ensuring I was contactable by phone during set interview times. I had regular check-ins with my supervisors, support networks and also had access to professional support services. All participants were given support contact numbers, and I explicitly asked them to reflect if they were in a good place to talk through sexuality.

Cultural supervision was undertaken with my supervisor Dr. Martin who is an Indigenous scholar. Dr. Martin and I had various conversations about the cultural considerations when undertaking research in Aotearoa. A data management plan was established to specify the secure storage of transcriptions and other research materials, ensuring participant privacy and the protection of all materials, including any identifiable information.

What was very important to me was relational ethics. Hodgetts and colleagues (2022) align relational ethics with the Māori concept whanaungatanga which refers to kinship like connections which requires genuine ethical relationships, empathy and support. Relational

ethics requires researchers to act from a place of heart and to build and maintain a human relationship. Scholars argue that by prioritising richer interpersonal relationships over more distant connections (e.g., definitive line between researcher and participants), foregrounds a principled practice that emphasises reciprocity and accountability in relationships that are often marked by asymmetries of power (Ellis, 2007; Hodgetts et al., 2022). This required balancing my authority with a responsibility to remain grounded in participants' accounts, ensuring their voices were not overwritten by my own. This aspect of the research was crucial and was done through extensive self-reflexivity. This was a difficult tight rope to walk but I found it grounding to position myself not as the researcher who is carefully laying out links for the participants and baiting them with my own stories but rather, planting myself as a sounding board and as a point of impact and curiosity.

Crucially, this approach also aligned with my use of narrative inquiry as it honours human experience and understands knowledge as emerging through the sharing of stories (Townsend, 2019). This mutual recognition of subjectivity reflects a feminist commitment to valuing lived experience while acknowledging the relational conditions which stories are told. As our shared experience as women, there was always an innate feeling of shared experience even though our stories were oftentimes completely different. This sense of relating to one another strengthened our bonds, contributing to this sense of a shared endeavour (Hodgetts et al., 2022).

Although I now really value relational research and intend to strengthen my practice, I do remain critically aware of the ethical weight of some of these interactions. There were times I feel as though I failed in my responses to certain vulnerable stories or moments that took me off guard. These moments though, only produced through my value on care and respect through my relational practice, tested my ability to determine the best course of action in moments of ambiguity and uncertainty. In particular, these moments required me to continually negotiate the boundaries of my position as both researcher and relational participant – navigating the tightrope between empathy and responsiveness with overstepping or centring my own stories.

Analysing Participants Narratives

The data analysis stage was not a neutral or technical process but an interpretive process in which my own assumptions and lived experiences were actively implicated. I

found this stage the most challenging as I was relying on both my instinct whilst also remaining attentive to how my feminist poststructuralist lens shaped what I noticed and what I prioritised (Gavey, 2019). I wanted to honour every story and analyse the participants account as I imagined they would best see fit. I engaged in a consistent relationship with self-reflexivity. This self-reflexivity afforded me insights into parts of myself that were harder to access, through which aided me in getting closer to the women's narratives. This feminist, relational, narrative approach married with the process of analysis was perhaps quite illuminating of my own assumptions, emotional responses and biases. Ultimately, these are the stories of eight women as they have been interpreted through my analytical lens, shaped by both their accounts and my engagement with them. While I have sought to honour the integrity and complexity of their narratives, I acknowledge that these representations are necessarily partial, situated, and co-constructed. In this way, analysis became not only a process of making meaning from participants' stories, but also of critically reflecting on the conditions through which those meanings were produced.

I will now outline the three-dimensional narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) which was used to analyse the narratives of the participating women. The decision to incorporate narrative inquiry aligns with the life history collection method whereby special emphasis is paid to self-defined transitions, trajectories and turning points (Locke & Llyod-Sherlock, 2011). A three-dimensional narrative inquiry approach attends to experiences temporally, socially and spatially. Furthermore, Clandinin and Caine (2013) describe narrative inquiry as "beginning with a narrative view of experience, researchers attend to place, temporality, and sociality, from within a methodological three-dimensional narrative inquiry space that allows for inquiry into both researchers and participants storied life experiences" (p. 166). Within this space, each story was situated within a larger cultural, social and institutional narrative.

Phase One: Converting the Narratives from Audio to Text

Following the completion of the interviews, the first phase of analysis began with the transcription process for each of the eight interviews. The length of interviews varied significantly with the initial interview ranging from 10,000 to 20,000 words and the follow up interview being between 15,000 to 25,000 words. While narrative inquiry yields rich material, it is a time-consuming task, with each separate interview taking approximately one week to transcribe ending with a total of eighteen weeks in total for the transcription phase.

Phase Two: Re-reading and Producing Narrative Threads

The second phase of my analysis involved listening to the interviews again, while I followed along with the transcripts to produce narrative threads across the material. Narrative threads are what Clandinin (2019) conceptualises as central narratives or patterns that occur across individual accounts. These threads are useful as they formed the beginnings of the analytical process. From here, I wrote up life history vignette for each participant. The vignettes aimed to position each woman's narrative within a biographical 'story' which was organised around their self-identified key moments and transitional events (e.g., trauma, upbringing, school, university, first sexual experience, dating, sexual encounters) which then informed the more discursive interpretations of these experiences. This process allowed me to stay grounded in each woman's story while also beginning to interpret how these experiences were shaped through broader discourses. Life history vignettes and narrative threads allowed me to see how different women's experiences, while non-linear and differing in substance, often spoke to the same discourses (e.g., navigating heterosexual sex, virginity loss). This part of the phase was challenging as my logic naturally, desired to organise the women's accounts chronologically and into themes. However, following a narrative inquiry, I resisted this temptation and instead welcomed fragmentation and temporal fluidity.

Phase Three: Constructing the Analysis and Interpreting Discourse

The third phase of the analysis involved the construction of life narratives through the aid of the narrative threads that were developed in phase two within a three-dimensional inquiry framework. At this phase, I moved from identifying patterns to re-storying each woman's account as coherent - attending to temporality, sociality and place. This process involved grouping narrative threads according to shared patterns in how participants described learning about their sexual subjectivity. Here, I organised the materials into two broad domains based on how participants describing learning about their sexual selves. The first domain captured the more 'symbolic' forms of learning referring to experiences where sexual knowledge was acquired through informal and formal learning, observation, and cultural exposure rather than direct embodied experiences. This was intentional and informed by Bryant and Schofield's (2007) who articulate the relationship between the symbolic and material domains, arguing that while sexual subjectivity is lived through embodied practice (e.g., the 'material'), it is too shaped and negotiated through symbolic systems such as cultural norms and education "normative and normalising discourses of female sexuality are

significant, but they operate as symbolic technologies that the participants adopt in making sense of their sexual practices and in fashioning their development” (Bryant & Schofield, 2007, p. 337). Symbolic learning reflects how women come to understand their sexual selves through external cultural frameworks. In this way, Chapter Five ‘learning her sexual self’ was grouped by narratives relating to education, the internet, pornography, social interactions and media.

Chapter Six, titled ‘embodied sexual self’ explores the participants embodied experiences. In this chapter I traced women’s narratives of learning by doing (Montemurro, 2014) and embodied learning. Accounts of virginity loss, casual heterosexual sex, romantic relationships and unwanted sex and so forth were grouped to form the various subchapters such as “negotiating sex” and “the reclamation”. All of these subchapters all sit under the broader category of embodied experience, thus reflecting how sexual subjectivity is produced through lived experience whilst too being complemented by the symbolic. These categories were not predetermined but emerged with repeated engagement with the data.

Organising the participants accounts into a coherent structure was no small feat due to the dynamic and fluid nature of one’s sexual subjectivity. In this way, much trial and error occurred to produce a clear analysis. It is worth noting that the analysis is not set up chronologically as this option was impossible due to the myriad ways in which these eight women’s sexual journeys played out. However, I found it to be the most coherent format to begin with the symbolic discourses to the material lived experiences as this allowed me to tell the women’s stories in a fashion that honoured temporality (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and context but rejected a chronological, beginning to end order.

The process of writing was not separate from the analysis, but a continuation of meaning making where interpretations were refined and challenged. The power I inherently had in the act of selecting, shaping and presenting the participants stories was an uncomfortable, challenging feeling. As such, I approached writing from a place of accuracy and let the women’s narratives do the talking as much as possible. Due to the non-linear nature of the narratives (e.g., lacking a clear beginning or end) navigating the uncertainty and self-doubt created by the tension between clarity and complexity proved challenging. This tension required deliberate and reflexive decisions regarding how participants were represented and how their narratives were positioned within the broader analytical framework. Managing this tension required me to sit within the ambiguity and resist the urge

to either oversimplify or shorten participants accounts in favour of neat ‘categorisable’ narratives. In this way, the writing process was an extension of my feminist methodology where I chose to foreground complexity and ongoing negotiations of meaning. Here, I positioned myself as a conduit who had the privilege of engaging with and sharing these young women’s stories. In the end, I found comfort in the absence of any ‘clear’ ending as these narratives do not conclude but remain ongoing and are continuously becoming.

Chapter Five: Learning Her Symbolic Sexual Self

This chapter is the first out of two separate analysis chapters. The present chapter explores the symbolic dimensions (Bryant & Schofield, 2007), of sexual subjectivity, attending to the cultural narratives, social norms and discursive resources through which participants learned about sex and sexuality. I examine school-based sexuality education as an influential site of learning. I then move to participants interactions with friends and whānau which highlight the social and cultural norms the participants experience regarding their sexual selves. Lastly, I briefly observe the participants' experiences with mainstream media and social media, before turning to pornography, which frequently served as a frame of reference through which participants made sense of sex, desire, and sexual relationships. The following chapter turns to embodied experiences, exploring how these symbolic understandings were negotiated, reinforced, and interpreted through embodied sexual experiences.

The aim of these analysis chapters is to explore and observe the dominant discourses and the wider cultural and societal structures that ultimately contribute to the participants' understanding of their sexual subjectivities. To honour narrative inquiry (Frank, 1995) and critical feminist scholarships (Bryant & Schofield, 2007) take on temporality, the analysis is not organised chronologically in regards to the women's narratives but rather attaches to the idea of "the project" of being human which is "intrinsically generative" (Bryant & Schofield, 2007, p. 336). Temporality, as I have formatted this analysis, is fragmented and non-linear. In this sense, the narratives in this study suggest that sexual subjectivity is an ongoing process actively made through ongoing engagement with cultural norms and embodied experience.

School Education: Biological, Protective and Gendered

All the women in this study communicated that their sexuality education was not significantly helpful in the aiding of their sexual subjectivity as it tended to only focus on risk-aversion, the biology of sex, and protecting oneself from harm. According to literature (Allen, 2005; Carmody & Ovenden, 2013; Garland-Levett, 2017), the period in which the eight participants experienced intermediate and secondary school education (2012-2018) was marked by curricula that reinforced heteronormative discourse, foregrounded risk and protection and largely neglected discussions of desire (Carmody & Ovenden, 2013). Most of

the young women were critical of their sexuality education schooling, with Isla pointing out that:

My sex education was just like, how to stay safe, sex is really special...you should be careful who you have it with, don't give it away type of thing...it was always gendered...always boys separate from girls...I am curious what the boys sex ed was, but it sort of seemed that ours was more about like protecting ourselves.

Here, Isla's experience is rooted in risk through the emphasis of self-protection (how to stay safe...about like protecting ourselves) and self-surveillance (sex is really special...you should be careful who you have it with) - both characteristics of neoliberal discourses. Zoe's narrative echoes this risk-based curriculum that just focuses on the biological side of sex explaining that it was:

Very cut and dry in terms of like only sticking to, really honing in on the medical side of it...only takeaway that I got is you know, if you have sex with somebody, wear a condom because of all these diseases.

Julia's experience further reinforces the dominance of a risk-based, medically centred sexuality education curriculum. Julia emphasises that safe sex was not meaningfully taught, and that safe sex was framed purely in terms of pregnancy and STI prevention, rather than being understood as inherently linked to consensual sexual practice:

These are STD's [you can get] pregnant from sex, this is how you put a condom on and that was it. That was small town, limited understanding of sex and consent. I didn't learn what consent was until I was like, in my 20's. Like I just didn't. It was nothing – it was so garbage.

Julia's understanding of her social location (small town) and its impact on her education and in turn, her sexual self was clear. Other research has highlighted that depending on one's location and access, learning about topics such as consent may be delayed or never made clear in Aotearoa (Allen, 2003).

The participants framed their education as leading to knowledge gaps in one's sexuality education. Zoe's narrative illustrates how young women were expected to understand sexual risk without being given the conceptual skills to understand sex itself:

Boys and girls went into different rooms and then the girls talked about like tampons and like how to put condoms on guys like ... ok? I don't know why we can't all be in the room for that but whatever...and strangely all I really remember the teacher saying was don't have sex with a tampon in. I just specifically remember that, and I was thinking like well ok, thank you for this but how does sex work?

Zoe and Julia's narratives reiterate similar responses to Allen's (2008) study where her Aotearoa NZ based teenage participants criticised sexuality education as something that only focused on prevention, diseases and avoiding pregnancy.

Violet considers the absence of discourses of pleasure for girls, noting that she felt pleasure and desire "wasn't for girls" as informed by her experience in intermediate school when sexuality education was always separated by gender because of the content that was discussed:

It's just not, I guess, a normal or natural part of development for girls [experience pleasure] ...it's not okay for you like as a girl or as a woman to do that...it was such a reaction of like, oh that's disgusting...I suppose it's that idea of boys can be sexual creatures and for that to be like a positive thing, but for girls, it's like oh no, you shouldn't be thinking about that or that pleasure isn't an important part of your development...kind of reoccurring themes of that at a crucial time in your psychosexual development.

Jane's schooling experience resonates with Violet's in that there was "no desire" content during her schooling years. In hindsight, Jane is quick to criticise the lack of desire taught at school saying:

Desire is like a massive part of consent and realising, like, thinking about your own sexuality and what consent means to you and when you do want to have sex, that's so important and it's completely missing, that's fucking crazy to think about.

Here, Jane's point speaks to Lois Pineau's "reformulation of the criterion of consent" (Pineau, 1989, p. 221), where instead of consent being founded within a one-shot agreement where one is bound to sex through a faux contractual model, consent should be seen as something more akin to an ongoing cooperation based upon mutual desire.

Ella's narrative extends on this gendered theme, highlighting that sexuality education is not always explicitly informed by the curriculum, but the classroom dynamics and what is socially accepted:

There was like a module on like, consent which you know especially like obviously all the boys in the class just did not care. They thought it was hilarious and at that time, you kind of want to act like, oh yeah that is silly when they say that to you and then you go home and you go, I'm so scared! Because like, what are you guys laughing about?

Here, we see that Ella's sexual self is evolving in an environment that caters to Aotearoa's infamous *she'll be right* culture where it is socially accepted to undermine serious content and to make light instead (Braun, 2008). To accommodate to this passive, relaxed, expectation of women to be unbothered, even in the face of discourse surrounding sexual violence, Ella feigns humour even though it feels disingenuous to her considering her fears.

It is important to highlight that these accounts demonstrate how the exclusion of pleasure in sexual education becomes internalized early in a young woman's sexual subjectivity development. Although sexuality education is a determining factor in one's sexual becoming, it also highlights the young women's agency and determination to gain richer knowledge and undertake their own sexual knowledge. I shift now to discuss other various ways each of the young women have learnt about their sexual selves.

Friends and Whānau

Friends and whānau inform one's sexual self in complex and interconnected ways. For the participants in this research it was evident that sexual socialisation occurs at a micro-level whereby the women, throughout their life, acquire understandings of ideas, beliefs, meanings and codes of conduct through those closest to them (e.g., friends and whānau) (Gavey, 2019).

Violet illuminates how individuals are products of the world around them by saying "you're obviously defined by like your people and relationships around you. You're defined by your own values and beliefs". She states that bodily awareness became apparent through "people my own age" but more significantly with "people who are older". Violet continues saying that when she began puberty, she developed an eating disorder explaining that it was a "bit about control, but I think it was also a little bit of rejection of not wanting to physically grow up". Violet explains she began to reject her developing body because of the "off the cuff" comments "random men" would make in reference to her body such as "you're developing quickly". These early comments informed Violet's understanding of her body as something that is openly discussed, perceived and critiqued, and that this was a normalised

occurrence. Violet explains that being hyperaware of her body and sexual self, felt as though she had to “figure out how to like, perceive of someone else as seeing you as desirable” which has “contributed to like me looking for a certain level of like, maybe validation, in terms of male attention...this idea of like, that’s what you’re supposed to be doing”. From a young age, Violet internalised the expectation that culturally, her body is something that can and should be manipulated to please men, evident in her trying to figure out how to be desirable and accepted.

Similarly, during Zoe’s adolescence, she explained that when she “was a kid my parents were unconsciously drilling that idea into me... you need to be aware that you can be perceived in certain ways, and that can be different to how you feel or who you are”. Zoe’s parents were consistently reminding her that she should:

Be careful...men see you differently, if you wear this be careful... it was always angled on the fact that men liked me and were interested in me, and I had to always be aware of that. So, I always had to be aware if men were interested in me, I think out of safety from them.

Albeit, from a place of concern for safety, Zoe’s parents position her body as something that is inherently dangerous and sexual. Here, we see the normalisation of blame being subjugated onto the woman, informing her sexual self as something that she has the responsibility of protecting. As boys and men are positioned as innately dangerous, in turn, girls and women are positioned in a way that self-discipline and ‘slut’-surveillance (Townsend, 2019) is integral to their safety. This understanding both amplifies and normalises women’s passive position (Gavey, 2019).

Zoe describes how this sense of surveillance made her feel like:

My body and my personality were two different things...my body was external and how I look is external and used for consumption for somebody else and then, you know, when they get to know your personality is when that issue stops.

Zoe’s parents’ views contributed to Zoe treating her sexual subjectivity as being created by the impression of her body, distinct from her personality. This divide was something Zoe had to navigate in her interactions with men.

Jane shares her experience with a memory of her mother policing her body “like, when I stopped shaving my legs she was like, hated that and was like you have to shave”.

In a similar vein, Ella describes her mother querying her body hair choices:

I never cared about it [body hair] but my mum is evil...I see her look down on my legs and she goes do you want to start shaving? And I go no not really and then it got to a point where she was looking at my legs, and she'd be like are you sure?

Outward indicators of femininity for Ella and Jane were seen as something to be managed and learned. Parents inadvertently positioning their daughters as objects of potential desire (e.g., clean of hair, body surveillance) were one example of the participants showing the complexities of developing sexual subjectivities relationally and in a developmental stage.

The participants tended to have more positive things to say about friends and sexual subjectivity. Zoe explained that she is grateful to be raised in Aotearoa as her peers were overall laid back and that humour regarding sex was “unavoidable...to not have somebody joking about boobs or penises or, you know, like making stupid jokes all the time. So, I think I definitely got introduced to that, like the actual concept of sex, by other peers at school”. Additionally, Lily notices a similar norm where humour is a normalised and expected societal cue when engaging with people saying “you know, if a guy approaches you, or anyone approaches you, it's sort of, you know that back at like that banter, almost, I feel like, you know, just the dry Kiwi humour”

Akin to this lightness, Violet explained that she recently “discovered having conversations in like, a humorous way is quite a fun way to do it as well...like, making jokes about that [sex] with my friends” where Zoe also suggested that learning from friends is “fun” and that it leads to:

Light-hearted, positive conversation...I feel so grateful that I have people that I can just ask any in-depth, gruesome detail about my sex life, and they would give me their honest, funny take...it's really nice to have truthful experiences being shared with each other, so it's not veiled with any sort of rose-tinted glasses, like in a movie or in porn.

Lily's take on speaking about sex with friends and peers is illuminating and highlights a specific, stereotypical Aotearoa societal norm:

I feel like we are quite a reserved society...we are not outspoken sexuality wise...it can be considered quite a foreign thing [talking about sex in reference to Aotearoa culture] ...it's the whole like sticking out thing, right? I don't necessarily know if its tall poppy, maybe

something related...it's just about not wanting to be like, look at me, I'm a sexual being with all of this power.

Zoe also brought up 'tall poppy' syndrome saying "[Aotearoa] definitely has a bit of tall poppy syndrome...if you're doing things outside of the like allotted times or what is considered normal, then you're definitely seen as like, there's a bit of a stain on you". Lily and Zoe's reflections align with Couper's (2022) finding where women in Aotearoa refrained from speaking openly and positively about their sexual pleasure and sexual lives in response to the nations cultural norms that penalise those perceived as tall poppies.

Taken together, the young women's accounts highlight the social conditions through which their sexual subjectivity is influenced and subsequently reproduced in Aotearoa. The young women's experiences with their parents are resoundingly similar in that parents tend to perceive women's sexuality as a form of danger. Although these parents come from a place of protection, this also speaks to the literature found on Aotearoa NZ culture being one that is conservative and *risk* adverse (Brady, 2012; Brickell, 2009). The women's accounts of their experiences with friends suggest that friendships are a space where the sharing of knowledge and information is crucial in gathering and comparing new information about their sexual selves. Interestingly, the mention of humour and light heartedness suggests a potential relationship between Aotearoa's national identity and women's sexual selves, informing an expectation to approach sex, sexuality and communication with humour and light-heartedness' and even perhaps, a sense of being unserious, as evident in previous research (Braun, 2008; Couper, 2022).

Media: TV, Films and Social Media including Pornography

Popular culture was a significant way some of the participants learnt about their sexual selves. Like the discussions surrounding pornography, media acted as a reference offering woman insight into seeing what sex and relationships looked like. Although media typically depicts women problematically through the likes of hyper sexualisation (Gill, 2007), the young women critically renegotiated their understandings of the dominant discourses made available to them.

For example, Zoe speaks on having to actively reject discourse she had learnt in movies as a younger girl saying:

Watching early 2000's movies always showed men being immediately hard, and women don't need any warmup and that it [the penis] just goes straight in and they apparently just cum after 30 seconds...I had to work really hard not to incorporate it into my daily perspective, which is like, women are supposed to be pursued and that men are always pursuers.

Zoe justifies that learning from media didn't necessarily 'help' her but rather gave her "some perspective" about sexual dynamics.

Expanding on nostalgic influences, Violet explains the hyper sexualisation portrayed by pop stars in the early 2000's "...Jessica Simpson, Fergie, Britney Spears...there is this expectation of like being sexual as well as sexualised". Isla explains that media such as TV or movies, felt like a blueprint of what it meant to be a woman "sort of what it means to be a girl and internalising that". She goes on to say how interesting it was to watch media that were centred around:

Teen pregnancies and a lot of like drama around women having sex, you know? It was like oh my god – she's pregnant! Or, oh my god – she's a whore! It was hard to find a show that was like about healthy relationships to sex and your body.

Zoe explained to that she had recently taken a hiatus on social media as it was making her feel like a "bad woman". The messages Zoe was referencing were of a neoliberal feminist nature wherein the narrative was that she must "take control of [my] agency...like, if my man is doing something mildly annoying, it made me feel like I was not a feminist...especially sexually as well". Crucially, Zoe said that this internal pressure "got to the point where it was just so intense that the girl power just started doing the reverse like, it just started blaming me, you know?".

Pornography: Learning, Confidence, and Contradiction

The participants agentially employ their own resources and practices of self as a means of becoming more knowledgeable sexual citizens through pornography as a reference or as a framework to learn from. The young women recognised that most of these references or influences were not necessarily realistic and were aware of the dominant discourses framing the varying types of 'women' the media portrayed. However, it should be noted that some aspects of pornography were not always helpful.

Pornography emerged as a key informal sexual educator for many participants, offering access to images and representation of sex that were otherwise absent from formal education or mainstream media (Meehan, 2023). Access to pornography played a significant role in access, curiosity, and sexual possibilities. Dominant discourses of sexual health and sex education deem pornography dangerous with the implication that young people engage passively with pornographic material and that they are then vulnerable and at risk of its effects (Meehan, 2023, 2025). While this outcome has merit, the young women's accounts below suggest an active engagement with pornography, as opposed to a passive one.

Pornography was one of the first places Jane pursued her own sexual education, describing its role in her life, as both significant and positive. As opposed to cultural discourse which positions porn as inherently negative (Meehan, 2023) or as something that can only benefit men's sexual desires (Ashton et al., 2020), Jane's relationship with pornography has:

Played a huge role in my understanding of sex...I think it's a great way to explore your sexuality in a safe way and that you are in control and you can stop and start and try different things...like watching like blow-job videos and like hand-job videos like makes me feel like a beast in the bedroom – like, it makes me feel so confident.

Here, pornography takes an educative role, one that fills in those knowledge gaps that the de-eroticised content from formal school education fails to satisfy (Allen, 2003, 2005). Jane articulates that knowledge is power and through engaging in pornography she develops a sense of competence and control within sexual encounters. Jane's narrative positions knowledge as intimately tied to power, where access to sexual scripts, even if they are male centered in pleasure, enables a more confident engagement with intimacy. Pornography becomes a site of self-formation, contributing to the formation of a sexual subject who is knowledgeable and self-assured.

Ava's narrative further demonstrates similar themes of education where she highlights her like for pornography due to its explicit detail. Through pornography, Ava was more readily able to understand her desires and thus self-identifies as hypersexual:

When I was fourteen, I started reading erotica, and then I got pretty swiftly into like watching porn. I would watch like weird porn...you know like...bad porn. I identified kind of like in my 18th, 19th year as hypersexual because I was really into porn from a young age...I just loved the scope and the diversity and stuff and I was like, that's what I want, and this is like very

young as well like when I was learning all these things, just from fucking porn...I was just like so fascinated .

Pornography grants young people a representation of sex that they may have not been aware of prior as well as access to detailed imagery of genitalia which may be useful for young people in developing sexual scripts (Meehan, 2023; Townsend, 2019). Explicit representation of sex is another element lacking in formal sexual education resulting in another gap in young people's sexual learning process. For example, pornography was the first place Ella saw two women having sex and describes the representation as a significant awakening into the world of the male gaze:

I didn't know women could be with women...I'd seen it and I knew it was a thing in porn and I knew that it was something that people joked about but I genuinely because the kind of media I was being exposed to and the lack of information I had, I thought that when women, like had sex with women, that's for men like I thought that's literally what it meant...I didn't know it was possible for women to enjoy that and engage in that together

Ella describes her experience watching pornography in her younger years as positioned in "watching it with academic interest...I was like, hmmm, this is interesting...it was like my body was experiencing arousal, but I didn't know what it was". Taken together, Ella's narratives highlight the representational access where education is otherwise silent, particularly around pleasure, queerness, and women's sexuality.

Whilst acknowledging the positive aspects of pornography the participants also were very aware of the negatives. Ella, who earlier explained that although porn is an effective source for education, it also offers a "disturbing" view of sex:

A lot of it is really intense... watching fisting and I'm like oh my god! You guys! I have to do this one day! Like that's how I felt. I'm going to have to do all of this and I can't believe I have too. I have to do all of this soon and it took me a really long time to realize no, actually, you don't ever have to engage in fisting! So, that was, that gave me a very skewed education of what sex was...and I definitely saw some videos on there that I was like...this is not scripted...this is like, legitimately – I'm watching someone get sexually assaulted.

Here, Ella's narrative echoes similar concerns health and feminist researchers (Ashton et al., 2020; Lamb, 2010) raise, where pornography depicts a limited representation, centring physically dominant, male-centric discourses. Through this specific pornography Ella is

watching, she is learning about sex through a lens that values men's inherent right to sexual fulfilment and domination (Gavey, 2019). Ella's belief that she will one day, *have* to partake in fisting highlights the well-cited discourse of men having control in sexual encounters versus women's passive and responsive sex drive (Impett & Pelau, 2002). Even in the face of fear or danger, women may believe they are still expected to perform certain sexual acts. Further, this too highlights the potential negative effects porn have on one's idea of sex such as the normalisation of sex that mimics sexual assault. Here, for intimacy, women need to objectify themselves to both compete with and abide by the norms of pornography (Ashton et al., 2020). This objectification is further exemplified in Ella's narrative where she states that pornography has directly influenced how she "performs" in sexual encounters:

I need to be seen as like a good sexual partner. Noises, I find that difficult because okay moaning, cool, good with that but took me a while to be comfortable with it until it took me being in a sexual situation that I was like this is fine because all those you know women that moan in porn like, they're just hamming it up like that. That's not real life ... so I just thought moaning was a performative thing that you do. So, the first time I moaned during sex, and I didn't mean too I was like oh, it's a real thing? It's okay to do that. Then it was kind of ok but there is like, always going to be in the back of my mind that you like need to moan right.

Ella's concern with moaning 'right' depicts this pressure of the up for it sexuality where in exchange for being seen as a good, desiring partner, there is a pressure to perform to and for the male gaze (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008). To produce the best version of herself, Ella agentically employs practices of the self to accommodate the prescribed norms. Interestingly, assuming Ella is experiencing genuine pleasure as possibly evidenced through her involuntary moan, she actively corrects her sincere pleasure to exist within the realm of what she believes is expected of her - "need to moan right". This dialogue is compelling in exploring Ella's sexual subjectivity in that it reveals how moments of embodied pleasure are mediated through dominant scripts of heterosexual desirability. However, what is interesting to note is that this dynamic also highlights how sexual subjectivity is not as simple as presence versus absence. Rather, Ella's 'performativity' does not show a lack of sexual subjectivity but her attempt at actively negotiating it. In this way, sexual subjectivity does not appear as this internal truth and/or state but as something continually negotiated within expectations of femininity.

Julia's narrative centers pornographies influence on certain sexual encounters saying that men have tried to do "forceful blow jobs" and "choke her" and when she has explicitly resisted, they persist and use domineering language like "you're never going to have sex with anyone ever again, you're mine". Julia explains that this was a common occurrence in her casual sex days and says that "it's definitely a porn thing... Like, I think it's a real dominant/submission thing that stems from porn."

Julia argues that porn has had an influence on her sexual encounters and Aotearoa NZ masculinity in general explaining that:

There's such a need to dominate and you know, you bring in stuff like, I'm not saying porn is a problem. I think, you know, I'm not against porn but you bring in the porn that is available to people who it tells them like to be masculine and dominant. Like, these are the things you can do. I think it's a combination of that.

Similarly, Ava extends here on her experience with men in casual sexual situations and how their masculinity has also been informed by porn at a micro level:

A woman on his arm to like, complete his outfit...like hey guys, I'm getting laid [I'm] so casual I've been watching all this porn and now I think I know how to have sex, and I don't even want to converse with the women I'm sleeping with either...um so I think women are expected to be yeah like submissive and almost like innocent

Ava and Julia highlight a gendered sexual identity "is historically entrenched within New Zealand society" (Meehan, 2025, p. 722). The participants pointed to knowing men learn about sex through pornography and this is impacting the way they are expecting women to have sex.

As it stands, there is a significant disconnect between the versions available to young women educationally and those available socially and through media (Allen, 2005). Based on the narratives above, the young women have drawn on pornography to fill some knowledge gaps – namely, as access to an explicit representation of sex. However, Ava, Julia and Ella are not without a critical lens. Here, we can see that the supposed risks of exposure to pornography are somewhat mitigated by the women's agentic and cognisant interactions with pornography – even affording them a frame of reference to what they will not or do not like.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explored the dominant discourses, symbolic resources and social contexts that shape the young women's sexual subjectivities in Aotearoa NZ. For the participants sexual knowledge was not passively digested but actively negotiated through multiple, often conflicting, sites of learning. Further, the influence of neoliberal discourse, which positions young women as responsible, self-managing subjects tasked with regulating their own sexual risk, behaviour, and desirability in multiple contexts is significant throughout these accounts.

Chapter Six: Learning Her Embodied Sexual Self

This chapter explores how young women's first consensual sexual encounters demonstrate both determination and agency in the ongoing production of their sexual subjectivities as they navigate, accommodate and resist prevailing norms. I explore women's embodied experiences when engaging in sexual situations that they did not classify as romantic relationships/encounters and examine these narratives through dominant discourses such as neoliberalism, the male sex drive, and various subject positions such as the up for it woman (Farvid & Braun, 2014; Gavey, 2019). I then explore the women's narrations when learning about themselves in romantic relationships – a dynamic that produces both positive and negative experiences of sexual learning. Lastly, I explore unwanted sex, sexual coercion and the young women's experiences with consent or lack thereof which were often rooted in inequitable dynamics, such as gendered sexual scripts that position men as dominant and women as passive. I end by exploring the participants experiences with entitlement to pleasure through voice, and masturbation. Across these narratives, both the embodied and symbolic 'learning' dimensions, as explored in Chapter Five, deeply intersect.

Sexual Experiences: Negotiating Sex, Self, and Social Norms

This theme captures four sub-narratives: virginity, casual sex, relationships, and unwanted experiences. For all participants, virginity functioned as a significant marker within their sexual subjectivity, representing a culturally meaningful transition into becoming sexual. Participants also reflected on their experiences of casual sex and the ways they negotiated dominant discourses surrounding those encounters. These experiences were predominantly shaped by the male sex drive and the societal norm of being up for it (Farvid & Braun, 2014; Gavey, 2019). Participants then recounted experiences of unwanted sex and sexual coercion, highlighting the complex intersections of agency, consent, power and social expectations within their sexual lives.

Virginity Loss

All participants talked of their first partnered sexual experience and losing their virginity. The emotions and dominant discourses inspiring them to have sex varied between being a rite of passage or a normal aspect of life. For Violet, Lily and Ella, feelings of embarrassment about not yet having had sex appeared to stem less from personal desire and

more from social comparisons with peers and broader cultural expectations surrounding the timing of sexual debut.

Violet felt unphased about sex until she started “making friends with people who had sexual histories” who, by proxy, influenced her to question if it was embarrassing to be a virgin at 18. Violet describes her first sexual experience being uncomfortable, anxiety inducing and ultimately regretful. Violet explains that her sexual partner discovered her status as a virgin and attempted to back out, with him claiming that it would be a “big deal” for her and that if they had sex she would “fall in love” with him. Lily also felt peer pressure and initially felt that the loss of her virginity was insignificant until she started to notice her friends equate virginity with shame. For Lily, her motivation was aligned with the view that losing one’s virginity was important for social standing, not an intrinsic desire:

I can't be 19 or, like, 18 and like, be a virgin. That's so embarrassing. I remember thinking I was not that phased. I just feel like; I guess if it happens it will happen. But then I had all these friends around me with the same narrative of like they were so stressed about being virgins. It was just this thing, you know, this label.

Ella’s interpretation of virginity loss is also aligned with the desire to inhabit a socially valued sexual identity seen through her desire to get her virginity loss “over with” not because she desired sex but because she believed she would feel “lifted once it’s finally out of the way”. Virginity for Ella signified a digression from the norm believing its presence signified she would be perceived as:

The kind of person that like doesn't have sex... I was equating being a virgin with being scared, being someone that's afraid and that is something that's not good to be. Like, the best kind of person is, like, someone that's confident and self-assured, not someone that's scared of like normal human things.

For Ella in particular, even in the absence of readiness, she felt compelled to shed what virginity represented to her – fear, childness and/or being a “loser”. Reflecting on her experience, Ella noted that she expected to feel transformed “I’m a completely new woman” – however, she noted nothing of substance changed except some physical discomfort the following day. The symbolic burden of virginity was what felt most significant as she no longer had to “deal with the fact that I’m someone who hasn’t had sex before”. This outcome potentially highlights the *faux* sense of power that comes with the terms and conditions of this subject; the feeling of power and desirability is so fleeting that it highlights how unstable

and easily dismantled dominant subject positions may be. Here, we can see the way Ella is both an agentic subject by choosing her way to be – a sexually liberated, up for it woman – and how she is too, determined by specific dominant discourses that make her feel pressure to be a certain way.

For Lily, Violet and Ella, a key practice of self, involved relinquishing the status of virgin in exchange for an up for it sexuality that is culturally rewarded, socially validated and framed as more stylish and fulfilling. Here, we can observe the young women's investment in their technology of sexiness (Evans & Riley, 2014) whereby their focus is to transform themselves into non-virgins to ultimately explore a more celebrated sexual position. Additionally, Ava, Zoe, and Julia all viewed their virginity loss as a rite of passage with Ava saying it “was exciting! It's like, oh I have sex now!” and Julia saying, “it was super sweet...really wanted to do it...big significant thing”. Zoe explained her first time as positive saying that “I always think about it as I'm very lucky to have had that as my first consensual experience”.

During the interview process, I was surprised to hear that every woman used the word “lucky” when describing a sexual event where abuse, violence or coercion was not present. After both Ava and Julia used the word lucky to explain their first consensual experiences, I queried – why is it that we use the word lucky? Ava explained that “I feel like there's so much that can just be like, not very good...using me...or not caring about my pain”. The word lucky in this context does not reflect chance but rather points to a cultural narrative that tell women their pleasure is secondary, their safety is fragile and their sexual becoming is negotiated through risk.

Casual Sex Culture within Aotearoa: I'm Up for It, right?

This section explores two interrelated aspects of the participants accounts of casual sex culture in Aotearoa. First, the participants described this culture as something that women must learn to navigate. Second, the participants spoke about the work involved in positioning themselves within this culture in the ‘right’ way. This right way was commonly aligned with the up for it subject position, characterised by being sexually knowing, confident and empowered (Evans & Riley, 2014; Gavey, 2019).

Ava's narrative talks to the complexities of what she has noticed regarding the sexual culture around her. Ava firstly introduces the concept of women expecting to be casual sexual

creatures but to be accepted, you cannot cross the threshold as too sexual. Her narrative speaks to casual sex culture in Aotearoa, specifically how it is frustrating:

The concept of casual sex blows my mind. Like, um, you know, like, non-committal sex is fine. Like, you know, casual - that's fine. . .but we have to have enough trust to be able to talk about, like, our sexual health status and like all this stuff, and people just are so fucking flippant about it, and it pisses me off!

Ava theorises why there is such a significant expectation on casualness in Aotearoa saying that:

The nonchalance epidemic is something that I have been really fucking grappling with...people are so intent on like not caring and pretending they don't care...like you're literally putting your dick inside me, like I think we should have some kind of emotional rapport and vulnerability. . . kiwi culture is like avoidance and indirection...I think it stems from the small-town nature of New Zealand and how separate it is from the rest of the world... this is an experience I know many women are familiar with ... everyone is so casual...because it's cool to not care.

Ava continues to divulge into Aotearoa's culture and the significance it has on the nation's sexual culture stating that the size of the country contributes to how "everyone knows each other" and consequentially, your "reputation sticks to you". Additionally, Ava believes that such values inform "bros drinking at the rugby...the All Blacks is like this thing projected onto everyone's mind...macho aggression and nonchalance...". The "nonchalance epidemic" coined by Ava signals more than just emotional avoidance. Within this regime, communication, casual emotional investment and vulnerability are seen as excessive. Nonchalance then, becomes a mechanism through which heterosexual scripts are maintained – ultimately preserving masculine scripts while still expecting feminine availability and passivity.

Although dominant discourses position men as sexually active and women, sexually passive, Ava describes a cultural shift wherein men retain sexual access while abandoning emotional up-keep. Here, nonchalance does not rid men's sexual agency but rather it further intensifies women's responsibility in navigating their reputation and safety while maintaining the appearance of an effortless, passive sexual woman. Through this specific cultural script of casualness, informed by Aotearoa's notable Kiwi culture, Ava argues that her sexuality is only accepted within narrow boundaries. Ava rejects that sex is inherently special but expects

a level of communication when sharing her sexual self with someone. Her frustration reveals how sexual subjectivity is constrained not only by acts, but a cultural tone deemed acceptable within heterosexual norms in Aotearoa.

Jane's narrative echoes this cultural trend saying:

I reckon the sex culture in this country is so male forward and maybe it's because we [Aotearoa] are obsessed with farming or something but it gives all the emotionally perturbed men in this country an inflated sense of self...all the guys my age at least are so bad with sharing their feelings, talking, and communicating about simple things...we as a country put them on pedestals so they are just allowed to act like nothing matters.

Lily shares this narrative, stating that Aotearoa is a “reserved society...especially sexuality wise... young people rely on drinking to sort of alleviate these self-imposed restrictions...you know because it's the whole like, sticking out right?”. By describing Aotearoa as reserved, Lily situates sexual communication within a realm of emotional restraint. Here, openly communicating runs the risk of violating the norms of modesty and humility suggesting that being sexually confident may be socially policed, rendering open communication as potentially excessive, possibly, further intensifying the expectation for women to appear passive. Overall, Lily describes this:

You can't be casual, it's [casual sex] not like a sacred thing but my body isn't something to be given to someone...maybe you get caught up in the moment and you're like oh this is fun and then it's not and you're like oh maybe I shouldn't have done that...I didn't enjoy that...casual sex is like, a funny term because it's not really a casual thing to do.

Lily's narrative highlights the disjuncture between embodiment and dominant discourses around casual sex. While the concept of Western casual sex is typically framed as low stakes (Townsend, 2019), Lily's narrative suggests that the casual sexual encounters she has participated in have not felt emotionally light. Lily's talk suggests an awareness of bodily investment that emerges through embodied experience and hindsight, contradicting the notion of sexual practice as relaxed and effortless. Lily also argues that alcohol is a socially accepted crutch that works to briefly halt restrictions imposed by Aotearoa's social environment. Ava extends upon this reliance of alcohol saying “one night stand culture, the involvement of alcohol...influences this lack of discernment to think that this is cool like being low maintenance is good and desirable, and so we as woman, it's like being easy is easier...”

The descriptions of casualness, and the rejection of overt communication was a dynamic all women experienced during or post casual sexual encounters. Overall, women held disdain for this heteropatriarchal notion of casual as it positioned the development of their sexual selves as something that should exist under the radar and in reference to males. The other aspect of casualness was articulated by all the participants as discomfort with being perceived as one-dimensionally such as “slut” or a “prude”. For example, when Isla reflected on her most ‘sexual’ time in her life, she was labelled a “home wrecker and a slut...people being like you’re having sex with a lot of people, like a dirty awful thing to be doing because you’re causing suffering and hurt for the guys who I was having sex with”.

Being perceived erroneously was felt at some point or another with by all the young women, with Ava sharing, “there’s this whole thing like being innocent, but then if you’re not innocent, they’re like sexy and the guy wants to have sex but then you’re a slut – like a major paradox”. Julia extends this point by saying “I grew up with men wanting to have sex with me but then also being told by them I was a slut – like these men want you for casual sex, so what do they want?”.

Jane describes the feeling as “a bit frustrating...I feel they [men] perceive you as soon as you do something and then it’s really hard to be like a complete, dynamic person...”. Jane goes on to compare women’s general openness again by saying “[women] are very aware of like, the dichotomy and like...everything can be true at the same time – you can be more than one thing at once”.

These narratives on dichotomy and slut shaming align with the narrow parameters of a women’s sexuality as articulated by Powell’s (2010) research where she noticed that the “new rules supporting an active female sexuality may themselves contribute to existing pressures on young women in talking the fine line between frigid and slut” (p. 50). The unease with assumption and subject positions was articulated by every woman in this study, with Isla summing it up:

When someone is physically interacting with me and they are not quite understanding what I’m actually about or what I actually desire and they just have this other idea of who I am, that feels uncomfortable. You have this word: woman. What I mean when I say I’m a woman is like specific, but then like, what Richard down the road says what a woman is feels very different...so, in sex if I’ve established that this person sees me in the way that I want them too I will feel like my organic sexual self...you have your own sexuality and identity versus

like how its perceived by others and it feels like the tension I feel only comes when it meets the outside – like, when I’m having to explain my sexual self to a partner or like demonstrate in some way or like perform it...there is just this tension with how my sexual self can be perceived by men and I feel protective of it...I feel empowered when I feel genuine power like when I’m actually being myself, not when I’m just like responding to something he wants.

Isla summarises an all-too-common narrative across scholarship in this area (Allen, 2005; Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Gavey, 2019; Townsend, 2019) demonstrating discourses that situate women as ‘empowered’ yet still having their behaviours shaped by heteronormative scripts. Zoe describes an era where consistent casual sex “made me feel really powerful...I’m like yeah, like I’m so hot... that sort of phase really just made me try and gain control again through having sex”. Zoe elaborates on this sense of control saying that she:

Can control what men see me as...I feel like I can control their desire for me...I can have some malleability of like turning on the power and then turning off the objectification sometimes and then like switching it around sometimes...so like, objectifying myself for something, like a guy that I want or turning it off when there’s a guy I don’t want.

Zoe also queries why she is “worrying about this? Is it just that I need attention...it feels really embarrassing”. After reflecting on her casual sex era, Zoe asked herself why she was sleeping with people she thought were “horrible”. Zoe continues:

Why am I doing this? Like for what reason? For their benefit? No! It was suddenly, felt like I do not feel powerful anymore. I just suddenly feel like a bit of an idiot – empty...soulless...I decided to stop having sex with all other people and that’s when I met my [current] partner.

In Zoe’s narratives about casual sex there was a delayed realisation that she was not being truthful to herself. Although she felt powerful when instigating the sex and power from feeling desired, the sex itself often felt disappointing, and that power cruelly evaporated. Instead of feeling like the active subject (which she initially did), she ended up feeling like the passive object within the dynamics of these heterosexual encounters, a common phenomenon observed in sexuality studies (Rome & Lambert, 2020).

This internal feeling of power is further evidenced through Ella’s description where she argues that some women want and need to be perceived positively “sometimes the need to be perceived overrides the need for actual pleasure and enjoyment”. Ella uses contradictory

wording showing the complexities of navigating this position – “sacrificing myself” versus “tool to reap a benefit” and “perceived need to seem sexy” versus “I have power”.

Sacrificing myself through my body or my sexuality, it is not just in service to a man, it is also a tool to reap a benefit...it just usually is something much more complex and abstract than sexual pleasure, which seems to be for women, quite common to have these more layered wants and desires...sex is very easy to give...if I'm desperate to feel like a man sees me as cool, fun, sexy, interesting...I just need to give him what he wants...there is a sense that, actually, I'm on top in this situation. Like, I get the sense that, like, I know that you're a man and you're supposed to be the, I don't know, like, the driver of this, or the most important player in this, but because I want this to happen, because I'm participating, I actually have power in this situation.

Here, Ella articulates agency in her decision making. However, this agency is fluid, slippery and relational. It is negotiated in relation to her male partner/s and shaped by broader heterosexual scripts. Within this narration, Ella's desire to enjoy and have sex is rooted in the desire to seem sexy. Her power in this sexual encounter is predicated on participation and wilfully giving the male partner what he wants. In this 'sacrificial exchange', Ella articulates that because she is willing to have sex with this person, she has the power, because she is giving him what he wants: sex. Her power emerges through the logic of exchange: because she is able to provide something culturally constructed as highly valuable to men (e.g., sex), she feels positioned as the one who ultimately enables the encounter. In this framing, sexual participation itself becomes a form of leverage.

Ella then reflects that she is not alone in navigating the up for it subject position; expressing this feeling is common for many women. She then positions herself as seeking enjoyment by not wanting to seem lame.

I think the biggest thing, to be honest, which is a lot of women, especially, talk about, is I don't know. I'm committed to this is that sometimes the need, the perceived need to seem sexy and cool and whatever, overrides the need for actual pleasure and enjoyment. So, like, I feel the need to be like, I, you know, I'm not going to have sex with someone and have them leave that situation thinking I'm like, lame.

Ella moves in and out of the up for it neoliberal subject position where her sexuality is seen as a commodity and as a currency to exchange for being seen as desirable and powerful.

Nevertheless, this feeling of participation-equals-power was met with personal anguish by Ella:

I feel shame, because there is a voice in my head going you suck! Like you can't even look after yourself because you're so desperate to like just have these men think that you're chill and cool and sexy and fun and that you're just willing to hand over your body, like it doesn't matter. You're a loser for that because you can't look after yourself and your safety so that's pretty much how I feel every time.

Ella's strong language in framing her sense of shame (you suck) and her position of loser highlight the cognitive and emotional work that goes into deciding and following through with an up for it subject position.

I'm already feeling like I've essentially just tricked myself into thinking that I have power in that situation, just because I have this illusion of choice and I almost think that me feeling like I have power, because I'm, like, being sexually desired, and I'm choosing to do this in the moment I think that's sort of a mask, because then afterwards I just get the sense of, well, actually, well for this is specific to me, I guess, but this realisation that or like, yeah, I felt really like top dog I felt powerful and desired when, like, he was eating me out, and then he just decided to have sex with me, and I didn't really have a say in that and then immediately afterwards, I go, again, you've tricked yourself into thinking that you have more power than him.

Ella's narrative is powerful here for exploring the complex dynamic that young women are navigating with their bodies, agency, power and their sexual selves in some heteronormative encounters. In the absence of genuine, positive, empowered female sexuality, Ella presents the painful reality of this "illusion" whereby women are still left to abide by the rules of a male sex drive where the up for it subject positioned as a trick. Ella's sense of being "on top" is still contingent upon male desire and recognition. The benefits she describes are not primarily erotic pleasure, but affective and symbolic rewards: feeling desirable, cool, sexy, interesting, or chosen. As such, her agency operates within a postfeminist framework where empowerment is experienced *through* self-sacrifice, performance, and the management of male desire, rather than outside of it. The power she articulates is therefore ambiguous and unstable; while she experiences herself as agentic because she is willingly participating, that participation is simultaneously organised around giving men what they want in order to secure validation, intimacy, or self-worth in return.

Ultimately, Ella is left with this feeling of shame, that this time, her sexual prowess did not pay off, and that her performance was not good enough, reinforcing the up for it pressure to evaluate sexual encounters in terms of performance and adequacy. A retrospective ‘taking of responsibility’ in a poignant neoliberal fashion (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). Within this framework, sexual success is measured through feeling desired or valued.

Within these accounts, the participants framed Aotearoa’s sex culture for young people as casual and noted perceived expectations of how to act within these bounds. Casualness was framed as a cultural expectation that required women to perform emotional restraint and sexual availability while also avoiding being overly sexual. The up for it subject position consistently prevailed, reflecting a highly contradictory landscape whereby women were expected to be sexually agentic, confident, and desirable, while still navigating the persistent regulation of femininity and heterosexual norms. While some sexual experiences were described as initially empowering through feeling desired or in control, these experiences were often contingent on male recognition and shaped by neoliberal logics of self-responsibility and performance. The up for it subject position was utilised strategically by participants, employed through the concept of technologies of self and technologies of sexiness (Evans & Riley, 2014; Rome & Lambert, 2020). However, these experiences were layered and contradictory, existing within ongoing tensions between desire and performance, empowerment and self-surveillance, and power and shame.

Sexual Self in Intimate Relationships

There are two components to this section. Firstly, I begin with women's narratives of negotiating heteronormative and dominant patriarchal social norms. Then I move to intimacy and learning where I specifically explore the participants experiences in heteronormative relationships and their influence on their sexual selves.

Male Sex Drive and its “Taking”

Weaved throughout the interviews was common occurrence of heterosexual encounters feeling highly gendered and inequitable. Further, these interactions exude examples of pleasure gaps.

Julia states: *“why did I bother, why was I so vulnerable with this person who doesn’t care if I’m having a good time? [I] don’t believe sex is like this holy thing...but it’s inherently vulnerable”*.

Julia describes her pleasure and sexual self being minimised and somewhat, erased. Within the bounds of this heterosexual interaction, reciprocity was not written onto the script. The male partners lack of concern for her pleasure highlights that casual sex is not neutral but rather, structured. This highlights a common contradiction where women are taught and positioned to be sexually liberated and enjoy casual sex yet, the actual ongoings within the sex are unevenly distributed (Gavey, 2019). This narrative speaks directly to previous research that suggests ‘casual’ heterosexual sex is predominantly centred around a man’s pleasure and a man’s desires (Rome & Lambert, 2020). Equally, this narrative highlights the falsity that is the neo-liberal, up for it subject where Julia is expected and encouraged to engage in casual sex for herself and for her pleasure but is met with conditions that do not translate to the proclamations of said subject position (e.g., desire, abundance of pleasure, power, control).

Isla extends this sense of inequality when describing her experience with casual sex explaining that:

Men have made an assumption that it’s about sex or like maybe I’ve tried to communicate I want some affection or physical connection and then they assume this could only mean PNV³ sex...I just wanted some closeness, but the ultimate closeness is seen as having sex.

As discussed earlier, through the scholarship of Gavey (2019) and Powell (2010), the coital imperative is as described in Isla’s narrative – the most natural form of heterosexual sex. In Čierna & Bianchini’s (2024) study, women explained that good and healthy sex was when they had control over sexual scripts and when they felt comfortable being able to engage in sex that was not only phallic-centred. This phallocentric imperative is accounted for by gendered sexual scripts that prioritise men’s sexual pleasure and orgasm. The young women in this study consistently describe their unease with sex that is strongly aligned with heteronormative script centred around penises. Isla extends this by stating that she “doesn’t experience this feeling with women” but with men she describes this:

Element of like, I’m giving you what you want...transactional part is prominent when having sex with men...when I have sex with a woman, I always feel spiritually safe because I feel like there’s an understanding for better or for worse, we’ve been through similar sort of socialisation

³Acronym standing for penis-in-vagina sex

When I asked Isla to qualify where this innate feeling yields from, she explained that it might be the nature of “a penis going into a vagina, like the act of itself can evoke like – it’s a taking in a way...with women there is more of a natural balance...we see each other as we are – as people!”. Isla expands saying that she does not think men “necessarily perpetuate this consciously” highlighting the naturalised notion of the male sex drive (Powell, 2010). Here, Isla opens up the discourse of appeasement in a way that sacrifices her genuine desires saying that she can gauge when men are, “horny...or want to have sex...I could just appease his needs, but I hate that – it’s awful...you are a thing to have sex with”.

Violet endorses the transactional nature of sex at times explaining that she struggles with “straight [sexual] interactions” in the way that it can feel like “an exchange, and it feels like you always lose the exchange...you are the object in that scenario, and they’re getting what they want, but you’re not...it feels gross”.

Julia underscores this heteropatriarchal notion that men in casual sexual encounters are not invested in women's pleasure saying that:

They are like ok we’ve fucked; we are good now. And it’s like, what about me? What about my pleasure? They don’t really care in casual sex I found heterosexual men do not care about my pleasure, so it is hard to explore your sexual self and learn what empowers you in that kind of context.

For the participants the male sex drive was significant in women’s negotiation of their desire, pleasure and in turn, their sexual selves. Further, while women are entitled to their pleasure, their pleasure is minimised through the normalisation of dominant discourses centred around male sex drive and their needs (Rome & Lambert, 2020).

Intimacy and learning

Most of the participants claimed that they learnt the most about their sexual selves positively in their respective relationships. Jane explained that her long-term relationship was informative and distinctly different to more casual encounters:

[I could] try a lot of things...you can do the normal [sexual] stuff and just like tweak it here and there instead of like this is a completely different person and completely different way of having sex...so that was sort of a cool way to sort of like very deliberately experience different things...sometimes though, it did feel like I was a sex doll, like I was being poked and prodded.

Jane's narrative of feeling like a sex doll at times resonates with existing scholarship (Powell, 2010) by which women in heterosexual relationships can feel pressured to engage in unwanted sex as a means of relationship maintenance and fulfilling normative expectations of being a 'good' partner.

Julia also talks of her long-term relationship with her fiancé:

My fiancé... [is] someone who is caring and attentive to your sexual needs and your desires....if you had a partner who wasn't attentive and wasn't interested in your pleasure, then this [comfortability] wouldn't happen ... the best sex has been with my fiancé, I just find casual sex that it's rare to find men who are interested in your pleasure...they are in it for their pleasure.

Julia's narrative highlights the relational aspect of sexual encounters and that for genuine comfortability in her sexual experiences, attentiveness and an interest in her pleasure is crucial. Here, good sex is conceptualised as equitable, rather than one-sided. At the same time, Julia's account points to the challenges women face in cultivating their sexual selves in encounters where reciprocity is not always present, and where their pleasure may not be consistently prioritised.

Isla argues that in her relationships she has learnt about herself:

During sex and being intimate with someone and becoming more comfortable with my body the more I navigate sex...sometimes, I think the most intimate and educational ways I've learnt about my sexual self is the intimate things that happen in a relationship that aren't just sex so that's also been helpful

Isla's narrative highlights the generative and continuously evolving nature of sexual subjectivity, with embodied sexual experiences contributing to an increasing sense of comfort, confidence and familiarity with her body and sexual self.

Zoe explained that the most significant way she has learnt about her sexual self is with her romantic partner, noting that she no longer feels the need to seek external sources to understand her body or "what makes me feel good" but still spoke to challenges of having to learn how to negotiate being the one with the higher sex drive and how this made her uncomfortable in her heterosexual relationship. Julia echoed this experiential framing, describing sexual learning as something that happens through "bearing down with someone to learn about your body but that only works if your partner is someone who is caring and

attentive to your sexual needs and your desires and how your body works...”. Similarly, Violet conceptualised her sexual learning as a positive:

[A] reciprocal interaction... It’s a relationship, right? It’s about discovering yourself and also like discovering another person...a lot of my sexual growth, it came from me feeling safe in that space with another person, and someone who was more comfortable already with their own sexuality.

The participants within this study most often described learning about their sexual selves in positive and meaningful ways within the context of emotionally intimate relationships. Overall, these narratives suggest women feel more comfortable to explore their sexual selves when there is an element of trust, reciprocity, and comfortability (Powell, 2010). Sexual learning here is framed as an embodied and relational process, shaped through interactions with trusted partners, reinforcing the idea that sexual subjectivity is relational, and generative not predetermined or fixed (Townsend, 2019). However, a few of these accounts also revealed ongoing negotiations within heterosexual relationships including discomfort around gendered sexual scripts.

Unwanted Sex and Sexual Coercion

I now explore the participants experiences of pressured and coerced, or unwanted sex. As discussed in Chapter One, I utilise Liz Kelly’s ‘*Continuum of Sexual Violence*’ (1989) to navigate the participants experiences of sexual violence. The upcoming stories, albeit distressing, highlight the complexity of consent as it is negotiated in practice. Further, as will be explored, the line between wanted and unwanted sexual encounters becomes indistinct as the participants describe sexual situations that proceeded in the presence of dominant discourses. Within these encounters, the participants discussed passivity, silence and expectation rather than mutual desiring; reflecting what Gavey (2019) argues as the cultural scaffolding of rape.

Isla describes this continuum of sexual violence by highlighting that consent is much more than yes:

Some of the times I’ve had sex, you could define it as sexual assault...when there’s been sex and I haven’t really wanted it, there hasn’t been an explicit expression of consent or otherwise but like we’ve ended up having sex...it’s almost like I’ve been passive...maybe it wasn’t their intention to sexually assault me but you could define that as sexual assault

because of the nature of it, the nature being, they didn't ask for permission and they did it anyway.

This narrative reiterates the problems that occur within a two-fold understanding of consent. Isla's talk refers to the normalisation of the male sex drive. In this case, Isla's 'consent' was her passivity. Instead of an explicit yes or a no, the yes is dressed up as apathy – in silence, the coital imperative is the constant. Isla's understanding of this encounter could be defined as "sexual assault" even though she believes this was not her partner's intention, highlighting the naturalisation of the male sex drive (Powell, 2010). Isla continues saying that "when someone sort of like enforces an act or something during sex, every single time it happens, agency feels like it completely dissolves and it's really disempowering".

Further, Lily shares her experience in a heterosexual encounter:

It's not, like an un-consensual situation at all but I can't really think of another word to put on it, because you're sort of like, he got what he wanted, he finished, and then there's sort of like nothing given to me. It's sort of just like, you know that once again, just there I am there to serve him ...you're disappointed in yourself after that.

Lily's qualification of the sex not being *unconsensual* but feeling technically *un-consensual* lies at the very meeting of active masculinity and passive femininity where his pleasure and desire take precedence over hers "there's sort of like nothing given to me". Crucially here, Lily feels disappointed in herself, exercising this "after-the-fact" agency, a common occurrence, as argued by Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras (2008) in how their participants made sense of unwanted sex.

Julia elaborates on this concept of self-surveillance and self-reflection and how agency is learned alongside doing:

[My] ex-boyfriend was like, giving me a forceful choking blow job and I look back on that and I'm incredibly disappointed that I didn't stop that situation...I didn't say actually fuck you, I don't want to have sex with you anymore. I just kind of ended up going along with it. It was when I was 17, I had never had education around consent, never had education around boundaries. I hadn't yet learned how to voice what I wanted or what I didn't want in a sexual context. So, yeah, I try to have compassion for myself, and I take it as a learning experience like I've since said to men like don't do that, please stop – absolutely not!

Julia's sense of self-blame indicates that she believes she should have known better. She justifies her "going along with it" as a learning experience – highlighting the normalised concept that women likely must face violence to learn how to voice their boundaries (Gavey, 2019; Powell, 2010). Interestingly, there is also a notion of experience, maturity and education in the aiding of one's voice and boundaries. This illuminates the generative nature of sexual subjectivity as an ongoing process shaped through the intersection of symbolic knowledge (or lack thereof) and embodied experience, where learning is often produced retrospectively through doing (Bryant & Schofield, 2007). This highlights the importance of providing useful education to women early on in life regarding the complexities of consent and agency.

Ella shares her story with me, explaining that she was sexually abused as a young child "I don't have memories of it because I was so young" but that she has felt an innate awareness of it her entire life and has felt as though her "body is something that can be used as a stepping stone". Ella continues by saying "I think because I began with such a strange start, it wasn't even a feeling it just felt like I knew for a fact that sex was something I had to do". She continues:

I think that sex and engaging in anything in that space in a real and tangible way, in my head, there's something really - it's this kind of pure and creative thing. But in reality, I think it feels like sacrificing myself. It feels like - it's I think, because of the situations that I have been in, I think there is a world where it is something beautiful, but in reality, I think that a lot of the time it just feels like a necessary evil in pursuit of receiving connection or getting an interaction over with. So, I think, yeah, if I was to put it in one word, I think it would just be sacrificial, if anything.

Through Ella's unpacking of body and self, there is a clear weight on sacrifice. This sense of sacrificial sex is reminiscent of normative ideals where women are expected to manage a man's sexual drive, 'giving in' to unwanted sex for a 'greater good' such as relationship maintenance or abiding by dominant discourses such as the up for it subject position (Powell, 2010). Ella describes sex that she wants to get over with and only engaging in it to gain connection. This type of 'consensual unwanted sex' has been conceptualised as a form of self-sacrifice that women may engage in to benefit romantic relationships and to assist their sexual reputation as desirable/desiring (Rome & Lambert, 2020; Scappini & Fioravanti, 2022).

Ella expands on consent, relaying a story about a sexual experience where she believes her sexual partner was performing consent rather than meaning it. Ella said she hardly moved or reacted throughout the entire time they were kissing leading up to the sex and that it was clear she was not interested. Ella still felt as though she had to go along with the sexual encounter as she was not technically saying “no”.

Ella then went on to discuss an experience with her ex:

The rule is - I have to be cool, and I have to be so good at sex to men, and the symptom is disregarding my own comfort. Examples of that would be like - this is difficult to say, because it's sort of a fine line, like there's a fine line between doing things that sort of out of character for you or a bit uncomfortable for you, but it's worth it, because, you know, they're into it, sort of a line between that, and then, like my ex used to, he used to get behind me, not even we were having sex, like I'd just be sitting there talking to him, and then he'd get behind me, and he'd start choking me so hard and then he would grab one of my boobs... But he would be, like, crushing it to the point that I would have like, bruised hand punches around my chest, and he would be, he would be like, grabbing it so tightly that his arm would be shaking because he's exerting as much strength as possible and he'd be also choking me and I'd be going, oh my god, like he can't see my face and I'm like, Jesus fucking Christ, this hurts so bad. Afterwards or whatever he'd be like, you like it when I do that? And I'd be like, yeah! because I know that he really like, he was clearly really enjoying that and that is one of the times where I like the rule that being sexy, be a good sexual partner is like just being up for it, whatever they want.

Ella's narration of this violent and unwanted sexual encounter is underscoring the notion that as a young woman, there are guidelines or even explicit “rules” of how one can be a good partner. These rules are not self-generated and are instead rooted in heteropatriarchal discourses where violence and domination are normalised (Gavey, 2019; Scappini & Fioravanti, 2022). In this vein, to be perceived as sexy and up for it, you must accept and feign pleasure from violence (Townsend, 2019). Ella's articulation of feeling powerful in the moment and/or before the moment, also mirrors what Burkett and Hamilton (2012) describe as a form of compulsorily sexual agency, in which young women understand themselves as active, desiring subjects, even within encounters that are shaped by pressure or harm. In Burkett and Hamilton's (2012) study, their participants similarly initially framed their experiences as empowered, while simultaneously indicating that refusal would position them

as undesirable, or socially inappropriate. Ella's account extends this analysis by exposing the limits of this agency through her articulation of having a sense of control in the moment but then is unable to prioritise her own comfort. The power she describes is therefore contingent, operating within the confines of the up for it subject, rather than reflecting her own genuine sexual autonomy. Within this logic, the power she 'receives' is dependent on her performance which in turn, will classify her as a desirable, sexually knowing, up for it subject (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012).

Jane echoes this experience with men and how she navigates their "sex drive":

I'm quite go with the flow so it's like, okay, if you want that so bad, then like, sure, we'll do that, you know? Instead of like, yeah, instead of there being like, a discussion of like, meeting in the middle, even with, like, having sex, like, it's like, god, you want this so fucking bad and it's like, I don't care enough, like to feel like I need to hurt your feelings now, or, like, turn you down. So, I was like, okay, I'll just do it. Like, keep the peace, which is crazy.

Jane's account illustrates how unwanted sex can emerge not through explicit coercion but through the normalisation of heteronormative scripts (e.g., male sex drive) where men's sexual wants are constructed as integral to wellbeing, while a women's sex drive is positioned as responsible for managing those desires tactfully. Her narrative suggest that refusal for sex is weighted against the need to "keep the peace", illuminating how not being in the mood for sex is reframed as disrupting relational harmony rather than a valid boundary.

Ashley says that "[when I was] first sexual in high school, I was like, very powerful because it felt like I had control over if people participated in my sexuality or not". She goes on to explain that when she had a nonconsensual encounter, that feeling of power faded:

We had a big party that night, and I remember feeling like, oh, like I'm so excited maybe, like, tonight's the night, and like, I can't wait to maybe, like, like, you know, sleep with him or something....but I got really, really drunk because I was 17, and I didn't know what else to do. I was nervous, obviously. ... I don't even remember what happened, but I got put to bed, and then in the middle of the night, I just, like, woke up, and he was on top of me, you know, and he immediately stopped. And I was like, what are you doing? And he's like, oh my gosh. I thought you were awake and interested. I was like, I'm completely drunk. Like, you saw me pass out. I think his excuse was that I like, rolled into him or something, so it must have been that I was, like, initiating. But that was my first, like, actual sexual experience and I think the it was the first time that I knew somebody was interested in me and that I didn't have control

over it suddenly and it was like, ..oh, you know, like a really just pulled me out of this whole like perspective of how it made me feel ...I really don't know how to deal with this anymore, but I immediately cut him off because I knew it was wrong and I knew that that was not okay. So that was, I think I'm proud of myself for that.

Ashley initially constructs her sexual identity through a discourse of individual control and empowerment, describing herself as “powerful” in her ability to determine who participates in her sexuality. This framing partially reflects a post-feminist sensibility in which her sexual agency is understood as something explicitly owned and exercised by an individual (Gavey, 2019). However, this sense of control erupts following Ashley’s nonconsensual encounter. Her reflection that she did not have control signals a rupture in her sense of sexual agency, thus exposing the fragility of empowerment discourses (e.g., up for it) that fail to account for the relational and uneven nature of power within some sexual encounters.

The women’s narratives were shrouded in neoliberal ideals that suggest personal responsibility being of utmost importance where women have complete control over their sexual happenings. However, what was revealed was the complexities of consent (being assumed, taken for granted, having to be learned) across time, in different situations, and how intertwined consent is with agency. The next theme captures this intersection.

The Reclamation

This theme overall captures narratives on consent, pleasure and the (re) negotiation of agency over time. The reclamation is not understood as a singular turning point but as an ongoing, temporal and generative process through which participants make meaning of earlier sexual experiences and rework their sexual subjectivities in relation to them. Within these reclamation narrations, the participants describe the range of ways in which sexuality/sex was used as a site of self-discovery, a tool to cope, and a way to recognise self-empowerment to then liberate themselves — rewriting their sexual subjectivity in the face of adversity. The following section first explores these reclamation narratives on hardships and new meaning-making, before turning to other accounts of consent and pleasure.

Navigating hardship

Julia says she felt sexually perceived pretty early when she was growing up which she attributed to the small town she grew up “sexual harassment was a big thing...you know like I remember when I was 14 being chased by some gang members and I had to hide in the bathroom and lock the door”. Julia explained that she was bullied in school and attributes this to using sex to find connection and sense of self.

Sex became a way of finding connection and validation...I was doing things that were probably really risky and I was to be honest having sex with people I wasn't even attracted to, which is like, I look back and cringe deeply at those experiences but I was just desperate for any form of validation that would tell me I wasn't all the things – that I was desirable, like I was a human that other people wanted to be around.

Julia explains that some of the situations she experienced in pursuit of finding connection were oftentimes problematic but that she does not regret going through them as it felt “empowering and good...it felt bad sometimes because I was doing things that were not great...on the other hand, I was like fuck yeah look at me! I'm great! I can do these things with my body”. Additionally, Julia states that exploring her sexual self in that way ultimately did help her, regardless of the risky situations she explains that:

it probably did get me through...like it was a way of processing the grief, the trauma of being bullied so badly...I'm like grateful for my sexuality as an adult now, and I like, look back on

my younger self with kindness and compassion...I don't know what I would have done without that coping mechanism.

Isla also explains that she turned to sex to feel better about herself following struggles with her mental health:

Used sex and guys to feel a bit more sparkly about myself... a rough time in my life, and I found it really useful to just sleep around...there is something about the performance that feels liberating... something validating about like, knowing I am providing a pleasurable experience to this person. I just wanted to fuck people and see how it feels not to care! Just to feel hot.

Isla continues that she was slut shamed for this period of her life which was “hurtful” but explains that “it has made me way more able and feel way more confident now after having seen how bad it can be and how gross people can treat your body”. Through Isla’s immersion in sexually embodied practice, she utilised technologies of self to actively negotiate and rework dominant sexual scripts. While this pursuit of sexual encounter was intertwined with seeking validation and desirability, her narrative illuminates a deeper complexity. Rather, her experience of navigating pleasure and external judgement facilitated new forms of self-knowledge, allowing her to exercise greater control over how she inhabited her sexual self.

Through Isla’s immersion in sexually embodied practice, she utilised technologies of the self to move towards a more agentic relationship with her sexuality. While her pursuit of sexual encounters was intertwined with desires for validation and desirability, her narrative does not end there. Rather, the experience of navigating pleasure, judgement, and slut-shaming facilitated new forms of self-knowledge and confidence, allowing her to exercise greater control over how she understood and inhabited her sexual self.

Ava describes her “coming-of-age sexual journey” marked by her early self-identification of hypersexuality, driven by curiosity about sex and also a desire for validation “wanting to feel pretty and desirable”. She explains that during this time her sexual exploration was intertwined with external validation, which in turn, often meant she would engage with sexual partners “who did not respect me”.

I don't really feel shame in the way other people do. I think that's part of the hypersexuality thing. Umm talking about hypersexuality when I was younger, the

hypersexuality was like a bad thing. So, I was putting myself in positions where I was getting disrespected and stuff... problems started to arise when I was like 17, 18 it's because I was just so excited ... but I was a bit naïve and I was so interested and curious about sex, but I didn't yet have the framework to be like, this is a good situation.

Recognising this, Ava chose to be celibate as a means to reclaim her sexuality and after having one too many “painful experiences – kind of just feeling used and like discarded a lot”. This period of solitude became a space for healing, where she began to rebuild a more self-directed and empowering relationship with her sexuality. During this “purification” phase, she distanced herself from both casual sex and pornography. When she later reengaged with porn, it felt different, less tied to discomfort or misogyny, and more like an affirmation of sexual energy, “fuck yeah, sex”, which helped her reconnect with herself. Returning to partnered sex, she emphasises that the connection she felt with herself was more significant than with her partner’s and that the validation she once sought, came more from within. Ava’s reclamation encapsulates a journey of healing and intentional withdrawal that produced a more authentic sexual subjectivity through renegotiations of power, control and agency.

Jane’s reclamation is a complex narrative that is intertwined with her childhood abuse and emotionally abusive marriage: “[I had] a pretty happy childhood I think except for my parents fighting all the time and being molested”. Jane’s trauma, albeit, unknown to her until years later, does not exist as a resolution but rather reorganises her formative sexual experiences through a new perspective. Jane communicates that instead of feeling shame, she began feeling validation following her remembrance. Instead of her ‘sexual stage’ as a child being “really fucking weird...I had a period of fantasising about my [abuser] and it would get me off...really weird”, Jane redefines her abuse as a central marker in her journey claiming that her new knowledge makes her feel “way more normal because I actually know why I was like that now”.

Jane explains that during her marriage her experiences of abuse impacted her relationship with her husband:

I felt very disconnected from my body for years...I just felt like so guilty and shit about myself if I didn't want to have sex with [ex-husband] and honestly that was playing into my chronic headaches because he [ex-husband] always wanted to have sex in the mornings and I'm not a morning person and then I'd just be turning him down again and again and I'd feel so bad...I

really started to feel like the naggy wife...I stopped feeling any sexual feelings really and genuinely believed I never would again.

After Jane and her husband separated, Jane found a renewed engagement with her sexual self, characterised by pleasure, experimentation, openness and introduction to boundary setting.

I have basically reinvented my sexuality through having sex with a bunch of just new people! I feel so much more in control now, like I don't just have to pretend to enjoy sex with [ex-husband] – I actually just like go and have sex and enjoy it and do it on purpose...I feel like I'm fucking like a man.

This “fucking like a man” journey displays similar traits to the up for it subject position (e.g., independent, active, liberated) but there are also elements that do not align with the up for it position and rather, resist them. Compared to Jane’s initial articulation of the “naggy wife”, we see a shift to a self-identified masculine, active sexuality.

I'm definitely a slut at the moment and I love it. I think there is a sense of like fun and there is a sense of like not taking everything so fucking seriously...maybe in a few years I'll look back at what I'm doing now, like having lots of casual sex and regret it or I'll look back and be like wow you actually did learn so much about yourself and your voice.

While Jane framed this period of her life as fun and exciting, she remains mindful that although this phase of her life feels right for now, she may end up reinterpreting it later in life – whether that be positive or negative, she embraces the messiness of the ongoing generative process of one’s sexual subjectivity. This highlights that sexual subjectivity remains open and relational; Jane can be both sexually agentic and dissociated. Jane can enjoy casual sex and be uncertain about it. Jane did not return to a pre-trauma self but “reinvents” a new sexual subjectivity.

These participants demonstrated generative, accumulative, embodied learning within their reclamation experiences. Notably, through experimentation and embodiment, the participants navigated and renegotiated norms, discourses and systems of power. At times this was through withdrawal (e.g., Ava) or through immersing themselves in experiences that prompted new understandings of pleasure, desire and sex (e.g., Jane). While these experiences differed in trajectory and experience, all participants agentially renegotiated their sexualities to suit and serve them best. Strikingly, the participants meaning making was

renegotiated through the active rejection and/or revision of dominant discourses that allowed them to explore various dynamics and perceive themselves in new ways. Most importantly, the reclamation does not serve as a one-time event but rather, acts as a generative and ongoing process of sexual subjectivity formation. The above descriptions coincide with Carmody's (2005) qualitative study where her participants narratives use a myriad of ways to negotiate pleasure such as: trial and error, risk-taking, trust, flexibility and self-reflection.

Learning Consent: Safety, Visceral, Embodied and Ongoing

In the wake of the narratives just discussed, I now move briefly to explore the participants' accounts surrounding what consent feels and looks like to them. However, it must be noted that pleasure and consent were dually spoken about, highlighting the intertwined relationship between mutual pleasure and ongoing consent (Gavey, 2019).

Ella begins this consent journey by saying to feel safe and seen:

I need my partner to create a safe container for that to be an option...like, if it's not a repeat partner, it still needs to be vocalised enthusiastically...it's just inconceivable to me that so many men don't care....so, that's what I would need to feel like safe...for my partner to actually prioritise my pleasure and autonomy...be a safe space that makes it clear that I can express what I want and don't want which is so simple.

Ella narrates that to feel safe (e.g., consent), her sexual partner would need to prioritise her pleasure and autonomy – accentuating that consent runs far deeper than the binary yes or no. Ella then remarks on a time she felt safe:

It was nice, the first time in my whole life I experienced this sense, like building a sense of, I want to have this [sex]...I want to have sex with him and that in itself was massive for me because I was actually like in my body and mind at the same time...I want to do this, I don't feel afraid...I'm doing it right. This is how it's supposed to be. Overall, I am learning what it looks like when somebody doesn't care about your consent, and that means I'm at least a step closer to knowing when to voice my lack of consent. So, journey with consent is complicated, but there is forward movement.

Ella conceptualises consent as a visceral experience, both body and mind and learned. She explains that through experience she is learning what consent looks and feels like, which as we can observe, has been learnt through embodied doing and trial and error (Cameron-

Lewis, 2016). Ella's narrative highlighted that for her, consent is situated in pleasure, desire and communication.

Julia explains that her deeper knowledge for consent came from "age" which was a common occurrence amongst all the women. While all the women did some learning about their sexual selves through casual sex, at some stage or another, came an enlightenment of sorts. This enlightenment is not the women rejecting casual sex but, instead, rejecting the heteronormative scripts that actively misalign with their pleasure and happiness. Crucially, these new perspectives were aided through embodied experiences.

It's like that, like, levels of consent, right? Like, you're initially into something, but then you're like, oh shit actually, I'm uncomfortable with this. I think, I mean, the main factor is, like feeling, you start to feel really small, because you start to feel anxious and uncomfortable...it's really important to verbally and physically check in...

The women's accounts of learning consent were closely tied with the development of knowledge around pleasure and boundaries which is intertwined with emotional and embodied labour involved in producing sexual knowledge in practice. These narratives highlight how embodied experience and temporality contribute to the generative unfolding of sexual subjectivity over time, as will be discussed further in the following section.

Pleasure: Consent, Learned, Practiced

Pleasure and a woman's entitlement to it is at the core of sexual subjectivity studies with numerous studies equating a woman's 'positive' sexual subjectivity with 'high' levels of entitlement to pleasure (Martin, 1996; Montemurro, 2014; Tolman et al., 2005). Within these studies, there often is a lack of nuance regarding a woman's agency and empowerment, suggesting that if a woman was not proactive in her taking up of pleasure, she did not have sexual subjectivity (Townsend, 2019). In the following narratives, instead of entitlement to pleasure being highly predicated on agency, the participants demonstrate that pleasure is not always individually claimed or explicitly articulated. Here, pleasure is deeply intertwined with consent and reciprocity, emerging through relational, embodied processes and negotiation and rearticulation.

Julia explained her battle with physical health issues that made sex extremely painful for her which came with a "lot of feelings of guilt...I couldn't have penetrative sex". Julia says that after some medical procedures this is not a problem anymore, and that she is

grateful for her healthy body, stating that since she has previously experienced significant pain, she does not take pleasure for granted.

Isla explained that through her experience of adversity, she learnt:

[society] is not built for me to feel desire and to feel pleasure and to feel good about my sexual body and my sexual self...I learnt that no one is coming to save me, so I have to go out in society and dictate my own experiences and dictate how I am going to be treated.

Isla communicates that society is not accommodating of her pleasure and thus, in the wake of her sexual journey, now navigates her sexuality and entitlement to pleasure with unapologetic confidence “...I would never just fuck anyone these days. I mean, I've done the hard yards, now I just know how to feel hot and confident and it's just about open communication and not fucking the wrong types of people”. Isla highlights the learned nature of pleasure regarding sexual subjectivity (e.g., I've done the hard yards), suggesting that through embodied experiences, comes a richer understanding of personal desire and pleasure. Also evident in Isla's narrative is her use of technologies of self in pursuit of 'figuring' her sexual self out (Evans & Riley, 2014).

One way the participant's practiced pleasure and demonstrated agency was through writing their own sexual scripts and the young women in this study articulated their desires and pleasure as being in opposition much of the time to dominant discourses. The participants felt most empowered when they had control of sexual scripts. Further, women's reenvisioning's and renegotiations of what pleasurable sex and a healthy sexual subjectivity means was linked to agency and power.

Jane begins saying that in her sexual exploration era she discovered that:

it's not gendered, like you can have control without being like, intense or weird...kind of realizing that it's not like these two sides where one is dom and one is sub. Where one is in control and one is out of control, like sort of realizing its more of a collaborative effort...like, that's hot as well and it makes me feel a lot more comfortable.

Jane's account echoes modern literature on women's narration on pleasure and sex (Čierna & Bianchi, 2024; Scappini & Fioravanti, 2022; Krasnow & Maglio, 2021). Jane articulates a rejection of gendered sexual scripts that position women as passive or submissive and men as dominant and overpowering. Rather than reproducing this binary, Jane reframes sex as collaborative, destabilising the notion that one person must be “in

control” while the other is “out of control.” This suggests a learned rejection of rigid sexual dichotomies, recognising that sexual encounters can involve fluidity, mutuality, or movement between positions rather than fixed dominant/submissive roles. Importantly, this reconfiguration reflects agency, but also highlights that agency, communication, and consent are not necessarily intuitive, but learned through sexual exploration and experience. Jane’s growing comfort with collaborative sex indicates a movement away from performative gendered expectations toward a more relational and negotiated understanding of pleasure and intimacy. Jane’s conceptualisation of sexual subjectivity and agency fits with Butler’s concept whereby through ongoing performance there is an emergence of new meaning making and subject positions (Reddy & Butler, 2004).

In a similar vein, Isla discusses her practice of being “passive” and how this led to more harm than good:

Being like passive about this sort of sexual being that I am, has led to harm and like discomfort like ingenuine behaviour and just existing as a person for other people versus myself. So, like portraying myself and presenting myself as someone for other people... I feel very liberated when I like trust that this person is like seeing me in the way I want them to see me...if I’ve established that, I feel very free.

Isla’s narrative also demonstrates this denial of gendered scripts in pursuit of validation from sexual partners. This ‘ingenuine’ behaviour is a product of her proximity to gendered sexual scripts. This narrative highlights the pressure Isla has felt to portray and perform the ideal sexual self, but that it has not felt natural.

Ava continues on discussing connection and feeling of empowerment:

The people that I found a genuine sensual connection with, I felt that spiritual connection with the person that I was engaging with that affected my connection to the act itself, and I explored more...talking about that power in the past, I’d, you know, classic, like missionary, like, what have you, you know, but now I was like, on top more, you know, um, kind of being having a I’ve always been very submissive, but I started having these exploring different dynamics...to honour each person’s energy as it interacts with my energy, rather than just kind of like being like, I’m submissive, so you have to choke me out. Instead, I can choke you out, you know? That helps learn about the own, my own process in reverse...that mutual honouring, that is what I think is like the secret of sexual connection and sexual empowerment.

Ava's narrative illuminates and supports Isla and Jane's narrations whereby the denial of gendered sexual scripts enforce not only both desire and pleasure, but power too. Ava's journey also highlights how consent and pleasure are both significantly intertwined in that there is a mutual honouring through an exploration of dynamics that leads to sexual empowerment. In this way, Ava's narrative echoes Pineau's (1989) model of consent where a more holistic approach to pleasure and desire is crucial. As gendered sexual scripts were examined and re written, the participants created opportunities for reflexivity and self-discovery. In this way, sexual empowerment became situated in mutuality, choice and the capacity to renegotiate desire on one's own terms.

The dynamic of reciprocity and equality is relevant for discussions of pleasure. For all the women, pleasure with a partner required a level of reciprocity and equality, moving beyond transactional to genuine. For example, in Lily's narrative in which she explains that "words of affirmation...encouragement...try new things...talking...and both like having equal amounts of control". All the women in this study explained that their best sexual experiences were when both parties were present and when the sex did not feel like, as Jane puts it, "a means to an end".

Zoe extends here by saying that she felt the most empowered during a sexual encounter where "there was a genuine interest in not just my body but me as a person as well". The dynamic of reciprocity and equality emerged as central to participants' understandings of pleasurable sex. Across the accounts, pleasure with a partner required a level of mutuality and shared control, moving beyond sex as transactional or performative toward something more relational and genuine. Importantly, "control" here appeared multifaceted, referring not only to control over one's body, but also over the sexual experience, emotional safety, communication, and the relational dynamic itself. This suggests that pleasure, empowerment and control were not solely derived from sexual acts themselves, but from recognition, reciprocity, and feeling valued beyond the sexualised body.

Isla introduced to me a term, "spiritual safety" which extends on formal consent. For Isla the focus lies within the pre and after care of sexual and romantic situations such as emotional vulnerability, clear communication and freedom from coercion in your own meaning making.

I can completely relax and there is no expectation, and, yeah, no performative aspect...the solution to the performance when I'm with others is to get more comfy with myself, give

myself the power and the will to be comfortable enough with my sexual self to then articulate to those around me what I actually want, what I actually deserve... when you feel safe that's when I would feel like liberated and free...like, as I was saying, I want to be understood, like I want someone to see and understand me in the way that I want to be understood. That comes from like an emotional intimacy, like I feel like some of my sexual experiences have not been – sometimes I'm not safe, like I'm not spiritually safe. Like, I'm physically safe, like there is consent but it's something else, this person is seeing me for some other thing.

Islas narrative describes this recognition of the importance to gain power through being seen as a subject and not the object some subject positions place her in. Through lived, embodied experience, Isla negotiates boundaries through turning inward. Spiritual safety highlights existing literature on what good sex and healthy sexuality feels like to women (Čierna & Bianchi, 2024; Krasnow & Maglio, 2021). The essence of spiritual safety is recognition, mutuality, emotional presence and being seen as a subject rather than an object.

All the women in this study spoke on feeling more pleasure and more confidence when asserting themselves, with Jane explaining that:

I want to change the style that we're doing right now. Like, I want to be on top or, like, I want to, I want you to go down on me now, you know, just like finding your voice that like, sort of, I can't think of the word, but like, helps you get enjoyment, and helps you respect yourself, because you're also looking out for your own pleasure...it came with age...sort of to get more of a voice and be louder now feels easy.

Further, Julia also qualifies confidence with age saying that she feels much more able and willing to be vocal about her needs, “like I want to stop or for whatever reason I might be like.... I need a drink of water...or just a moment...being able to do that makes me feel in control...”.

As evidenced (Rome & Lambert, 2020; Krasnow & Maglio, 2021) reciprocity validates subjecthood with comfortability and in turn, pleasure, intensifying when sex is collaborative instead of hierarchical. It seems here then, that when women have control over the sexual scripts that inform their sexual encounters, a more genuine sense of pleasure and desire come forth. Autonomy and reciprocity can then function as preconditions for embodied pleasure. This is in comparison to narratives where women felt as though they could not redirect or had to abide by dominant norms and were thus seen as lacking sexual subjectivity (Martin, 1996; Montemurro, 2014; Tolman, 2002a).

The women in this research generally felt entitled to pleasure, a finding consistent with prior research (e.g., Satinsky & Jozkowski, 2015). However, pleasure was not simply available on demand. Rather, participants described developing greater access to pleasure over time through confidence, communication, and embodied experiences. In this way, pleasure was relational, practiced, and continually negotiated within the context of sexual scripts and dominant discourses. Pleasure was also a personal, individual embodied act as outlined in the next section.

Learning Pleasure through the Body – Masturbation and Self

Lily, Zoe and Isla all said that masturbation has been integral into their discovery of their sexual selves with Lily saying:

I think it's something everyone should do, it's a really important part of yourself and then that's how you learn what you like with someone else...obviously, as a person who hasn't been, like, sexually active with other people, it doesn't mean I've not been sexually active like, with myself. Like, I feel like I'm quite in tune right with that part of my myself, which is maybe part of why I'm like, okay, I haven't, like, necessarily hooked up with anyone, like, the last few years, but it's just like, because it's like, I'm like, serving for that part of myself. But then, yeah, so I feel like I have a good relationship with pleasure.

Lily's narration further articulates an unrepentant entitlement to her personal desire which is contrasting to the foundational sexual subjectivity scholarship (Martin, 1996; Tolman, 2002a) where women were typically painted as lacking entitlement to pleasure, or their pleasure is conceptualised in response to a man's desire. Zoe then adds:

[Masturbation] was quite a personal thing, like the only sort of consistent sex would be masturbation...just having sex with people for the sake of having sex, wasn't something that was making me feel good, it definitely became not really a priority because every time it happened, it just made me feel bad, so [masturbation] made me become really good at understanding myself and my needs.

This narrative further situates masturbation as a foundational aspect to a women's sexual subjective experiences in that it aids getting to know one's desires better. In place of coital sex, masturbation is articulated as a sure-fire way to gain pleasure.

Isla explains her relationship with masturbation as “medicine” qualifying that:

It just feels like a lot the my sexual beingness with myself, my sexual self and the space that is kept just for me, feels like almost more expansive and more maybe spiritual, or it's definitely more relaxing and simple in some ways, because I don't have to explain things to myself.

Isla's framing of masturbation as medicine, spiritual and relaxing suggests both regulation and restoration, where the self becomes the site of sexual care. This positions solitary sexual practice as a space where dominant sexual scripts are suspended, allowing for more expansive and less constrained experience of sexual embodiment.

Through Julia's narrative, we can see that masturbation is not just about pleasure – it is epistemological; “I learned I could have internal orgasms from masturbating and that unlocked my ability to have it with partners... because I could do it myself, I knew it was possible”. Julia extends here by saying:

I masturbate all the time...like every day to every second day. Like, any chance I get I masturbate...a great source of - I view it as stress relief, and I view it as my right to do that with my body. I feel, I, yeah, I, if I don't masturbate in a couple of days, I just get this, like, like, the stress build up and I need to release it...it makes me feel sexy too.

Here, Julia's unapologetic entitlement to her pleasure, using it both as a form of medicine and a way to exercise her desirability.

Ella describes her sexual self before her introduction to partnered sex reorganised her feelings on pleasure “feeling like I am on my own, like standing on my own, I am somebody that, regardless of connection, independently of other people, I naturally deserve and receive pleasure in all sense of the word”. Ella explains her entitlement to pleasure independent of the feeling of validation from others. Further, Ella says that:

Masturbation was [before partnered sex] like indulging in something...kind of an extension of everything else in the world that feels good...it feels good to hold a warm mug...it feels good to have an orgasm...it feels good to eat a piece of cake...like all of those things were on the same level.

Isla discussed how her relationship with pleasure and masturbation directly informs and influences her self-esteem and how she understands her sexual self:

I feel like more recently, in the last couple years, last few years, that's been the transition to be more like conscious and that's when I've, like, masturbated more. That's been a big part of

it, like nurturing the relationship I have with it... that's been really fruitful and the sort of like, even just in the practical ways of understanding what feels good and understanding what makes me feel pleasure and like, ... so like rebuilding my sexual self from within from masturbation and self-love rather than being at the complete mercy of societal norms and misogynist expectations because that's where the harm gets in!

Isla's narrative conceptualises sexual subjectivity as something that can be actively nurtured and cultivated over time. What emerges from her account is a focus on a transition towards a more intentional relationship with her sexuality, where self-pleasure becomes a means of developing knowledge, and a way to understand her desires. Rather than relying on external validation, masturbation is framed as a crucial practice through which Isla (re) builds her sexual self from within. Here, self-pleasure operates as an embodied, agentic and protective act, enabling a partial rejection of dominant discourses by grounding her sexual knowledge in her own personal experiences of pleasure. This account suggests that developing a stronger relationship with oneself can provide a stronger foundation from which to negotiate, resist or challenge dominant discourses.

Chapter Summary

Chapter Six documented the participants narratives of embodied learning – foregrounding the young women's lived and material experiences of learning their sexual selves. As explored in previous chapters, risk-averse expert knowledge (e.g., health and sex educators) suggest that experiential knowledge is innately dangerous. However, the young women's accounts suggest that embodied learning is the most productive and transformative way they learn about their sexual selves. This part of the analysis also highlights the contradictory, messy, liberating, scary, rewarding, confounding and complicated process of becoming and illuminates the practices of self that young women engage in as they work to produce their sexual selves. The women negotiated, resisted and accommodated dominant discourses in the production of their sexual selves – how they shape (are agentic) and how they are shaped (determined). The 'reclamation' period stood out as a significant period in these women's sexual subjectivity journeys. These accounts highlight women's negotiation of normative discourses and reveal the practice of self that women employ as a means of reproducing their sexual subjectivities (Evans & Riley, 2014). Further, these accounts are all suggestive of temporality and all exist as still 'becoming' rather than the end of their stories. The women all speak to a transformation of some kind, through embodied practice where

more clarity on their sexual selves, emerge. Cameron-Lewis (2016) argues that these challenges are unavoidable to any process of becoming.

Chapter Seven: Discussion

This thesis has explored young women's sexual subjectivity within the cultural context of Aotearoa and how they narrate and make meaning within the cultural norms and discursive conditions that shape, constrain and enable their sexual selves (Gavey, 2019; Gill, 2008a; Townsend, 2019). The picture that emerges from the analysis is a complex one that depicts young women as agentic, yet fragmented and empowered, somewhat determined by dominant discourses, sexual scripts and cultural norms. Through engaging with the narratives of these eight women, *Situated Desires* reconceptualised sexual subjectivity as an ongoing, ambiguous, contradictory, praxis-in-time (Bryant & Schofield, 2007).

Rather than positioning women within binary understandings of empowerment and oppression, this thesis made room for “both/and” (Townsend, 2019) by exploring the participants experiences of agency, power and sexuality through a post-structuralist, Foucauldian lens (Gavey, 1989; Townsend, 2019). In this way this thesis challenges reductive assumptions within existing literature (Martin, 1996; Montemurro, 2014; Tolman, 2002a) and thus, contributes to scholarship that celebrates a more layered understanding of women's sexual subjectivities (Gavey, 2019; Gill, 2008a; Townsend, 2019). As will be discussed below is the established complexity and process of these eight young women's sexual subjectivities and the broader cultural and discursive frameworks that shape how their sexuality is understood, performed, complied with, negotiated and then, *renegotiated* through embodied learning, agency and temporality (Bryant & Schofield, 2007). I will now briefly summarise the findings from chapters four, and five before moving onto the conclusive discussions, limitations, future research and implications.

Summary of Findings: Learning Her Symbolic Sexual Self and Embodied Sexual Self

While the findings are presented across two chapters, sexual subjectivity cannot be neatly separated into distinct symbolic and embodied domains. Rather, sexual subjectivities are continually produced through the interplay of culture, social discourses and lived experiences. In this way, this section sums up the findings together. Chapter four explored cultural norms, and dominant discourses that symbolically informed the young women's sexual subjectivities. Chapter five explored the young women's embodied practices in

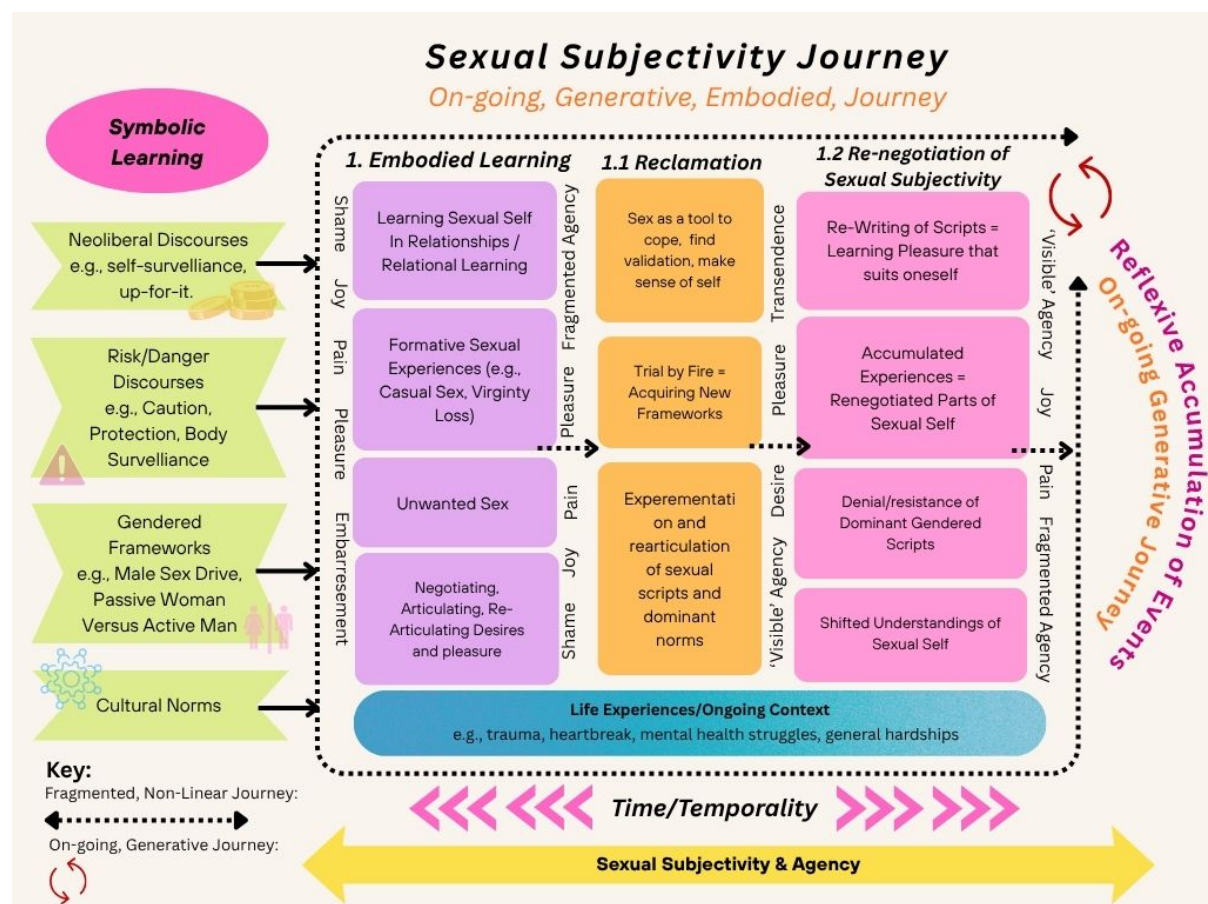
relation to their sexual subjectivities – how they manage the symbolic education, information, and practices for themselves. The findings presented in Chapter Five were comparatively more complex and nuanced than those explored in Chapter Four and were therefore interpreted within a broader cultural and discursive context, partly in extension to the themes identified in chapter four. The themes from both chapters are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Findings

Section	Narrative Theme	Subtheme
Learning Her Symbolic Sexual self	School Education: Biological, Protective and Gendered	
	Friends and Whānau	
	Media: TV, Films and Social Media including Pornography	Pornography: Learning, Confidence, and Contradiction
Learning Her Embodied Sexual Self	Virginity Loss	
	Casual sex within Aotearoa NZ: I'm up for it, right?	
	Sexual Self in Intimate Relationships	Male Sex Drive and its “Taking” Intimacy and learning:
	Unwanted Sex and Sexual Coercion	
The Reclamation	Navigating hardship	
	Learning Consent: Safety, Visceral, Embodied and Ongoing	
	Pleasure: Consent, Learned, Practiced	Learning Pleasure through the Body – Masturbation and Self

Both chapters point to sexual subjectivities being learned, embodied, navigated and generated across time and experiences. By extending on Bryant and Schofield's (2007) life history study, I argue that the sexually embodied practices, as described by the participants, produces a myriad of experiences including shame, joy, pleasure, embarrassment, pain, and transcendence. In this way then, women are learning what they like and dislike through 'trial by fire' and through the entangled process of discourse and embodied doing. Cameron-Lewis and Allen (2013) argue that good, safe sex does not occur by chance and is instead, "explored and embodied by oneself and potentially in relationship with one's partner(s)" (p. 129). I attempt to capture the findings including the complexity and dynamic nature in Figure 1. The discussion is loosely structured on this diagram.

Figure 1: Sexual Subjectivity Journey



Learning Sexual Subjectivity: Education, Neoliberal Discourses and ‘Knowledge Gaps’

School-based sexuality education emerged as a key institutional influence for the participants, characterised by biological, risk-averse, and gendered discourses aligning with a substantial body of literature that has documented similar patterns (Allen, 2003, 2005; Allen & Carmody, 2012; Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013; Garland-Levett, 2017). Through a neoliberal lens, this framing constructs young women as rational, self-surveillant agents responsible for mitigating harm. Simultaneously, it withholds the knowledge required to meaningfully understand sex as an embodied and relational practice, as they are not yet considered “sexual citizens” (Quinn, 2025). This tension is central: sexuality education does not simply fail to provide information; it actively structures the conditions under which certain kinds of sexual knowing become possible while others are rendered unintelligible. This positions women as possibly knowing how to have “safe sex” through condom use but the logistics of actual sexual encounters are not explicitly provided (Allen, 2005). For example, some participants stated that the lack of education around desire and embodied sex directly relates to their lack of knowledge about consent.

I argue then, that the contradictory positionings of these young women’s formal sexual education may work against the aims of this education (e.g., how to have safer sex). The expert discourses do appear to have somewhat of a *determining* effect on young women – for instance, in their self-identification of lacking knowledge (e.g., “it was so garbage...I didn’t learn what consent was until I was like in my 20’s) – this determining effect was not totalising. In this way, I argue women are knowledge *producers* in the way that they employ practices of the self to ‘*fill in*’ such knowledge gaps (Townsend, 2019).

Friends and whānau further shaped participants’ sexual subjectivities through everyday interactions, norms, and expectations. Familial messages often reinforced neoliberal logics of self-regulation, framing female sexuality as risky and requiring constant vigilance. In contrast, friendships provided more supportive and exploratory spaces, enabling open and often humorous discussions about sex. Fascinatingly, through the women’s narrations, we can see a semblance of Aotearoa culture with the support of previous research (Braun, 2008; Couper, 2022; Cooper & Gordon, 2015) that points to a paradoxical risk adverse and relaxed sexual culture. The women articulated a prominent gendered script specific to Aotearoa that pointed to men’s inability to be open/vulnerable in sexual encounters (e.g., poor

communication), their needs as dominant with women being expected to be passive yet still sexual. This dynamic reinforces a paradox in which women must be “up-for-it” without appearing agentic, and men are discouraged from engaging in open, communicative sexual encounters. These unique cultural norms predominantly conceptualise the participants sexual roles as submissive, and/or passive, positioning women to navigate uneven, contradictory terrain in the becoming of their sexual selves (Townsend, 2019). Thus, the findings point to gaps in formal and informal education that would help young women navigate sexual subjectivities.

In response to these gaps, participants turned to alternative sources of knowledge - most notably: pornography. Pornography emerged as a contradictory pedagogical system through which sexual subjectivity is both enabled and disciplined. For some, it enabled exploration, confidence, and access to otherwise unavailable representations of sex, including explicit acts, pleasure, and sexual diversity. At the same time, it reproduced dominant heterosexual scripts aligned with neoliberal and postfeminist ideals, including self-optimisation, performativity, and the expectation to be a “good” sexual partner (e.g., to “moan” right). In accordance with Meehan’s (2025) study, pornography may be a useful tool for young women to utilise in pursuit of demystifying their initial formative relationships with their bodies and sex as provided through sexuality education. Importantly, participants engaged with pornography in agentic and critical ways. In this way, these young women possess the critical skills that inform pornography literacy demonstrating that its influence is neither wholly deterministic nor uniformly harmful. Arguably then, the supposed risks of exposure to pornography (Lieberman, 2015; Meehan, 2025) are somewhat mitigated by the women's agentic interactions with pornography.

The findings suggest that sexuality education, pornography, and peer-based discourse do not simply function as distinct sources of knowledge but operate as competing epistemic frameworks through which sexual subjectivity is continuously assembled, negotiated, and revised (Cameron-Lewis, 2016). Rather than producing clear or stable understandings of sex, these frameworks generate partial and often contradictory scripts (e.g., avoid risk versus be sexually skilled) regarding safety, desirability, agency and performance. In this way, the ‘knowledge gaps’ that were identified, are not simply absences to be remedied, but reflect the structural inconsistency produced when sexual subjectivity is formed across misaligned regimes of knowledge and within a cultural system that tells women to both protect their sexuality and utilise it to its extreme (Allen, 2005). Women's sexual knowledge is not absent;

rather, it is shaped, manoeuvred and reworked within and through incomplete and often contradictory sources of knowledge sources. Sexuality education, pornography, and socialisation are competing epistemic systems that produce conflicting 'rules' for what sex should be like, and young women have to stitch these together in real time during sexual encounters.

Neoliberalism, Agency, and The Up For It Subject Position

The participants' sexual subjectivity journeys were both agentic and shaped by the up for it subject position. This desire to be perceived as sexual and up for it was a position that all my participants negotiated, often alongside a continuum of shame, choice, power, control, and agency (Bay-Cheng, 2015). In the participants descriptions of early sexual encounters, they were often characterised by language reminiscent of economics and financial systems, namely references to "power...control... transaction...loss...reap a benefit...gain" (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008). Within these encounters, confidence, sexual attractiveness and feeling *successfully* desirable (e.g., being chosen and thus, validated) became forms of capital that were measured, compared, and implicitly rewarded within the neoliberal sphere where being seen as more sexually desirable is conceptualised as success, power and control (Evans & Riley, 2014).

Some participants initially felt empowered by utilising their sexuality as a form of leverage to "reap a benefit" (e.g., being seen as cool, sexy, hot). However, this feeling of 'power' was often fleeting through its reliance on performance and objectification of the self, in pursuit of attaining a status congruent with being up for it (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). Crucially, these encounters are foregrounded by the postfeminist gaze which positioned the young women to judge themselves on how well (or not) they were at performing the up for it subject position. This form of self-surveillance yielded feelings of shame as women came to grips with the realities of their power and the utilisation of technologies of self being predicated on male recognition and in dynamics that only valued men's sexual pleasure (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Evans & Riley, 2014).

A strong example of this was in the participants narrations of virginity loss. There was a significant focus on crossing the threshold from being a virgin to being sexual in pursuit of the characteristics and social standing of the up for it woman (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Carpenter, 2005). Particularly striking was the participants desire for sex, not for pleasure or

connection, but because the social stigma bore too much weight. In this way, virginity loss acted as the initial marker of the cultural expectation felt by the participants that we can observe as a significant plot on the journey of the participants sexual subjectivity. Although the desire to lose their virginity was their *free* choice, perhaps it was also the socially *celebrated* choice. Here, virginity loss was a portal by which generative transformation was expected to occur with the aid of technologies of self thus, propelling one into a more socially desired form - the form of a sexually knowing woman (Gavey, 2019).

Evans and Riley (2014) argue that although these practices of self-improvement mimic practices of freedom, they are indeed consequences of a neoliberal subject formation. They argue that the neoliberal identity must feel choiceful, but that this is inherently contradictory as one must understand themselves as making free choices, but at the same time, these choices must be the right choices. However, these right choices often reproduce the prioritisation of male pleasure and desire (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). The implication here is that women are both expected and obliged to present themselves as a choice biographer – willingly and freely creating oneself as if the choices are made without the limits of constraints that inadvertently come with the pressures of dominant discourses (Evans & Riley, 2014). In turn, these ‘right’ choices for self-improvement (e.g., being sexually knowing, exchange self for the greater good of being up for it) consistently translated to disempowerment through their prioritisation of male pleasure and reliance on being perceived as sexy by their male counterparts.

Sex was conceptualised by most participants at some point as a sacrificial exchange - that to be desirable, celebrated, accepted and validated you must perform confident sexuality successfully. While participants frequently described themselves as empowered, their narratives suggested they construct their sexual subjectivities through discourses predicated on choice and agency in pursuit of attaining power and control despite seeming disempowered and disconnected in their narrations of early/formative embodied sexual experiences (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). This outcome manifested contradictorily through two avenues: first, in the participants attempts to attain a sense of power and control in their sexual encounters, frequently citing feeling moments of empowerment in the beginnings of their sexual encounters and second, through their post-sex reflections which revealed a predominantly male-orientated positioning, evidenced by the participants concerns with how successfully they had been perceived in the eyes of their sexual partner, often resulting in behaviours of self-surveillance and thus, disappointment. Crucially however, this awareness

to the performative nature of the up for it subject never operated through ignorance, but through reflexive complicity. I argue this finding is crucial as it rejects positioning women as passive, docile dupes and instead reinstates them as strategic subjects who are both determined and agentic within the predominant neoliberal discourse.

This logic too permeated the participants' interpretations of unwanted sex – a finding reminiscent of Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras (2008), Burkett and Hamilton (2012) and Rome and Lambert's (2020) studies on unwanted sex and neoliberal discourses. Rather than conceptualising sexual consent as a purely autonomous expression of individual desire, this analysis suggests that sexual decision-making is embedded within relational and cultural economies of desirability and thus, shaped by structured social norms. This is significant for my conceptualisation of sexual subjectivity, particularly in contrast to foundational work (Martin, 1996; Montemurro, 2014; Tolman, 2002a), which interprets women's narratives of compliance in unwanted sexual encounters (e.g., "it just happened") as evidence of a lack of sexual agency and subjectivity, due to their perceived absence of sexual 'confidence' and entitlement to their own pleasure (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Townsend, 2019). Crucially however, it is of utmost importance that I acknowledge sexual assault as an act of violence and that the broader cultural implications make no excuse. Both Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras (2008) and Burkett and Hamilton (2012) write to this inclination of young women framing their experiences of unwanted sex through neoliberal ideals of empowerment and choice in pursuit of attaining a sense of equitability in the wake of prioritising male pleasure.

Burkett and Hamilton (2012) argue that the gap between women feeling unprepared to say no and instead framing sexual experiences as one's they have either chosen for themselves or done out of the 'greater good' as a great irony of the up for it sensibility such that women's sexuality can no longer be openly disparaged by men acceptably, it is now women positioning themselves and conforming to sexual experiences that are both male-centred and potentially regressive. This phenomenon is what they refer to as 'postfeminist agency' whereby women engage in sexual encounters that only serve a man's desire but can maintain agency by positioning themselves as having actively chosen this route (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Gill, 2008a). This notion of post-feminist agency was striking in this thesis with all women narrating many moments of autonomy, often manifesting as moments of empowerment (e.g., I felt so hot...fucking like a man...in control). Yet, while this sense of empowerment was common among the participants, it frequently failed to translate to the sexual encounters themselves, particularly, post-sex (Evans & Riley, 2014). Crucially though,

these moments of disappointment and failure to feel genuine empowerment were consistently critically analysed (e.g., “I’m already feeling like I’ve essentially tricked myself into thinking that I have power...I have this illusion of choice...tricked yourself into thinking that you have more power than him...why am I doing this...do not feel powerful anymore...feel like an idiot...lose the exchange”).

Crucially however, whilst the participants sometimes failed to actualise feeling powerful within and after sexual encounters, at no point were they *unknowing* of the dominant discourses and dynamics shaping their experiences. The participants accounts demonstrate a complex intersection of agency and sexual subjectivity in which they are simultaneously engaged in active compliance with, and critical resistance to, neoliberal sexual norms (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). This finding is crucial in complicating reductive understandings of agency that frame unwanted sex as the outcome of a lack of agency, empowerment and thus, sexual subjectivity (e.g., Martin, 1996; Montemurro, 2014; Tolman, 2002a). Instead, the participants narratives suggest that within neoliberal sexual culture, agency is not a stable possession that is either present or absent, but a continually negotiated, relational practice that must be interpreted in relation to the cultural demands neoliberalism brings such as compulsory empowerment, compulsory agency and the expectation to always appear choiceful (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012).

While neoliberal frameworks encourage self-surveillance and individual responsibility, the participants’ narratives reveal moments of resistance, critique, and agency (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Townsend, 2019). Therefore, we start to see the emergence of sexual subjectivity not as a fixed state, but as an ongoing, negotiated process shaped by both constraint and possibility (Townsend, 2019). In addition to Bryant & Scholfield’s (2007) findings, this research adds to the idea that sexual subjectivity is a dynamic configuration of lived practice. As discussed further below, the symbolic and embodied intersect through the continuous development and negotiation of the self as a sexual and agentic subject. The symbolic dimensions of sexual culture create parameters of possibility that both enable and constrain access to particular subject positions, shaping how participants come to know, experience, and perform their sexual selves (Allen, 2005; Bryant & Schofield, 2007; Townsend, 2019). In this context, sexual agency cannot be understood as the expression of fully coherent desire or informed choice, but as ongoing interpretive labour in which young women actively reconcile and navigate contradictory expectations in real time and in retrospect (Allen, 2005; Bryant & Schofield, 2007; Townsend, 2019).

Conclusively, I argue that agency was always within the participants decision making, albeit, influenced by and through dominant discourses. However, as evidenced, through the participants embodied learning, we can observe a generative journey where they are consistently negotiating, resisting, adapting and exploring discourses (e.g., the reclamation) (Bryant & Schofield, 2007). Over time, new meanings emerged in a multi-layered and heterogenous way as participants created and reworked understandings of sexuality, their sexual selves and desire. It is through this process that agency thus becomes *visible* through modification and reconceptualisation of sexual scripts and dominant discourses (Gavey, 2019; Reddy & Butler, 2004). It is crucial that sexuality researchers reject the conceptualisation of agency as revolute acts of resistance against dominant discourses. Instead, compliance and resistance exist simultaneously – honouring the complexity that encapsulates a young women’s sexual self.

Sexual scripts: Casual Sex, Male Sex Drive and Lack of Pleasure

What was particularly striking across participants’ accounts was the extent to which the male-sex drive was naturalised and taken for granted. This was especially evident in participants’ repeated use of the word “lucky” when describing sexual encounters, revealing an acute awareness of a culture in which women’s pleasure is rendered secondary and where safety, respect, and care are framed as exceptional rather than expected. The invocation of “luck” reflects how women navigate sexual encounters within conditions shaped by the possibility of male disrespect, coercion, or violence, requiring them to manage risk while simultaneously attempting to cultivate sexual agency and self-knowledge. Dominant discourses such as the male sex drive minimised women’s desire and normalised unwanted sex, orientating women as ‘receivers’ in sexual dynamics (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Gavey, 2019; Rome & Lambert, 2020; Kettrey, 2018). Navigating one’s sexual subjectivity within such a sexual culture inhibited and slowed authentic learning from the women about what they may like and/or dislike. This had the effect of placing significant constraints on sexual-self-development (Allen, 2005). Throughout the analysis, there was also a normalised pressure to engage in sex even in the absence of a woman's desire. As summed up by one participant, “men do not care about my pleasure, so it is hard to explore your sexual self and learn what empowers you”. Additionally, ‘keeping the peace’ and going with the flow were seen as more important than their own needs and desires.

The participants spoke to casual sex experiences that felt emotionally restrained, lacked pleasure, and rooted in casual, masculine, ‘Kiwi’ culture (Brady, 2012; Braun, 2008). This highly gendered terrain saw inequitable sexual outcomes such as pleasure gaps and disempowering sex, as sustained through heteropatriarchal sexual scripts that focused on coital sex. As Gavey (2019) argues, heteropatriarchal sexual scripts and dominant discourses are the cultural scaffolding of rape. This was evident in this research as male sex drive was a significant discourse in the positioning of women complying with unwanted sex. The normalisation of the male-sex drive discourse consistently established women in dynamics that constrained their attempts to shape the course of sex.

Crucially however, participants described positive sexual encounters with sexual partners they trusted where comfortability and communication were crucial in the re-writing of highly gendered script, a finding consistent with multiple studies (Čierna & Bianchi, 2024; Satinsky & Jozkowski, 2015; Scappini & Fioravanti, 2022; Krasnow & Maglio, 2021). Pleasure and a woman’s entitlement to it is at the core of sexual subjectivity studies with numerous studies equating a woman’s ‘positive’ sexual subjectivity with high levels of entitlement to pleasure (Tolman et al., 2005). Within these studies (e.g., Martin, 1996; Montemurro, 2014; Tolman, 2002a), there often is a lack of nuance regarding a woman’s agency and empowerment, suggesting that if a woman was not proactive in her taking up of pleasure, she did not have sexual subjectivity (Townsend, 2019). For the participants in this research, pleasure was not simply learned or contingent on entitlement to it but emerged as something that was already present that became increasingly recognisable and meaningful through embodied experiences. Here, I observed a generative “expedition” in which comfortability with pleasure developed through both embodied sexual acts and when those acts were rooted in recognition and mutuality. This finding coincides with discussed scholarship that show how heteronormative scripts hinder a woman’s ability to gain pleasure or desire (e.g. Čierna & Bianchi, 2024; Fahs & Plante, 2017; Krasnow & Maglio, 2021). These accounts challenge the idea that women’s sexual subjectivity is defined by reduced entitlement to pleasure or libido, and instead shows an active disinvestment in dominant sexual frameworks that influence women’s sexual encounters (e.g., passive/active binaries)

From a Foucauldian perspective, moving through sexual experiences can be understood as technologies of the self, whereby individuals actively work upon themselves in order to navigate, modify, or resist the norms through which they are constituted. Similarly, from Butler’s (2004) perspective, these moments reflect the re-articulation of subject

positions, as participants did not simply inhabit dominant sexual scripts passively, but continually reworked and re-signified them through their embodied practices and relational negotiations. In this sense, agency did not emerge outside of power, but through participants' ongoing engagement with, and partial reshaping of, the discursive conditions that produced them (Bryant & Schofield, 2007; Townsend, 2019).

The Reclamation

Feeling comfortable and empowered for women was related to the ability to resist expectations dictated by dominant discourses and gendered scripts (Čierna & Bianchi, 2024; Scappini & Fioravanti, 2022). This growing confidence enabled them to resist unequal expectations embedded within dominant heterosexual scripts and to rework sexual encounters into experiences that felt more reciprocal, spiritually and emotionally safe. Importantly, these shifts were deeply embodied and temporal, tied to age progression, accumulated experience, and a stronger sense of sexual selfhood. This process was particularly highlighted in the reclamation theme. The reclamation narratives highlight the dynamic, embodied, and temporal nature of sexual subjectivity (Bryant & Schofield, 2007). Participants in this section often began from positions of hardship, including experiences of sexual trauma, relationship breakdowns, and struggles with mental health. Importantly, these experiences were not static endpoints. Rather, participants' narratives demonstrated how embodied experience, experimentation, and the passage of time facilitated generative processes of meaning-making.

Within this framing, pleasure can be understood as partly learned through embodiment, with participants referencing age and "doing the hard yards" as key factors shaping why they would no longer have sex with just 'anyone'. This points to pleasure as something learned rather than passively received, contributing to the accumulative and generative nature of sexual subjectivity (Čierna & Bianchi, 2024; Fahs & Plante, 2017; Krasnow & Maglio, 2021). Accumulative embodied experiences revise what is considered desirable or pleasurable. However, this does not suggest the arrival at an all-knowing or fixed form of sexual expertise. Rather, it signals an ongoing process of renegotiation, where sexual knowledge is continually revised in relation to new experiences, reflections, and shifting relational contexts (Bryant & Schofield, 2007). Notably, self-pleasure was positioned as an important mechanism through which participants worked on or reconstructed their sexual subjectivity from within, shifting the focus from external, partnered sex. Masturbation operated as both an agentic and protective practice, one that was nurtured over time.

Masturbation's role acted as a partial disengagement from normative discourses of desirability and performance by anchoring sexual understanding in personal pleasure and bodily awareness.

Reclamation occurred at different moments and paces for the participants and were shaped by various experiences and social contexts (Čierna & Bianchi, 2024). The findings suggest that framing sexual subjectivity as something that can be diminished or lost through life experiences (e.g., sexual abuse, relationship breakdown) is reductive and positions women too passively. Sexual subjectivity was altered, renegotiated, reflexively considered, and positively generated (reclaimed) illustrating women's ongoing capacity to reinterpret and reshape their sexual selves. Through embodied "doing," trial and error, and reflexive engagement with their experiences, participants began to rewrite sexual scripts and reconfigure the meanings attached to sex, intimacy, and desire (Bryant & Schofield, 2007). In turn, these processes enabled new ways of understanding themselves sexually, reshaping how they approached and interpreted subsequent sexual experiences.

Sexual Subjectivity and Sexual Agency as Resistance and Manoeuvring

The participants demonstrated that sexual subjectivity is always present regardless of entitlement to, refusal of and confidence towards sex. At times sexual subjectivity was challenged but as the reclamation theme showed, sexual subjectivity is dynamic and can be reworked. This requires some discussion of agency, power and resistance as sexual subjectivity considering Foucault's conceptualisation on power and discourse (1978), McNay's (2000) generative model on subjectivity and Bryant and Scholfield's (2007) embodied doing. This study's findings coincide with these scholars' logic and demonstrate that sexual subjectivity is not a fixed state congruent on whether one has agency or not. Rather, choice, and agency emerge through power, technologies of self (Foucault, 1988), embodied learning (generative learning) and temporality. I observed a generative, dynamic and relational evolution to the "becoming" of their sexual selves through temporality and embodied learning, *influenced* by cultural norms and dominant discourses (Bryant & Schofield, 2007; Townsend, 2019). Crucially, and in contrast to foundational sexual subjectivity research, (Martin, 1996; Montemurro, 2014; Tolman, 2002a) agency and thus choice, is not something one obtains and thus keeps - it is fragmented, complex and relational.

In contrast to prior research (Martin, 1996; Montemurro, 2014; Tolman, 2002a), participants' sexual subjectivity was not contingent upon the overt visibility of agency (e.g., refusing unwanted sex or articulating sexual pleasure). Rather, agency was evident throughout their narratives, emerging in complex and evolving ways through embodied experiences, reflexive meaning-making, and the temporal accumulation of sexual knowledge and experience. Gill (2008a) and Burkett and Hamilton's (2012) notion of compulsory agency is a useful framing for complex expressions of agency within neoliberal discourses. Compulsory agency captures the expectation that young women must understand themselves as autonomous and freely choosing even when these choices are shaped by dominant discourses and cultural norms (e.g., virginity loss, male-centred sex) (Gill, 2008a). In this way, participants' desires to be up for it, sexually experienced, or desirable cannot simply be read as either authentic empowerment or passive submission. Rather, this outcome reflects the contradictory conditions of neoliberal femininity, where agency itself becomes a cultural obligation (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Evans & Riley, 2014; Gill, 2008a).

For the participants, sexual subjectivity is a messy, transformative, ongoing journey whereby agency is fragmented and relational – learned through embodied doing. In other words, rather than understanding sexual subjectivity being something women possess or lack (Martin, 1996; Tolman, 2002a) as predicated on one's ability to exercise 'agency', these findings show it to be situational, relational and developing over time. Crucially, temporality emerges as a key factor in this process of 'becoming sexual', highlighting how sexual subjectivity is continuously negotiated and reworked (Bryant & Schofield, 2007). It is within this space that we see new meaning-making emerge as participants actively reinterpret dominant discourses in ways that allow for greater alignment with their own comfort, desire and sense of self, indicating that both agency and sexual subjectivity are not always immediately visible but emerges gradually as women come to reinterpret their experiences and desires (Bryant & Schofield, 2007).

The participants demonstrate that we require a more complex and nuanced notion of agency (Gill, 2008a; Townsend, 2019). These findings illuminate how pervasive dominant discourses are in the shaping of women's sexual selves. As such, it is problematic to apply a notion of agency that resides either in resistance or compliance given that we understand young women as produced in and through discourse. I argue that this thesis illuminated the participants capacity for creating space for manoeuvring. So, rather than grand resistance against oppressive power (Tolman, 2002a; Tolman et al., 2005), the participants were

strategic, fragmented, partial and thus, demonstrated temporal movements of agency – aided and propelled by embodied doing (Bryant & Schofield, 2007). Within the constraints of dominant discourses, space for manoeuvring was still made. Within these spaces, micro-dynamics of agency became visible through the participants practices of negotiation, reinterpretation and resistance.

By highlighting these young women's practices of learning, and the expertise they hold in navigating their sexual selves, this begins to make visible the participants own sexual learning and illuminates what *is* and should *be* recognised as legitimate, helpful, symbolic and embodied knowledge in relation to sexual learning and sexuality (Byron, 2014; Cameron-Lewis, 2016; Townsend, 2019). I extend and contribute to existing literature that creates awareness for young women to be more accurately understood and represented as the sexual citizens they already are (Allen, 2003, 2005; Carmody & Allen, 2013). Overall, I argue that women are both agentic and determined by extraneous influences, namely neoliberal discourses (e.g., up for it) that value individuality, self-improvement and desirability.

Future Research and Limitations

While this research has contributed and extended on existing research about young women's sexuality, there are some limitations worth considering which relate to my analysis and the types of experiences explored. Future research suggestions are also outlined below.

Firstly, despite the focus on Aotearoa's culture, this thesis is largely missing narratives from Māori and Pasifika voices. In the planning for this thesis my supervisors and I aimed to gather a pool of participants that represented the diversity of the population of young women in Aotearoa. However, the process of gathering the participants for this thesis ended up being the first eight women who reached out to me and by chance, this group of women were predominately white. Therefore, future research would benefit in developing an intersectional approach to the sexual subjectivities of young women in Aotearoa. More culturally centred projects that allow for the diversity of sexual subjectivities is certainly needed for more complex conceptualisation of sexuality to emerge.

Secondly, all the participants in this research identified as female. Research on sexual subjectivities is needed with people who identify with all genders and sexual orientations. Historically, research on transgender people is highly pathologised and frequently centered

around sexual dysfunction (Fraser, 2020; Whitney et al., 2022). Within this space, there is very little focus on how transgender people ‘become’ sexual and holistically experience their sexual selves. I believe the outcome of this kind of study would positively add to transgender studies on mental health and mitigate dominant assumptions. Researching involving larger groups of young people, as well as individuals in intimate relationships would further extend these findings. In particular, it would be beneficial to explore how experiences of embodied learning, entitlement to pleasure, and the rewriting of gendered sexual scripts differ between young people engaging in casual sexual encounters and those within intimate ongoing relationships.

In this space, while narrative inquiry was a good choice for my research design, other qualitative methods that allow for more voices and opinions would be useful, particularly when considering the role of school-based education. Undertaking further research with a large group of young people (of all genders) would be beneficial to guide policy and school curriculum reform. Following this, a longitudinal study would enrich sexual subjectivity studies. By following women over the development of their sexual selves, interviewing them concurrently during real time new experiences unfolding, we would be able to explore the relationship with temporality, agency, dominant discourses and learning by doing more closely.

An important consideration of this study is the impact of the participants previous sexual trauma. I included stories of previous sexual harm in my analysis because they are significant in one’s sexual development. However, due to the scope of the study and the time constraints involved, it was not possible to explore their experiences in the depth they deserved. I deliberately refrained from making causal claims about the relationships between participants past trauma and their current processes of learning and negotiating their sexual desires. This was an intentional methodological decision. I am not positioned or qualified to determine cause-and-effect relationships, nor did I want to impose meaning onto participants personal experiences, particularly where such connections were not explicitly articulated by the participants themselves. By interpreting the participants stories through the lens of embodied practice and temporality, I aimed to foreground the ways their sexual subjectivities emerge, shift and are continuously negotiated. Future research could focus specifically on the impact of trauma on sexual subjectivities.

Practical Implications

The findings from this research point to several suggestions particularly for high school education. These are summed up in Table 2.

Table 2: Practical Implications

Recommendation	The aims of the recommendation would ideally
1. Aotearoa specific communication education 2. Mitigating the up for it sexual subject position through consent and script diversification 3. School education that involves more learning of mechanics of sex, pleasure, desire and consent. 4. Courses and resources that are provided outside the school systems that support exploration of sexuality, different sexual scripts, that are grounded in different cultural, religious and other belief systems 5. Create space for sexual reflexivity	1. Reduce the pressure for young people, particularly young women, to perform sexual availability as a marker of desirability or legitimacy. 2. Challenge the idea that “good” sexual subjects are always confident, willing, or sexually available 3. Decouple sexual agency from performative enthusiasm 4. Critically examine gendered expectations around desirability, responsiveness, and validation 5. Present multiple and diverse sexual scripts that include slowness, negotiation, and discontinuity 6. Destabilising the link between sexual confidence and sexual availability 7. Broaden cultural narratives of desire beyond linear, performance-oriented scripts

	8. Address how neoliberal logics frame sexuality as a site of self-optimisation and social legibility
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Extending on existing research (Braun, 2008; Couper, 2022; Cooper & Gordon, 2015), there may be cause for claim that Aotearoa has a particular and specific way of communicating about sex and desires. In this way, I argue that it may be beneficial to embrace this outcome and cater to Aotearoa’s generalised humour and way of ‘being’. A good example of this is “The Best Place in the World to Have Herpes” Aotearoa specific campaign where they showed Sir Graham Henry (ex-All Blacks coach) speaking about the stigma that surrounds having herpes, pulling on the nations insider jokes (e.g., the country with the sexiest accent, the best pies and the best rugby team). By speaking to the cultural values and familiar forms of humour, such campaigns may make audiences more receptive to sexual health messages and encourage greater engagement with information that might otherwise be dismissed.

Initiatives that promote more nuanced and pluralistic understandings of consent may reduce the pressure young women feel to engage in unwanted sexual activity in pursuit of social acceptance, desirability, or the performance of the up for it subject position. Such approaches acknowledge that sexual decision-making occurs within broader social and cultural contexts rather than as a series of purely individual choices. This would provide young people with the opportunity to engage with diverse sexual scripts before having to rely solely on sexual (embodied) experience. This aims to reduce the extent to which sexual learning occurs through ‘trial by fire’ experiences where knowledge is forcibly acquired only after navigating risk, shame or harm.

A significant outcome of this thesis was that sexual subjectivity positively develops through opportunities of reflection (e.g., embodied learning, discussions with friends). Therefore, schools, universities, youth programmes and therapeutic settings could provide opportunities for young people to discuss sexuality, desire and sexual identity without judgement.

Conclusion

Sexual subjectivity is a messy, relational process – one that emerges through contradiction, embodied doing and, temporality. By exploring how women are both agentic and influenced/determined by dominant discourses, this thesis contributes to critical feminist research and challenges reductive scholarship regarding women's sexuality studies. While the participants were undoubtedly shaped by neoliberal ideals, heteronormative sexual scripts and various dominant discourses, they were never passive recipients of these forces. The participants illustrated how they actively negotiated, complied with, resisted, reinterpreted, and reworked the conditions through which they came to understand themselves. Importantly, the participants narrative illustrated that sexual learning extends far beyond formal sexuality education. Sexual subjectivity was shaped through socialisation, media, pornography, intimate relationships, sexual encounters, experiences of unwanted sex, self-pleasure and the ongoing process of reclamation. Agency, likewise, emerged as ever-present rather than something women either possess or lack. While shaped by dominant discourses, participants' reflexive engagement with their experiences and embodied learning facilitated the rearticulation of subject positions and thus, space more manoeuvring. Following this process, I argue agency becomes increasingly more visible through embodied experiences and reinterpretation and that this process is ongoing and everchanging.

In conclusion, this thesis argues for more nuanced conceptualisations of both sexual subjectivity and agency. Rather than asking whether women have sexual subjectivity, this research highlights how sexual subjectivity is relational, continually produced, negotiated and transformed throughout women's sexual lives. Here, women are positioned as not incomplete objects striving towards an endpoint but as active participants in their own ongoing process of becoming sexual.

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Appendix A: Advertisement Flier



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PUREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

WOMEN WANTED !

This study aims to explore (rather than explain) young women's experiences of making sense of their sexuality in Aotearoa, New Zealand (NZ).

This study aims to gain more diverse understandings of young women's sexual selves in Aotearoa within the context of cultural, educational, and societal norms and how they contribute to NZ's young women's sexual selves.

Participant Criteria:

- Participants must be between 18-30.
- Participants must self-identify as woman.
- Participants must live in Aotearoa NZ.
- Participants must have undergone secondary education (intermediate, high school) within Aotearoa NZ .
- Participants must self-identity as being comfortable talking about sex, sexuality and relationships
- Be available to attend two interviews either face-to-face or via zoom

Exclusion criteria

Women who do not feel safe to take part (either are currently experiencing significant mental distress or have experienced sexual harm) for support please call Safe To Talk: 0800 044 334

interested?

please contact Frankie at either:

██████████@massey.ac.nz
or

██████████

Appendix B: Information Sheet



School of Psychology
Massey University
Private Bag 102-904
North Shore
Auckland 0745

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Situated Desires: A Critical Inquiry into the Formation of Sexual Subjectivity Among Young Women in Aotearoa New Zealand

Kia ora, my name is Frankie Dale, and I am a psychology student undertaking my master's at Massey University. Thank you for your interest in this research, please read the following information to decide if you would like to continue as a research participant.

Project description:

The aim of this research is to explore young women's experiences with their sexuality and sexual subjectivity within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) culture, societal expectations, and education. In this study, sexuality is defined broadly, without constraints, as opposed to binary definitions which inadvertently places women in stereotypical boxes, lacking room for diverse and 'messy' stories. People are complicated. In this way, it is crucial to undertake research where women can share the various layers of themselves and how women's diverse experiences contribute to their sexual life and sexual subjectivities.

Research questions:

1. How do young women critically navigate and construct their sexual subjectivities?
2. How are these understandings shaped by education, gender, societal expectations, and broader cultural discourses?
3. How can these insights inform and reshape sexuality education in Aotearoa?

Who can participate:

- Participants must be between 18-30 years old.
- Participants must identify as a woman.

- Participants must live in Aotearoa NZ.
- Participants must have undergone secondary education (intermediate, high school) within Aotearoa NZ.
- Participants must self-identify as being comfortable talking about sex, sexuality and relationships.
- Be happy to attend two interviews either face-to-face or via zoom.

Exclusion criteria

- Women who do not feel safe to take part and/or speak about their sexuality.

If you choose to participate in this study:

By choosing to participate in this study, you will be included in two separate interviews (both approx. 1-1.30hrs). Your total contribution for this study will be:

- 3 hours in total – there will be two interviews with potential follow up for clarification purposes.
- 10-15 mins for admin (responding to advertisement, reading information sheet and setting up interview)
- 2 interviews (estimated 60-90 minutes each)
- 25-30 minutes to review transcript and return

The first interview will be an opportunity for the researcher and the participant to get to know each other and an opportunity for the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the participants life story. The second interview will be held on a separate date at the participants convenience. During the interviews you will be able to skip any questions, pause at any time, or withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. You may email me with any questions concerning this research which will not be recorded as part of data collection.

What happens after the study:

After the interviews commence, I will analyse the materials collected from the two interviews. These materials will be used for my master's thesis only. You will have the opportunity to review your transcripts and make edits at any point after the interview process has finished.

The benefits and risks of this research:

This study will give you the opportunity to share your personal experience with your own sexual life in a way that accounts for all social, cultural, and educational context. More diverse understandings of young women's sexuality need to be acknowledged in order to educate those in and out of the field. As sexuality can be a sensitive topic to discuss, these interviews will give you the opportunity to do so in a safe, autonomous environment.

- If distress were to arise, upon completion of the interviews, a follow-up phone call will be had and for further support please contact lifeline.org.nz.
- At the first interview, a koha (gift) of \$50 will be given to each participant to thank you for your time and agreeing to be involved in the interview process.
- The interview will be transcribed, and your transcript will be sent to you to read and review. You can then request for any edits to be made.
- A summary of research findings will be sent to you via email at the end of my research.
- I will also email your transcript for any edits after our interview, and research findings at the end of my data analysis.

Data management:

Your confidentiality and privacy are a priority. No identifying information will be required or used in this research. As this is an explanatory master's thesis, only descriptive statistics and a narrative inquiry analysis of data will be included. The anonymous data will be stored within a password protected file on a password protected device and stored for five years following Massey University's document destruction policies.

Participant's rights:

You are under no obligation to participate in this research. If you decide to take part, you have the right to:

- Contact me via email to ask questions about the interview/s.
- Decline to answer any questions you do not wish to answer within the interview schedule (which will be sent to all participants prior to the scheduled interview time).
- Exit the study at any time before completion – in this case, your responses will not be included in the research.
- In any case, you will be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.
- Note: any disclosure of sexual harm or other harm by a participant will be disclosed to my supervisors.

Contact details:

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, you may email me or my supervisors.

Researcher:

Frances Dale
School of Psychology, Massey University Auckland
Email: [REDACTED]@massey.ac.nz

Supervisor Names:

Dr. Kathryn McGuigan,
School of Psychology, Massey University Auckland
Email: k.mcguigan@massey.ac.nz

Ahnya Martin
School of Psychology, Massey University Auckland
Email: A.martin@massey.ac.nz

Committee Approval Statement:

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, Application OM2 25/31. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact the Chairperson, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, email: humanethics2@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix C: Consent Form



School of Psychology
Massey University
Private Bag 102-904
North Shore
Auckland 0745

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Situated Desires: A Critical Inquiry into the Formation of Sexual Subjectivity Among Young Women in Aotearoa New Zealand

Research Team: Ms Frances Dale, Mrs Ahnya Martin, Dr Kathryn McGuigan

We would like to invite you to take part in two separate interviews. In these interviews, you will be asked questions regarding your upbringing, family life, milestones, things that are important to you, education, worldview, self-esteem, relationships with the self, sexuality, sex life, masturbation and romantic/sexual relationships. The two interviews will be audio recorded and then transcribed. These two separate interviews will take place on two separate dates, at a mutually agreed location and time. In order to take part in this research we ask you to sign this consent form.

- I have been informed about this research and understand my participation in it.
- I understand that my participation in the interviews is confidential, will be anonymous and no identifying information can be linked to my responses.
- I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, and I can opt out at any stage of the interview process without penalty.
- I understand that both interviews will be recorded and then transcribed
- I understand that I can choose not to answer any particular question, take a break, leave the interview, or bring friends/family to the interview as support.
- I understand that I can request the audio recorder to be turned off at any time during an interview and any information I have provided to that point can be withdrawn from the research.

I confirm that:

- I agree to take part in this research.
- I agree to being audio recorded in both interviews.
- I understand that information will be stored securely for five years and then deleted.

We encourage you to reach out to the research team if you have any further questions (details available below).

Name: _____
Signature: _____
Date: _____

Contact details:

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, you may email me or my supervisors.

Researcher:

Frances Dale
School of Psychology, Massey University Auckland
Email: [REDACTED]@massey.ac.nz

Supervisor Names:

Dr. Kathryn McGuigan,
School of Psychology, Massey University Auckland
Email: k.mcguigan@massey.ac.nz

Ahnya Martin
School of Psychology, Massey University Auckland
Email: A.martin@massey.ac.nz

Committee Approval Statement:

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, Application OM2 25/31. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact the Chairperson, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, email: humanethics2@massey.ac.nz.

Thank you in advance for taking the time to be involved in this project!

Appendix D: Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule

Situated Desires: A Critical Inquiry into the Formation of Sexual Subjectivity Among Young Women in Aotearoa New Zealand

Prior to commencing the interview, a brief of the research project will be explained to the participant, followed by the answering of any questions the participant might have. Informed consent and demographic information will then be obtained.

First interview

Aim: to understand the participants background which will inform the life vignette – an attempt at painting a portrait of each participant.

The life history vignettes are to be developed from the 1st interview transcripts and are organised around two sets of topics – firstly around chronological stages of life (e.g. upbringing and family background, school, dating and relationships etc); and secondly those themes which will emerge out of the initial narrative analysis (e.g., pleasure, power, sexual learning, fluidity).

1. Intro:

- Ask about passions, beliefs, what's important to them.
- Create a comfortable energy – share things about myself if it feels natural and that it would help them open up – just a normal korero between two people.

1. Upbringing & Family Background

- Can you tell me a bit about where you grew up and what your family life was like?
 - Who were the key people in your life growing up?
 - How were topics like relationships, gender, or sexuality talked about in your household, if at all?
 - Were there any spoken or unspoken rules about what it meant to be a girl or a young woman?

2. Early Understandings of the Body, Gender & Sexuality

- When do you first remember becoming aware of your body or the idea of “being a girl”?

- What kinds of messages (from family, media, school, etc.) shaped those early understandings?
- How did you feel about those messages at the time?

3. Schooling & Formal Education

- What role did school play in shaping your ideas about relationships, sex, or gender?
 - What stands out to you about your sexuality education experience, if any?
 - Were there things you wished had been talked about or taught differently?
- What do you remember about learning about sex, sexuality, or relationships in school?
 - Was it helpful, harmful, awkward, empowering?
 - Who delivered it, and how did they approach it?
 - Were Māori, Pacific, or queer perspectives included or excluded?
- Did you feel represented in the content of sexuality education?
 - Was anything missing, misrepresented, or uncomfortable?
- How did school influence how you thought you were *supposed* to act in relationships or around the opposite/same sex?

3. National Identity & Cultural Norms

- How do you think New Zealand as a country talks about sex, gender, and relationships?
 - Do you think those messages are different depending on your ethnicity, class, gender, or where you live?
- What are some common Kiwi ideas about what it means to be a “young woman” in Aotearoa?
 - How have you felt about those ideas?
- Do you think colonial history plays a role in how people in NZ think about gender or sexuality today?
 - How does being in a bicultural (or multicultural) society affect how you see yourself?
- How do you think New Zealand culture encourages or discourages talking openly about sexual experiences?

5. Friendships, Peers, & Informal Learning

- What role did your friends or peer group play in your learning about sex, sexuality, or relationships?
 - Were there stories, jokes, or rumours that stood out or shaped how you thought about these topics?
 - Was there pressure to act or think a certain way?

6. Dating, Relationships, & Sexual Experience

Can you tell me about your early experiences with dating, crushes, or relationships?

- How did you make sense of these experiences at the time?
- What ideas or expectations did you have around sex, intimacy, or love?

7. Culture, Identity, & Belonging

- Do you feel like your cultural background or community influenced how you understood gender and sexuality?
 - Were there any specific values, traditions, or beliefs that shaped your views?
 - Have these views shifted over time?

8. Reflection – one of the most important parts

- Looking back, how would you describe your journey of understanding yourself as a sexual person?
 - Are there any moments or phases that feel particularly significant?
 - How have your ideas of sexuality changed, and what influenced those changes?

Is there anything else you would like to share? In this first interview, everything is relevant.

Second interview

(specifically questions about my study that will help compliment the first interview)

Resources: