

**Awkward Sex:**  
**Revisiting Rosalind Gill's Sex Advice Repertoires in the**  
**Context of New Media Listics**

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## Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction: Gill and Current Study</b>	<b>4</b>
Rosalind Gill's (2009) study background	
Gill's findings and conclusion	
Current study	
<b>Intimate Entrepreneurship</b>	<b>16</b>
Heterosexual Assumption	
Tonal Shift	
Affect	
<b>Men-ology</b>	<b>21</b>
Male Sexual Impotency	
Pleasure	
Women and Sexual Pleasure	
<b>Men-ology 2.0</b>	<b>27</b>
Micro-Narratives of Pleasure	
A Different Type of Pleasure	
Men-ology Revised	
<b>Psychological Transformation</b>	<b>31</b>
Complicated Transformation	
Regressive Transformation	
Public Regulation	
<b>An Awkward Ending</b>	<b>40</b>

## **Abstract**

This thesis revisits Rosalind Gill's 2009 influential study of sex-advice columns in *Glamour* (UK) magazine in order to test her arguments about mediated intimacy within the new media genre of the listicle. This is achieved through employing a discourse and content analysis of a sample of 12 'awkward sex' listicles. While the three interpretive repertoires that Gill identifies at work in *Glamour* do not appear to be as actively employed in my sample, I propose that the listicles still employ 'postfeminist sensibilities' predominately through the classifier of 'awkward.' While these listicles resemble Gill's sample insofar as they remain centred on male sexual pleasure and the regulation of women's bodies, I highlight the manner in which mediated intimacy is now secured through peer-to-peer discourse rather than the expert discourse that was the focus of Gill's original study.

## Introduction

### Introduction and Aims

The aim of this research project is to revisit Rosalind Gill's influential 2009 study of sex advice articles in *Glamour* magazine in the contemporary context of sex listicles, a genre associated with new media.<sup>1</sup> Gill argues that advice articles construct intimate narratives that train young women into certain forms of feminine subjectivity. I intend to test if her findings still hold true in the new media landscape. A discourse and content analysis of selected sex listicles will re-examine the key tropes of Gill's original research. This research aims to sit in a larger body of work that surrounds postfeminism, new media, affect and intimate narratives. Due to time and length constraints, the bulk of the dissertation is given over to data analysis rather than theoretical contextualisation.

### Background

Undertaken a decade ago, Gill's study sits among many other critical studies that examine women's magazines and the role they play as a locus of "cultural ideas regarding women, men and gender relations" (346). The aim of Gill's study is to "examine sex and relationship advice in popular women's magazines" (345). Gill identifies the key "representations, themes and discourses which constitute sex and relationship advice and explore[s] the ways in which these may be connected to enduring gender inequalities" (345-346). Specifically, Gill is interested in the way a feminist identity is often disavowed by young women and is regarded as an unnecessary and politically backwards stance.

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<sup>1</sup> Gill, Rosalind. 2009. "Mediated intimacy and postfeminism: A discourse analytic examination of sex and relationships advice in a women's magazine." *Discourse & Communication* 3(4): 345-369. All subsequent references in text.

Acknowledging that postfeminism is a disputed term, Gill states that her study is additive rather than definitive regarding the relation between feminism and postfeminism. In her study she posits that a “distinctive *postfeminist sensibility* is evident in the magazines approach to heterosexual relationships” (346, original emphasis).<sup>2</sup> Gill explains that she sees:

Postfeminism as a sensibility characterized by a number of elements: a taking for granted of feminist ideas alongside a fierce repudiation of feminism; an emphasis upon choice, freedom and individual empowerment; a pre-occupation with the body and sexuality as the locus of femininity; a reassertion of natural sexual difference grounded in heteronormative ideas about gender complementarity; the importance placed upon self-surveillance and monitoring as modes of power; and a thoroughgoing commitment to ideas of self-transformation, it is, a make-over paradigm. (364)

Gill states that there is very little research that has examined the discursive constructions of sex in women’s magazines. Rather, research to date has tended to focus on questions regarding beauty and the body with a heavy emphasis on visual stimuli. While the previous studies she cites (Ballaster et al. 1991; Coward 1984; Currie 1999; Ticknell et al. 2003) have been crucial for understanding the contradictions regarding femininity and their construction, she aims to expand this body of work by looking at the conflicting constructions of gender that emerge within sex and relationship advice and their larger relation to feminism and postfeminism.

### **Gill’s Data, Methods and Approach**

Gill’s object of study is the UK magazine *Glamour*, a women’s monthly glossy with a target demographic of women ages 18-35. At the time of Gill’s study, *Glamour* sold nearly

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<sup>2</sup> See also Gill (2007a).

600,000 copies a month as well as receiving 8 million views a month on its website. Most of *Glamour*'s consumers are women who are in socioeconomic groups A, B and C1 and features a variety of articles from celebrity news and fashion to real stories of rape and cancer (350).<sup>3</sup> Gill's data sample consists of the 36 issues of *Glamour* published between April 2005 and March 2008. From this sample she finds that each monthly edition has on average four articles that focus substantially on sex and relationships (plus additional short features), which provides a data set of more than 140 articles. From this large data set she randomly selects five issues from the three-year period which gives her 20 articles to analyse. Through the examination of these 20 articles she identifies four standard types (or genres) of articles that are recurrent:

- Survey report
- Articles focusing on teaching the readers what men think
- 'How to' articles focussed on improving sexual and romantic techniques
- Feature stories about a particular type or group of women

All four genres take sex and relationships as their primary topic.

Gill deploys a discourse analysis to identify gender ideology as a means to understand how meaning is integral to power and relations of domination (351). The importance for Gill of this approach is the "emphasis upon power's material-discursive effects rather than on a distinction between ideology and truth" (351). The feminist approach taken by Gill is animated through her focus on "patterns of inequality, domination and oppression" and their relation to gender constructs (351). Gill outlines the salient aspects of her approach as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> The UK office for National Statistics define socioeconomic groups A, B and C1 as the top three socioeconomic groups based off occupation and income and are primarily used in classification of media demographics (UK Geographics 2014).

First that its focus is on *discourse itself*, rather than seeing this as a means of ‘getting at’ some reality which is deemed to lie behind or beyond the text- whether social, psychological or material; second, that *language is constructive*, which highlights the fact that we deal with the world in terms of constructions, not in a somehow direct or unmediated way- that in a very real sense, texts of various kinds construct our world; third, that *discourse is action orientated* and best understood as a social practice; and finally that discourse is *organized rhetorically*, in order to combat alternative formulations and make itself persuasive. (351, original emphasis)

Gill’s approach allows her to identify various ‘interpretative repertoires.’<sup>4</sup> Gill understands repertoires as “being a unit of analysis that allows scholars to go beyond individual or discrete expressions to begin to identify patterns across and between texts, and to connect these to wider contexts and social formations” (351). For Gill, this distinction is important as it allows for “processes of *articulation*” (351, original emphasis) that acknowledge the possibility of discourses not being applicable to only one domain. Through analysis of these *Glamour* articles Gill identifies three interpretative repertoires which she believes structure the conversation around sex and relationships.

### **Interpretative repertoire 1: Intimate entrepreneurship**

The first repertoire Gill identifies is intimate entrepreneurship. This captures the elements in the articles in *Glamour* that cast relationships as work. The invocation of work is created through “engaging with linguist repertoires and analogies from finance, management, science, marketing and military campaigns” (352). She notes that rather than relying on notions of fate or destiny, the underlying assumption of this repertoire is that heterosexual

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<sup>4</sup> See Wetherell (1998) and Wetherell and Potter (1988).

true love is seen as something you have to work to find. Gill finds that in these articles relationships are minutely broken down into quantifiable features where attributes can be ticked off with potential partners. This repertoire not only engages analogies to work but also to scientific management and metaphors of precision and investment. In this repertoire she concludes that, “women are depicted as knowing what they want, and then as using every strategy available to them, to get it” (353). A feminist tone is employed in this repertoire that suggests women are capable, confident, and empowered, yet paradoxically this talent is geared to obtain goals that are very traditional in nature. Although this repertoire in theory deals with emotive content (finding love, happiness and a partner) it adopts an affectless tone. There is no room or reports of women feeling heartbroken or lonely, but rather “as if love is the outcome of meritocracy; if you work hard enough you will find it” (353).

### **Interpretative repertoire 2: Men-ology**

The second interpretative repertoire that Gill identifies is classified as men-ology. The name draws attention to its aim of assisting women to learn about men and, as a corollary of this, women learning to please men. This learning project enforces the idea that women must take responsibility for the emotional management of the relationship. For Gill, this repertoire is in stark contrast to the previous one as it constructs women as “somewhat uncertain and unworldly about sex and intimate relationships” (354). The advice in this repertoire uses expert psychological terms, such as mirroring and co-reacting, to engage stereotypical notions of femininity that paint women as manipulative and deceitful. Women are called upon to “monitor their self-presentation, to break down every element of social interaction” (355). While this advice still classes relationships as work, it no longer aims to secure the woman’s satisfaction but rather the man’s. Gill’s analysis highlights the amount of emotional labour that is required of women and how unevenly it is placed on them in the context of

relationships. Rather than men being held responsible for their behaviour, “it is simply a matter of ‘the way men are’ and a naturalisation of ideas of essential sexual difference” (356). When dealing with notions of sex, women are specifically advised to put their own anxieties aside and instead console men about any anxiety they may be experiencing.

### **Interpretative repertoire 3: Psychological transformation**

The final interpretative repertoire that Gill identifies is that of the psychological make-over paradigm. She splits these into four separate categories: love your body; be confident; transform your feelings about sex; and, try something new. In the first category, Gill identifies an abandonment of previous make-over paradigms focusing on the body in favour of “the regulatory work [needed] to discipline *subjectivity* by remaking one’s ethical relationship to oneself” (358, original emphasis). The second category encourages women to make over their behaviour and cognitive patterns in order to better themselves. Within this advice category, she notes, there is an inbuilt rebuttal of feminist critique. This inbuilt rebuttal is achieved through the framing of bettering yourself not for a man but for your own purposes. Gill notes that “this uneasy conjoining of pre-feminist, anti-feminist and feminist ideas, together with a focus on pleasing oneself that marks out such advice as distinctly postfeminist” (359). The third category is transforming your feelings about sex. Gill finds that a perpetual theme in these articles is that of defying repression and becoming open to sex. This repertoire engages with psychological transformation and techniques that invite one to “move from sexual subjecthood characterized by shame, secrecy and ‘hang-ups’ to a newly made-over ‘open’, ‘healthy’ and ‘uncomplicated’ (!) sexual subjectivity” (360, original emphasis). The final category in this repertoire is the imperative to try something new. Gill notes that, of the multitude of new sexual activities suggested, all operate within the realms of

heteronormativity. While there is encouragement to explore and expand one's sexual skill and knowledge, it is invariably for the purpose of heterosexual penetrative intercourse (361).

### **Gill's Conclusions**

Gill pays attention to the nature of the contradictions within the *Glamour* sex advice columns and features since she takes them to indicate the complex ideological work going on within this ostensibly benign discourse directed at young women. Gill argues that it is through the lack of any singular notion of desirable femininity that postfeminist sensibilities are effected. That is, it is the entanglement of feminist, anti-feminist and pre-feminist ideas that is of importance. The intimate entrepreneurship repertoire, for instance, draws on the feminist language of empowerment and equality in order to promote goals that might be interpreted as traditional in gender terms. For Gill this is an example of the kind of double entanglement of feminist and antifeminist ideologies that McRobbie identifies as distinctive of postfeminism. According to Gill's study, it would seem that what in a pre- (second wave) feminist era would have been described as the obligation to please your man, now must be framed and understood as self-chosen. Gill states that "it is as if what were formerly presented as men's desires have been internalized and must now be understood as authentically as women's own" (363).

Within these postfeminist sensibilities around women's desires, ideological constructs regarding masculinity are also being presented. Indeed, Gill argues that there is a similar contradiction regarding men in these *Glamour* articles, since men are presented as both benign and grateful for sex, as well as less easy to please and more judgemental. Gill calls this part of the 'Mars and Venus account' where men and women are positioned as crucially different but complementary species (364). Moreover, the employment of the notion of work that women must do in these relationships interlaced with the man's 'natural' inability to not

understand what women want, produces a “radical gender asymmetry in relation to power and emotional labour” (364). This naturalisation of women performing emotional labour is, however, contradicted through statements that emphasise ‘it takes two’, ‘mutual respect’, and ‘communication’ (364). These contradictions, Gill argues, are indicatively postfeminist.

Gill’s final observation concerns the manner in which the regulatory work encouraged of women is tied to notions of neoliberalism (365). The neoliberalist construction of individuals as “entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating” (365) mirror closely the constructions within the sex advice discourse under analysis. While the notion of self-regulation has always been a part of social constructions of femininity, Gill observes that the regulation promoted through *Glamour* is markedly different. Firstly, there is an emphasis upon self-regulation while simultaneously disavowing any form of regulation. Secondly, self-regulation enters new areas of life and intimate conduct. Finally, the locus of self-regulation has shifted from the body onto the interior. This self-regulation is embedded as a form of personal choice and becomes an elective part of a women’s sexual narrative of self (366). Gill concludes that the discourse of mediated intimacy as reflected in *Glamour*’s sex advice columns “is the perfect marriage (heteronormative metaphor intended!) of postfeminism and neoliberalism” (366, original emphasis).

### **Selection Parameters and Methodology of Current Study**

Since Gill’s (2009) study was undertaken the media landscape has changed with the rise of social media and the shift from print to online publication. The current study is determined to examine if Gill’s findings still hold true in the sexual advice and intimacy narratives that are presented in new media texts. The chosen genre for this study is the ‘listicle’ which is a mixture between a list and an article (Lawlor 2013; Walters 2016). The listicle as an evolving genre does not have strict rules, however there is a general consensus

that a listicle will contain items presented in a list format with between one sentence to two paragraphs of elaboration or explanation per list item (Lawlor 2013; Walters 2016). Most listicles will appear with a preamble that will give a description of the topic it covers and an indication of content. Although the listicle is not in fact a new genre of writing, it is considered the hallmark of new media (Sparrow 2014; Walters 2016) and therefore seems an appropriate platform to revisit Gill's findings through.

When digital platforms and digital native media companies emerged, it was theorised that these new platforms would replicate traditional print media in order to accrue legitimacy (Lowrey, Parrott, and Meade 2011).<sup>5</sup> While this has been documented, the reverse phenomenon has also been observed whereby legacy print media has adopted components of digital native media (Tandoc and Jenkins 2015; Wu 2016). The genre of the listicle is one of the main digital strategies that has been adopted by traditional legacy media. The adaptation of listicles by legacy media can be seen within my sample as half are taken from the digital platforms associated with print media magazines and half are native digital media platforms.<sup>6</sup> The undetectable difference in content within my sample suggests that there has been an adaptation of traditional media's ideologies by digital media in terms of sex and relationship constructions. The adaptation of these strategies is especially prominent when examining the sensational and explicit tone branded throughout these listicles, something I will return to in my analysis.

Since the main purpose of the listicle is to create virality in order to generate advertising revenue, they operate as a form of 'click-bait' (Sparrow 2014; Gottfried 2014; Kilgo and Sinta 2016). A predominate feature of click-bait is a sensational heading that draws

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<sup>5</sup> 'Digital native' or 'native' media refers to media platforms that have been established entirely online without a print subsidiary ever existing (Wu 2016).

<sup>6</sup> *SELF* magazine was print and digital up until February 2017 where it has now moved to entirely online, however it is still considered a part of legacy media as it originated in print.

consumers into the article and then onto the media platform in general (Kilgo and Sinta 2016). Consistent with this aim, such affects such as shock and humour are used to draw in the reader. Unlike Gill's sample, these listicles (all bar three) do not present as a format to educate or inform their readers regarding sex and relationships, thus they lack the tone of expertise that is prominent in Gill's study.

The age demographic targeted by the listicles under analysis is similar to the addressees by Gill's sample, namely women aged between 18-35. While most of these listicles are on platforms that have a majority female based demographic, two listicles are taken from platforms specific to a male audience. However, considering the digital nature of listicles it is impossible to determine how far they have circulated beyond these original gendered platforms. While this is one limitation of this study, it is an important aspect for any work that examines online media as its distribution channels are inherently different to that of print. This acknowledged limitation is not prohibitive of the goal of testing Gill's findings. Because the reading demographics of the listicles are not knowable, I will focus on the gendered address presumed within the listicle itself rather than the platform on which it first appears. This limitation would need to be addressed if further research were undertaken in this area.

The selection criteria for the listicles that I have chosen is as such: first, they must have been published after Gill's study; second, they must be produced solely as digital content; third, the title must indicate general sex, not a specific type of sex (e.g. sex outdoors, first time sex etc.);<sup>7</sup> fourth, they must be content obtained or produced from the source site;<sup>8</sup> fifth, they must be written listicles not just images, videos or gifs; and finally they had to include

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<sup>7</sup> *Cosmopolitan's* (2013a) listicle mentions new guy sex in its preamble, however since the title is 'Awkies sex moments' and the content is about general awkward sex, not new guy awkward sex, it has been determined to fit the selection criteria of this study.

<sup>8</sup> The listicle is often referred to as an aggregate source, which means that the content reproduced in the listicle is not original but obtained from elsewhere. Considering that listicles having multiple sources supports my decision to concentrate on the gendered ideology within the listicle rather than that of the platform on which it occurs.

the word ‘awkward’ in the title. This last criterion reflects my interest of the affect of the use of awkward as well as a strategic grouping strategy due to the time limit imposed by an honours thesis.

The selection criteria draws attention to the second limitation of this study. While I endeavoured to obtain a broad and varying degree of content, my own digital trace (including my personal search history, Facebook activity and a myriad of other past online activities) affected my data pool. While I attempted to combat this limitation by using multiple computers, incognito mode and different browsers, this does not eliminate the bias that may have occurred in my data set. This conundrum is indicative of a problem for all research that has online components.

The sample of listicles I collected was obtained through canvassing popular digital websites, the digital platforms of well-known print magazines, and multiple search engines. Applying all of the selection criteria I established a data set of 12 different listicles across 10 different platforms.<sup>9</sup> These listicles can be broken down into three distinct categories:

- The general listicle, these are the most common and generic with an author compiling a seemingly random list of awkward sex moments
- The advice listicle, these are similar to the first category but include advice either by an expert or by the author of how to overcome these awkward sex moments
- The confessional listicle, these are short first person micro-narratives that have been compiled into a listicle of people’s awkward sex experiences

In total, this left me with 128 listicles items about awkward sex.

The chief purpose of this study is to examine whether the three interpretive repertoires identified in Gill’s study remain prominent in the listicle form. If these repertoires are still

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<sup>9</sup> Although four of the listicles are from *Cosmopolitan*, *Cosmopolitan US* and *Cosmopolitan AU* are run as separate entities even on their digital platform and thus are counted that way.

prominent, does Gill's account of mediated intimacy remain unchanged? Do new media texts addressing sexual experience still employ postfeminist sensibilities? While Gill relied heavily on discourse analysis I commence with a quantitative analysis of the data obtained.

## Intimate Entrepreneurship

### Gill's Findings Recap

Gill identifies her first interpretative repertoire as intimate entrepreneurship.<sup>10</sup> This is due to the employment of language that shares a lexicon with science, management, finance and military campaigns within relationship advice articles. These particular strategies are employed for the attainment of the goal of finding heterosexual true love. Gill notes that there is an absence of negative affect amongst this advice for when goals are not obtained. Women are constructed as being empowered and assertive and finding a perfect (male) match is simply a meritocracy. This section will test if Gill's findings still hold true, and if not, how they differ.

### Heterosexual Assumption

Within the *Glamour* articles, Gill identifies an underlying assumption of heterosexuality that is reinforced through the main goal of finding a husband. While the ultimate goal of marriage is not specifically dealt with in these listicles, there is still a focus on heterosexual relationships as the correct or main form of sexual intimacy. However, there are three listicles that appear to expand this assumption in my sample. Across the 12 different listicles analysed one listicle mentions penetrative sex being possible without a penis (*SELF*, 2016). *SELF* (2016) and occasionally *JellyShare* (2017) listicles also attempt to avoid gender specific language through the absence of gendered pronouns. *JellyShare* and *Buzzfeed* (2014) both include listicle items that engage with concepts of anal play, which some argue is a non-heteronormative sexual activity (Dean 2014, 181-246; Ward 2015). Although *JellyShare* does

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<sup>10</sup> For the sake of brevity and easy reading, all references to 'Gill' will be referencing Gill's (2009) study.

have one listicle item for anal play, it also states that anal play is usually unwanted 95% of the time. *Buzzfeed*'s two listicle items that deal with anal play both focus on the woman being penetrated anally by a penis or anal beads. *JellyShare* as a platform has a predominately male audience of 78% (Thalamus 2017b). *Buzzfeed*, conversely, has a majority female audience with a higher than average female demographic (Alexa 2017). It is notable that in all mentions of anal play it appears to be a part of the normative heterosexual repertoire insofar as women are presented as being anally receptive not men. That noted, the aforementioned gender demographics of the listicle platforms could be indicative as to why *JellyShare*'s framing of anal sex is mostly unwanted, and *Buzzfeed*'s is of it being normative.

In comparison with Gill's sample, it seems that the heterosexual repertoire has expanded to include sexual activities previously considered peripheral. While the host platforms of these listicles represent sexual diversity the listicles themselves are heterosexual in focus. The exclusion of queer sex and queer narratives from the awkward sex listicles effectively positions 'queer sex' as different to 'sex.' This also reinforces the idea that penile-vaginal penetrative sex is the real form of sex. Even *Buzzfeed*, which has an active queer sub-platform, only features heterosexual micro-narratives within their sex listicle. Although the listicle as a genre has expanded the normative heterosexual repertoire to include forms of sexual play absent from Gill's sample, sexual intimacy is still constituted as something that occurs between a man and a woman.

### **Tonal Shift**

With the bracketing of queer sex, we can observe that these intimate narratives conform in general to those studied by Gill, however the construction of sexual empowerment needs to be explored further. The listicles deal with the notion of having or not having sexual pleasure. The empowerment of women is seen through the notion that women are sexually active and

that having pleasurable sex is an important aspect of their lives (*Bustle* 2016; *Cosmopolitan* 2013a; *Cosmopolitan* 2015; *Elite Daily* 2014; *JellyShare* 2017; *SELF* 2016; *Women's Health* 2014). However, there is also room within the listicles to examine women's experiences of unsatisfactory sex. This is an important distinction to Gill's sample where there is no reference to women having negative experiences around sex. While the advice listicles (*Cosmopolitan* 2013a; *Cosmopolitan* 2013b; *Men's Fitness* 2017) offer ways in which to avoid certain sexual events, the generic listicles (*College Times* 2014; *Cosmopolitan* 2014; *Cosmopolitan* 2015; *Elite Daily* 2014; *JellyShare* 2017; *SELF* 2016; *Women's Health* 2014) tend to operate in a humorous mode that opens up a space for sexual embarrassment to be collectively shared. This humorous tone and shared address is also evident within the confessional listicles (*Bustle* 2015; *Buzzfeed* 2014), a point I will return to later in my analysis.

The metaphorical language from lexicons of science, finance and military campaigns that Gill notes at work is absent from these listicles. Instead the listicle language trends towards the vernacular, particularly when referencing sexual acts. There is mention of either urination, defecation, blood or passing gas in every listicle, with some listicles mentioning all or a combination of these functions. Quantitative analysis reveals that 54 of the 128 listicles items mention awkwardness of an explicit nature. These include gagging and crying from performing oral sex on a man (*JellyShare* 2017); swallowing a blood clot while performing cunnilingus (*Buzzfeed* 2014); accidental defecation (*Bustle* 2016; *Buzzfeed* 2014; *JellyShare* 2017) and queefing/vaginal flatulence (*College Times* 2014; *Cosmopolitan* 2013a; *Cosmopolitan* 2014; *Elite Daily* 2014; *JellyShare* 2017). These types of sexual misfunctions are not apparent within Gill's sample. Relative to the *Glamour* columns, the listicles tend to de-romanticise sex and install a tone of peer-to-peer informality. This tonal shift is perhaps due to the remediation of content from print to the digital media platform

which removes the expert perspective of legacy journalism in favour of aggregating or sharing perspectives that are horizontally aligned rather than hierarchically.

## **Affect**

The absence of affect that Gill notes within her study does not hold true upon examination of these listicles. These listicles use affects such as shock, humour, disgust, and embarrassment in order to attract digital traffic. Furthermore, the subject matter of these awkward sex listicles is on sex that is embarrassing or has moments of frustration and ambivalence. Considering that lack of negativity is an element in Gill's intimate entrepreneurship repertoire, it is interesting to observe that an entire genre now exists around negative sexual events that can be classed as 'awkward.'

The term awkward has risen to popularity in association with millennial experience and media (Evans 2014; Kim 2010; Kirchoff 2013). Upon analysis of Google search results, the phrase 'awkward' has been a popular search term since 2012 (Google Trends 2017a). The phrase 'awkward sex' is also a common search query in Australia and the U.S. (Google Trends 2017b). A cross analysis of different affective terms that are searched for ('funny,' 'embarrassing,' 'uncomfortable,' 'hilarious,' and 'awkward'), 'funny' was the only term that was consistently searched for more than 'awkward' (Google Trends 2017c).<sup>11</sup> Although awkward has been studied as a trope within cinema and television (Kirchoff 2013), this Google trends data suggests 'awkward' has migrated to digital media. Previously, when awkwardness appears in screen comedy it usually marks a character as negatively different (Evans 2014; Kim 2010; Kirchoff 2013). However, the listicles studied appear to employ awkward in a different manner. Rather than having a negative association of difference, the

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<sup>11</sup> There was an attempt to do a cross analysis of 'awkward sex' with other sexual search terms but it became apparent very quickly that this was not possible due to the ubiquity of pornography on the internet.

listicles emphasise the common or shared experiences of awkwardness. This could be due to the popularity of the term awkward amongst millennials as a self-descriptor (Evans 2014; Kim 2010; Kirchoff 2013). It has also been suggested that using awkward as an identity characteristic is evidence of the dualism of society seemingly becoming more accepting of difference, while simultaneously making difference the new normal (Evans 2014; Kirchoff 2013).

The dualism that is apparent in the term awkward has also been noted by academics in regards to popfeminism. In *Awkward Politics* (2016), Smith-Prei and Stehle identify digital popfeminism and activism as awkward due to its ability to both regulate and de-regulate patriarchal ideologies and its ability to move and redefine itself. In an essay on Lena Dunham, the creator and star of *Girls*, Elwood Watson (2015) describes the relationship that Lena Dunham has with racism as awkward since racist attitudes are simultaneously disavowed and upheld.

There appears to be a dualism and a contradictory nature inherent within the term of awkward which is not unlike the contradictory and dualist nature of postfeminist sensibilities as identified by Gill (2007b). While Gill's repertoire of intimate entrepreneurship does not seem to hold true in the new genre of listicles about awkward sex, the comparison itself serves to highlight the new phenomenon of awkwardness as an affect through which information about sex is transacted. I will now go on to examine how awkwardness is constructed within the listicles to see if it can shed light on the larger concept of postfeminism.

## **Men-ology**

### **Gill's Findings Recap**

The second interpretive repertoire identified by Gill is men-ology. This repertoire is named as such due to the focus *Glamour* places on women studying men with the aim of learning how to please them. From this observation, Gill goes on to argue that young women are being instructed to expect that within heterosexual relationships the burden of emotional labour will be carried by them. Gill notes that within these columns in general the uneven distribution of emotional work is naturalised as a reflection of innate sexual differences between men and women. This section aims to examine if Gill's claims still hold true in reference to contemporary awkward sex listicles or if her findings need to be revised in this context.

### **Male Sexual Impotency**

Gill notes in her findings that whenever men's impotency is mentioned, the articles she examines always go to great lengths to defuse any blame towards the man and instead urge the woman to console him. *Men's Fitness* (2017) first listicle item is advice for dealing with the awkward situation of premature ejaculation. Similar to Gill's findings, this particular listicle employs expert discourse, in this instance from sex educator Barbara Carellas. Considering that *Men's Fitness's* target demographic is men, there is an emphasis upon the normalcy of premature ejaculation and a disavowal of any blame or shame experienced. Consistent with the target audience being male, there is an absence of emphasis upon communication or employment of any type of emotional labour. Rather, sexual labour is encouraged through Carellas' advice that "if PE is an ongoing problem, you can learn ways to last longer." This reinforces the concept that penetrative vaginal sex is the ultimate sexual

act just as the absence of emotional labour and the promotion of male sexual labour encourages ideas about innate sexual difference that rely on stereotypical concepts of masculinity as being primarily libidinal and femininity being primarily emotional.

The enforcement of women performing emotional labour and men performing sexual labour when premature ejaculation occurs, is also apparent in the *Cosmopolitan* (2013b) advice:

Take it as a compliment- you turned him on too much (you sexy thing, you). He might be finished, but that doesn't mean the sesh [sic.] is over. He can still help you get the big "O" with his hands and mouth. He probably feels more embarrassed than you for his speedy performance, so make him feel comfortable and take control to keep things going in the right direction. (*Cosmopolitan* 2013b)

While *Cosmopolitan's* advice deviates from the expert discourse that Gill identifies, it mirrors its encouragement of women performing emotional labour. The framing of a man being able to bring a woman to orgasm with his hands and mouth occurs on the condition that she directs and ensures the man's emotional state is secure. The lack of male responsibility for either sexual ineptitude or sexual finesse is consistent with Gill's findings. By constructing the woman as turning him on "too much," there is a sense of blame being partially directed to the woman's body. Through appropriating the blame for the man's inability to delay ejaculation, this shift also plays into discourse around men's inability to have sexual self-control. The concept that men are lacking sexual self-control relies on ideas of innate sexual differences. *Cosmopolitan's* advice has turned something that was potentially shameful for men into an event that women should almost feel pride in. This advice seems as if it is empowering and sexually progressive but can be seen to be employing tactics similar to those Gill observed

where women are encouraged to perform emotional labour which is justified through the appeal to innate sexual differences.

## **Pleasure**

Within the listicles, Gill's men-ology repertoire also appears around the construction of women's sexual pleasure and the issue of lubrication. Female genital lubrication in these listicles is not constructed as primarily about the woman's pleasure, but rather it centres on the man's ability to have penetrative intercourse and his sexual pleasure. *Cosmopolitan* (2013a) gives advice for if you are "dry as the desert":

Grab some lube or add some saliva via a foreplay blowjob. If it's still too sore, then stop because it will only be agony later. But you don't have to draw attention to this fact, just help him finish off and act as if this was your plan all along- let's be honest, what guy is going to question an impromptu BJ? (*Cosmopolitan* 2013a)

While the awkwardness in this listicle item is the lack of natural lubrication for the woman, the focus remains on the man enjoying sex. Considering that natural lubrication can be considered evidence of sexual arousal (Fahs 2016; Jozkowski et al. 2012; Rellini et al. 2005), one would expect there would be more of an emphasis upon achieving female arousal. Furthermore, the implication that the woman must hide physical pain from sexual penetration and instead perform fellatio on the man seems to agree with Gill's findings.

*Cosmopolitan* (2013a) also advises women that "if you're not there yet, tell your partner. He wants you to enjoy it as much as him, and if that means a bit more good ol' foreplay, he'll definitely be on board." While this piece of advice does tangentially acknowledge the aim of securing female sexual pleasure, it still insists that women perform

the corrective labour of communication and initiation.<sup>12</sup> *Elite Daily* (2014) states that when you cannot become self-lubricated enough for easeful penetrative sex it is “infuriating.” While this statement still constructs heterosexual penetrative sex as the ultimate sex act, it forgoes any indications of shame or inadequacy that may result from the situation. Considering that women have noted that when they cannot self-lubricate they experience shame and feelings of inadequacy (Fahs 2016) this is of importance particularly in association with *Elite Daily*’s item on male sexual dysfunction.<sup>13</sup> In a listicle item regarding the inability of a man to sustain an erection *Elite Daily* explains “it’s embarrassing for both of you. You feel like a failure and she feels inadequate.” The contradictory messaging within these listicle items covering sexual dysfunction creates a space where sexual dysfunction is seen as normative, yet women’s self-worth is still tied to a man’s erection. This double entanglement of feminism and pre-(second) wave feminist ideologies marks these listicles as distinctly postfeminist in Gill’s terms.

### **Women and Sexual Pleasure**

The listicle items that mention women’s sexual pleasure tend to construe the attainment of an orgasm as something that women must control through providing men instruction. The responsibility that is placed on women to achieve orgasm is evident in *Cosmopolitan*’s advice which states:

...if you think there is absolutely no way he is going to get you off, you should tell him sooner rather than later that you’re just too tired.

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<sup>12</sup> Although natural lubrication does not occur for every woman, especially older women, most research currently suggests a positive correlation between sexual desire and genital lubrication, especially in younger women (Fahs 2016; Jozkowski et al. 2012; Rellini et al. 2005).

<sup>13</sup> As Fahs points out, most research into women’s lack of self-lubrication presents it as an indicator of sexual dysfunction and impotency, that is as a corollary to the male inability to achieve an erection and premature ejaculation (Fahs 2016).

When you put on the breaks, make sure he knows it's not because he doesn't turn you on, but in that moment not even Ryan Gosling is going to do it for you. *Or* you can help guide him to make it more fun than furious: softly show his hand what to do with your own. Seeing you touching yourself will not only turn him on, it will show him what is actually going to get you to the sweet spot.

(*Cosmopolitan* 2013b, original emphasis)

The first part of the advice offered is to lie. Similar to Gill's findings, women are still being encouraged to employ behaviour that makes them appear to be deceiving and conniving in order to secure men's emotions. Though the purpose of lying is for the man's benefit, it still requires emotional labour to be performed by the woman. Similarly, the attainment of the woman's orgasm is justified through the sexual pleasure the man will thus receive from that achievement. The woman's sexual pleasure is both her responsibility, which sounds empowering, and his reward insofar as her orgasm is subjugated to his emotional security and/or pleasure.

The conflation of women's sexual empowerment and the centring of male sexual pleasure can be observed in the *Cosmopolitan* (2013a) listicle as well. This particular listicle employs both expert discourse sourced to Gary Douglas and more informal editorial advice for managing the awkward situation of your mind wandering:

[Douglas] suggests that if you're getting distracted, you might want to check in and see if your partner is feeling the same way. "Men have been taught to think about other things so they don't ejaculate quickly, and since most women are intuitive they can pick up on this and start thinking about other things as well."

So while he's trying to think of everything else under the sun to make himself last longer, our minds wander to life admin. Refocus on the task at hand- and indulge in a sex fantasy if you're still distracted. (*Cosmopolitan* 2013a)

From the outset *Cosmopolitan's* (2013a) advice relies on the notion of innate sexual difference in a manner that normalises and naturalises the woman performing the emotional labour of re-engaging sexually. There also appears to be an assumption that the man withholding ejaculation is for the woman's pleasure and that merely by withholding ejaculation he is doing his half of the sexualised labour and any other labour should naturally fall to the woman to perform. The mention of "life admin" is a further reiteration of the unequal employment of labour, this time domestic, encouraged for women to perform. From this we can see that Gill's repertoire of men-ology is still at work. Similarly, the marking of these listicles as postfeminist is reinforced through the entwining of women's sexual pleasure and liberation through the pleasing of a man.

## Men-ology 2.0

So far we have observed a distinct similarity between Gill's sample and the sample of listicles. One aspect that appears to be new in the listicles, however, is the normative emphasis on unsatisfactory sex that is encapsulated in the titular focus on awkwardness. This section will explore further and ultimately suggest a revision of Gill's men-ology repertoire.

### Micro-Narratives of Pleasure

The continuation of sexually unsatisfactory sex on women's behalf is apparent within *Bustle's* (2015) confessional listicle. *Bustle's* listicle comprises ten first person micro-narratives of women's experiences of awkward sex. These micro-narratives place the blame of awkwardness half the time on the men and half the time on the women. In every narrative where the woman is the cause of awkwardness, sex ceases. Conversely, when the man is the cause of the awkwardness, four out of the five times the sex continues. The one instance where sex was not continued was when the awkwardness occurred prior to sexual activity commencing. *Bustle's* micro-narratives also appear to trace the cause of awkwardness to stereotypical gender ideologies. Specifically, men cause sexual awkwardness because of the lack of understanding of female sexual desire and women cause sexual awkwardness through their failure to regulate their own bodies. This observation will be further explored in the following section.

*Bustle's* (2016) micro-narratives appear to support Gill's findings in regard to male pleasure but not the justifications for it, particularly in the examples where women continue to have sex despite awkwardness. Rather than justify the need to continue to have unsatisfactory sex as keeping male anxiety at bay, the emphasis appears to be on the sense of shared comradery that the confessional listicle invokes in its readers. This comradery is evident

within *Bustle*'s preamble through the explicit statement of "awkward sex happens to everyone" and the acknowledgment that these women have "managed to soldier on." *Bustle*'s preamble also outlines how awkward sex stories have already been shared amongst friends thus highlighting the manner in which these awkward sex narratives function to secure bonds outside the sexual relationship itself. The confessional listicle appears to suggest that a part of being a sexually liberated woman is consuming, participating and sharing these 'war stories.'<sup>14</sup> Participating in unsatisfactory sex narratives, vicariously or in reality, is a notion that has been linked to popular culture's representation of the postfeminist woman (Gill 2011; Kim 2001; Nash and Grant 2015). I propose that these listicles are the latest in a long line of regulatory tools that assure women that they are not alone in the experience of awkward sex, but part of a community of women that endure such awkwardness. Through the comedic tone of these listicles retelling, the experiences of awkwardness becomes cathartic while also establishing the normality of these occurrences. That is, these listicles operate to create a normative shared experience among heterosexual women in which sex is acknowledged to be unsatisfactory.

### **A Different Type of Pleasure**

The issue of unsatisfactory sex that needs no justification is also prominent across other listicles. *Women's Health* (2014) has three items that deal with women pursuing unenjoyable sexual activities. These are: when the man is playing with the woman's breasts as if they are not attached to her body; when he cannot be gentle; and when there are penis 'mishaps' (such as when the penis is unintentionally forced into the anal cavity or the perineum). The item dealing with a penis mishap also states that "now he's trying to soldier through a jammed

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<sup>14</sup> These narratives have been classed as 'war stories' due to *Bustle*'s (2015) use of military language in their preamble which is similar to the military like language Gill discussed in her first repertoire.

penis and you're trying to pretend like you liked it." These listicles items are framed in a humorous or ironic manner. *Elite Daily's* (2016) listicle states that it is particularly common for women not to orgasm but to simply wait for sex to be over: "you're lying there on your back thinking, mmk, anytime now... Oh, this is still going on, OK." This listicle item is interspersed with a video that discusses faking orgasm. Read together, this could suggest that faking orgasms is a way to resolve the awkward situation of sex not ending.

It is here I would like to introduce Jagose's (2012, 196-202) notion of faking orgasms as a shared collective practice amongst heterosexual women. Jagose provides a counterintuitive reading of the phenomenon of fake orgasm that queerly constitutes women who fake as a sexual collectivity in the same way that other sexual practices bring together other sexual identities (like homosexuality or BDSM). Considering the collectivity brought about by sharing awkward sex narratives, I propose that Jagose's theory be expanded. Whether or not a woman fakes an orgasm in these awkward situations is irrelevant. Rather these listicles allow women to bond and share an identity over awkward sexual encounters. Furthermore, sharing the experience of unsatisfactory sex appears to take the place of the justification that Gill identified. Rather than justifying everything in relation to male pleasure, awkward sex secures membership in this group of women who can laugh at the shared sexual experience of men.

### **Men-ology Revised**

Despite the heightened sexualisation of the listicles and the retraction of expert advice there is still evidence of Gill's men-ology repertoire in the construction of pleasure and emotional labour. However, what does appear to be a new aspect is the manner in which continuing sexually unsatisfactory sex is justified. While, the practice of women continuing sexually unsatisfactory sex is not a new phenomenon, especially in order women (Braun, Gavey and McPhillips 2003), the lack of overt justification is new. It would appear that

through the listicles peer-to-peer engagement a form of collective identity is being formed for heterosexual women (Jagose 2012, 196-202). Potentially, similarly to Braun, Gavey and McPhillips (2003) findings, the pursuance of unsatisfactory sex allows other pleasures in life to be achieved. In this case, it could be becoming a part of the collective identity that awkward sex narratives forms. While the notion of continuing unsatisfactory sex may seem to defy postfeminism, I argue it is still distinctly postfeminist. The entwining within these listicles of the notion of feminism and sexual liberation, and then of forgoing sexual gratification and centring male pleasure is distinctly postfeminist. Especially as these actions appear to be justified through their normativity and their bonding capacity amongst heterosexual young women. Therefore, when it comes to the repertoire of men-ology these listicles do not challenge Gill's repertoire, rather they further complicate men-ology and Gill's notion of postfeminist sensibilities.

## Psychological Transformation

### Gill's Findings Recap

Gill identifies her final repertoire as the make-over paradigm. She categorises four different components of advice that address psychological transformation: love your body; be confident; transform your feelings about sex; and, try something new. Gill argues that these four components reveal that the locus of gender regulatory work has shifted from the body to subjectivity. This section will examine if this shift is upheld in contemporary awkward sex listicles.

### Complicated Transformation

Since listicles operate in a peer-to-peer mode rather than that of expert discourse it is not surprising that the advice given surrounding transformation is no longer as overt as in Gill's original sample. Rather, advice is presented in a covert manner that appears to place the choice in the readers' hands as to embrace the transformation or not. For instance, *SELF* (2016) identifies one cause of awkwardness as "feeling self-conscious about some body 'flaw.'" While *SELF* acknowledges that feeling self-conscious is normal, the listicle also emphasises those feelings will prohibit satisfactory sex. While not explicitly offering advice, the manner in which this listicle item is constructed suggests that unless the woman changes how she feels she will prohibit herself from experiencing sexually pleasurable sex. Therefore, it falls to her to decide to transform or live a life of sexual dissatisfaction. *SELF*'s listicle item conflates acknowledging these feelings as normal with accepting personal blame. This conflation marks this listicle item as consistent with other postfeminist impulses as identified by Gill.

The only instance within the listicles that advice is explicitly given in terms of performing a cognitive or psychological transformation is when the awkwardness is caused by someone potentially overhearing sex. This particular awkward event is featured in *Women's Health* (2014), *SELF* (2016) and *Men's Fitness* (2017). The last of these employs expert advice from Carrellas that suggests “if you're simply worried about being overheard, ‘embrace your inner exhibitionist’ [since] ‘it could make the sex hotter’” (*Men's Fitness* 2017). This is seemingly similar to Gill's sample where readers were encouraged to overcome feelings of shame or embarrassment in order to realise a more sexually open version of themselves. *Women's Health* and *SELF* both posit that without transformation of this kind sexual satisfaction cannot be achieved. In part, this is further evidence of the ‘double entanglement’ that McRobbie argues is indexical to postfeminism (2004).

While these contradictory messages are consistent with Gill's original findings I would argue that the locus of transformation and regulation has shifted away from subjectivity back to the body. A quantitative analysis of the listicle samples was performed by coding the source of awkwardness as either ‘body,’ ‘behaviour,’ or ‘other.’ Out of the 128 listicle items considered, 102 items were classified as awkward through the lack of bodily regulation. Further analysis identifies that out of these 102 failures of bodily regulation, 62 placed the woman's body at fault [see Figure 1]. It would appear from these results that women's bodies are being classified as the main source and cause of awkward sex.

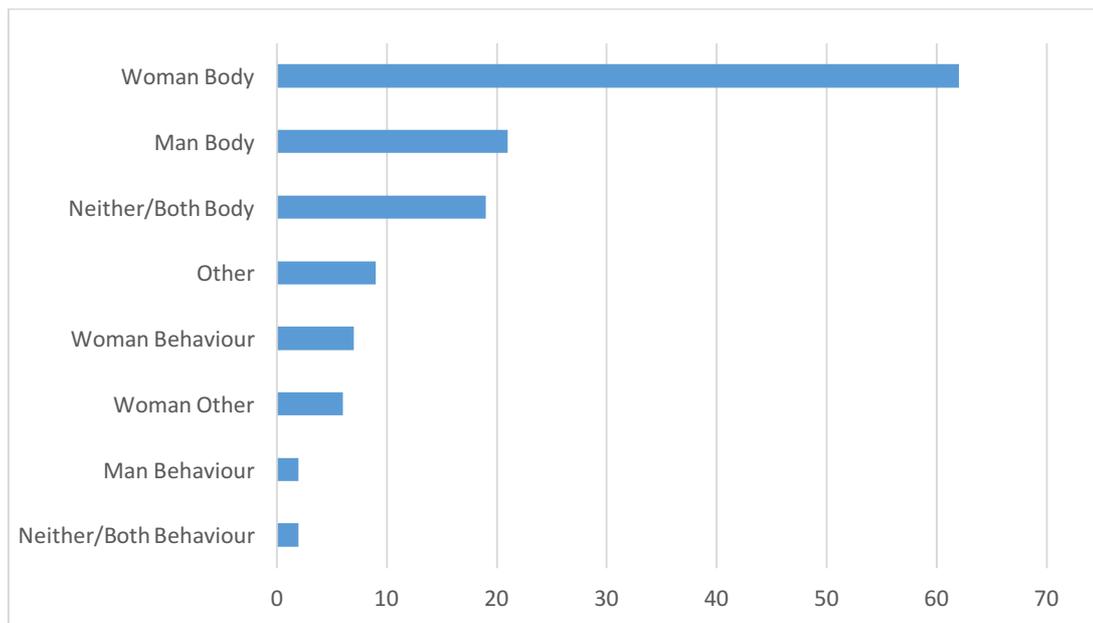


Figure 1: Cause of awkwardness for each listicle item.

### Regressive Transformation

The data recorded in Figure 1 would suggest that women’s bodies are the main cause of awkward sex in the listicles examined. The most prevalent issue throughout the listicles is that of vaginal flatulence, commonly referred to as the ‘queef’ (*College Times* 2014.; *Cosmopolitan* 2013a; *Cosmopolitan* 2014; *Elite Daily* 2016; *JellyShare* 2017). Queefing is defined as the removal of air from the vaginal cavity which makes a similar noise to that of anal flatulence but is odourless (Neels et al. 2017). The pre-eminence of the queef in these listicles could be due to the humorous nature of the listicle and the fact that a queef is now considered the equivalent of a new take on the ‘fart joke’ (Cuen 2016). However, the manner in which the queef is depicted within these listicles would suggest otherwise. *Cosmopolitan* (2013a) deploys expert discourse to advise women to “laugh it off instead of being embarrassed” and reminds them that “great sex depends on much much fun you have.” Although this particular advice is encouraging women to perform emotional labour, it normalises the queef rather than demonising the woman’s body: “You’re certainly not the

first to have had this happen, and you won't be the last." *Elite Daily*'s (2016) listicle item states that they will "let this one lie." *Cosmopolitan*'s (2014) listicle item expresses the hope that the man just thought it was the bed. In both the *Elite Daily* and *Cosmopolitan* (2014) listicles, the manner in which the topic is brushed over is indicative of the social stigma that attaches to this sexual event in its mediation through popular culture (Cuen 2016; Neels et al. 2017).

The final two listicles that mention the queef are *College Times* (2014) and *JellyShare* (2017), which both take a different approach to the queef. *JellyShare* has a male demographic of 78% (Thalamus 2017b), whereas *College Times* has a majority female demographic of 62% (Thalamus 2017a). Considering *College Times* listicle is titled 'Awkward Moments That Happen to Guys During Sex' we can surmise that this aggregation is probably aimed at a male audience.<sup>15</sup> *College Times* states that when a women queefs it is "an always unprecedented and unwelcome surprise." This sentiment is echoed by *JellyShare*'s statement that queefing "makes the rest of the world suddenly seem to stand still." Although neither of these listicles shy away from explicit content, they both employ a coy imaginary monologue to capture the excruciating aftermath of the queef. *College Times* states "Oh God, don't make eye contact with her" and *JellyShare* asks "will I be able to maintain my sanity?" When *College Times* discusses vomiting during sex, the tone is markedly different. Vomiting is simply a sign the night needs to end. Similarly, when *JellyShare* discusses accidentally defecating there is simply an acknowledgment that cleaning will need to be done and that it may harm the relationship.

Although these five listicles construct queefing from different perspectives, they all appear to share the sense of shame and embarrassment bestowed upon the woman. I propose

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<sup>15</sup> Considering that it has already been established that these listicles assume their readers are heterosexual, the assumption of the male audience is reinforced through the opposition of 'you' and 'she' (*College Times* 2014).

that the queef has become a way to refocus regulation onto the woman's body. In part this is achieved through the medical discourse surrounding vaginal flatulence where it has been thought to be associated with women who have looser vaginal cavities (Neels et al. 2017). Perhaps, due to the societal connotation of loose women and the imagined corollary between a loose vaginal cavity and multiple sexual partners, a woman queefing may indicate a morally deviant woman. This suggestion would appear to be supported by Mintz (2007, 1-23) who states that cultural ideologies mark bodies as deviant, rather than deviance being an innate character of certain bodies.

As noted previously, the noise of a queef is similar to the sound of anal flatulence (Cuen 2016; Neels et al. 2017). Not only is the concept of passing gas unfeminine but the humour in passing gas or 'fart jokes' has always been considered male humour (Cuen 2016). Thus any attempt to embrace the queef as humorous is seen as women taking over a traditionally male space. This notion is supported through the negative reaction that is noted when *Ghostbusters* (2016) appropriated what is traditionally a 'fart joke' and turned it in to a 'queef joke' (Cuen 2016).<sup>16</sup> I suggest that the prevalence of the queef in male targeted listicles may be representative of greater anxieties regarding gender equality and women's sexuality. As a result of these anxieties the queef functions as a cautionary tale to warn women about the social dangers attendant on not regulating their sexual bodies.

## **Public Regulation**

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<sup>16</sup> Cuen (2016) states that when *Ghostbusters* was remade in 2016, the inclusion of a queef joke at the beginning of the film was highly controversial on social media with many people disgusted about the mention of a queef within a film. Furthermore, the screenwriter Katie Dippold has stated in interviews that the inclusion of the queef joke was one that she had to fight for in the process of writing the script (*W Magazine* 2016). While this is only one film, it demonstrates partially the manner in which the queef has become a popular cultural reference as well as a point of contestation.

It is apparent that psychological transformation is not as dominant within these listicles as in Gill's original sample. Rather, the locus of regulation has shifted away from subjectivity back to the sexualised body. The question thus becomes, why has this shift occurred? It has been noted that the digital platform has opened up a new type of public sphere for democratic practices and discourse (Fuchs 2014; Zuckerman 2014). Through the ability of members of the general public to comment, like and share these listicles, a collective discourse can be established among like-minded publics. The way in which awkward sex listicles are re-articulated by members of the public can be observed in the *Buzzfeed's* (2014) confessional listicle that comprises 19 first person micro-narratives about awkward sex. The final micro-narrative is as follows:

My boyfriend wanted to go down on me while I was on my period- he insisted. Funny enough, **he came back up gagging and then ran off to puke in my bathroom. Once he finally calmed down he claimed he swallowed a blot [sic] clot.** It was thoroughly embarrassing and hilarious at the same time. (*Buzzfeed* 2014, original emphasis)

The other 18 micro-narratives that comprise this listicle include: being covered in faecal matter after removing anal beads from a female partner too quickly; being defecated on without asking; a tooth falling onto one's head in the middle of sex; being vomited on when a penis engaged a woman's gag reflect; and one's testicles being attacked by a cat. However, of the more than 800 comments this listicle has received through its Facebook plugin, the period micro-narrative is the most commented upon.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Due to *Buzzfeed* as a platform changing their guidelines about comments, any comment that is published must be through Facebook and is only published under the listicle if the comment is recent. However, on *Buzzfeed's* Facebook page it is possible to all all the comments therefore Facebook will be referenced for simplicity.

The public comments that refer to the idea of oral sex with a menstruating women frame it as “gross,” “disgusting,” and “sick” (*Buzzfeed* 2017). When one female commentator attempted to defend the idea of having oral sex while on your period, she was called “stupid” and an example of “feminism gone crazy” (*Buzzfeed* 2017). While the listicle form presents that woman’s micro-narrative about her period as equivalently awkward to the other 18 events, albeit the last, digital media’s ability to share and comment has created a counter-discourse where a sexual liking for menstruating bodies is marked as deviant. This particular re-mediation suggests that the peculiar affordances of digital media allows these awkward sex listicles to re-articulate ideologies of regulation and self-motioning in differently gendered spaces.

## **An Awkward Ending**

The chief purpose of this study was to examine whether or not Gill's three repertoires were still evident in the digital medium of the awkward sex listicle. It would appear that although aspects of the men-ology repertoire remain pertinent, overall the three repertoires are not employed to the same extent as in Gill's original sample. I have gone on to argue that the peer-to-peer engagement encouraged by the listicle form has allowed for a space for the negatives affects of unsatisfactory sex to be explored. The manner in which these listicles allow women, especially, to articulate and share in these experiences of unsatisfactory sex appears to function in a way that is partly empowering. However, there is also a capacity for misogynist discourse to be circulated via and around the listicle form.

These listicles appear to reinforce ideas around placing men's sexual satisfaction and pleasure at the centre of heterosexual relationships. However, the listicles also appear to use humour and shared experiences of awkward sex to justify the continuation of unsatisfactory sex. The explicit focus that these listicles place on the female body suggests a closer and more intimate form of regulation of the female sexualised body. While the listicles in this sample both conform to and modify Gill's original repertoires, I argue that they are still reflective of postfeminist sensibilities in the way in which notions of female empowerment or choice are made consistent with securing male sexual pleasure.

There is, however, still the issue of awkwardness to address since that is the classifier that now mediates sexual bodies and practices (Evans 2014; Kim 2010; Kirchoff 2013).

'Awkward' by definition denotes something that is difficult, embarrassing, unhelpful, poor movement, a lack in grace or requiring of caution, yet these terms do not quite capture what is at work here. While awkwardness has long been a trope within popular culture it has recently shifted to being an identity that millennials (people born between 1980-2000) have

incorporated strongly. It has been suggested that the term awkward encapsulates millennials anxieties around adulthood and life, prominent within online media and television programs such as *Girls* and *Awkward* (Saedi 2012; Daalmans 2013; Kirchoff 2013). While this usage of the term awkward may account for part of the terms affective properties, I argue that awkward in this context of these listicles suggests a level of ambivalent affect. I suggest that awkward operates in a manner that is similar to Ngai's (2005) explanation of lived experiences of ambivalent emotions. In *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Ngai explores the concept of 'stuplimity', a term she coins which stem from the Kantian roots of the sublime in combination with stupidity. Rather than the extreme register that the sublime operates in, stuplimity brings together of aesthetic experiences of shock and awe with feelings of boredom and irritation. Ngai suggests that the experience of minor fatigues and irritants comprise a contemporary aesthetic within which I would include the awkward.

To some extent these listicles are classifying awkward sex as minor irritants that simultaneously create an urge to forgo any form of sex again while also suggesting the need to reconfigure notions of satisfactory sex. Perhaps, the forming of a collective identity around unsatisfactory sex is a form of stuplimity. When the notion is considered in relation to Smith-Prei and Stehle's (2016) employment of awkward, again there is evidence of awkward suggesting an ability to change and reformulate. Smith-Prei and Stehle (2016) employ the term awkward to describe popfeminist digital activism, due to ability of awkward to consistently reframe itself and to signal the manner in which this activism constantly reframes itself.<sup>18</sup> Combining these approaches to affect and aesthetics I propose the following ideas regarding the affect of awkward. Firstly, perhaps, it is through the employment of

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<sup>18</sup> Berlant and Ngai (2017) also state that "real-time improvisation takes place in the land of the awkward" as an explanation for the manner in which pleasure, comedy, and knowledge are inter-related (246). Berlant and Ngai's observation suggests that awkward and its relationship to comedic tone is starting to receive scholarly attention, however regrettably this was brought to attention too late to be taken into account.

awkward that these listicles are able to express these notions of postfeminist sensibilities in a manner that is representative of inconsistencies within postfeminism itself. Through the ability of the term awkward to productively bump up against itself it is representative of postfeminism's capacity for internal contradiction. The framing of the female body as awkward is perhaps an attempt to head off yet more regulatory work where women are required to change for their own good. Through the awkward humour that these listicles employ, traditional notions of femininity can at least be laughed at alongside the sexual incompetence of men. Finally, there is the possibility that 'awkward' is representative of the tension between the progress made by feminism and the rise in anti-feminist ideologies especially in the digital space. Feminism as an ideology has become more viable through the digital space, however so have anti-feminist ideologies. Potentially awkwardness is an attempt to reconfigure the balance of feminist and anti-feminist ideologies in this digital space.

While this thesis did not set out to explore the notion of the affective properties of the term awkward, it seems that the notion of awkward is strongly tied to both the female body and mediated textual intimacy in the digital age. This study has thereby raised an area for further research with regard to the notion of awkward and its capacity to perform ideological work in the vicinity of gender and sexuality.

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