# Doing it for the Boys: An Account of Young Women's Experiences of their Body Image and Sexuality.

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# ABSTRACT

*This research was conducted with six young women (between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-four). It explores how young women experience their body image and sexuality, particularly within the context of the everyday. Conducted within a feminist paradigm the research hopes to unearth and expose the power structures which are in place, and in turn explain how these structures affect the participants' relationships to their body image and sexuality. This project also explored how the participants engaged with the relatively rare method of data collection used. A combination of diary entries, and follow up interviews were employed, with the intention of reducing the hierarchy between the participants and the researcher, and also to encourage the participants to engage with the research on their own terms, using their own language.*

*Findings from the research suggest that body image and sexuality plays a significant role in the participants' lives, and is often coupled with fear and anxiety. The research identified a particular inequality of power, in which the participants' experiences are frequently dependent on the role of men and their subsequent approval, or disapproval. Three significant findings emerged from the research which are: a reliance on male endorsement or validation, the role of comparison in determining body image and sexual experiences, and the representation of women in the media. The research also offers interesting, and relevant accounts of resistance provided by the participants.*

*This research will contribute to the sociological discussion on women, their body image, and their sexuality, through providing empirical data gathered from a method of data collection which affords participants more control over the research. The research will also contribute to a sociological discussion of women's body image and sexualities, which is somewhat lacking in the Irish context.*

# INTRODUCTION

Women's bodies and sexualities have frequently been the topic of discussion within the political sphere, and in the media. These discussions have taken many forms, from the debate surrounding women's access to reproductive rights, to discussions in women's magazines asking "What do men really think about cleavage?"; evaluating female celebrities as "sexy or skanky" (Cosmopolitan Magazine Online). It is an interesting time to conduct research on women's body image (BI) and sexualities considering both have come under increasing scrutiny from politicians and the media alike in recent years. Women's bodies and their sex lives seem to be infinitely deserving of commentary, debate and criticism. What should they look like? How should they be acting? What rights are they entitled to? When should they be having sex? What kind of sex should they be having? etc. What is interesting is that women's actual experiences and understandings of their bodies and sexualities are often glaringly absent from these discussions. They are often, it would seem, considered as an object of discussion, rather than as actors with agency, opinions and subjective experiences.

Growing up, I gave BI and sexuality much deliberation, and such thoughts preoccupied a significant amount of my time. Having a close group of female friends, I realised I was not alone; that BI and sexuality were the concerns of a lot of women. As I became interested in feminism and began reading feminist literature I began thinking about the stories and experiences we shared, and noticed that they were not frequently represented or attended to in a wider context. These experiences, I thought, could provide a valuable contribution to the existing discussion. When it came to choosing a research project I wanted to address this absence of women's everyday experiences, through providing a space were their voices would be heard and recognised.

This research aims to do just that; to attend to the agency, opinions and subjective experiences of the participants' relationships to their BI and sexuality. The research employs a feminist research paradigm and hopes to address the gendered nature of women's experiences, while also aiming to alleviate the hierarchy between the researcher and participants which exists in much traditional research. In order to do so, the methods used were chosen carefully in order to give the participants' voice and increased control over the research process. The method chosen was a combination of solicited diary entries, complemented by follow up interviews. In order to conduct the research, six young women kept diaries for two weeks, and completed a follow up interview. The methodology and methods employed in the research will be discussed further in the "Methodology" chapter of the thesis.

While much work has been done on both women's BI and sexuality from a feminist perspective, there are gaps in the literature which this research hopes to address. Firstly, having done extensive searches, there is very little (if any) research on women's BI and sexuality from a sociological or a feminist perspective situated within the Irish context. Secondly, much of the research which has been done comes under the discipline of psychology (see "Methodology" chapter), which uses primarily quantitive methods of research while the qualitative research which has been done within the field of sociology primarily employs semi-structured interviews as their method of enquiry. I think this research, which utilises both diary entries, and interviews could provide a more nuanced account of women's everyday experiences of their BI and sexualities. Finally, much of the feminist literature published on the topic is predominately theoretical in nature (e.g. Bartky 1997, MacKinnon 1989), providing little empirical evidence from research conducted with women. In conducting this research, I hope to attend to some of the weaknesses outlined above, and contribute to a wider discussion of BI and sexuality.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the rallying cries of 'the personal is political' from feminists in the 1960s and 1970s succeeded in establishing female sexuality as a valid form of academic inquiry, there has been a labyrinth of literature published on the female body as a site of oppression. This came to a peak during the 'feminist sex wars' of the nineteen eighties. However, as far as I am aware the literature which explicitly investigates women's experiences of their body image and sexuality based on empirical evidence within the Irish context is lacking. Nonetheless, there are three pieces of feminist literature which are particularly interesting, and relevant to this research: MacKinnon's 'Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: "Pleasure under Patriarchy"' (1989), Bartky's 'Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power' (1997) and Holland et al.'s 'Power and Desire: The Embodiment of Female Sexuality' (1994). These articles focus on sexuality, the female body, and the embodiment of female sexuality, respectively.

## *Sexuality*

The argument MacKinnon presents in her article 'Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: "Pleasure under Patriarchy"' (1989) proved insightful and relevant to this research. MacKinnon situates sexuality within relations of power and in doing so provides a foundation from which understandings of the relationship of BI to sexuality can begin to manifest.

MacKinnon invites us to critique and problematise the concept of sexuality as we know it, as a construct grounded in patriarchal assumptions. Given, she argues that the power dynamics favour men, mainstream conceptualisations of sexuality buttress male expressions and experiences of

sexuality, to the detriment of women who are forced in turn to negotiate their sexualities within this framework (1989:317). This sentiment has been echoed by many feminists who write on the both on subject of sexuality and also on women's bodies, for example Walter. In 'Living Dolls' (2011) she uses the example of glamour modelling, which has been hailed by its participants and supporters as an opportunity for women to express their sexuality and sexual confidence. She argues that it is as an activity governed by men's terms, and through the lens of their sexuality. This is made clear by the one-dimensional image to which glamour models predominantly conform.

MacKinnon insists that gender is socially constructed and realised through sexuality. As what is considered sexual is 'what gives a man an erection' (MacKinnon 1989:325), what it is to be a woman is consequently defined by what gives men said erection. This ergo results in female sexuality being characterised by the desire to generate this arousal. Female sexuality becomes a vehicle for seeking men's endorsement, which leaves a great deal to be desired in light of the alleged sexual revolution. MacKinnon explains that many features of female subordination are reproduced in sex. She gives many examples, however the requirement for women to present themselves 'as a beautiful thing' is particularly relevant to this research (1989:318). Literature which explicitly deals with the demand for women to conform to a particular idealised appearance will be covered in due course with particular with reference to work of Sandra Lee Bartky.

Much of the criticism directed at Catharine MacKinnon's arguments is from the 'pro-sex' contingent of the 'feminist sex wars'. Willis, a pro-sex feminist, criticises the 'neo-Victorian' movement for labelling the woman who enjoys heterosexual, particularly penetrative sex as 'brainwashed' or 'male-identified' (1982:8). This presupposes that a true or proper female sexuality exists and in turn categorises sexual acts as good or bad. She argues this will cause women to experience shame and

5

guilt as a result of their sexual desires, and would add to their subordination. While Willis's critique of MacKinnon's arguments are plausible, and well-articulated, I reason that they are taken from within the context of a hegemonic (male) sexuality, like that which MacKinnon articulates. MacKinnon herself recognises that women can adopt similar sexual desires and fantasies to men. Willis problematises her own argument when she equates sex to revenge; hypothesizing that if a woman is aroused by a rape scene, it is possible that she is not only identifying with the victim, but with the rapist as well (1993:355).

Beyond the criticisms of the 'pro-sex' movement, one can find fault with 'Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: "Pleasure under Patriarchy"' (MacKinnon 1989) for its broad, overarching theories which aren't grounded in empirical research with women. While MacKinnon consults popular culture and pornography as reference points I think her arguments would have benefitted from consultation with women which would have provided concrete example to demonstrate her proposals. Despite these criticisms MacKinnon's work provides a natural starting point for this research, and will be supported by a review of Bartky (1997) and Holland et al. (1994).

### *The Female Body*

MacKinnon's article 'Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: "Pleasure under Patriarchy"' (1989) has been employed to demonstrate the power relations which are inherent in experiences, expectations and expressions of sexuality. We now turn to Foucauldian literature which has been the focus of much feminist literature (McNay 1992, Ramazanoğlu 1993) and in particular to Sandra Lee Bartky and her article 'Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power' (1997) to flesh out how these power relations might manifest themselves with particular reference to the female body and in

turn, sexuality.

Bartky (1997) asserts that women are no longer expected to be virginal, to be confined to the home, or to be defined by motherhood (107). Bartky (1997) argues that women are now expected to embody 'presumed heterosexuality and its appearance', to 'please' and 'excite' (107). Much like outlined above in MacKinnon's article, women are expected to cause arousal, otherwise they will be denied male companionship (Bartky 1997:104). What is considered sexually desirable is quite narrowly defined, and obviously patriarchal in nature. In order to achieve sexual approval and to be sexually desired women must subject themselves to a life of discipline. The must endure a tough regime in an attempt to meet the standards of appropriate female appearance and desirability. For example: bodies which do not resemble that of a prepubescent boy must be starved, and toned, and sculpted, permissible hair i.e. that on the head, must be straightened, dyed, conditioned, and curled, unruly hair must be plucked, waxed, and shaped, and faces must be cleansed, toned, moisturised and made up. In order to make sense of why women collectively engage with these taxing activities Bartky proposes a Foucauldian explanation.

Bartky employs the model of the Panopticon which Foucault uses to exemplify the structure of institutions to demonstrate why women continue to endure such gruelling rituals. The Panopticon, a type of prison, is organised so that all the prisoners are alone, while at the same time being constantly subjected to observation by the guards. This constant surveillance results in the prisoner regulating and monitoring his own behaviour. Instead of having good behaviour enforced by the guards, the prisoner now undertakes this as his own responsibility (Bartky 1997:95). The power is thus internalized. Bartky argues that this same model is experienced by women in relation to wider society. The role of the guard is replaced by the 'male connoisseur' (101), who harnesses all the expectations

of her sexual desirability. She is constantly under his watch and fearful of his judgement. His expectations are internalized and reflected in her actions (Bartky 1997:101). However, as this power can't be attributed to a particular instigator, no one who can be seen to be pointing the finger or forcing women to engage with this routines, it fosters the belief that women's beauty regimes are adopted freely, and willingly, by both by men and women alike (Bartky 1997:103). This Bartky suggests is why women don't revolt against these patriarchal beauty standards, and instead why they wholeheartedly adopt them.

Bartky's (1997) article is problematic however, as, like MacKinnon (1989) she doesn't offer much empirical evidence to back up her claims, relying on stereotypes and anecdotes to prove her point. I think her article would benefit from research carried out with women to understand how women understand and interact with this "male connoisseur" (101), and this panoptical power in their everyday lives. It would be interesting to demonstrate if women recognise the presence of a "male in the head" (Holland et al. 1998). Furthermore, I think empirical evidence would have offered accounts of resistance, like that contributed to this research which will be discussed in the findings sections. It would be beneficial to analyse accounts of resistance, and in what contexts they take place.

Nevertheless, this Foucauldian understanding of power and control of femininity and women's bodies is significant to the research I am carrying out. Like MacKinnon's accounts of sexuality, Bartky's analysis unearths and makes explicit the power structures at work over women's bodies. It offers a perspective from which to research female sexuality and bodies; that of self-surveillance. Like MacKinnon and sexuality, Bartky demonstrates how integral the role that the body plays is in relations of power and structures of subordination. Having these, I believe, understandings are essential for carrying out any feminist research on the body and sexuality.

*** The Embodiment of Female Sexuality ***

In 'Power and Desire: The Embodiment of Female Sexuality' (1994) Holland et al. utilize interviews with young women to research how their sexualities are embodied. As Holland et al. explain, while women can, and do negotiate sexual encounters, these negotiations take place within social constraints; within a patriarchal society, these social constraints are favourable to men, at the expense of women (1994:23). In this article, Holland et al. reflect on the concept of disembodied femininity, this results from the paradoxical relationship women confront between the active pursuit to sculpt her appearance in order to be sexually desirable, and the requirement to in turn detach themselves from their sexuality to conform to patriarchal definitions of sexuality (1994:24). Holland et al. identify certain conditions through which this disembodied femininity is revealed.

Women experience disembodied femininity as a result of many aspects of the power structures embedded in sexual relations. For example, the double-standard of 'casanova' and 'slag' (Holland et al. 1994:24), sexual violence, fulfilment being found through pleasing their partner, and sacrificing their own sexual needs in the form of faking orgasm (Holland et al. 1994). The second two examples are particularly interesting as they represent women policing their own sexuality for the benefit of men. The empirical evidence supplied by Holland et al. thus supports Bartky's (1997) arguments of self-surveillance as a contributor to the manifestation of patriarchal power. Furthermore the acceptance by these young women of this unjust distribution of pleasure serve to buttress penetrative sex, culminating in men's ejaculation as normal. This perfectly illustrates the power structures which govern female sexuality which MacKinnon (1989) discussed, as outlined above.

'Power and Desire: The Embodiment of Female Sexuality' (Holland et al. 1994) can be criticised for its attempt to conceptualise the embodiment of female sexuality in too broad of a framework. The

article outlines, in general, the ways in which young women embody their sexuality, which I think, as a result skims over the surface of the lived experiences of these women. While Holland et al. discuss the different ways which patriarchal assumptions of sexuality negatively impact on young women's lives they fail to offer any in depth account of these manifestations e.g. faking orgasm. In doing so this article understates young women's attempts of resistance, coping mechanisms, etc. Nonetheless, this article situates research on women's bodies and sexualities within empirical evidence, and proposes interesting and relevant findings to my research on BI and the role this plays in women's experiences of their sexualities.

### *Reflections*

Much of the literature which explicitly discusses BI and sexuality in conjunction with one another is carried out using a quantitative methodology (La Rocque and Cioe 2011, Sanchez and Kiefer 2007, Wiederman 2000) which I argue merely serves to demonstrate that this relationship exists while offering no further insight. These quantitative studies gloss over women's lived experiences in favour of measurements and percentages, and in turn fail to offer any understanding into how this relationship manifests. In doing so this research offers no problematization of the relationship between BI and women's experiences of their sexuality which is what this research aims to achieve. For these reasons, I chose the literature outlined above, which: problematizes the construction of female sexuality in relation to men's experiences, outlines the power structures which regulate women's bodies and appearances, and demonstrates how female sexuality is embodied through consulting women's lived experiences. This literature outlines and supports necessary theoretical frameworks from which one can begin to research this relationship between women's BI and their sexuality from a feminist perspective.

# **METHODOLOGY**

## *Research Question and Objectives*

In conducting this research, I wanted to address how young women experiences their BI and sexuality. More specifically this research set out to explore how these experiences and understandings influence and condition their sexual selves. I also wished to investigate how the participants engaged with the method of data collection employed in this research; solicited diary entries, accompanied by follow-up interviews.

The research is predominantly exploratory in nature, as it seek to understand the meanings people give to their actions and experiences, and what the participants' main concerns are (Schutt 2009:14). Exploratory research investigates without presumption (Schutt 2009: 14). This aspect of the research, is reflected in the research question which has been left "open and exploratory" (O'Leary 2010:47) to facilitate creativity, and to encourage participants to engage with the research on their own terms. By virtue of the exploratory nature of the research, it will also be inductive, meaning that the information provided by the participants is used as an explanation for the findings, rather than using the data gathered to test a predetermined theory (Schutt 2009:45).

## *Research Paradigm*

This research employs a interpretivist paradigm, and as such is guided by the philosophy that reality is socially constructed (Schutt 2009:92), and is dependent on "human observation and conceptualisation" (Ritzer and Ryan 2010: 483). As Neuman explains, reality is what people

understand it to be and is experienced internally (2003:77). For this reason, people and society cannot be studied objectively, as there is no underlying truth to be discovered, rather, there are meanings which people attribute to their experiences, and these are the realities that can be studied (Schutt 2009:92).

This research is also conducted within a feminist framework, and strives to engage feminist research principles. Feminist philosophy assumes that research is predominantly carried out from a male, perspective, thus studying men's worlds, and ignoring women's experiences (Letherby 2003:20). As such, this research is committed to encourage and empower women to speak about their own experiences on their own terms. Feminist discourse also critiques the construction of an unequal relationship between the researcher and the research participant, in which the researcher is constructed as the expert (Brayton 1997). Feminist research strives to restructure the research process in order to alleviate the hierarchy, and recognise the participants as the authorities of their own experiences (Brayton 1997). These principles of feminist research shaped, and eventually determined the research method which was employed.

### *Selecting the Research Method*

The interpretivist and feminist philosophies that guide this research, as well as the research question itself assured that a qualitative approach was the most advantageous method of data collection. Qualitative research is primarily concerned with investigating the social reality and experiences of participants and thus facilitates the collection of rich, in-depth information (Schutt 2009). Quantitative research methods would be too clinical in application, and would not be of benefit to either the research or the participants involved. Furthermore, qualitative research more readily attends to the

subjective role of the researcher, and incorporates reflexivity within the research process which are important in fulfilling feminist research principles (Sarantakos 2005, Schutt 2009). I am aware that in using qualitative research methods I am drawing from a smaller, non-representative sample and therefore cannot generalise the findings to the wider population (Schutt 2009). However, I am not concerned with generalizability, but rather with understanding the world through the eyes of the participants. The decision to conduct this research using qualitative research was a natural one given the paradigm(s) within which this research is conducted, however, selecting the specific methods of data collection required much deliberation, and consideration.

In conducting this research I was interested in the personal and intimate details of the participants' everyday lives. As such it was very important that given the sensitive nature of the research topic, and the feminist framework within which this research is conducted, a research method which would give increased control to the participants would be employed while ensuring that the women participating would have their voices heard, and  their primary issues and concerns represented and recognised. I needed to go beyond semi-structured interviews in order to provide the participants with a space to shape the research. After much research I settled on solicited diary entries, followed by semi-structured interviews.

## *The Research Methods in the Field*

Harvey (2011) explains that solicited diaries are useful within social research which aims to investigate the everyday life of the participants, and is particularly useful in exploring the private sphere. Solicited diaries can often provide a more comfortable space for participants to engage with personal or intimate topics (Meth 2003). These sentiments were supported by one of the participants,

Dana, who described the interviews as "really effective". She explains that:

> people will write what they feel in the diaries... it's just you and the diary so you don't feel a
> pressure of being restricted in saying something.

In using diaries as a form of data collection, the hierarchy between myself, the researcher, and the participants was greatly reduced as it allowed the participants to actively engage, and determine the direction of the research. Furthermore, the use of diaries ensured that the research was grounded in the language and experiences of the participants and not my own. For example, Leanne stated that diaries "helped for being able to engage on your own terms".

The participants responded very positively to the diaries, with many claiming that keeping them has has made them more aware of how they experience their BI and sexuality. For example, Aoife explains that she found the exercise to be really interesting because she became conscious of things that she hadn't noticed before, "which has actually had a beneficial affect on things since then". Similarly, Christina describes how since she has finished keeping the diary she still thinks about it, wondering "what would I write today?". Dana also suggest another beneficial aspect of the diary which is that it presents the opportunity to relay daily experiences:

> You were able to write down what you saw or what you experienced during the day.

If you were in an interview she there would have been "loads of different elements that you would have forgotten".

The diaries were kept by six participants for two weeks each. Each participant was provided with an information sheet upon receipt of the diary. The information sheet outlined the research being undertaken, and what was involved in the diary keeping process. Participants were provided with sample questions and topics which they could pursue, however, it was explained that these topics and

questions were not exhaustive, nor were they necessary, and what was deemed to be relevant was left entirely up to the participant. Participants were encouraged to log experiences which took place during the diary keeping process, but also to include past experiences, thoughts, opinions etc. as they saw fit.

The participants' diary keeping was dispersed over a month long period, partially in keeping with participant requests, but also to facilitate the analysing process, and the organisation and conduction of subsequent interviews. The amount of entries ranged from five to thirteen, and the majority of individual entries were at least a page in length, with many being significantly more. After the diaries were completed, returned and analysed follow up interviews were arranged with the participants. The questions asked in the interviews were both general and specifically tailored to each individual based on their diary entries.

The follow up interviews which I conducted were semi-structured and informal. Before entering each interview I had a set of open-ended questions prepared to ask each participant which had been gleaned from reading the literature, and from analysing individual diary entries. However these questions were intended as a guideline, and in most, if not all cases, some of the predetermined questions were excluded as it became obvious that they weren't relevant to the participant, or that it might be a topic the participant would prefer not to talk about. As Schutt explains, often in exploratory projects, each interview is conducted in a "unique direction" (2009:341) according to the participants' interests and experiences. We can see how this type of interviewing, like the diaries, attempts to give as much control as possible to the participants. The interviews were purposefully informal in nature and conversational in experience. Like Oakley (1981) I attempted to reject the disengaged nature of traditional interviewing, through which the researcher exploits the researched for her experiences,

offering nothing in return. During the interview the participants and I swapped opinions, experiences and advice which served to build a rapport between myself and the participants, and in turn served to reduce the researcher/ participant hierarchy. In doing so I believe I was better able to convey the "very personal business of being female in a patriarchal capitalist society" (Oakley 1981: 253).

Due to the participants' living arrangements, three out of the six interviews took place in my house. Two took place in the participants' own dwellings, and finally, one took place over Skype. The interviews ranged in length from ten minutes to an hour and a half and were recorded on a mobile phone, and subsequently uploaded to a laptop. Permission to record was gained from the participants prior to the interview. The transcripts of each interview was emailed to the participants three weeks before the project was due for submission, giving the participants sufficient time to read over and think about their interviews and inform me of any changes or clarifications they would like to make. All of the participants responded giving their approval of the original transcripts.

*Sampling*

The diary-interview process, much like intensive interviewing, is a time consuming process, which requires a certain commitment and willingness to talk. For this reason random sampling would not have been suitable for the research project. The six participants who took part in the research were recruited through non-probability, convenience and purposeful sampling and were drawn from my own social network. This method of sampling is partially due to the time and resource restraints of the research project, but also reflects a lack of concern for generalizability which is typical of much qualitative research (Schutt 2009). What was important to this research is not that the sample would be representational of the wider population, but rather that the data collected would be

16

representational of the concerns and experiences of the participants.

The participants all identified as cisgendered females and aged between twenty two and twenty four years of age. All of the participants had a third level qualification, and two of the participants had a masters level qualification. All of the participants were white, Irish, able-bodied, and from a middle-class background. Four of the six participants self-identified as heterosexual, while two of the participants identified as pansexual. Two of the heterosexual participants are in long term relationships, while the rest of the participants are single. The sample is quite limited both by the number of participants, and also in terms of race, ethnicity, gender identity, and social class.

### *My Role as a Researcher*

As a feminist researcher, it is important that I reflect upon what experiences, qualities and attributes I might have brought to the research and how this affected the relationship between myself and the participants (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). Along with the participants I am a white, Irish, cisgendered female, who comes from a middle class background. However, unlike any of the participants, I identify as lesbian. Given my lesbian identity I think at times during the research process I failed to relate to, or understand certain experiences or worries that the participants had. I do believe, however, that my lesbian identity played a positive role in two ways. Firstly, I was able to relate to one participant whose sexual orientation featured prominently in both her diary entries and interview. And secondly, as an outsider to relationships with, and attraction to men I think I brought different understandings, which in turn made me privy to patterns and connections which insiders due to their familiarity, may not have seen (Schutt 2009).

*Ethics*

As both Schutt (2009) and O'Leary (2010) state, the primary, basic ethical concerns which arise in carrying out research are: obtaining informed consent, preventing harm to participants, guaranteeing confidentiality to participants, and avoiding deception within the research process. Other ethical issues which I was concerned with throughout this research process were ensuring that the participant was represented both accurately, and in a way that she would be happy with, and I also felt ethically obliged to engage to the best of my ability in a way which reduced hierarchy and promoted a collaborative approach to research.

Participants can only give informed consent if they have a complete and comprehensive understanding of what their involvement will entail (O'Leary 2010). Participants must understand the time commitment, topics which will be covered, and the potential emotional and physical risks (41). All of the participants were given consent forms and diary entry information sheets at the beginning of their participation. The consent form and information sheet outlined all of the above details, plus the participants were given my phone number and email address should they have any queries. Furthermore, I ensured consent was negotiated on an ongoing basis. Participants were informed that they could change, remove, or clarify information at all stages of the research project, up until its submittal. The participants were also sent a copy of their interview transcript to facilitate them in making any changes, as I mentioned earlier.

The measures taken to ensure informed consent was given, also serve as methods to prevent emotional harm. The participants were fully aware of the nature of the research before it commenced and of the agency and control they had within the research process. The use of the diary-interview

method ensured that the participants had control over what they disclosed and the direction of the interview (Harvey 2011). This reduced the chance that the participants would be confronted with upsetting or distressing topics during the interview process. I also asked broad, open-ended questions during the interviews which allowed the participants to address concepts and topics using their own interpretations, this increased agency and control, assuring that information was volunteered, not solicited. These measures helped to prevent "resentment, anxiety, embarrassment or reliving unpleasant memories" (O'Leary 2010:41). Participants encountering physical harm was not relevant to this research.

Confidentiality was guaranteed to the participants through the removal of personal information, and the use of pseudonyms. Furthermore, the participants' diaries were stored in compliance with O'Leary's (2010:42) recommendations. The raw data was stored on a password protected laptop, or phone. The data is accessible only by myself and will be deleted according to the project guidelines. Finally, the diaries were stored in a locked cabinet in my house, and again, are accessible by myself alone.

Deception of the participants was avoided through an honest, informative and open recruitment and consent process. It was ensured that the participants had a fully comprehensive understanding of all aspects of the research project before participations, and questions were actively encouraged.

As a feminist, it was very important to me that the participants' voices were heard in their own right in the research project (Brayton 1997). The use of the diary-interview method situated the research within the participants' own experiences, using their own voices. As mentioned previously the participants were given a copy of the interview transcript prior to research submittal. I had hoped to

send the participants a copy of the completed thesis prior to submittal so they could approve their contribution to the final project, however, due to time limitations I was unable to do so. Nevertheless, I do believe that the measures taken increased the validity and authenticity of the research, and guaranteed that I wasn't using the research data to prove pre-existing theories or biases (Schutt 2009: 73).

Finally, ethically I was concerned with reducing the hierarchy and unequal power relationship which typically exists between researcher and participant. The measures taken to reduce this hierarchy have already been covered in some depth above so it only necessitates to sum them up here. Firstly, the research methods used (diary entries in particular) served to alleviate the unequal power relationship for the reasons outlined above. Secondly, the informal, collaborative nature of the interview reduced the hierarchy, and followed Oakley's (1981) example of not exploiting women for information, while offering nothing back in return. Finally, encouraging participant input in the editing process, reduced the inequalities in power.

# DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The methods employed in this research prompted much agency and creativity from the participants in their engagement with the research. As a result the data provided by the participants was diverse and detailed in nature. The data provided by the participants in the diaries were frequently referenced and fleshed out in the follow-up interviews, and as a result I have not presented the findings from the diaries and interviews separately. If I were conducting this research without the time and space limitations I would have opted to analyse each participants' individual contributions separately, taking into consideration each participant's demographical information and background, as all of the information offered was interesting and relevant in its own right. However, given the aforementioned restrictions, the findings of the research will be presented using the key topics: validation, comparison, representation in the media, and resistance to guide the research. It is worth noting that while the key findings are presented separately from one another, the participants did not echo this division, and each of the topics were interwoven with one another in the participants' accounts.

When I began analysing the data I had collected from the diary entries and interviews I had initially planned on proposing the ***role of men*** in the participants' experiences of their bodies and sexualities as one of my key findings. However, as the research progressed and as I delved further into the data I struggled to present this male influence as a standalone finding. I realised that almost all of the data could be situated within this framework; the findings which resulted from this research were affected by and immersed in this concept of the "male connoisseur" (Bartky 1997:101). As a result I couldn't alienate one from the other, and suggest role men played as an individual finding. I soon discovered that these women's experiences of BI and sexuality were couched in the opinions and expectations of both real and imagined men.

Many examples of the role of men were offered by the participants who explained how their BI and sexuality are grounded in men's terms. For example, Christina explains:

> I think men want long hair, big eyes, big boobs, big bum, skinny waist. I think if I have all of these things men will find me attractive. So I put hair extensions in, (wear) make up to make my eyes and face look better...

And:

> You want to feel sexy for a guy.. dress up, look nice (Hannah).

The role of men was also strongly criticised by two participants, who resented the hierarchy of power at play in the construction of female beauty and sexuality:

> women are seen as being beautiful through the eyes of men (Leanne).

and:

> feminine beauty is constructed by a more powerful elite... it's coming from men, because men have always been in a position of power", "Men continue to draw expectations for women, on how they thing they should look because they expect women to be attractive for them (Dana).

The above quotes illustrate a structure, in which men hold the power. The women's sexualities seem to rest on the condition that men find them physically attractive. Awarding men with the power to grant women a sexual self, which women must apply to using their beauty as a persuasive device. Sylvia Blood sums up this occurrence stating:

> Women's prospectus for relationships and intimacy are deemed largely on their physical attractiveness (2005).

This power structure grants men ownership over women's bodies and sexuality, encouraging women to seek approval from their male counterparts in order to validate themselves as attractive and sexual

beings. We will analyse and discuss how this power structure plays out in the everyday lives of the participants through looking at three key topics: validation, comparison, and representation.

The participants' diary entries and interviews demonstrated that how they felt about their bodies and appearance was particularly dependent on receiving male appreciation and endorsement. Christina describes coming to this realisation early in her teenage years:

> ... then you want people to really fancy you and you wanted to lose weight to look good for other people.

For many of the participants, this validation was received through the flirting. For example, Hannah explains:

> If someone is flirting with you then they find you attractive, and if someone finds you attractive then you've obviously something going for ya.

The importance of flirting was also outlined by Aoife who explains that since she's been in a long term relationship, the absence of flirting has negatively impacted on her BI. Before, she explains, flirting would have been "a way that I measured my BI". Not only do these two accounts indicate how women's attractiveness and BI is validated through generating male desire, but they also lend to suggest that for these women, sexuality is often realised through this process of pursuing male approval.

Many of the participants' accounts exemplified how their sexual selves were experienced through seeking this male approval of their bodies and appearances, rather than as a result of an active desire for pleasure. For example, Christina discusses her sex life with her boyfriend. She explains that she is not really sexually driven, but she has sex for her boyfriend, it makes her feel better about herself, she feels "more sexy and desirable". Similarly, Leanne describes the importance of her first

kiss. She had been nervous around the opposite sex for a long time because she hadn't felt she was attractive, and having this first kiss helped ease these anxieties. She also explains that she places a lot of self-worth on whether she is in a relationship or not, it gives her a sense of euphoria because she thinks "... yay! Someone's not completely repulsed by me" (Leanne). MacKinnon (1989) argues that women's bodies and sexualities are continuously objectified, and women in turn manage this objectification through striving to meet this "male standard" (340). Like Leanne above demonstrates, women as a result often measure their self-worth depending on how successful they are in securing this male endorsement (MacKinnon 1989:340). Another participant indicates how her desire to have sex with her boyfriend, is often grounded in anxiety, explaining that:

> anytime we were together and not having sex I was like why the fuck aren't we having sex...
>
> the gratification of knowing someone wants to have sex with you is important. (Aoife)

When her boyfriend didn't initiate sex when they were alone it made her feel unattractive. Aoife attributes these anxieties to the media, claiming that movies and films have made her believe that "if a man doesn't want to have sex with you whenever you're alone you are obviously repulsive".

Participant accounts of seeking male validation and endorsement, and how this influences their BI and sexuality, support much of the feminist literature on the topic, who theorise the inequality of power within "the regime" of heterosexuality (Bartky 1997:101). Within this heterosexual contract, women, Bartky (1997) argues, must make themselves "object and prey" (101) for men. Andrea Dworkin (1987) argues that women must make themselves "object and prey" (Bartky 1997:101) for men, because often, women must present themselves in a specific way as a precondition for male sexual performance. The pre-requirements which are expected of women are clearly defined by men, and demonstrate an inequality of power in which women's bodies and appearances are commandeered and stripped of their autonomy and sexuality, and are instead proposed as a means to give a man an

erection. Hence, the power structures deny women an embodied sexuality, defining it instead as a means to secure male endorsement.

The participants identified that media has had a huge impact on how they experience their BI and in turn their sexuality; presenting the pinnacle of feminine sex appeal which would guarantee male approval. The participants had a complex, and tense relationship with the media, with the majority of the participants offering fierce criticism of the representation of women, while at the same time comparing their bodies to the women presented in the magazines, films, tv shows etc. Dana, is particularly critical of the power of the media. The media, she explains "have a particular idea of what a woman is supposed to look like". She suspects these expectations may have done much damage for women. Leanne describes some of the negative affects these unrealistic expectations have had on women:

> These magazines... they set too high a standard... and I think women beat themselves up when they can't reach that high standard and it just makes them miserable.

Christina supports Leanne's argument, saying that she pays attention to the sexy women in magazines, and gets annoyed at herself because she wants to look like them, but does nothing about it. Similarly, Susie claims that Closer magazine is the "cause of everything"; the root of all of the body anxieties she suffered as a teenager:

> There'd be one person who was supposed to be overweight at ten stone, and I'd think well I'm ten and a half stone... I can easily lose a bit more.

As Aoife proclaims, women are obviously going to be "fucked up about their bodies", when there is never anyone who "represents somebody that looks average".

Along with being critical of the media in general, many of the participants were particularly critical of pornography. Aoife described how pornography has had a significant impact on how she experiences her body and her sexuality explaining that she is under increased pressure knowing "that every single boy that you know has seen women who look like that". This sentiment is echoed by Christina, who demonstrates how pornography is implicated in her body worries:

> if men are starting from such a young age watching all these things they'd obviously have expectations and I feel I'm not reaching those expectations.

Christina describes a particular anxiety which results from the influence of pornography. From watching pornography, her boyfriend prefers women to have a clean-shaven pubic area. She experiences pressure to remove her pubic hair, however instantly regrets it, thinking:

> why did I do this to myself, it's just not nice, and just thinking about it, it's like basically like a baby.

Pornography has played a central role in feminist discussions of female sexuality. One of the main contributors to this discourse is Andrea Dworkin who argued that pornography portrays women as whores, and that their sexuality is "sluttish" (1983). Pornography proposes that the nature of female sexuality is the desire to be submissive to men. Furthermore, pornography, she argues, legitimises rape and prostitution, perpetuating the male supremacist society from which it springs. While the majority of the participants didn't explicitly speak of rape or prostitution, in her diary, Aoife does explain that from watching porn she is frightened that images of "all these women being horribly degraded and (that) are made out to be young, raped..." have become so common, she is worried that due to the popularity and visibility of pornography that people may "become desensitised". She also explains that she knows women who "would be willing to put up with bad things just because of the precedent porn has set for them". Aoife suggests that pornography has had a massive affect on how

women experience their BI and their sex lives as of recent years. As Dworkin suggested, pornography is indicative of wider societal norms and expectations which reflect the inequalities of power between men and women, which are played out on their bodies and through their sexualities. The same, I would argue can be said about the media in general, which not only reflects, but dictates wider social norms and expectations which are forced on women, as exemplified by the participant accounts above.

The majority of the participant discussions of pornography (and the media in general) were characterised by an engagement in constant comparison. The participants explained that engaging in comparison was paramount to how they experience their bodies and sexual selves. For the majority of the participants, it was through the framework of comparison that accounts of their BI was predominantly relayed. Many of the participants explained how they first developed body anxieties through comparing themselves to their peers. Leanne became aware of her body and appearance in relation to others when she was six or seven after her Granny commented "you're after getting big aren't you?". From then on she was constantly comparing herself to her peers, and she explains "that really hurt". Susie remembers her eleven year old self asking her classmates what they weighed:

> they all said six stone, seven stone, and I got such a complex about the fact that I was nine
> stone... I started dieting then.

The above quotes reference Leanne's and Susie's discovery of themselves in relation to others, however, possibly more significantly, they illustrate how both participants already had decided that to be bigger, larger, or heavier than ones peers was a bad thing. That these standards would have been ingrained in a child as young as six is testimony to the presence and power of the patriarchal beauty ideals to which women are expected to conform.

The role of comparison did not appear to diminish as the participants got older, if anything participants demonstrated an increasing awareness. One participant, compares herself to other women that she thinks her boyfriend could potentially find attractive, worrying "that he'll find someone a lot better" than her (Christina). Aoife's awareness was galvanised when she realised that her "ridiculously pretty" colleague was being consulted more than her by the men at work. She came to the conclusion that there is an "unfair advantage given to people who are more attractive".

Bartky (1997) supports Aoife's observation that attractive women are rewarded for their adherence to socially sanctioned standards of beauty.  As a result, women may be encouraged to invest in their appearances as a valuable attribute, and thus compete with other women on those terms. This "pretty privilege" which Aoife and Bartky (1997) suggest explains the reason why the participants so frequently engaged in comparison with other women, especially those men deem attractive. The power structures in place ensure that it is advantageous (at least in the short term) for the participants to know their competition, and strive to best them. Furthermore, Bartky (1997) suggests that it is the rewards which women recognise through compliance with patriarchal beauty standards which explains why many women reject feminism. She explains that "a genuinely radical feminism" (105), which attempts to deconstruct patriarchy and ergo patriarchal beauty standards, could result in many of the skills women have developed being rendered useless. It could be for this reason, that the majority of the participants  do strive to obtain these beauty standards, and are willing to compete for success on those terms. The participants may be caught in a double-bind, in which they suffer both in emulating and rejecting patriarchal beauty standards. The participants explored this struggle through accounts of resistance.

The participants' accounts of resistance took many forms, with some participants such as Dana actively severing all ties between her BI and sexuality, choosing to invest in expanding her knowledge instead:

> If I want someone to engage with me and respect me for my personal, political ideologies and personal philosophies this is what I should focus on as opposed to looks.

Dana explains that she was encouraged to reject these expectations following her introduction to, and engagement with feminist literature, "As a feminist I oppose the need to adhere to a socialised version of feminine beauty", "I should practice what I preach". Other participants mainly resisted in a personal capacity, through individual actions. For example Christina explains that her boyfriend will sometimes pass comment on her pubic hair when she hasn't shaved, as a result she gets "really pissed off" and thinks "I'm definitely not doing this for ages". Leanne resisted the pressure to conform to certain standards through the adoption of "rocker clothes" when she was in her early teenage years. She explains:

> that kind of look is really aggressive... you're covering yourself up and I would wear things with spikes and stuff, it was almost like you were trying to keep people away from you.

Susie, offers an interesting and unique account of resistance; acceptance of her sexual orientation. Through acceptance of her feelings for women, Susie has become "much kinder" to herself and how she looks. Referencing her struggle with eating disorders she explains that "eating disorders are all about control", allowing her to compensate for the control that was lacking in how she was experiencing her sexual desires. When she was younger, and struggling with eating disorders she says she was "in total denial of her feelings for women". Recently she has accepted her sexual attraction to women, and as a result her self image has improved. She explains that "the link is with accepting yourself", "your BI issues will arise through lack of acceptance". Susie's experience with resistance

and reconciliation is quite particular to her social situation, and as a result was not echoed by the other participants. She does however offer an interesting insight into one particular aspect of BI and sexuality which would benefit from further insight.

The examples of resistance offered by the participants encapsulate the relationship women have to their BI and sexuality. Their bodies and sexualities are almost entirely experienced in relationship to men and their (real or constructed) expectations. The participants presented their body image and sexualities either as trying to research men's expectations, or in trying to reject them. Either way, this demonstrates that their experiences are experienced in relation to men, suggesting that they lack a sense of ownership; unable to embody and experience their bodies on their own terms, as women. Rather than as women with a responsibility to men. Dana offered a really interesting explanation for this alienation:

> That the state still control women, and doesn't allow them full choice over their sexuality
> shows that it is a much bigger issue.

Similarly, in her diary, Hannah proclaimed:

> I believe women have the right to have an abortion.

It is possible that state control of women's bodies and sexuality which means that women don't have control over their reproductive choices has had an impact in the participants' experiences of alienation and a lack of control over their BI and sexuality. This topic deserves further research and could illicit interesting findings. However, what is most significant about this state control over women's reproductive rights to this research is that it in some ways mirrors the participants' accounts of BI and sexuality. It signifies a structure within which women are alienated from their bodies and their sexualities through an inequality of power, which is replicated in the women's accounts.

As mentioned at the beginning of the findings, this power structure manifested itself as the ***role of men*** in the participants' accounts, and all of the sub-findings emerged out of this concept. The role of men in women's experiences of their bodies and sexualities has been documented in much feminist literature, including MacKinnon (1989) and Bartky (1997) who were outlined in the "Literature Review" section of this thesis. MacKinnon (1989), for example argued that women's sexuality is constructed "under conditions of male supremacy" (331), meaning that women, and thus their bodies and sexualities are defined on men's terms, in relation to men. Furthermore, the beauty practices which women are expected to adopt produce "a body on which an inferior status has been inscribed" (Bartky 1997:101). Bodies are therefore "produced, understood, deployed in the service of certain interests and relationships of power" (Bailey 1993:115). It is obvious from the data provided by the participants that the arguments presented in the literature review, do apply to the experiences of the participants whose experiences of their BI and sexualities were influenced greatly by the inequalities of power which they experience.

In summary, analysis of the research findings demonstrated that the participants' BI and sexualities are predominantly defined in relation to men, through male endorsement. Ergo, for the most part, the participants' BI and sexuality were experienced in conjunction with one another. Sexuality was deployed to generate approval of their BI from men, through sexual reciprocation, and seeking validation for one's appearance coloured many of the participants' sexual experiences. This resulted in much anxiety; an experience of their bodies as "deficient" (Bartky 1997:100) for not living up to patriarchal standards. Furthermore, the participants frequently narrated their sexuality with an absence of reference to an active desire seeking sexual pleasure. The participants sought validation from their male counterparts in the form of sexual advances or sexual interest. Ergo, the women's sexuality was often experienced and defined in relation to their BI, lacking in an active desire for sexual pleasure,

rather serving as a medium through which their appearance was validated. The women's accounts suggested that men had ownership over their BI and in turn their sexualities, resulting in a system whereby the participants applied to their male counterparts for access to their bodies and sexualities, using their appearance as a method of persuasion.

## CONCLUSION

The research conducted aimed to explore young women's relationship to their BI and sexuality. In particular, I was interested in gaining a further understanding the power structures at play, and how they influenced and potentially conditioned the participants' experiences of their bodies, and their sexual selves. The most significant finding which emerged from the research, was the ***role of men*** in the participants' experiences of their BI and sexuality. Men (real or imaginary) were implicated in almost all of the participants' experiences, and thus, the subsequent findings related in the research reflect the different forms the ***role of men*** took in the women's accounts.

Firstly, I identified the role male validation, or endorsement played in how the women felt about the bodies or conducted their sexualities. For many, being found sexually attractive by a man was an indicator of how attractive they were, and thus often determined how they measured their BI.  The participants' sexuality was implicated in this vying for male endorsements, often being characterised by a desire to be found attractive, rather than a desire to actively seek and experience sexual pleasure.

Secondly, analysis of the data presented the importance of comparison in influencing how the participants experience their BI and sexuality. I proposed that the participants are drawn into competition with other women based on their appearance, because women are routinely rewarded for their compliance and adherence to the socially sanctioned beauty standards. As a result, the participants were frequently involved in comparison with other women, to either see what they were up against, or what they should be striving towards.

Relating to the role of comparison, the participants were highly critical of the media, and attributed

much of their body worries to the role the media has had in shaping their experiences. The participants explained that the majority of women featured in magazines, tv shows, films etc present an unrealistic ideal for the participants to try and live up to. The participants were also particularly critical of pornography, often indicating that is has had a negative impact on both their sex lives and BI, due to the unrealistic expectations they worry men might have given the saturation of pornography in today's society.

Finally the participants offered accounts of resistance. While one participant had decided to outright severe any connection between her BI and sexuality (Dana), and reject patriarchal beauty standards, the majority of the participants resisted beauty expectations through individual actions. What the accounts of resistance demonstrated was that, even in resistance, the participants' experiences were determined in relation to men, as accounts of resistance involved deny men what the participants thought they wanted. This suggests an inability to experience and negotiate BI and sexuality on the participants' own terms, ignorant of the role of men.

Overall, I think the research was successful in achieving its aims and presents interesting findings to offer to both sociological and feminist literature, particularly within the Irish context. However, reflecting on the completed research I do believe there are some issues which need to be addressed. First of all, the research was extremely limited in terms of the demographical background of the participants. I think, in hindsight, I would have strived to collaborate with a more diverse sample. For example, it would be beneficial to address the role which, race, ethnicity, class and sexual orientation could have on the findings. Furthermore, if I were to conduct this research again, I would endeavour to include trans women, and disabled women, who I think would offer an interesting insight into experiences of BI and sexuality.

The data provided by the also provided interesting avenues which could be pursued. Most notably; the role which state policy has on women's experiences of their bodies and sexualities which was suggested by Dana and Hannah and how one's acceptance of their sexual orientation might affect how women (and men) experience their BI and sexualities which was proposed by Susie. I would like to propose one more avenue which could be addressed which wasn't outlined in the "Discussion and Findings" chapter, but which is similar to the role of sexual orientation. Susie, in both her diary entry and interview explained how it was important for her to be perceived as sexy and attractive to men as she believes this might camouflage her feelings for women. Ergo, Susie suggests that beauty standards are particular to the heterosexual contract, and may not be as important in queer, or non-heterosexual relationships. It would be interesting to conduct further research, investigating Susie's claim.

When asked what could be done to alleviate the pressures placed on women, many of the participants suggested initiatives such as media literacy programmes, or censorship of the media (e.g. no size zero models). Having conducted this research, and analysed the findings, I believe that the aforementioned initiatives might afford women with some tools to negotiate the expectations placed upon them. However, it is obvious from the findings that the problems facing the participants are much grander than just the media, and are as a result of overarching patriarchal power structures, which will need to be addressed in order to enact any real change. To paraphrase MacKinnon (1989), as long as there is an inequality of power between women and men, through which men "author the scripts to their advantage" (316), women's experiences of their sexuality and their bodies will continue to be characterised by this inequality.

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# APPENDIX 1

### Profile of Participants

| Name | Age | Level of Eduction | Sexual Orientation | Date of Interview |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Leanne | 24 | MA | Heterosexual | 11/03/2013 |
| Aoife | 23 | BA | Heterosexual | 22/03/2013 |
| Christina | 22 | BA | Heterosexual | 24/03/2013 |
| Hannah | 23 | BA | Heterosexual | 24/03/2013 |
| Dana | 23 | MA | Pansexual | 25/03/2013 |
| Susie | 23 | BA | Pansexual | 26/03/2013 |

<u>Interview Transcript:</u> Aoife (23)

<u>Date of Interview:</u> 22/03/2013

*How did you find the diary?*

At the start i found it quite easy because I was in a state of mind where I needed to write something, then when I was actually feeling better, feeling positive about myself it took me a bit longer to write things or like I just would write like a page and that'd be it. So, but I found it really interesting because the thing that I wasn't conscious at all I became conscious of which has actually had a beneficial affect on things since then because it has made me more aware of how my hormones affect me or how like one comment from somebody might change my whole day.

*How are you feeling now?*

I think I've always been a fairly confident with my BI, but in the last year or so I gained a bit of weight and especially in the last couple of months I've become more conscious because of that, I think that has affected me slightly in a strange way, its definitely affected my sexual relationship, but actually in the last couple of days I've had a conversation with my bf about that and now everything's kind of ok but I think that I've become in the last couple of months definitely a lot more aware of my BI and that has actually affected my day to day life.

*Why do you think that is?*

I changed my job and now I work with adults from all over the world and it's my first real adult job where I work in an office and I think just even in my head being compared with

other people I work with and other people I see everyday it's made me a little bit more conscious of how I look.

What made me very aware of was before Christmas we had a really ridiculously pretty intern in the office and I became quite conscious of the fact that a lot of the male students would go and speak to her or ask her questions and stuff and I think subconsciously that kind of bothered me a little bit and obviously that it just a really weird thing but I was just becoming more aware of myself and I think before I used to feel kind of naturally feel like I was noticed or something and in the last couple of months I feel less like that.

Not that I felt like I'm so beautiful or anything but I didn't feel that my BI was holding me back and now I feel like a little bit my BI is holding me back and that if I was skinnier or something I would actually generally feel more happy which is a terrible thing but I think that actually I used to not think like that but now I think like that.

*Do you think it's having an affect on your personal life?*
I think in my personal life it isn't holding me back all my friends and my boyfriend are all accepting of me and they love me and I feel really comfortable around them, when I'm around Irish people I feel very confident whereas I think in work I'm surrounded by people from all over the world who are all very exotic and very beautiful in very stereotypical ways and that has made me less confident in myself. If I'm on a night out with my friends I feel pretty and I feel grand, but if I'm on a night out with people from work or with the students from work I would be way more self conscious...
I think in my head I feel like people are judging me before they even know me and that has

made me more aware.

*Can you remember when you first started thinking about your BI, and how you look?*

I think I've always been very conscious about my appearance my mam would be quite like that as would my sisters and I think that has had a knock on affect on my general life, my mam always thought we should be as well presented as we should be and like for that reason I would never go into work with no make up on. If I woke up late and had to rush... all day long I would be thinking oh god I have to stand up now at my desk and someone's gonna look at me or I have to walk up the stairs and the students are gonna see me, whereas before I would never have really thought about that kind of thing.

*Would you be concerned with them finding you attractive or just presentable?*

I think with girls its just presentable, I think with certain boys it would be finding me attractive which is strange because I have no wish to ever kiss anyone but I feel like there definitely in the world, in society there is a unfair advantage given to people who are more attractive. I think more people are more likely to (this is a terrible thing to say) but are more willing to chat with people, especially with men, you'll find that a man would be much more likely to talk to a pretty girl than talk to an average girl and that I'm always conscious of that.

*You mention in the diary about the role flirting used to play, can you talk about that a little bit?*

Before I would naturally sort of not flirt but just I think with males there's definitely, even with women actually, with women that you don't know you don't speak to them the way you talk to your friends and there's always another level there of like, and before when I was single I'd feel like I'd walk into a bar and I'd just get chatting to somebody and I think that

would give me a little boost or make me feel more attractive and if I'm on a night out and I feel attractive then the whole night is a totally different night... I'm much more willing to just have the craic and chat to people that I don't know, whereas if I'm feeling really self conscious about my self, about my BI I'm way less likely to just talk to somebody at a bar and not even just in a flirtation way but I do think that when somebody flirts with you a little bit it gives you a little private boost, and not I'm gonna act upon this but in a way a personal way it's nice to know that somebody finds you attractive.

*How has you BI changed since you started going out with boyfriend?*
Like when I'm with him I'm comfortable with my body and he speaks really positively about my body like he never has said anything bad about my body, and he's like very openly loving and very touchy feely and in that way it's had a positive affect on my body, in that personally when we are together I feel completely comfortable, fine being naked and fine, whereas I think with other boys in my life I've been way more self-conscious about showing my body. But at the same time, maybe in my general life it has negatively affected me because, in a very small way the fact that there's a lot more weariness about talking to a boy you don't know, you'd never want to give anyone the wrong impression.

I've got really comfortable, I'm with my bf a lot of the time and absolutely happy not to wear make up and like I make a big effort with him obviously, but if I wake up in the morning and I haven't done my hair or put on my make up I'm not gonna rush away and hide from him. Because of that I see myself as I am a lot more rather than as I want to look like.

I know that he loves me, he knows that I love him, we say nice things about each other and we tell each other you're so gorgeous, you're so handsome all the time, but when you've

heard it from the same person a million times it's not the same that's so weird but it's true, you can't feel the same way as you did when like 5 boys in a month you're a ride or whatever, whereas now obviously I'm not gonna let them.

*You also mention in the diary about worries about shaving and hair removal?*
I used to be very conscious of it now I'm... because we don't get to have sex a lot when we do, when for example, we haven't had sex for three weeks and I know we're going to have a night together then I would shave my legs but generally on a day to day basis I don't give a shit about that. I think that sometimes has a negative affect because I don't like shaving my legs because I hate shaving my legs because it's so much effort and it's the same with my pubic hair and my armpit hair, it's like he has seen it with a little bit of stubble loads of times so it hasn't really had a negative affect so sometimes I think I get a little bit lazy about that but at the same time he said openly that it doesn't bother him. My leg hair doesn't really bother me unless it was like a forest... but my pubic hair definitely bothers me I'm very conscious of that, I'm sometimes like oh god I really don't want him to look down there... because... I don't know why because actually with my first boyfriend I literally had never done anything with my pubic hair, I hadn't shaved anything, or touched down there, I couldn't give a rats ass. My pubic hair as far as I was concerned, I didn't care I'm not touching that, but like for some reason now i'm more conscious of it, maybe it's because i'm a little bit older and I've seen porn and I've seen what other girls do and i've talked to other girls about it and i've realised how much of a big deal it is for them and so maybe i've become more conscious of it because of that.

Also, my bf is also really really handsome and i've the seen the way a lot of other girls would

look at him and also a negative thing is that i know his sexual past and i knew his ex girlfriend quite well and i knew what she was like and i think i would imagine she was very conscious of that kind of thing so that has made me a little bit more aware of it. I've realised that you shouldn't know your partners sexual past because it makes you think about your body and your sex in a totally different way when really they obviously don't matter because they're not around anymore.

*You mention in the diary that you think porn has changed the way women think about their bodies and their sex lives, can you explain what you mean?*
I think a lot of girls are willing to put up with more now because they think that's the norm like a lot of people think that, not a lot of people actually, I don't any boys who think like this, but I know a lot of girls who would be willing to put up with bad things just because the precedent that porn has set for them. It's also definitely affected the way that women feel about their body hair and boobs and BI like i know so many people who just flat out wont do particular positions because they know there boyfriend is going to see them in a certain way and know that comparatively with a porn stat they're not gonna look the same. I think for a lot of boys they don't actually care about that but still in girls' heads it has become a negative precedent that stands ahead of everything that they do.

Porn has become such a massive thing for men, I don't think I know any boy who doesn't watch porn and that's a mental thing because if you know that every single boy that you know has seen women who look like that, and it's not just a once in a lifetime thing it's every single day and for the generation behind us that didn't exist, boys had seen things here and there but it was a big deal, it was very difficult to find porn and see things. Whereas now everywhere you look there's porn, half of the tv shows half some sort of light porn and you

can literally search anything on the internet and you can find something to do with porn.

*You also talk about the media in general in the diary?*

Yeah, so we were talking about that show Girls earlier - everyone else in that show is really skinny and really beautiful so there's one character who is completely different and everybody else is totally normal. So even in the one show that we have where there's a normal looking person having sex still only a quarter of the population of that show. I literally can't think of another show where there is one person who has an average shaped body. Even Brigit Jones is a size 14 and all she ever talks about is that she's a size 14 but the average size of women in Ireland and the average size of women in america is size 14 and for some reason it's like fucking mental to think that anybody who represents the population would be praised in anyway and so obviously women are going to fucking thinking about their bodies all the time and fucked up about their bodies when nobody ever represents somebody that looks average. It's like well done fat girl.

*In the diary you talk about when the man arrived back in the office it changed how you were thinking about your BI?*

There's two other men who work in the office and one of them is really really happily married and when he's in the office I never ever give a second thought to what I look like but there's another guy who's super super handsome and in a really horrible relationship where he's unhappy and I'm pretty sure quite unfaithful and when he's in the office I get very conscious again. And there's a third guy who used to work around me and now he's gone to germany and he came back to visit and when he came back in the office the whole time i was just thinking about the fact that he was in the office and thinking about what way I should hold my stomach and what way my hair was and i went to the bathroom to check my face

and i don't know what it is about him actually cause i'm not in anyway attracted to him. I don't particularly want them to be attracted to me and i don't want to have relationship with either of them but for some reason... i think just somewhere in my head somewhere i feel like girls who are found attractive generally get on better and maybe that's what makes me try a little bit harder...

*You talk about how sometimes it can make you feel unattractive when your boyfriend doesn't try to have sex with you?*
There was a period of time that the moments we got to have sex were so rare that anytime we were together and not having sex I was like why the fuck aren't we having sex, and obviously i'm a human and i want to have sex but not like i have a crazy sex drive where i need to have sex every second but for some reason the gratification of knowing someone wants to have sex with you is important, that the feeling that you are sexually attractive to someone... is definitely a significant factor in every moment that i spend with him.

There was one morning me and bf had had really incredible sex and it was the first time we had had sex in a long time and it was unbelievable sex and i think later on that day i kissed him or initiated something and he said we don't have a condom or whatever and there was a condom, but the wrapper had been slightly opened in the fumble of the previous sex and so we had a big conversation about it and he was like, because of the fact that he knew that i was self-conscious about my body there had been times in the past were i had said that i didn't want to do a particular position or something because i didn't want him to see me in a particular way and he said that what we were doing was he was getting tired afterwards that the fact that there was a period of time where we were doing the same thing for long periods of time that he was actually wrecked afterwards and didn't want to be the main activist so

since then i've been taking charge and it has worked out better and everything is fine.

49

There's definitely some positions that I don't like doing, like I don't like doing doggy style... I don't mind it as long as it's dark and everything is definitely 100% clean down there. There had been two times in a row where I had said I didn't want to do doggy style because of the fact that it was bright in the room and he got the impression that i just never wanted to do it which wasn't the case and then because of the we just got a bit boring and lazy and didn't really make any effort for awhile. And also because the times we get to have sex are so rare that it became that when did get to have sex it was like ok let's do it and then you'd do it and it would always been the same.

But definitely my BI, and the fact that he was conscious of my BI affected everything for several months because we didn't talk about.

## APPENDIX 3
### Consent Form:

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research project on ***how young women experience their body image and sexuality***. For the purpose of this research the term sexuality is loosely defined as: the way in which people express themselves as sexual beings, capable of erotic experiences and responses.

I am conducting this research as part of my undergraduate degree in sociology at the National University of Ireland Maynooth.

This research is made up of two sections: a diary kept by the participants, and a follow up interview with participants.

The diary will be kept for two weeks by the participants, and will then be returned to the researcher for data analysis. Up until publication the participants have the right to edit the information included in the diaries. Following publication of the research the diaries can either be returned to the participants, or stored in a safe space by the researcher. What is included in the diary is guided by the research question. More information on the diary entries will be given to the participants before they begin the process. The information included in the diaries will for the basis of the follow up interview questions.

This interview may take up to one hour and with your permission I would like to tape record the conversation. A copy of the interview tape or a transcript of the interview will be made available to you afterwards if you wish. The participant can edit the information given in the interview up until publication.

A copy of the work within which your data from the diary and the interview is included will be made available to you at your request.

There are no risks involved in this research and the interview does not constitute any type of counselling or treatment.

The benefit to you is that you will have access to the research when it is finished and you may use it to understand how your experience compares with others or to the wider sociological literature. This research may also be of benefit to you as it provides an opportunity to consider your body image and sexuality in a context which you may not have encountered before.

All of the interview information will be kept confidential. We will store the diaries and the tapes of our conversation safely. Your identity will be kept confidential and we will use a pseudonym to identify your interview data. Neither your name or private information will not appear in the final research project.

Your participation is voluntary. You are free to refuse to take part, and you may refuse to answer any questions or may stop at any time. You may also withdraw at any time up until the work is completed.

If you have any questions about the research, you may contact me at sarahnichinneide@gmail.com or at 0863715628. "I have read the description above and consent to participate."

Signed_____ Date _____

Diary Information Sheet

Hi!

Thanks a million for agreeing to take part in this research. Your contributions are really appreciated. As you know this research is made up of two parts; the diary entries, and the follow up interview.

This section, the diary entry, is a two week long process, in which contributions are made daily, or as regularly as possible for you. The length of these entries is completely at your own discretion. As is the format/ layout. All that is asked is that you date your entries.

What information you include in the diary is completely up to you, and can be edited up until the research is published. All your information will be kept in a secure location, and will be made confidential in the research.

As you know, the subject of this research is ***how young women experiences their body image and sexuality***. The definition of what constitutes sexuality is left entirely up to you. What you write in the diaries should, as much as possible, be related to the above topic. However, you can write about body image, and sexuality separately, or the relationship between them. The diary entries can include experiences you had while writing the diaries, or any previous experiences which you think are relevant. If you have any other information which you think would be relevant please include it e.g. musings, thoughts, feelings etc.

Here are some guiding questions to consider if you are have any trouble (however, please bear in mind these questions are meant as a a guide so you can: answer them, exclude them, or add to them as you see fit):

- How do you feel about your body and your appearance today?
- Why do you feel this way?
- How has the way you feel about your body image and appearance affected your day? - How has it affected the way your relationship with other people?
- What actions have you taken regarding your body image today?
- Have you expressed your sexuality in anyway today? How? Why?
- Did you find that the way you felt about yourself affected decisions concerning your sexuality? In what way?
- If so, why do you think this is?