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Selling sex sells: Representations of prostitution and the sex industry in sexualised popular culture as symbolic violence

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SYNOPSIS

The mainstreaming of the sex industry into popular culture is evident in the proliferation of commercial sex premises in urban spaces and the popularity of pimp/ho chic. In this paper we explore representations of prostitution, including what stories are told about prostitution in films and television and how the dynamics of prostitution are presented as a template for intimate relationships. Throughout the paper we contrast this glamourisation with the empirical realities of prostitution that include violence and psychosocial harm. While the sex industry is portrayed as empowering and entertaining in popular culture, its existence as cause and consequence of gender inequality is unchallenged. We suggest that these representations constitute symbolic violence, obscuring the gendered inequality of commercial sex and the physical, sexual and psychological harm experienced by women in prostitution.

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Introduction

Sexualisation of popular culture, increasingly evident in sexualised imagery and discourses (Gill, 2007), is a topical subject of academic and policy analysis and debate (APA, 2007; Attwood, 2005; Coy, 2009a; Papadopoulos, 2010). However, several theorists and commentators have suggested that the term 'pornification' (Dines, 2010; Paul, 2005) more accurately captures the 'porno chic' (McNair, 1996) that pervades sexualised media (McRobbie, 2008). Anette Dina Sorensen (2005), for instance, argues that 'pornification' is invading mainstream popular culture in three core ways: the increasing volume and availability of pornography; interest in the porn industry from real life media genres and journalism, giving it credence that she refers to as a 'clean-up tendency'; and the use of conventions of porn in mass culture. In this article we frame the representations of prostitution that we discuss, such as pimp and ho chic, as 'pornification' as they introduce and reify

'pornographic permutations' (McRobbie, 2008) that go beyond sexualised imagery to celebrate the separation of sex from intimacy and the reduction of women to body parts as the 'true' story about sex (Dines, 2010). At the same time some imagery appears more nuanced, and here the term sexualisation might be retained. Where our points refer to themes of both sexualised/pornified media, we reflect this by using both terms.

In the context of what Rosalind Gill (2007) has conceptualised as a 'postfeminist media sensibility' (where the body is endorsed as a site of profit for women, individual choice venerated and differences between women and men re-essentialised as 'biologically natural'), what appear to be contradictory positions have emerged over the potential benefits and limitations of sexualisation and pornification. Some commentators focus on the opportunity for 'democratisation' of sexuality and the apparent opening up of space for women to positively participate in sexualised mass culture (Attwood, 2005), while others are concerned with ongoing sexual objectification and narrowing of space for girls and women to resist a sexualised sense of self (Coy, 2009a; see also McRobbie, 2009).

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In the midst of this debate, policy reviews suggest a range of negative impacts associated with exposure to sexualised and pornified media, including: educational underachievement; issues with self esteem and body image; pressure to conform to sexualised femininity, and the (re)production of a masculinity equated with sexual entitlement and conquest (APA, 2007; Australian Senate Committee, 2008; Papadopoulos, 2010). For feminist theorist Kathleen Barry (1995), sexualisation reduces women to bodies, the culmination of which is found in prostitution where access to women's sexualised bodies is the point of the exchange. It is in this backdrop of sexualised and pornified media that the mainstreaming of the sex industry has emerged as central to much of the policy and academic discussion. Recent collections of essays have explored representations of women involved in prostitution in the news, television and documentary genres (see Mendes et al., 2009, 2010). In this article we explore representations of the sex industry – what Karen Boyle (2010: 113) refers to as the 'mainstream narratives of commercial sex' – in order to demonstrate that the dynamics of prostitution are increasingly found in contemporary globalised media as part of the pornification of popular culture. By the dynamics of prostitution we refer to notions that: women's bodies are commodities in a global marketplace to be bought and sold; women are sexually available for men's sexual pleasure, represented as sexual objects; and that women are empowered by sexualisation and objectification (see also Gill, 2007). We suggest that these themes are perpetuating a falsely positive perception of global sex industries, and contend that this constitutes a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1990).

Representations of prostitution in popular culture as symbolic violence

Popular culture is 'a means by which we learn to engage with the world' (Rose, 2008: 52), thus the meanings made available by socio-cultural representations construct perceptions and understandings (Cameron & Frazer, 1987). The narratives and representations of prostitution in mainstream media combine to reflect and reconstruct certain ways of perceiving and understanding the sex industry, which we define as symbolic violence.

The concept of symbolic violence refers to unseen forms of domination that are embedded in everyday actions, with such invisibility framed as 'misrecognition' of power inequalities (Bourdieu, 1990 cited in Morgan & Bjokert, 2006). As defined by Jenkins (1992: 104), symbolic violence is 'the imposition of symbolism and meaning (i.e. culture) upon groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate'. This legitimacy obscures the power relations which permit that imposition to be successful. Symbolic violence is thus a means of reproducing gendered hierarchies, of reinforcing gender orders that privilege men and masculinity, and casting women as less than human, without coercion or physical force (Bourdieu, 1990). Central to this misrecognition and perpetuation of oppression and domination is women's complicity and engagement in these dynamics (ibid). We thus use the concept of symbolic violence here in a number of ways: first, to reflect our argument that the glamorisation of prostitution, for instance 'pimp and ho chic', disguises the

harm that women in the sex industry experience and the gender inequality of consumerism that underpins global sex markets (see Jeffreys, 2009). Secondly, the argument that prostitution is the 'oldest profession',¹ an ahistorical and inevitable system of exchange between men and women, is an example of how dominant perspectives are presented as 'natural' (Bourdieu, 2004). As Morgan and Bjokert (2006: 448) suggest, 'symbolic violence is ... so powerful precisely because it is *unrecognisable* for what it is' (original emphasis). Thirdly, we recall Angela McRobbie (2004) who uses the concept of symbolic violence in her analysis of the television programme *What Not to Wear*, on the basis of the individualisation that draws sharp lines between women by denigrating 'poor and disadvantaged women' (p101), presented and defended as 'just good fun' (p100). Some women are thus made 'worth less' in ways that are not widely recognised as hostile, with their complicity. McRobbie draws on Bourdieu to develop 'symbolic violence as a process of social reproduction' (p103). This forms part of her wider proposition that as (at least in some regions of the world) women have equality in terms of legal rights and participation in the labour force, popular culture has become a site where unequal gendered power relations are 're-stabilised' (McRobbie, 2009). Women's investment in femininity and self-sexualisation is portrayed as emblematic of individualised empowerment and choice, hence feminist challenges to the socio-cultural pressures that help shape their decisions/investments are lost, even silenced (ibid).

Following this, we argue that representations of prostitution in popular culture which glamorise the sex industry and fail to acknowledge harm and violence, socially reproduce divisions between women who engage in 'pimp and ho chic' as a temporary identity and the girls/women who, around the globe, are coerced into prostitution by poverty, predatory men, drug use and limited options. The examples of such glamorisation that we draw on are also defended in the name of humour, fun and irony, and women's 'freedom' to self-sexualise, as we will go on to demonstrate. These representations of the sex industry, and the discourses that they are both embedded in and reproduce, are thus powerful conduits of the perception and appreciation of prostitution as entertainment and leisure rather than the systematic ab (use) of women's bodies. The key discourse is 'superficial empowerment' (Boyle, 2010: 99) that does not subvert concrete gender inequalities of violence against women, access to economic resources and political decision making. The message about women's involvement is therefore about 'choice' – if prostitution is a means to personal and financial power, a manifestation of sexual liberation, why would women not choose to participate in it? The mainstreaming of the sex industry has carried these messages into a range of media and socio-cultural sources. These sources, holistically framed as sexualised and pornified popular culture, become *agents* of symbolic violence, which work as an 'indirect cultural mechanism' (Jenkins, 1992) of 'invisible' domination, which is legitimised by its location within the field of mainstream mass culture. This location becomes the vehicle for and place of misrecognition, where the harms and violence of prostitution and the unequal gender relations on which it is based, are not only obscured but mimicked, celebrated and consumed as entertainment, a fashion style

and leisure. Here, complicity advances into consent, and 'the legitimate culture becomes experienced as an axiom' (ibid:107).

Harms of prostitution

Central to framing the glamourisation of prostitution as symbolic violence is recognition of the harms women experience in the sex industry: violence, coercion and exploitation as well as the dehumanisation of the body as commodity. The disjunctions between women's experiences of prostitution and sanitised versions in many popular media representations (characterised by pimp and ho chic) are most acute with respect to violence; women's experiences of violence in prostitution are either absent entirely and invisibilised by an emphasis on 'fun', or trivialised in the name of humour, as we shall demonstrate. For context, research demonstrates that the majority of women in the sex industry report experiences of physical and sexual violence – one study of 854 people in nine countries found that 63% had been raped since entering prostitution, suggesting that violence is a routine rather than exceptional event (Farley, et al., 2003). Violence and abuse are not confined to specific settings – a quarter (23.3%) of exotic dancers, and over two thirds (66.7%) of women in prostitution in U.S. drug houses reported sexual violence, while one in five (21%) of women in prostitution on the street, in their own homes and as escorts had been raped more than ten times (Raphael & Shapiro, 2004). A UK study across three cities found almost half of women in street prostitution and over a quarter of those in indoor prostitution had experienced violence in the last six months (Church, Henderson, Barnard, & Hart, 2001). Qualitative analysis of women's accounts of prostitution illustrates parallels with their experiences of sexual violence in terms of their sense of violation and disruption of relationship with the body (Coy, 2009b). The harms that we refer to throughout this article thus involve these physical, sexual, material and psychosocial layers of abuse.

This pervasive violence reveals the depth of stigma and worthlessness attached to women involved in the sex industry; while such stigma attached to sexual reputation affects all women to varying degrees, it has an acute meaning for women in prostitution since 'the 'prostitute' is the 'end stop' in discourses on good and honest women' (O'Neill, 2001: 186). An acute illustration is the way in which language used to describe women in prostitution – whore, 'ho' – persists as a means of denigrating all women, despite its apparent reclamation in popular culture. For example, in May 2011 a British woman described being labelled 'a prostitute' in a civil Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO) as having ruined her 'whole life' (BBC News, 2011). The designation of women in prostitution as 'other' and 'lesser' has been cited as justification by serial murderers (Salfati, James, & Ferguson, 2008; Smith, 1990). Research suggests that women in prostitution are almost 18 times more likely to be murdered than women not in prostitution (Potterat et al., 2004). In the majority of cases, the perpetrator is a sex buyer (Kinnell, 2008). One UK study showed that 89% men paying for sex thought women who sell sex were dirty, 91% more sexually available and 77% inferior (Elliott et al., 2002). In this context, portrayals of prostitution in popular culture that reinforce the

pornified mythology of women as sluts and 'hos' (Dines, 2010), failing to recognise the multiple abuses that women contend with, constitute symbolic violence. For instance, glamorising prostitution appears, for some, to carry the potential to subvert stigma. However, the sex industry is built on objectification and commodification of women (Barry, 1995; Jeffreys, 2009), as well as on women's lack of subjectivity and suspension of the self to serve men's desires (Coy, 2008; O'Connell Davidson, 1998). Glamorisation of prostitution in popular culture brings these notions into wider currency. Mainstreaming the idea that women exist as sex objects, even embracing that status, mainstreams a conceptual justification for violence. This is in itself potent symbolic violence, bringing into popular consciousness the sense that as sexual objects women are less than human. Furthermore, glamorising the sex industry and equating sexualisation, pornification and pimp and ho chic with empowerment enacts symbolic violence on women who experience prostitution as harmful, desperate and distressing.

The mainstreaming and normalisation of the sex industry

Across the globe, the sex industry is tightly knitted into corporate culture and generates billions every year that contribute significantly to national and local economies (Barry, 1995; Brents & Hausbeck, 2007; Jeffreys, 2009). Globalisation – in terms of extension of free markets and opening up of national borders – has increased both the availability and visibility of prostitution (Marttila, 2008). Commercial sex premises proliferate in cities and urban spaces, in the form of strip/lap dancing clubs, sex tours and in some areas licenced parlours, with the anodyne epithet of 'adult entertainment' (Jeffreys, 2009). This normalisation of commercialised sexual activity is what Marjut Jyrkinen (2005) refers to as 'McSexualisation', in recognition of the links with global consumerism. One study of brothels in Nevada draws attention to the use of marketing strategies associated with mainstream businesses and audiences, including the packaging of buying sex as a touristic experience (Brents & Hausbeck, 2007). Through this, commercial sex premises embed themselves further into tourism industries, increase their economic and political power, and (re)present paying for sex as a normalised commodity in the 'global cultural marketplace' (Altman, 2001: 83). The process of such normalisation contributes to the invisibilising of the gendered consumption of women's bodies by male buyers, thus misrecognising power inequalities.

As part of 'McSexualisation', the paradigm of prostitution has entered popular culture in interlinked, but myriad, ways. Kathleen Barry (1995) argued that the normalisation of prostitution would lead to it being a reference point for all other heterosexual relationships, whether or not they involve the exchange of money. In Megan Tyler's (2008) trenchant analysis of ideal hetero(sex) in self help books recommended by sex therapists, she defines 'the sex of prostitution' as 'synonymous with the servicing of men... the model of sex which is performed in prostitution rather than the element of monetary exchange' (p365). In these self-help books, the key messages are that (hetero)sex is biologically determined and privileges men's desires; for instance, penetrative intercourse is repeatedly acknowledged to offer limited pleasure for

women and detailed advice is given to overcome discomfort of oral sex. Similar advice is often used to condition women in prostitution about expectations and appropriate activities (ibid). Thus while the commodification of sex is one feature of the socio-cultural prostitution motif, another is the reframing of (hetero)sex to align with the instrumental model of sex in prostitution that foregrounds male pleasure. Finally, Tyler identifies a major theme in self help texts that mirrors the portrayals of prostitution in popular culture that we discuss: the requirement for women to engage in and embrace the sex of prostitution, just as Rosalind Gill (2007) and Gail Dines (2010) point out the similar requirement in sexualised media and pornography. Ariel Levy succinctly captured this equation with empowerment in her exploration of the mainstreaming of the sex industry:

Because we have determined that all empowered women must be overtly and publicly sexual, and because the only sign of sexuality we seem to be able to recognise is a direct allusion to red-light entertainment, we have laced the sleazy energy and aesthetic of a topless club or a Penthouse shoot throughout our entire culture (Levy, 2005:26).

Sexualised consumerism actively promotes models of prostitution as a prototype for intimate relationships. There are few cultural references to sex buyers in pimp and ho chic, indicating a selective discourse which minimises men's accountability and visibility as consumers. Yet the limited representations are revealing. For instance, in 2005, a UK based lads mag, FHM, ran a feature which invited readers to calculate how much sex cost them, by dividing costs such as wine, meals, gifts, by the number of acts of sexual intercourse (Viner, 2006). As one journalist commented, 'this aggressively blur[s] the line between girlfriend/boyfriend and prostitute/punter relationships' (Viner, 2006) and is also couched in open misogyny since the budgeting advice is 'less than £5 is about the same price as a Cambodian whore Each shag now needs to be a better purchase than a new CD' (Turner, 2005). Research with men who pay for sex demonstrates these themes of 'value for money' and market forces influence their decision making processes (Coy, Horvath, & Kelly, 2007). Sex buyers report seeking quality of service and ensuring that contractual obligations are fulfilled, with the most transparent expression of this sexualised consumerism a comparison of the relative cost of paying for sex to heterosexual dating:

To go out looking for a girl, it's a lot of expense... paying for sex, it's an agreement between you and the girl, you pay your money and then that's done with. I've taken girls out, I take her for a meal, that cost me £40... you don't get bugger all after that... [whereas when paying for sex] you can do anything you want for 20 min. Everything and anything. For £40 (cited in Coy et al., 2007: 20).

Interestingly a study in Australia reports virtually the same account from one sex buyer: 'I could spend 100 bucks a night taking some bird out, you could do that 3 or 4 times you know before you're anywhere.... I'd rather come here every now and again and then, pay my money and you know, that's that' (cited in Plumridge, Chetwynd, Reed, & Gifford, 1997:

172). Similar sentiments were also noted in diary accounts of sex tourists to Thailand (Bishop & Robinson, 2002). Thus in reproducing these cost benefit analyses in a lads mag, albeit in what is claimed as a 'tongue in cheek' style (that, as Benwell (2004) and McRobbie (2009) note, deflects criticism), FHM instals the dynamics of prostitution into the thought processes and relationships of readers. Women in the sex industry are mocked using notions of race and ethnicity (the article also refers to 'Cypriot tarts' for £20 and over £31 'Cuban show girls') that fail to acknowledge the structural inequalities underpinning women's involvement in prostitution. The symbolic violence of these discourses is both the objectification and dehumanisation of women to serve men's instrumental sexual desires and the disguising or 'misrecognising' of gendered, racialised power. This casual normalisation of the exchange of women's bodies for money tells a strong story about how prostitution, not just sexualisation, has become a lexicon and potential paradigm for heterosexual relationships.

How this is framed as 'entertainment' is of the most relevance in this article. Borrowing from Amy-Chinn's (2006) analysis of how lingerie advertisements position women as actively embracing a sexualised self while reinforcing masculine norms, we ask for who are these forms of sexualised entertainment? This is evidenced by research showing that globally the majority of sex buyers are men (Coy et al., 2007; Jeffreys, 2009; O'Connell Davidson, 1998; Ward, Mercer, & Wellings, 2005). Thus commercial sex is, as O'Neill (2001: 155) notes, 'with few exceptions... a market for men'. Accounts from men who visit strip clubs in Scandinavia and the U.S. indicate that many are seeking a space that affirms 'traditional' gender roles based on masculine superiority, free from obligations of gender equality (Frank, 2003; Marttila, 2008). Yet the framing of prostitution as entertainment obscures these structural power relations and privileges a masculine entitlement to sex (Barry, 1995; Coy et al., 2007), by normalising the sexualisation of women's bodies.

Airbrushing harm: the glamorisation of prostitution

Here we explore how portrayals of women in prostitution in television and films, with a thematic construction of 'superficial empowerment' (Boyle, 2010: 99), propagate notions of 'choice' to explain women's involvement in the sex industry and adoption of 'ho chic' fashion. The most iconic film, 'Pretty Woman', (re)presented a mythology of prostitution whereby women are saved by a rich man, but films such as *Taxi Driver* and *Leaving Las Vegas* also contribute to these perceptions. As Rochelle Dalla (2000) notes:

Popular images presented on the big screens often portray prostitution as a temporary course of action, where in the end the heroine finds love and happiness and suffers few, if any, enduring scars from her brief stint on the streets; an image not borne out by empirical research and the realities of drug use, homelessness and the multiple challenges of leaving prostitution that women face (p352).

In contrast to the fairytale route to prosperity, research shows prostitution actually impoverishes women, if the time out of the employment market and lack of opportunities to

develop and update skills/training are calculated over the life course (DeRiviere, 2006). The profits from the sex industry for owners of brothels, sexualised dance clubs and escort agencies, however, run into billions – indicative figures suggest that men spend \$15 bn a year on strip clubs in the U.S.; trafficking of women is worth \$31 bn annually (Jeffreys, 2009) and sex industry profits in Japan alone are an estimated annual 4.2 trillion yen (Sassen, 2002).

Two examples of representations of women's involvement in prostitution illustrate the discourses of superficial empowerment and entertainment. The first is a 2006 British television situation comedy *Respectable*, set in a brothel, which featured women involved in prostitution to buy new shoes (Hayley) and pay student fees (Kate), and men who pay for sex as timid and seeking kindness (Michael). The series was broadcast for a late night audience, and while not commissioned for a second series in the UK, it was subsequently shown in Germany, Australia and Hungary (Internet Movie Database, 2010). In response to feminist critique of the characters and plotlines, producers contrarily claimed that as a comedy there was no requirement for *Respectable* to be realistic, but it was based on real stories from women in prostitution (BBC News, 2006). One possible reading of the series is that it attempted to personalise the characters and thus diminish stigma and 'othering'. These fictional characters do not, however, reflect the range of experiences of women in prostitution and there are no references to poverty and coercion. In particular, the representation of an Eastern European woman (Yelena) masks the issue of trafficking of women into the UK from Eastern Europe. At a time when media coverage and government campaigns were urging sex buyers to be aware of women being trafficked from these regions, the portrayal here was of an empowered woman from Eastern Europe in control of her situation. Whether or not individual women like Yelena, Hayley, Kate and men like Michael exist is not our point here (see also Mendes et al., 2010), rather the ways in which these narratives paint a picture of the sex industry which airbrushes out the all negative aspects (see also Cochrane, 2006). Similar debate followed the UK dramatisation of the novel *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, (De Jour, 2005), where a young woman with a university education engages in prostitution for hundreds of pounds an hour, loves sex and enjoys luxury in all aspects of her life. The concern of many critics was not whether or not the character of Belle herself is real,² or women with similar experiences exist, but that such glamorisation in popular culture diminishes the space to recognise harm, violence and exploitation within the sex industry and places notions of choice and empowerment at the forefront of cultural discourse (Saner, 2007, see also Boyle, 2010).

The second example is an analysis of the film *Moulin Rouge* (and associated commercial merchandise that has evolved into a genre of clothing named after the film) where notions of 'choice' are also reflected. The film portrays a young 'courtesan' (Satine) for whom prostitution has the potential to be socially and financially rewarding, as women are depicted as able to choose buyers (Della Giusta & Scuriatti, 2005). Despite these emblems of empowerment, the virgin/whore dichotomy of femininity is reinforced – as Satine's virginity is her marketing point, her death in the film is

inevitable in order to enable her to be the lost love of the two male protagonists (ibid). In dying, Satine cannot be 'despoiled' through prostitution, and can be immortally preserved as 'untainted' and 'pure'. This reveals the ultimate contradiction of the representation in prostitution in *Moulin Rouge* – that while it spawned clothing ranges inspired by the film, the stigma attached to the actual exchange of sex for money is left intact (ibid). Della Giusta and Scuriatti's (2005) analytic focus is on the 'process through which prostitution, which still bears a negative cultural stigma, is deployed to make clothes attractive to buyers' (p36). Following the release of the film, women's clothing on the high street and in designer ranges featured corsets, basques bustiers, chokers and stockings as synonymous with sexy femininity (Freeman, 2001). Similar paths from the sex industry to high street fashion are reflected in the mainstream popularity of the 'stripper shoe', (Roach, 2007), and sales of Playboy bunny branded clothing, stationery and home accessories (Attwood, 2005). Sexually objectifying clothing has become trendy and is marketed as empowering, born of both patriarchy and consumerism. Della Giusta and Scuriatti suggest:

The use of images of prostitution in fashion and fashion advertising is located at the intersection of these issues: the commodification of women's bodies is a product of non-egalitarian relations, which express themselves at the social, economic and sexual levels, and on which capitalism is ultimately based. The need for a specific role for women as consumers leads to continuously reinventing their subordinate role, and in this sense glamorization of images of subordination is just one tool (2005: 41).

The transformation of prostitution into a fashion marketing device is harmful in two ways: the (re)presentation of prostitution as empowering; and the ongoing stigma attached to women in 'real' prostitution (ibid). Catherine Roach insightfully identifies that clothing associated with the sex industry has led to a context where 'it may be acceptable for your average college girl to look like a hooker, but hookers [sic] themselves are not benefitting from this upturn in their popularity' (Roach, 2007: 117). However, Angela McRobbie (2008) argues that precisely this assimilation of 'hooker' chic into everyday fashion destigmatises women in prostitution. While it may be superficially true that women in prostitution are 'less visible as an object of contempt or derision' (ibid: 228), we question how the camouflaging of young women as objects for men's sexual release represents power or equality, and why adopting a role so often associated with harm and violence should be celebrated. Metaphors of prostitution are marketed to women as a fun, liberatory way to be sexually adventurous and desirable, while grim realities of poverty, abuse, coercion are unchallenged. Through this, the sex industry myth of inevitability ('the oldest profession', see Jeffreys, 2005) and the male sex right of sexual access to women's bodies (Barry, 1995) are implicitly normalised, whilst women in prostitution remain 'other'. Attwood (2005) analysis of how sex is marketed to women through the lens of fashion, beauty and appearance is also relevant here. She suggests that as sexualised femininity is still largely shaped by patriarchal mores, nascent attempts at an empowering framing of sexuality are constructed around masquerade and

theatrical accessories. The incursion of apparel associated with prostitution might therefore be understood as 'trying on the clothes of an adult female sexuality' (p402), in the absence of a fully formulated autonomous sexuality for women. However, the promotion and popularity of 'ho chic' links such an adult female sexuality with prostitution, and the motifs and messages associated with commercialised sex without the exchange of money (Barry, 1995). While the stigma of prostitution still exists in reality, prostitution is simultaneously being sold as glamorous and emblematic of individual choice in popular culture.

There are also explicit links with the sex industry in some contemporary children's clothing, including t-shirts for babies that have 'pimp squad' or tassels for twirling nipples emblazoned across the front (Coy, 2009a). These products normalise prostitution as a light-hearted topic for embellishing clothing, an emblem of edgy, 'cool' fashion, but link children to an industry that is defined as exploitative and abusive when they are involved in it in real life. It is difficult to imagine other contexts and forms of abuse of children that would be subject to 'ironic' promotion in the name of humour. Yet the mainstream cultural backdrop of prostitution as harmless entertainment facilitates this symbolically violent marketing device.

The language of prostitution: mainstreaming 'pimp and ho'

Here we explore how the celebration of the pimp and ho vocabulary constitutes symbolic violence. References to pimping in popular culture originated in commercial hip hop music lyrics (Rose, 2008) and the term has since become widely used as a verb.³ The MTV show *Pimp my Ride* introduced pimping as a verb in 2004, as the title of a programme where old cars are restored to a brand new appearance and technical standard with luxury additions (www.mtv.co.uk/shows/pimp-my-ride). Versions of *Pimp my Ride* are/have been broadcast in the US, the UK, Germany, the Baltic Region, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Brazil and through MTV Arabia. Subsequently, 'to pimp' has become a verb that if not exactly mainstream, is associated with youth-oriented popular culture, as a light hearted way to describe improving an object to make it more valuable. There is an implicit connection here with the traditional use of the word 'pimp' – the value of an object [woman] can be increased by enhancing 'packaging' and negotiating the demands of the market. For instance, one use of the word that is rooted in the gendered dimensions of pimping is the UK website *Pimp my Bride*, which aims to enable women to lose weight before a wedding. Their rationale for choosing this term is revealing: defensively claiming postmodern irony – 'Though the name's a little tongue in cheek, we take your training serious' (sic) (www.pimpmybrideuk.co.uk). *Pimp my Bride* identifies the gendered nature of the concept of pimping when seeking to attract customers – 'We don't just cater to brides to be either, but 'Pimp My Groom' wouldn't have worked...!' There are transparent links between the use of 'pimping' as a marketing device and the original meaning of the term, specifically with respect to notions of women as commodities to be made as desirable as possible for marketing purposes.

Popular culture is saturated with exemplars of how the term 'pimp' has become normalised as a marketing device through corporate sponsorship (Lloyd, 2010): 'Pimp that snack', a website dedicated to massive enlargements of snacks and chocolate bars; 'Pimp my search' – a website that enables users to create a personalised website with their own logo. Virgin Airlines advertised their upper class passenger facilities with the tag-line 'Pimp My Lounge' (Frith, 2006). An extras package for the computer game 'The Sims', featuring clothes, accessories and makeup to enhance players' characters in the game, is called 'Pimp my Sims'. A similar site exists for additions to the software package Safari – 'Pimp my Safari' (www.pimpmysafari.com). The website 'Pimp-text' invites users to 'create your own pimp text' by adding sparkle to fonts for use on social networking sites. The application of the word 'pimp' for products associated with information technology also has an iterative impact for young people that use the Internet on a daily basis (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). One acknowledgement of how entrenched in contemporary youth culture the term 'pimping' has become is the publication of the book *Pimp Your Vocab* in September 2009, a guide to 'teenglish' for adults (Tobin, 2009).

A prominent marketing use of the term is the energy drink 'Pimp Juice', named after the rap singer Nelly's track and sold internationally, targeted at young people. It is an example of what Eithne Quinn (2000) calls the 'lifestylisation' of the 'misogynist, street-heroic figure' (p116). While Ice-T claims that 'pimping' denotes a 'fly, cool lifestyle which has nothing to do with prostitution' (cited in Quinn, 2000: 124), many of the ways in which pimping has become a verb in popular culture frequently invoke the prostitution-related meaning of the term. For instance, a 2005 Christmas advertising campaign for Selfridges (a UK department store), for example, featured a black man holding a glass of champagne and dressed in 'pimp chic', while women wearing only lingerie posed beside him (Frith, 2006), drawing on intersections of race and gender in pimp discourse. In references to pimping and 'hos' that proliferate in commercial hip hop song lyrics, these themes are also apparent – for instance, in P.I.M.P. by 50 cent, the video for which features women being walked on leashes (Levin & Kilbourne, 2008), and Three 6 Mafia's (2005) 'It's hard out here for a pimp', which won an Academy Award for best original song, and refers to 'making change off these women'. That song which valorises the 'trials' of men who profit from selling women's bodies was re(a)warded by the film industry is extremely telling; despite references to women's fear of murder and poverty, the lyrics reiterate the inevitability of prostitution ('that's the way the game goes') and the sovereignty of the market in securing men's sexual access to women ('you pay the right price and they'll both do you'). Here symbolic violence is evident in the way in which pimping as a verb has become so mainstreamed that it is not only an acceptable topic for popular music songs, but also that the lyrical content explicitly endorses and promotes profiting from women's bodies while disguising (misrecognising) this through the lens of entertainment.

Pimping has also become a role play game identity, available in board and online game formats. One particular example of hostile attitudes to women in prostitution is found in the 'Pimps and Hos' game, developed in 2004 and

marketed on 'adult' board game websites. It is described on one website as 'made for the person with a twisted mind that wants gut busting laughs' (www.pimpcostumes.com). All the players are designated pimps, and the aim is to 'acquire hos' and pimp them out while travelling around the board (a fictional city named HoTropolis), with the winner being the first to reach \$1500 profit from their 'ho'. Sample cards enable players to infect rival 'hos' with STIs, and 'bitch-slap' women for 'lipping off' – trivialising violence against women and reiterating age old stigmatising images of women in prostitution as reservoirs of infection. Sexual violence as a core aspect of prostitution is a consistent theme; in contrast to many of the representations that we discuss such violence is acknowledged here, but treated as a legitimate source of humour, as one sample card demonstrates: 'when the guards were tossing your cell for contraband, they find a tube of sex lube; too bad they decided to pound you dry...Pay the clinic \$200 for the soothing cream' (www.guanabee.com). Pimp and ho chic, equated with 'cool', reduce violence and harm to humour, rearticulating physical and sexual violence as a form of symbolic violence by celebrating abusive, predatory masculinity. Free online pimping based games also echo these themes: Pimp War requires players to 'play the part of a ruthless pimp on a quest for power and money. You will become a master at the art of pimping your hos' (www.pimpwar.com). The game is linked to social networking sites and claims to have registered over a million 'pimps' since its 1999 launch (ibid). Pimps Street is similarly transparent about the significance of 'hos' on the site, reminding players that 'to keep hos happy you want to make sure you have a good stock of condoms, crack and medicine and to increase this stock as your hos use them up (during turns, attacks, whoring etc.) and as more hos join your crew' (www.pimpsstreet.com).

As Tricia Rose, author of books about the racialised, gendered dimensions of commercial hip-hop notes:

Despite the cuddly and fuzzy hat image in some mainstream outlets and celebrated films like Hustle and Flow that attempt to generate sympathy for pimps, pimp ideology and its expression in popular culture are fundamentally exploitative to women (Rose, 2008: 168).

To recognise the symbolic violence of the mainstreaming of the term 'pimping' requires recalling the manipulative techniques that men who pimp women use to secure control, including disrupting or destroying identity, violence and drugs (Barry, 1995). These are used to form the basis, and humour, of the games discussed above, again mainstreaming notions of women as less than human, existing for men's pleasure and profit. In pornified popular culture, shored up by notions of choice and empowerment associated with prostitution, 'to pimp' has become shorthand for 'to market' something for maximum profit – a usage seemingly devoid of, yet fundamentally based on, the term's semantic origins of exploiting women in prostitution.

Conclusion

References to, and representations of, prostitution across a wide range of sources in contemporary popular culture are

indicative of the normalisation of commercial sex. In many of these portrayals, commercial sex is associated with female empowerment and entertainment, reflecting a 'postfeminist media sensibility' (Gill, 2007), a key notion of which is that women can use their bodies or profit as a means of, and route to, personal empowerment. Yet we argue that the increasing use of prostitution as a motif and marketing device in popular culture obscures empirical realities of violence, exploitation and harm and the structural inequalities on which the sex industry is built. Our analysis also draws attention to the mainstreaming of 'pimp' as a cultural motif, and its defence and normalisation through humour and irony even where violence is a core theme. Selling sex may indeed, in marketing terms, sell, but the airbrushing of harm and equation with empowerment lead us to conclude that many contemporary representations of prostitution constitute symbolic violence.

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End Notes

¹ The notion of prostitution as the oldest profession is disputed by historian Gerda Lerner (1986), who notes that prostitution only appeared after the establishment of slavery. Bindel and Kelly (2003) also suggest that if there is an oldest profession, it is more accurately agriculture.

² In November 2009, Dr Brooke Magnanti, a university researcher, revealed that she was the writer of the Belle De Jour novels and they were based on her experiences of prostitution while completing her PhD.

³ We owe this phrase of 'pimping as a verb' to Professor Liz Kelly, from her presentation at the UK Vice Conference, Gloucester, July 2007.

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