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no. 35 Constructions of Education and Resistance within Popular Feminist Commentary on Girls and Sexualisation

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No. 35 Charles, C., Constructions of Education and Resistance within Popular Feminist Commentary on Girls and Sexualisation, August 2012
Gender: Revisited, Revised, Reconfigured

Introduction: Adam Brown and Kim Toffoletti

The three papers comprising this series (Working Papers 35, 36 and 37) emerged from a one day symposium titled Gender: Revisited, Revised, Reconfigured, held at Deakin University in November 2011. An initiative of the Faculty of Arts and Education’s Processes of Signification Emerging Research Group (PSERG), the symposium aimed to showcase current research in the fields of gender, feminist, women’s and masculinity studies being undertaken across the University. The symposium provided a forum for emerging and established scholars to participate in theoretical, methodological and critical debates around gender, with a view to identifying intellectual synergies, points of connection and sites for potential research collaboration and exchange.

The focus of the inaugural PSERG symposium was on the re-interpretation and re-imagining of gender in different contexts, posing broad questions: In what (new) ways are gender stereotypes constructed in an increasingly media-saturated world? How are complex re-workings of gendered behaviour and expectations breaking down binaries and subverting dominant paradigms? What relevance does the concept of ‘gender’ have today? Given the wide scope of the topic, the papers presented engaged with issues relating to gender from a variety of contemporary perspectives, offering opportunities for rich inter-disciplinary dialogue between fields as varied as new media, psychology, literature, health, law and education. Participants ranged from postgraduates to new and senior academic staff.

The selection of Working Papers presented here is indicative of the range and scope of gender analysis and critique occurring across disciplinary boundaries. Taking the mediasphere as the site of critical focus, the contributions range from explorations of gendered discourses of childlessness in print media (Melissa Graham and Rich and Stephanie Rich, Working Paper No.36) to ‘moral panics’ about the sexualisation of girls in mainstream commercial culture (Claire Charles, Working Paper No.35), and the relationship between gendered embodiment and popular television programming (Jack Migdalek, Working Paper No.37). Each contribution demonstrates how gender, as a fluid – even unstable – concept and category continues to impact on Australian socio-cultural and political life in complex ways.
Constructions of Education and Resistance within Popular Feminist Commentary on Girls and Sexualisation

ABSTRACT

We are currently witnessing a renewed vigour to ongoing concerns about the sexualisation of young women and girls in western popular culture. This paper takes up Angela McRobbie’s concerns that the commercial sphere has become a primary site for talking about, and educating, girls and young women (McRobbie, 2008). I first explore the growth in ‘expert’ commentary, on girls and sexualisation, drawing on the work of a number of commentators and authors from the USA, the UK and Australia, who have become ubiquitous media commentators on issues facing girls, including sexualisation. I then draw on feminist and education theory to explore the possible limitations of how education is conceived within this cultural site, particularly with respect to constructions of girls’ resistance. In the final part of the paper I show how girls’ resistance is complicated in postfeminist, neoliberal societies and I propose that education scholarship and practice must confront the ways in which girls’ resistance is bound up in their developing classed and raced identities.

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Introduction

A reinvigoration of concern about the effects of popular representations of gender on young women and girls is in our midst. In Australia, commentary from high profile cultural commentators has been receiving airplay on major national radio stations, and coverage in national broadsheet newspapers in recent times (Freeman-Greene, 2009; Maguire, 2010; Neill, 2010; Shanahan, 2010; Tankard Reist, 2010). This commentary suggests that feminist critique remains important in a culture of intensified sexualisation of young women and girls, where themes and images from pornography are becoming increasingly mainstream. Posited as offering such critique, a series of books has emerged in recent years. American author Ariel Levy’s popular book *Female chauvinist pigs: women and the rise of raunch culture* (2005) was followed by Emily Maguire’s *Princesses and pornstars* (2008), Melinda Tankard Reist’s *Getting real: challenging the sexualisation of girls* (2009), and British feminist Natasha Walters’ *Living dolls: the return of sexism* (2010). Welcomed within the Australian media, these texts and their authors – as well as other high profile feminists and commentators such as Naomi Wolf – are being presented as the feminist response to popular culture and its implications for women and girls. A review on Ariel Levy’s personal website, for example, suggests that, “With *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, Ariel Levy becomes feminism’s newest and most provocative voice” (Malcolm Gladwell in Levy n.d).

Much discussion already exists within feminist cultural studies literature around feminism and popular culture, which tends to consider how various aspects of feminist discourse have been integrated into mainstream media and popular culture (such as TV programs and popular music), and the possibilities and problems associated with this (Aapola et al., 2005; McRobbie, 2004; Hollows & Moseley, 2006). Perhaps this has been particularly evident in the recent work of Angela McRobbie, who has asked important questions about the meaning of feminist messages becoming encapsulated within mainstream television programs such as *Sex and the City*, and films such as *Bridget Jones’ Diary*. The media visibility of what I call ‘popular feminist commentary’, by contrast, is an under-explored cultural phenomenon. Given the presence of authors and commentators such as Ariel Levy in the Australian media in recent years, I consider this popular feminist commentary to be a present cultural phenomenon worthy of exploration and scrutiny. In this paper I first explore some of the ways this commentary invites us to understand young feminine identities and relationships to popular culture. I consider selected examples of commentary from the USA, UK and Australia. I then draw on feminist and education theory to explore the possible limitations of how education is conceived within this commentary, particularly with respect to its location in the commercial sphere. In the final part of the paper I consider how girls’ resistance is complicated in postfeminist, neoliberal societies and I argue that education scholarship and practice must pay attention to the ways in which girls’ critical engagements with sexualised culture are linked with their developing classed and raced identities.

New times, new commentary

We live in a world in which representations of young femininity and gender relations within popular culture have changed significantly. It is now common to hear of ‘raunch culture’ (Levy) in which young women have now been licensed to behave like men (McRobbie, 2007) within specific leisure practices like weekend drinking culture. We hear of ‘girl power’ (Hopkins, 2002) and ‘new femininities’ (Gill, 2007a) where images of girlhood in popular culture have departed significantly from older images of passivity and preoccupation with romance. Hedonistic sexual ‘objectification’ of men and images of female (hetero)sexual desire (Harris, 2005) are more common within today’s media. These messages about girlhood and femininity are by no means straightforwardly celebratory for many feminist commentators and academics. When American pop idol Stefani Germanotta (better known as ‘Lady Gaga’) visited Australia in 2010, a wave of media commentary ensued. Gaga was constructed as one of the latest examples of a growing integration of pornography into mainstream popular culture (Tankard Reist, 2010). Themes and images from pornography, and the sex industry, and their implications for young people’s identities, are a key aspect of this new wave of feminist critique of popular culture.
Well-known American feminist author Naomi Wolf visited Melbourne, Australia, in May 2010, and was interviewed by a young Australian feminist author, Emily Maguire, in a feature article in The Sunday Age Magazine. Throughout this article, Wolf and Maguire note that the popular cultural terrain in which today’s young women grow up has shifted, since the publication of Wolf’s landmark book The beauty myth, in 1990, toward the mainstreaming of pornography, and the possibility that young women may be pressured to emulate the sexual and bodily practices associated within pornography, such as anal sex, and the pursuit of completely hair free genitals. Such norms may even be driving some young women to undergo cosmetic surgery in order to change the appearance of their genitals – a practice which other commentators have also associated with the pressure of popular culture (Freeman-Greene, 2009). These kinds of concerns are repeated across a number of different books and newspaper articles or columns over the past several years. What I am interested in here, is how a particular young female subject is constructed through this repetition, the kind of subject that needs to be educated by concerned parents and teachers, and taught how to resist the negative effects of sexualised popular culture.

Education and resistance within popular feminist commentary

As Emma Renold and Jessica Ringrose have observed, contemporary popular “debates tend to fix girls as either objectified, innocent passive victims, or agentic, knowledgeable, savvy navigators” (2011, p. 391). The high profile commentators I explore here do tend to position girls and young women as passively drawing on popular culture to construct their identities and relations with others. Ariel Levy’s book contains much evidence that Americans have unanimously bought into what she describes as ‘raunch culture’. She concludes her book by stating that “[t]he proposition that having the most simplistic plastic stereotypes of female sexuality constantly reiterated throughout our culture somehow proves that we are sexually liberated and personally empowered has been offered to us, and we have accepted it” (2005, p. 197). Throughout the book she finds many examples of how young people have taken up these cultural incentives.

There is a chapter in Levy’s book called ‘Pigs in training’, in which she focuses specifically on young people and their investment, and participation, in the kinds of feminine identities legitimised by ‘raunch culture’. Based on a series of observations of teen culture, Levy argues that teens are “reflacting back our slobbering culture in miniature” (p. 146). This is not the only implication in the book that raunch culture has simply been accepted, more or less unanimously, by young people. The behaviours she explores in young people, mostly young women, include increasing levels of cosmetic surgery such as breast implants, wearing revealing or sexually provocative clothing such as skirts so short they are described as ‘belts’, and T-shirts with provocative slogans. Other feminist commentators have drawn attention to T-shirts of this nature, locating them within a postfeminist culture that is apparently reclaiming the ‘objectification’ of women’s bodies as a symbol of empowered liberation (see Gill, 2003). Levy also explores various examples of young women revealing their bodies, and engaging in simulated or actual sex acts, in public forums. Cultural practices such as ‘Girls Gone Wild’ are cited as evidence of the extent to which a hyper-sexualised culture is shaping young people’s identities. There is little discussion in the book of how young people might demonstrate resistance or critique of these kinds of cultural incentives.

Natasha Walter is careful not to make as conclusive claims as Levy does, regarding the wholesale impact of hyper-sexualised culture on young women’s identity practices. Writing from a UK perspective, she even acknowledges, in her book Living dolls, that “the current hyper-sexual culture does not impact equally on all women” (2010, p. 125). She does, however, claim early in the book that “the equation of empowerment and liberation with sexual objectification is now seen everywhere and is having a real effect on the ambitions of young women” (p. 6). She devotes a chapter to exploring some of the ways in which hyper-sexualised culture appears to be shaping the lives of young girls and teenagers. From girls as young as four dressing in mini-skirts for a trip to the cinema to see Bratz: the movie, to 12 year old girls’ experiences of their older boyfriends watching porn on their computers, Walter
outlines some of these cultural practices that appear to be on the rise. Walter’s examples echo Levy’s, repeating the image of a young woman driven to cosmetic surgery in pursuit of the perfect body, and for whom a mini skirt is the fashion item of choice.

Walter gives more attention than Levy does to the voices of young people who feel angry and stifled by these cultural trends. She speaks with one young woman who refuses to buy into the embodied femininity that many of her friends have been engaging in since the first year of high school – miniskirts and makeup. For this particular teenager, her decision resulted in being bullied during the early years of secondary schooling, and eventually leaving school altogether. Thus, Walter’s research is partly concerned to show the damaging effects of hyper-sexualised culture for young women who resist it. She asserts that “what was once seen as sexual liberation has become, for young girls, more like sexual imprisoning” (p. 82), citing news media reports that, for example, “nearly three-quarters of adolescent girls are dissatisfied with their body shape and more than a third are dieting” (p. 67), and that “teenagers now see plastic surgery as an answer to their anxieties about their bodies” (p. 68). Whether embracing or rejecting it, however, there is a fairly clear relationship, for Walter, between the hyper-sexualisation of culture and young women’s developing identities.

Not only are young women often represented as highly vulnerable to the effects of sexualised culture within popular feminist commentary; the possibilities for education and resistance are also constructed in fairly simplistic ways. The only statements made about resistance and education in Maguire’s interview with Wolf appear toward the end, when Wolf is quoted as saying, “[t]he best thing we can do is try to persuade young women and men that it’s not good for their sex lives… and they’ll have better sex if they choose not to let this stuff [pornography] shape their sense of sexuality” (Maguire, 2010, p. 18). Maguire concludes the article by suggesting that “[t]he beauty myth taught masses of women to question harmful media images and messages. The challenge now is to do the same for a new generation facing a new onslaught” (p. 18). While the first comment evokes familiar approaches to feminist media education that have long been discredited for their positioning of media consumers as ‘passive dupes’ in need of rescuing (see for example, Kearney 2006; Lumby, 1997), the second does not offer any suggestions as to how we might respond to the challenge posed around assisting young women to question their popular cultural landscape.

Regarding education, Levy rightly suggests that “the way we educate young people about sexuality is not working” (2005, p. 162), arguing that abstinence-only education in schools will not help youth engage meaningfully and critically with cultural incentives around sexual practice. Yet there is no discussion of how we might conceive of alternative ways of educating with and for young people. Walter states that “girls need renewed leadership from one another, or role models, to be encouraged into seeing themselves as valued for more than their sexiness” (p. 81). What these ideas have in common is the implication that concerned adults (such as parents or teachers) need to help young women resist the damaging effects of a hyper-sexualised culture. Girls are positioned as vulnerable and stifled, requiring support from parents and educators that will help them to further critically deconstruct sexualised media content. Prominent Australian girls’ advocate Dannielle Miller, CEO of a company called Enlighten Education, urges parents to help their daughters move beyond “Bratz, Britney and Bacardi Breezers” (Miller, 2009, p. 1). At the same time, she cites many times in her publications an image of young women as “brave, captivating, creative, intelligent” (Miller, 2012) people, battling against a toxic media culture.

The implication of this is that girls are both vulnerable and requiring adult intervention, and also extremely capable, simply needing to be prompted by a caring adult to harness their inner strength, and become empowered to develop a critical distance from sexualised culture. All that is needed, it seems, is for girls to become ‘savvy navigators’, who can challenge and work against oppressive regulatory discourses of femininity and sexuality. In the remaining section of this paper I explore how such a construction of girls is too simplistic and individualistic, avoiding any consideration of girls’ social contexts (in terms of class and race) and the possibility that their critical engagements with sexualised culture may not be entirely straightforward in terms of challenging normative femininities, and redressing social injustice.
The commercial sphere and the silencing of complexity

Popular feminist commentators sell easily accessible narratives that are appealing for consumers. Lisa Gring-Pemble and Diane Blair write about ‘popular press feminists’ (such as Camille Paglia and Christina Hoff Sommers), suggesting that “these texts rely predominantly on story-telling as a persuasive vehicle” (2000, p. 361). They argue that “[t]he power of these popular-press feminist texts does not reside in the form of traditional arguments; rather, the power of these texts comes from the story that the authors tell” (2000, p. 361). Thus they highlight how the commercial sphere involves simplifying things and making them easily accessible and powerful for a wide audience. Dawn Heinecken (2003) has also noted that the commercial sphere must create narratives and representations that appeal to many whilst repelling few.

Popular feminist commentary is a ‘saleable’ kind of critique of contemporary sexualised culture, one which eschews complexity through the repetition of particular narratives about young women, and the impact of sexualised culture on their lives. These are not necessarily complex engagements with the varied impacts of this culture on young women and girls. Popular feminist commentary tends to gloss over complexity around how young women relate to a sexualised culture, as a certain narrative about the impact of sexualisation on young women is repeated. Its location within the commercial sphere is particularly noteworthy given McRobbie’s observation that western society has witnessed significant growth in girl consumerism. She argues that:

’T]he old social institutions of family, education, medicine and law, which have historically been charged with the responsibility of producing and reproducing the category of girl as a certain kind of subject...have seen their responsibility eroded in recent years.
(2008, p. 532)

Corporate culture is now seen to have the ‘answers’ and is overtaking other institutions (such as schools) in addressing young women, and in the formation of categories of youthful femininity. It is thus important to reflect upon whether popular feminist commentary is contributing to the increasing presence of the consumer media industry in defining girlhood. Education scholars have explored how teachers are perhaps ‘out of touch’ with young people’s corporate culture soaked identities, and are forced to ‘compete’ with these pleasurable pedagogies of consumer media culture (Kenway & Bullen, 2001; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004). Young people’s lives are now defined and shaped by corporate driven consumer culture, and it works on their emotions, creating powerful experiences and investments, in order to secure them as consumers. This is a pedagogy built on pleasure and when looking at the work of Enlighten Education, for example, this pleasurable approach to education is directly replicated.

McRobbie writes that “such a transition, wherein consumer culture takes upon itself this role as champion of girls’ rights and provider of the wherewithal which permits girls the quest for self-identity, is surely a key question for feminist scholars today” (p. 546). Equally though, this is a question for feminist educators. Companies such as Enlighten Education are now taking responsibility for educating young women about the dangers of sexualised corporate popular culture. Popular feminist commentary competes with scholars and educators who may be trying to explore the complexities of young women’s engagement and resistance to sexualised popular culture in a postfeminist, neoliberal context.

There is a clear relationship presented by most popular feminist authors between popular culture and young women’s identity practices. Their accounts are not well nuanced in terms of young women’s social contexts. Walter briefly mentions social class (2010, p. 48), suggesting that aspirations of being a ‘glamour model’ in the UK may be associated with aspirations of class mobility by some working class young women. Other than this little complexity is discussed around how young women’s engagement with this culture might be differently nuanced in terms of race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, or religion. It is precisely such questions that are often overlooked by journalistic style research concerned with mapping out broad scale cultural trends, rather than detailing their distinct inflections with respect to...
social difference. It is the location of this work in the commercial sphere that makes these nuances and complexities unpalatable and unnecessary.

Education scholarship and practice has already done much to explore and document young people’s agency in relation to popular culture, but it must also continue doing more than this. It must continue to grapple with the significance of girls’ raced and classed identities, in terms of their engagement and resistance to hyper-sexualised culture. It must consider the significance of the postfeminist, neoliberal context of contemporary western societies, and explore the complexities and contradictions for feminism when girls engage critically with sexualised media icons in this context.

Girls’ resistance to sexualised popular culture may not always work to challenge key normative discourses of femininity and gender relations. What constitutes ‘normative’ femininity for girls is complex and contradictory in a culture characterised by increased visibility of girls and young women in recent years. Older heteronormative discourses whereby girls must carefully negotiate a ‘slag or drag’ binary, are reconfigured alongside newer regulations for girls’ identities in neoliberal, postfeminist societies. Neoliberalism and postfeminism work together to position and require girls in particular (Harris, 2004) to be individuals who are entrepreneurial, successful and self-determined, as well as (hetero) sexually confident and desiring. As Pomerantz and Raby note, “the successful girls’ narrative has become a central tenet of postfeminist discourse” (2011, p. 550), and excellence in education and work are part of this narrative. Another key part of this narrative is the mantra of choice, whereby, as Gill observes, “women are … required to account for their decisions to have a Brazilian or Hollywood wax in terms that suggest free choice, pampering or even self-indulgence!” (2007b, p. 75). Such practices, which might be seen as regulatory and oppressive through a particular feminist lens, are now increasingly constructed in terms of free choice.

Class and race are both important in any theorisation of normative femininity. Heteronormative discourses of gender and sexuality have always been linked with class and race, and the ‘slag or drag’ binary is thought to be particularly difficult for working class, and non-white girls and women to successfully navigate (Youdell, 2005). Indeed, as scholars have shown, class antagonisms and middle class anxiety are frequently mapped onto women’s bodies and sexualities (Skeggs, 2005; Walkerdine, 1997). Commentators such as Beverley Skeggs have long explored the associations between hyper-sexual femininity and ‘working classness’ (Skeggs, 1997; 2005). Others have drawn attention to associations between hyper-sexualities and non-white racial or ethnic ‘others’ (Bordo, 2004; Perera, 1999; Weekes, 2002). Such accounts have shown how the middle-classes can ascribe a ‘trashy’ hyper-sexuality to working class or ethnic ‘others’ in order to distance themselves from being constituted in this way, and to shore up the boundaries of ‘respectable’ white femininity.

The new ‘can-do’ subject position is thought to be most easily attainable for middle class, privileged, white girls (Harris, 2004), and representations of ‘failed’ neoliberal subjects in popular culture often gather around the figure of the working class or non-white woman (McRobbie, 2004; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008; LaBennett, 2011). Class and ‘race’ (whiteness) are thus pertinent when thinking about ‘normative’ femininity, and girls’ possible resistance. Yet as I have shown, conceptualisations of girls’ resistance found in some popular feminist commentary, are devoid of discussion about girls’ various social contexts, and how these may be relevant for thinking about what their agency and resistance means. Furthermore, they mostly omit any discussion about the multiple ways in which girls’ identities are regulated in contemporary neoliberal postfeminist societies, and in particular, the possible tensions and blurring between ‘feminist’ and ‘postfeminist’ discourses that may shape and frame girls’ deconstructions of sexualised popular culture. Thus they construct girls’ resistance as fairly straightforward, and automatically progressive, overlooking the complexities that may be at work.

There are significant limitations to adopting an uncritically celebratory approach to girls’ critical engagements with sexualised popular culture, when we take into account the
multiple ways in which girls’ identities are regulated in postfeminist cultural contexts, as well as the classed dimensions of these regulations. What we might understand to be a progressive feminist manoeuvre is complicated in a postfeminist neoliberal context. Renold and Ringrose, for example, have explored how middle class girls’ rejections of hyper-sexualised femininity can reinscribe class based hierarchies of difference (Renold & Ringrose, 2008). They have also explored how white working class girls in the UK engage with hyper-sexualisation in their use of social networking sites such as Bebo, and when listening to popular rap music together (Renold & Ringrose, 2011), arguing that these girls’ engagements with sexualised popular culture non-linear and complex, and should not be understood as simply passive adoption of hyper-sexualised femininities.

The young women in my existing research were part of a privileged class which is now normatively expected to have a voice and be highly educated, as well as remain recognisably heterosexually attractive (McRobbie, 2009). They attended an elite private girls’ school, and this institutional context is relevant when thinking about their engagements with sexualised popular culture. Many teenage girls with whom I worked in this context were highly critical of popular sexualised celebrities such as Britney Spears, which I have explored elsewhere (Charles, 2007, 2010). What was so pertinent about their rejections (and occasional endorsements) of these pop stars is the way they inscribed discourses associated with neoliberalism and postfeminism in their talk. They were not simply resisting normative constructions of youthful femininity in any straightforward way. To simply celebrate their ‘savvy navigation’ when it comes to critically engaging with sexualised popular icons would smooth over a series of further issues and questions that are important for feminist research and pedagogy concerned with social justice. Specifically, it would ignore what these girls’ engagements with sexualised culture can tell us about their developing classed and raced subjectivities, and the relationship of these to ‘other’ classed and raced subjects.

Conclusion

Popular feminist commentary on girls and sexualisation has been growing in recent years. Western nations such as Australia, the USA and the UK have seen particular commentators achieve significant public profiles, and media coverage, for their advocacy work around issues associated with girls and sexualisation. Commensurate with McRobbie’s observations about the growth in girl consumerism, the work of these commentators has become a key site through which girlhood is debated, and defined, in contemporary western societies.

In this paper I have explored some of the ways in which education is conceived within popular feminist commentary on girls and sexualisation. Central within some of this commentary is the image of a young woman who is vulnerable to the effects of sexualised culture. Through adult guidance and intervention, she will learn to deconstruct media, achieve critical distance from sexualised culture, and become empowered. This narrative, I have suggested, is simplistic due to its location within the commercial sphere where stories need to be clear and catchy. The narratives that these commentators run, and the education they offer, is competing with education researchers and practitioners who may be trying to explore the more complex elements of young women’s identities and resistance in neoliberal postfeminist contexts.

Education scholarship and research has already done much to show not only how young people have agency when it comes to media culture, but also how their social positionings have important implications for their engagements with media and popular culture. In relation to girls in particular, feminist and education scholars have explored how although girls’ resistance to sexualised femininities might be worthy of celebration in many ways, it is not unproblematic. Class, race and other dimensions of difference are key when it comes to thinking about how girls might be resisting normative femininities, and what kinds of power relations they may be challenging (or reinscribing), when they engage with sexualised culture. Detailed ethnographic work with young women, and complex theoretical frameworks are needed to show how girls’ resistance to normative femininities is non-linear and multi-layered when it comes to sexualised culture.
These layers are significant, and it is important to move beyond positioning girls as individuals when thinking about whether they are empowered to resist sexualised femininities. If girls are understood to be located within particular classed and raced social contexts, then their engagements with sexualised media become significant for what they can tell us about girls’ developing classed and raced subjectivities. For researchers and practitioners interested in social justice, this is a key issue that needs to be explored further.

Endnotes
1 Girls Gone Wild (GGW) is a cultural practice in which a production team travels around popular university holiday destinations, asking young women to expose their breasts and genitals, and/or simulate sex acts for the camera. Girls are then rewarded with a GGW hat or T-shirt, as well as being surrounded by crowds of excited onlookers. The filming is then broadcast on television.
2 Glamour modelling, as Walter describes, is a euphemism for semi-naked, or naked, posing in men’s magazines such as Nuts and Zoo (UK).

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