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No, you're not 'hardwired' to stare at women's breasts

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You'll likely know by now about the Free the Nipple Picnic event held in Brisbane on January 17, described by one of its organisers as:

Author



Michelle Smith

Research fellow in English Literature,
Deakin University

just a way for us to sit around in an open public area and feel that we can have our nipples free and have great discussions.

The Free the Nipple campaign – named after Lina Esco's 2014 film – is a global push to desexualise women's breasts and allow women the freedom to be topless in the same places in which it is acceptable for men and boys to do so. But are such campaigns ridiculous in a hypersexualised porn culture? Isn't the sexual appeal of breasts for men, and many women, "hardwired" and unable to be changed?

The Brisbane picnic drew the attention of hundreds of men online who were troubled that men were excluded from attending, even though the event was intended to provide a safe space for women to

gather, free from “sexualisation”.

Contemporary Western culture codes breasts as erotic objects, as the increasing practice of breast enlargement through implants illustrates.

Much of the discomfort and shaming surrounding public breastfeeding stems from the overwhelming understanding of breasts as sexually arousing to the viewer.

There have been repeated instances in which Facebook, for example, has deleted photographs of mothers breastfeeding.

The site’s most recent nudity policy restricts “some images of female breasts if they include the nipple” but now allows “photos of women actively engaged in breastfeeding”.

What is often overlooked in discussions about the sexual appeal of breasts is the fact that they have not always been regarded as irresistibly attractive in all points in history and across all cultures.

Other parts of women’s bodies have been viewed as more enticing than breasts, including buttocks, legs, ankles, hair, and feet. Bound feet (or the “golden lotus”) in ancient China had strong erotic connections and acts that could be performed with them were detailed in illustrated sex manuals.

Some of these body parts have no connection to a woman’s capacity to reproduce or nurture her offspring, as is often suggested to explain the modern fixation on large breasts. (Greater breast size, or

more fatty tissue, does not mean that a woman can produce more milk than a smaller breasted woman.)

Buttocks are actually a greater marker of a woman's fertility than breasts. Buttocks show whether women have sufficient stores of fat to sustain a pregnancy, signal pelvic size and are prominent when young, becoming less pronounced with age.

The appeal of larger buttocks is evident in historical fashion trends such as the bustle in the 19th century, but also among certain racial groups in modern culture. African-American and Hispanic communities are the most likely to seek out buttock augmentation (implants), and hip hop music has given us dozens of odes to large "booties".

The body parts that different cultures fetishise are often those that must be covered by clothing. In the words of author Elizabeth Wilson, in her 1985 book *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*:

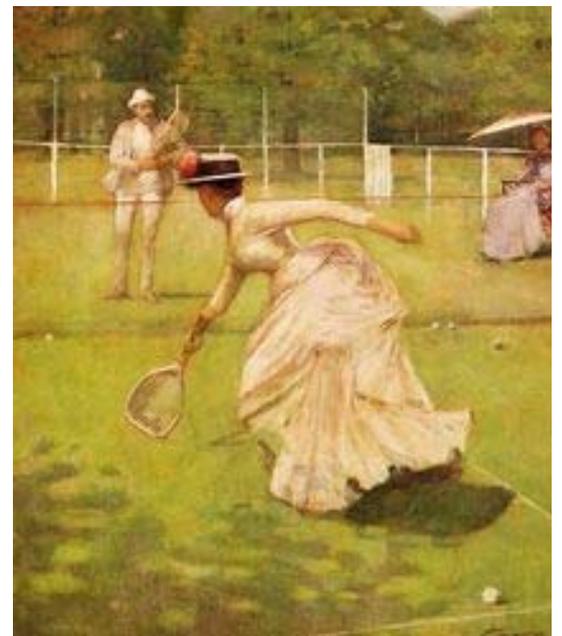
Even in societies whose members ordinarily wear few clothes, it is said to be customary to dress up for dancing ceremonies and other occasions on which sexual interest is likely to be aroused. It is often said that dress enhances sexual attraction because it both reveals and conceals the body.

Breasts are an example of concealment feeding into sexual attraction today, but there are other instances that reveal how this process is not the result of an innate, "hardwired" desire.

Buttocks and breasts might be sexualised, in part, because of their proximity to genitalia and status as secondary sexual characteristics, but how can the eroticisation of women's ankles be explained?

In Victorian Britain, respectable women wore long skirts and dresses that covered the entirety of their legs. As the author Jane Nicholas put it in *The Modern Girl* (2015), the fact that these areas were always concealed meant that "a glimpse of an ankle or calf could be erotic" for men.

Like ankles, head hair has no inherent sexual function, but it has also been eroticised within numerous religious traditions that have, in turn, required women to keep their hair veiled. Many Muslim girls and women cover their hair outside the home, and in some Jewish communities married women wear hats, scarves or wigs to hide their own hair from view.



A Rally, an 1885 painting by Sir John Lavery, Irish artist (1885). Wikimedia Commons

These taboos on the exposure of women's ankles and hair in public illustrate that the parts of women's bodies that are considered sexually arousing are changeable in different times and places and that concealing them only adds to their forbidden allure.

When thinking about the Free the Nipple movement, there is also the obvious point that many traditional cultures around the world did not require women to cover their breasts until the intervention of Christian missionaries or introduction of Islam. In locations where women are routinely topless, attitudes towards breasts are, unsurprisingly, different to places in which there are prohibitions on their exposure.

None of this is to deny that many people derive pleasure from looking at breasts or that women themselves often derive sensual pleasure from their breasts. But when it comes to the debate about whether women should be able to appear in public topless, we can challenge the idea that an unstoppable desire to gaze on women's breasts in a sexual way is an inherent part of male biological makeup that will never alter.

Just as we might not understand why a Victorian woman could not stride down the street with her calves exposed, so too might we look back in future with some mystification at the idea that a few topless women having a picnic could provoke heated debate.

