

Good Girls Gone Bad: The Consumption of Fetish Fashion and the Sexual Empowerment of Women

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study seeks to extend the recent psychology, fashion theory, and consumer research by considering female motivations for, and outcomes from the consumption of fetish fashion. Based on preliminary qualitative research, support was found for the theory-based propositions that females consume fetish fashions because doing so allows them to experience more positive self evaluations, and that over time these positive evaluations result in sexual empowerment in the form of increased control over sensual experience and sexual self presentation.

INTRODUCTION

Previous research suggests that consumer goods or objects are given meanings by the culturally-constituted world, which are then passed on to individuals within that society (McCracken 1986). However, because many individuals are not part of mainstream culture, recent research has sought to extend the scope of culturally constructed meanings to include various subcultures of our society. The study of the unique meanings ascribed to products by the members of the groups which exist on the margins of society such as homosexuals (Kates 1998; Wardlow 1996), consumers of tattooing (Sanders 1989) and body piercing (MacKendrick 1998), and ethnic minorities (Penaloza 1994), has provided interesting new insights into the motivations for product consumption in everyday life.

One group which may offer a particularly unique perspective on the relationship between product meanings and consumption is the fetish subculture, whose members are motivated by very special and unique product meanings to consume products such as high-heeled shoes, full-fashioned stockings, corsets, and PVC, latex and leather clothing, etc...The fetish community is comprised of both males and females (Polhemus 1994; Steele 1985, 1996), who may be either fetishists (those who rely on the fetish objects to help them achieve sexual arousal and gratification; Freud 1933/1964; Krafft-Ebing 1886/1965) or nonfetishists (those who consume the fetish products, but do not need them for sexual arousal). As suggested by the majority of previous research, fetishism is a male domain in which women, while not fetishists themselves, act primarily as facilitators of perverse scenarios by wearing the fetish objects (Freud 1933/1964; Kaplan 1991; Krafft-Ebing 1886/1965; Stoller 1985; Steele 1996). Though several researchers have recently suggested that females may fetishize food and other objects (Gamman and Makinen 1994; Kaplan 1991), this study focuses on the role of the nonfetishistic female in the fetish subculture, specifically, her motivations for consuming fetish fashions. Accepting that they are not fetishists themselves according to the psychoanalytic definition of the word (Freud 1933/1964; Kaplan 1991; Krafft-Ebing 1886/1965), female members of the fetish community will be referred to as consumers (rather than fetishists) of fetish fashion (rather than fetish objects) throughout the rest of this paper.

MOTIVATIONS FOR FETISHIST CONSUMPTION OF FETISH OBJECTS

Understanding the motivation for consumption of fetish objects by (male) fetishists is simple—for them the fetish objects have a very complex and unique set of meanings that enable sexual arousal, and ultimately gratification (Freud 1933/1964; Kaplan

1991; Krafft-Ebing 1886/1965; Stoller 1985; Steele 1996). In fetishism “[t]he basic requirement or obligatory precondition for sexual arousal is that the pervert have in his possession an inanimate object—a leather boot, a lace handkerchief, a black corset—or that he obtain a sexual partner who is willing to wear the inanimate object” (Kaplan 1991, p. 21). Freudian theory suggests that, for fetishists, the special meanings of fetish objects occur spontaneously as a defensive response to the fear of castration which accompanies the discovery that an important female figure in their life (usually their mother) lacks a phallus, rather than being culturally constituted (McCracken 1986), or taught by members of the fetish subculture (Kates 1996).

To overcome their castration anxiety, and thereby reinforce their own sense of masculinity, fetishists feel compelled to create the phallic woman through the incorporation of body parts or fetish objects, into the sex ritual (Freud 1933/1964; Krafft-Ebing 1886/1965). By sexually empowering the fetishist, the “consumption” of fetish objects should lead to improved perceptions of virility, and because virility is such a highly regarded attribute for males in Western society (Costa 1994; Kemper 1990; Kimmel 1995), these perceptions should lead to more positive self esteem (Rosenberg 1979). While fetishists are motivated to consume fetish objects because doing so facilitates self esteem enhancement (which is a continuous motivator of human behavior; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon and Rosenblatt 1990; Spencer, Josephs and Steele 1993; Tesser 1988), as of yet, little attention has been paid to understanding those factors that motivate females to consume fetish fashions.

MOTIVATIONS FOR FEMALE CONSUMPTION OF FETISH FASHIONS

While the special meanings and powers of fetish objects occur spontaneously to fetishists, female members of the fetish community must “learn” about the special meanings of these objects from members of the subculture (Kates 1996). Females and other nonfetishists who are curious may learn the special meanings of fetish objects either from acquaintances who are themselves fetishists or through the global fetish market, which consists of thousands of retailers (e.g., Syren, So Hip It Hurts, Romantasy, Stormy Leather, House of Whacks, Dark Garden), publications (e.g., Marquis, Skin Two, Leg Show, Bizarre, Fetish Girls), clubs (e.g., Bondage A-Go-Go, Club DNA, Torture Garden, The Dungeon Club, Stiletto, Masquerade), and world wide web sites that cater to the fetish community (e.g. Skin Two, Honour, Dream Dresser, Caressable, Touchable).

As this industry grows in size (a recent search for the term “fetish” resulted in 771,840 responses; <http://www.altavista.com>), and as fetish fashion trickles up from the clubs and streets, the worlds of fashion (e.g., designers such as Versace and Westwood) and advertising (e.g., the latest campaign for Absolut Au Kurant) also provide mainstream audiences with tiny glimpses into the fetish subculture (Gladwell 1997; Steele 1985, 1996; Theroux 1998). Regardless of whether they are initially exposed to fetish fashion by members of the fetish community or by pop culture, because they are not fetishists themselves, female members of the fetish subculture would appear to have different motivations for consuming fetish fashions than their fetishistic counterparts...or do they?

Short Term Motivators: Positive Self Evaluation

Internal Reinforcement. Attribution theory suggests that the fact that any woman would make a conscious choice to wear garments and accessories which are restrictive (e.g., five-inch heels, latex clothing and corsets), expensive (e.g., ready-to-wear latex dresses currently average around \$300, custom designed corsets begin at \$400) and impractical (e.g., try dancing in a pair of five-inch stilettos, or cooking dinner while wearing a latex catsuit), would indicate that she receives either internal or external reinforcement for such behavior (see Folkes 1988 for a review). As the fetishist perceives himself, and is perceived by others, more positively when the fetish objects are incorporated into the sex ritual, one possible explanation for female consumption of fetish fashions is that nonfetishistic women also experience more positive self evaluations when they wear fetish gear.

Because self evaluations are based on information received from internal and/or external sources including self perceptions, social comparisons and reflected appraisals (Schwalbe and Staples 1988), the potentially positive self evaluations resulting from consumption of fetish fashions may come from within the female consumer or from outside sources. This point is demonstrated in a reader response letter to a website called "Legs-Stockings-Garters" (<http://www.l-s-g.com>), where Sarah, a 45 year old, married professional woman writes:

"I live in upstate New York and my female friends (who only wear pantyhose) think I am crazy for wearing stockings... they assume that I only wear them for my husband and cannot believe that I wear them! ...Well...my husband certainly does enjoy them!...But I wear them mostly because I LIKE WEARING THEM...and THEY MAKE ME FEEL INCREDIBLY FEMININE!!!!"

Sarah admits that, while her husband is happy that she wears stockings instead of pantyhose (an external source of positive self evaluation), the positive reaction she experiences based on her *self perception* (Bem 1972) is her primary motivation for wearing fetish fashions. Because wearing stockings and garter belts allows her to perceive herself as more feminine, based on cultural standards of feminine beauty (Mazur 1986), Sarah's evaluation of herself becomes more positive when she wears fetish fashions.

While previous research provides support for the notion that fetish garments, which are often tighter, shinier and more restrictive than most mainstream fashion, cause women to perceive of themselves as more sensual, sexual and confident individuals (Steele 1985, 1996), self evaluation theory suggests that such behavior may also impact the comparisons a woman makes with other women (*social comparison*; Festinger 1954). By allowing women to reconstruct their physical appearance, and therefore their identities (Schouten 1991), consumption of fetish fashions may result in more favorable social comparisons with culturally-dictated norms of female attractiveness, which will also lead to more positive self evaluations (Festinger 1954; Mazur 1986; Wood 1989).

Sarah for example perceives of herself as being more feminine (according to societal femininity norms) when she wears stockings and garters—and she is motivated to continue consuming such items because she likes feeling more feminine.

External Reinforcement. Just as virility is an important characteristic for males in our society, physical appearance, because of its correlation with dating, and marriage success in Western society, is an extremely important characteristic for females (Hatfield and Sprecher 1986; Patzer 1985). The third source of self evaluative information, *reflected appraisals*, comes from an individual's interpretations of other peoples' reactions (either real or imagined;

Solomon 1983) to her (Shrauger and Shoemaker 1979). Women who wear fetish fashions frequently elicit attention from both fetishists and nonfetishists (Steele 1996; Theroux 1998), and providing this attention is perceived as being positive, it may serve as another motivator for women to consume fetish fashions. Sarah's perception of the joy her husband experiences when seeing her in stockings and garter belts appears to serve as an additional motivator for her to continue consuming them.

Because human beings constantly seek to maintain or enhance their self esteem (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon and Rosenblatt 1990; Spencer, Josephs and Steele 1993; Tesser 1988), and because self esteem is based on self evaluation (Rosenberg 1979), women who experience more positive self evaluations as a result of wearing fetish fashions should be motivated to continue doing so.

P1: Positive self evaluation motivates female consumption of fetish fashions.

While positive self evaluation is proposed to be an immediate response to wearing fetish fashions, it seems likely that over time, this positive reinforcement may lead to more long-term positive consequences as well.

Long Term Motivators: Sexual Empowerment

Because beautiful women have been portrayed as dangerous and cunning in the myths and folklore of many cultures (e.g. Eve, Pandora and Lilith), Western society has historically viewed female sexuality with suspicion and fear (Tseelon 1995). To protect themselves from this danger, male members of patriarchal society have created and enforced a doctrine of modesty and chastity in female dress (Steele 1986; Tseelon 1995). While fashion theorists debate the effectiveness of this doctrine (see Tseelon 1995 for a more thorough discussion), there is little disagreement that the Industrial Revolution brought with it a renewed interest in, and attention to women's clothing (Banner 1992; Steele 1985; Tseelon 1995). This renewed attention occurred as the role of men's clothing shifted from being a mechanism for self display to a mechanism for communicating status and position within the world of commerce (Lowen 1968). As a result of this shift, gazing upon female clothing became a compromise for male desires for self display (Steele 1985; Tseelon 1995). Throughout history women's clothing has played a number of important roles, all of which have been controlled by men.

While it is clear that by wearing fetish fashion, females have the power to elicit positive responses from fetishists (Freud 1933/1964; Krafft-Ebing 1886/1965; Steele 1985, 1996), evidence suggests that fetish items such as stilettos, stockings and latex clothing elicit positive responses from nonfetishistic males as well (Steele 1996; Theroux 1998). As they experience increased positive self evaluation from both internal and external sources, the women who consume fetish fashion may look upon it as a discourse through which they can communicate their confidence in and comfort with their own sexuality (Thompson and Haytko 1997), and reclaim the sexual power that has historically been controlled by men. By wearing or choosing not to wear corsets, high-heels or other fetish products as she desires, the female fetish fashion enthusiast assumes control over her own sensual experience, as well as her sexual attractiveness to others—which is empowering. Assuming sexual empowerment results in enhanced self esteem, women will be motivated to continue consuming fetish fashions.

P2: Sexual empowerment motivates female consumption of fetish fashions.

METHODOLOGY

Consistent with naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba 1985), the purpose of this exploratory study is to use primary research to refine and extend the theory of consumption motivation, by applying it to a unique subculture of the population—the fetish community. Having established the unique product orientation of the fetish subculture, and the lack of consideration given female motivations for consumption of fetish products in the domain of consumer research, it was concluded that this study would extend the theory of consumer behavior (Marshall and Rossman 1989).

Beginning with a conceptualization of the phenomenon based on theory from psychiatry, psychology, sociology, fashion theory and consumer behavior, a set of questions was developed for use in long, semi-structured interviews (McCracken 1988). As the interviews progressed, research questions were revised to reflect the new information received, and the revised questions were used for subsequent interviews (Spiggle 1994).

Five female consumers of fetish fashion were recruited from various sectors of the fetish community in an attempt to maximize the depth and breadth of information obtained. Due to the "sensitive" nature of the topic, opportunities for recruiting informants were somewhat limited, and purposive sampling was necessary. Two of the fetish enthusiasts (one a college student, the other a married sales representative for a packaged goods manufacturer) were recruited by the researcher at a fetish event called the "Exotic/Erotic Ball", which has gained national attention due to coverage by national network news and television shows such as MTV's "Real Sex". The third subject, a professional fetish model, was recruited at a performance-art event staged by fetish photographer Eric Kroll (see <http://www.fetish-usa.com>, 12 Women, 12 Boxes). Two additional informants were recruited through their fetish fashion businesses—one a custom-design latex clothing company called So Hip It Hurts, and the other a boutique called Romantasy, which specializes in custom-fitted corsets. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 2 hours and were tape recorded with subjects' approval. Four of the five interviews were conducted in person while the fifth was conducted over the telephone. In addition to these interviews, more than 20 shorter interviews were conducted over the course of six months to provide additional insights into the fetish phenomenon.

Data analysis was inductive and open-ended and each subsequent interview was used to verify, refine or dispute the information received both from the secondary research and the previous interviewees (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Every effort was made to ensure the trustworthiness of the research including a 20-month period of observation of the fetish subculture, triangulation across sources and methods, regular on-site interaction, negative case analysis, debriefing by peers, and member checks. As the data were collected and transcribed, emergent themes were checked against the literature and the initial research questions, which were continuously revised (Marshall and Rossman 1989). Data analysis provided support for the two research propositions.

RESULTS OF ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

While the psychological literature is replete with information about the consumption of fetish objects by fetishists (Freud 1933/1964; Krafft-Ebing 1886/1965), it offers little information about why a female, who is not a fetishist herself, would consume such products. To better understand the role of positive self evaluation in motivating women to consume fetish fashion, subjects were asked about both internal and external reinforcement (Shrauger and Schoeneman 1979) they receive when wearing fetish attire. Consistent with previous fetish fashion research (Steele 1985, 1996), much of the reinforcement the subjects experience comes from the

physiological aspects of wearing the fetish fashions. The simple act of putting on an item such as a corset, a latex or vinyl garment, or stiletto shoes was said to cause immediate physical changes in a woman's posture, and her gait, which results in a heightened sense of awareness of her own body, which each respondent agreed was extremely positive. As anticipated, positive internal reinforcement in the form of feelings of heightened self awareness, sensual pleasure, and enhanced sexuality were mentioned.

"Corseting forces you to stand up...Everyone knows heels make you hold your body better, which is why some women will go through hell...You feel it instantly, like suddenly you're holding yourself confidently and sexy, not because you did it, but because the clothes are forcing you to. It kind of seeps into your mind, then you build confidence off that. After a long time you do it on your own [without the garments]" (Nicole, receptionist/fetish model)

"It just feels almost, hmmm, just like sexual, you know? It's like a lot of times when I walk around in my everyday life I don't feel like necessarily a sexual being, but for every minute that I'm walking around in vinyl, I'm real aware of myself and my sexuality and the energy that I'm putting out, you know? It's really sensual and sexy." (Stephanie, college student)

A second theme surrounded the feelings of security and comfort that come from being physically "embraced" by the garments, and from being able to use the restrictiveness of the products to help define or signify the boundaries that separate the individual from the rest of the world.

"Wearing a corset is like being embraced." (Amy, corset shop owner)

"I just remember it being really, really interesting and suddenly becoming aware of my body in a way that I had never been aware of it. You know, it's almost like when you cut the tip of your finger. Suddenly it's like 'Wow, I never realized I used the tip of my finger this much!'. That's the way it was in a corset. It's like suddenly I totally felt different about myself and I had this kind of strange sense of, like, security." (Mary, latex clothing designer)

"I'm not sure if I can explain this, but one of the things I like about fetish fashion is that it gives me boundaries and constraints which kind of define me. These days we have so much freedom that it's harder to define ourselves, in the world. These things help us define ourselves—they give us limits, almost like parental discipline." (Dianne, sales representative)

Mary, the heavily tattooed and pierced clothing designer described the source of her positive self evaluation this way: "It never came from a relationship or a boyfriend or anything. It was always just me."

Several women mentioned that prior to their involvement with fetish fashion they received very little positive feedback from males, which they attributed to their failure to meet cultural standards of sexual attractiveness.

"I was always the smart one, the straight-A student, I wore glasses and had a flat chest... When I got up on the stage at that corseting seminar and they squeezed me into this really small

corset—I loved the attention and the applause I got. I bought my first custom-fitted corset about four months after that and now I have over 40 corsets.” (Amy)

“I was always a kind of chunky kid, so I never had... I played a lot of sports. I was always very like buff, but kinda chunky. I had more of a masculine type body, so by putting this on it was like ‘Wow, I look like a girl!’ At one point when I was corseting regularly I was down to about a 17 inch waist. Yeah, a 17 inch waist with 38 inch hips.” (Mary)

The external reinforcement these women receive from both fetishistic and nonfetishistic males was described as being gratifying, and exciting, and it was also mentioned by each of the informants.

“I first started dressing sexy for the attention, to get attention from men. My husband loves me in this stuff.” (Dianne)

“When I wear my corsets, men can’t take their hands off of my waist, they keep stroking and stroking it, they’re mesmerized.” (Amy)

“It was a great look and a lot of people wanted to take pictures.” (Stephanie was recruited at the “Exotic/Erotic Ball” wearing a long black vinyl, “mermaid” skirt, a vinyl top and 5 inch patent leather shoes)

“When I wore my PVC nurse’s uniform to the Folsom Street Fair (a San Francisco gay/lesbian/S&M/fetish, street festival) men were literally following me down the street.” (Nicole)

While several of the informants mentioned enjoying the attention they receive when they wear fetish fashion, their enjoyment is contingent on their ability to control that attention.

“Some people are shocked, like in an offensive way, kind of offended, but other people are just like outwardly appreciative which—sometimes goes to the other end of the continuum of being disrespectful.” (Stephanie)

“I was starting to get tired of the attention. Ummm, I mean, I would have these men just like, I’d go out anywhere and these men would like follow me around...They’d want to touch me and be staring at me. I didn’t want that much attention....Even when I’d go out in my overalls, I’d be at the grocery store and I would have a submissive man following me around.” (Mary)

Control is an important issue for these women, many of whom had never experienced the feeling of being able to control their own sensuality and/or sexuality prior to wearing fetish fashions. As they become more and more able to control their sexuality, they suggested that they feel empowered.

“New Year’s Eve we went to Denny’s and this group of like eight high school boys came in and they couldn’t even talk to each other. They just stopped, and they were just looking, just gawking and it was just that, you know, feeling a little powerful.” (Stephanie)

“You know that when you go out in this outfit (referring to a PVC nurse’s uniform) that people are gonna look at you and you know that men are gonna be like, ‘Can I buy you a drink?’, ‘Can I pay your way in?’, ‘Can I give you a ride home?’. You

know you can get stuff for it, it’s really a base emotion. That’s just how it works. So when you know that, it gives you a sense of power, you know, I know that I can turn heads when I walk through. It’s like a magnet. You know, you have as much power as the strongest magnet in the world. It gives you a whole new attitude.” (Nicole)

“I loved the way it looked and I really liked the way that it felt and I thought it empowered me as a woman because it changed my posture, it made me stand upright, it commanded attention. People wanted to touch me and I was able to control whether they touched me or not.” (Mary)

“I know that when I wear this men are going to look at me as sexy, but when I wear it, I look at me as confident. You know, I mean I definitely feel sexy, but my main feeling is this confidence, like I know I look good. I know I feel good. Man’s first feeling about it is ‘Wow, she looks sexy!’ I don’t think any man out there is like ‘Wow, she looks confident!’ I think subconsciously that’s why they’re attracted—It’s like the way you’re holding yourself. See, they don’t realize that, but I do.” (Nicole)

CONCLUSIONS

By consuming fetish fashions, the women interviewed for this study have been given a mechanism through which they have little choice but to pay attention to and focus on their own bodies. Each of them spoke of the changes in posture that occurred as they slipped into their stilettos, their corsets or their latex dresses. By forcing them to stand tall, chest held high, the fetish gear instilled in them a sense of self confidence that many indicated they had previously lacked. As they appeared more confident, self assured, and sexy, they also experienced increased attention from others, which further increased those feelings of self confidence. Ultimately, fetish fashions gave these women the mechanism to tap into the power of their own sexuality and for that they seemed grateful.

The meanings these women ascribe to fetish fashions are special and unique, for their empowering qualities appear to last long after the garments have been removed and put away. These feelings are similar to the feelings fetishists have about the fetish objects in that they are infused with a sexual power that’s not found in mainstream culture, and it is this shared meaning that distinguishes members of the fetish subculture from nonmembers (Kates 1996). Yet, at the same time, because the woman who wears fetish fashion does so by choice, she is able to enjoy the feeling of sexual empowerment even when the fetish items are not present, giving her a unique perspective on the power of the fetish items.

Future Research and Limitations

While the sample size for this exploratory research was quite small, it was extremely helpful in refining and focusing the research questions. Other limitations include the fact that all respondents were residents of San Francisco, a city known for its acceptance of many diverse subcultures including the fetish community. People living in other geographic areas may encounter a different experience. Because all participants are actively involved in the consumption of fetish fashion it seems likely that their experience is positive, therefore, future research should attempt to seek out women who no longer wear fetish fashions to understand whether they experience any long term, residual effects from such behavior, as well as their reasons for ceasing consumption. Additionally, because each of the respondents in the sample was heterosexual, applicability of the research questions to gays and lesbians (many of whom are members of the fetish community as well) was not addressed. Finally,

because the researcher worked alone, triangulation across researchers was not possible (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Based on the results of this exploratory research, the next step of this project will be to test the propositions set forth in this paper on a larger sample of the female, fetish population. In addition to exploring what motivates women to wear fetish fashions, other areas which should be studied include; further teasing out the differences between internal and external sources of positive self evaluation, the development of a model of the meaning transfer processes within the fetish community, consideration of the distinction between provocative clothing and fetish fashions, the meanings and significance of the increasing appearance of fetish imagery in mainstream fashion and advertising, and cultural standards of sexual attractiveness.

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