

The Politics of Cleavage

A young man and woman are having a friendly chat after a yoga class. The fresh-faced blonde seems totally relaxed but then she freezes. "Did you just look at my chest," she asks angrily, arms firmly folded.

"Yep," mutters the bloke sheepishly. Her response is fierce. "Can't I go to one yoga class without being ogled by some jerk?"

Instead of being cowed, he takes her on, launching into a passionate defence of his action: "If you really didn't want me to stare at your beautiful breasts, you'd be wearing something other than a purple sports bra covering maybe one-third of your perfect tits," he argues, suggesting, among other things, that he's biologically programmed to scan for life-giving breasts for his future offspring. He's cute, passionate and ultimately convincing. She ends up asking him out for coffee.

This skit, from New York media company The Kloons¹, has attracted more than a million hits on YouTube. The producers say it wasn't just meant as a joke but rather "to investigate the deep chasm between men and women".

That mighty chasm is indeed wide and growing, with so many women now feeling absolutely entitled to dress as they like - bare tits, enticing flesh squeezed into the shortest, tightest clothing. Everywhere you look, women are stepping out dressed provocatively but bristling if the wrong man shows he enjoys the display.

And men - well, they are in a total state of confusion. There are cocky, attractive, successful men, alpha males, revelling in this unexpected bounty, boldly eyeing off the assets of women they fancy.

Sensitive males are wary, not knowing where to look. Afraid of causing offence. And there are angry men, the beta males who lack the looks, the trappings of success to tick these women's boxes. They know the goodies on display are not for them. These are the men most likely to behave badly, blatantly leering, grabbing and sneering. For them, the whole thing is a tease. They know it and resent it.

The state of play was neatly summed up some time ago during the SlutWalks, where scantily dressed women took to the streets, proudly proclaiming their right to dress as they wish, in protest over a Canadian cop, who suggested women shouldn't dress like sluts if they don't want to be raped.

Jamie Lauren Keiles, an organiser of SlutWalk Chicago, explained that a half-naked woman as a form of protest is different from a half-naked lady pandering to the male gaze. It's about "a woman putting herself out there as a 'f--- you' as opposed to a 'f--- me'," Keiles explained. That may be fine in the context of protesting that scantily dressed women aren't asking to be raped. Of course, there's never an excuse for sexual violence or for men to paw or harass women.

But when young women stand in front of mirrors on a Saturday night, adjusting their cleavage, seeking ever greater exposure, maybe they need to think more about what they are doing. While there are women who claim they dress sluttishly just to make themselves feel good, the fact remains that, like the protesters, the main message sent is about flaunting women's sexual power.

It's an "UP YOURS" gesture of the most provocative kind.

Not that all women understand that's how they come across. A mid-40s woman told me about a naive 22-year-old work colleague who had had a breast enlargement. "She is a tiny thing, quite pretty but socially inept and ready to settle for anything that comes along. She went for a breast enlargement to a D cup in the belief it would attract a better type than her current, unsatisfactory bloke."

The older colleague tried to discourage her but she went ahead with the operation. "Now she gets all weird when older men or ugly men or fat men or any men she doesn't see as ideal even glance at her. She reacts with nervous laughter and at the first opportunity runs back to me and says, 'OMG, you won't believe who looked at me,' as if it is unreasonable for these men to take any notice of her."

"And surprise - it hasn't introduced her to a better partner! Now she is talking about having them redone a size larger."

This girl hasn't a clue but plenty of other women know exactly what they are doing, as they make clear in internet discussions of this issue.

"I luv my 36DDs and show them off. I like to see men drool."

"It's so funny when some men get caught cos they have that 'Am I in trouble?' look on their face!"

"It is a tease thing ... men are so weak."

"We have such power over them."

Jean is a 33-year-old, extremely attractive Sydney divorcee completing her PhD in physics. She has a fit body and large breasts, which she likes showing off in revealing clothes. When she "gets the girls out", she enjoys the subtle looks, even a discreet compliment about her body from the right man.

"A quick glance from them, a little moment of recognition, and then back to the conversation. It's part of the dance, hinting at a possible connection," she said.

Are some allowed to look and others not?

"Well, I think there's a sort of sexual food chain and I prefer to engage with people on a similar level as me. Sometimes it feels sleazy when I'm way out of the observer's league, like if they're really old or fat or ugly."

That's the problem. She's advertising her wares to the world, not just her target audience, and somehow men are expected to know when they are not on her page. Jean described at length the subtle dance, based largely on non-verbal behaviour, that she uses to show men when attention is welcome. But as we all know, many men are lousy at that stuff - the language totally escapes them.

Rob Tiller is a Perth counsellor who has run more than 200 men's workshops on communication skills, sex and intimacy. He believes many men are confused about what's going on.

"In one of my workshops, I remember a guy describing women flaunting their bodies as a form of 'biological sexual harassment' towards men, to which most of the group gave a collective nod," Tiller says. "The self-assured, cocky blokes seem to see bare flesh as a green light and often express a 'bring-it-on' attitude but others find it difficult to handle. I think it's a real catch-22 for most men. We

really do want to be respectful but that's not always easy with a neon pink G-string staring up at us."

The internet is bristling with men writing about what they regard as women's sexual arrogance. Provocative female attire is an assault against men, wrote Giovanni Dannato for *In Mala Fide*, an online magazine of heretical ideas. He argued women exposing themselves without intending to reciprocate the attention they attract is impolite and inconsiderate - which, he bizarrely suggested, is rather like schoolchildren who bring something tasty to class that they are not prepared to share. It amounts to "an act of aggression in which they use the power of their sex as a weapon", he wrote.

Dannato may be on to something when he proposed that some of the catcalling these women attract is a "defence mechanism used by low-status men against women flaunting themselves publicly". There certainly are a bunch of men writing about the plight of the beta males - unattractive, low-status guys who don't get to first base with women.

F. Roger Devlin, a political philosopher who has written challenging material on gender issues for *The Occidental Quarterly*, points out these beta males have long been tearing their hair out trying to discover what on earth they have to do to make themselves acceptable to the girl next door. They get the message that what women instinctively want is "for 99 per cent of the men they run into to leave them alone, buzz off, drop dead, while the one to whom they feel attracted makes all their dreams come true".

Of course, there is no excuse for gross behaviour when beta males are told to buzz off, told that the titillation isn't meant for them - plenty of men do manage to control themselves in these circumstances.

But surely men have a right to show what it's like to be on the receiving end. There's a great scene in the animated television comedy *Family Guy*, where Peter Griffin, the overweight, ugly, blue-collar dad, lets fly about Lindsay Lohan putting on her little outfits and jumping around on stage throwing "those things" in front of his face. "What am I supposed to do? What do you want from me?" he asks plaintively. But he knows the answer all too well: "I'll tell you what you want. You want NOTHING. We all know no woman anywhere wants to have sex with anyone and to titillate us with any thoughts otherwise is just bogus."

Griffin's howl of protest is based on the simple truth that some men spend their lives in a state of sexual deprivation, dealing with constant rejection. Roy F. Baumeister is a psychology professor, now at the University of Queensland who has extensively researched gender difference in sex drive. "Sexual frustration is almost inevitable for the majority of men and not just occasionally. They won't have enough partners or even enough sex with one partner to satisfy their wishes," Baumeister writes, concluding, "the tragedy of the male sex drive" is men's state of perpetual readiness, which so rarely meets its match.

That's the context that makes the constant just-out-of-reach titillation men now face confusing, irritating and even insulting. Yet many men are still trying hard to get it right, listening to their partners about why they hate men's ogling.

Take these soul-searching words from a 35-year-old Brisbane man.

"When I was first dating my partner, we'd be walking along the beach through the 'minefield' of tanning lasses and I'd moan out loud when a particularly sexy beach bunny crossed our path. My lady would protest my caveman shenanigans to no avail; not only was she hurt by my overtly disrespectful

ogling, it also deeply impacted her confidence about her body. Over time, she became much less comfortable with her body at the beach, as well as the bedroom. Five years later, the scars left by my clumsy perving are healing but she still struggles with her body image. Such a shame because, honestly, she's a knockout."

Of course, men are going to want to look - "it feels like there's a magnet in her chest" one man complained. But there are men struggling with how to do this in a respectful way. There's a sweet blog on *The Good Men Project* website - which promotes enlightened "masculinity" - where Hugo Schwyzer describes his total humiliation when Jenny Talbot caught him staring at her boobs in maths class. "You're so perverted," she yelled and Hugh cringed with embarrassment. But since then, he's taken women's studies courses and understands "the problematic power of the male gaze".

And he's ready to give helpful hints to men about how to look without making women uncomfortable. Like the Three-Second Rule: "Few women are going to feel you're undressing them if your glance lasts so short a time."

There are other blogs where men describe how awkward it is not to be caught glancing chest height. Spending conversations looking over women's heads, or straight up at the ceiling. "By the time the conversation is over, we'll know how many light bulbs are in every room," joked writer Anslem Samuel Rocque.

It does all have its funny side and there are also plenty of men who love the passing parade. Some men, particularly successful, attractive men, enjoy the show - confident that they are in the target audience. Harry is a fit, cute 28-year-old, well launched on his media career, a world where he suggests flirting and flaunting is part of the culture. He's comfortable with women displaying themselves to him: "If she has a great body and she enjoys showing it off, for sure I enjoy looking." He tells the story of a meeting with a young woman wearing a fairly fitted yellow dress, "popping out of the top".

"The conversation was about the rate I was going to charge them for advertising. As I looked down at my notebook and did some basic sums, I realised that she was leaning forward, deliberately showing her tits, presumably to throw my concentration." He called her bluff.

"I started to laugh and made a comment about putting her body on the line for the business!"

She backed off, embarrassed, and he got his deal done.

The young people caught up in all the titillation rarely see any harm in what's going on. I have had many conversations with parents of young women who try to tell their daughters that revealing dress isn't a good idea, only to be rebuffed by statements about women's rights.

Often, the older women will admit they'd been down this road themselves. Here's one: "At 43 years old, I no longer wear revealing outfits as I don't have the body for it, I think women my age look silly flaunting themselves and, frankly, I couldn't be bothered. But when I was young I was always the one to wear outfits that would make a father say, 'You're not going out in that, young lady!'"

She'd yell abuse at guys catcalling from cars at her. "I can wear whatever I want!" Only now does she think about the confused young men she left in her wake, the mixed messages she'd sent them. "Deep down I was much more aware of my power than I actually let on."

That may well still apply to many young women today. But feminists have so successfully shut down proper debate on this issue that women are discouraged from ever considering their own responsibility in flaunting that power and the disdain that shows for men.