

is smart the new sexy?

The intelligent woman is finally having a well-deserved moment. By Tania Gomez

For someone who epitomises sexy, it was a jaw-dropping moment when Beyoncé Knowles - Miss Bootylicious herself - admitted to US ABC News that US President Barack Obama made her wish she were smarter. Why would someone who oozes sex appeal want to be smarter? These days, isn't it enough to have an envy-inducing rump?

And then there's comedienne Tina Fey. She's a sharp, funny, intelligent woman, but she's no fashion magazine covergirl, is she? Well, US *Harper's Bazaar* seemed to think so when it eschewed its usual glamorous Hollywood actress default to feature Tina on its November 2009 cover. (Yes, you could argue Tina is also an actress, but, let's be honest, she's not *that* kind of actress.) If that wasn't



enough, Rob Pattinson also said the following about Tina: "I don't really have a 'type', but I like smart people. I really like Tina Fey – she is, like, the sexiest woman." If that wasn't a slam dunk for cerebral-kind, we don't know what is.

This brings us to this seemingly new-found inclination towards embracing intelligent women. Obviously, being switched-on has never exactly been frowned upon, but the attractive personality traits have always been more of the "rich", "beautiful", and "sexy" kind. Since when is it cool to be smart?

we want to have sex with his brain.

A smart man has always been lusted over. Just think of the number of desirable

guys who are intelligent, haven't come from the Brad Pitt factory of beautiful, yet still pull really, really attractive women. There's Booker Prize-winning author Salman Rushdie (his ex-wife's a model); French president Nicolas Sarkozy (his spouse is a model); and billionaire businessman Donald Trump (his current and former wives are all catwalkers). There's even research to prove this claim.

A study conducted by psychologist Mark Prokosch from Elon University in the US had female university students watch videos of males performing various cognitive and athletic tasks, after which they were asked to judge each man's intelligence and desirability. When asked to pick out the men they deemed to be most attractive, it turned out they'd chosen the most astute of the group.

Brains equal sexy when it comes to men. For women, these two things haven't always been a happy coupling.

they just want to do it with our torso.

Writer and columnist John Bastick knows all about what's considered hot. He's a former men's magazine editor, after all. And he says smart women have traditionally been painted with the dowdy brush. "They're often portrayed as loners, with too many books, cats and heavily rimmed glasses."

And it's true. Most of the time, the women who men salivate over are lauded for their physical attributes; their intelligence is almost a novelty. Take, for example, Natalie Portman. She's beautiful, but the fact that she has a psychology degree from Harvard is treated as a mere footnote to her looks.

It's hard to think smart and sexy aren't mutually exclusive when it comes to women if, traditionally, there's always been a divide between the two. If this weren't the case, every ugly duckling makeover in teen flicks wouldn't involve a nerdy girl taking out her ponytail, shaking her hair and tossing away her glasses. In that magical act, she becomes "sexy".

Cultural studies scholar Maja Mikula from the University of Technology,

"traditionally, smart women have been portrayed as loners, with too many cats and heavily rimmed glasses."

Sydney, says that this is, in part, due to women playing up what they think men want. "Women have been portrayed as empty status symbols and decorative objects of male desire: think the sexy babe in luxury-car advertising. And women have responded to this systematic objectification by striving to fashion themselves as carbon copies of the imagined object of male desire." So if we think men don't find intellect arousing, then why even bother showing them our brainy sides?

First of all, things are starting to change for the better. Mikula says the women's movement and several waves of feminism over the past century have finally had some lasting effects. The result is that women can now challenge the notion of what is "sexy" and change the perception that a smart woman is the quiet, shy girl, hiding behind her glasses. She is, in fact, much more than that.

ending our stay at the paris hilton.

Even in pop culture, it seems we're growing tired of the whole Paris Hilton, in-your-face version of sexy. In fact, the tendency for Paris to come across as quite vacuous seems to contribute to her waning popularity. As Mikula says, "Being 'simply hot', as Paris likes to describe herself, can't sustain continuing fame. On the other hand, when we watch Tina ➡





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Fey, she seems to be telling us, ‘Watch this space. I will make you laugh; I will make you cry; I will make you want to be with me.’” And judging from Paris’ deteriorating appearances as a covergirl (discounting tabloid magazines that expose her latest dating conquests) and her fading entertainment career, we don’t want to be with her anymore.

With the saturation of celebrities who are famous for doing absolutely nothing but cashing in on their famous surname, we’d really like someone who has more to offer. Perhaps someone who seems to have higher aspirations than simply being skinny, pretty and relatively well-known, which explains the rising popularity of women such as Alexa Chung, Emma Watson, and, yes, Ms Fey. They’re all admittedly book-smart, but they’re also successful, articulate and seem as though they’d be able to talk about a lot more than how their pet chihuahua is doing.

smartening up to a woman’s hotness.

Celebrities are one thing, but what do real guys think? After all, it was supposedly their version of sexy that we have been trying to replicate for so long. Having put his fair share of barely clad

ladies on the cover of a men’s magazine, Bastick says gorgeous women, such as Miranda Kerr and Jennifer Hawkins, will always have a special spot in any red-blooded man’s heart. For guys, being visual creatures and all, both of these women are undeniably spectacular to look at. However, Bastick also concedes that as blokes get older, they learn to appreciate less superficial traits, those like a great personality, a sense of humour, and intelligence. It becomes less about the looks and more about what else is brimming under the surface.

Mikula adds, “When men hit their thirties, they realise that beauty fades with age, while intelligence lasts longer. Though I think it’s actually young men who want more in a woman than just looks. They’re more attuned to popular representations of gender, which are deliberately more fluid and performative. They know that attractiveness and brains aren’t mutually exclusive, and won’t settle for second best.” (It’s a heartening thought, don’t you think, that the next few generations of men will learn to appreciate that brains are actually very sexy in women?)

And as Dr Christine Whelan attests in her book *Why Smart Men Marry Smart Women* (Simon & Schuster, \$35.99), the

intelligence of a woman is a valuable asset when it comes to the marriage market. In her research, Whelan found that 90 per cent of high-achieving men said they wanted to wed – or were already married to – a woman who’s as (or more) intelligent than they are.

sex appeal is all in our heads.

While sexy will always undoubtedly be linked with appearance, the thing about intelligence is it can be pretty damn attractive too. A woman who is opinionated, articulate and brainy will never go out of style.

As Mikula says, “Smart is becoming the new sexy because our society has well and truly outgrown its own time-honoured gender stereotypes. We are surrounded by astute, intelligent women. In the unlikely case that there’s a non-fitting of that description in our home, school or workplace, all we need to do is switch on the TV or start browsing the internet [to find these types of women]. Even the staunchest traditionalists have to begin questioning their beliefs.”

And, really, if RPatz says a lady who uses her brain is sexy, how are you supposed to argue with that? □