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What is This?
‘The whole playboy mansion image’: Girls’ fashioning and fashioned selves within a postfeminist culture

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Abstract
This article is located in contemporary feminist interrogations of postfeminism and postfeminist popular culture. Fashion articulates a postfeminist ideology through notions of empowerment via sexuality and consumption, and engages a postfeminist aesthetic of the ‘sexy’, desirable young woman. Recognising the potential complications of these postfeminist constructions and practices for embodied identities of girls within discourses of child innocence, in this article we explore how girls negotiate contemporary postfeminist meanings of femininity marketed to them in fashion. To do so, we examine narratives extracted from a media video diary component of a ‘tween’ popular culture project with 71 pre-teen girls. Using a psycho-discursive approach within a feminist poststructuralist framework, the analyses focus on ways girls engage with and disengage from postfeminist identities constituted through ‘girlie’ and ‘sexy’ clothing. Our findings illuminate the fluidity of girls’ subjectivities as they positioned themselves in some moments within constraining discourses of girlhood femininity (e.g. influenced by media) and at other times as critical ‘savvy’ consumers, rejecting marketing ploys and ‘sexy’ identities. In narratives of clothing practices we found careful, situated negotiation of clothing styles open to sexual meanings and distancing from ‘sexy’ dress through refusals, derogation of other girls and negative affective responses. These practices intersected with class and age and commonly used regulatory and constraining discourses of femininity. We argue that the challenge for feminisms and
feminists is to find ways to research and work with/for girls that will open up spaces to explore meanings of femininity that escape limiting, repressive boundaries.

**Keywords**
Clothing, discourse, popular culture, postfeminist, ‘sexualisation’, ‘tween’

Although the notion of feminist ‘waves’ has been critiqued for its implication of disconnected eras rather than continuities, there are nonetheless distinctions that reflect the different historical and cultural locations in which feminisms have emerged. For girls born in more recent times, Girl Power perhaps presents a form of feminism with which they are most familiar since it is a term deployed in much of the popular culture that addresses them as its audience. The roots of Girl Power can be traced back to the ‘grrl power’ angry activism of a riotgrrls subculture in the early 1990s that challenged patriarchal treatment of young women (Harris, 2004). With the transformation of grrlpower into a commodified Girl Power, made popular by the Spice Girls (Lemish, 1998), meanings shifted around a postfeminist articulation in which media played a significant role. As a media (re)production, Girl Power offers girls ‘power’, independence and choice, all of which may be seen as having continuity with feminist goals. The ‘twist’ or departure point is marked by the modes of accomplishment; consumption, (hetero)sexuality and reclamation of a ‘girlie’ femininity that draws on a discourse of emphasised femininity (Connell, 1987). Some refer to this ‘brand’ of feminism as commodity feminism, others Third Wave feminism and others postfeminism; there tends to be considerable conflation as well as debate about the relationships (Genz, 2006; McRobbie, 2009).

In this article we acknowledge but do not engage in debates about differentiation between postfeminism and Third Wave feminism (see Genz, 2006). Rather, we contextualise our work within recent feminist scholarship interrogating postfeminism (e.g. Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009), most particularly that which has focused on girls’ negotiation of subjectivity in a postfeminist landscape (e.g. Raby, 2010; Ringrose, 2008). Our aim is to contribute to and extend understandings of how girls both engage with and disengage from a direct postfeminist address to them in popular culture (McRobbie, 2008). We propose that ethnographic work, such as ours, is crucial to further theoretical development about changing feminisms in contemporary times. An understanding of how girls are negotiating an era where past feminisms are both deployed and erased within the ideology of postfeminism (see McRobbie, 2009) is pressing. One of the ways in which such negotiation may be examined is through clothing, which, as historical analyses so clearly illustrate, can be seen as an interface of the social and the individual (Entwistle, 2000). A postfeminist construction of contemporary femininity becomes recognisable through, for example, ‘edgy’ clothing that combines frilly, pretty femininity with a ‘masculine’ style and garments that suggest a more porn-inspired raunch (Levy, 2005). In this article, we ask how pre-teen girls negotiate a postfeminist fashion marketing address to them and how this address impacts on their own clothing.
practices in the context of contested cultural meanings of girlhood femininity. Before examining these questions more closely through material from our research, however, we need to elaborate the meanings of postfeminism and postfeminist popular culture that we are using here.

**Postfeminism and postfeminist popular culture**

As Gill (2007) suggests, postfeminism has variously been conceptualised as an epistemological position, a feminist backlash and an historical moment. In her own negotiated position, Gill proposes the notion of a postfeminist sensibility which theorises postfeminism as a constructed phenomenon that incorporates a range of discursive productions (e.g. bodily property, individualism, emphasised sexual differences). Feminist scholars (e.g. Attwood, 2006; McRobbie, 2008; Tasker and Negra, 2007) have emphasised the location of postfeminism within consumer culture where feminist arguments for choice, independence and agency have been appropriated and commodified in the marketing of goods to women. Within this consumer discourse, women and girls are positioned as powerful citizens where shopping for girlie products such as clothes and shoes assumes status as an expression of empowered choice. ‘Girliness’ is a key feature of postfeminism, softening the edges of an empowered construction that might otherwise suggest too much masculinity (Walkerdine, 2006). Its separation from conventional passive femininity, however, is accomplished through being performed wittingly and, in postfeminist style, ironically (McRobbie, 2009). Often elided with girlie consumption and practices, sexuality and sex are key components of the versions of femininity produced within a postfeminist discourse. Indeed, being ‘sexy’ and being ‘empowered’ are conflated. Gill (2007) argues that a key shift around the sexy production of femininity is from a construction as object (of the male gaze) to one as subject, confident and agentic enough to express herself as sexually knowing and desiring. Yet the move may say more about harnessing women as agents of their depiction sexually in ways that closely resemble the sexism of earlier years, particularly through the porn-chic styling that postfeminism appears to appropriate (see Levy, 2005).

For girls, a postfeminist address is perhaps made more specifically available to them through Girl Power in its invocation of ‘girl’, although a broader postfeminist ‘girl-ing’ of femininity extends Girl Power’s reach to young women (see Projansky, 2007). Girl Power offers girls a seductive blend of independence, choice and fun blended with heterosexual appeal; sassy, sexy and smart are key Girl Power significations (e.g. Griffin, 2004; Harris, 2004). As pointed out by several feminist scholars (e.g. Banet-Weiser, 2004; Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2008), Girl Power’s ideology of powerful, smart and independent girls is rendered problematic in popular culture where it is largely mobilised within a commodity market that produces girls as consumers. One such problematic is the chaining of feminist accomplishments (independence, choice and so on) to a hyperfeminine, hypersexualised version of (post)femininity. In other words, ‘successful’ femininity requires achievement in customary masculine domains (academic, intellectual,
confidence, assertiveness) to be moderated by an abundance of girly femininity. The production of femininity in girls’ magazines provides a good example, wherein pages celebrating girls’ cleverness juxtapose pages of instruction about ways to make themselves prettier (through clothes, makeup, diet) and more attractive to boys. This sexual address to girls, however, contravenes a childhood innocence discourse, in which pre-teen girls especially are popularly positioned (see Egan and Hawkes, 2008; Walkerdine, 1997). Within this moralistic discourse, young girls are denied sexuality and are afforded either an abject position as Lolita seductress or a morally correct one as the unblemished ‘good girl’ (Walkerdine, 1997). Importantly, no discourse is inherently limiting (or enabling) and there may be occasions where a girl’s positioning of self in a child innocence discourse accomplishes a positive effect. The tensions between these two discourses – postfeminist and child innocence – are particularly salient to girls’ clothing practices, and we consider such tensions next.

Postfeminist fashion and pre-teen girls

As we signalled earlier, popular culture is a significant source of postfeminist constructions of femininity and it provides girls with an avalanche of material that elides empowerment, sexuality and clothing in the figure of the ‘sexy’, ‘cute’ and ‘hot’ girl (Brookes and Kelly, 2009; McRobbie, 2008). While not an exclusive address to girls, celebrity culture, especially the pop musicians who prevail in their everyday lives (Baker, 2004), provides a rich source of meanings around sexuality. Those meanings appear to be heavily saturated by ‘raunchy’ (see Levy, 2005) representations in music videos where body revealing clothing (e.g. bra tops and brief shorts or very short skirts, tight body-fit dresses) is accompanied by acts of sexual simulation, self-touching, sexual poses and so on. The marketing and availability of these celebrity modes of ‘sexy’ clothing for girls has centrally featured in contemporary ‘child sexualisation’ discourse which positions girls as both influenced by and emulative of it (Rush and La Nauze, 2006). However, claims about the sexualising effects of media on girls are currently undermined by the lack of research examining girls’ perspectives and engagement with contemporary postfeminist popular culture; assumptions about their ‘sexualisation’ are drawn from theory, research with women and older teens and supposition (see Egan and Hawkes, 2008; Lerum and Dworkin, 2009; Lumby and Albury, 2010). Garments highlighted in both ‘sexualisation’ debates and feminist critiques (e.g. McRobbie, 2008) include adult ‘sexy’ clothing such as G-strings, bras (for very young girls), tight fitting crop tops, short skirts and shorts, low-rider jeans and little bikinis. We should point out, however, that the marketing and availability of such clothing may vary somewhat across the Anglo-American world. For example, a recent Scottish study (Buckingham et al., 2010) which systematically researched the products, including clothing, being sold for and to children failed to find a prolific ‘sexual’ marketplace.

If postfeminist styled fashion is being marketed to and purchased by girls, how is it being understood by them, either as wearers or observers? In practice, the
sexually empowered ‘raunch’ celebrated in postfeminist popular culture is subjected to a regulatory socio-cultural eye. Despite being ‘free’ to experiment with body-exposing or ‘sexy’ clothing as some researchers appear to suggest (e.g. Duits and van Zoonen, 2007), girls are subject to the risk of being alienated and derogated as ‘sluts’ should they adopt such dress (Griffin, 2004). Feminist ethnographic research with girls regularly demonstrates how operation of the sexual double standard continues to pose the risk of being named a tart or slut if a girl wears short skirts, tightly fitting clothing or a (visible) thong (e.g. Gleeson and Frith, 2004; Raby, 2010; Renold and Ringrose, 2008). Importantly, Griffin and others (e.g. Attwood, 2006; Tyler and Bennett, 2010) highlight the highly classed nature of this kind of regulation of girls and women via the ‘slut’; the ‘abject’ positioning of the slut is characteristically associated with working class girls. So although, as Skeggs (2004) notes, there has been a recoding of working-class ‘excess sexuality’ as respectable for middle-class women in popular culture (e.g. Sex and the City), everyday practices call upon classed female sexuality. Intertwined with regulation of the heterosexual matrix (see McRobbie, 2009), this classed notion of what constitutes ‘respectable’ femininity may inflect middle-class girls’ disgust with other girls or women who reveal their ‘boobs’ or thong or don the too-short skirt or too-tight fitting top (e.g. Jackson and Vares, 2011; Raby, 2010; Ringrose, 2008; Vares et al., 2011). ‘Othering’ girls who expose their bodies as sluts or tarts enables a comfortable distancing from associations of working class disrespectability. And although girls in Gleeson and Frith’s (2004) research articulated pleasure in wearing ‘sexualised’ clothing, they carefully constructed doing so in ways that rendered its meanings ambiguous. These studies about girls’ clothing practices and preferences highlight the complexities of girls’ negotiations of the subjectivities available to them in contesting discourses of postfeminism and ‘good girl’ femininity.

Attending to such complexity around girls’ expressions of identity through clothing (in particular clothing that may be read through sexual meanings), in this article we draw on material from our research project ‘Girls and tween popular culture in everyday life’, located in two New Zealand metropolitan centres, to explore the ‘pushes’ and ‘pulls’ for girls as they negotiate both the media’s address to them to purchase contemporary fashion and their own clothing practices. Our exploration is theoretically framed within Foucauldian poststructural understandings of self and the social and we elaborate this framework in the next section before detailing our research project and then presenting our analyses of the girls’ material. In the final section of the article we highlight the complexities for girls around positioning as ‘media influenced’ consumers and ‘media savvy’ critics and consider the challenges for feminists to find ways of assisting girls to navigate disjunctions between contemporary and ‘old’ femininities.

Theoretical framework

Researching the complexity of ways girls navigate subjectivity within a social environment of conflicting and contradictory discourses around meanings of being a
‘girl’ (e.g. ‘sexy’/’good’) demands methodologies that can help us to understand the ways girls are working with, through and against these contemporary cultural conditions (see also Currie et al., 2009; Renold and Ringrose, 2011). For us, Foucault’s (1990) theoretical formulations of discourse, when integrated with a critical feminist framework (e.g. Gavey, 2011), provide relevant and useful concepts for thinking through and developing research in this area. Drawing on Foucault’s work, we understand the articulation of a postfemininity discourse in popular culture to be a cultural resource that makes available a particular version of ‘being’ a woman or a girl. Our analytical formulation of the relationship between this cultural resource for identity work and subjectivity accords with Wetherell’s (2008) articulation of psycho-discursive practices wherein the social (e.g. discursive practices, social categories such as class) and the psychological (e.g. self, emotions) are inextricably intertwined in a complex network of intersections.

While our focus is on a newer postfeminist version of (sexualised) femininity, older constructions of female sexuality are not erased by its prolific presence (see Davies, 1993). It is in the contradictory spaces within and between ‘new’ and older discourses that negotiated identity work is most clearly seen (Walkerdine, 1991). Relevant to such negotiation are the notions of complicity and resistance; power may both constrain and enable. In the context of our research, arguments that girls are sexualised by a postfeminist sexuality discourse in popular culture locate them as constrained and influenced. On the other hand, the argument that girls can ‘freely choose’ within this discourse (see for example Duits and van Zoonen, 2007) positions girls as agentic. We argue, as do a number of feminists (e.g. Currie et al., 2009; Raby, 2010; Renold and Ringrose, 2008, Walkerdine, 2006), from the position that girls’ identity work under contemporary cultural conditions is a good deal more complex; the questions we need to ask are around how, why and under what conditions girls position themselves as variously agentic and complicit in relation to contemporary femininity and ‘sexualisation’ discourses. These questions are central to the discursive analyses of girls’ material that we present below; we look at girls’ fluid movements across positions of agency and complicity (i.e. resistant and influenced) and how their negotiation of these positions is informed by the femininity and girlhood discourses of their cultural worlds. This nuanced approach crucially avoids agency/influence, negative/positive dichotomies that commonly inflect arguments around girls and sexualised media and alternatively offers the potential to open up understandings about how they work ‘through each other’ (see also Evans et al., 2010; Willett, 2008).

**Method**

Our theoretical framework mapped on to our approach to the methods we developed for undertaking the research. Since we were interested in both the socio-cultural conditions in which girls’ understandings of contemporary femininity may be produced and in their way of navigating these conditions in producing their own identities, we selected both focus groups (girls as cultural informants of girl-culture and broader culture) and media video diaries (girls as consumers and
media producers) as our means of gathering data. The girls’ material in this article is only from the media video diary phase of the project. Although anthropologists have long used cameras and film in their ethnographic field work with participants (Pink, 2001) and use of cameras has become more widespread in work with young people (e.g. Steele and Brown, 1995), the use of video diaries in research with younger girls is a much less charted territory (notable exceptions are Bloustien, 2003; Pini, 2001). Yet, given the key part visual culture plays in ‘sexualised’ representations, the opportunity for girls to not only talk about media but to also show us media seemed highly appropriate. Moreover, giving the girls video cameras allowed us to gather an altogether more embodied representation of self that merged well with the project’s focus on identity work. However, within our post-structuralist framework, we do not contend that having the film of girls in their ‘real world’ confers truth status; we view the diaries as produced in a specific context (research about girls and popular culture) and, though not present, produced for us. Nonetheless, the cameras did literally take us into girls’ bedrooms (and often other rooms or outside) which not only conveys a sense of their material lives but also the lived culture of girlhood in a private ‘girl-space’ (see also McRobbie and Garber, 1991; Steele and Brown, 1995).

**Research process**

We recruited 71 girls in Primary and Intermediate Schools in two New Zealand cities – Christchurch (35 girls) and Wellington (36 girls) – for this study. The recruitment process involved gaining approval from school principals and teachers, and giving presentations about the nature of the project to Year 7 (aged 11–12 years) and Year 8 (aged 12–13 years) girls in five schools. The presentation was framed in terms of an interest in girls’ media use in the context of growing concerns about girls growing up too soon. Consistent with our aim of obtaining a diverse group of girls through the selection of schools, the minority of our participants self-identified as Pakeha/New Zealanders (38%), the next largest group identified as English or British (14%) and 9.9% of our girls listed their ethnicity as indigenous Māori/Māori-Pakeha. Of the remaining 39.1%, girls named Samoan, Jamaican, South African, Australian, Sri Lankan, Indian and Tongan ethnicities, often together with a second or third ethnicity (e.g. New Zealand ‘Kiwi’). In terms of class we aimed for a range of social backgrounds by selecting schools in different economic areas but the majority of girls choosing to participate could be considered middle class in terms of their material conditions. All of the girls in this article may be described as middle class; the term is referenced to their observed material conditions; their talk of activities, consumption and events (e.g. overseas holidays); and their descriptions of parental occupations. While we reference their self defined multiple ethnicities we do not attend to them in our analyses as we are still processing the way these may be intersecting with girls’ self narratives.

Working in one school in each location at a time, we began the project with focus groups of 6–10 girls and at the end of the session we discussed the media video diaries and gave each girl a handycam recorder with instructions on
how to use them. We also provided them with guidelines about ethical use of the cameras, their restriction to girls’ homes and girls in the project (who could co-film), and ideas for the kinds of recordings they might make without being prescriptive. For example, we suggested girls might like to conduct a ‘bedroom tour’ to show us some of the popular culture in their rooms and we explained how they could tell us and show us different media they used and liked such as websites, television, magazines or DVDs. Video diaries were recorded for a one month period. Although we suggested diaries be recorded for around 10 minutes every day, in the main girls recorded less frequently but for much longer than 10 minutes. At the end of the one month video recording period, we reconvened girls for discussion groups to talk about their experiences of filming and what they had filmed. The entire project was repeated in a second year of the study, by which time girls were aged 12–14 and in secondary school. To analyse the video diary material we used the video transcription programme Transana. This enabled us to see both the visual recording and the written transcript simultaneously. Video transcripts included details of non-verbal data (e.g. movement, gesture, expression, appearance) with verbal text. Analyses involved repeated close readings of transcripts and viewings of the video diaries. At the time of writing, analyses for the second year of the project are yet to be undertaken and so this article only uses video data from the first year. From our analyses we identified clothing as a key signification of sexual meanings around which girls negotiated identities with and against contemporary postfeminist meanings of femininity.

Analyses and discussion

Before girls venture to shopping malls or the ‘high street’ to purchase their clothes, inducements to fashion selves ‘fit to belong’ through wearing contemporary girlie styles hail them through the many different forms of the popular culture that they use. So how do they make sense of this media address to them and how do they negotiate their own clothing practices in relation to it? These two questions frame the two sections of our analytical discussion and we begin with the first.

‘Get this [dress] now’: Postfeminist media(ted) fashion

Marketing practices designed to entice girls into purchasing clothes through possibilities to fashion the self as more desirable and attractive received particular attention and critique across girls’ video diaries. Girls’ critiques particularly referenced a media influence discourse and, given that the construction of girls as media-influenced is widely circulated in contemporary ‘child sexualisation’ discourses, girls’ own use of it is perhaps to be expected. Equally, however, the notion that media can be influential and powerful should not be dismissed. Girls did not only position themselves within a discourse of influence but also outside of it in their critical accounts of its operation or their non-complicity with marketing mandates. It is the moments of movement between and across these positions that belie straightforward arguments of either agency or influence (see Evans et al., 2010)
and in the first section of our analyses we examine two video diary extracts to illustrate the ways girls engage in such movement. We begin our analysis with Cory’s transitional self-positioning around a discourse of media influence.

Cory (‘NZ/European’, aged 12), a self-described ‘huge, huge fan of Miley Cyrus’ who goes to ‘the mall quite a lot’, talked about the deployment of celebrities as a marketing strategy. In one part of her diary she tells us that when she went to her dad’s place recently they talked about ‘ways ads influence us’ and then directly relates the following:

cos we went to the mall and I saw this ad and it said like— I can’t remember the name the celebrity would of been— it said like blah, blah, blah get this now and it was this dress and it was really, really pretty and like I saw about ten— seven, seven girls lining up for it. They wouldn’t, I probably wouldn’t have wanted that dress and I didn’t get it but like I don’t think we would’ve wanted that dress but it said ‘wanna be like Vanessa Hudgens?’— it wasn’t her cos I don’t like Vanessa Hudgens, but like it was somebody else and I think that’s kinda funny cos that is like very clever marketing because that’s getting girls to want it cos they want to be like that person and it says that so they buy the dress. And it goes for like everything like, just an ad saying this skirt is the exact same material or pattern or the same skirt as what Miley Cyrus wears and people go ‘oh my god Miley Cyrus wears this I need it’ pretty much.

Cory’s narrative underlines the pervasive, powerful marketing to girls of the possibility to ‘be’ a Vanessa Hudgens (a ‘stand-in’ for the celebrity one likes) or Miley Cyrus through adopting celebrity style. Cory presents herself as attracted to, and wanting, the ‘really, really pretty’ dress advertised in the mall and, in this moment of desire, recognises the way in which she and other girls may be seduced by the notion of donning a celebrity identity in the act of wearing the dress. Yet the ‘doing’ of this identity as an influenced subject is subsequently undone through Cory’s resistance to buying it, unlike the other girls in the mall who were ‘lining up’ to buy it. It is further unravelled in her unmasking of the ‘very clever marketing’ that gets ‘girls to want it because they want to be like that person’ which constitutes her as a more ‘savvy’, knowing and critically aware girl. While this ‘savvy’ self may also be understood as a postfeminist production (McRobbie, 2009), the point we want to emphasise here is the fluidity of Cory’s movement in and out of positions as ‘influenced’ and ‘agentic’. While she recognises marketing’s address to girls’ needs and desires that cohere around the fame, prettiness and popularity of a celebrity, she also sees that she herself is not immune despite such recognition. Within the structure of a strategic marketing machine, Cory’s account reminds us about the limits of the ‘critical self’ within structural social constraints of girlhood discourses.

The plays between positions of critical agency and passive influence similarly infused Iris’s narrative in her production of the ‘Iris Rocks the Bedroom’ series, a mock television show in which she expresses opinions and insights about various kinds of media. We found girls used a variety of ‘production modes’ in filming their media diaries; some solely narrated, addressing the camera (and us), others filmed
self and popular culture while yet others would sometimes engage in solo or joint ‘entertainment’ performances. In the following extract, Iris, a ‘NZ/European’ 11 year old girl, discusses the influences of advertising on girls’ purchasing of clothes in the first ‘episode’ of her ‘info-tainment’ series. Sucking on a red lollipop as part of her ‘show’ about advertising (it features in a satirical ad break) she asks us ‘Did you know ads actually influence girls like us?’ and then goes on to say:

I know I’m babbling on but ads can influence us in different ways especially us girls. They tell us what fashions we should wear, what fashions we shouldn’t wear, trying to prepare us to be a ‘cool’ teenager. But do you really need the latest clothes, fashion and technology to be that person? I don’t think so. I have loads of clothes and everything but would I buy them if people hadn’t influenced me or told me to wear them?

We find this excerpt particularly interesting as a demonstration of the pushes and pulls for girls as they navigate the contemporary postfeminist, consumerist landscape. Consistent with postfeminism’s call to empowerment through consumption (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008), Iris positions herself as a consummate buyer of clothes. However, Iris constructs that consumption not as an act of personal power or even pleasure but an act of submission to power – the power of the market to influence all girls’ clothing practices, herself included. Earlier in this same episode of her ‘show’, however, Iris alienated herself from a position of being influenced by advertisers’ instructions on ‘what to wear, what to do, how to look’. She told us of how ‘some girls’ were influenced then explained ‘as you can see, I’m not one of those girls’. In a literal sense, her invitation for us to ‘see’ draws our attention to the girl through the lens, apparently without make-up or ‘girlie’ clothes. Iris’s appearance counters a postfeminist styled ‘girly’ media subject. But the term ‘see’ is not always literal and another possibility is ‘seeing’ in the sense of us now ‘knowing’ from her talk that Iris is critical of that influenced ‘look’. Iris’s distancing of herself from the beauty discourses of fashion media scripts through ‘othering’ works discursively to counter an identity as an influenced prolific consumer of clothes and so allows her to manage the contradiction. Within the extract, and her ‘show’ as a whole, Iris continues to manage the contradiction through an agentic media-resistant identity, locating herself as a media-savvy decoder, skilled in detecting advertisers’ strategies to influence teen girls like her via ‘selling’ them imagined futures as ‘cool teenagers’. Her savvy-ness also allows her consumption of clothing to be understood as possibly unrelated to any need to be like a ‘cool teenager’. We suggest that in a social context where moral panics about girls’ ‘sexualisation’ have re-intensified the ‘good/bad girl binary’ (Egan and Hawkes, 2008), particularly around clothing (e.g. Raby, 2010), careful management by girls is required, and we read Iris’s distancing from an older (teenager) and, potentially sexy, ‘cool’ narrative through this lens. Additionally we venture the possibility that Iris’s recognition of and separation from a media influence discourse are important ways of enabling her to access an agentic identity.

Advertising’s deployment of the teenage girl in targeting pre-teen girls strategically engages with the notion that girls desire to be older, mature and
more sophisticated. Sexuality significations are widely harnessed in portraying such maturity in these media representations (Gleeson and Frith, 2004), resonating with girlhood research that identifies girls’ understandings of sex and sexuality as a marker of adulthood (see Tolman, 2002). It is of course this use of sex and sexuality as a strategic marketing ploy to girls that underpins current debates around the ‘sexualisation’ of girls by media (see Egan and Hawkes, 2008). A particularly clear awareness of the elisions of maturity and sex appeared in Alicia’s (Year 9, 13 year old) video diary where in a narrative about her purchase of a ‘Playboy bunny’ duvet she told us with some gentle self-mockery ‘Ooh, here’s my Playboy be-ed! Playboy! [zooming in on bed] Makes me feel much more grown up!’ In the main, however, we found girls to be cautious about identifying with any consumption of products that may invite readings of them as sexual (Jackson and Vares, 2011; Vares, et al., 2011), a finding we consider to be readily understood in terms of the rigid regulation of girls’ sexuality through child innocence and girlhood femininity discourses of ‘good girl’ (a)sexuality. In the next part of our article we shift our focus to girls’ negotiations of identity when sexual significations come into play related to clothing practices.

‘The whole Playboy Mansion image’: Girls’ negotiating ‘sexy’ clothing

Girls adopted casual, sporty styled dress on camera, and their stated preferences for wearing jeans, boots, long cardigans and leggings appeared so regularly in their narratives and wardrobe displays as to suggest a pre-teen girl ‘style’. Such a style markedly contests the ‘sexy’ subject adorned in body-fitting or revealing clothing that is seen in postfeminist media (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008). Clothes that held possibilities of more sexualised meanings such as the strapless dress, the glittery top, the heeled shoes etc were classified as only appropriate for ‘special occasions’ (e.g. weddings, school discos). Girls’ choices, then, may be seen as circumscribed by the notion of what may be socially considered appropriate both for girls their age and for the social milieu. We are mindful, however, that the girls produced their video diaries for us, as white middle aged, middle class researchers, and that our participation as audience was a significant context for what girls included and excluded; this may be particularly so in relation to sexuality. On the other hand, the age-appropriate violations of other girls through their positioning within a postfeminist discourse of sexual display in girls’ narratives could be articulated. Elodie (‘European/Irish’, aged 12) for example, told us:

a lot of girls at my school are influenced by the whole [contemptuous expression] Playboy Mansion image, that whole miniskirts and tank-tops and crap [exasperated laugh]. It’s, it’s sick, like, it’s seriously sick! Like the whole (puts on a ‘bimbo’ voice) ‘I wanna impress guys so I’m gonna wear a padded bra today!’ Or, or ‘I’m gonna make up my face so I look prettier for the guys today’. And the guys are not at the [makes quotation marks] mature status that we’re at right now and so obviously, they’re still kids .... I mean they wouldn’t notice any kind of that stuff.
The sexualised ‘raunch culture’ and ‘porn-chic’ descriptions in feminist critiques of postfeminist representations of femininity (e.g. Attwood, 2006; Levy, 2005) inflect Elodie’s elision of body-exposing clothing with the ‘Playboy Mansion’ image. The contempt with which she regards the phenomenon is projected onto her positioning of girls who adopt ‘sexy’ clothing to impress boys; her disparaging commentary produces them as somewhat pathetic, emphasised by the ‘silly’ voice she uses in enacting the kinds of things they say. Although her contempt for girls buying into the trappings of hypersexuality can be read as positioning Elodie as critical and outside of the heterosexual matrix, within which hypersexuality is constructed (see McRobbie, 2009), it is accomplished in her mocking other girls rather than critiquing cultural conditions (as with Cory). Elodie’s scathing treatment of the ‘mini-skirt- girls’ may also be understood in terms of what Ringrose (2008) calls heterosexualised aggression whereby the regulatory demands of heterosexualised competition between girls underpin their practices of sexual aggression (e.g. derogation as ‘slags’) toward one another.

So if girls more often positioned other girls as the ones producing themselves in sexual ways through clothing, how did they position themselves in relation to sexual representations available to them in postfeminist media discourses? In the remainder of this section, we focus on examples of narratives where girls actively positioned themselves and their practices around clothing in relation to what they were viewing in popular culture. In the main, consistent with findings of other feminist researchers (e.g. Gleeson and Frith, 2004; Ringrose, 2008; Willett, 2008), girls represented themselves as carefully negotiating possible sexual meanings of their clothing. Alicia, for example, emphasised that the long top/short dress she had purchased on the online website TradeMe was ‘only, only worn with leggings’ and Lindsey similarly described herself as liking to wear short dresses but only with leggings. These practices accorded with the common view expressed by girls in video diaries (and focus groups) around the inappropriateness of skirts or dresses that revealed too much leg, tops that bared midriffs, and too-low cut tops that showed breasts (see Jackson and Vares, 2011).

Nikita (‘South African Indian’, aged 12) was one of the girls who spoke about management practices around getting the clothing code ‘right’. Here, she is telling us about her recent shopping trip with three other girls (friends also in the study):

And this is a tunic that I really got and it was on sale ten bucks which is pretty cool and this scarf was five dollars and this [a sheer white shirt-type garment that tied at the bottom], the top I’ve always wanted– well it’s not really a top, like if you’re wearing a really, really short top or like a vest thing you can put that underneath and it looks really good so I recommend that if you know what I mean. And sometimes it’s a bit inappropriate if some girls, you know, wear them with nothing underneath, it looks really disgusting.

Through recommending to us the ‘proper’ way to wear the sheer white shirt, with something underneath it, Nikita is able to position herself against the ‘disgusting’ practice of exposing body and bra rather than concealing them.
In our focus groups, we similarly found girls’ affective and embodied use of disgust, which we suggest may work to safely distance them from potential violation of ‘proper femininity’ through constituting the self as ‘sexy’ (Jackson and Vares, 2011) which would position them within the ‘raunch’ of a postfeminist discourse. As Nikita recorded her narrative about the clothes she purchased, a video clip of the Pussycat Dolls performing ‘When I grow up’ appeared on the television. She described the video as typifying the ‘horrible thing that girls have to watch’ which have a ‘bad influence’ on them. Specifically, her reaction focused on the ‘really disgusting’ clothes, constructing their ‘outfits’ as a ‘really bad image’. Probyn (2000) discusses the classed nature of disgust, explaining that statements such as ‘that’s disgusting’ function to distance one’s ‘uncomfortable’ proximity to what is typically seen as ‘working class’ and to affirm one’s position as ‘not disgusting’. Following these ideas, we might see the contribution of Nikita’s social positioning in a reasonably affluent middle-class family to her reinforcement of classed binaries of good girl/bad slut, and ‘disgusting’/appropriate. As revealed in Tyler and Bennett’s (2010) analysis of the ‘celebrity chav’, a middle class respectability finds sexual displays of working class femininity indicative of ‘bad taste’, a spectacle to be shamed, reviled and treated with disgust.

Like Nikita, Daria (‘Tongan/European’, aged 11) conveyed practices of wearing revealing clothing in a highly negative way. Her narrative presented us with one of the more, if not the most, extreme views expressed about body-revealing, and in that sense sexualised, clothing. A cluster of our girls’ material about clothing related to girls taking us through the magazines they read, mainly \textit{Girlfriend} and \textit{Creme} which target a young Australasian teen market. Daria’s talk about clothing occurred in this context and in the excerpt below she is showing us a feature on the pop celebrity Rihanna which shows her wearing various outfits. Daria talks about two photos. In the first Rihanna wears a sheer black lace body suit with small strips of leather covering her breasts, criss-crossing bands to her midriff then ending in a minute bikini pant and she also wears long black leather gloves. Her pose is a sexual one, that is she is shown in slight profile, her buttocks thrust out and her breasts projected forward; her gaze confronts the camera. In short, the image of Rihanna invokes a typical postfeminist porno-chic representation (Levy, 2005), in particular the figure of the dominatrix. The second photo shows Rihanna wearing a tulle dress that exudes femininity but is accessorised with a waist-cinching wide leather belt and leather cuffs, which confer some suggestibility of porno-chic. Daria’s commentary follows:

\begin{quote}
This clothing right here that Rihanna is wearing is see-through and the poses she is doing in this photo is just really just ew I never do anything like that, I never dress like that not even in my own house where no one can see me. No thank you. [Moves onto photo showing Rihanna in ‘really, really weird dress’]. As you can see Rihanna is into lots of showy clothes – things that shows herself off.
\end{quote}

Daria’s term ‘see-through’, while ‘correct’, understates the explicit porno-chic sexuality of the black lace bodysuit and the degree of body exposure it allows.
Her affective response of ‘ew’, however, unequivocally constructs Rihanna’s presentation in the photo as an image to revile, her indication of disgust working in a similar way to Nikita and to other girls in our research who used ‘ew’ as affective distancing from sexual significations in images (Jackson and Vares, 2011). Daria’s disgust with the kind of sexual ‘excess’ displayed by Rihanna (‘showy’) alerts us to the possibility that her affective response registers a violation of middle class respectability (Skeggs, 2004). Daria’s distancing from this ‘porno-chic’ style is emphatic and absolute: her ‘never’ is emphasised through the ‘not even in my own house’ which revokes even a private context of relative obscurity as a possibility. In the second image, Rihanna’s body exposure is minimal but the dress is a strapless one. For Daria though, it seems that the dress like the sheer body suit is emblematic of Rihanna’s proclivity to ‘show herself off’. Daria’s rejection of ‘showy’ representations extended to images of girls modelling clothes in the magazines:

This clothing is not the very best clothing I have ever seen it is really showy and really, really high – it is really shorter than a mini skirt it is kinda like a pair of undies really with a top on it. Never something I would wear, ever, ever, wear. This girl right here with the bra and knickers on is only fourteen years of age and already posing half naked in a magazine that any old dirty man could pick up and get quite excited over, I would never do that. Not at that age anyway. No thank you.

In her commentary, Daria’s value position organises around two aspects of girls’ (un)dress codes: body exposure and age. Both images represent levels of ‘showy’ body exposure that violate Daria’s sensibility of appropriateness for her own clothing practices and she adopts extreme distance from them (‘never... ever, ever’). Lines of (in)appropriateness are drawn around decency or propriety in the length of the skirt through Daria’s comparison with a pair of ‘undies’. While the reasons for her rejection of the leg-revealing mini skirt may be multiple, widely circulating ‘child sexualisation’ discourses in which body revealing clothing, from the spaghetti strap dress to the tiny mini skirt, is signified as adult and sexual (Egan and Hawkes, 2008; Lumby and Albury, 2010) are a significant cultural resource for her own construction. For us, this comes particularly to the fore in the second image Daria talks about. The image of a girl in a bra and ‘knickers’ is constructed through a paedophilic gaze in Daria’s description of it as ‘posing half-naked’, its sexual register incorporated through its potential to excite a ‘dirty old man’. Connotations of paedophilia are contained in her explicit reference to the girl’s age, signifying the inappropriateness of posing in underwear. Daria distances herself not from the ‘half-nakedness’ so much as being photographed in underwear (‘I would never do that’); it is ‘posing’ in underwear that opens up paedophilic meanings. We suggest that Daria’s narrative importantly demonstrates how ‘child sexualisation’ discourses may be used by girls as a cultural resource for making meaning. Specifically, components of a ‘sexualisation’ discourse that thread her talk include the conflation of nudity with sexuality, the construction of girls’ bodies as vulnerable and
endangered under a paedophilic gaze, and an idealised asexuality or ‘innocence’ of the girl-child (Egan and Hawkes, 2008; Lumby and Albury, 2010).

Concluding comments: Fashioning and fashioned

The centrality of the ‘push’ of an actively fashioning self and the ‘pull’ of the particular kind of self, fashioned within postfeminist popular culture, is evident in the girls’ narratives we have examined here. We suggest, as do Renold and Ringrose (2011) in their discussion of ‘schizoid subjectivities’, that these ‘pushes and pulls’ organise around the requirement to negotiate contradicting girlhood femininity discourses that constitute them as passive and asexual on the one hand (‘media influence’/‘child innocence’) and ‘savvy’, agentic and ‘sexy’ on the other (‘postfeminist discourse’). Examining the girls’ narratives here we have not ended up at a place of ‘influenced’ passivity or ‘agentic’ savvy-ness, but a more nuanced point where neither possibility is straightforward. Rather, the binary is complicated: we found ‘agency’ embedded in regulatory discourses, ‘influenced’ selves rubbing up against ‘savvy’ ones, ‘sexy’ identities being both refused and carefully negotiated. Girls’ social identities as middle class ‘tween-children’ worked with and through discursive constructions of the binary, establishing boundaries of appropriateness around age and sexuality that constrained possibilities for girls’ embodied identities. Indeed, we must underline the specificity of our findings to the particular pre-teen age and social class of the girls, as well as to their location in a New Zealand culture that both shares much in common with Anglo-American societies but also has its own unique features. Moreover, our methodology perhaps invited a particular voice to be spoken given that making a video diary requires the kind of articulation and commentary that is readily familiar to the middle class (see Skeggs et al., 2001). As Skeggs et al. comment, ‘research practices do not simply “capture” or reveal the world out there, they generate the conditions of possibility that frame the object of analysis’ (p. 20). Nonetheless the video diaries did allow our participants to convey embodied kinds of knowledge that were not restricted to the verbal, for example in enactments as TV reporters or hosts, parodies of modelling shows and filmed activities (e.g. Wii games).

Within these specific parameters of our research, the absence of a ‘tween’ girl figure that embraces ‘sexy’ postfeminist styled clothing, as produced in concerned ‘sexualisation’ discourses, was striking. Rather, our own work with girls, in common with that of other researchers (Baker, 2004; Raby, 2010; Ringrose, 2008; Willett, 2008), suggests girls’ positioning around ‘sexy-ness’ is complex and negotiated. We suggest these discrepant perspectives of girls as passively emulating ‘sexy’ or actively negotiating it may, to some extent, reflect the absence of girls’ perspectives in ‘sexualisation’ claims. Moreover, it seems from our findings that a ‘sexualisation’ discourse may function as yet another socio-cultural condition that restrains girls’ possibilities of sexual agency, yet another boundary to be negotiated. For example, Cory and Iris moved across subjectivities as media influenced and ‘media savvy’ critics although ‘other girls’ were more straightforwardly
constituted as the influenced ‘victims’ of powerful media. Girls could position themselves against both ‘media victim’ subjectivity and the ‘sexy’ subject in such ‘othering’ and in disparagement of the influenced girls dressing in a ‘sexy’ way (e.g. Elodie’s account of the ‘seriously sick’ hypersexual performances of girls in ‘crap’ clothing). Such ‘othering’ seemed to work not only to shore up girls’ positioning as ‘not-influenced’, but also to position them as stronger, more mature and ‘better’ informed than (some) other girls. Girls’ maneuvering in these ways complicates antinomies of agency and influence and highlights the negotiated processes of constructing subjectivities.

But it was the ‘inappropriate’ sexuality of girls, long constituted in child innocence and girlhood sexuality discourses (Egan and Hawkes, 2008), that most inflected the negotiated practice of dress. For these pre-teen girls, ‘sexualisation’ discourses around age (in)appropriateness of body-revealing fashion have particular resonance. Much of the girls’ negotiated positioning around clothing practices may be understood in relation to keeping within the boundaries of ‘appropriate sexuality’ for their age: restrictions of ‘showy’ clothing to special occasions; refusals of ‘sexy’ clothing as age-inappropriate and sexually laden; careful negotiation of body exposing clothing (e.g. the leggings under short skirts, the under-top). The latter is of particular interest to us, since it illustrates how girls may find creative ‘solutions’ to navigate classed, sexual meanings of clothes (such as wearing leggings) while still producing a/the self as fashionable; it also reminds us that discourses that repress may also enable (Butler, 1990; Davies, 1993). Making sense of girls’ careful negotiation of clothing that could be read within sexual meanings must also consider their identities as middle class girls. Drawing on Skeggs et al. (2001), we might understand Elodie’s disparagement of the hypersexualised girls and Nikita’s disgust with girls’ practice of wearing see-through clothing, for example, through a lens of middle class sensibilities of good taste. More broadly, sexual excess (as in being ‘showy’) has historically been a feature of ‘working class’ sexuality, from which middle class femininity must be divorced (Attwood, 2006).

Both avoiding and modifying ‘sexy’ clothing not only manages the spectre of the classed ‘slut’; it also manages the social construction of girls’ sexuality as dangerous or risky (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 2002; Vance, 1992). The operation of discourses of danger works to remind girls of their vulnerability to a predatory and sexually insatiable male; girls are responsible for protecting themselves from victimisation through, at least in part, not dressing provocatively (Vance, 1992). It is these elisions of dress and ‘asking for’ sex that the recent ‘Slutwalks’ around different points of the globe have sought to dismantle (see http://www.sparksummit.com/). In our material it was Daria’s commentary in particular that expressly oriented to constructions of girls’ vulnerability within victimisation/sex as dangerous discourses with her referencing of a paedophiliac gaze.

While in one sense we might understand girls’ refusals of the ‘girlie’, ‘sexy’ postfemininity constructed inside the heterosexual matrix (McRobbie, 2009) as a form of agency, there is a compelling sense that such refusal may (also) attend to a rather less attractive possibility of an abiding structural restraint around ‘old’
gender binaries that underpin heterosexual regulation (Fine, 1988). As feminist scholars we could be tempted at this point to feel somewhat defeated; after all what kind of agency is it that rattles around the chains that bind it? Like Renold and Ringrose (2011), however, we want to underscore the accomplishments of girls in managing to find pathways through the contradictions. Nonetheless, at the same time, it is important to address what we see as the problematic: the lack of explicitly feminist or politicised registers in discursive resources available to girls that would enable them to critique postfeminist sexualities without being trapped into using repressive, classed, regulatory discourses (e.g. the ‘slut’ or the ‘good girl’), if even momentarily. Although it can be argued that feminist discourse is available within the empowerment and agency messages of postfeminist rhetoric, its classist and racialised entanglement with commodification and sexuality distorts the message of power (see also Currie et al, 2009; Griffin, 2004).

So, extending from our findings, how might feminisms and feminists contribute to girls’ critical awareness and negotiation of contradictions within postfeminist femininities in ways that give them a discourse and language in which to ‘explode rather than redraw’ (Currie et al., 2009) its classed and racialised boundaries? While we cannot tackle so large and significant a question here, we can point to some important developments in feminist research and educational practice that we suggest to be steps to move us forward. By engaging methodologies that are capable of addressing the complex entanglements of social identities and contradictory femininities and by using methods capable of involving girls from diverse backgrounds, feminist research may push beyond binaries and dualisms. Applying such research to practice is a key feminist challenge, one that Currie et al. (2009) embraced in their Girl Power project, developing comprehensive suggestions for educational practices. And, at a wider societal level, the USA social media based initiative SPARK (‘Sexualisation’, Protest, Action, Knowledge; http://www.spark-summit.com/) provides girls and young women with various opportunities to be involved in political activism. It seems fitting for us to conclude with an excerpt from one girl’s blog on the SPARK website in response to the Jour Apres Lunes girls’ lingerie campaign: “‘Showing too much skin’ is the way we simplify all of our culture’s problems with sexualization and focus them back on the woman (in this case, little girls) in question” (Melissa Campbell, SPARK, August 2010, http://www.sparksummit.com/).

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Notes
1. Māori are the indigenous people of New Zealand; Pakeha is the indigenous term for non-Māori.
2. Transana is software which enables researchers to analyze digital video or audio data. Transana enables one to transcribe the audio component of videos, identify analytically interesting clips, arrange and rearrange clips, create complex collections of interrelated clips etc.

References


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