

**Post-feminist Advertising Laid Bare:
Young Women's Talk About The Sexually Agentic Woman Of 'Midriff'
Advertising**

Helen Malson, Emma Halliwell, Irmgard Tischner and Annadís Rúdólfsdóttir

Helen Malson (corresponding author): Dept of Psychology, University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol, BS16 1QY, UK.

Email: Helen.Malson@uwe.ac.uk

Emma Halliwell: Dept of Psychology, University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol, BS16 1QY, UK.

Email: Emma.Halliwell@uwe.ac.uk

Irmgard Tischner: Psychological Sciences, The University of Worcester, Henwick Grove, Worcester, WR2 6AJ, UK.

Email: i.tischner@worc.ac.uk

Annadís Rúdólfsdóttir: Manager for the Gender Equality Training Programme, Gimli Sæmundargata 3, 101 Reykjavík, Iceland, www.get.hi.is

Email: annadis@hi.is

**Post-feminist Advertising Laid Bare:
Young Women's Talk About The Sexually Agentic Woman Of 'Midriff'
Advertising**

Abstract

This paper presents a feminist Foucauldian analysis of women's interpretations of images of women in post-feminist advertising. Building on Ros Gill's analysis of post-feminist advertising images of women, and more specifically the figure of 'the midriff', the paper presents an analysis of focus group discussions with seven young women who were asked to discuss 'midriff' advertising images. Whilst participants sometimes construed these images positively as 'sexy' and independent, midriff figures were more frequently constituted negatively as 'bimbos' and/or 'slutty' 'sex objects' whose seeming independence was achieved through or limited only to attracting men. In interpreting midriff figures negatively, participants, we suggest, constituted the midriff as other: as different and distant from themselves and 'normal' women. Where occasionally participants interpreted images more favourably, the midriff figure was, in contrast, constituted as 'normal' and 'natural' and as being about 'what she likes, not what he likes'. Participants did not identify themselves or their arguments as feminist. Nevertheless, they articulated critiques of these images which often converged significantly with critical feminist analyses. Our analysis suggests, therefore, that young women read these images in complex ways. These complexities of interpretation, we argue, should be central in understanding the relationships between women, bodies and post-feminist images of women's bodies.

Keywords: post-feminism, advertising, midriff figures, women, reading, discourse.

(8247 words, revised January 2010)

**Post-feminist Advertising Laid Bare:
Young Women's Talk About The Sexually Agentic Woman Of 'Midriff'
Advertising**

I don't think they need to have barely anything on to show they're an independent woman. ... I think they they don't need a man in their lives. (fg1 179-180)

Introduction

This paper presents a feminist Foucauldian discourse analysis of young women's talk about images of women in 'post-feminist' underwear advertising. In her article, *Empowerment/sexism: Female sexual agency in contemporary advertising*, Ros Gill (2008; see also Gill, 2007a, 2007b) analyses the recent shift in the advertising industry's representations of women whereby women are now often presented not so much as passive objects of a male gaze but, increasingly, as powerful, independent and sexually agentic. As Gill (2008) argues, this shift can be understood, and indeed has been framed by advertisers, as a response to feminist critiques of more 'traditional' sexually objectifying images of women (see e.g. Coward, 1984; Ussher, 1997). The sexually agentic woman of post-feminist advertising seems to counter the longstanding, culturally entrenched equation of femininity with passivity (see e.g. Jordanova, 1989; Mitchell, 1974) and the concomitant cultural occlusion of female sexual desire (Fine, 1988).

The shift, then, from images of 'woman as sexual object' to those of 'woman as sexually agentic' might thus, from a feminist perspective, be viewed as positively progressive. As Arthurs (2003) notes in her discussion of the TV series *Sex and the City*, post-feminist consumer culture disrupts bourgeois codes of feminine sexual decorum and has therefore been seen by some as a source of empowerment and pleasures that potentially resist male control (see also Hollows, 2000; McRobbie 1997). Thus, for example, the figure of 'the midriff', - most notably embodied by Eva Herzigova in the Wonderbra adverts of the 1990s with captions such as 'Hello Boys' and 'Or are you just pleased to see me' (Amy-Chinn, 2006) - appears sexually agentic rather than passively objectified (Gill, 2008). 'She' addresses the viewer in an

assertively active, provocative *and* humorous way as the five advertisements analysed by Gill (2007b) illustrate. In one Wonderbra advert displaying a woman holding the ties of the bra she is wearing, the caption reads ‘I pull the strings’ whilst another features a woman in a bra with ‘I can’t cook, who cares?’ printed across her cleavage. The other three examples of midriff adverts analysed by Gill (2007b) again feature images of women in underwear accompanied by similarly witty captions: a Triumph bra advert with the caption ‘New hair, new look, new bra. And if he doesn’t like it, new boyfriend’, a Gossard bra advert with the caption ‘Who said a woman can’t get pleasure from something soft’ and a Ganz BodySlimmer tights advert (this time showing the torso and legs of a woman in fishnets) with the caption ‘While you don’t necessarily dress for men, it doesn’t hurt on occasion, to see one drool like the pathetic dog that he is’. The midriff thus appears to deploy her heterosexual attractiveness agentically and ironically for her own amusement and/or gain. Like other post-feminist texts, such as *Bridget Jones*, *Ally McBeal*, and *Sex and the City*, the midriff advert emphasizes a sexually desirable appearance as the index of self-worth whilst at the same time ridiculing this attitude and thereby potentially disrupting the heterosexist construction of woman as object of a male gaze (see Arthurs, 2003) with ‘new’ constructions of femininity and sexuality where women ‘exploit’ their sexuality for fun and at the expense of men (see Amy-Chinn et al 2006).

However, through her analysis of three key post-feminist figures – ‘the young, heterosexually desiring “midriff”, the vengeful woman set on punishing her partner or ex-partner for his transgressions, and the “hot lesbian”’ – Gill (2008: 35) powerfully illustrates the inadequacy of any straightforwardly celebratory reading of these newer images. ‘What is striking’ in these images, she argue,

is the way in which advertisers have managed in these three figures to recuperate and commodify a particular kind of feminist consciousness and offer it back to women shorn of its political critique of gender relations and heteronormativity. A new version of female sexual agency is on offer that breaks in important ways with the sexual objectification and silencing of female desire of earlier advertising. Yet in refiguring female sexual agency in these particular ways, it raises new problems and challenges.’ (ibid.: 54-55)

That is, these post-feminist images can be seen as part of a contemporary production of neo-liberal femininities (see Gill and Arthurs, 2006), entailing both a regulation of subjects as autonomous ‘entrepreneurs of the own lives’ (Davies and Bansel, 2007: 248) and a ‘process of continually refashioning an appropriately feminine self’ through consumption (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008: 228). They seem to offer choice, autonomy and an escape from more traditional femininities (Walkerdine and Ringrose, 2006; see also Amy-Chinn et al., 2006) but only through the production of subjectivities that must be reflexively and endlessly worked upon as both subjects and objects of commodification and consumption (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). ‘The midriff’, like other post-feminist images, thus morphs feminist political goals into private desires for particular commodities through which self and lifestyle would be reconfigured (Douglas, 1994; Gill, 2007a, 2008; McRobbie, 2009).

Moreover, whilst these images are coded as universal (for women), they nevertheless prescribe a specifically bourgeois femininity (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008) and further delimit the promise of post-feminist empowerment and pleasures to those women who can embody a particular heteronormative vision of beauty that is young, slim, attractive, able-bodied, ample-breasted and usually white, (see Gill, 2008). And, whilst disrupting more conservative constructions of woman as passive sexual object (Arthurs, 2003), post-feminist femininities are also, problematically, hyper-(hetero)sexualized – sexually attractive, provocative, and always ‘up for it’ (Gill, 2008; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). Focused so prominently on the figure of a seemingly empowered, half-naked, sexually desiring female body, midriff advertising, Gill (2007a/b, 2008) argues, repackages pornography’s ‘male sexual fantasy’ as the authentic desires of modern liberated women whilst airbrushing out not only any physical ‘imperfection’ but also any hint of the inequalities and violences that permeate many ‘real’ women’s lives. The midriff thus represents an exemplar of neo-liberalised femininity in which, as Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008: 229) argue, liberal feminism converges with

post-feminist, neo-liberal mythologies of success and possibilities for women, where feminism is “recuperated” and rendered simultaneously “obsolete” (Gill & Arthurs, 2006; McRobbie, 2004a) in a discourse that empties out classed, gendered or racialized power differentials from contemporary thinking and meaning making.

In short, critical feminist analyses clearly elucidate the complexities of post-feminist cultures (e.g. Amy-Chinn, 2006; Arthurs, 2003; McRobbie, 2004a; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008) including midriff advertising images of women (Gill, 2007 a/b, 2008), illustrating how such images cannot, from a feminist perspective, be adequately viewed as wholly ‘good’ or wholly ‘bad’.

Methodology

Inspired by Gill’s (2007b, 2008) incisive critiques and her argument that we now need to research how female audiences make sense of these images, we were curious to explore how women more widely read and responded to post-feminist images and, in particular, to ‘midriff’ advertising images.

Participants

Our preliminary investigations comprised both an experimental (Halliwell et al., under review) and a qualitative study with women undergraduate psychology students at a UK universityⁱ. In the qualitative strand of our project, reported here, we conducted two focus groups, involving discussions with a total of seven women, recruited at the experimental stage of the project in return for course credits. The seven women, aged 18-21, all self-identified as either white or white British. Only four of the seven gave BMI information in the demographics requested and these varied from 14 to 22.86. In retrospect it would have been useful to also ask how participants self-identified in relation to sexual orientation and socio-economic class given the blatant heteronormativity of ‘the midriff’ (see Gill, 2008; Arthurs, 2003) and since, post-feminism prescribes a specifically bourgeois femininity (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2006) and, as Storr (2002; see also Bourdieu, 1984; Skeggs, 1997) argues, ‘lingerie’ and sexual display are suffused with issues of social class as well as

gender, creating socio-economic (as well as gendered) tightropes between being 'seductive' and 'cheap'. However, in so far as they were all undergraduates, it might be assumed participants were middle class.

Procedure

In the focus groups we asked participants to discuss their views on and feelings about images of women in advertising and, in particular, the five midriff images analysed by Gill (2007b) as outlined above (p.xxx). Each focus group, lasting approximately one hour, was facilitated by the first author, with the third author taking notes to aid transcription. Participants had been provided with an information sheet about the focus group study prior to recruitment. A brief verbal explanation of the study was also provided immediately prior to the discussion which began with an exploration of participants' views on and feelings about images of women in advertising generally and then proceeded to a discussion of the five midriff advertising images, copies of which were provided during the discussions which were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatimⁱⁱ. The resulting transcripts were then analysed within a feminist Foucauldian framework to explore the ways in which these images were discursively constituted in our participants' talk and the relationalities between women, women's bodies and images of women's bodies that were thereby constituted.

Theoretical framework

Our aim here was not to supplement our experimental findings with a qualitative analysis of 'media effects' but, rather to explore the ways in which the women made sense of these images; to interrogate the processes of *interpretation* and *relationality* entailed in reading/viewing these images. Research into 'media effects' has undoubtedly been valuable in indicating the potentially pernicious impact of images of slim female bodies on girls and women (e.g. Grogan, 1999; Halliwell et al., 2005). At the same time, however, such work has been subject to considerable criticism not least for its often epistemologically dubious and over-simplistic conceptualisations of cause and consequence and the relationship that such work often assumes to pertain between images and bodies. Blood (2005), for example, has argued that, even whilst problematising media images of (slim) female bodies, mainstream experimental

methodology re-articulates culturally dominant constructions of the female body as a 'natural' target of aesthetic judgement. Coleman (2008) has further argued that much feminist qualitative as well as quantitative work in this field problematically presupposes a masculinist dichotomy between body and image; between "the subject who looks" and "the object looked at" which, she contends, is inadequate (ibid.: 167). It is, Coleman (2008) argues, not so much (or only) a case of images effecting bodies than of bodies being constituted and experienced *through* their relationships to and with images. Neither bodies nor images of bodies can be anterior to their relationality because, for women, these images are 'over-present' (Doane, 1992, cited in Coleman, 2008) and of such pervasiveness that they constitute a visual pedagogy in how to see and experience our bodies as normal/ideal or - more likely - defective (Bordo, 2003). The relationship(s) between bodies and images might thus be best understood not in terms of 'media effects' but of bodies *becoming* through their constitutive relationships with images (Coleman, 2008). Drawing on Coleman's argument, our concern in analysing the focus group discussions about midriff advertising images was not therefore with gauging their effects but with the way in which our participants *actively* interpreted these images and with the participant-image relationships were thereby constituted.

Analysis

In analyzing these women's discussions of midriff advertising images what was immediately striking was that whilst participants 'recognised' the appeal of these images they were also often highly critical of them in ways which frequently inserted a distance between the women and the images. In the analysis below we explore how the figure of the midriff was constituted as the ostensible post-feminist 'ideal' - beautiful, 'sexy', independent and in control - but also conversely as a mere masquerade of equality (see also McRobbie, 2009) - as a 'bimbo', 'slut' or 'sex object' whose control and independence was illusory or trivial, limited only to her appearance and her ability to attract men. These divergent constructions clearly imply quite different relationships between the participants and images (identification or aspiration versus derogation and critical distance). Indeed, as we seek to illustrate, participants frequently constituted the midriff (and also the target audience of midriff advertising) as the other of 'normal' women and of themselves not only because the

midriff looked ‘extra beautiful’ but also because ‘she’ (and ‘her’ target audience) were (interpreted as) appearance-oriented and, in one way or another, at the beck and call of men. Concomitantly, where on occasions midriff images were interpreted as being less oriented to men they were also constituted positively as more ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ implying, we argue, a less distant or antagonistic relationship between participants and image. In the analysis below we thus seek to map out some of these multiplicities and complexities of both interpretation and relationality in young women’s readings of midriff images.

Reading the midriff as post-feminist ideal

Whilst participants, as noted above, offered various criticisms of the advertising images, midriff bodies were almost invariably described as beautiful and as possessing easily recognizable culturally idealised characteristics.

Extract 1

Lisa: They’re always famous and like really beautiful people. (fg1, 26)

Extract 2

Carla: Yeah, well she’s like blonde and she’s got like big lips and big boobs and perfectly groomed eyebrows. (fg2, 237-8)

Extract 3

Jo: They seem like size zero=

=H: Uum=

Jo: and really like thin and beautiful in them. You don’t, you never see an advert with an ugly person. (fg2, 33-5)

Whilst this physical ‘perfection’ is fundamental to the midriff figure (Gill, 2008), it clearly does not in itself, distinguish ‘her’ from more longstanding idealised images of women in advertising (or elsewhere). However, in line with numerous cultural analyses (e.g. Gill, 2007a; McRobbie, 2009), participants also read these advertising images, firstly, as signifying women’s autonomy and confidence and, second, as

overtly sexualized. In the extracts below, for example, the figure of the midriff is read as strong, independent and as getting what she wants.

Extract 4

H: D'you think it [the advert] is (.) trying to get us to think this is a particular sort of woman, that she might have particular kinds of characteristics, do you think?

Lisa: Like confident and everything=

=H: Mm (.)

Lisa: no flaws. [laughs]...

Kate: The kind of a woman that has no problem getting a man,=

=H: Mm=

Kate: whoever she wants. (fg1, 87-93)

Extract 5

Anna: I think it is portraying women sort of stronger, more independently ...

Paula: She's stronger than you=

=Anna: She's strong and dominating. (fg1, lines 99-103)

Extract 6

Gemma: I kind of think 'she pulls the strings': say if she was my girlfriend, if I was a man

H: Mm

Gemma: uhm she would be completely in control of the whole relationship.

She pulls the strings so=

=H: Right=

=Gemma: like quite *fierce*. I see her as quite fierce=

=H: Right=

=Gemma: and like if she wants something she'll have it=

=H: Right=

=Gemma: In that sense demanding. (.) I reckon. (fg2, 267-71)

The midriff thus appears to be (read as) very different from earlier sexually objectifying images that inscribe 'woman' as passive and subordinate. In this more

contemporary 'post-feminist' representation 'she' is 'strong', 'independent' and even 'quite fierce' as well as beautiful. It is 'she' who is 'completely in control' and 'tells the man what to do' and 'her' sexual desire is no longer occluded (c.f. Fine, 1988) since 'she' is now '[t]he kind of a woman' who gets the man '*she wants*' (emphasis added). Whilst, heterosexuality clearly remains normative (and unremarked upon), heterosexual power-relations are read here as significantly altered. In contrast then with the passive sexual object of yesteryear, the midriff appears, at least initially, to be (read as) a sexually agentic and desiring subject (see e.g. Gill, 2008; Arthurs, 2003). And, as the extracts below further illustrate, her sexualisation is read as more blatant than in advertising images of previous decades.

Extract 7

Anna: Now they tend to be (.) quite (.) well (.) a bit risky, not like like =
=Lisa: They're quite sexual aren't they.=
=Anna: Yeah yeah really sexual and I *don't* remember that. I don't guess they used to be like that=
=H: Right.=
=Anna: But now they're like (.)
Lisa: like associated with sex really. (fg1, 42-5)

Extract 8

Carla: I think [laughing] they've got a lot more sexual to be honest=
=H: Right.
Jo: Oh yeah=
=Gemma: That's so true.=
=Carla: from being like homely women you know like staying at home (.) selling this cleaning product=
=H: Mm=
=Carla: to now like all this sex. ...
Carla: They're [the adverts] ... both geared towards (.) going out and getting that bloke that you want. (fg2, 40-45, 258)

In extract 8 the phrase 'to be honest' arguably suggests a dis-ease with this reading but the contrasting of this 'more sexy' image with earlier representations of domestic

femininity also perhaps suggests that this increased sexualisation is read positively. Women here are no longer portrayed as stuck at home cleaning but as ‘going out and getting that bloke that you want’.

Reading the midriff as perfect(ly oppressive)

In extract 9 this seemingly positive construal of the midriff’s sexualisation is quite explicitly located as part of a package of post-feminist ‘perfection’.

Extract 9

H: Is there anything that we’re meant to think about these women other than that they’re sexy and beautiful (.) or skinny?

Gemma: Uh (.) that they’re sexy (.) but then that’s (.)

Jo: That they’re perfect and [laughing] that’s what everyone should be like really.

H: Right=

=Carla: And that they’re successful and they’re successful because of (.) um the way they look [inaud.]

H: Um right. And how would you, how would you define that success that they’ve got?

Jo: They’ve got money. They’ve got wealth.

H: Right (.)

Jo: So they can buy what they want and have what they want because they’ve got money and because of the way they look. (fg2, 52-64)

In this discussion of how ‘we’re meant to think about these women’ in midriff advertising, participants constitute the midriff as ‘perfect’, ‘sexy’, ‘successful’, wealthy and able to buy and have what she wants, an interpretation that clearly resonates with analyses of post-feminist culture as a source of empowerment and pleasure for women (see also Arthurs, 2003; Gill, 2008; Hollows, 2000; McRobbie, 1997). Yet, whilst this discussion can be read as articulating a positive construction of the midriff, it is also implicitly critical of these images. First, because this image of ‘perfection’ is framed as prescriptive: ‘that’s what everyone *should* be like’ (emphasis added) and, second, because ‘her’ success and wealth are framed as a consequence of

'her' looks rather than, say, 'her' intelligence. In the extracts below this latter critique is made more explicit.

Extract 10

H: And that last one as well? 'I can't cook who cares' [laughter] um.

Lisa: But she only doesn't care cos she's got boobs like that. [laughter]
[inaud.] She pulls the strings cos look at her. She's not exactly like confident about that she's got a good job or a lot of money is it. It's just because she looks like that. (fg1, 117-20)

Extract 11

Jo: Because with the writing it's just like: I'm just a blonde bimbo with a pretty face.

Gemma: And I can't do anything=

=Jo: and I can't do anything (.) so I need a man to do everything for me.

H: Right. [laughter] ...

Carla: I don't think she feels good about herself.

H: What makes you say that? (.)

Carla: Just I think she, she hasn't got anything apart from her body really. She looks, I don't know,

H: Mm=

=Carla: I kind of feel a bit sorry for her. ...

Jo: Yeah the lights are on but nobody's home. [laughter] (fg2, 370-402)

Extract 12

Paula: This one's basically just like (.) can't cook but I can, I'm (.) I'm really good in bed,

H: Mm.

Paula: So that's fine.

Lisa: Yeah.

Paula: And that is *all* that matters. And because it's just her in the picture it's just (.) her boobs and her face (.) and (.) um

H: Mm.

Paula: I didn't really like it. Her face as well, it's just it's another one of these come-and-get-me faces.

H: Yeah, so it's not suggesting independence to you?

Lisa: Not at all, no, not at all. (fg1, 331-8)

In these extracts the midriff's escape from domesticity (see also Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2006) appears rather less like a representation of gender equality. It doesn't matter that she can't cook *only* because 'she's got boobs like that' and 'one of these come-and-get-me faces'. She is read here as the derogatory stereotype of the 'bimbo' whose 'lights are on but nobody's home'; whose confidence is only about the (hetero)sexual attractiveness of her body and is 'not at all' about independence, ability or a career. Her body and its capacity to secure men's sexual attention 'is *all* that matters' and if she is successful or wealthy it is *only* because of this.

The fact that in extract 11 Carla 'kind of feel[s] a bit sorry for' the figure of the 'I can't cook' advert arguably underlines participants' distinctly critical reading of 'her' seeming control and confidence as illusory and/or trivial. (It also indicates a distance between participants and the images they were discussing – an issue to which we shall return after further exploring participants' readings of the gender-politics of the midriff.) In the extracts below this delimitation of the midriff's success to the possession of a (hetero)sexually attractive body is explicitly problematised - sometimes in ways which might themselves be viewed as problematic.

Extract 13

Paula: Even though she's dominant, she's dominant sexually, not like anything else

H: Yep (.)

Paula: Makes her look like a prostitute I think. [laughter] (fg1, 270-2)

Extract 14

Jo: Like this one specially. Do you know what I mean. I mean no one really wants to (.) look that, (.) do you know what I mean, just wear that (.) like really (.) slutty. That's what I think about it. (fg2, 123-6)

Extract 15

Lisa: It's just all about sex.

Paula: Yeah.

Lisa: They're all portrayed as just sex objects. (fg1, lines 83)

Here the midriff is read not as an image of liberated female desire and gender equality but as 'slutty' and 'look[ing] like a prostitute'. Her sexualisation, however novel in some ways, is nevertheless recuperated back into longstanding, culturally entrenched, derogatory stereotypes of sexually active or attractive women such that, as extract 15 illustrates, even her (seemingly liberated) sexual agency is occluded: 'They're all portrayed as just sex objects'.

Given that 'the midriff' has been defined as an image of 'female sexual agency ... that breaks in important ways with the sexual objectification and silencing of female desire of earlier advertising' (Gill, 2008: 54-55), the framing above of midriff models as 'all portrayed as just sex objects' may seem surprising. The sliding of interpretation of the midriff from sexually agentic subject to 'just sex object' might, however, also be understood as indicating a critique, along the lines of Gill's, of the way in which the heteronormativity of the midriff works to undo the independence, confidence and sexual agency 'she' *seems* to represent. That is, images of 'the young, heterosexually desiring "midriff"' (Gill, *ibid*: 35) challenge notions of women as passive sexual objects. But in doing so they resonate with the already-existing cultural imagery of, for example, male-oriented pornography (see e.g. Gill, 2008; Ussher, 1997) or earlier religious and medical depictions of voracious female sexual 'deviancy' (see e.g. Jordanova, 1989; Bordo, 2003). Thus, whilst post-feminist discourse frames hyper-sexuality as 'the new mode for women's empowerment' (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2006: 233) the midriff's hyper-sexuality is read here rather differently as 'slutty', objectified and, implicitly at least, oppressed.

The terms such as 'bimbo', 'slutty' and 'prostitute' which participants sometimes used in describing midriff figures do, of course, reference a distinctly non-feminist perspective and might therefore be taken as evidence of participants' non-feminist readings of the images. Indeed, in criticizing these images as pre- rather than post-feminist, participants arguably circumvent criticism of (some) post-feminist values

themselves and perhaps affirm their own neo-liberal credentials as autonomous and empowered womenⁱⁱⁱ. At the same time, however, the post-feminist perspective, conveyed ‘through sexual subjectification in midriff advertising [that women] *must also now understand their own objectification as pleasurable and self-chosen*’ (Gill, 2008: 45) is clearly dismissed in reframing the image in more traditional and derogatory terms of oppressed femininities. Further, these conspicuously problematic terms were embedded in conversations which draw, in part, on feminist discourses critiquing sexist, sexualised representations of women. Indeed, participants frequently elaborated their critiques of these images in terms of their problematic androcentrism. In extract 13 her dominance is *only* sexual and is therefore ‘all about the man and its not about how you feel about *yourself*’. In extract 16 below it is, again, quite specifically the ways in which these images re-instate men, male desires and masculine perspectives that is problematised.

Extract 16

Gemma: I think she’s trying to be like (.) like seem like a strong woman [inaud] but its still basically all revolved around men. So it’s like be a strong woman and make them drool even though it shouldn’t really be anything about men at all. ...

H: Ok do you think [the advert is aimed] at people, at women who see themselves as independent? (.)

Jo: No.

Gemma: Not really.

H: No? (.)

Gemma: Cos I think it’s for the man=

=Jo: Yeah=

=Gemma: at the end=

=H: Right=

=Gemma: of the day, not for women themselves. (fg2, 158-161, 203-6)

Thus, Gemma and Jo constitute the midriff as pandering to men through her half-nakedness and her ‘choice’ of underwear. Whilst ‘she’ may ‘seem like a strong woman’ her apparent independence and strength is framed as illusory since she is not dressing for herself but ‘for the man’ and her strength lies only in ‘making [men]

drool'. That participants' tended most often to read this version of female independence as unpalatable is further illustrated below where Gemma suggests that the adverts are 'geared towards men'. Her comment implies that she reads these advertising images as sufficiently sexist and/or masculinist that women would not buy the products for themselves.

Extract 17

Gemma: *I think* personally most these adverts are like (.) I think they're geared towards men to buy the products for like their girlfriends as opposed to like for women themselves. (fg2, 117-9)

Interrogating relationality in women's readings of the midriff

In many of the extracts discussed above the distinctly critical tone of participants' comments suggests that in their readings of the midriff images there is a significant distancing of themselves from these images; that these images are constituted as other and, perhaps as abject (see e.g. Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2006^{iv}). Indeed, in extract 17 Gemma questions whether these adverts even address women whilst in extract 18 below there is an explicit separation or disjunction between viewer/reader and image.

Extract 18

Lisa: It's just all about sex.

Paula: Yeah.

Lisa: They're all portrayed as just sex objects. And I can't relate to that=

=H: Right=

=Lisa cos I don't do that=

=H: Right=

=Lisa: so (.) just, just, it just doesn't look like normal women does it. You can't relate to them.

H: Mm.

Lisa: Its just all putting like sexy faces and everything.

Paula: Yeah.

Lisa: Its just like hum. (fg1, lines 83-6)

The relationality between Lisa and these images appears to be neither one of identification nor aspiration, at a least not in any straightforward sense. Lisa ‘can’t relate to that’, first, *because* ‘[t]hey’re all portrayed as just sex objects’ and, second, because the midriff figure ‘just doesn’t look like normal women does it’. The distance between woman and image, as it is constituted in this comment, prioritises the critique of the midriff’s sexualisation and then, perhaps as part of that, constitutes the midriff as not looking like ‘normal’ women. In extract 19 this reading of the midriff’s body as outside of the norm is further elaborated.

Extract 19

Paula: They always look like so beautiful and=

=Anna: Yeah=

=Paula made up. It’s never like normal people with normal hair. It’s extra shiny and extra beautiful.

Anna: Yeah ...

Lisa: She hasn’t got a normal figure has she for like women nowadays.

Paula: No.

Lisa: I think not many people would wear that. I wouldn’t wear that

Paula:: *No* [laughs]....

Anna: I don’t think I would ever picture myself wearing anything with=

=Paula: No=

=Anna: that kind of design. (fg1, 32-33, 263-76)

There are various differences read here between a midriff body and the bodies of ‘normal’ women and, particularly where advertising models are described as ‘so beautiful’, this could be read as an idealising construction of the midriff body as one which ‘normal’ women would want but of which they fall short. At the same time, however, participants’ readings of midriff bodies here does not seem to be only or straightforwardly about comparing themselves negatively. Paula, Lisa and Anna all agree that they - like ‘many people’ - wouldn’t dress like the model in the advert. It is hard to disentangle the midriff’s (perhaps idealised) physical attributes from the (often criticised) highly sexualised nature of ‘her’ presentation. But, whether positioned as different from participants and ‘normal’ women because of their ‘figures’, ‘extra shiny hair’ and beauty and/or because ‘[t]hey’re all portrayed as just sex objects’, the

relationships constituted between midriffs and participants (and other ‘normal’ women) were overwhelmingly of difference and distance.

In the extract below it is not only the midriff figure but the intended or ‘ideal’ reader who participants constituted as different from themselves.

Extract 20

H: Do you think the ad is maybe aimed at a particular kind of woman? (.)

Jo: Younger women?

H: Yeah (.)

Gemma: I reckon about 22. Ha [laughter] (.) ...

Jo: I think it’s like to people that are very (.) like body orientated. Because like me as a person, like you you’re only gonna wear this if you’re slim in the first place. You know, you’re not gonna get like *me* going out and buy this. D’you know what I mean ... I think appealing to people that are already body conscious and already like skinny=

=H: Mm=

=Jo: and long and being like: well we’ll need to be=

=H: Mm=

=Jo: even more that way.

H: Yeah (.)

Carla: I think any other, like most women will just flick past it. You might like read it just out of polite but they won’t be like: oh I’ll go and get that. But if like (.) vain, *not vain*, I don’t know (.) like (.) I kind of feel like *vain* people would get it.

H: Right.

Carla: I don’t know why.

H: Right.

Gemma: Yeah like it’s only like advertised to uh a certain people of=

=Jo: Yeah.=

=Gemma: it’s not advertised to everyone.

H: Ok do you think at people, at women who see themselves as independent?

(.)

Jo: No. (fg2, 183-204)

The 'kind of woman' this advert is 'aimed at' is of a similar age to the participants and like some participants, she is 'slim'. These similarities notwithstanding, however, 'she' is also constituted in ways which, at least implicitly, suggest these readers do not position themselves as the intended or receptive audience of the advert. This 'kind of woman' is not only young and slim but is also, 'body orientated', 'vain' and not independent. 'She' is constituted here as psychologically as well as physically different (despite the similarities with participants noted above) from 'most women' who 'will just flick past' such adverts. In the extracts below this difference between participants and the women they consider to be the targets of these adverts is again apparent.

Extract 21

Carla: I think that's horrible.

H: Yeah, what would you say is horrible about her?

Carla: Uuh (.) just like: (.) dress up for your man so you can be the prostitute.

H: Right [laughter]

Carla: It's just like, it's completely=

=H: Mm=

= Carla: fake and its completely, its horrible. It's all about the man and it's not about how you feel about *yourself*. It's about how your man feels about you.

H: Right.

Carla: Just cos you're wearing these (.) slutty things.

H: Right

Carla: I don't like it at all. ...

H: So d'you think this advert's aimed at a kind of particular *sort* of woman?

Carla: Prostitutes? [laughter]

(fg2, 131-8, 403-4)

At the end of extract 21 the framing of women to whom these adverts might appeal as prostitutes is expressed as a joke, suggesting perhaps a considerable (and safe) distance between Carla and the women she describes. In the first part of the extract, however, there is a clear sense of discomfort. The advert is similarly read as addressing women as prostitutes or prostitute-like but here the term prostitute does not

seem so much to create a categorical distinction between participants and women addressed by the advert. Rather it is read as inviting (or instructing [see Gill, 2008]) women generally to ‘be the prostitute ... wearing these (.) slutty things’.

In the following extract - where Jo and Gemma discussed the advert with the caption ‘While you don’t necessarily dress for men, it doesn’t hurt on occasion, to see one drool like the pathetic dog that he is’ - the advert is similarly criticised for ‘inviting’ women to dress for men. But here there is a suggestion of duplicity in the advert’s message such that, participants are again positioned as different from the ‘kind of woman’ who might be fooled by its message.

Extract 22

H: What about that phrase at the beginning about ‘you don’t necessarily dress for men’? ...

Jo: I think the key word is ‘necessarily’.

H: Yeah.

Jo: It’s like: well you don’t necessarily but you *might*=

=H: Mm (.)

Jo: and you probably *do*. [laughter] So because you probably *do* dress for men then why don’t you just go and buy this and they can drool even more.

H: Mm yep.

Gemma: The advertisers are probably like saying it so that it’s like: well you’re not completely (.) to make the person think=

= H: Mm=

=Gemma: that she’s not doing it, she’s doing it for herself as well

H: Yeah.

Gemma: although it’s not true. (.) She’s doing it for her man. (fg2, 214-230)

Thus Jo and Gemma unpick a subtext – ‘you probably *do* dress for men’ - underlying the caption ‘you don’t necessarily dress for men’. Their discussion suggests that it is the absent presence of this subtext which produces the advert as humorous *and* which is pivotal to the advertising intent of selling the underwear to women. In the reading of the advert presented here the image and its caption appear, whilst amusing, to be disingenuous and disparaging of women. Set up in the caption is an ideal of the

woman who dresses 'for herself' and, through the use of 'you', the reader is called to identify with that ideal. At the same time, however, through its subtext and its reference to drooling men, it seems to (attempt to) elicit a desire to dress for men. Thus, woven into participants' discussion here is both an analysis of the neo-liberal regulation at work in the advert and an assertion of themselves as different from any such women in that midriff advertising is constructed here as appealing only to those women who mis-recognise pleasing men for pleasing themselves (see also Gill, 2008; Amy-Chinn, 2006).

As noted above, the majority of participants' interpretations of the adverts were distinctly critical and constituted a distancing of participants from both the images and the women to whom, they suggested, these adverts would appeal. Two of the five adverts – the Triumph and the Gossard adverts - however, elicited favourable as well as critical comments. For example:

Extract 23

Paula: The thing is with the messed up hair, are they trying to make her seem like more of a normal woman compared to all these celebrity people who've got the lovely glossy long hair. And we're saying we don't like it cos it looks boring but [laughing] we don't like it when they've got really nice hair.

Anna: No I do, no I like her, I like how (.) like her pose and all that. I'd=

=Paula: Yeah.

Anna: I think she (.) just looks, I d'know (.) she's comfortable and happy whereas the others look like they're there to impress somebody. She's just [inaud.]

Lisa: And it's short and sweet like like 'new boyfriend', doesn't, she doesn't really rely on him=

=Anna: No=

=Lisa: does she. It's what she likes, not what he likes. (.) So she looks more independent (.)

H: In the the one with about the boyfriend?

Lisa: Yeah and she doesn't look like such a sex object.

Anna: No.

Lisa: She just looks normal.... Maybe she's in a bra but it's not like all her boobs pushed up or anything. It's more natural.

Anna: Yeah (fg1, 238-49)

Extract 24

Jo: I think this one would be that like she's quite a a successful woman in a lot of aspects (.)

Gemma: Yeah, I'd say that as well=

=Jo: just cos of the way like that she's spread out and like commanding space=

=Gemma: She's comfortable with herself as well perhaps.... Yeah she's comfortable with herself in a relaxing way. She's not (.) in a seductive way like the others are.=

=Jo: Yeah=

=H: Right=

=Gemma: I mean like she's just like (.) this is me=

=Carla: I don't think she looks that relaxed though. Her body looks really twisted, like the way her hips go one way and her shoulders almost the other.

H: Mm.

Carla: I don't think=

=Gemma: Oh yeah=

=Carla: she looks comfortable. (fg2, 306-316)

In these last two extracts, these two midriff image are positively construed, at least by some participants. In extract 23 different opinions are expressed as to whether the image is boring or likable and extract 24 there are different views about whether this particular midriff looks 'relaxed' or not. In both extracts, however, a likable image is constituted as one which portrays the woman as 'comfortable', 'happy' 'relaxed' and 'natural'. 'She' is 'independent', 'successful' and focused on 'what she likes, not what he likes'. In contrast, then, with participants' previous negatively valued constructions of midriff figures as hyper-(hetero)sexualised, appearance-focused and not 'normal', participants here constituted these two images more positively precisely for her not being 'seductive' and 'there to impress somebody'; because 'she doesn't look like such a sex object'. Participants' rather infrequent positive construals of

midriff figures thus converged, we would argue, with their critical interpretations of midriff images in prioritising ‘what she likes, not what he likes’ as the index of un/palatability and thus in the discursive production of relationality between the women, bodies and images of midriff bodies.

Discussion

In this paper we have sought to explore how women - specifically young, white, able-bodied undergraduate women - read and make sense of midriff figures in advertising and the kinds of relationships that they thereby constitute between themselves, their bodies and the images of women’s bodies they view. Whilst clearly further research is required to explore how other groups of women might interpret these images, our analysis nevertheless indicates a cultural availability of discursive resources on which women can (and, in our study, did) draw to critique post-feminist images of women in advertising or indeed in other media fora. Whilst participants sometimes articulated positive construals of midriff images their discussions of these images were overwhelmingly critical and tended most often to construct a sense of difference and distance between themselves and the images. This difference was articulated as, in part, a difference between ‘perfect’ midriff bodies and the bodies of themselves and other ‘normal’ women but it was more prominently articulated as a difference from the negatively construed hyper-hetero-sexualised characteristics and orientations (to appearance and to men) signified by midriff images. That is, participants almost invariably interpreted the midriff figure as an image of a beautiful and sexy but ‘slutty’ and/or incompetent woman who dresses only to please men (rather than herself), who ‘hasn’t got anything apart from her body really’ and whose independence and success is, therefore, illusory and/or trivial in that it is a consequence only of her heterosexual attractiveness.

None of our participants explicitly identified themselves or their arguments as feminist nor the images they discussed as sexist and, as noted above, some of the terms such as ‘bimbo’ and ‘slutty’, applied to the images are in themselves problematic and not easily reconciled with feminist perspectives. And, as noted above, whilst participants were clearly critical of midriff images, their comments were

often made from the arguably neo-liberal/post-feminist position a woman who pleases herself. Nevertheless, we would argue, participants articulated, often quite forcefully, critiques of these images which converge with the critical feminist analyses of Ros Gill (2007a, 2008) and others (e.g. Arthurs, 2003; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2006; McRobbie, 2009).

Perhaps most significant here are, first, participants' critiques of how the midriff's hyper-hetero-sexualisation functions to reduce 'her' seeming control and independence to the possession (and sexual presentation) of a particular kind of (young, slim, able-bodied, ample-breasted, white) body and, second, how this sexualisation also thereby re-instates men, male desires and male or masculinist perspectives (on women) as pivotal not only to the midriff's 'success' but also to the version of feminine subjectivity on offer in post-feminist advertising. In participants' readings of these adverts, first, the midriff 'hasn't got anything apart from her body really' so that whilst she may 'seem like a strong woman ... it's still basically all revolved around men' and 'dress[ing] up for your man so you can be the prostitute ... and it's not about how you feel about *yourself*. It's about how your man feels about you.' And, second, 'how your man feels about you' is then packaged 'to make the person think ... she's doing it for herself ... although it's not true. (.) She's doing it for her man.' Thus, whilst not explicitly feminist, participants' discussions can be read as, in part, re-articulating a critical feminist analysis of such post-feminist advertising images as a form of neo-liberal regulation of gendered subjectivity whereby a distinctly heteronormative construction of female sexual agency and embodiment is duplicitously presented not as complicity with the prescriptions of a male gaze but as 'the freely chosen wish of active (confident, assertive) female subjects' (Gill, 2007a: 90).

Our analysis suggests, therefore, a cultural availability of feminist (or feminist-like) discursive resources (for these participants at least) with which to critique post-feminist images of women and the neo-liberal gender-politics embedded therein. These ways in which participants interpreted the midriff images must, we would argue, be central to the ways in which we understand the relationship(s) between (these) women, bodies and images of women's bodies. Thus, as the above analysis illustrates, participants generally, though not exclusively, asserted a difference and

distance between themselves and images of the midriff implicitly through their often negative or derogatory constructions and more explicitly where, for example, midriffs were framed as not like ‘normal’ women and participants talked about not being able to relate to them. Whilst the experimental strand of our project (see Halliwell et al., under review) suggested a ‘media effect’ of increased body dissatisfaction and self-objectification, our discourse analytic exploration suggests a rather more complex relationship between women, bodies and midriff images. The question of how women’s ability to draw on critical discourses in discussing post-feminist images of women relates to their/our being ‘un/affected’ by this cultural habitat of images remains unclear. But, by focusing analysis on women’s interpretations of relations to these images (where women are thus understood as *active* readers/viewers), the possibilities (see also Coleman, 2008) of feminist resistance and critical othering of (post-feminist) media images of women (rather than only identification/aspiration and ‘effect’) become central in understanding these images and women’s relationship(s) to them.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Ros Gill and to three anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

References

Amy-Chinn, D. (2006) This is just for me(n): How the regulation of post-feminist lingerie advertising perpetuates woman as object, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 6 (2) 155-175.

Amy-Chinn, D., Jantzen, C., and Østergaard, P. (2006) Doing and meaning: Towards an integrated approach to the study of women’s relationship to underwear, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 6 (3) 379-401.

APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) Executive Summary,
<http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualizationsum.html> accessed 06.09.09

Arthurs, J. (2003) Sex and the City and Consumer Culture: Remediating Postfeminist
Drama, *Feminist Media Studies*, 3 (1) 83-98

Blood, S. (2005) *Body work: The social construction of women's body image*,
Routledge, London.

Bordo, S. (2003) *Unbearable weight: Feminism, Western culture and the body*
University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Coleman, R. (2008). The becoming of bodies: Girls, media effects and, body image,
Feminist Media Studies, 8 (2) 163-179

Coward, R. (1984) *Female desire: Women's sexuality today*, Paladin, London.

Davies, B. and Bansel, P. (2007) Neo-liberalism and education, *International Journal
of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 20 (3) 247-259.

Doane, M.A. (1992) Film and the masquerade: Theorising the female spectator, in
Screen Editorial Collective (ed) *The sexual subject: A Screen reader in sexuality*,
Routledge, London.

Douglas, S. (1994) *Where the girls are: Growing up female with the mass media*, . Penguin, Hammondswoth.

Fine, M. (1988) Sexuality, schooling and adolescent females, The missing discourse of desire, *Harvard Educational Review*, 58 (1) 29-53.

Gill, R. (2007a) *Gender and the media*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Gill (2007b). *Supersexualize Me! Advertising and the midriffs*. Paper presented as part of Critical Sexology Seminar series, Embodying Femininity, South Bank University, June 2007.

Gill, R. (2008) Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising , *Feminism & Psychology*, 18 (2) 35-60

Grogan, S. (1999) *Body image*, Routledge, London.

Halliwell, E., Malson, H. and Tischner, I. (under review) The Effects of Contemporary Framings of Women in Advertising on Weight-Concern and Self-Objectification. Ms under review *Sex Roles*.

Halliwell, E., Dittmar, H., & Howe, J. (2005) The Impact of Advertisements Featuring Ultra-Thin or Average-Size Models on Women With a History of Eating Disorders. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 15, 406-413.

Hollows, J. (2000) *Feminism, Femininity and Popular culture*, Mchaester/New York: Manchester University Press.

Jantzen, C., Østergaard, P. and Viera, C.M.S. (2006) becoming a 'woman to the backbone': Lingerie consumption and the experience of feminine identity, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 6 (2) 177-202.

Jordanova, L. (1989) *Sexual visions: Images of gender in science and medicine between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, London.

Levy, A. (2005) *Female chauvinist pigs: Women and the rise of raunch culture*, New York, Free Press.

McNair, B. (2002) *Striptease culture: Sex, media and the democratization of desire*, Routledge, London

McRobbie A. (1997) Bridging the gap: Feminism, fashion and consumption, *Feminist Review*, 55 (Spring) 73-89.

McRobbie, A. (2009) *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change*, Sage, London.

Mitchell, J. (1974) *Psychoanalysis and feminism*. Penguin, Hammondswoth.

Ringrose, J. and Walkerdine, V. (2008) Regulating the abject: The TV make-over as a site of neo-liberal reinvention towards bourgeois femininity, *Feminist Media Studies*, 8 (3) 227-246.

Ussher, J.M. (1997) *Fantasies of femininity; Reframing the boundaries of sex*, Rutgers University Press, NJ.

Walkerdine, V. and Ringrose, J. (2006) Femininities: reclassifying upward mobility and the neo-liberal subject, in C. Skelton, B. Francis and L. Smulyan (eds) *Gender and education handbook*, Sage: London

ⁱ The findings from our experimental study (see Halliwell et al. [under review] for further details) suggested that contemporary ‘midriff’ depictions of women as active sexual subjects may be even more damaging than more traditional objectifying representations in that they seem to similarly exacerbate women’s body dissatisfaction whilst also leading more strongly to self-objectification. A finding which is consistent with Gill’s (2007, p.90) argument that contemporary representations of women encourage an internalized ‘self-policing narcissistic gaze’. That they were also rated more favourably may also, as Gill also notes, make them more difficult to challenge.

ⁱⁱ In the extracts that follow participants’ names and any identifying details have been changed. (.) indicates a pause. ... indicates part of the transcript has been omitted. = are used to indicate no noticeable pause between one utterance and another. Emphasis is indicated by italics. Explanatory comments are enclosed in square brackets. Focus group and line numbers are given after each extract, e.g. (fg2, 52-64) for focus group 2, lines 52-64 of the transcript.

ⁱⁱⁱ Our thanks to an anonymous review for this insight.

^{iv} Ringrose and Walkerdine (2006) argue that post-feminist cultures, specifically TV make-over programs, work to elicit disgust in the working-class female body. Here, however, it is the (post-feminist image of the) midriff body itself that – framed as ‘horrible’ and ‘slutty’ – appears abject and as other of ‘respectable’ (bourgeois) femininity.