

# Immaculate consumption: negotiating the sex symbol in postfeminist celebrity culture

Evans, A. and Riley, S.

**Author post-print (accepted) deposited in CURVE December 2013**

**Original citation & hyperlink:**

Evans, A. and Riley, S. (2013) Immaculate consumption: negotiating the sex symbol in postfeminist celebrity culture. *Journal of Gender Studies*, volume 22 (3): 268-281.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2012.658145>

**Publisher statement:** This is an electronic version of an article published in the *Journal of Gender Studies*, 22 (3), pp. 268-281. The *Journal of Gender Studies* is available online at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09589236.2012.658145>.

**Copyright © and Moral Rights are retained by the author(s) and/ or other copyright owners. A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge. This item cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.**

This document is the author's post-print version of the journal article, incorporating any revisions agreed during the peer-review process. Some differences between the published version and this version may remain and you are advised to consult the published version if you wish to cite from it.

**CURVE is the Institutional Repository for Coventry University**

<http://curve.coventry.ac.uk/open>

## **Immaculate consumption: negotiating the sex symbol in postfeminist celebrity culture**

Adrienne Evans <sup>a\*</sup> and Sarah Riley <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Department of Media and Communications, Coventry University, Coventry, UK*

<sup>b</sup> *Department of Psychology, Aberystwyth University, Ceredigion, UK*

### ***Abstract***

Contemporary female celebrity is produced within a context of postfeminism, sexualised culture, consumerism and neoliberalism. Feminist analyses often argue that such celebrity figures commodify female sexuality and depoliticise feminist issues regarding autonomy and sexual agency; although some celebrate contemporary celebrity as a site for producing less conventional sexual identities. In this paper we contribute to these debates with analysis of focus group and interview data from 28 white heterosexual women aged between 23 and 58 living in the UK. For the women in our study, female celebrities were figures of successful neoliberal entrepreneurial selves, with the capacity to make money from their bodies. This capacity was associated with continuous work on the bodies, rather than a natural beauty. And while there was often admiration for the work that went into this self-transformation, a consequence for the participants of equating beauty with normatively unattainable levels of body work was that they came to understand themselves as falling short of even 'achievable' attractiveness. We conclude that these participants made sense of celebrity sexiness through neoliberal rhetoric of 'choice', entitlement and pleasure, which worked to constantly underscore the 'ordinary' woman's inability to measure up.

Keywords: celebrity culture, sexualisation of culture, postfeminism, neoliberalism

### ***Introduction: the new celebrity sex symbol***

Celebrity culture affects gender politics. Gendered norms are produced through the socio-economic and consumer-oriented conditions of their time; and through reiterations and developments of these gendered norms celebrity culture can reinforce and change gendered practices and expectations. For example, Elvis' hip-swinging sexuality can be located within the emergence of youth culture markets (Kellner n.d.). The spectacle of Marilyn Monroe's 'natural' sexuality arose during the era of the Kinsey report on women's sexuality and a developing 'adult' consumer culture (Dyer 1986). While Madonna's individualism and iconic 'porno chic' status during the 1980s has been linked to the fear and fascination that

surrounded sex in the era of AIDS (Leung 1997, McNair 2002). These celebrity sex symbols are credited with taboo breaking, alleviating nations of their sexually repressed characters and revealing the cultural narrative of women's entry and engagement in and around discourses of sexuality in the twentieth century (Dyer 1986, 2004). Given the significance of celebrity in changing cultural attitudes towards sex and sexuality, it makes sense to re-evaluate what current representations of celebrity suggest about existing social tensions and what they mean for women in a twenty-first century characterised by what is arguably a global (westernised) postfeminist sexualisation of culture.

Embodying a confident 'up-for-it' femininity, constantly made-up, and exuding sexual allure, contemporary representations of female celebrity are characterised by a hyperfeminine (but often classy) performance of sexiness within the domain of the fashion and beauty complex that embodies a confident 'up-for-it' femininity, constantly made-up, and exuding sexual allure (McRobbie, 2009). For example, the actress Teri Hatcher's engagement with pole-dancing classes was largely congratulated by the British press as evidence of the dedication and work that the actress puts into keeping her body toned, thin and sexy, despite approaching 50 (see Littlejohn, 2010). Similarly, despite being ridiculed by the media, glamour 'girl' Jordon Jordan continues to be presented as in complete control of her image, with her exploits often framed as the doings of a savvy business woman with a knack for creating her own brand of publicity (Coy & Garner, 2010). Contemporary female celebrity thus makes sense within McRobbie's (2009) typology of the postfeminist masquerade. Within this typology a spotlight falls on women who are able to 'make it' so long as they relinquish the desire to 'bear the phallus' and refrain from challenging hegemonic masculinities. Instead such a masquerade channels this desire into more traditional forms of femininity where women are positioned as experts in forms of consumption that which are spectacularly feminine and heterosexual, produced within a wider social context where feminism must be

shown to be no longer necessary.

In academic discourse the performance of the female celebrity's postfeminist masquerade has been the site of concern within feminist research, and is often hailed as calling into question the endurance of feminist politics. More generally many have identified the era of celebrity culture as representing a form of 'cold intimacy', in which celebrity is a product of a cynical industry of public relations, mass media and consumerism (Gamson, 1992,; Turner 2004, Illouz, 2007; Turner, 2004). From this viewpoint the new female celebrity sex symbol is understood as highly manufactured and extremely well managed; the opposite of a feminine identity based on expressive sexuality beyond the confines of the patriarchal order. For example, Paglia (2010) has claimed that singer Lady Gaga, well known for her extravagant and sexually flamboyant persona, symbolises the death of sex and a dramatic end to the sexual revolution. Gaga is deemed a clinical and synthetic artifice of sexuality that represents a decade of cold sexualities (Paglia 2010). In such interpretations, and in opposition to the notion of befriending or identifying with the celebrity figure in parasocial relationships where celebrities do their best to appear personal and intimate with their audience (Hermes 1999), the female celebrity's appeal now appears to rest in her cool and calculated quasi-godlike posthuman persona (Rojek 2001, Paglia 2010).

Similar concerns have been raised regarding the depoliticisation of feminist issues within media. Celebrity is imbued in a consumer culture where feminist discourses have arguably been incorporated into the mainstream (Goldman, Health and Smith 1991, Gill 2007, Groeneveld 2009, McRobbie 2009). For example, a recurrent issue for feminist analysis has been the new visibility of the 'hot lesbian' and the female celebrity's apparent heteroflexibility (Diamond 2005, Gill 2009, Thompson 2006, Jackson and Gilbertson 2009) in which the radical feminist claim to escape masculine constructs through collective separatism is challenged and replaced by an individualistic construct of sexuality. The individualism

displayed in the lyrics of Katy Perry's 'I Kissed a Girl', for instance, constantly reasserts the first person pronoun, and creates a heavily individual sentiment to the kiss. As such, the kissing of another woman in Perry's song remains highly detached from the social context and the gender power relations in which this kiss would happen. In place of collective identities and the politics of same-sex sexuality, the kissing of another woman is presented as testament to the sexually experimental but ultimately heterosexual nature of Perry - as revealed in the song's hopefulness that the protagonist's boyfriend does not object. The song captures the double tie of visibility. As Diamond (2006) notes, there is no better way to assert one's own heterosexuality than to affirm that one has at least tried what's on offer.

And yet for some, the emergence of this new celebrity sex symbol seems capable of more than simply inauthentic cold capitalism or a depoliticisation of feminist concerns. One area that has gained attention in relation to its capacity for newer figurations of femininity and feminism, for example, has been the rise of the sex blogger turned celebrity. In contrast to the fictional frivolous character of Bridget Jones or the endless search for a man in the television series *Sex and the City*, newer accounts of sexual relationships provided by authors such as Brooke Magnanti (*Belle de Jour*) and Abby Lee (*Girl with a One Track Mind*) appear more interested in the pleasures of sex, in and of, itself (Attwood 2009). For Attwood (2009) the self-narration of these women's sex lives opens up new possibilities where these contemporary female celebrities step outside of feminine norms in their sexual practices and experiment with less conventional sexual relationships. Indeed the media disbelief that these previously anonymous women must be male or that their stories were otherwise inauthentic is arguably more telling of the reactive anti-progressive British press than the actions of these women (Attwood 2009). (For other accounts on the possibilities of the new sexual female celebrity see analysis of Lady Gaga as subverting feminine norms, for example Halberstam 2010).

The concerns within feminist analysis that we outline above all seem to relate to an emerging postfeminist sexualisation of culture. Postfeminism can be defined as a sentiment of contemporary culture that directly follows on from feminist politics. This sentiment can be identified by its capacity to take on feminist ideologies, such as autonomy, freedom and sexual liberation, while simultaneously repudiating feminism (as old fashioned, out-of-date, unnecessary, unpleasant) (Gill 2007, McRobbie 2009). New discourses of femininity have thus emerged, in which sexually objectifying practices are understood through feminist-inspired concepts, creating a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification as women make sense of their engagement with sexualised culture through notions of auto-erotic pleasure and choice (Gill 2007). This shift to sexual subjectification folds into neoliberal notions of the self-as-project that is worked on through ‘appropriate’ consumption practices, creating a culture of self-scrutiny in which women engage in self-surveillance, self-monitoring and self-disciplining (Gill 2007, Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008). Postfeminist sentiment has tightened the relationships between femininity and body work. In contrast to traditional gender relations where women worked on their bodies in order to attract a husband, the new expectation is that women will reproduce male heterosexual fantasy based on the assumption that she is doing so for herself. In this context, women are encouraged to work on their bodies through consumerism and within the discourses of individualism, choice and pleasure (Evans, Riley and Shankar 2010a).

The emphasis on freedom and choice within postfeminist tropes mirrors not only the feminist emphasis on autonomous femininity but also the increasing political imperative towards the free markets and neoliberal subjectivity. The discourses of postfeminism, neoliberalism and consumerism are thus enacted in complex and interconnected ways (Gill 2008, Evans and Riley 2013). In this matrix of co-productive discourse, and intersecting with women’s increasing economic capacity through entry into the workplace, the female subject

has become a consumer citizen. One result of taking up this new female consumer identity has been the collapse of the social into the economic, in which all human action becomes economic action, so that women are required to construct themselves through, for example, notions of investment, capital and value (Brown 2006). Living through the metaphors provided by the economy, female identity in the twenty-first century can be considered increasingly risky (Giddens 1991, Beck 1992). There is an obligation on behalf of women to carefully manage the self, matched only by the level of derision at how quickly this self-management can fall apart (Harris 2004, Gonick 2006). A worthy example here is Britney Spears. The celebrations of Spears' early performances were later replaced by a ridiculing of her 'white trash' identity, apparently poor mothering skills and the distinctly unfeminine act of shaving her head (Williamson 2010). Notably this 'public meltdown' was interpreted by the press as almost directly related to Spears' sacking of her management, and the risk this sacking created in revealing her 'true' character. As the Spears example illustrates, the management of risk within the discourses of neoliberal femininity presents women as always culpable for their own individualised failure, often in highly racialised and classed ways (see analyses of the Jade Goody 'race row' as another example, Zacharias and Arthurs 2007, Riggs 2009).

The background that we outline above suggests that new cultural representations of femininity have emerged through postfeminism, neoliberalism and a consumer-oriented sexualised culture. Celebrity may be the perfect conduit for communicating these complex forms of governance where women are expected to regulate themselves and others through new competitive and judgemental gazes and be and feel constantly sexual and desirable though self-scrutiny and continuous work on the body (Gill 2008, Evans *et al.* 2010a, Riley, Evans and Mackiweicz *forthcoming*). The celebrity figure embodies shifts in gender relations

in which more 'active' forms of femininity have come to challenge older social values and makes this new expectation to engage in the constant performance of consumer-oriented sexiness seem manageable and attainable. Moreover, the female celebrity's embodiment of postfeminist ideals works to reinforce neoliberal subjectivities by individualising the problem of unequal gender power relations and replacing it with marketable solutions (Dyer 2004, Gonick 2006). Yet while research has engaged with women's views on celebrity, much work has come from the perspective of identifying the negative effects of this culture on psychological concepts such as body-image and self-esteem (e.g. Maltby, *et al* 2005, Ashikali and Dittmar 2011). Little research has documented how women negotiate celebrity (see for exception Lumby 2007). In this paper we explore how women are making sense of this new postfeminist female celebrity in relation to their own identities. In doing so, we ask not only about the complex social context of postfeminist celebrity, but also about the identity effects this new figure has on how women understand themselves within the neoliberal and postfeminist constructs of contemporary society.

### ***Method***

This paper is part of a larger study that employed recurrent focus group meetings and individual interviews in two phases of data collection to explore different aspects of female sexual consumption. A total of 28 women took part in the study. The women lived in the South West of England, were white, and identified as heterosexual. The study was passed by a university ethics committee and all names have been anonymized.

In phase one of the study recurrent focus group meetings consisted of two groups of four broadly middle-class women aged between 25-31 and 48-54. The two groups each met on three separate occasions. Meetings explored different aspects of sexual consumption

*Evans, A. and Riley, S.*

including female-oriented sex shops, sex blogs and books, sexuality in women's magazines, and burlesque, and while specific celebrities were not allocated to group discussions each topic elicited discussion of celebrity culture. The meetings drew on co-operative inquiry techniques in order to produce a dynamic and participant centred approach (Reason & Riley 2008). As part of this process participants were able to define their own agenda. On request of participants, the first author also developed (in collaboration between researchers and participants) tasks and activities for the participants to engage in. For example, at different times in the project participants were given copies of Belle de Jour's *Intimate Adventures of a London Call Girl* and a gift voucher to be redeemed at the 'women friendly' sex shop 'Ann Summers', with view to participants discussing their reading/shopping experiences in the focus groups. (For further discussion of 'female friendly' sex shops see Evans, Riley and Shankar 2010b). Examples of participants' own tasks included constructing a set of interview questions for each other and collecting magazines for imagery of female sexuality. A total of 10 hours and 35 minutes of audio data was collected.

Phase two of the study involved 20 individual interviews. These participants were between the ages of 23 to 57 and self-identified as either working-class or middle-class. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 90 minutes. The interview schedule was based on themes that emerged from preliminary analysis of phase one, which were converted into vignettes. This allowed us to build on themes from focus group data (such as empowerment through sexualised culture) and provided a psychologically 'safer' space for participants to discuss sexuality, since it enabled personal distance through the vignette's focus on another person's dilemma (Barter and Renold 1999). Again, celebrity was not the focus of any of the vignettes used, but discussions of celebrity culture developed organically through the interactions between interviewer and interviewee.

In both data sets participants talked about celebrity, describing celebrity culture as ubiquitous and something that they had to engage with and negotiate, in pleasurable, painful and ambiguous ways. The women in our study represented the female celebrity as a significant figure in contemporary cultural understandings and in their personal experiences of sexiness. Noting the importance of celebrity in these women's talk, we drew together our data sets to explore how our participants made sense of celebrity and the relationships between celebrity and their own subjectivity. To do so, we employed a form of discourse analysis informed by celebrity studies, that allowed us to develop a dual macro and micro analysis of discourse in order to examine: how our participants constructed celebrity and to what effect; the wider discourses that allowed our participants' talk to make sense; and what consequences these ways of talking might have on the participants' ways of being in the world (see Dyer 1986, Hook 2001, Willig 2001, Riley 2001, Dyer 2004, Turner 2004, Wiggins and Riley 2010). In our analysis below we map these women's constructs of celebrity, showing how postfeminist female celebrity was constructed in line with dominant discourses of women in the neoliberal economy, and how the women in our study internalised these discourses and used them as part of the self-surveillance of their own identities.

*All in a Day's Work: The Entrepreneurial Sex Symbol*

In the following we discuss how neoliberal constructs of money and beauty were folded into a dominant set of ideas concerning work and career, where postfeminist celebrity represented sexual entrepreneurial careers and a business savvy approach to achieving fame and notoriety. Here the 'job' became about the capacity to make money and the work required to maintain the appearance of beauty and sexiness. However the emphasis on money and beauty also worked to highlight many of the women's inability to engage in these practices in the same

way.

*Money Money Money.*

For all women who took part in the study, the postfeminist celebrity sex symbol was absolutely equated with the capacity to make money. In the extract below, for example, the women in one of the focus groups discussed glamour model and media personality Abi Titmuss.

**Extract 1**

Amy I do like Abi Titmuss though. Even though she's a bit er. I still like her  
Zoë It's because she's a nurse or she was a nurse  
Amy No she's just I think its cause she's like really quite not attractive and not deviant looking and she's made loads of money out of it hasn't she  
Zoë She's not attractive actually is she  
Amy She's not she's got no ass at all and massive shoulders  
Laura Wasn't she one of the first ones to realize um like if I own the rights to all my pictures then every time they use a picture  
Amy Yeah, I get paid  
Laura Yeah I you know so she has all the profit off them  
Zoë She's not an idiot I don't think  
Laura So she has basically all the every single magazine and paper, whenever there's a picture of her she just phones them up and says 'Right, that's a picture of me, I own the rights, thank you very much'  
Zoë Yeah, she's no fool

In the extract above the women in the focus group constructed Titmuss as a likable celebrity. The reasons given for her likability included the similar pre-celebrity-status career to one of the women in the group and Titmuss' appearance. The identification of Titmuss as unattractive and/or simply ordinary in comparison to most female celebrities made her both unthreatening and more like these women. Her appearance was framed as an 'against all the odds' scenario in which despite not being attractive nor deviant looking Titmuss had created financial revenue for herself through her body as a cultural signifier of sexiness. Moreover, her perceived money-making skills and business strategy added to the creation of Titmuss'

postfeminist celebrity. The agency in this extract was placed firmly in the hands of Titmuss, which Laura actively voiced in the above in a way that was presented as unhesitant and direct. Thus, not only had this fairly ordinary woman managed to make it as a celebrity sex symbol; she was also figured as a savvy and independent woman who could navigate the business of celebrity in new ways. It was less that the '[m]edia entrepreneurs want celebrities involved in their projects' (Turner 2004 p. 34) – in a neoliberal twist on the economy of personality, Titmuss fulfilled multiple roles as entrepreneur, celebrity, ordinary woman, and “no fool”, savvy, self-made business woman.

Brooke Magnanti's blog and autobiography penned under the name Belle de Jour proved an interesting point of discussion in relation to the capacity for the postfeminist celebrity sex symbol to be self-made and money-making. The narrative of prostitution might make this account different to the entertainment industry from which celebrity is usually formed. However, the publicity the blog and 'blook' received, combined with the media attention that followed after Magnanti withdrew her anonymity in late-2009, made both herself and her 'alter-ego' a self-made DIY celebrity (see Turner 2004). The following extract was collected before Magnanti's revelation of her identity. The extract represents part of a discussion these women entered into concerning their feelings about the blook, after having read it as a pre-meeting activity.

## **Extract 2**

Tessa	I think the sad thing about it [the blook], was that um it it wasn't about sex and it wasn't about fantasy and it wasn't about glamour it was about <u>money</u>
Helen	<u>Money</u>
Tessa	But even though she had the money she wasn't happy and she wasn't unhappy. She was just blah, wasn't she. She didn't have any friends, didn't have a real life
	[
Kerry	Didn't have a relationship
	[
Natalie	She didn't have a <u>life</u>

Tessa [ She didn't have any balance. She didn't have a very rich life.  
She had a very dull, incredibly dull life, with a few bob

Natalie [ Yes so she had

Helen [ Well relatively for a young  
woman, but=

Natalie Well she just dressed up, made loads of money and then

Kerry But it was her job, her job and nothing nothing else. That's it

In the extract above the women in this focus group discussed the story of Belle de Jour as only being about the financial rewards of her career. Sex, fantasy, glamour and relationships were ruled out of a narrative deemed to be primarily about money. The construction of Belle de Jour by these women was of a somewhat 'empty' character; neither happy nor unhappy but instead lifeless. In the extract above these women attempted to trivialise this construction of de Jour's life further, adding that while she may have had "a few bob" this was only relative to her (assumed) youth. Moreover, this lifelessness was identified as the outcome of her "job". The construction of this narrative of postfeminist celebrity as a wealthy but empty career choice closely mirrored a wider social discourse about celebrity (and often reproduced by the celebrity) that money doesn't buy you happiness. The career of a woman who "just dressed up, made loads of money" worked to highlight that this discussion was concerned with Belle de Jour's participation in postfeminist consumption, rather than in prostitution. Postfeminist celebrity is here painted as a rather unfulfilling experience, reflecting a wider story of celebrity as a cynical money-making practice and void culture of affluence (Gamson 1992).

### *Beautiful Career.*

For the women who took part in this research the daily working life of the postfeminist celebrity was deemed capable of producing a considerable amount of money, even if this was at the expense of a life. Supporting the set of beliefs around wealth, discussions of money

were matched in equal measure by discussion on the time and effort needed to perform the identity of the postfeminist celebrity successfully. Postfeminist celebrity was constructed as not being about ‘natural’ beauty; instead it involved diligent work and expertise. This constant self-transformation and beautification was often understood as a desirable practice, as Ellie identified in the extract below when discussing sexiness in women’s celebrity magazines.

**Extract 3**

Ellie            I think that there’s some really kind of beautiful women [in the magazines] doing this [sexy poses] and I think that actually it’s um. ‘Cause if I had an amazing figure and I had the opportunity and I was going to get paid well and things I’d definitely be up for it, you know. It’s cause it’s, I think if you’ve got something and it’s beautiful like a good figure or something then it’s, you you should show it off... Even if I had the time and the motivation to lose weight. I don’t know I I don’t know I think a lot of them have a personal trainer and not everyone can be airbrushed and things like that and a lot of it I think a lot of it can be quite kind of fake if you know what I mean and I don’t think that’s right

In the extract above Ellie identified the sexiness of the women contained in the pages of magazines as the right thing to do, where the woman who has ‘got it’ should most certainly ‘flaunt it’. The construction of this sexy woman in the pages of the women’s magazine fitted in with the postfeminist notion that the body is women’s main marker of success, and was tied into the discourse that being paid for it justifies it; that monetary gain was a valid means to empowerment (Forbes 1996, Gill 2007). Moreover, the admiration and desire expressed about these “beautiful women” was ultimately bound to Ellie’s aspiration to become like the woman in the magazine, where if only she had the figure and the expanse of time granted to these women, she too would participate in the practice of sexiness in the same way as the celebrity/magazine model. The positive evaluation that Ellie provided of the beauty of these women and of the benefits of being economically successful through sexiness was ultimately criticised in light of the sex symbol’s access to experts (personal trainers, airbrushing) that Ellie didn’t have access to herself. The construction of the image of other women appeared to

take place at “the interface between pleasure and pain, which this process of fascinated-looking, as well as the fantasy of identification with and in these scenarios, permits” (McRobbie 2009 p.99). (See Riley *et al. forthcoming*, for discussion on how postfeminist gazes reinforce competition and comparison at the expense of female camaraderie).

This kind of critique of the availability of time to achieve sexiness through assessment of the ‘beautiful career’ of others was represented by the women in the focus group in the extract below. Despite moments in which the ordinary woman could find solace in the similarity of postfeminist celebrities to themselves (see extract 1), this was also regularly contradicted. For while these women celebrated media personalities who could be identified as similar to them, the height of admiration was preserved for female celebrities whose body and beauty work appeared continuous and immaculate.

#### Extract 4

- Amy            Yeah, there’s more effort in it [the look of burlesque]. Your average porn star is just like a bit of fake tan, isn’t it. And bleached hair and, like, massive tits. And she’s [Dita von Teese] like probably takes ages just doing hair and make-up
- Laura           And she, there’s no way I think she could ever would even ever allow herself to walk outside the house with=
- Zoë            Oh yeah, definitely=
- Laura           With like not completely, not completely done. You know, you don’t see pictures in Heat magazine, of Dita at the coffee shop looking rough. You know, in a jumper  
[Laughing]
- Laura           She just wouldn’t go out with a jumper on, she always
- Zoë            ‘Cause that’s part of her job isn’t it. She has to maintain that
- Laura           And, you know, you’re like ‘Wow’
- Zoë            I just wouldn’t have the time to do it

For these women idealised versions of femininity represented in the above by burlesque revival icon Dita von Teese were hard work and unachievable for the ‘ordinary’ woman. Teese was differentiated from the stripper and the porn star, whose classed consumption of “fake tan...And bleached hair and, like, massive tits” were deemed easily replicable but undesirable

and too sexually available (see Tyler and Bennett 2010). And yet the fantasy of constant feminine beauty maintenance that was evident when discussing appropriately middle-class ‘icons’ of postfeminist celebrity such as Teese produced a tension with the reality of material bodies, and the pressures of contemporary life in terms of time, effort and money. The existence of neoliberal entrepreneurial careers that permitted constant beautification practices could not be realistically engaged in the same way (similar discussions appeared throughout the women’s Belle de Jour meeting). To quote Zoë, “I just wouldn’t have the time to do it”.

### *Immaculate Consumption: Mission Impossible*

In the above we have presented analyses of how the women in this research constructed postfeminist celebrities as business savvy women whose neoliberal careers constituted access to the time and finances needed to constantly make over the self. While this was often coupled with admiration for the celebrity’s diligent body and beauty work, these women’s own identities often fell short of the ultimate achievement; they did not have the resources to work on sexiness constantly. For example in the extract below Anna’s discussion reflected the kinds of pressures the contemporary woman may feel under in order to ‘keep up’.

#### **Extract 5**

Anna            The fact that you see so many men looking at these images of these perfect women. And you can’t, you’ve got no hope of ever looking like that yourself, you know, of having the stylists and the make-up and the hair and having all that and having like the personal trainer and all of that to look that good. And these images are so accessible of all these really beautiful women. And it just makes you feel really insignificant yourself. And you know when you find like your boyfriend or your male friends looking at images of these perfect women it makes you feel pretty crap about yourself

In the extract above Anna constructed a sense of hopelessness for the ordinary woman in the face of celebrity culture. There was for Anna both material and immaterial labour involved in the expectation to always look (hetero)sexy and achieve a similar appearance to the female

celebrity. But no matter how hard one tried to replicate the look of the sexy postfeminist celebrity, it would never compete with the team of professionals employed to maintain the celebrity's manufactured attractiveness. Locating this talk within neoliberal governance, the sexiness emulated by postfeminist celebrity did not constitute 'natural' beauty; the postfeminist celebrity's sexiness was achieved through work. Rather than having a natural beauty that others didn't share, what made the celebrity different from the ordinary woman was the ability (time and money) to put in the work. The identity effects of not sharing with the celebrity the ability to perform to the postfeminist standard are represented here in the level of insecurity communicated by Anna. For example, the female celebrity was constructed by Anna in the above as a ubiquitous figure, and thus produced a sense of constant competition and comparison. Moreover, what was framed as the inevitable discovery of male partners or friends finding pleasure in the image of these "perfect" women only served to deepen the sense of hopelessness and discursively reaffirmed the 'ordinary' woman's inability to even come close.

## **Discussion**

As a representation of new formations of femininity in postfeminist times, the female celebrity sex symbol is able to communicate the complex duality of contemporary femininity. In the context of significant shifts in gender relations, where women's new earning capacity and delayed motherhood might be cause for celebration of the successes of the feminist movement, the female celebrity arguably works to manage the transition and reinforce more traditional feminine ways of being. But equally there is more than simply a reinforcement of traditional femininity in these representations. The female celebrity embodies a presentation of knowingness and confidence, as one who is entrepreneurial in her performance of sexiness, and that offers the possibility for new formulations and alternative figurations of female

sexuality (Attwood 2007, Halberstam 2010). Female celebrity is thus unique in its capacity to highlight tensions in gender constructs (Dyer 1986). This paper has provided an analysis of women's negotiations of these new forms of (hyper)sexualised celebrity. Rather than the view of celebrity as contagious, one where women uncritically incorporate images of celebrity into their own psyche (as is often done in the case of anorexia, see Burke 2006), this paper has presented a discursive analysis predicated on the assumption that women can make use of the figure of female celebrity, but only within wider social constraints and power constructs.

In the analysis of our participant's negotiations above there was pleasure to be found in new female celebrity. For example, women were able to celebrate the success of other women who, having been perceived as similar to themselves, were nevertheless able to 'make it' in the current celebrity climate. This perception of the similarity and accessibility of certain celebrities may have a relationship to forms of celebrity enabled by reality television that highlight the interconnectivity between audience and 'ordinary'-person-turned-celebrity (or 'famous non-famous people', see Holmes 2004). The seeming accessibility of fame creates a celebrity culture further compartmentalized to create a category of the 'ordinary celebrity' (Turner 2004, Williamson 2010), where such programmes permit careers for their female participants in, for example, glamour modelling and TV presenting.

But more than the ability to perceive the celebrity as similar or ordinary was the capacity of the female celebrity to be a figure of wealth. For some of the women in our study, the monetary value of celebrity constituted a discursive site in which to construct themselves as critical consumers of celebrity culture. Here some women were able to use the discourses of sexy celebrity to create identities that were able to unmask the cold capitalism of contemporary representations of femininity and discredit its money-oriented vacuousness. For others there was admiration for the money-savvy and entrepreneurial wit of female celebrities.

While both constructs of celebrity allowed our participants a performance of agency and ethical self-hood, both also reproduced a neoliberal rhetoric in which all human/celebrity action became economic career-oriented action, where success was derived through personal effort and not through structural circumstance (Harris 2004, Brown 2006). And the greater the celebrity's ability to appear ever-immaculate, the more the celebrity's career was constructed as all consuming; whether it was the void of Belle de Jour's 'so-called-life' or for Dita von Teese, who would never 'dare' drink coffee in a jumper. The immaculate appearance of celebrities, so valued by some of our participants, was thus understood as requiring constant work and time. Free time then was identified as necessary to perform postfeminist sexiness ideals within a socio-historic context in which free time has never seemed scarcer, and where consumerism is able to inflect both work and leisure (Beck 1992, Rojek 1993).

In the analysis above, our participant's discussions also highlighted the implications of tying women's success to their bodies (Forbes 1996, Gill 2007). In their celebrations of the entrepreneurial career of the female celebrity our participants tied success to self-transformation and the need to constantly work on the body. This sense making echoes McRobbie's notion of the postfeminist masquerade. In McRobbie's (2009) discussion of postfeminist masquerade, the perfection mimicked by women in the performance of highly stylised femininity permits entry into male domains of work and leisure because hyperfemininity acts as a demonstration that one is non-threatening to the male order. Through this demonstration of masquerade, women are required to deny same-sex affinity and participate in forms of self-directed anger and illegible rage (McRobbie, 2009). The recognition of masquerade was evident in many of the women's talk about the inauthenticity or 'fake-ness' of celebrity, with the imagined team of stylists and personal trainers in place to aid the celebrity in maintaining their mask of femininity. Identification of the celebrity's mask

provided a discursive space for some women to critique representations of ‘perfection’ embodied by the celebrity sex symbol. But this was criticism directed at women rather than at patriarchal social structures. Moreover, rather than providing the space for resistance, this critique of immaculate consumption was often turned in on the self and used to evaluate the speaker’s own femininity. Evaluating the postfeminist masquerade of celebrity thus produced an ‘anger’ because it highlighted our participants’ inability to engage in the constant beauty and sexiness regimes of celebrity and represented a loss of one’s own sense of attractiveness.

In the analysis above, we have shown how women’s negotiations of celebrity created a context in which women were only ever able to position themselves as somehow failing. Within the rhetoric of postfeminism and neoliberalism, the ‘ordinary’ women does not escape the same kinds of close investigation usually directed to the celebrity (see Gill 2007 for a discussion on how the scrutiny of celebrity magazines over the bodies of women is comparable to make-over TV, which centres attention on the lack of glamour of the non-celebrity). Moreover, we have shown how the women in our study internalised this discourse into a form of self-inspection. The internalisation and identity effects of immaculate consumption created for these women the subject position of the affectedly insignificant and unmotivated; an undeniably dangerous subject position within the wider neoliberal rhetoric. Held up as a perceived equal against the celebrity, who had access to the valued constructs of time, money, and a team of experts ensuring the celebrity’s image was nothing less than (hetero)sexy, the women’s talk often foreclosed or reacted against the potential alternative discourses (for example, of the widening definitions of sexuality or of taking pleasure in another’s success) with which to make sense of the celebrity’s sexiness.

## References

- Ashikali, E., and Dittmar, H., 2011. The Effects of Primary Materialism on Women's Responses to Thin-Ideal Media. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, (forthcoming).
- Attwood, F., 2007. Sluts and Riot Grrrls: Female Identity and Sexual Agency. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 16(3), 233-247.
- Attwood, F., 2009. Intimate Adventures: Sex Blogs, Sex 'Blooks' and Women's Sexual Narration. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12(1), 5-20.
- Barter, C., and Renold, E., 1999. The Use of Vignettes in Qualitative Research. *Social Research Update*, 25, 1-6.
- Beck, U., 1992. *The Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.
- Brown, W., 2006. American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization. *Political Theory*, 34(6), 690-714.
- Burke, E., 2006. Feminine Visions: Anorexia and Contagion in Pop Discourse. *Feminist Media Studies*, 6(3), 315-330.
- Coy, M., and Garner, M., 2010. Glamour Modelling and the Marketing of Self-Sexualization: Critical Reflections. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13(6), 657-675.
- Diamond, L. M., 2005. "I'm Straight, but I Kissed a Girl": The Trouble with American Media Representation of Female-Female Sexuality. *Feminism and Psychology*, 15(1), 104-110.
- Dyer, R., 1986. *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. London: BFI.
- Dyer, R., 2004. *Stars*. London: BFI.
- Evans, A., and Riley, S., 2013. *Sex, Identity and Consumer Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press (forthcoming).
- Evans, A., Riley, S., and Shankar, A., 2010a. Technologies of Sexiness: Theorizing Women's Engagement in the Sexualization of Culture. *Feminism and Psychology*, 20(1), 114-131.
- Evans, A., Riley, S., and Shankar, A., 2010b. Postfeminist Heterotopias: Negotiating 'Safe'

Evans, A. and Riley, S.

and 'Seedy' in the British Sex Shop Space. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 17(3), 211-229.

Forbes, J. S., 1996. Disciplining Women in Contemporary Discourses of Sexuality. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 5(2), 177-189.

Gamson, J., 1992. The Assembly Line of Greatness: Celebrity in Twentieth-Century America. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 9, 1-24.

Giddens, A., 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gill, R., 2007. *Gender and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gill, R., 2008. Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and Postfeminist Times. *Subjectivity*, 25, 432-445.

Gill, R., 2009. Beyond the "Sexualization of Culture" Thesis: An Intersectional Analysis of "Sixpacks", "Midriffs" and "Hot Lesbians" in Advertising. *Sexualities*, 12(2), 137-160.

Goldman, R., Heath, D., and Smith, S. L., 1991. Commodity Feminism. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*. 8, 333-351

Gonick, M., 2006. Between "Girl Power" and "Reviving Ophelia": Constituting the Neoliberal Girl Subject. *NWSA Journal*, 18(2), 1-23.

Groeneveld, E., 2009. 'Be a Feminist or Dress Like One': BUST, Fashion and Feminism as Lifestyle. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 18(2), 179-190.

Halberstam, J., 2010. You Cannot Gaga Gaga [online]. Available from <http://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2010/03/17/you-cannot-gaga-gaga-by-jack-halberstam/> [assessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2011].

Harris, A., 2004. *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty First Century*. London: Routledge.

Hermes, J., 1999. Media Figures in Identity Construction. In P. Alasuutar, Ed. *Rethinking the Media Audience: The New Agenda*. London: Sage. 69-85.

Evans, A. and Riley, S.

Holmes, S., 2004. "All you've got to worry about is the task, having a cup of tea, and what you're going to eat for dinner": Approaching Celebrity in Big Brother. In S. Holmes and D. Jermyn, Eds. *Understanding Reality Television*. London: Routledge. 111-135.

Hook, D., 2001. Discourse, Knowledge, Materiality, History: Foucault and Discourse Analysis. *Theory and Psychology*, 11(4), 521-547.

Illouz, E., 2007. *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press

Jackson, S., and Gilbertson, T., 2009. 'Hot Lesbians': Young People's Talk about Representations of Lesbianism. *Sexualities*, 12(2), 199-224

Kellner, D., n.d. The Elvis Spectacle and the Cultural Industries [online]. Available from <http://gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/elvisspectacle.pdf> [accessed 26<sup>th</sup> June 2011]

Leung, L., 1997. The Making of Matriarchy: A Comparison of Madonna and Margaret Thatcher. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 6(1), 33-42.

Littlejohn, G., 2010. Desperate Housewife Teri Hatcher's pole-dancing hysteria on Wisteria Lane. *Mail Online* [online], available from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1241665/Spoiler-Desperate-Housewife-Teri-Hatcher-causes-pole-dancing-hysteria-Wisteria-Lane.html> [accessed 13<sup>th</sup> June 2011].

Lumby, C., 2007. Doing it for themselves? Teenage Girls, Sexuality and Fame. In S. Redmond and S. Holmes, Eds. *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*. London: Sage. 326-340.

Maltby, J., et al., 2005. Intense-Personal Celebrity Worship and Body Image: Evidence of a Link Among Female Adolescents. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 10, 17-32.

McNair, B., 2002. *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratisation of Desire*. London: Routledge.

McRobbie, A., 2009. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. London: Sage.

Evans, A. and Riley, S.

Paglia, C., 2010. Lady Gaga and the Death of Sex. Sunday Times Magazine [online].

Available from <http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/public/magazine/article389697.ece>

[accessed 13<sup>th</sup> June 2011].

Reason, P. & Riley, S., 2008. Co-operative inquiry: An action research practice. In J. Smith, Ed., *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Methods*. London: Sage Publications (2nd edition). 207-234

Riggs, D.W., 2009. Poppadoms, Princesses and Privilege: (Neo)Colonial Racism in the Celebrity Big Brother Household. In R. Clarke, Ed. *Celebrity Colonialism: Fame, Power and Representation in Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press. 209-224.

Wiggins, S. & Riley, S., 2010. Discourse Analysis. In Forrester, M. Ed. *Doing Qualitative Practicals in Psychology: A Student Workbook*. London: Sage.

Riley, S., Evans, A., and Mackiewicz, A., 2012. Practices of Looking: A New Visual Economy of the Postfeminist Gaze. *Gender and Society (forthcoming)*

Ringrose, J., and Walkerdine, V., 2008. Regulating the Subject: The TV Make-Over as a site of Neo-liberal Reinvention toward Bourgeois Femininity. *Feminist Media Studies*, 8(3), 227-246.

Rojek, C., 1993. After Popular Culture: Hyperreality and Leisure. *Leisure Studies*, 12(4), 277-289

Rojek, C., 2001. *Celebrity*. Reaktion Books: London.

Smith, C., 2010. Pornographication: A discourse for all seasons. *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, 6(1), 103-206.

Thompson, E. M., 2006. Girl Friend or Girlfriend: Same-Sex Friendship and Bisexual Images as a Context for Flexible Sexual Identity Among Young Women. *Journal of Bisexuality*,

Evans, A. and Riley, S.

6(3), 47-67.

Turner, G., 2004. *Understanding Celebrity*. London: Sage

Tyler, I., and Bennett B., 2010. Celebrity Chav: Fame, Femininity and Social Class. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13(3), 375-393

Williamson, M., 2010. Female Celebrities and the Media: The Gendered Denigration of the 'Ordinary' Celebrity. *Celebrity Studies*, 1(1): 118-120.

Willig, C., 2001. *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology: Adventures in Theory and Method*. Buckingham, Open University Press.

Zacharias, U., and Arthurs, J., 2007. Starring Race. *Feminist Media Studies*, 7(4), 455-469.