

# It's just between girls: Negotiating the postfeminist gaze in women's 'looking talk'

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### **Abstract**

Feminist literature often holds that women's bodies, appearance, and subjectivity are formed through a multitude of regulatory dispositifs and disciplinary apparatus. One such disciplinary technique has been 'looking', evidenced in work on the male gaze, disciplinary power, misrecognition, objectification, and indirect social aggression. But there remains a significant gap the role of women's looking in subject formation, particularly within the context of a postfeminist sensibility. To address this gap a poststructuralist informed discourse analysis was performed on interviews with 44 white heterosexual British women (aged 18-36). Four discourses deployed by the participants when talking about looking between women were identified. These discourses were: judgmental looking between women is pervasive; judgement is consumption-oriented; women's looks are prioritised over men's foregrounding a female gaze; and appearance is the vehicle to recognition. We conclude by highlighting the importance of a postfeminist gaze for understanding women's subjectivities, and how looking works in a postfeminist context to maintain regulation, anxiety, surveillance and judgement.

**Keywords:** postfeminism, looking, postfeminist gaze, sexualization, drinking cultures, subjectivity

This paper addresses an important but relatively neglected aspect of female subject formation, that of looking between women. To date, the focus of feminist research on looking has been on men's looking at women, with analysis of how women make sense of looks between women remaining limited and scattered. Less work, still, locates women's looking within new modes of governance informed by a postfeminist sensibility. There is, however, evidence to suggest that looking plays an important role in the formation of female subjectivity because being looked at creates a heightened sense of self-awareness that is contextualised within the gender relations in which the looking occurs, which for a range of women includes postfeminism. To address the paucity of research on women's looking within postfeminism, this

paper reports a poststructuralist informed discourse analysis of interviews with 44 white heterosexual British women on their talk of women's looking and the role of these looks in subject formation. In so doing we develop the 'postfeminist gaze' as a framework for thinking about contemporary femininity within postfeminist sensibility.

Below we outline key theoretical frameworks for thinking about looking. We show their importance in contributing to understanding the role of looking in subjectivity, but also their limitations in either foregrounding men's looking or in failing to contextualise women's looking within postfeminism. We then examine the literature on postfeminist sensibility to show the importance of postfeminism for contextualising our participants' talk and because postfeminist analysts have begun to highlight the role of looking in subject formation. These literatures provide the lenses through which we explore patterns in our participants' talk that described an appearance-related, consumer-oriented looking that became a mode by which women judged themselves and others.

### **Understandings of men's and women's looking**

We identify four theoretical frameworks for thinking about the role of looking in subject formation. These are: objectification theory, Foucauldian-informed disciplinary power, male gaze and misrecognition.

In objectification theory being looked at is a mechanism by which women learn to understand themselves and their bodies. Looking is only one of a range of social practices that also include media portrayals of women, sexual harassment, and sexual violence, through which women come to understand that their value is in how their bodies or body parts are used or consumed by others, in particular men. Women thus learn to understand their bodies as objects,

subsequently engaging in self-monitoring in anticipation of how men will judge their appearance (Calogero, 2004; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Objectification theory is important for highlighting looking in subject formation and the power dynamics of men's looking at women. But, its focus is on considering the relationships between women's disproportionate mental health risks (e.g. rate of eating disorders) and the sexual objectification of women within a heterosexist framework, and in so doing it foregrounds a male gaze<sup>i</sup>.

A different approach to looking and subjectivity is offered by a Foucauldian informed analysis that conceptualises people as drawing on available socio-historical meanings through which to think and understand themselves. The outcome is disciplinary power, in which people conform to social values while feeling that agency resides within them. Foucault likened disciplinary power to Bentham's model of a cylindrical prison where prisoners can be surveyed at all times from a central watchtower. Within the walls of this panopticon prisoners are unable to know whether they are being watched by a guard, and so act as if they were watched, coming to monitor and regulate themselves. Although Foucault was criticised for his limited analysis of women's experience within patriarchal structures (e.g. Ramazanoglu 1993), disciplinary power subsequently informed a range of feminist work (for example, Holland et al.'s, (1992) analysis of how young women talked about sex with a male audience in mind rather than their own embodied desires).

The psychoanalytic informed male gaze theory, first used to understand Hollywood cinema narrative, also offers a conceptual framework for thinking about the role of looking in women's subject formation. Mulvey (1975) suggested that when watching a film, the viewer unconsciously identifies with the active, agentic male protagonist, while distancing themselves

from the woman on the screen, either by making her an object of desire or annihilating her (e.g. killing her off or revealing her inauthenticity). This distancing is needed because women symbolize lack and the threat of castration. Like objectification theory, male gaze theory locates looking within gender power relations, but in using a psychoanalytic approach it offers a theoretical distinction between gaze and look. Silverman's (1992) adaptation of gaze theory, for example, distinguishes between the overarching and structuring power of the gaze, and individualised looking of viewers and characters on screen. Such a distinction allows us to think of the gaze as not an individualised possession, but as something deeply rooted in symbolic and patriarchal structures.

Male gaze theory did not originally theorise a female viewer, but subsequent analysts did, largely conceding that there is no female gaze within patriarchal structured narratives. Women are thus theorised as either over identifying with a female character or having to take up the male gaze in a form of masquerade (de Lauretis, 1984; Stacey, 1994; Tseelon & Kaiser, 1992; Doane, 1982). Male gaze theory, therefore, cannot theorise a homosocial gaze between women without women primarily understanding themselves as the objects of male desire.

The above theoretical frameworks show the importance of looking and the usefulness of theorizing an institutional gaze in relation to female subjectivity. However, these theories remain largely "male-centric", with the person doing the looking usually being male. In contrast, Skeggs (2001) offered a framework that considers homosocial female looking through the concept of misrecognition.

Misrecognition is "to be denied the status of full partner in social interaction and prevented from participating as a peer in social life" (Fraser, 1995, p. 280 cited in Skeggs, 2001, p. 295). Skeggs (2001) analysed women's accounts of their experiences in the all-female spaces

of toilets in English gay and lesbian bars. She argued that the meaning and value of women's appearance is precarious, and that successful achievement of a feminine appearance is dependent on being legitimised (or recognised) by others. Thus, when women look and evaluate each other, a dialogical process occurs whereby women communicate the symbolic value of their appearance and legitimate (or otherwise) their ability to be recognised as women.

Skeggs' (2001) work is important for highlighting the "visual economy" of looks (p. 300) and how women's subjectivity is predicated on others, including other women; but her study does not theorise in any depth the location of looks within a postfeminist sensibility, despite a body of work that considers postfeminism to be an important media address in the globalised west. Below, therefore, we draw out particular aspects of the postfeminist address relevant for thinking about women's looking.

### **Postfeminism and Looking**

The notion of a "postfeminist sensibility" denotes a contemporary gender discourse with a number of recurring features, including: understanding femininity as a bodily property; a shift from objectification to subjectification; a focus on self-regulation, self-surveillance, and self-improvement to enable transformation in line with a makeover paradigm; reassertion of sexual difference within a heterosexual matrix; and a simultaneous drawing on and refuting of feminism that celebrates individualism, choice and empowerment (Evans & Riley, 2014; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Renold & Ringrose, 2008). Postfeminist sensibility intersects with neoliberal constructs (Evans & Riley, 2014; Gill, 2008), so that the self is understood as a project requiring transformation, often through modes of consumption (Bauman 2000; Rose, 1996).

Analysts suggest that historical links between the femininity and the application of beauty and bodywork are intensified through a postfeminist sensibility that encourages hyper-feminine forms of consumption (McRobbie, 2008). Such consumption is facilitated by a proliferation of body techniques, products and services (e.g. skin bleaching, tanning, waxing, facials, cosmetics, surgery, epilation, manicures, hair extensions) that many women now experience as normative feminine practices, making the time, money and effort that they spend on appearance concerns significant (Evans & Riley, 2013a; Riley & Scharff, 2013). The use of such body techniques is supported by a discourse of self-transformation as an aspirational practice of the self (Foucault 1988). The “makeover paradigm”, for example, “requires people to believe... [that they are] amenable to reinvention or transformation by following the advice of relationship, design or lifestyle experts” (Gill, 2007 p.156).

Feminist critiques of the makeover paradigm in postfeminist media culture highlight the classed, gendered and racialized aspects of such shows in which ‘experts’ humiliate women regarding their consumer choices before teaching them (and by default the viewer) how to regulate themselves into “appropriate” femininity that maps onto a white, middle class aesthetic (e.g. Press, 2011; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). Through this media address, women are encouraged to “objectify the female body (self and others)” (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008, p.238), and internalise the expert in order to produce themselves within cultural ideals of feminine appearance through consumption. Postfeminist sensibility, thus, reproduces the idea that appropriate feminine appearance represents women’s value, while adding a neoliberal twist by conceptualising all subjects as capable of transformation through self-scrutiny and bodywork, replacing previous concepts of naturally given beauty (Evans & Riley, 2013, 2014).

Gill (2007) draws on both male gaze theory and the internalisation of the panopticon to make sense of this reconfiguration of power, stating that postfeminism “represents a shift in the way that power operates: from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing, narcissistic gaze...one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime” (p. 151-152). Her position is, therefore, similar to Bartky’s concept of a “panoptical male connoisseur” that “resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment” (1990, p.34). However, an important aspect of postfeminist sensibility is the shift from objectification to subjectification. Postfeminist beauty work is not an objectification evaluated by the “male in the head”; instead it is a process of subjectification because the transformation is understood as a practice of consuming oneself into being through the rhetoric of agentic individualism, choice and empowerment (Gill, 2007; Walkerdine 2003). We suggest, therefore, that rather than conceptualise an internalised male gaze we might better think of this new disciplinary regime as a “postfeminist gaze”.

A range of work offers evidence that a postfeminist sensibility found in particular contexts is implicated in the relationships between women looking at other women. McRobbie (2009), for example, talks about a postfeminist anxiety that is provoked through “fascinated-looking”, where the “narrative presence of the male subject, even in the background, is these days largely removed” (p.100). In fashion photography, for example, women look at the bodies of other women, a look that produces “illegible desires” (e.g. same-sex desire, feminist identity) that do not orient to the male gaze (McRobbie, 2009). Yet, precisely because these desires remain unimaginable within the heterosexual matrix of postfeminist sensibility, they are superseded by the fantasy of identification (to be like the woman in the image or to own what she owns), to the benefit of consumer culture and the beauty industry.



Ringrose and Coleman (2013) also identify a “politics of looking” (p.126) in how young women discussed images of themselves and other women. In doing so, they argue that a postfeminist visual culture, which produces forms of objectification through practices of subjectification, has created an assemblage of looks. This looking-assemblage constitutes new forms of regulation that shaped how young women make sense of themselves as valid/valuable women.

Both McRobbie (2009) and Ringrose and Coleman’s (2013) work demonstrates the subjective effects of the image in a postfeminist context where objectification and subjectification have blurred. Their work shows how practices of looking have “something very compelling to tell us about the formation of feminine subjectivity” (McRobbie, 2009, p.108; also see Coleman, 2008; Coleman & Moreno Figueroa, 2010). But because these studies have focused on looking at a text (e.g. photographs, advertisements), these accounts miss the dialogism of looking that occurs between women.

In contrast, Winch (2012) offers postfeminist contextualised work on looking between young women. Winch suggests that postfeminist media representations intensify female friendships by privileging them in a range of spaces including advertising, television sitcoms, magazines and the high-street (e.g. in notions of the ‘girly shopping trip’ and the ‘girls-night-in’). Despite their positive possibilities, Winch argues that we should be concerned with such female consumer-oriented homosocial practices because they are shot through with forms of self-regulation. Unable to appreciate the time, effort and im/material work of femininity, men fall outside the realms of anxiety and a judgemental “girlfriend gaze” emerges in which women maintain body hatred by assessing each other’s appearance.

What we find in Winch's "girlfriend gaze" and Skeggs' "toilet paper" is a construction of looking between women as socially constituted, relational, judgemental and regulatory: a powerful dialogic of looks that holds out the promise of recognition of successful femininity, and the threat of failure. We also find resonances in the work of others, who report data that show evidence of women talking about judgemental looking between women (Coleman, 2008; Evans & Riley 2013; Moreno Figueroa, 2013; Ringrose, 2013; Ringrose & Coleman, 2013). Thus, while men's looking and a male gaze may remain, we suggest that a postfeminist gaze may also be important in constituting feminine subjectivity. To consider the features of this postfeminist gaze and develop understandings of postfeminist sensibility, we analyse British women's interview talk about female-female looking and the implications of this sense making for subjectivity.

### **Method**

Our data are from 44 in-depth qualitative interviews, pooled from two studies. Study one was with women aged 18-27 years who participated in drinking cultures; study two was with women aged 23-35 years who took up new sexual subjectivities. Both drinking cultures and new sexual subjectivities are associated with postfeminist sensibility outlined above that include intense forms of appearance work and a shift from objectification to subjectification (Evans & Riley, 2014; Gill 2007; Griffin et al., 2012). All participants were white, heterosexual, living in England in a range of rural, market town and urban environments. Study one participants identified as middle class but the National Statistics Socioeconomic Classification would locate them as working-class. In contrast, study two participants had largely middle class socioeconomic indicators but often troubled these, for example, by providing historical working

class identifications. We highlight, therefore, the complexity of class identification for these participants, in part to demonstrate how the phenomenon we are exploring crossed over potential class divides. For discussion on gendered class complexities in contemporary Britain, see Skeggs (2005).

For qualitative methods this dataset represents a large relatively homogenous sample, which we consider advantageous for focused qualitative work that generates in-depth understanding (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006; Riley & Reason, 2015). Our homogenous sample also reflects the postfeminist context of our research, which as discussed above, privileges a white, heterosexual femininity while presenting itself as an address for all women (McRobbie 2009). How white, heterosexual women respond to this address is, thus, an important topic for feminist research. Our focus in this paper does not, however, reduce the importance of research on looking within postfeminist sensibility for women who do not identify as white or heterosexual (see, for example, Moreno Figueroa (2013) and Skeggs (2001)).

Participants were an opportunity sample, recruited through personal and work related contacts and by interviewing friends of participants. Interviews were held in participants' homes and lasted 40-90 minutes. Interview schedules were compiled according to research topics (drinking cultures, new sexual subjectivities) and developed from ethnographic and focus group work that formed part of the larger studies to which these datasets belonged. Both asked interviewees about how they made sense of themselves and other women. For example, study one included the question "is 'looking good' an important factor when you go out drinking?", while study two asked participants to comment on vignettes, such as a story of a woman going to a pole dancing class and, despite some pre-class nerves, enjoying herself. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Both studies received ethical approval from the University of Bath

Psychology Department Ethics Committee, and participants in study one chose their own pseudonym.

Both projects were associated with a critical social psychology research group where it became apparent that there were striking similarities in the datasets on talk about women's looking. We, therefore, pooled the data to provide a more significant dataset from which to examine the character of this talk.

We conceptualise our participants as drawing on a set of (multiple, contradictory and culturally specific) discourses from which to make sense of their world and so performed Foucauldian-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis on the pooled interview transcripts (Foucault, 1993; Rose, 1996). Instances in which participants talked about looking were identified and thematically coded for repetition, cohesion and contradiction within and between transcripts (Parker, 1997). Once themes had been identified, further cycling through the transcripts was done alongside an immersion in the literature. During this process we asked: How is looking between women being constructed? What are the implications for subjectivity? What broader, social and historical discourses are participants drawing on to make sense of women's looking? How are these accounts made to seem reasonable, and what is missing, excluded or absented in such ways of speaking? Through this process we developed the concept of a postfeminist gaze as a framework for thinking about contemporary femininity within postfeminist sensibility.

Our theoretical underpinnings mean we do not seek to make generalizations. Rather, we argue that finding and analysing a recurring pattern at two different data sites associated with postfeminist consumption has important implications for gender research in postfeminist consumer culture.

## Analysis

Below we outline four discourses deployed by our participants when talking about looking between women. These discourses are that: a pervasive judgmental looking occurs between women in social spaces; these looks are prioritised over men's, foregrounding a female gaze; judgement is consumption-oriented, and; appearance is the vehicle to recognition.

### **Inescapable judgemental looking between women**

Our participants described women looking at each other in judgemental ways that assessed and compared their appearance. Such looking was normative and almost inescapable, since all women, from “really good friends” (Dawn, 31, teacher), to all the members of an exercise class (Eve, 25, dental nurse) were constructed as looking at each other in order judge appearance: “every little aspect of...your body from sort've head to toe” (Sienna, 21, student).

#### Extract 1

I think that other women are much more inclined to have a good old look at you or each other than actually maybe men are. I think women really like to compare themselves to other people and even really good friends. Um and to judge each other on their appearance (Dawn, aged 31, teacher, study 2, responding to the pole-dancing vignette).

Dawn describes a deeply evaluative, relational dynamic of looking (“look at [...] each other”) and accounted for this as women's desire to compare and judge the appearance of other women. Her talk foregrounds women's looking (“other women [...] than actually maybe men”) and constructs this looking as problematic, evident in her statement that “*even* really good friends”

do it (our emphasis), a phrase that highlights both the ubiquity of judgmental looks, and suggests that they should not happen in supportive relationships, a point she reiterates later in the interview:

Extract 2

this is gonna sound awful but I'd feel more comfortable [laughs] taking all my clothes off in front of a boyfriend or a man you know than I would in front of even even close friends I suppose well maybe not close friends but a group of friends and even worse a group of strange women. Um and I guess that's again because I think I would look at other women and compare myself and therefore and I know that other women do do it. And that would make me feel uncomfortable. And more uncomfortable than say, er, don't know going to the beach or something. Oh that's not really a good example because then of course other women do look at you and you're aware of that and you do look at other women. But well I suppose or if I was gonna have sex with somebody and, you know, and I took my clothes off I wouldn't feel uncomfortable. And I wouldn't necessarily feel I was being judged in that same kind of way that a woman might judge me. That sounds a bit strange [laughs] (Dawn aged 31, teacher, study 2; part of her response to the question "do you think you could say a little bit more about the ideas around confidence and feeling uninhibited?").

Dawn articulates a preference for male looking because she constructs it as less judgmental. She describes this preference even in the most supportive of female relationships ("close friends"), although she softened this assessment to "friends", before strengthening again ("even worse, strange women"), since presumably the potential for support in female friendships

is removed altogether amongst women who are strangers, absencing feminist discourses of sisterhood outside of interpersonal relationships.

Dawn's talk describes the pervasiveness of women's judgemental looking as she struggles to identify any woman who wouldn't judge her: unable to be confident even with close friends, or to imagine a situation where women would not judge her ("going to the beach or something. Oh that's not really a good example"). In Dawn's extract there was, however, a suggestion that "close friends" offered space outside of this culture of regulation (a point we take up again after extract 5).

Dawn accounts for her understanding of women's judgemental looking in terms of her own behaviour ("I would look at other women and compare myself and therefore and I know that other women do do it"). And while she does not explain how she knows that other women do it, the word 'know' rather than, for example, 'think' creating a truth claim about other women's thinking. Yet, as we discuss below, Dawn also troubles this looking.

### **Judgemental looking that foreground a female gaze**

Dawn starts extract two by describing what she is about to say as "awful" and finishes by constructing her account as "strange". This is a recurring pattern in our data where participants problematised women's judgemental looking by orienting towards an expectation that things should be different (compare, for example, Dawn's "awful" and "strange" with Ellie's (extract 7) "ridiculous").

Judgement to appraise the competition would not be "strange" if women's looks were being made sense of in terms of direct competition between heterosexual women for men (as in the traditional sense of competition for a husband that relates to historical associations between

women's worth and their appearance). Nor would it be "strange" if same-sex desire was considered, given that looks are about appraising sexual attractiveness ("if I was gonna have sex with somebody"). The unaccountableness of this looking is, we argue, thus in the foregrounding of women as the viewer of other women within a heteronormative context. Here, we draw parallels with McRobbie's (2009) analysis of illegibility as an outcome of how the heterosexual rubric of postfeminist sensibility structures women's looking at images of women.

Dawn's "strange" comment and expectation that close friends might offer support could be read as her problematizing the female judgemental look through a discourse of sisterhood. However, she orientates to heteronormativity, rather than sisterhood, as the reason for its strangeness, a pattern also identified in extract three below. Our participants thus constructed the foregrounding of women's looking as troubling within normative expectations of heterosexual interactions. They also positioned this foregrounding as culturally new, as Posh (aged 21, office worker) said, "you used to get ready (.) to look good for a bloke, you don't anymore", a comment aligned with McRobbie's (2009) argument that the complexities of postfeminism leave women nostalgic for apparently simpler times.

### **A judgemental female gaze that is consumption-oriented**

#### Extract 3

[girls are] looking more so at other girls than they would at even (.) at blokes (.) girls are constantly judging other people against themselves [...] and that's why girls are more and more are spending so much more time (.) you know (.) in getting ready, and you know, all the hair extensions and all the (.) fake everything and loads of makeup and (.) loads of different outfits that you can wear (.) it's all to sort've (.) look better than the next girl (.) but it's almost



not even become about (.) for maybe (.) men (.) it's just between girls (Sienna, aged 21, student, study 1, part of her response to: "Is there a lot of competition when you go out (.) amongst women (.) about how they look?"<sup>ii</sup>)

In Sienna's extract we see again the idea of a female foregrounded look that is intense and judgmental. Such looking foregrounds other women within a heterosexual context creating self-evaluation through homosocial interaction that blurs subject and object distinctions, since "constantly judging other people against themselves" involves using the object (the other woman) to form one's own subjectivity.

Like Dawn, Sienna makes the prioritising of heterosexual woman's evaluative looking remarkable. In stating that "it's not even (.)[...] become about men", heteronormativity troubles women's looking by orientating to the idea that it would be expected for women to focus on men.

Sienna's extract also demonstrates how female judgemental looking is consumption oriented. She gives a sense of the intense amount of bodywork needed to successfully pass other women's judgmental and competitive looking: bodywork that involves "spending so much more time" and includes "fake everything", "loads of makeup", and "loads of different outfits".

Sienna associates the intensity of women's judgemental looking with an increase in consumer-oriented beauty work by women in her social circle. She constructs the motivation for this work as women "look[ing] better than the next girl", evidencing the regulatory role of women's looking in producing an expectation to participate in competitive, consumer oriented beauty work.

The extracts above construct traditional associations between femininity, appearance and social validation, and something new, in terms of prioritising a female viewer. Men's looking was not absent in our participants' talk; rather, a postfeminist gaze, characterised by a judgemental gaze that foregrounds women and which is consumption-oriented was prioritised over a male gaze. We argue that such a postfeminist gaze involves a blurring of subject and object and a requirement that women understand their value through their ability to work on their bodies and to produce themselves into recognised (hetero)normative, consumer-oriented definitions of beauty as judged by other women.

### **Appearance as the vehicle to recognition**

In our participants' talk women's looking was constructed as having important subjective effects since it was a process by which they developed an understanding of themselves. Such talk positioned appearance as the vehicle to female validation, potentially through male appreciation but primarily from females (see for example Sienna above "for maybe (.) men (.) it's just between girls"). Below we consider further how consumer-oriented beauty work was constructed as a vehicle to recognition.

#### Extract 4

you go into the loo, typical girly meeting up place, some girl'll be like "your hair looks wicked [fantastic], I love your outfit", that makes you feel even better than when a guy says it to you because girls are so bitchy, you get a couple of drinks down and a typical female round here (.) you know, they don't care (.) they don't care if they hurt your feelings or give you a

'look' (Esmee, aged 20, care worker, study 1, part of a discussion initiated with the question “when you’re getting dressed, what do you choose to wear?”)

Esmee describes above how other women supported or undermined her sense of self through verbal compliments or looks that conveyed judgement about her appearance. Such judgements evoked powerful feelings, which we interpret through misrecognition theory as occurring because they bestow or otherwise recognition and validation. Appearance was thus constructed as the vehicle to female recognition, with looking being one of the processes by which it may be confirmed or denied.

Validation was associated with pleasure, but positive evaluations bound our participants to a postfeminist sensibility where successes and failures were measured through their ability to achieve hyper-feminine looks. Looking was thus an important factor in how our participants came to understand themselves, and, we argue, one of the practices that enables postfeminism to reshape, intensify and reinforce forms of gender power.

In other interviews the power of women’s compliments was associated with women’s ability to understand the work that goes into female beauty practices, highlighting the consumer-oriented feature of the postfeminist gaze and the level of time, effort and skills required to transform oneself into successful feminine appearance (also see Evans & Riley, 2013). Esmee, however, constructs the greater value of women’s compliments in their transgression of the “bitchy” norm of femininity. The power of positive female looking was thus predicated on “bitchy” looking. The expectation of meanness between girls has been documented elsewhere (e.g. Ringrose, 2013; Winch 2013), while research on girls’ friendships have highlighted the role of “mean” looks in non-verbal indirect aggression (Underwood, 2004; Shute, Owens & Slee,

2002). Our data show that this sense making exists beyond school and into early adulthood, shaping the way that women understand other women, and expressed through practices of looking so that for some our participants a supportive stranger was unimaginable, as in the extract below.

Extract 5

sometimes women can be, can be quite judgemental of one another. They can be. Like apart from friends who would say ‘yeah, you look quite nice’, with strangers you would never sort of get someone sort of saying ‘oh’ you know ‘your arms are really toned’. Um you know, ‘how did you get them like that’. You would never really get a stranger like complimenting you. Um whereas you know friends would (Eve, aged 25, dental nurse, study 2, responding to the pole dancing vignette and a question about exercise spaces “so what about the idea of the all (.) female area?”).

Eve constructs the now familiar trope of judgemental women evaluating each other’s appearance. In this account a supportive stranger is inconceivable, that it could “never” happen is repeated twice. From this position all-female areas, which second wave feminists constituted as protective, are reconstituted as dangerous places of judgement.

Although strangers were constructed as unsupportive, Eve positions friends as expected to give positive statements about one another’s appearance or to share information on how to achieve appearance-related success (“how did you get them like that”). Eve’s talk resonates with Winch’s (2012) analysis of postfeminist discourse of female friendships, which showed that while female comradeship provided affirmation rather than negative judgement, in general this

served only to reinforce a postfeminist sensibility, since positive appraisal from friends was gained through successful beauty and bodywork. This means that while positive comments were constructed as deeply appreciated and with the power to positively affect subjectivity, they folded participants back into a regulatory framework in which they were valued through their appearance. Valuing the self through competitive appearance work also created other risks for participants, including fear of losing the competitive edge or realising they had failed to achieve success, as we explore below.

Extract 6

I don't wanna spend an hour gettin' ready in the morning, I'd like to just (.) in an ideal world I'd just get my clothes on and go out like a guy would (.) but if I did that, like I say, there are repercussions, girls will take the piss out of me, and they have done before (.) but I guess (.) people (.) you get the (.) get mocked more if you're always seen to look good and then one day you don't (.) than you would say if you always just looked normal I guess, average yeh, you get overlooked, but for some girls like me and [friend] as well, we don't like being overlooked (.) so we keep a level up of ourselves and if that dips then it gets very noticed very quickly (.) so you can't risk that. You have to think about everything (Tracey, aged 18, college student/bar staff, study 1, part of her response to the question "what is it like to be a young woman today, in your opinion?").

Tracey describes having to put considerable effort into appearance, which she compares to men's apparent lack of effort. She accounts for this discrepancy in terms of social repercussions from other women ("girls will take the piss out of me"), reiterating the mean girls discourse, which she

supports with a claim to experience (“they have done before”). She develops her account by explaining that she is vulnerable to such policing because she is successful in producing a culturally valued image of beauty: she is someone who is “always seen to look good”. Tracey employs rhetorical devices to manage this claim in a way that inoculates her against being labelled boastful. For example, she generalises her talk, using the pronoun ‘you’ rather than ‘I’ (“if you’re always seen to look good”). Subtly, then, Tracey makes the claim that she is someone who could be understood as looking better than other women who are “normal”, “average” and “overlooked”.

Tracey’s extract is an example of several features of the postfeminist gaze that we have been developing in this analysis: women’s looks are foregrounded, femininity is understood as a consumer oriented bodily practice, and appearance is positioned as the vehicle to recognition and validation. Tracey’s talk can also be read as an example of the makeover paradigm: a characteristic of postfeminist sensibility, where time, skill and expert knowledge transform women into culturally valued femininity.

The logic of Tracey’s account is that women are judged on their appearance, and face being mocked or overlooked (invisible) if they are not successful. As a woman who is able to successfully transform herself, Tracey is not overlooked, but that this needs maintenance so that it does not fail. Her account, thus, draws on a neoliberal discourse of risk management, evoking a context in which she must engage in continuous self-scrutiny and bodywork and “think about everything”. Such significant investment in working on appearance is, we argue, part of the final feature of postfeminism, in which the new visibility of women in the public sphere does not challenge gender power because women are redirected back into traditional feminine appearance concerns. Postfeminism, thus, constitutes a “retraditionalisation”, where, despite notions of

choice and empowerment, women are expected to engage in individualistic consumer-oriented practices under the guise that they are doing so “for themselves” either in terms of pleasures in consumption or, as in the above extract, in the interests of preserving a positive sense of self.

Extract 7

there's a couple of women at the front [of her exercise class] one in particular, she's just got this amazing figure. And she's got an engagement ring and stuff like that. And so I've just got this picture in my head and just feel quite insecure around her. And I don't mean to be mean but I kind of prefer it when she's not at the class. It sounds ridiculous really but it's just true kind of thing. But um if I was next to somebody who's the same size as me, I feel a billion times better. It's just these people who are kind of perfect (Ellie, aged 23, recruitment, study 2, responding to the pole-dancing vignette).

In Ellie's extract a comparison was made and the other woman, with her “amazing figure” and achieved heterosexual perfection (symbolized by the engagement ring), judged to be better. Ellie recognises her talk could be heard as problematic, and employs a disclaimer “I don't mean to be mean”, before continuing with a problematized confessional: “it sounds ridiculous really”. The process of comparison for Ellie is visual: it requires her to look at other women in order to compare herself, and this in turn creates a “picture in my head” and an intense sense of insecurity, since she feels “a billion times better” imagining a situation when the absence of this woman means there's no upward comparison and any assumption that she is doing OK can be maintained.

As earlier extracts suggest, the process by which women know if they are successful or not is through judgement and comparison to other women. Thus, women must continuously scrutinise themselves and others to assess how well they are doing. As others have noted, beauty practices and bodywork, such as going to the gym, are about maintaining normalcy and fitting in (Coleman & Moreno Figueroa, 2010). Analysing Ellie's talk through this framework, we interpret the role of similar sized women in her class as allowing her some confidence that her bodywork is acceptable, but the "perfect" woman creates misrecognition, and Ellie loses legitimacy to be recognised as a woman.

### **Discussion**

In this paper we address a gap in the literature by analysing 44 British white, heterosexual women's talk of how they made sense of women's looking. Our participants constructed looking between women as judgemental, comparative and pervasive: an intense look that was often considered more significant (and also more damaging) than men's in shaping how they felt about themselves. This comparative looking held the power to validate our participants as women, a form of recognition determined by their ability to transform into a shared understanding of ideal femininity predicated on significant appearance work.

To develop our analysis of these findings, we draw on the distinction between looking that takes place when people look at each other and a "gaze", defined as a set of institutional practices enabled by symbolic power that is not held by any one individual, but which may structure individual looking (Silverman, 1992). We posit that the looks our participants talked about were structured by the regulatory and self-disciplining technology of postfeminist sensibility, what we call a postfeminist gaze. Drawing on our and other postfeminist analysis



outlined in the literature, we identify several features of the postfeminist gaze, which we describe below.

First, the postfeminist gaze foregrounds women as the viewers of other women but their looking is structured within heteronormative sense making, creating an oscillating dynamic between subject and object: women are scrutinised by a viewer (a subject) who, in her scrutiny, also has to scrutinise herself (as an object). This oscillation may be one reason for the power of the postfeminist gaze since, its continual shifting renders self and other surveillance permanently compulsory.

The second feature is that femininity is understood as a bodily practice, with women required to work on and transform themselves (seemingly for themselves). While the male gaze objectifies through male desire or annihilation, a postfeminist gaze is consumption-oriented, evaluating women according to their ability to reproduce a hyper-feminine femininity. But this aesthetic is insecure because within a complex beauty-oriented consumer culture there is no set standard from which to judge. There is, therefore, a pervasive risk of failing to successfully work on the body and to consume “inappropriately”. Appearance work must, therefore, be judged through comparison with others or from others, with women’s evaluations having greater power because women understand the resources (skill, time, money) needed to produce successful femininity.

The outcome of femininity being understood as a consumer-oriented bodily practice, evaluated primarily through judgemental looking between women is that appearance becomes the vehicle to female recognition and validation, our third feature of the postfeminist gaze. This in turn allows the new visibility of women in public spaces to be managed in ways that do not challenge gender power, our final feature of postfeminist gaze.

Our analysis suggests a new shift in regulation through the postfeminist gaze but also a continuation of the disciplinary power of the male gaze, if in a more muted form. Our participants often oriented to a male viewer, either as one who might normatively judge, but whose opinion was no longer as important, or whose judgment was more forgiving than women's. The notion that postfeminist sensibility has rendered men's looking as redundant has been articulated elsewhere (Evans and Riley, 2014; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Winch, 2013). But in orienting to men as viewers of women, our data suggests men's looking holds a place in this dynamic (also see Calogero, 2004). We suggest, therefore, that the male gaze may be sidelined rather than redundant, so that a parallel set of gazes, male and postfeminist, are operationalised.

A postfeminist gaze does not mean the structures of heteronormativity or gender power are absent. Participants struggled to account for the foregrounding of women's looking, describing it as "strange", "weird", "awful" and "ridiculous". We align this illegibility to the dual heteronormative and homosocial nature of these interactions. Women are expected to work on self and appearance to make themselves heterosexually attractive for the judgemental appraisal of other heterosexual women; this may partly explain the seeming unaccountability of this look in participants' talk.

There was also no talk of resistance or disengagement with wider discourses that associate women's value with their appearance. The only alternative to painful judgemental looking was the supportive comments from friends or, occasionally, strangers. The subjective effects of this was that female comradeship served only to reinforce a postfeminist sensibility, since positive appraisal from friends was gained through successful beauty and bodywork.

In this paper we showed how important women's looking at other women is for female subjectivity within the context of postfeminism. In so doing we drew attention to an important, but under-developed, area for feminist psychological research. In moving forward we suggest further exploration of the dynamics between male and postfeminist gazes; how regulation works alongside female homosociality, and how the postfeminist gaze works with women who are both hailed and marginalised by a postfeminist address that privileges white, slim, heterosexual and middle class women, while pertaining to be an address to all. We offer the postfeminist gaze as a framework for understanding the visual economy of female looking within postfeminism and a springboard for further study in this area.

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#### Appendix: Transcription notation

(.) pause

[...] data deliberately cut

[laughs] additional information

, or . short break in the 'hearing' of the talk, without clear pause, with continuing or final intonation

Underlining emphasis

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<sup>i</sup> Although objectification theory was heavily informed by Bartky's (1990) *Femininity and Domination*, which does address women's looking at other women.

<sup>ii</sup> While this may appear a leading question it was in response to Sienna talking about girls fighting, it was also informed by the researcher's ethnographic work with the participants. That the interviewer was taping into an existing understanding rather than directing a new one can be read in Sienna's immediate positive and strong response to the question "Yes .. massively".