

# **Resisting Beauty?**

## **Examining How Women Negotiate and Respond to Contemporary Beauty Ideals**

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## Abstract

This thesis examines how women discursively respond to and resist beauty ideals through their talk. From conducting qualitative group and individual interviews with 42 women in Malaysia, Singapore and UK, I employ a discourse analysis to study how women make sense of beauty pressures in complex, contradictory ways that often reinforce these ideals as much as resist them. I first challenge taken-for-granted notions of dominant media influence by examining how women, as both media content producers and consumers, conceptualise and construct their own and other imagined audiences' interactions with media-perpetuated beauty ideals. I then move to study other repertoires and discourses that women engage and 'translate into' (DeVault 1990) – namely health, professionalism, and personal development – to negotiate their relationship with and resistances against beauty/ideals. Through my discussion, I demonstrate how previous concerns for fulfilling physical bodily ideals have now evolved into a preoccupation with securing ideals of successful enterprising, self-determined selfhood instead. This thesis argues that ostensible assertions of resistance against beauty are thus often redirected to fulfilling yet another ideal – the neoliberal, postfeminist demand for “compulsory individuality” (Cronin 2000) and confidence, which increasingly places responsibility on individuals to overcome beauty oppression and attain bodily contentment, while eliding the systemic inequalities that create and sustain these pressures in the first place. I also explore how these manifestations of resistance to beauty are enacted in specific ways by cosmopolitan women of a “global sisterhood” (Chen 2009), who possess class privileges, resources and cultural capital that enable and encourage them to employ a particular range of discourses. Finally, recognising the interactive moments of discussion, debate and reflection in my interviews, I suggest that the interview space itself (and other discursive events like it), offers potential for women to exercise agency, resist and talk back to dominant discourses around beauty.

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## Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University.

I first shared and discussed the phrase "...but is she pretty?", which is cited in this thesis, in a paper delivered at the *Aesthetic Labour* colloquium at the University of Sheffield (July 2016). I have also cited this phrase in my presentations at the *Three Minute Thesis (3MT)* competition at the University of York (June 2018), the Vitae (UK) 3MT finals (September 2018), and a Falling Walls Lab 2018, University of Surrey (September 2018).

Some aspects of my methodological approaches and methods were presented at the British Sociological Association (BSA) Postgraduate Symposium '*Doing*' *Reflexivity in Research: Practical Approaches to Methodological Complexities* at the University of Brighton (December 2016); the Centre for Women's Studies annual *Sisterhood in Action* conference at the University of York (February 2017); the University of York's postgraduate *Global Literature and Culture forum* (February 2017); and the BSA Postgraduate Symposium *The Promise and Perils of Researching Sensitive Issues* at the University of York (November 2018).

I have presented some of my autoethnographic experiences of working in a fashion magazine and briefly discussed participant interviews at several conferences/events as follows: *The Space Between: Psyche, Body, Skin Environment* symposium organised by the Fashion Research Network and the Royal College of Art in London (February 2017); at various presentations for the *Three Minute Thesis* competition (as above); *Falling Walls Lab*, University of Surrey (as above); *Telling Feminist Stories: Research & Activism*, at the York International Women's Week (March 2019) and the University of York's annual arts, humanities and social sciences research staff conference (May 2019).

All sources are acknowledged as references in the Bibliography.

# Chapter One

## Introduction: Let's Talk about Beauty

The 'story' of this thesis is mostly my own. The long-standing difficult relationship I have had with my body has directed so much of this research, from the very moment I decided to pursue a PhD, to the planning of my fieldwork, to each writing session. It has informed my research questions, my methodological decisions, the ways in which I have approached and analysed my data, and ultimately, my drive to find some resolution to the body-related anxieties that I experience, along with many of the women I know and love. So, I begin with my story.

### 1.1 My Body, My Stories

I was not a conventionally beautiful child. A series of health problems in my early childhood led to substantial weight gain which made me fatter than my peers and left me feeling ungainly and awkward. I was subject to constant teasing by my classmates and endless running commentaries about how fat I was by relatives. One of my earliest body-related memories is of my father telling me – whether jokingly or out of concern – that if I remained as fat as I was, I would never get a boyfriend. I would not have been thinking about dating at that age, but I did intuit the underlying message: being fat is not loveable. At around the same time, I started reading teenage girl magazines, mainly imported from Australia or the United States to Malaysia where I spent my childhood. I thumbed through hundreds of stylish pages of fashion and beauty tips, celebrity news and articles about teenage life, all filled with images of pretty girls – mostly tall, blonde, fair and slim. I remember wishing that I wasn't a fat, dumpy, Chinese girl, and wholeheartedly envisaging how much happier I would be if only I was as slim, blonde and fair as the girls in the magazines.

At fourteen, boys at school body-shamed me so constantly that I began dieting to extremes and was eventually diagnosed with an eating disorder. I had recovered by the time I went to university at eighteen, but then developed other odd and tortured practices around food and exercise – mainly switching between crash diets, eating only 'clean' foods, using laxatives and compulsive over-exercising. I saw fat as the antithesis of beauty, and I was terrified of fleshiness.

Many years, diets and weight fluctuations later, I landed myself a job as a features writer for the Malaysian edition of one of the world's largest women's fashion magazines. Having aspired to work in glossy magazines since my teenage years (while I was reading those magazines myself), this was a dream come true. If I could not be as thin and flawless as the cover girls, I would to be among the women behind the scenes. I harboured great hopes for writing smart, articulate, moving articles that would emphasise more than beauty, raise awareness of issues that mattered to women and inspire them to initiate social change in their own worlds. Perhaps naively, I believed I might be able to empower women with intelligent articles, even if they were wedged between pages of editorials and advertisements urging us towards impossible beauty standards and an insatiable consumerism. However, my idealistic hopes were quickly dashed. Article pitches I put forward for serious, hard-hitting features were often declined. Editors reminded writers that our articles must not be too serious; they should be aspirational, happy, and as beautiful and inspiring as the images in the magazine. As we discussed the women we wanted to feature during our editorial meetings, the final, deciding question that someone would always inevitably ask was, "... but is she pretty?" For all that women were accomplishing in the world, it still seemed like only beauty mattered.

Then, one day, our deputy editor pitched a light-hearted feature about books that had changed our lives, to which all members of the editorial team would contribute. I was especially taken by this editor's choice: Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*. I had read this same book almost fifteen years ago for my Masters dissertation and was thrilled to see it featured. It spoke directly to the increasing discomfort I was feeling around our own perpetuation of beauty ideals within the magazine, and it seemed apt that it had reemerged in my life at this moment.

At about this same time, around the early to mid 2010s, I also began noticing a rise of body positivity material online. This content showcased bodies of all shapes and sizes, and featured bold, clever articles that attempted to challenge conventional beauty ideals and offer alternative definitions of beauty. I was fascinated and hooked. As I came to feel increasingly disillusioned by the magazine I was working for, I turned towards these campaigns, projects and writings for inspiration instead. Eventually, I decided to return to academia to research the issues around conventional beauty ideals more thoroughly and to investigate the potential that these body positivity campaigns held for resisting mainstream beauty ideals.

Midway through my research, I further undertook a fitness and nutrition programme with a fitness coach. Engaging in these body-focused practices centred much attention back onto my body and would often cause me to feel strongly conflicted since my research sought to critique such bodily preoccupations. On the one hand, although I was keen to become stronger and healthier, I was aware that my primary, if sole, motivation for dieting and weightlifting was to lose weight and develop a more muscular build – in other words, to attain that very ideal of slenderness that had caused me so much grief. On the other, these practices were also giving me pause to interrogate what I felt, loved, feared or and understood about the way my body looked, how my relationship to my own body intersected with wider social beauty ideals, or how I might still find space to respond to and resist these expectations in ways that could be meaningful for me and other women. It was this spirit of contemplating how we discuss, understand and construct meanings around our bodies and how we negotiate, sometimes contrarily, our responses and resistances to beauty ideals that has driven this thesis.

## **1.2 Beauty Talk**

Altogether, my childhood experiences of body shaming, my fickle practices around nutrition and fitness, and my more recent academic contemplations upon the body have made for complex, often contradictory ways of thinking about bodily beauty. I developed an interest for exploring how other women like myself might be thinking and talking about their bodies and beauty ideals too. Body positivity campaigns seemed to offer new ways of addressing and resisting dominant beauty ideals, and creating alternative definitions of beauty. I therefore began my research with the hope of studying these projects in depth in order to understand what elements within these campaigns might be harnessed to provide women with more effective, helpful tools to talk about and construct new meanings around their bodies. However, I recognised early on in my research that the body positivity movement was more problematic than I had realised and needed to be troubled for how it often inadvertently continues to perpetuate certain ideals and privilege certain bodies.

I therefore amended my research to examine more broadly how women themselves were responding to beauty ideals and to such body positivity media. As I started conducting interviews, I saw quickly that women's relationship to the media was not a simple one. I realised that participants maintained a much keener interest in discussing the other experiences, interactions, relationships and stories of their lives, than they were to discuss

specifically media-perpetuated beauty ideals, including the newer body positive material. Ultimately, I completely reversed my initial decision to study body positivity campaigns and decided to focus exclusively upon women's discursive constructions of bodily beauty instead. This research then, aims to explore the meanings that these women attribute to beauty ideals, how they construct their understandings of and responses to these ideals, and the discourses and language they draw on to talk around beauty with me – as both friend and researcher – and with each other.

Driven by my initial interest in the challenges that body positivity campaigns posed to mainstream beauty ideals, I was likewise keen to investigate the ways in which women were attempting to resist these ideals and seeking alternative ways of thinking and talking about beauty and their bodies. The narratives and discussions that arose in the individual and group interviews that I conducted with women revealed complex negotiations of beauty in women's lives that spoke of their pleasurable, guilty and conflicting responses to beauty ideals. Feelings of body confidence may be countered sharply by feelings of shame and inadequacy. Or, they might enjoy some form of active agency in rejecting beauty ideals while also passively colluding with some of the very norms they appear to reject.

So, how might we begin to decipher between these conflicted understandings and meanings of beauty? At this point, I wish to consider some of the conventional routes by which I have tried to address my own contradictory feelings around my body. Mainly, I have turned to conversations with friends or family to try to make sense of and overcome societal beauty pressures, and to formulate my responses to them. Doctoral research afforded me further opportunities to have these conversations with research colleagues in focused ways. Although I relished the opportunity of being back in an academic space and reading more widely about beauty and bodies, I now recognise that my research also benefitted substantially from the conversations I had throughout my PhD with peers. It was from speaking with Women's Studies colleagues and/or researchers working on women's bodies that I learned to problematise and critique beauty ideals more thoroughly. While theoretical writings offered me a range of perspectives, these conversations offered me the opportunities to flex these critical skills, for example, to deconstruct the meanings of health and wellbeing, or to rethink what concepts like resistance, empowerment, pleasure and choice might mean for the twenty-first-century woman. My PhD friends and I would spend hours talking about how we felt about our own bodies, locating these feelings, experiences and stories within and against the theories we were reading. For example, we would talk about the differing experiences of being fat in Western and Asian contexts; how we still felt excluded by body

positivity campaigns; and how difficult it was to really think that we were exerting ‘empowered’ ‘choices’ around our bodies when these choices were not always equally available to us.

Meetings with one of my supervisors prompted deeper ways of critiquing and troubling concepts and texts. She first brought to my attention a novel way of approaching taken-for-granted concepts by asking, for instance, “*How* does the body mean?”, replacing the more common phrasing, “*What* does the body mean?” Using the word ‘how’ to unravel the meanings of a particular word or concept captures an “activating process rather than the result (the ‘what’)”<sup>1</sup>, and a multiplicity in the formation of meanings. In other words, it is not just to examine a straightforward definition of what the body means, but to investigate how it comes to mean that way, which influences and discourses alter its meanings in different, conflicting ways, and how these definitions can change for different people, in varying contexts and times.

These conversations have ultimately played a pivotal role in shaping the directions I took with my interviews, my later analysis and theorisation, and the thesis as a whole. I understand that taken alone, such personal reflections and discussions among friends and colleagues can be regarded as little more than solipsistic navel-gazing (Mykhalovskiy 1997). However, I argue for the powerful potential that the active process of talking, telling and dialoguing can have for shaping our understandings and responses to the everyday issues and pressures we confront. Certainly, for me, these conversations with my supervisors, colleagues and friends were an integral part of gaining the knowledge and critical skills needed to act with more informed agency around the decisions I was taking towards my own body. Of course, this is never a perfect nor straightforward process. I am conscious that I often reject beauty ideals even while I still partake in them; and that I resist as well as perpetuate the values that have caused me so much discomfort with my body. Still, these conversations provide ripe opportunities for reflecting upon how my/our actions, reactions and cultural choices “are not only about ‘creating’ our own individual lives but constructing the landscape of our culture” (Bordo 1999b, 16). I am reminded that my engagement with beauty is never only personal but always discursively ‘in conversation’ with the broader cultural “landscape” of which I am a part.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Ann Kaloski-Naylor, email message to author, 11 January 2016.

I acknowledge that there exists a rich history in studies and debates around beauty ideals and women's engagement with beauty – I discuss some of these theories in the proceeding chapter and they have played an important role in informing my thinking and analysis. I hope that one of the original contributions this thesis makes to the body of work on women's beauty is due to its discursive exploration of how women talk about beauty, discuss their relationship to their bodies, and articulate their responses and resistances to beauty ideals. Importantly, I attempt to examining more deeply 'how this resistance means' and *how resistant* these assertions may be. I seek to investigate the discursive practices and structures that constitute women's discussions of these ideals, and to explore how women use these discursive, conversational events to negotiate and express their relationship to bodily beauty – for example, I study what language they draw on to express their rejection of particular beauty ideals or how they discursively convey confidence (or the lack of) about their bodies. Ultimately, I examine the potential that such beauty talk holds for women to individually and collectively discover ways of resisting hegemonic beauty ideals, and to assert new definitions and understandings around their bodies.

### **1.3 Resisting Beauty Ideals**

Although this study has shifted away from focusing solely on body positivity material, I am still interested in the articulations and assertions of resistance that they encourage against contemporary, mainstream beauty ideals. I have moved my primary focus to examine how women themselves try to challenge beauty norms and resist gendered body ideals in their talk and conversations, primarily through the interviews I conducted with them. Studying how they discourse with me and each other about their engagements with beauty can, I hope, offer some novel insights into how women assert and negotiate resistance towards beauty ideals, even as they also discuss certain pleasures they derive from their selected beauty practices.

To talk about resistance necessarily also entails consideration of the ongoing debates around agency and structure, empowerment and oppression, particularly among feminist writers on beauty and women's bodies (Bordo [1993] 2003b, 1999b; Davis 2003; Duits and van Zoonen 2006, 2007; Gill 2007b). I offer a lengthier discussion of these debates in the next chapter, while the rest of this thesis attempts to understand how my participants reconcile these tensions as they interact with their chosen media platforms, and discursively negotiate, make sense of, query and resist beauty ideals in their conversations.

First, I question:

- How do women, as both media producers and media audience/consumers, conceptualise the (potential) role that the media plays in shaping their interactions with and responses to beauty ideals?

Then, to extend the discussion beyond the media, I ask how women themselves conceive of and respond to beauty ideals:

- How (else), besides through the media, do women discursively construct and express their relationship, responses and resistances hegemonic beauty ideals?
- What potential forms does this resistance take?
- How can we conceive of these articulations of resistance as actually resisting beauty ideals?

These four research questions drive my study as I set out to investigate how resistance is discursively articulated and asserted by the women I interview. I have deliberately avoided asking the 'simpler' question of what resistance means for these women, as I have found that these assertions are not always straightforward or clearly expressed. Often, resistance is bound up with the pleasure of engaging with beauty practices and can even be read as colluding with the very ideals that are rejected as harmful. Sometimes, women continue to encounter feeling inadequate in/around their bodies even as they reject the ideals that cause that shame in the first place. At other times, ostensible demonstrations of resistance coalesce into a ready adherence to another set of ideals – primarily those of neoliberal and postfeminist values that promote a very particular definition of highly individuated, self-actualised, entrepreneurial success. Simultaneously, in the pursuit and promotion of these updated values and aspirations, women may tend to overlook the need to address structural inequalities, or to foster collective social action and support for confronting the systemic oppressions that continue to harm themselves and other women.

Therefore, instead of searching for simple explanations of what these resistances mean, I seek to understand, instead the forms and manifestations that these resistances may take, and how we might understand these expressions of resistance as actually *being resistant* – or not. To what extent can these assertions be understood as actually, effectively resisting beauty ideals? Or, does this resistance simply redirect them towards the fulfilment of other equally



demanding ideals? What other discourses and structures continue to circumscribe and shape their responses to and engagements with beauty?

I find myself asking if is there ever a way out of these overarching pressures? Or are we always going to be trapped, either in a beauty myth, or by some other ideal? I have purposefully chosen to work with a discursive analysis, working upon the foundational premise that the cultural and social worlds we inhabit, and the values we live by both constitute and are constituted by the discourses we employ in our everyday talk and interactions. While the media is certainly a dominating presence (and, perhaps, influence) within our contemporary lives, I am more interested to understand how women themselves grapple with the beauty discourses and rhetoric they encounter, how they comply with or resist particular facets of beauty, and what renders their resistances meaningful – or not – to themselves. With this focus, I hope to show instances where women can begin to ‘talk back’ to dominant and oppressive gendered beauty ideals in their conversations, even as these discursive acts sometimes, paradoxically, also reinscribe the pressures they try to resist.

Importantly, by the end of the thesis, I conceive of the interview itself – or any discursive event between women – as an important space containing significant potential for disrupting existing and dominant discourses around beauty. While I also acknowledge and discuss the limitations of this space for fully confronting hegemonic beauty ideals and the continued gendered oppression of women’s bodies, I suggest that the creation of safe, supported spaces within which women can converse around a subject like bodily beauty can allow for deeper problematising and debate of mainstream beauty and body ideals. By offering opportunities wherein women actively and collectively hear, receive and honour each other’s responses to these overriding ideals and discourse about their own bodies, we might thus begin to counter the more common social, cultural devaluation and dismissal of such ‘girl talk’ as frivolous and insubstantial.

Finally, I round off this section with a note about who these women are. Because so much of this research has evolved from and around my own stories, I also made the decision to recruit and interview women who were, for the most part, very much like me – for example, relatives, friends, and former colleagues. While we mostly share similar interests, social and cultural attitudes, and perspectives around bodily beauty, we also enjoy very similar backgrounds, including quite specific transnational experiences, and educational, financial, class and, at times, racial and religious privileges. So far, I have made broad references to ‘women’ and their responses to beauty ideals, but it would be remiss of me not to consider

how this particular category and cosmopolitan class of women that I work with may converse about, respond to and resist beauty ideals in certain ways, and by drawing upon their access to resources and discourses that are not equally employed by other communities of women. I therefore bear this categorisation of women in mind throughout the thesis, investigating at each turn, what social and cultural values they prioritise as they talk about beauty, and how their particular class privileges enable and encourage them to draw on the discourses they do to enact agency and resistance in specific ways. I hope that by focusing predominantly upon the insights and perspectives of this very specific group of women, this thesis can offer original perspectives on a specific cosmopolitan community whose responses to and negotiations around beauty ideals have not, thus far, received ample academic attention.

## **1.4 Working through Beauty Oppression: Chapter Outline**

I begin this thesis by contextualising my research within existing writings about women's bodies and femininity. Drawing largely from post-structuralist perspectives, through the work of feminists such as Sandra Bartky and Susan Bordo, Chapter Two forms a critical context, examining how ideals of bodily beauty and femininity have commonly and historically arisen out of and been constituted by prescriptive gender roles and hierarchies in culture and society; and how these ideals are further internalised and sustained by women through constant self-regulatory practices. The second half of this chapter moves to consider updated, contemporary post-, neoliberal and popular feminist ideals around women's bodies and subjectivities, and the more recent feminist critiques of these ideologies. From examining these two frameworks, I then engage and expand upon existing debates on women's responses, agency and resistance around beauty in my discussion chapters, Four to Six. I draw especially from the works of critics of postfeminism, neoliberalism/neoliberal feminism and popular feminism to explore how women's responses to, and/or resistances against, beauty ideals often coincide with or challenge contemporary values of self-actualised success and the crafting of individuated, self-managing, entrepreneurial selfhood.

Before proceeding to the discussion, I outline in Chapter Three the feminist methodological approaches and reflexive processes that have shaped this research. I open this chapter with a straightforward outline of my methods: individual and group interviews with women in Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, London and York, discourse analysis, and autoethnographic

reflections. In this chapter, I also begin to explore both the potential and limitations of discourse analysis and the interview space for the specific purposes of my study. I consider both how these methods can help us to better understand women's negotiations of and challenges to beauty; and where these approaches may be limited.

I then engage feminist perspectives on reflexivity and research positionality to explore the strong feelings of discomfort and skepticism that I encountered throughout my fieldwork and analysis. I discuss how I have employed this discomfort as a resource to further critique and interrogate my data. I clarify why these intuitive responses to my data and my autoethnographic reflections have been pivotal for directing the theoretical frameworks that I eventually employ in my analysis and discussion.

In the first of the discussion chapters, Chapter Four, I focus my study upon women's discussions about how they conceptualise the potential role of the media in shaping their responses to mainstream beauty ideals, looking specifically at women's glossy magazines and the social media platform, Instagram. Notably, I draw from interviews with women who have worked as editors or writers of women's fashion magazines, studying their responses as both media content producers and readers/audiences themselves. Using Barthes' concept of commonly accepted cultural myths, this chapter seeks to challenge the taken-for-granted notion that beauty ideals are predominantly created and perpetuated by the media. Instead, I trouble the multifaceted, and at times contradictory, approaches that magazine editors/writers themselves take to addressing beauty ideals and to envisaging an intelligent readership that is thought to understand and respond to media messages (of beauty) in particular ways. I then also examine how some women as readers/viewers talk about their complicated and conflicted responses to their chosen media platforms. I examine, for example how these readers attempt to demonstrate agency and discernment in/through the media content they choose to consume, while also often revealing continued anxieties in failing to meet the beauty ideals they encounter therein. Finally, I explore how this group of media producers and consumers draw from common discourses and language that assume and speak to very particular classed, postfeminist, neoliberal values emphasising individuality and self-directed 'choices'. By this, I attempt to show that the idealised intelligent reader is also often necessarily a specifically privileged one who possesses options and capital not commonly available to all; and that therefore, certain expressions of resistance to media-perpetuated beauty ideals presume and require access to class-enabled freedoms and resources.

From examining how women conceive of the ways in which media informs their engagements with bodily beauty ideals, I move to question *what other* discourses and experiences these women draw from and reference as they converse about beauty. Chapter Five continues with the discursive analysis I begin in Chapter Four to investigate how women make sense of and converse about/around beauty. The first half examines three repertoires (Potter and Wetherell 1987) of beauty that women employ, to investigate the meanings that beauty and beauty practices hold for them. The second half considers other presumably more valued and respectable discourses that women ‘translate into’ (DeVault 1990) as they define and justify their own engagements with beauty.

In Chapters Four and Five, I aim to show how women’s interactions with beauty are often redirected towards the fulfilment of neoliberal, postfeminist ideals of individualism and self-directed entrepreneurship. Chapter Six advances this argument by specifically exploring the ways in which women talk about assuming personal responsibility for overcoming beauty pressures and body anxieties, and the corresponding benefits of confidence, positivity and mental wellbeing they experience. I specifically examine two emergent themes: 1) the (necessary) personal development of ‘inner’ qualities of confidence and acceptance, and 2) the acceptance and enactment of individual therapeutic work to heal fractured relationships to the body.

Finally, in the concluding chapter (Seven), I begin to think about an alternative means of approaching the way we talk about women’s body. I propose that the interview space itself and the process of beauty dialoguing in conversational events can constitute a powerful means by which women can negotiate and assert agency and resistance against beauty ideals, and construct new understanding and meaning of beauty for and between themselves. I offer some examples from my data to illustrate how my participants already began to resist, trouble and ‘talk back’ to dominant discourses during their interviews. I also explore how specially convened interviews or safe supported dialoguing spaces can work to re-centre attention and respect upon issues that are personal and important to women, but which are so commonly disregarded or dismissed as unproductive and insubstantial.

## 1.5 Summary

I end this introduction by drawing attention again to the significance of my personal experience. It is important for me to reiterate how emotionally involved I have been throughout the processes of conducting and writing the research. My continuing anxieties around fat loss; my nutrition and fitness practices; the countless conversations I have with friends and family about my and their body insecurities – these have all been woven into the research. My despair for persistent instances of body shame that I, and women everywhere, still encounter daily continually energises me to elevate and honour all that women have to tell around and about their bodies.

Above all, I argue that the work to overcome these body anxieties cannot be relegated to individuals alone, despite increasing exhortations in popular discourses to just ‘choose’ for ourselves, ‘lean in’ and believe that ‘you’re worth it’. I have certainly never been able to successfully process troubled feelings towards my body on my own. Neither my body itself nor any of my practices or experiences have been able to fully heal my bodily woes nor facilitate an improved relationship with beauty and body ideals. Rather, it has almost always been the conversations I have had, and the active, engaged process of discussing personal experience, culture and theory that has offered me some way of resisting overarching beauty pressures and uncover what is meaningful for myself. Importantly, however, I acknowledge that these conversations are not easily had. Often, I speak only to my closest friends about my bodily insecurities; or to research colleagues who enjoy debating the same critical and theoretical approaches as I do. Outside of these groups, I feel self-conscious talking about my preoccupations with my body for fear that I will be further shamed or ridiculed for talking about something as unsubstantial and frivolous as my looks. I am also aware that ‘girl talk’ among women is often denigrated as “gossip” (McRobbie 1982, 50) and not taken seriously. So, when the talk of women *and* the subject of the talk, such as beauty, are both so frequently dismissed, how might we reclaim these conversations as significant and meaningful?

A substantial element of this research has therefore also been to propose the creation of more safe and supportive spaces for women to convene and purposefully talk about their bodies with each other. I suggest that through these processes of dialoguing and debating about beauty, women can actively and assertively work through their personal and collective understandings of beauty ideals. By analysing these discussions, we can begin to understand

how such talk either confronts and resists these ideals or, inadvertently, reinforces the very gendered and body ideals we are trying to transform.

Above all, this study attempts to shine light upon women's talk and to illuminate the highly complex processes of dialoguing and meaning-making that such talk facilitates. Moreover, when this talk is situated within social and cultural milieus that tend to disregard women's conversations, or to disparage issues like beauty as unsubstantial and trivial, then paying attention to that very talk *is itself* to be resistant, and to challenge dominant notions of what is valuable. I strive in the following pages to re-centre such talk, to give credence and meaning not just to the talk itself, but to the very issues discussed, debated, 'confessed', storied, troubled and navigated by the women of my research.

So, let's talk about beauty...

## Chapter Two

### Revisiting the Beauty Myth: A Critical Context

#### 2.1 Introduction

I first read Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1992) in the early 2000s as I wrote my Masters dissertation on the influence of fashion magazines on women's identities in the 1920s (Khoo 2003). The premise of Wolf's argument is that the pressure on women to be beautiful had increasingly intensified over the twentieth century so as to keep women's attentions focused upon their bodies, and away from political, social and cultural advancement. She suggested that these beauty-related anxieties were perpetuated and maintained to bolster capitalist, consumer industries, which would sell to women commercial solutions to 'flaws' that were created and sustained by this very myth. This vicious cycle would keep women locked in a bind that would continuously reduce them to their bodies and the bodily aesthetic labour (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017) they were urged to perform. Twelve years later, when I worked for magazines myself, I revisited the book, reading it from two new perspectives: firstly, as someone now working within the fashion and beauty industry, and secondly, in the light of contemporary body positive media and campaigns that sought to challenge conventional beauty ideals.<sup>2</sup> From about 2012, when I started seeing these alternative beauty campaigns and when I joined the fashion magazine, *The Beauty Myth* became of interest again to me as I began to look more closely at how these projects were attempting to destabilise this myth.

Before proceeding further, I pause to clarify my use of two terms used throughout this thesis. First, as this research concerns itself exclusively with *women's* responses to beauty, it is

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<sup>2</sup> Originating from fat activism (Cooper 1998, 2016), the body positivity movement (Afful and Ricciardelli 2015; Cwynar-Horta 2016) arose as individual responses to acts of body shaming and called for greater social acceptance and celebration of diverse body types which differed from those promoted in mainstream fashion and beauty industries. Examples of body positive projects include *The What's Underneath Project*, *Body Image Movement*, *A Beautiful Body Project*; social media hashtag campaigns like #EffYourBeautyStandards and #SelfiesForSelfLove; commercial advertising campaigns popularised, for example, by cosmetics company Dove or fashion brand Simply Be; and body positive articles/content on websites such as *Bustle*, *Everyday Feminism* and *Buzzfeed*.

important to define what I mean by ‘woman’. Generations of feminists have queried ‘what a woman is’ (Moi 1999), challenging taken-for-granted, socially constructed meanings imposed upon sex (biological and physiological) differences. For example, defining women’s bodies as a “situation”<sup>3</sup>, as de Beauvoir ([1949] 2011) does, throws into sharp relief the surrounding variable social and cultural conditions against which a woman is always defined. Intersectional feminists call further attention to the ways in which the material, lived experiences of intersecting social categories of race, class, disability, sexual orientation and age necessarily impinge upon individuals’ experience and understanding of what it means to be a woman (Brah 1992, 1991). I acknowledge the importance of considering women’s beauty stories and experiences alongside the differences that inhere within the definition of ‘woman’ itself, but my focus here does not lie in exploring these differences nor in seeking alternative definitions. I work with a normative, taken-for-granted definition of ‘woman’, mostly as understood by my participants who self-identify as women<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, my examination of these women’s discursive responses to contemporary beauty ideals has led me to work with understandings and representations of women that are common to mainstream beauty discourses and the associated cultural and media channels that perpetuate them. Importantly, we must recognise that these discourses do not just employ a clearly established definition of ‘woman’ but themselves contribute to (re)constituting these definitions. Broadly, then, when I speak of ‘woman’ or ‘women’ in this study, I refer to any individual who self-identifies as a woman; to persons born female and are correspondingly assigned, and identify with, the gender ‘girl/woman’; to individuals located within a gender binary that situates women as the diametric counterpart to men; and finally, to individuals who are commonly presumed to be feminine and/or associated with ‘femininity’ and feminine attributes.

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<sup>3</sup> I especially like, and choose to work with, Moi’s summary of this principle: “To claim that the body is a situation is to acknowledge that the meaning of a woman’s body is bound up with the way she uses her freedom. For Beauvoir, our freedom is not absolute but situated. Other situations as well as our particular lived experience will influence our projects, which in turn will shape our experience of the body. In this way, each woman’s experience of her body is bound up with her projects in the world [...] The way we experience – live – our bodies is shaped by [a dialectical interaction with our surroundings, that is to say all the other situations in which the body is placed]. The body is a historical sedimentation of our way of living in the world, and of the world’s way of living with us.” (Moi 1999, 65-66, 68)

<sup>4</sup> My participants do not explicitly state in their interviews that they self-identify as women. However, the background information about my research clearly states that I am interviewing *women* and studying *women’s* responses to beauty ideals; we clearly discuss their *experiences as women* in the interviews. I therefore take their acquiescence to participate, and the absence of further clarification about their gender, as confirmation that they self-identify as women.



The second term I wish to clarify is ‘beauty’. The Oxford English dictionary defines beauty as:

1. A combination of qualities that delights the senses.
2. A beautiful woman.
3. An excellent example.
4. An attractive feature or advantage.

Highly gendered definitions aside (why can a man not be described as ‘a beauty’?), I have puzzled over what these definitions mean for physical, bodily beauty. When we speak of a ‘beautiful woman’, what exactly makes her beautiful? Which particular “combination of qualities” “delight the senses”? Can an individual be considered a beauty if only some of her physical qualities are considered beautiful – and which ones? If she has a beautiful face but the rest of her bodily features do not ‘delight the senses’, is she still considered ‘a beauty’? In the first place, we must ask *who* determines what is beautiful – Tate (2009) argues that “[a] judgement of beauty cannot rightfully just belong to an individual but is based in sociality” and is thus performatively reiterative; beauty is something that we are each socialised to learn to ‘do’ and therefore, recognise in others (5-7). But what *is* that beauty itself? I have found that writings on women’s bodily beauty struggle to articulate *what* this beauty comprises beyond how they relate to beauty ideals associated principally with whiteness (fairness as well as traits associated with Caucasian bodies), slenderness and youth. Freedman (1988), distinguishes beauty from “pretty” by defining the latter as “primarily refer[ring] to physical traits, meaning ‘ornamental beauty without grandeur... pleasing in a feminine, childlike way’” (2), which orients prettiness as a particularly feminised term. This distinction suggests then, that beauty contains some ‘grander’ ethereal qualities that extend beyond physical appearance – “an external radiance, an inner tranquility, a sexual allure, a fact of social exchange” (4). This definition is still not a precise one. Others discuss women’s relationships with specific parts of the body – for example, eyes (Kaw 1993, 1994), hair/body hair (Toerien and Wilkinson 2003; Weitz 2001) or vulvas (Braun 2009) – and the physical beauty practices<sup>5</sup> that women engage with to render those parts of the body beautiful (such as makeup, hair styling or cosmetic surgery). Conversely, broader discussions of bodily beauty reference the body as a whole entity, for example in shaping the body through weight loss and fitness, dressing the body, the sexualisation of the body or its comportment.

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<sup>5</sup> I offer my working definition of ‘practices’ below on page 29.

*Beauty ideals* are often conflated and interchangeable with *body ideals*; to fulfil a body ideal is often to simultaneously fulfil a beauty ideal – to be, ultimately, beautiful. However, feminist theorists writing more recently argue that the current ideals of (beautiful) successful womanhood forwarded by contemporary neoliberal, postfeminist climates (within which this study is located) speak to much more than just beauty. It is no longer enough to make the body beautiful. Rather, the body becomes a site from which women are encouraged to also demonstrate *multiple other* qualities of upward social aspiration and mobility (McRobbie 2004a; Skeggs 1997; Sanchez Taylor 2012a) confidence (Banet-Weiser 2015; Gill and Orgad 2017; Thompson and Donaghue 2014), discipline and self-care (McRobbie 2015; Rottenberg 2014a, 2017), work-life balance, health and wellbeing (McRobbie 2015; Rottenberg 2014), and self-determined individuality. I propose, then, that while the phrase ‘beauty ideals’ is still more commonly used, the term ‘body ideals’ may be more helpful for referencing a broader range of characteristics. I employ both terms in the following chapters: I use ‘beauty ideals’ to speak directly about physical bodily beauty; and later, in later Chapter Six, when I discuss issues around subjectivity and selfhood, I use ‘body ideals’ more frequently, referring to both physical appearance and the ways in which bodies speak of interior, affective states. Finally, I often also use the phrase ‘feminine bodily beauty’ which draws specific attention to the gendered nature of these ideals (as discussed further in Section 2.2).

Though *The Beauty Myth* was recognised more as polemic than academic scholarship, its focus on the pervasiveness of “beauty thinking” (Wolf 1992, 75) as enforced upon women has long been a subject of academic debate. Such studies examine how cultural images of beauty are created and sustained, and how they continue to affect women’s body image, which “encompasses one’s body-related self-perceptions and self-attitudes, including thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors” (Cash 2004, 1-2). Ideas advanced by *The Beauty Myth* have been frequently reproduced in popular culture and academia such that Wolf’s original premise – that beauty is used “as currency” to sustain “men’s institutions and institutional power” (Wolf 1992, 12-13), and curtail women’s social and political advancement – were for a long time accepted as a given. Subsequent research responding to *The Beauty Myth* has striven to either illustrate the quantitative and qualitative effects that beauty ideals have on women, or to refute the social and cultural influences of these ideals upon women’s body image altogether. For example, writing on beauty practices often expand on Wolf’s assertion that women continue to be judged primarily for their looks over other qualities (Dellinger and Williams 1997; Toerien and Wilkinson 2003; Walter 2010;

Weitz 2001). Some challenge the argument that the beauty myth is a product of Western cultural norms, claiming instead that beauty is a universal concern found across diverse cultures (Cunningham et al. 1995; Gottschall 2008); others reject altogether the concept of beauty as culturally constructed, drawing instead from evolutionary biology to argue for the invariable “science of beauty” (Etcoff 2000). However, articles on popular cultural websites and blogs continue to cite *The Beauty Myth* today, regarding the text as still relevant for addressing beauty pressures faced by women now (Strimpel 2017; Weiner 2016; Weiss 2017). Wolf herself wrote an article for *The Washington Post* twenty years after the publication of *The Beauty Myth*, lamenting the fact that the issues she had raised have only “gotten worse” (Wolf 2011).

In the concluding chapter of *The Beauty Myth*, Wolf offers what I read as an oversimplified solution for women to eradicate the beauty myth, suggesting that we strive towards a “prowoman definition of beauty”, such that “when we celebrate the individuality of our features and characteristics, women will have access to a pleasure in our bodies that unites us rather than divides us” (Wolf 1992, 285, 290). Ostensibly, the online beauty campaigns I initially sought to study seemed to offer various versions of the “prowoman definitions of beauty” that Wolf had proposed, to celebrate the “individuality” of women and to encourage the unity of women against the oppressive structures that enforce beauty pressures. These online campaigns arose alongside neoliberal and postfeminist promotions of individuality, often coinciding with expressions of ‘choice feminism’ (Ferguson 2010; Kiraly and Tyler 2015; Scanlon 2009), wherein women are encouraged to overcome oppression and social inequality simply by making the right (often consumerist-fuelled) choices (Johnston and Taylor 2008). For example, when criticised for being photographed almost bare breasted in *Vanity Fair* magazine in 2017, actress Emma Watson responded by saying, “Feminism is about giving women choice [...] It’s about freedom, it’s about liberation, it’s about equality.” While this is not untrue, reductive statements like this obscure the complex material realities that render access to these choices deeply unequal. Through the promotion of such simplistic notions of choice, we come to believe that everything from political affiliations to fashion styles are determined only and entirely by the choices of each individual woman.

While I was still working in the fashion magazine in the mid-2010s, I regarded the burgeoning online body positivity campaigns and blogs in the early twenty-first century as straightforward challenges to these beauty oppressions, reminding us of the diverse options technology offers us to “shatter the beauty myth” (Coppola 2016). They were proclaiming

that conventional beauty standards need not apply anymore and that we, the intelligent, discerning public, should not have to accept them. Online petitions calling for Victoria's Secret to apologise for and amend their "Perfect Body" advertising campaign in 2014<sup>6</sup>, or demanding that Protein World remove their body shaming advertisements in 2015<sup>7</sup> demonstrated how quickly Internet audiences could mobilise to voice collective outrage and demand change. However, I began to feel that the messaging behind these campaigns was often oversimplified, and nowhere near enough for tackling the continued body-anxious conversations that were still occurring globally and locally, among the women around me. In some ways, it seemed that body anxieties were ever more heightened now that individuals had constant access to social media platforms that exposed them to more and more body-perfected images, including those of their peers (Fardouly et al. 2015; Fardouly and Vartanian 2015). While body positive media and celebrities were claiming that women were making their own choices, there seemed little in the way of examining *how* these women were making these choices in different arenas of their lives (for example, in their selected beauty practices), what informed, influenced or limited these choices, and how they processed and anticipated the consequences of these choices (Kiraly and Tyler 2015).

Numerous studies – mostly from psychology – on the effects of beauty standards upon women have attempted to investigate how exposure to media images and body practices such as 'fat talk' (Nichter and Vuckovic 1994) can negatively affect women's body image (Stice, Maxfield, and Wells 2003; Stice and Shaw 1994; Tiggemann and Polivy 2010; Tiggemann and Slater 2013; Tiggemann and Zaccardo 2015; Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath 2010; Yamamiya et al. 2005). However, while studies like these provide useful insights into the immediate effects of exposure to such practices or media content (albeit controlled within experimental settings), much of this research is quantitatively oriented. Sault's (1994) suggests that, "a person's body image and social relations have a

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<sup>6</sup> In October 2014, lingerie brand Victoria's Secret launched a new collection of bras called "The Perfect Body". Advertisements featured a group of women who had approximately the same body shape – thin, tall, able-bodied and mostly white. The public strongly disagreed with the very narrow definition and representation of a 'perfect body' and responded fiercely with a hashtag campaign (#iamperfect) and an online petition. Victoria's Secret amended the campaign's tagline to "A Body for Every Body" but never issued any public apology.

<sup>7</sup> In June 2015, Protein World, which sells fitness and weight-loss products, released advertisements around the London Underground that featured a prominent image of a bikini-clad woman and the tagline "Are you beach-body ready?" The adverts were read as body-shaming for suggesting that only a particular kind of body could publicly sport a bikini. Public outrage was widely expressed on various social media platforms, and by the creation of satirical blogs, defacements of the posters, and a protest in Hyde Park. The posters were not removed until Protein World's advertising contract ended.

reciprocal influence on each other. [...] People experience their lives in terms of a body image that expresses both cultural traditions and social relationships” (19). Taken in this light, quantitatively-oriented studies can be seen as limited because they often do not – or cannot – account for, the diverse nuanced influences, social interactions, cultural traditions and experiences that participants qualitatively draw on to ‘express’ their responses towards specific body anxieties.

Empirical studies on specific beauty ideals or practices offer some further insight into women’s engagement with and responses to the beauty myth. It is worth taking a moment here to clarify the word ‘practices’. I work with Morgan’s (2011) discussion of family practices, which emphasises an activeness and a ‘doing’, particularly as located in the everyday and the mundane/regular. Morgan highlights that practices are not ‘done’ as isolated activities, but that, “in carrying out these everyday practicalities, social actors are reproducing the sets of relationships (structures, collectivities) within which these activities are carried out and from which they derive their meaning” (1-2). He offers an example of friendship to illustrate how an interaction or relationship between friends is not just about being friends, but about the social meanings and ideas that surround the notion and expectations of friendship. I rewrite this example for the purposes of my discussion of beauty practices; words in italics are my own substitutions:

*Beauty practices* are more than an indication that *an individual is engaging in a specific set of activities to beautify herself* but much more a matter of activities and thoughts which reproduce *particular notions of beauty* and [...] the very idea of and expectations (*ideals*) associated with *being beautiful*.<sup>8</sup>

I define beauty practices as any activity that is undertaken in order to effect some physical transformation upon the body (including parts of the body, such as the face, and specific facial features such as the eyes or skin) so as to improve its appearance. Examples of such beauty practices include the use of makeup, dieting for weight loss, or cosmetic surgery. Additionally, although these practices may originally have been conceived for reasons of beautification, we must acknowledge that they have come to encompass other reasons in more recent decades, such as health, activism or artistic expression (Davis 1997b;

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<sup>8</sup> The original definition reads: “Friendship [...] is more than an indication that such a person is a friend but much more a matter of activities and thoughts which reproduce that particular friendship and [...] the very idea of and expectations associated with friendship” (Morgan 2011, 2).

Featherstone 2010). This thesis argues that although our focus may have shifted away from beauty alone, women still refer to and converse about the body (and associated practices) as a means to negotiate and fulfil other ideals of subjectivity and selfhood, and it is important to consider how they construct and talk about what the body means to them. It might therefore be argued that ‘body practices’ may be a more accurate term than ‘beauty practices’ to account for the way that women discourse around and about their bodies. However, because I am specifically examining how these practices are largely in service of attaining some kind of *ideal* – whether one of beauty and/or of selfhood – I suggest the phrase ‘beauty practices’ captures these underlying motivations more aptly. In contrast, ‘body practices’ speaks to and of the body in a context that can also be neutral and not necessarily in pursuit of any beautified or idealised state.

Davis’ (1995, 1997b, 2003) studies on women opting for cosmetic surgery, Beausoleil (1994), and Dellinger and Williams’ (1997) analysis of women’s use of makeup, and Entwistle’s (1997) article on the development of power dressing among career women are just some examples of empirical studies that have examined how the beauty myth is refracted through specific beauty practices, which may be used to either comply with or resist beauty ideals. Still, I argue that such studies remain comparably narrow in focus. Instead, I aim to question how thinking and talking around certain beauty practices coincide with and respond to overarching gendered body ideals and femininity. I understand that these studies do not intend to account for all these complexities, and that these empirical studies are important for providing deeper insight into women’s relationship with specific beauty ideals, practices and their bodies. However, what seems to be generally limited is further consideration of the discursive space between overarching cultural and social beauty pressures and the everyday responses to these ideals, wherein women determine what these practices mean to them, what value to give to these practices, and how their perception of specific beauty practices intersect with their construction of desirable subjectivities.

While I began this research looking optimistically towards *The Beauty Myth*, I now seek to extend and critique its arguments by drawing from and discussing other significant writings on women’s bodily beauty. I divide this chapter into two main sections – the first discusses the debates around beauty from the late 1970s to the 1990s, exploring specifically how women were seen to be influenced and constricted by beauty pressures. These writings took as their premise the notion that historically, women’s bodies have been constructed as inherently flawed and distinctly ‘othered’ from the more valued norm of men’s worlds and masculinity. The pursuit and maintenance of beauty was thus viewed as necessary for

proving and gaining social acceptability. Importantly, I study writings that sought to show how these ideals were not just externally imposed but further internalised by women themselves through acts of self-policing and self-regulation.

In the second half, I move my discussion to contemporary debates around beauty, in particular neoliberal and postfeminist conceptions of beauty oppression, and the increasing degrees of aesthetic labour expected of women today. Primarily, this body of work argues that contemporary pressures continue to demand the self-monitoring and transformation of women's bodies, but that they are no longer only in service of beauty. Rather, beauty and its associated practices are now used as a means to also prove successful, enterprising selfhood. It is therefore not just the body that is regarded as flawed and in need of fixing. Rather, contemporary feminist critics explore how the body and its physical 'flaws' are now viewed as a means through which women can construct acceptable neoliberal citizenship and show themselves to be driven, self-determining, self-regulating individuals. At the same time, however, this body of work emphasises how increased encouragements towards individuality and individual success frequently mean that systemic oppressions and social, gendered inequalities are overlooked, and worse, allowed to persist. In this half of the chapter, I also begin to consider how class positions bear upon women's engagement with beauty. I examine how established texts on class, along with more recent work on aesthetic labour and postfeminist engagements with the body, can offer insight into the intersection between particular class privileges and the achievement of neoliberal, postfeminist subjectivity; and how discursive constructions about ideal beauty, bodies and selfhood often draw from and are enabled by these privileges.

## **2.2 The Beauty Policing of Women's Bodies**

### **2.2.1 Whose Body Is This? The Discursive Body and/or Embodied Self**

As this thesis takes a predominantly discursive approach to examining women's responses to beauty ideals, I begin by drawing from Foucauldian (post-structuralist) theories of discourse and power, emphasising the ways in which the meanings around bodies are socially constructed. Recognising that the meanings of the body cannot be reduced to its corporeality alone, theorists such as Butler (1990) and Grosz (1994) point to the ways in which categorisations of, for example, gender, race, class, sexual orientation and ability become inscribed upon the body and bear upon the way these bodies are experienced, treated and enabled (or not) to act. With the advent of industrialisation and the rise of consumer culture,

the body has increasingly become a site upon which institutions exert governmental control and discipline over a population (Giddens 1990, 1991). Bodies are differentiated and classified, and correspondingly, *particular* kinds of bodies are constructed and promoted to exemplify ‘correct’ modes of behaviour, health, discipline and citizenship (Woodward 2007, 2009). In Western (or Western-influenced) societies, the differentiation of bodies is most commonly ordered against a dualism of body and mind, as conceptualised by Descartes. Bodies then, as distinct from the mind, are regarded as objects – we talk of exercising mind over matter, for example, which suggests “the primacy of thought and cognition over the flesh that is subject to the will” (Woodward 2007, 82). Bodies thus come to speak for the mind, thought, will and the self – we inscribe meaning upon bodies according to their physical presentation, and simultaneously, the body comes to mean “something about the background of the individual as well as a certain self-image which she or he has cultivated” (Giddens 1991, 63).

The Cartesian mind/body dualism correlates as a culture/nature split: culture, rationality and virtue are equated with the mind, and ‘nature’, diametrically cast as unruly and unrefined, correlated to the body. This dichotomy is further gendered: women, mostly because of their biological predisposition to childbearing, tend to be “defined ... in relationship to bodies: their own bodies, their husbands’ and their children’s bodies” (Freedman 1988, 19) and correspondingly, excluded from the more highly valued, masculine domain of culture and the mind (Bordo [1993] 2003b; Chapkis 1986; Crossley 2001). Holliday and Hassard (2001) summary this dichotomy:

For Descartes and his descendants pure mind is equated with the rational, sovereign individual, but since [for example, black bodies, fat bodies, queer bodies, female, disabled or working-class bodies] are in some ways associated with irrationality (women) or the masses (of working or colonized people), these subjectivities are non-subjectivities. For Descartes, then, ‘mind’ is unequivocally white, able-bodied, heterosexual and male. (4)

It follows that “[a]ll ‘others’ are products of their bodies” (4), and thus, read as opposite to the rational, disciplined male body – specifically, “women’s bodies are linked either to physical weakness (... middle class women), inappropriately masculine traits or obesity (... working-class women), and seen as leaky, uncontained, ever-changing and thus out of control” (9). This perspective forms a pivotal basis from which many discourses around women’s bodies and beauty ideals have been constructed, the primary principle being that



the successful woman is one who is able to best control her body, to align it as closely as possible to the more valued (masculine) qualities of the rational, disciplined mind.

At this juncture, it is important to also consider theoretical approaches that explore the material, embodied experience of bodies more closely. Responding to post-structuralist perspectives on the body, theorists on embodiment have argued that too great an emphasis on discourse and structure risks erasing the body itself from our studies, and they have called for bringing greater focus back onto embodiment (Davis 1997a; Nettleton and Watson 1998). By recognising that our subjectivities and sense of self are always embodied, and can only be experienced in and through the body (Holliday and Hassard 2001), embodiment theorists seek to better understand how bodies are ‘used’ to create and navigate everyday life, and “how people experience their bodies and [...] articulate their experiences” (Nettleton and Watson 1998, 8-9). Further, such work examines how modes of differentiation and discipline are experienced in the everyday by ‘othered’ bodies who do not or cannot visibly conform to acceptable ideals of citizenship – for example, queer, fat, disabled, sick, old bodies or female bodies. As Shilling (2003) argues, it is “[o]ur experiences of embodiment [that] provide a basis for theorising social commonality, social inequalities and the construction of difference” (20).

Holliday and Hassard (2001) seek to demonstrate how bodies might thus be used to resist, contest and rework presiding, hegemonic body ideals. By accounting for the everyday embodied experiences of non-normative bodies – such as those of women, queer, disabled, old, ill or working-class communities – such work challenges how representations of ideal bodies are constructed and questions who possesses the power to create and proliferate these representations. Empirical studies of embodied experience – examining how individuals physically ‘use’ and move their bodies and the beauty/body practices they employ, both in specified social spaces as well as in mundane, everyday contexts – attempt to bridge the gap between (discursive) representations particular bodies and their actual lived experiences. These studies examine, at an everyday level, how bodies, and their ideals, conformities or resistances, are “produce[d] and reproduce[d] [in everyday life]” (Nettleton and Watson 1998, 2) within and/or against overarching structural influences, and offers insight into the ways that socially constructed constraints and ideals are negotiated, reinforced or resisted by the everyday, embodied action and experience of individual bodies.

One example is Davis’ (1995) examination of cosmetic surgery patients’ narratives to demonstrate how the embodied affective experiences of not feeling ‘normal’ shapes

women's responses to beauty ideals and their consequent decision to undergo surgery. Other examples include Grimshaw and Arthur's (1999) edited collection of articles which investigate the diverse ways that people engage (with) their bodies to conform to or transgress body ideals; or Gimlin's research (2002) on the ways in which women 'do' 'body work' and negotiate feminine bodily beauty ideals in the multiple sites of the beauty salon, aerobics studios, plastic surgeon clinics and fat acceptance activist events. These studies are useful for studying not only what participants have to say about the physical body ideals they contend with, or the people and situations they interact with, but also their accounts of how they themselves negotiate, process and resist these ideals and interactions as they 'do' this work on their own (or others') experiencing and lived bodies.

By drawing primarily from empirical data, such work on embodiment offers important understandings into how individuals respond in and with their bodies to socially and culturally gendered body pressures, and explores how specific discourses around the body – such as normative appearances, femininity and fitness, in the examples cited above – are materially experienced in or resisted by embodied everyday inter/action. However, maintaining only a focus on embodiment also risks veering our readings of bodies in an opposite direction, where there is 'only' the body, without adequate consideration of how overarching social and cultural structures, including discourses, influence and direct the attitudes and actions we take to our bodies in the first place. Poststructuralists point out that even as we are embodied, the ways in which we 'perform' our identities through our bodies, and the performativity (Butler 1990) of our everyday practices and subjectivities, are still always substantially shaped by the discourses and structures we reside within (Bartky 1990; Bordo [1993] 2003b). We can thus never fully 'do' embodied action or 'be' these embodied subjectivities without being simultaneously directed by these overarching structures and discourses.

Correspondingly, these disparate approaches to the discursively constructed body, on the one hand, and embodiment, on the other, map onto debates around structure and agency. By considering human embodiment, we might better understand the ways in which agency and resistance can be enacted and experienced – after all, “we have bodies and we act with our bodies” (Shilling 2003, 20). However, simultaneously, it is our very bodies that may also limit our ability to act. Constrained by the social, cultural and political structures that impose particular values on specific types of bodies, certain individual bodies may be demarcated, by hegemonic discourses, as different and 'other' than what is decreed socially acceptable and 'normal'; these differences, in turn, limit access to social resources or cause others to

respond to these bodies in less than desirable ways. Thus, the agency we are afforded by “*having* bodies” from which to act is also structurally and discursively curtailed by the fact of us “*being* bodies”, which accords us very different ways to act, if at all (ibid.).

Braun (2000) further questions the practicalities of bringing the body (fully) into research. She ponders:

*how* we should go about including the material, lived body in our work. How does the body really get into our writing? And how can what is essentially a disembodying exercise – the translation of experience or even talk about experience into writing and publications – avoid the tendency to be disembodied?

(517)

As I discuss further below (Section 2.4), it is difficult to fully separate agency from structure. In much the same way, the influence of discursive structures – the construction of meaning of and around our bodies – cannot be completely disentangled from our embodied lives – how we use and experience those bodies. In doing so, we risk recreating hard dualistic and Cartesian binaries, seeing the body as only either discursively constructed or physically embodied. It may be useful then, to consider studies that investigate both approaches simultaneously, considering the body as a “‘blend’ of the material and social” (Richardson and Shaw, in Braun 2000, 517). For example, Woodward (2009) looks both at bodies as “situated by social, cultural and political factors” and at “bodies as situations” (99). By employing discourse analysis to examine how the media (re)produce meanings around sporting bodies, as well as by interviewing activists in the field of diversity politics, Woodward examines both sides of this debate – the institutions that organise and regulate sporting practices (and the representations thereof), and the narratives of the corporeal bodies that ‘do’ this sport. Or, in studying how women experience and position themselves under the male gaze, Glapka (2018) examines not just her participants’ discourse about the male gaze, but specifically, the specific moments where they narrate and contemplate their physical, embodied experiences of, and responses to, being looked at by men. In this way, although she very clearly positions her study as a discursive one, Glapka is still able to address the space between embodiment – the ‘doing’ of the body, its lived experiences and practices – and discursivity – how they talk about the ‘doing’.

My own focus in this thesis has been mostly directed towards interrogating how women ‘are situated’ by hegemonic discourses around beauty and women’s bodies, and how they talk about and back to these discursive structures. I am aware that this is only one such approach which could be adopted and that extensions of this specific research would benefit from incorporating additional investigations, merging other approaches that also study the individual, agentic ‘situations’ of these women with/through their embodied experiences and resistances. As seen in Woodward’s study, adopting a dual-pronged perspective could address the structure/agency debate in a different way than my chosen approach: investigating the discourses that shape women’s responses to beauty as well as their lived, embodied experiences of pleasure or resistance as they align with or resist these discourses, would allow for reflections on both sides of this debate. Thus, although embodiment is not the prime methodological nor theoretical focus of this study, I suggest that the embodied self can still be usefully reflected on in a discursive way, and that embodied experience can be studied alongside the multiple other communicative practices that comprise beauty discourses. However, because I have ultimately chosen a discursive focus for this thesis, I use the remaining sections in this chapter to further explicate how beauty ideals are perpetuated and circulated by the dominant discourses and structures that construct them.

### **2.2.2 Manufacturing Beautiful Feminine Bodies**

In *The Fashioned Self*, Finkelstein (1991) argues that not only does the historical “physiognomic principle of the detection of character from outward physical signs [remain] an axiom of sociality in modern times” (68), but that it persists despite our knowing of the manipulations made possible through newer technologies such as cosmetic surgery and consumer products (76-77, 82, 87; see also Featherstone 1982; Orbach 2009; Turner 1996). It could be argued that the increasing availability of such ‘solutions’ heightens the anxiety to manufacture a perfect body and image: with all that is available now, there is no excuse *not* to lose weight, erase wrinkles or straighten that nose (even if done digitally). Moreover, the scientific and medical industries normalise bodily intervention and manipulation – “the surgically perfected body [...] has become the model of the ‘normal,’ [and] the ordinary body becomes the defective body” (Bordo 1999, 54). Cosmetic surgery is therefore not just a necessity to address illness or debilitating physical defects, but actively encouraged as a means for improving social and cultural standing (Finkelstein 1991; Kaw 1993; Morgan 1991; Riessman 1983). The increasingly available options to transform our bodies renders the body as an object, a site upon which we can act and in doing so, demonstrate virtues such as discipline, self-restraint and perseverance. The body becomes a “personal

responsibility”, a “statement” and ultimately, the “physical enunciation of [a] true state of being” (Orbach 2009, 136, 139).

This physiognomic principle becomes all the more salient when we consider how bodies are gendered, and what meanings are overlaid on these bodies. I offer a brief discussion here of women’s bodies, for it is not just the anatomically female body that is under scrutiny in beauty discourse but, more specifically, the gendered and feminised woman’s body. Woman, as theorised by de Beauvoir, is not something she is born as but “becomes” by the social and cultural expectations placed upon her bodily presentation, comportment and roles (de Beauvoir [1949] 2011, 283). Further, because she is always positioned in relation to her ‘natural’ opposite – men – these social expectations and roles presume a cisgender heterosexuality. Women often become locked into a “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 1981) that orients them towards men. Subsequent references to women’s bodily presentation and beauty then necessarily also presume this heterosexual norm: a woman’s presentation as appropriately feminine (and thus beautiful) distinguishes her from men while also marking her as being in service of men and masculine sexual desire: what Jeffreys (2005) suggests as simultaneously indicating “difference” and “deference” (24).

Feminist writers have noted that this dualistic Cartesian split of body/mind ties beauty and preoccupations with the body ever closer to women than it does for men. While rational, mindful men are encouraged to be outward facing and active in society, women must assume the opposite: an inward-facing passivity that centres its attention on the body and the domestic domains of home and family. The conflation of women with their bodies, and therefore nature, further renders the feminine as wild and untamed, the counterpart to the cultured and restrained masculine minds of men. Sault (1994) summarises:

The culturally defined opposition between female Nature and male Culture is restated in terms of another opposition between body and mind. Women are viewed as more body than mind, and the body represents the “other” that must be controlled. Either women’s bodies are controlled by men or women themselves must learn to control their bodies. Otherwise a woman’s body may rebel and take over the “true self” that resides in the mind.

(8-9)

In this context, enacting beauty by controlling the body is about much more than adornment; it becomes a requirement for women to ensure acceptable social citizenship. Foucault

explained in *Discipline and Punish* that social obedience was proven not only by the “signifying elements of behaviour or the language of the body”. Instead, the more “meticulous” level of control, “internal organisation” and discipline “produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (Foucault [1977] 1991, 137-38). Foucauldian feminists such as Bordo and Bartky reference this ‘docility’ by arguing that the work that women perform upon their bodies to fulfil gendered beauty ideals is one of the most articulate examples of the ways in which bodies are disciplined, regulated and transformed to adhere to social and cultural norms (Bordo [1993] 2003a). Paradoxically, it is by taming the body into an acceptably feminine state that she can best demonstrate obedience to the socially revered, masculine qualities of restraint and discipline. Beauty, then, is the pinnacle of this docility; to achieve beauty is to prove that the body has been subjected, practised upon and made docile.

In the 1980s, Lakoff and Scherr (1984) noted that beauty is not truly something that can be attained by a woman herself, but something that is bestowed upon her by another, “created by the beholder” – “[b]eauty merely *is*, it does not *do*” (18; original emphasis). After all, an individual cannot declare herself beautiful for that would be vain and narcissistic. It is only ‘the beholder’ who can decree whether and how beautiful she is. It is principally by this virtue that Lakoff and Scherr (1984) conceive of beauty as deeply political, for it is always bound into a process of bestowing or being bestowed with power. They remark that beauty,

is a political instrument held over women: a promise, a threat. The little girl is signaled [...]: If you do this, say this, act like this, you will be beautiful; if you do otherwise, you give up your one chance of worldly success. As we are all controlled, our actions and even thoughts governed by political power, the power of those in command, women in particular are controlled by the tyranny of looks, by the threat of having approval, and with it power, withheld.

(20)

Beauty does not facilitate an equal exchange of power but is something decreed and determined by someone other than the woman herself. Chapkis (1986) points out that the contradiction that while men have historically scorned any excessive attention to the body, it has primarily been men who have evaluated and judged women’s bodies – such as judges in beauty pageants or authors of what become popular cultural stories, such as fairy tales. Moreover, critics have noted that the beauty ideals set forth by men in power have

historically defined beauty in terms that reinforce women's powerlessness – the idealisation of youth (childlike-ness), physical smallness and clothing that literally restricts their physical movement are just some examples (Coward 1984; Brownmiller 1985; Dworkin 1974). Additionally, Freedman argues, longstanding myths around women and their bodies reinforce these gendered stereotypes: for example, a woman might be either heralded for her youthful beauty or discarded as an aged, ugly crone; exalted for her purity and innocence, or banished for being unclean (Douglas 1966; Freedman 1988). These tropes become cemented in popular cultural imagination through mediums as basic as fairy tales – the good princess is always lovely and beautiful; the evil witch is always ugly and disfigured (Dworkin 1974). Again, the archetypes assigned to women are not of their own doing, but externally imposed. Beauty, imbued with the moral qualities of goodness, virtue and restraint, is thus pursued as a redeeming quality “to help balance woman as a misbegotten person” otherwise regarded as deviant, lacking, and uncontrollably ‘other’ (Freedman 1988, 18).

Later, in the 1990s, Bordo ([1993] 2003a) argues that even as they attempt to exert some autonomy over their bodies, women remain trapped within the gendered power dynamics of a Cartesian dichotomy. In her essay, “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity”, Bordo examines how hysteria, agoraphobia and anorexia play out on the female body, and demonstrates how women's bodies are at once *constituted by* and *constitute* the highly gendered social structures that contain them. Here, Bordo offers an insightful way of thinking about how women's resistance and protest eventually implode into the same oppressive structures from which they first arise: the hysteric's muteness and return to a “primarily bodily expressivity” (177) reduce her womanly status to that of ‘only’ a body; the agoraphobic responds to being housebound by being even more reclusive; the anorectic achieves an idealised slenderness by exerting, to an extreme, masculine traits of self-control through intensive dieting. In other words, in striving for the feminine (body) ideal, a woman inevitably ends up playing by and within rules that have not been set by herself in the first place. Bordo explains:

[T]he protest collapses into its opposite and proclaims the utter capitulation of the subject to the contracted female world [...] To *feel* autonomous and free while harnessing body and soul to an obsessive body-practice is to serve, not transform, a social order that limits female possibilities.

(176, 179; original emphasis)

Scholars of modernity have suggested that the imperative to continually act upon and improve the body has intensified with the rise of Western capitalist consumer culture. Body concerns thus extend to men and male bodies too. Featherstone (1982) argues that because consumerism creates never-ending desires and ‘needs’ to sustain the consumption and production of commodities, this drive to consume and produce becomes mapped onto the body itself. The body is regarded as a project that must be worked upon, maintained and transformed to become ever more efficient – that is, stronger, healthier and more attractive (Giddens 1991; Moore 2010). However, working on the body as a project is about more than immediate reward for the individual; it is also about proving productive, contributing citizenship. As capitalist modes of production and operation proliferated from the eighteenth century onwards, modern Western society rearranged itself around the public workplace and the commodities it produced, while individuals became increasingly valued for how they contributed to collective material and economic growth. It follows that the modern individual’s relationship to her body – the vehicle providing the labour needed for production – also needed to change to accommodate what was newly demanded of her; the physical presentation of an adequately efficient body is judged accordingly. Foucault draws further attention to the politics of health in the eighteenth century, remarking that the health and wellbeing of individuals became publicly and political policed so as to ensure a fit and ready workforce that would be “utilizable, more or less amenable to profitable investment” (Foucault 2002, 96). Simultaneously, as modern society shifted its focus away from the intimate, personal spaces of the family to the public sphere, “[t]he ‘ideal’ employee of late capitalism is... not just a hard-working individual, but a person who possesses the public characteristics, of being an acceptable shape, size and ‘well dressed’, and who, therefore, confirms the desirability of the products of a service-sector economy” (Evans 2002, 10). Orbach forecasts: “The body is turning from being the means of production to *the production itself*” (Orbach 2009, 6; my emphasis).

The emergence of health ‘experts’ today, combined with the discursive authority that biomedical and scientific fields hold, exacerbate this drive to endeavour upon the body. By constantly demonstrating new knowledge about the body and offering increasingly innovative technologies and commodities to support the production of efficient, healthy bodies, contemporary discourses around health continually construct the body as a “project that is seen as ‘unfinished’, malleable and ... subject to transformation” (Petersen and Lupton 1996, 24). An individual proves good citizenship by visibly enacting health – either by engaging in the ‘correct’ body practices, or by displaying the physical traits that define a healthy person, such as slimness and muscle tone (Becker 1986; Bordo 1999a; Shilling



2003; Woodward 2007, 2009). In a discussion of the biomedicalisation of health – which incorporates psychosocial, sociocultural, entrepreneurial and commodifying dimensions of health, along with the scientific and medical aspects – Flowers et al. (2013) even note that the ‘success’ of health promotion is predicated precisely on the “necessary unattainability” of complete health. Today, it is therefore not enough to aspire towards beauty, but also to a healthy, fit and efficient body. In many instances, the two are conflated, such that beauty becomes indicative of health, and vice versa (Ayo 2012; Chapkis 1986; Coward 1984; Featherstone 1982).

Diligence finds its strongest expression in the physical appearance of an individual’s body, and body pressures – not least upon women – are thus intensified. I have discussed how conventional Cartesian views have long privileged the mind over the body. I argue however, that the reverse also holds true now. The body is still regarded as separate from the mind, a ‘thing’ to be controlled to conform to exacting physical standards. However, because the visual imagery of bodies (which includes their beauty, deficiencies, obedience or deviance) has become such a central part of how bodies and selves are judged, the body often commands as much attention as – or even more than – non-physical attributes and accomplishments. Finkelstein (1991) argued in the early 1990s that physical appearance is just as, if not more, central to the way individuals’ characters are gauged and valued. The growing popularity of a highly visual online social media makes such judgement all the more apparent (in spite of us knowing that image editing tools are no longer the exclusive remit of the technically qualified, but anyone with a smartphone). In fact, some researchers argue that the pervasiveness of images on social media (including ‘selfies’ – photos taken of and by the self) encourages more frequent and intense peer comparisons, thereby contributing towards higher levels of negative body image among young women (Chua and Chang 2016; Fardouly et al. 2015). How we present to the world – both online and off – is thus predominantly determined by *what we look like*. For women, who are so much more frequently conflated with their bodies, the pressure to “manufacture” (Orbach 2009, 136) the right body that will speak for the most desirable social and cultural values of the time is especially heightened.

It may be argued that since women have gained greater political, social and cultural visibility in recent decades, they are also increasingly lauded for their public achievements. However, as this thesis argues, women’s bodies and looks remain a central locus upon which many of these successes are worked out and proven. Culturally popular feminist texts are quick to claim that women are now more frequently recognised for achievements that are not

appearance related. I argue that these body pressures are actually intensified within neoliberal and postfeminist contexts. As an example, I point to the continued widespread media coverage at prominent film and music award shows (such as the Academy Awards or the Grammys), which almost always allocate substantial column inches or airtime to what women actors or artists are wearing. For all that they may have achieved in their respective fields, such cultural preoccupations with women's looks speak for how strongly physical appearance still figures as a defining criterion by which women are judged. Moreover, not only is attention still focused upon their beauty, but women are shown – or indeed, expected – to maintain these looks *in addition to* working towards their political, social and cultural accomplishments. I discuss these increasing obligations faced by women in Section 2.3 but now turn to look at the specifically gendered ideals of beauty and how these expectations bear upon notions of femininity.

### **2.2.3 Femininity**

My discussions of women's relationship to beauty ideals address what I refer to specifically as *feminine bodily beauty*, which draws attention to the socially and culturally gendered site of women's bodies. I am deliberately gendering my discussion – referring specifically to *feminine* beauty – because the ideals imposed upon women's bodies and bodily comportment are so often inextricable from socially constructed notions of femininity (Brownmiller 1985; Young 1990). Employing the phrase *feminine bodily beauty*, then, encompasses all of the most salient aspects of women's physical appearance, including the mainstream beauty standards they are measured against (Jeffreys 2005; Walter 2010; Wolf 1992), beauty practices enacted upon the body (Frost 1999; Davis 1995; Dellinger and Williams 1997; Morgan 1991), and even physical movement (Young 1990).

On this note, I turn to discuss femininity as it pertains specifically to beauty ideals. In almost every instance, discussions on beauty ideals for women necessarily arise out of and respond to existing assumptions about feminine bodies, feminine comportment and the expectation that women adhere to these prescriptions of highly (or hyper) feminised behaviour. Second-wave feminist writings on femininity drew much attention to the ways in which beauty standards were used to keep women subordinated so as to ensure men's continued political and social dominance. Radical feminists in the seventies and eighties such as Andrea Dworkin, for example, sought to expose the implicit violence behind the insistence on femininity, and to demonstrate how the imposition of physically harmful beauty practices such as corseting and foot-binding aimed to keep women literally restrained. Beauty

practices which reinforced femininity, argues Dworkin (1974), “did not formalise existing differences between men and women – it created them. One sex became male by virtue of having made the other sex some thing, something other” (107). She further argues that these constraints are not merely about controlling a woman’s physical appearance. Rather, embedded within these beauty practices is the mechanism to physically – and therefore, socially – restrict women:

Standards of beauty describe in precise terms the relationship that an individual will have to her own body. They prescribe her mobility, spontaneity, posture, gait, the uses to which she can put her body. They define precisely the dimensions of her physical freedom.

(113)

Though she writes much later, in the mid-2000s, Jeffreys echoes a similar argument when she writes:

women are not simply ‘different’ but, most importantly, ‘deferential’. The difference that women must embody is deference ... Women are required to practise femininity in order to create sexual difference/deference. But the difference is one of power, and femininity is the behaviour required of the subordinate class of women in order to show their deference to the ruling class of men.

(Jeffreys 2005, 24)

Both Dworkin and Jeffreys cite examples from Eastern and Western cultures and across historical periods – foot-binding in China, corset-wearing in nineteenth-century Europe and the wearing of the veil in Muslim communities today (Dworkin 1974; Jeffreys 2005; see also Brownmiller’s [1985] discussion of foot-binding and corsets) – to underline the universality of femininity imperatives and beauty ideals. The employment of these examples is highly problematic for its homogenisation of women’s experiences across cultures and time, and for overlooking how women make sense of these practices or negotiate their responses to these expectations within cultural, historical and imperialist contexts. For example, Dworkin (1974) and Brownmiller’s (1985) simple comparison between the Chinese practice of foot-binding and the Victorian English practice of wearing corsets does not account for the cultural specificities of gender divisions and expectations, what they mean and how they are experienced or sustained in two very distinct societies, each encompassing very different cultural histories. However, although these generalisations may

be too broad to be helpful today, we can still engage with Dworkin's, Jeffreys', and Brownmiller's arguments that beauty ideals and their associated practices arise out of overarching social and cultural ideals of femininity expected of women's appearance and comportment; and examine, as I do below, how these ideals have since evolved beyond a simple fulfilment of femininity.

Popular feminist texts throughout the 1980s and 1990s reminded women that while we were gaining ground in social, cultural and political arenas, our bodies remained sites to be constrained and controlled. Femininity, as enacted on and by the body, was still a woman's most valuable currency. Brownmiller (1985), Faludi (1991), and Wolf (1992), argued that the resurgent anxiety to be sufficiently feminine rose in proportion to the growing success of women in other arenas – the workplace, politics and even at home. Wolf (1992) remarks, “the closer women come to power, the more physical self-consciousness and sacrifice are asked of them” (28). And so, “a renewed interest in femininity” notes Brownmiller (1985), “serves to reassure men that women [still] need them and care about them enormously” (4-5). Femininity ensures that difference is maintained: “[it] pleases men because it makes them appear more masculine by contrast” (4) and simultaneously in the “unending absorption in the drive for a perfect appearance [...] is the ultimate restriction on freedom of mind” (33). In other words, by keeping a woman preoccupied with the demands of femininity and beauty, she is kept far away from posing any potential threat to the masculine status quo. Brownmiller suggests that a woman's success in Western society is dependent on her displaying and enacting the appropriate femininity: “To be insufficiently feminine is viewed as a failure in core sexual identity, or as a failure to care sufficiently about oneself” (15). Ironically, she is a ‘successful’ woman by virtue of establishing her “feminine difference” (15), which she attains by way of the “grand collection of compromises, large and small, that she simply must make” (16). The fact that such culturally iconic texts as Brownmiller's, Faludi's and Wolf's are still frequently cited in popular media (Combe 2017; Strimpel 2017) is depressing evidence of the paradox that women still need to maintain at least some degree of feminine “obedience” (Wolf 1992, 187) to succeed socially and politically. Importantly, the key word in this last sentence is “maintain”, for the ultimate expression of femininity is in *sustaining* the associated physical ideals. In other words, it is not enough simply to appear to *be* feminine; a woman must also be seen to continuously engage in the necessary self-regulatory practices and behaviours to *cultivate* and *preserve* her femininity, which I discuss next.

## 2.2.4 The Self-Policing of Women's Bodies

Joining the discussion several decades after radical feminists, Foucauldian feminists such as Bordo and Bartky shifted the focus away from a simple binary – regarding femininity as the dialectical opposite to masculinity – to viewing the body as being enmeshed within varying power dynamics, that both shape and are shaped by wider structural forms. Bartky (1990) highlights the disciplinary mechanisms found within media discourse and commercial advertising that “leave no doubt in the minds of most women that they fail to measure up” (71). But this discipline is not unidirectional. Bordo and Bartky draw on Foucault's notion of the panopticon to describe women's relationship to beauty and body ideals. This concept works around the model of a prison designed by Jeremy Bentham, wherein prisoners' cells are arranged to all face inwards to a central guard post. Significantly, the warden in this central station can look out to all prisoners while remaining concealed himself, so prisoners are aware that the guard may be watching them at any time. It is therefore suggested that, whether or not a guard is actually present, prisoners begin to monitor their own behaviour as though they *are* being watched (Foucault [1977] 1991). Feminist theorists argue that women adopt this same panoptic self-surveilling gaze, by turning pervasive social messages about feminine beauty upon themselves and consequently enacting the necessary disciplinary “technologies of femininity” (Bartky 1990, 71-72) to achieve these ideals. Each woman thus becomes “enmeshed in collusion with forces that sustain her own oppression” (Bordo [1993] 2003a, 167).

And so, “[t]he disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular” (Bartky 1990, 74). It is not just that culture and the media explicitly dictate to women what is beautiful; rather, they suggest that by not looking like the women in the beautiful images they constantly proffer, their women readers are deficient and need to maintain vigilant self-surveillance to measure up to these images (74, 78-81). By this system of self-policing then, a woman engages in beauty practices because she understands that she is “a body not only for another, but *for herself as well*” (41; my emphasis). Barky (1990) explains:

Woman has lost control of the production of her own image, lost control to those whose production of these images is neither innocent nor benevolent, but obedient to imperatives which are both capitalist and phallogentric. ... Women experience a twofold alienation in the production of our own

persons: The beings we are to be are mere bodily beings; nor can we control the shape and nature these bodies are to take.

(42)

This cycle still does not end here. Women do not only lose control over their own image and the images shown to them, but once they have achieved one ideal promoted by a set of images, other images start to promote another ideal. Ideals and images continuously change, Bartky (1990) argues, precisely so that the fashion and beauty industries can continuously “[refine] and [deepen] feminine [bodily] anxieties” which they then – conveniently! – offer to assuage through their products and technologies (41).

The lack of freedoms expounded by theorists like Bartky and Bordo are further complicated when we remember that these practices may still be experienced as somehow empowering. In her discussion of the “fashion-beauty complex” (Bartky 1990, 39), Bartky notes that although the media, fashion and beauty industries promote a particularly narrow aesthetic, they couch this ideal within a (neo)liberal discourse that speaks of individuality, self-expression and knowledge. Thus, although women who are most adroit in the know-how of fashion and beauty practices may be regarded as disempowered and controlled by the fashion-beauty complex, they may believe themselves to be all the more knowledgeable, autonomous and in control of their actions. Bartky reminds us that these body and beauty imperatives are not actually coming from any one social institution. Rather, because of the pervasiveness of these directives – coming from ‘everywhere and nowhere’ (74) – participation in these practices are perceived as being voluntary, and the expression of informed and individualised choice. The very mechanism of the fashion-beauty complex that determines what is appropriately feminine – and therefore beautiful – is thus “internalized” (77) and reframed as self-determined choices made by each woman. Consequently, any challenge to the mechanism that encourages women towards these beauty ideals is, paradoxically, regarded as a threat to their freedoms. Simultaneously, it follows that falling short of these beauty and body ideals is read as an *individual*’s failure to take responsibility or to enact the necessary practices for beautifying her body.

I thus move to the second half of this chapter, where I explore how the adoption of personal responsibility has evolved and intensified within neoliberal, postfeminist contexts, such that the aesthetic labour enacted by women upon their bodies is now not only obediently assumed but joyfully undertaken, and regarded as essential for their holistic and mental wellbeing.

## **2.3 The Psychic Life of Beauty: A Neoliberal and Postfeminist Context**

Contemporary cultural discourses around women's bodies and associated beauty practices are very often enmeshed with tropes about the self – self-acceptance, self-improvement or development, and the importance of 'being yourself'. This focus on the self is especially prevalent in body positivity content which often promotes messages of authenticity and, in tandem with the self-help industry, advocates the notion that body acceptance or contentment is achieved (only) when we also work on our *selves*. I locate these discussions within an increasingly neoliberal and postfeminist climate, and join theorists such as Gill, Elias and Rottenberg in their argument that labouring upon the body as a project (Giddens 1991; Petersen and Lupton 1996) now extends to – or is replaced by – the larger psychic project of managing and perfecting the *self* (Gill and Elias 2014; Rottenberg 2014a).

To better understand the elements that constitute the neoliberal, postfeminist subject examined in this thesis, it is helpful to first qualify the characteristics and theoretical concepts of neoliberalism and postfeminism that I work with. Further, I understand these sensibilities as being interconnected and often inextricable – it would be incomplete to acknowledge the influences of one without also seeking to understand how the other simultaneously contributes to constituting women's subjective experiences. By engaging the work of critics of neoliberalism, and post-, neoliberal and popular feminism, I now formulate a framework to shape my onward discussion of women's responses to contemporary beauty and body ideals.

### **2.3.1 A Brief Discussion of Neoliberalism**

Speaking simultaneously to political and economic policies, neoliberalism originates as a term that refers to the decentralisation of governmental authority, such that financial markets are permitted and encouraged to operate freely, privately and independently with little to no state intervention. Despite the huge variance in economies and political ideologies across the world, neoliberal ideas, policies and strategies have come to be absorbed and mobilised in countries and societies globally (Hall 2011). More importantly, neoliberalism now stands for much more than just a political or economic ideology. Instead, the principles of the free market "[takes] shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values [and] practices" (Brown 2015, 30), to political and social spheres, and

indeed, “every dimension of human life” (Brown 2006, 694). Just as markets are decentralised from overriding governmental control and encouraged to operate freely and independently, so too does self-governance become a central trait for successful individual citizenship. However, Dardot and Larval argue, neo-liberalism is not just a rationality that *governs* economic and institutional practices but “is also *productive* of certain kinds of social relations, certain ways of living, certain subjectivities”; it determines the “*form of our existence* – the way in which we are led to conduct ourselves, to relate to others and to ourselves” (Dardot and Laval 2013, 3; original emphasis). Foucauldian critics such as Dardot and Larval regard neoliberalism as a “‘governmental’ rationality”, accounting for the shift from institutional governance to the self-governance of individuals (4). Hence, just as the woman described above in Section 2.2.4 directs the panoptic gaze upon her own body, so too does a neoliberal subject take it upon herself to self-govern her social citizenship and success.

The practices and market rationality of free trade find their ultimate expression in political and social spheres by reconfiguring citizens as “rational economic actors in every sphere of life” and developing policies that “figure and produce individuals as entrepreneurs and consumers whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for ‘self-care’” (Brown 2006, 694). Individuals must identify and fulfil their own needs, direct and achieve their ambitions themselves, and successfully craft the self as enterprise (McNay 2009). Success in all domains is consequently redefined to encompass the economic language of productivity and profitability, and “the entrepreneurial subject” (Dardot and Larval 2013, 259) is encouraged to constantly “strengthen its competitive positioning and appreciate its value” (Brown 2015, 32). In short – whether for university admission or beautification of the body, advancing a career or fulfilling a fitness regimen, success is reliant upon how well an individual continually ‘invests’ in, labours upon and ‘sells’ herself.

Neoliberalism recasts success and individual citizenship in terms of empowerment, choice and opportunity. The underlying message in each of these terms is that given the independence and freedoms enjoyed by the “free, possessive individual” (Hall 2011, 706) to manage their lives as they wish, there is no excuse not to do what it takes to feel empowered. Paradoxically, however, if an individual manages herself as enterprise within these neoliberal parameters, these ‘freedoms’ are always necessarily constrained by the imperatives to be ambitious, competitive and self-governing in particular socially sanctioned ways. Dardot and Larval (2013) remark that such a governmentality “actively exploit[s] the freedom allowed individuals so that they end up conforming to certain norms of their own



account” (5), and thus, assuming total responsibility for both their successes *and failures* (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017).

Most troubling in the dissemination of these neoliberal values is the recurrent evasion of the ways in which structural inequalities continue to bear on the lived realities of marginalised groups. As Rushing (2016) suggests, when “liberatory subjectivities are seen as generated through personal experience, insight and expression [...] empowerment is easily reduced to aesthetic self-expression and individual choice, in a way that not only neglects but fully invisibilizes the relationship and structural conditions of ‘choice’ and freedom” (3).

Moreover, despite the proliferating rhetoric around choice and empowerment, success within neoliberal environments continues to be defined by and privilege only very specific groups of people. In Western societies, this most privileged figure is almost always constructed around the wealthy, educated, white, middle-class, heterosexual, cis-gendered, able-bodied man. The ‘choices’ available to the neoliberal individual – if indeed she wants to be considered a successful citizen – are therefore always already defined, circumscribed and even “compulsory” (Cronin 2000).

### **2.3.2 Post-, Popular and Neoliberal Feminism**

The term ‘postfeminism’ gained currency in feminist media theory, responding initially to film and television representations of what appeared to be a newly autonomous woman, who simultaneously acknowledged the feminist struggle for equality while generating novel expressions of femininity that reinforced the gendered stereotypes they were trying to contest (Gill and Scharff 2011; Lazar 2009; Tasker and Negra 2005). The figure of Bridget Jones is often cited as an example of this tension: though she is portrayed as an independent career-woman with access to plenty of life options, the actions she takes throughout the film are ultimately in service of fulfilling traditional feminine goals of weight loss (beauty), romance, marriage and children (Gill 2009; McRobbie 2004b and 2004c).

By its many overlaps with neoliberalism, postfeminism extends beyond a media genre to sit within a wider social and cultural context, and encompasses a set of values and ideals that become commonly absorbed and enacted by individuals. Gill (2007a) (along with Scharff and Elias in other writings) conceives of and works with postfeminism as a “sensibility”: rather than serving as an analytical perspective, postfeminism as a sensibility “is simultaneously discursive, ideological, affective and psychosocial” (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017, 25). The notion of ‘a sensibility’ speaks to and can be used to analyse postfeminism as

“a circulating set of ideas, images and meanings” (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 2020, 5), within popular culture, considering the many variable, affective experiences and responses that shape our social and cultural interactions. Gill positions postfeminism as a “critical object” rather as an analytical perspective (ibid.) – thus, rather than thinking of ourselves as “*being* postfeminists we identify ourselves as *critical analysts of postfeminist culture*” (Elias, Gill and Scharff 2017, 25; original emphasis; see also Gill 2016).

Importantly, postfeminism does not explicitly promote any doctrine or beliefs as earlier forms of feminism did; neither does it explicitly disavow feminism in a ‘backlashed’ defiance (Faludi 1991). Rather, it emerges as traits in practices and discourses often enacted in the name of feminism but which simultaneously deny or reject its very tenets. Feminism is “taken into account” in the incorporation of feminist values across institutions and in the acknowledgement of women’s public achievements (McRobbie 2009, 14). However, by suggesting that the social equalities that feminism fought for have been achieved, and that any further promotion of feminist values is antiquated and unnecessary, feminism as a collective movement becomes “repudiated” and “undone” (17-18) within and by postfeminist contexts (13): feminism is “invoked only to be summarily dismissed” (18). Working from the assumption that most feminist goals have been achieved across social and political domains, the postfeminist subject prioritises instead her ability to exercise *individual choice* in each domain of her life to attain and express her independently determined ‘empowerment’. For example, Rich’s (2005) study of young women student sports teachers exemplifies the commonly shared belief among women that “[they are] free and equal with men to explore the opportunities of ‘equal opportunities’ in practice”; and that their acts of self-determination and self-actualisation are “‘free’ of” gender constraint (499-500). McRobbie (2004b) thus calls for the need to problematise the contemporary notion that “female achievement [is] predicated not on feminism, but on ‘female individualism’” (7).

It is at this juncture that postfeminism converges with neoliberalism/neoliberal feminism. As state governance shifts to individual self-governance (Dardot and Laval 2013; Brown 2015), so too does the collective feminist struggle for equality become subsumed as a part of the individual woman’s responsibility for her own self-care and success. Gill and Scharff (2011) note that, “postfeminism is not simply a response to feminism but also a sensibility that is at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas” (7). This overlap is evident in two key ways: first, an increasing emphasis on individualism in both overlooks the reality that political, social and cultural pressures continue to bear upon individuals’

lived experiences. Secondly, the autonomy enjoyed by the self-enterprising neoliberal subject strongly mirrors the independently attained success and free choice upheld by postfeminism's ideal subject. By drawing on these parallels, I understand postfeminism not just as overlapping with, but *inextricable* from neoliberalism.

In an article shaped around a three-way 'conversation', Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg (2020) further clarify the differences, connections and overlaps between three terms: postfeminism, neoliberal feminism and postfeminism. In this article, Rottenberg and Banet-Weiser note that neoliberal and popular feminism is differentiated from postfeminism in the way that both iterations acknowledge continued gender inequality, whereas postfeminism largely believes that equality has already been achieved and therefore, discards a need for feminism. They proceed to clarify that it is the methods through which neoliberal and popular feminisms seek to overcome these continued inequalities that sets them apart from earlier feminist movements. Neoliberal feminism shifts the focus from a collective address and critique of structural oppressions onto the *individual* development of "a new feminist subject [...] who accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care" (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg, 7). Simultaneously, popular feminism concerns itself primarily with the "visibility" (popularity), accessibility and positivity of its message, in a way that encourages again, *individual* choice, consumption and action, such that any woman's individual success is read as an effective, and collective, defeat of whole structures (ibid.; see also Banet-Weiser 2018).

Importantly, Banet-Wiser (2018) adds that although postfeminism stems from an oppositional base from that of neoliberal and popular feminism, all three feminisms are "mutually sustaining" for their underlying emphasis on the responsibility, economic and social success and visibility of the individual woman (Banet-Weiser 2018, 20). In an earlier article, Rottenberg (2014a) writes:

Individuated in the extreme, this subject is feminist in the sense that she is distinctly aware of current inequalities between men and women. This same subject is, however, simultaneously neoliberal, not only because she disavows the social, cultural and economic forces producing this inequality, but also because she accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care [...] The neoliberal feminist subject is thus mobilised to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair. (420)

To offer an example of this subject, Rottenberg (2014a) refers to Sandberg's popular motivational corporate self-help book *Lean In* (2013). Here, she argues, the contemporary neoliberal (and post)feminist is less concerned with challenging oppressive social structures (especially within the workplace) than with changing *herself* and confronting her own internal obstacles. Whether she is to succeed in the workplace or find body contentment, the neoliberal feminist must believe that she can 'have it all' if only she 'leans in', works harder (on herself) and has the courage to take up Nike's constant incitement to 'Just Do It' (Cronin 2000; Bordo 1999a). Given the individual 'freedoms' to choose and participate across sectors, the successful neoliberal woman is thus exhorted to rely on no one but herself to succeed, and by that same token, has only herself to blame if she does not adequately 'lean in'. Rottenberg summarises that, "this kind of hyper-individualising neoliberal feminism [...] construes women not only as entrepreneurial subjects but also as individual enterprises" (in Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 2020, 8).

With its emphasis on 'internalising the revolution', the rhetoric expounded by neoliberal feminist texts like *Lean In* obliquely acknowledge the need to continue redressing the gender inequalities that previous waves of feminism sought to overcome. However, rather than fostering a collective call to action, this 'revolutionary' work is reconceptualised "into an interiorized and individual activity" (Rottenberg 2014, 426). The double-entanglement of postfeminism (McRobbie 2009) overlaps here in the way that the individualisation of responsibility now assumes that "the revolution has in some sense already taken place, and therefore all women need to do is to rouse themselves by absorbing and acting on this reality" (Rottenberg 2014, 426). The successful postfeminist woman is thus upheld as an ideal neoliberal subject: she does not just prove how creatively and efficiently she is able to achieve self-care, fulfil her own needs and desires, and engineer self-actualised success (Rottenberg 2014; Brown 2006). Significantly, by maintaining the narrative of feminine empowerment, choice and individual achievement through her own spectacularly visible example, she proves that social and structural inequalities are either no more, or no longer hamper equal opportunity (Banet-Weiser 2018; Budgeon 2011).

'Choosing' to define oneself as feminist thus becomes more of a kind of trendy statement – a declaration of one's individuality and autonomy – than one that confronts continuing structural inequalities. Banet-Weiser defines these social conditions and sensibility as popular feminism, comprising "practices and conditions that are accessible to a broad public, from organising marches to hashtag activism to commodities" (Banet-Weiser, Gill and

Rottenberg 2020, 9). This kind of feminism is popularised and circulated in what Banet-Weiser (2018) terms an “economy of visibility” (27), which privileges and promotes the needs and concerns of very particular kinds of girls and women – mainly white, middle-class, heterosexual and cisgender. Popular feminism converges here with neoliberalism in its offering of ‘solutions’ to continued social and gendered inequalities by way of emphasising individual responsibility and choice, almost always enabled by highly capitalistic consumer practices. Insidiously, by using those terms of ‘choice’, ‘opportunity’ and ‘empowerment’, it calls and relies upon the willing and complicit participation and consent of women to self-govern and take responsibility for their own wellbeing, while eliding continuing systems of gendered oppression and violence. Indeed, it is gains traction and ‘popularity’ precisely because it does not threaten existing capitalist structures and the political status quo.

Feminists signpost women’s increasingly ready acceptance (and even endorsement) of such activities as lap-dancing, glamour modelling and pornography (McRobbie 2009; Walter 2010) as examples of this self-referential collusion, especially when these actions are reconstituted and asserted as ‘empowered’ expressions of the self. Given the many individual freedoms and choices she believes she can now enjoy by participating in public life, the “modern, sophisticated girl” no longer needs – or perhaps even denies – feminism (McRobbie 2009, 18). Thus, “despite her freedom” (or perhaps because of it) she is “called upon to be silent, to withhold critique” (ibid.).

Banet-Weiser (2018) argues further that the messages and commodities of popular feminism are made especially attractive and “palatable” by its “central logic” of empowerment (21, 17), though this understanding of ‘power’ must remain necessarily shallow and advance the idea that it is enough for women to *say* and *believe* they are empowered for them to *be empowered*. Within this individualised definition of (self) empowerment, however, there is “little to no specification as to what we want to empower women to do” (17) and no any questioning of where that power originates or who really “owns’ [that] power” (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006, 263). Who/what has now deemed it permissible for women to ‘empower’ themselves? Who/what decides what empowerment actually constitutes (or how to ‘do’ it correctly), whether an action is empowering or not, and why it is empowering? The emergence of neoliberal and popular feminist campaigns, literature and popular cultural rhetoric encourage that women rise above any continued experience of “injury”, insecurity and suppression (5) through an application of *individual* effort and capacity, and this effort is framed as autonomous self-determination and empowerment. There is, simultaneously, no challenge of the structural oppressions that create and sustain

the conditions that cause women to feel *un*-empowered in the first place (Banet-Weiser 2018). Worse, these inequalities are allowed to continue under the guise that women have freely chosen these circumstances for themselves.

With this illusion of freedom and choice available to her now, the postfeminist woman is urged to willingly assume full responsibility for enacting self-transformation and reinvention, both bodily and psychic (Gill and Scharff 2011). Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) point out that the opening of public arenas to women encourages, on the one hand, that they learn to “inhabit [...] a masculine, rational, productive, worker self” while simultaneously requiring that they also maintain a traditionally acceptable “(hetero)sexualized feminine, (appropriately) reproductive identity that both consumes itself into being and is the object of consumption” (231). At all levels, it is women, more than men, “who are called on to self-manage, to self-discipline”, to not only prove themselves capable of success alongside men, but also to avoid social failure (Gill and Scharff 2011, 7). Critics such as Harris (2004) and Gonick (2006) argue that consequently, girls’ and women’s bodies become increasingly visible sites upon which these ideals and tensions are negotiated. For example, Gonick uses the girl-band Spice Girls and the film *Reviving Ophelia* to illustrate how self-determining subjecthood is to be successfully achieved by an individual’s exertion of ‘girl power’; and, contrarily, how an inability to attain these ideals is attributed to each individual girl’s failure. The opening of spaces hitherto denied to women offers greater potential for transformation; but by the same token, the expectations that women are obliged to fulfil and the stakes for failure are also heightened.

### **2.3.3 The Increasing Demands of Aesthetic Labour**

The neoliberal, popular and postfeminist emphasis on individualism plays out most prominently upon the site of women’s bodies. As Banet-Weiser (2018) elucidates:

For girls and women, adopting the logics and moralities of an economy of visibility means that despite the fact that popular feminism claims to be about empowerment, this kind of empowerment is often achieved through a focus on the visible body – precisely one of the aspects of patriarchy feminism has been fighting against for centuries. The visible body is also the commodifiable body.

(25)

So, while body positivity campaigns and communities urge their followers to resist and confront conventional beauty ideals, feminist scholars have noted a simultaneous intensification of beauty and body pressures. For example, popular before-and-after makeover shows and celebrity magazines minutely police what is considered acceptable or desirable beauty (McRobbie 2004a; Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2006); the simultaneous rise of social media makes for more intense and constant digital surveillance over many more girls' and women's bodies (Elias and Gill 2017; Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017). Paradoxically, it is precisely through such monitored body practices that contemporary neoliberal discourses of 'empowerment', 'choice' and 'freedom' find their highest purchase. Gill and Banet-Weiser point out across their writings that women are often called upon to consume products or participate in (embodied) activities not through explicit sales or promotional tactics, but by appealing to their autonomy. Women are led to believe that they are freely acting from and upon their own bodies as expressions "of [their] own individuality and empowerment" (Gill 2007, 76), and "conflate personal fulfilment and individual achievement with the attainment of a physically ideal body" (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2006, 256) – or at least one they can appear to confidently accept and love (Gill and Elias 2014). In this context, the debates around resistance and agency become especially tricky. To what extent can we think of these practices as being undertaken with agency? As young girls post YouTube videos asking the public to rate how "pretty or ugly" they are (Banet-Weiser 2014) and as women declare their 'choices' to engage in potentially harmful cosmetic surgery, how helpful are their assertions that they "are doing it for themselves" (Braun 2009)?

Because the postfeminist sensibility is so caught within the contradictions that simultaneously celebrate women's autonomy while reinforcing their constrained social status, *femininity* becomes an especially contested space. Expressions of femininity, of course, are most visibly displayed and perceived upon the body itself, so beauty practices form an explicit means for demonstrating a revived engagement with and reclamation of femininity. Women are called upon to 'celebrate' their femininity by enhancing their girlishness or emphasising their sexuality (Lazar 2009). Biological sex differences are evoked not only to assert these differences as 'authentic' and 'natural' but in its very difference, femininity is constructed as sexy and pleasurable. (Hyper)femininity becomes ever fashionable, desirable and beautiful (Gill 2007a). However, while the tropes of choice, self-expression and empowerment recast this celebration of femininity as individually chosen and self-determined, the enactment of these bodily choices and presentation often reinforces gender stereotypes that keep women bound to the very beauty ideals they are

attempting to challenge. Simply put, it is acceptable – even desirable – for women to exercise choice and exert their ‘girl power’ so long as it occurs alongside a “‘girling’ of femininity” that does not threaten the status quo (Tasker and Negra 2005, 109).

Pressure further extends from the body to the rest of a woman’s selfhood. Now, it is not just body ideals that she contends with (and despite what body positivity campaigns tell us, there are still an abundance of [other] body ideals that women are now urged to fulfil [for example, healthy, muscular or yoga bodies]) but also the proving of efficient self-management, discipline and confidence. Elias, Gill and Scharff (2017) highlight the increasing emphasis in media and culture upon “the psychic life of neoliberal beauty culture” that not only encourages women to feel ‘comfortable in their own skin’ (30-33) but simultaneously redirects blame for body dissatisfaction towards the individual and her unwillingness to ‘love [her body]’ (Gill and Elias 2014). Women are thus enjoined to partake in *aesthetic labour* (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017), or in *aesthetic entrepreneurship*, which tasks them with working (labouring) upon their bodies not only to fulfil body ideals but to enact and fulfil neoliberal ideals of ambition, responsibility and self-actualised success: “like the neoliberal subject [...] the aesthetic entrepreneur is autonomous, self-inventing and self-regulating in the pursuit of beauty practices” (39). So, while Brownmiller (1985) argued in the eighties that “beauty, as men have defined it for women, *is an end in itself*” (19; my emphasis), beauty today is deployed as *a means to an end*, a tool for constructing and proving other updated ideals of successful feminine citizenship. To offer an example, I refer to Banet-Weiser’s (2017) study on beauty vloggers (women who create public makeup tutorials online) and their enactment of aesthetic labour. In contemporary contexts, she argues, women engage in such body-centric practices not just as “rituals of disciplined femininity” (273) as Bartky had argued in the nineties (1990), but more subtly, as expressions of authenticity, self-empowerment, self-made celebrity and even financial wealth.

One of the primary qualities encouraged by/within neoliberal, postfeminist cultures is confidence, a new ideal that women must strive for, embody and maintain. Though postfeminist media culture attempts to recuperate harmful messages of very narrow beauty ideals by pushing notions of self-confidence and body-acceptance instead, this focus merely shifts the monitoring of women’s bodies to a regulation of their psychic life. As Gill and Elias (2014) write:



Beauty becomes ‘a state of mind’, not in a feminist sense that involves a rejection of and liberation from patriarchal appearance standards, but in a way that represents an intensification of pressure and its extensification from body work to psychic labour.

(15)

This attitude is not entirely new. In the early 1980s, Coward (1984) wrote about media messages that promoted the notion that if ‘you feel good, you’ll look great!’ The emphasis then was upon improving a state of mind in order to achieve a certain physical ideal: “We could think ourselves thin, if only we had the will-power to change our lifestyle...” (24). Today, physical appearance, though still important, is secondary to a healthy mental disposition – within body positivity movements, for example, projecting that we ‘love our bodies’ as they are, however they are, becomes more strongly encouraged than any action to alter physical appearances (Gill and Elias 2014). While affect was previously harnessed to effect change on the body, this process is now reversed so that the body is used as a site on/from which to work through psychic anxieties. The associated aesthetic labour practices employed to manage our visible, physical appearances are therefore not just to do with the body, but also to transform and evolve the self, in order to demonstrate virtues of discipline, self-motivation and confidence.

Importantly, encapsulated within these constructions of ideal neoliberal citizenship are the constant encouragements to *consume*. Feminists (Ballaster et al. 1991) have noted the close, long-standing association between women and consumption. As the entrepreneurial dimensions of neoliberalism encourages consumerism, women are thus even more intricately bound into consumer practices and culture. Featherstone had already examined ‘the body in consumer culture’ in the 1980s, arguing that beauty practices and consumer products were employed for more than improving the physical body. “[E]verything has to be good for something else”, he summarises (Featherstone 1982, 25). The drive to consume either practices or products was more for the perceived benefits of social status and desirable lifestyles than for the primary function of those commodities themselves. Today, the (re)direction of consumer practices towards the attainment of ideal feminine selfhood is intensified. Consumer brands draw attention to and appropriate contemporary anxieties, and popular feminist campaigns capitalise upon continued gender inequalities and struggles, only to then assuage these very tensions by offering readily available solutions in the form of consumer products. They suggest that, “an answer is [always] at hand, and with only the right products, anything is possible” (Banet-Weiser 2018, 7). For example, Lazar (2009,

2011 and 2017) demonstrates how advertisements in women's magazines acknowledge the multiple stressors faced by successful modern working women in order to then offer them self-caring remedies and relaxing, pleasurable rewards in the form of consumer beauty products and services.

Critics such as Goldman, Heath and Smith (1991) have conceived of these gendered encouragements to consume as "commodity feminism" wherein women are urged to believe that it is through the buying into of consumer products and services that they are able to best exert choice, autonomy and self-determination to define and shape their lives: the "sign-objects" of commodities, as promoted within consumer culture, "are thus made to stand for (or made equivalent to) feminist goals of independence and professional success. Personality can be expressed, and relationships achieved, through personal consumer choices" (336). Frequently, these exhortations to consume are intricately bound into the practices of aesthetic labour, the premise being that one can only successfully perform these practices with the right consumer products. To cite Banet-Weiser's (2017) study on makeup vloggers again, successful feminine subjecthood in this instance is shown to be incomplete without the consumption of the correct makeup products. Moreover, these consumer practices are presented as both freely chosen and yet, essential for achieving success and pleasure – "you can be anyone you like, and beauty is a mere make-up brush stroke away" (275). In turn, the success that subjects can anticipate is itself in support of furthering consumerism – popular beauty vloggers often receive free product samples to review or are paid for advertising or brand ambassadorship. Self-policing projects thus come full circle – where women were previously directed to work upon their bodies principally to fulfil physical beauty ideals, these efforts now also speak for the appropriate and acceptable policing of correct, desirable social citizenship and selfhood. The female body – and a woman's visible labour upon it – serves "as a window to the individual's interior life" (Gill 2007a, 150).

### **2.3.4 Negotiating Class and Beauty in Neoliberal, Postfeminist Contexts**

Neoliberal and postfeminist cultures emphasise and encourage the development of individual merit and self-directed, self-actualised success. At face value, the emphasis on individual capacity and potential appears probable and empowering – *anyone* can aspire towards and enjoy the opportunity for success if they try hard enough (Banet-Weiser 2018; Duffy 2017). This easefulness however, belies the fact that within these neoliberal contexts, the model of success is made easier and more possible for certain classes of people with very particular privileges. Notably, this figure is most often from a male, white, heterosexual,

middle-class community, possessing greater access to the resources needed to achieve this ideal subjecthood, including, for example, education, economic stability or wealth, and healthcare. As Skeggs (2004) notes, these “‘new’ theories [of individualizations, flexibility and reflexivity] rel[y] on an old model of the self that was not available to all” (61). What is positioned as a desirable social status and towards which social mobility is directed “is [thus] only available for some, whilst forced on others” (ibid.).

Skeggs, working through Bourdieu’s work on body, field and habitus, also argues that the physical body, especially, figures as “the most ubiquitous signifier of class” (Skeggs 1997, 82). Narratives of transformation and improvement, as a means of differentiating oneself from the working classes and demonstrating upward social aspiration and mobility, are most visibly communicated via the physical markers of appearance, bodily dress and comportment, and material possession (of homes or accessories for example). Skeggs writes, of her research participants:

...comments [from respondents] suggests that these women do see and invest in their bodies as a form of cultural capital. It is the means by which they can tell others who they are. [...] *They regulate their bodies to make sure that they cannot be seen to be one who does not or cannot care.* [...] The surface of their bodies is the site upon which distinctions can be drawn. Skills and labour such as dressing-up and making-up are used to display the desire to pass as not working class. [...] Class is signified through elegance and sophistication which demonstrate a dissimulation from the working class but a simulation of the middle class.

(83-84; original emphasis)

Paradoxically, the visible act of working upon the body to construct a “respectable” enough body (82) and to prove their possession of the ‘correct’ forms of cultural capital, is exactly what distinguishes them as *not* middle-class. As Skeggs reminds us, members of the middle class “do not need to pass. A lack of concern with class means that one does not have to try to pass to gain cultural (and other) capitals. The capitals already exist” (91). In neoliberal cultures and societies, then, middle-class persons need only prove their *individual capabilities*, since they already possess and embody other socially valued ideals and cultural tastes.

One of the arenas where such improvement and transformation narratives find the greatest purchase is in television makeover programmes. These shows form a nexus between what is upheld as acceptable, aspirational middle-class respectability; and the visible process of enacting the required practices, usually upon the body, for acquiring that same cultural capital and respectability. Importantly, of course, it is predominantly the people who do not already possess the respectable, desirable traits of the “white, desexualised, hetero-feminine and usually middle class” individual (Skeggs 1997, 82) who are shown to be most in need of improvement, and thus feature most prominently on these shows. In her analysis of *What Not to Wear*, a popular British makeover programme from the early 2000s, McRobbie (2004a) argues that although the show is crafted around the personal and transformational journey of *individual* women, this iteration of:

female individualization is ... a social process [that brings] into being new social divisions through the denigration of low class or poor and disadvantaged women by means of symbolic violence. What emerges is a new regime of more sharply polarized class positions, shabby failure or well-groomed success.

(101)

Correspondingly, the show contestant (whom McRobbie refers to as ‘victims’) is encouraged to make improvements or adopt practices that speak to respectable, middle-class and consumer-oriented values. By steering the working/lower-middle-class women of these makeover shows to work on their bodies in particular ways, “women are both individualized and respectabilized” (104). Upward social mobility and the wish for upper/middle-class respectability are then shown to be fantasy (Skeggs 1997) made real through the physical transformation of the programme’s contestants. More importantly, these are normalised as worthy and acceptable aspirations. The aesthetic labour performed by contestants of these shows are thus shown to be necessarily classed. This labour is performed not just in service of individual expression and confidence, but more so, a particular kind of acceptable, desirable model of individuality that aligns specifically with middle-class values of social acceptability and prestige.

Through an analysis of beauty pageant and reality television programmes, including makeover shows, Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2006) extend this focus on class to argue that such makeover programmes fail to address, question or challenge the inherent racism, classism and sexism that inform and constitute these dominant feminine body ideals in the

first place. Instead, participants of these shows are mostly directed towards achieving or adhering to, “a particular (white, middle-class, heterosexual) norm of femininity, so individuals merely see their non-attainment of beauty norms as *personal obstacles* to be overcome” (264; my emphasis). In this process, the limitations encountered in an individual’s experience of wider class oppressions and social inequalities are overlooked, even denied as legitimate reasons for not being able to accomplish the physical and affective ideals highlighted by such programmes. Aesthetic labour, as necessary work done upon the body to express values of individuality, autonomy and choice, is therefore, ironically, not really about individual expression at all. It is folded into a very specifically delineated brand of individuality that is predicated on and made possible by resources and subject positions availed only to a particular class of women. The very emphasis on heightened, compulsory consumption and enthusiastic engagement of updated technologies within such makeover programmes already assumes an affluent subject – anything is possible, so long as the individual woman is willing to consume, and able to afford, the right items, purchase the right services, and celebrate her choice to buy into these many products. Women are shown to have agency and subjectivity, “yet the primary place in which this agency is recognized and legitimated is within individual consumption habits as well as within general consumer culture” (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2006, 260).

In the thesis, I would like to extend this discussion on class to further consider an urban, cosmopolitan class of women, which has previously been relatively understudied. Chen, writing about *Shanghai Baby*, the semi-autobiographical novel by Wei Hui, describes this class of women as positioning themselves within a “global sisterhood of financially and sexually confident cosmopolitan women” (Chen 2009, 74). This new type of (Chinese) woman, Chen suggests, is:

increasingly conforming to globally defined and locally endorsed standards of what it means to be a modern, confident and sexually attractive woman in the new age. This meaning is predicated on a seemingly pervasive and universally shared consumerist discourse of freedom of choice and individual consumption.

(ibid.)

Individual capacity, enterprise and achievement are made manifest in novels like *Shanghai Baby*, and other cultural forms like them, most evidently through the visible purchase and use of consumer products – notably in the form of branded clothes and accessories displayed

upon/with the body. The women of global chick lit and chick flicks (novels and movies aimed predominantly at women) are presented as being united across culture, geography and class by their participation in and understanding of the “shared ... discourse of freedom of choice and individual consumption” (ibid.) made possible by this global consumer culture. Class differences are elided, replaced instead by the possibilities of individual desire, choice, endeavour and accomplishment. Paradoxically, however, the means for achieving of these neoliberal, postfeminist ideals of individuality are only “variously available to globally ‘scattered’ feminine subjects who have the material, discursive, and imaginative capital to access and to buy into it” (Dosekun 2015, 966).

In summary, neoliberal and postfeminist cultural forms emphasize the importance of individual agency, autonomy and self-directed success. These discourses of individuality and confident, enterprising spirit suggest that *anyone* can succeed, regardless of their circumstances. In doing so, however, they overlook the hugely contrasting experiences of oppression and restriction, access and privilege across classes. What this means for women’s bodies, and the associated aesthetic labour or body practices, is that, on one hand, women of lower/working classes are directed to individually adopt practices to ‘improve’ their bodies and visibly display their acquisition of or adherence to respectable middle-class values and tastes (Skeggs 1997; McRobbie 2004a). On the other hand, middle class women, or those occupying an increasingly transnational, cosmopolitan class, are more strongly encouraged to direct their efforts and resources towards the development of individual confidence, capability and accomplishment, all the while overlooking broader structural inequalities that continue to persist across multiple communities of women. In both instances, the unifying drive is one of personal transformation and improvement – it is each *individual* woman who must not only uplift herself with the right commitment, effort and consumer practices, but prove that all social barriers can be transcended if she only enacts the correct, adequate aesthetic and affective labour upon herself.

## **2.4 Beyond Beauty? Negotiating Agency and Resistance in Our Beauty Practices**

Though I draw from post-structuralist readings of women’s bodies in this chapter, I understand that such interpretations risk a representation of women as unreflectively susceptible to the imposition of social and cultural forces upon their experiences and interactions. The theories I have discussed so far speak mainly of women as unwitting

victims of the beauty myth, assuming that they respond to these influences without understanding its machinations, and that they experience beauty oppression in broadly the same ways, to the same degree of influence. On the other hand, I am also reluctant to turn too readily to the opposing idea that women are in full control of the ‘choices’ they make around the beauty practices they employ. The tenets of ‘choice feminism’ – which encourages women to assert their freedoms and power by simply making their own choices (Baker 2008; Ferguson 2010) – offers too simplified an answer that cannot fully account for the complex ways in which societal and cultural power “works in and through subjects [...] by structuring our sense of self, by constructing particular kinds of subjectivity” such that the decisions we make are inevitably always-already circumscribed (Gill 2007, 76).

The volleying between Davis (2003) and Bordo (1999) in the nineties/early2000s, and more recently, between Duits and van Zoonen (2006, 2007), and Gill (2007b) exemplify the longstanding, continued difficulties that feminists confront in reconciling these debates around structure and resistance/agency. In these exchanges, Davis, and Duits and van Zoonen attempt to place women’s experiences and dialogue centre stage, according them the status of “actors instead of objects in the debate” (Duits and van Zoonen 2007, 168). In response, Bordo and Gill emphasise that no matter how freely these ‘actors’ believe they may be exercising choice, these actions are always tethered to overriding structural constraints. Bordo (1999) notes that the notion that women are making choices or electing beauty practices (such as cosmetic surgery in Davis’ study) ‘for themselves’ elides the fact that the “norms that encouraged these individuals to see themselves as defective [and therefore to regard and elect such practices as desirable] are enmeshed in [or, I would argue, even created and sustained by] the practice and institution of cosmetic surgery itself” (43). The same principle can be seen in other beauty practices, such as with the girls of Duits and van Zoonen’s study who ‘choose’ to wear crop tops or the headscarf. In turn, again, Davis, and Duits and van Zoonen point out that studying agency as the “purposeful actions of individuals” is not to deny that these actions can be either “autonomously arrived at, or are the results of structural forces” (Duits and van Zoonen 2007, 165). As Davis (2003) highlights, “[a]gency is invariably linked to social structures and yet never entirely reducible to them”, and therefore, a focus on agency and resistance is really to explore “how people draw upon their knowledge of themselves and their circumstances as they negotiate their everyday lives” (12).

I read Bordo and Gill as having the last word. Picking up on this latter definition around everyday knowledge and negotiation, they call attention to the necessity to be reflexive, both

on the part of the subjects we study, and as feminist researchers ourselves. Agency, then, is not simply about choices freely made by individuals in a dislocated space but:

...undertaken in full consciousness that they are not only about 'creating' our own individual lives but constructing the landscape of our culture. Each of us shapes the culture we live in every moment of our lives, not only in our more public activities but also in our most intimate gestures and personal relationships, for example, in the way we model attitudes toward beauty, aging, perfection, and so on for our children, friends, students, lovers, colleagues.

(Bordo 1999, 15)

Further, Gill (2007b) urges the researcher to maintain a "critical respect" that "involves attentive, respectful listening" to our participants, while also always staying mindful of the need to critically question their utterances and to locate them within and against overriding structures of inequality and oppression (78).

Through most of this chapter, I have discussed, primarily, existing debates around how women both constitute and are constituted by beauty ideals, and how this double bind keeps them trapped within the beauty myth. I am curious however, to discover and study more closely the moments of agency and resistance that might emerge among women as they discursively negotiate, discuss and respond to issues around beauty and body ideals. I take Gill's (2007b) reminder to bring "critical respect" into my research – to honour what they have to say as active, agentful subjects while also being alert to the need to problematise their discussions. I question for example, how and if demonstrations of resistance are actually *resistant*? And how? In what ways are these expressions of beauty resistance always and already enmeshed within social and cultural structures that reinscribe and sustain (other) oppressive practices? Or, more hopefully, how might this resistance contribute to reshaping these structures at all?

Finally, among these endlessly circular debates around agency and structure, I wonder if it is naïve of me to read the 'opposing' perspectives of feminists such as Davis, Duits and van Zoonen, Bordo and Gill as ultimately saying the same thing – at least at some level. That is, as feminists we seek to listen to and 'critically respect' what women have to say about their beliefs and experiences; but simultaneously, as researchers, we must continue to query these assertions for the ways in which they not only afford women with moments of clarity,



empowerment and joy, but also inadvertently, still constrain them. This research hopes to get at both these positions at once, querying how my participants discursively negotiate and articulate their resistance to beauty ideals, even within the constraints they encounter, and what these momentary assertions of agency towards and resistance against beauty ideals can mean for them – whether hopeful, joyful, troubled, empowering or restraining.

## 2.5 Summary

So far, by outlining the critical context on which my research is based, I acknowledge the debt this thesis owes to this long-standing feminist history of debates and theorising around women's bodies and beauty. The proceeding chapters seek to add to the ongoing conversation around resistance to beauty. I have located my research within a body of work that spans three decades, beginning around the time of Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* to our present day; and which has focused specifically on addressing continued cultural and social gendered beauty pressures encountered by women and their corresponding responses to this oppression. This thesis seeks to contribute to this debate by exploring further the intersections between on the one hand, women's responses to and resistances against beauty ideals, and on the other, their negotiation of (other) contemporary neoliberal, post- and popular feminist ideals of individuality and confidence. Furthermore, while existing work on beauty and class has tended, for the most part, to examine the practices and experiences of lower- or working-class women, or middle-class women in specific national contexts, I hope to offer some novel insights into the perspectives of a relatively understudied class of upper/middle class cosmopolitan women. I aim to show how certain class privileges enjoyed by this community of women enable or encourage specific expressions of resistance within a neoliberal, postfeminist climate, while at the same time, considering certain other cultural, social or work-related gender constraints they still contend with.

In summary, I have explored in this chapter two principal bodies of work on beauty which inform and shape my onward analysis and discussion. In the first half of this chapter, I have examined how traditional gender roles in Western society have historically relegated women to the domain of nature and body, in opposition to the masculine domain of culture and mind. This dichotomous binary has led not only to the prescription of very particular social and cultural roles for both men and women, but has bound women especially closely to their bodies. Women's bodies, in turn, become sites of power and control – power enacted *on women* by the imposition of beauty ideals, and control practised *by themselves* upon their

own bodies to fulfil these ideals. Acceptable femininity – indicative of appropriate modern selfhood and social citizenship – is thus most clearly evidenced in bodily presentation and comportment, and the practices that a woman visibly undertakes to achieve and maintain her feminine bodily beauty.

The latter half of this chapter updates the discussion to consider contemporary beauty pressures, using both neoliberal, post- and popular feminist sensibilities as a lens for understanding how the beauty myth has broadened its scope to demand regulation and control not just of women's bodies but of their psychic lives as well. As a theoretical basis, I use Elias, Gill and Scharff's (2017) concepts of aesthetic labour and aesthetic entrepreneurship, emphasising the ways in which women continue to labour upon their bodies not just to manage their physical appearances but more importantly, to also prove desirable twenty-first-century values of individualism, confidence and self-driven entrepreneurship.

My onward study and discussion of women's responses to contemporary beauty and body ideals is located primarily within this latter framework, and I attempt to illustrate how concerns for and around women's bodies have shifted from a project of physical, bodily perfection, to one that also calls for psychic development. Although I began my research believing that body positivity campaigns were straightforwardly resistant to beauty ideals, the proceeding chapters examine the ways in which these acts of resistance may still be constrained by, or redirected towards, contemporary pressures to achieve other models of ideal, 'compulsory individuality' (Cronin 2000) and confidence, as outlined above.

Significantly, when we also consider how class privileges enable women to enact resistance in particular ways and/or to fulfil these broader neoliberal, postfeminist values of individuality more easily than others, we might begin to trouble the readiness with which many of these women proclaim 'choice' and self-empowerment, or to examine if and how these specific expressions of agency and resistance are possible only in limited contexts, and for an elite few. I am unsure, therefore, whether perceiving these resistances as 'resistant' is to be naïve; or whether, by reading responses to beauty ideals as always inextricable from structural oppression is to be overly cynical. As I move to analyse and theorise around my data, therefore, I consciously maintain some curiosity for how women move to question, challenge and deconstruct overriding beauty pressures; and, more so, how effectively *resistant* these conversations can be.

## Chapter Three

### Addressing Discomfort and Uncertainty with a Feminist Reflexive Methodology

#### 3.1 What I Did: A Brief Outline

My research has been strongly and consistently shaped by feminist, reflexive and autoethnographic approaches. I have tried to tease these strands apart but realise now how interconnected and inseparable they have been throughout the process of this research: the feminist core of my work demands continual reflection upon my own location, beliefs and experiences through all stages of my research. In turn, reflecting upon how I am situated within my fieldwork and my responses to the data has strongly influenced my onwards analysis and theorisation. It is difficult to talk about these strands separately as they are so interwoven, so, for clarity, I begin this chapter with a brief outline of the methods I have used before proceeding with a fuller discussion of the epistemological and methodological approaches that have informed this research.

##### 3.1.1 Focus Groups and Interviews

As I sought to understand women's experiences and perspectives around beauty and body ideals by hearing their stories and views in their own terms (Braun and Clarke 2013; Kvale 1996), I elected to conduct semi-structured interviews with groups and individuals<sup>9</sup>. The focus groups (I rename these to 'group interviews' which I explain in Section 3.2.2) involved pre-existing groups of women who interacted regularly with each other, at work or socially (Barbour 2007; Kitzinger 1994). This decision was directed by an initial interest both in what women had to say and in how they talked about beauty and body-related issues within their social networks. Because I was initially interested to study how friendship influences women's talk, I included myself in these clusters and sought to recruit participants who were also my friends.

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<sup>9</sup> Copies of the information sheets provided to participants before the interviews, and the consent forms which were also signed prior to beginning the interviews can be found in Appendices III a & b and IV a & b.

In total, I conducted twelve focus groups, with thirty-one women: eighteen in Kuala Lumpur (KL<sup>10</sup>), Malaysia, five in London, UK, four in Singapore and four in York, UK. The first of these, in York, was conducted to pilot my interview format and questions; having run well, I have included this focus group in my analysis.

Later, as a result of feeling some discomfort around the focus groups – which I discuss further below – I added semi-structured individual interviews with eleven women: six in London, four in KL and one in Singapore. I chose to work with different participants from those in the groups because I did not want the individual interviews to draw on previous discussions and I intended to examine each discussion as separate entities. There is only one instance where a participant – Sonia – is interviewed twice. The first instance was for the pilot focus group; the second was in a separate focus group with another woman. The individual interviews were also done with friends, as well as with a few acquaintances I had recently met – one, a friend of a friend, and two whom I had met at a body positivity event. As almost all interview participants were my friends (and/or friends of friends), the question of who these women were in relation to me and the social categories they occupy became significant for the thesis. I discuss this further below, exploring how interviewing friend-participants has influenced my analysis of their interviews. Lastly, all participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. Understandably, however, as I have had a long-term friendship with many of them, complete anonymity may not always be possible<sup>11</sup>.

### **3.1.2 Autoethnography**

I elaborate below, and in subsequent chapters, my working definition of autoethnography and how this methodology has been pivotal to my analysis. Here, I offer a simple summary of the aspects of my life/experiences that I have engaged with for and in this research. Principally, I frequently reflect upon my own troubled relationship with my body, and my personal experiences of being exposed to beauty ideals – both from instances of body shaming, and from working in women’s fashion magazines. Throughout the PhD, I have

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<sup>10</sup> Henceforth, I will use the commonly used abbreviation KL to refer to Kuala Lumpur.

<sup>11</sup> Participants were informed of issues of anonymity in the information sheets I provided them before the interview and in briefings I conducted before each session. Participants also signed consent forms before each interview acknowledging that they understood these terms. Participant characteristics and details of the focus groups and interviews can be found in Appendices I and II.

sustained a preoccupation with weight loss (as I have for almost all of my life). Over the last two years, I have undertaken a nutrition and fitness programme which was devised for me by a personal coach and maintained by my own efforts. For the context of my research and analysis, I combine my previous experiences of body insecurity and shame, with these more recent nutritional and fitness practices. Simultaneously, I reflect upon my own continuing body anxieties and how I respond to them. My subsequent reactions and affective responses have then formed a comparative basis from which I have read and analysed my participants' interviews.

## **3.2 Deeper Reflections on What I Did**

### **3.2.1 Women 'Like Me': The Participants of My Research**

Critiques of recruiting friends in research have mostly addressed the ways in which friendships are employed for convenience (Brewis 2014). My decision to work with friends was more purposefully directed by a desire to examine how women's social networks contribute to their co-creation of shared understandings around beauty ideals. Methodologically, engaging friendships in the research process – in fieldwork, analysis and theorising – raises its own complications which I discuss separately in Section 3.6.1. For now, I discuss some of the identifying categories of these women, with a focus on their geographical location, national and cultural identities. I have mentioned that almost all my participants were also my friends, and in this regard, many of them were 'like me'. While our likenesses have more to do with shared cultural attitudes and beliefs than identity categories, I recognise that many of the perspectives and experiences we have are shaped by our social situations and privileges, and it is necessary to account for them (Harding 1987). I therefore open this section by clarifying my own situation: I am a middle-class Malaysian woman of Chinese heritage who was born in London; raised in KL, where I was schooled in a private British school; attended a private international secondary school in Singapore and later, university in York, England. After university, I worked as a journalist for 12 years in KL before returning to York for my PhD, when I was 34 years old. I identify as heterosexual, cisgender and able-bodied.

I am aware that the majority of the participants I recruited are mostly 'like me' in the following ways: they speak English as a first language or are fluently bilingual; have had a Western-influenced education and/or studied in Western countries and/or worked in multinational companies (mostly headquartered in the West); come from a middle to upper-

middle class background; are able-bodied and cisgender. Finally, we share an interest in body-related issues as informed, predominantly, by contemporary Western or Western-influenced media and culture. This means that our ideas of beauty and body ideals are drawn mainly from cultural forms of entertainment that either originate from North American, British, Australian or Western European sources; *or* from regional/local Asian editions of, for example, international magazines (e.g. Harper's Bazaar) or television programmes (e.g. MTV) that originate in the West and use English as the medium of communication.

Many of my participants also share with me similar international exposure or diasporic experiences. As such, I often found that the precise geographical locations of the interviews have not held special significance. For example, some of my participants in London were Malaysian of Indian (Melissa) or Malay descent (Natasha and Rana); one of my 'Malaysian' participants was not Asian, but a Caucasian Australian woman who had lived in London, and was working and living in KL when I interviewed her (Hannah).<sup>12</sup> Acknowledging that the exposure and enjoyment of these international experiences are made possible by particular privileges – especially of class, education and financial background – I conceptualise of this cohort of participants as belonging to a very specific “global sisterhood” (Chen 2009) of cosmopolitan women. Consideration of these middle- and cosmopolitan class privileges bear quite significantly on the analysis and discussion, which I explore in the following chapters.

The geographic cultural division between East and West is not a deliberate focus in this thesis. I chose to narrow my scope to only interview women who were located within countries I had lived in but geography was, in many instances, incidental. Where geography and culture raises particular pertinent issues and bears upon my analysis and theorising in specific ways, I am careful to highlight these examples and issues clearly, and accord them, if necessary, separate discussion. Across most of my analysis, I have focused my attention on my own and participants' similarities and shared cultural exposure to and interest in beauty related issues, most of which find their origins in Western media and culture. While I do not purport to speak of a homogenous, global definition of beauty ideals (understanding that this denies the experiences, ideals and practices found within specific cultural and ethnic communities), I was curious to examine how increasingly Western and neoliberalised notions of beauty might be confronted *across cultures* and geographical borders by this

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<sup>12</sup> I have looked at the 'messiness' of conducting research across geographical borders and categories in previous work (Khoo 2017).

cosmopolitan class of women who share similar backgrounds, class privileges, and educational and diasporic experiences.

As much as we are all women and share similar backgrounds and privileges, it is also important to acknowledge that these 'likenesses' are not necessarily enough for me to claim sameness in our experiences. Feminist theorists have pointed out that claiming 'oneness' with other women simply because of our shared gender is an unstable premise (McRobbie 1982). We risk generalising experience and presuming to speak for 'women' as a homogenous category that overlooks the complexities arising from individual differences. My participants themselves often call attention to certain particularities of their own ethnic communities and it is important to understand that, for example, the beauty ideals for a Malaysian-Indian woman living in Malaysia are constituted and experienced very differently from a Malay woman living in London. I attempted to account for some of these intersectional differences where possible and relevant. However, because my participants span a wide number of geographical locations, nationalities and cultural backgrounds (not just between them, but within the experiences of each individual, who may straddle a number of cultures/nationalities/international residences), it is impractical to consider every difference. I have therefore chosen instead to focus predominantly on *shared experiences*, examining how neoliberal, postfeminist ideals of/around the body are commonly absorbed, understood and enacted by this group of women.

As would have been apparent in my previous chapter, the shared exposure to Western (-influenced) media and cultures that informs my participants' views on beauty ideals has led me to work predominantly with Western feminist, sociological and cultural theories around beauty, bodies and neoliberalism. While I acknowledge that there are nuanced cultural differences in individual women's experiences – particularly those based in Asia or of Asian heritage – incorporating Eastern theories around these same topics would extend this thesis to beyond its current scope. I do not mean to deny and ignore Asian beauty cultures or the research and theorising of beauty ideals and practices in Eastern contexts (for example, Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012; Holliday et al. 2017). However, the predominantly Western focus of the shared interests and cultural backgrounds of myself and participants have been better addressed by Western methodological approaches to and Western theories of beauty – these are the frameworks I have employed.

I also wish to remark upon the ages of my participants. While nine of my participants are in their twenties, all other participants are between the ages of thirty and fifty-four. Taking this

age range into consideration is significant for thinking about my participants' potential engagements with social media. As someone from within this same age range, I am aware that many participants from this age group may not use social media as heavily as younger generations of women in their twenties or teens. Many of the incidents and memories that these women recall would have been either during or before the mid-1990s, at a time when the Internet was not yet widely available and when exposure to beauty ideals would have been predominantly through social and familial interactions, or media channels such as television, film, commercial advertising and magazines. Since social media (and research on social media usage and influence) is so pervasive now, this thesis might therefore be considered unique for its continued consideration of participants' mostly 'offline' reflections. I do employ some examples from social media (for example, in Sections 4.3.2 and 6.3.1), but only to supplement principal themes I have noticed emerging from my data. I acknowledge that if participants came from a younger demographic, this study would be a markedly different one for its greater consideration of women's interactions with social media and its effects upon their relationship with their bodies.

I conclude this section with a note on local language and cultural idioms. Although all interviews were conducted in English, and all my participants are fluent in English, several of my Malaysian and Singaporean participants often speak in the local patois of 'Manglish' or 'Singlish' (Malaysian or Singaporean English), and use slang from local languages (Malay, Mandarin or Chinese dialects). Although these linguistic variations do not significantly change the overall themes of their stories or discussions, some specific terms and turns of phrases carry with them particular cultural meanings that would be appreciated only by fellow Malaysians or Singaporeans. From having grown up in the region, I rely on my own understandings of and familiarity with the local vernacular to make sense of how these participants use these phrases and what they can mean.

### **3.2.2 Rethinking Focus Groups and Interviews**

There are various definitions of focus groups. Khan and Manderson (1992) draw on some conventional descriptions (Barbour 2007; Bloor 2001; Krueger and Casey 2000; Morgan 1993, 1997) to define it as a "formally constituted, structured group which is brought together to address a specific issue within a fixed time frame, and in accordance with clearly spelled out rules of procedure", and for which moderators must have received training (Khan



and Manderson 1992, 57-59). Initially formulated for market research, focus groups had specific aims to understand the responses and beliefs of groups of people on defined subjects, usually determined by a client/sponsor. The results obtained from focus groups were commonly mobilised for applied purposes, such as in policy-making or product development, rather than considered as self-contained data in themselves (Frey and Fontana 1993; Krueger and Casey 2000). Within these formulations of focus groups, there are often pre-defined, structured sets of questions, a recommended number of six to twelve participants (although this number also varies) and a set timeframe within which the focus group is run (Frey and Fontana, 1993; Krueger and Casey 2000; Morgan 1997). However, Khan and Manderson (1992) also suggest that “there is a continuum along which the focus group represents an extreme” (59). They differentiate between, on one end of the spectrum a structured “focus group” and on the other, “informal group discussions” which occur opportunistically as and when the researcher encounters groups in their natural social surroundings (59-61).

In her study on the impact of group dynamics in focus groups, Kitzinger emphasises “the explicit use of the group interaction’ as research data” (Merton 1987 and Morgan 1988, quoted in Kitzinger 1994, 103) – this feature most clearly distinguishes focus groups from group interviews, which prioritise instead the *content* of discussion over the *interaction* (104). As Morgan (1997) elaborates, focus groups provide the researcher with direct opportunities to observe and hear the similarities and divergences in views between participants on particular topics (10-11), as well as how they might collaboratively negotiate these views to co-create new meanings (Albrecht, Johnson, and Walther 1993; Ellis and Berger 2001; Farquhar and Das 1999; Kitzinger 1994, 1995). What participants say is thus examined in the context of *how* these utterances occur within the group context.

Although I initially intended to study the interactions between focus group participants, I have ultimately come to focus more on *what* they have said (Wilkinson 2011), than *how* they have said it within the group. I understand that in many cases what my participants discussed was probably made possible *because* they were speaking to and among a group of friends they felt safe with. I acknowledge that closer attention needs to be paid to participants’ interactions and the dynamics of the focus group itself but this focus would extend into separate/different study, which exceeds the scope of this thesis. However, I note briefly here that my concluding chapter does begin to explore how this interactive process of dialoguing can itself be harnessed for women to more actively enact agency and negotiate meaning around beauty ideals. I explore the strong collaborative potential in group discussions and

suggest a method for developing such conversational spaces in order to better respond to, resist and challenge beauty ideals. For now, since I have more closely studied the content of what my participants have shared, calling them focus groups would be erroneous for my minimal discussion of participant interaction and communicative practices. As Kitinger (1994) notes, studies that examine the content of discussions more substantially than the interactions therein are more commonly referred to as *group interviews*, which is the term I will use henceforth.

As a result of the initial discomfort I experienced with these group interviews (discussed below), I also decided to conduct individual interviews. Having read about the potential challenges of interviewing groups, I intuited that some of the difficulty I found in drawing deeper reflections from these participants might have been a result of certain group dynamics that shape and influence the way individual participants speak and interact. For example, strong personalities can end up dominating and directing the discussion, while more passive persons can tend to acquiesce with their views rather than voice their own (Barbour 2007; Bloor 2001; Krueger and Casey 2000). I hoped that conducting one-to-one interviews might provide the space for participants to explore and interrogate issues more deeply, or to share information they otherwise may not in a group (Morgan 1997).

One of the concerns of this thesis has been to also consider how the discursive event of the interview itself can be useful as a space for reclaiming agency and asserting resistance against overriding discourses and oppressions. While I have not had room to fully explore the intra-group interactions between participants, it can still be helpful here to think about how the interview can serve as a platform for helpfully making sense of beauty discourses and for ‘talking back’ to dominant discourses, even at a micro, personal level.

Frank’s (2013) description of storytelling and narration as “less a word of reporting and more a process of discovery” (xv) is useful here for conceptualising of the interview or conversation as a particular temporal moment within which participants figure as active agents co-creating and negotiating meanings. The interview space comprises a process of ‘discovering’ what beauty ideals mean for women as they converse: they can uncover how they are constituted by these ideals, reflect upon how they would respond, and contemplate how their engagements consequently reinforce or reconstruct these bodily pressures for both themselves and others. Thus, as women discuss their engagements with beauty practices, negotiate their stances towards beauty and assert their embrace of or resistances against beauty ideals, these conversations can be regarded not as fixed assertions but as continually

evolving negotiations of “choice, solution and problem, empowering and disempowering, all at once” (Davis 2003, 13).

I return in the conclusion (Chapter 7) to reflect on some of the means by which my interviews have begun to offer space for participants to ‘(re)discover’, trouble, resist and/or embrace various meanings of beauty and bodies on their own terms.

### **3.2.3 Beauty Stories and Beauty Dialoguing**

I would like to clarify two terms I employ throughout the thesis. In discussing beauty and body ideals, I found that interviewees often chose to share personal stories around/about their bodies and their engagement with beauty ideals and/or practices. I became fascinated with the potential that these stories had for problematising beauty ideals and eliciting discussions on wider themes. Personal stories about experiences of body shaming or stories about other people that participants would recount to the delight or disdain of the group, became pivotal jumping-off points for discussing multiple other associated issues. I refer to these narratives as *beauty stories*.

In many instances, the issues that arose from participants’ beauty stories extended to topics that would not seem obviously related to bodies, such as overarching cultural and traditional norms, or fractured family and community relationships. I eventually came to recognise that what was more salient to the study was how these stories were employed to explain and make sense of other issues (Kvale 1996). I therefore expand the term beauty stories to include the process of *beauty dialoguing*. While the former term implies that one party tells a story to a passive audience, *beauty dialoguing* suggests instead a constant and active conversing and sense-making between two or more persons. The stories become just one element enmeshed within debates, questioning and the provocation of further responses and sharings between participants.

## **3.3 Theoretical and Analytical Perspectives and Tools**

### **3.3.1 Grounded Theory and Thematic Analysis**

My research was informed by a grounded theory approach (Dey 2007, 82) throughout the process of designing and conducting my fieldwork, and later, transcription, coding and

analysis. This meant I moved frequently between data and analysis, allowing one to continually inform the directions I took with the other (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Thornberg and Charmaz 2014). As I am located so ‘closely’ to my interview participants, a specifically constructivist grounded theory approach has helped me account for my place within and alongside my analysis of the data, and the epistemological stance that “sees both data and analysis as created from the shared experiences of researcher and participants and the researcher’s relationships with participants” (Charmaz 2001, 677). I took a mostly abductive approach in my analysis, drawing simultaneously from both analysis and certain pre-existing theoretical frameworks in order to formulate ‘new’ questions for further investigation (Thornberg and Charmaz 2014). During my analysis, I was concerned that I was misreading my participants’ meanings and inadvertently speaking ‘for them’ (see Section 3.6.1). Taking an abductive approach and using constructivist grounded theory to regard my data as “views” rather than as hard “facts” (Charmaz 2001, 678) has helped me to better understand that working with my data in this way would offer “new insights that help to explain some aspect of the phenomenon under investigation” rather than to infer generalisations or assert final conclusions (Dey 2007, 91).

Within my research, this abductive movement between data and theory became most apparent during the coding process<sup>13</sup>. I elaborate: I began with a round of initial coding, which searched for the most apparent and frequently occurring themes, generated by what participants had discussed (Braun and Clarke 2013). Interestingly, instead of offering clarity, these emerging themes provoked in me more doubts and discomfort, which thus led me to developing more specific codes in the subsequent round of coding (Thornberg and Charmaz 2014). I realised during this second stage, that my themes were not being directed by terms or concepts so much as by my scepticisms and questions. For example, this second phase of coding sought to answer questions like, “What do participants really mean when they say they are doing something ‘for themselves’?” or “What does ‘inner work’ constitute?”

The issues I examine in my analysis are therefore not straightforward discussions of prominent themes or topics arising from the interviews. Rather, my analysis attempts to answer the questions that both arose out of and formed the coded themes. This informs, broadly, the three discussion chapters. Feeling doubtful about my participants’ apparent indifference towards media influence, I started by asking, “How (else) are these women responding to and talking about media representations of beauty?” This is explored in

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<sup>13</sup> I used qualitative data analysis software NVivo.

Chapter Four, which studies responses from both lay audiences and women who (have) create(d) content for women's magazines. In Chapter Five, I venture deeper by questioning, "If women aren't drawing exclusively from the media to talk about beauty ideals, *how else* are they talking about these issues?" This develops into a discussion about the other more culturally valued discourses that women 'translate into' (DeVault 1990) as they negotiate around bodily beauty, such as health and professionalism. Lastly, I attempt to address the strongest doubt I experienced throughout my fieldwork. I query what this 'inner work' is that so many of my participants refer to, and how they conceive of and construct this inner work. This discussion comprises Chapter Six.

### **3.3.2 Discourse Analysis**

From coding my interviews to determine the most salient themes and questions, I then employed a discourse analysis to study the coded excerpts of data. Discourses comprise communicative practices, such as writing, speaking and using texts of all mediums (for example, images, pictures, artefacts), which work in combination with each other to construct very particular understandings of social realities (Phillips and Hardy 2002). For example, when we speak of a feminine beauty discourse, we might refer to the language used in women's magazines to describe beauty ideals and women's bodies, the images and text used in advertising, the scripting and editing of television makeover programmes, and the colloquialisms and stereotypes that people employ in casual conversations about beauty. These elements combine with each other, and with other discourses – such as femininity, health, and fashion – to create a particular collective cultural understanding of what beauty 'is' or comprises.

I work primarily with Mills' definition of discourses "as sets of sanctioned statements which have some institutionalised force, which means that they have a profound influence on the way that individuals act and think" (Mills 1997, 55). As with my use of grounded theory, I also employ a broadly constructivist approach, which regards discourse (and the language that constitutes it) as a deeply social process. As van Dijk (1997) points out, "language users engaging in discourse accomplish *social acts* and participate in *social interaction* [...] Such interaction is in turn embedded in various social and cultural *contexts*" (2; original emphasis). Discourses are always in interaction with other discourses that they draw from or oppose; always located within and constituted by social contexts; and used by social beings to construct their experiences, subjectivities and identities (Gee 2014; Macdonell 1986; Wetherell 1995). As such, my analysis of participants' responses is not simply an

extrapolation of ‘answers’ to the doubts and questions I formed during fieldwork and coding. Nor do I approach their interviews as straightforward accounts. Rather, I seek to interrogate how participants construct their responses to beauty ideals and practices by drawing on existing language and discourses of beauty and women’s bodies, as well as by referencing other discourses, such as health, professionalism and self-development.

Discourse can also be thought of as a process of social interaction for the ways in which it is “shaped by situations, institutions and social structures, but it also shapes them” (Fairclough and Wodak 1997, 258). Thus, “[discourse] is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it” (ibid.). Thus, by applying a discourse analysis to my interviews, I hope to examine how the “discursive events” (ibid.) of my participants’ discussions of beauty serve to simultaneously reinforce hegemonic ideals and discourses around feminine bodily beauty, as well as resist and potentially alter them.

### **3.3.3 Acknowledging the Limitations of a Discursive Focus**

My discussions on discourse analysis and interviews also call for a reflection upon the limitations of relying primarily upon a discursive method and approach. Gee (2014) uses metaphors of building and construction to describe how discourse works. He explains that, “we ‘make meaning’ by using language to say things that, in actual contexts of use, amount, too, to doing things and being things [...] We use language to build things in the world, to engage in world building” (31). This definition is useful for thinking about how my participants “build” their understandings of and responses to beauty ideals through the language they use and in the accounts they tell. However, this approach alone is limited for not also accounting for “how people experience their bodies from the perspectives of the people themselves” (Nettleton and Watson 1998, 3) or for exploring individuals’ material, embodied experiences of living in the worlds that they “build” discursively.

The communicative event of the interview itself is, after all, embodied, participated in by the living, breathing bodies of researcher and participants. I recognise that I am studying, principally, participants’ discursive constructions of and around beauty ideals but discussions pertaining to the body are not only theoretical, academic reflections; they also constitute and are constituted by embodied experiences. As Shildrick (1997) reminds us, the boundaries of the body are ‘leaky’ and “[the body itself] is both the surface of inscription and the site of material practices” (10). It is, therefore, sometimes difficult to completely

disentangle the discursive dimensions from the embodied experience(s) that inevitably accompany them – participants are speaking from and in bodies; these bodies physically occupy and move within the interview space; and they are experiencing/have experienced the physical sensations and affects revealed in their accounts. Participants and I might not only find ourselves talking about the body but also that the body itself ‘speaks’ through its physical comportment (Burns 2003, 234), either in accordance or at odds with what is being said.

I acknowledge that taking a purely discursive approach does not account for these tensions experienced by every/body within the interview space as we discourse about the body. For example, how do we feel about how our own bodies might be read within the room *by each other*? How would these feelings and responses change among other groups of people, or in settings beyond the interview setting? Thus, I suggest that future study would also benefit from extending the parameters of the interviews to incorporate closer participant observation during the interview itself. We might better account for how participants dress, how they position themselves in relation to each other, their physical mannerisms and interactions. We could record how participants’ utterances are supported or contradicted by their physical action – for example, whether they sit in a relaxed way or self-consciously fidget as they talk about a subject like confidence.

A purely discursive focus cannot answer questions like: How are confident assertions of resistance (re)enacted in their everyday embodied interactions and practices? How are participants’ reflections from uncertain debates and questioning worked out once they leave the interview? How might we transpose and recreate the same safe and supported spaces in everyday occurrences and interactions? It is one thing to talk about, for example, body confidence, within a specially convened interview space; it is quite another to enact that confidence in a situation where an individual is physically confronted with body ideals and/or shaming. After all, as Robinson (2010) notes, there remains always “a dialectical relationship between the hour(s) of the interview and the life course trajectories of interviewer and interviewee within which it is situated” (312). The moment of the interview necessarily ‘leaks’ (Shildrick 1997) from past and into future experiences beyond the interview.

I understand how a discursive focus on talk might be odd given my interest in bodies. However, because this research intends to explore more closely women’s understandings and constructions of and around beauty ideals, I have chosen to focus my study upon their

discursive negotiations on and around these issues rather than on narratives of embodied experience. It is these discursive moments and articulations that I have analysed and focused on in the proceeding chapters. By conducting only interviews, I have also purposefully chosen to examine only the ‘meaning making’ dimensions of my data that rest at the level of discursive utterances and interactions. This has proven to be a large enough scope for this study (though one which has not permitted me space nor time to also further investigate the embodied dimensions of ‘meaning making’ with/in the body).

### **3.4. Honouring the ‘Everyday Knowledge’ of Women: A Feminist Approach**

In *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*, Dorothy Smith (1987) calls attention to the “authority of the male voice” (30) across all sectors of social life. What men say is what “counts”, she argues, for it is regarded as “representative of the power and authority of the institutionalised structures that govern society” (31). Because their speech, actions and perspectives are valued as authoritative, men’s standpoint is represented as universal. Conversely, this means that women’s voices are silenced and “[the] means women have had available to them to think, image, and make actionable their experience have been made for us and not by us” (19). Feminist scholars point out that, correspondingly, traditional sociological inquiry into the lives of women has also been defined by and through masculine language and experience, such that women remain “outside the frame” of the very studies that seek to articulate their experiences (Smith 1987, 63; see also Oakley 1974; Spender 1985a).

In thinking about what a feminist methodology entails, Harding (1987) calls attention to the importance defining what this means separately for *method* (how we gather information), *methodology* (how we theorise and analyse the directions of the research) and *epistemology* (how we come to know what we know). Traditional research methods have been critiqued by feminist researchers for not being designed or conducted in ways that allow for women’s voices and experiences to be accurately recorded (DeVault 1990; Klein 1983; Oakley 1981). For example, conventional guidelines for conducting interviews advocate maintaining unbiased objectivity and distance between interviewer and interviewee (Holstein and Gubrium 2011; Krueger 1998; Krueger and Casey 2000). This approach assumes that the researcher is removed from the research and that the ‘objective’ truth of the knowledge shared by/gained from participants is created using a language, discourse and experiences



that individuals of all social categories access equally. However, since most language and discourse has been shaped by and around men's lives and experiences (Smith 1987; Spender 1985b), women's experiences and accounts are thus always and already necessarily excluded. Interviews conducted by a distanced 'objective' researcher also do not allow participants to 'ask questions back' (Oakley 1981). Not only does this disjuncture in language reinforce gendered hierarchies that prioritise men's experience over women's, but women's experiences and realities continue to be defined *for them* in ways that reduce their agency. Traditional methodologies are likewise deemed inappropriate for research on women because they often assume certain gendered characteristics of the research subject that are shaped, again, by men and around men's experiences (Spender 1985b). The theories that are then applied are incongruous with understanding how women participate in and make sense of social life (Harding 1987). Finally, Harding (1987) explains, the epistemology underlying many traditional androcentric research approaches consistently "exclude the possibility that women could be 'knowers' or agents of knowledge" (181) since men's perspectives are regarded as universal (Smith 1987).

To bring a feminist approach to research calls instead for a consideration of the 'everyday world' and experiences of women as a valid locus of study and production of knowledge (Harding 1987; Smith, 1987). Since women, and the private domains of the everyday experiences that they are associated with, are traditionally excluded from public discourses, a feminist approach shifts the focus from women as passive objects of study to active subjects (Smith 1987; Holstein and Gubrium 2011), whose "everyday knowledge" (Stanley and Wise 1983, 206) and perspectives are respected as authoritative and valid in their own right. From this premise, I take an approach to hopefully challenge the prevailing Cartesian values in Western/Western-influenced societies, which still privilege the knowledge produced by and within the masculine spheres of public life over the femininised spaces of private life. Certainly, nothing speaks to the denigration of femininised spaces and activities than the female/feminine body itself, often regarded as the wild, uncontrollable opposite to the rational, disciplined, masculine domain of the mind (Bordo [1993] 2003b; de Beauvoir [1949] 2011; Ellman 1979).

The assumptions made around women's engagement with bodily beauty render this subject especially hard to talk about. To begin with, the very display or discussion of beauty practices is often regarded as self-indulgent, frivolous or vain (Bartky 1990; Frost 1999; Lakoff and Scherr 1984), and therefore, of little productive cultural or social value. Therefore, one my strongest motivations for this research has been to advocate for the

creation of safe, supportive spaces for women to talk about bodies, beauty and related issues which, in their association with the feminine sphere, typically ““have no name”” nor importance in public or academic fields (Klein 1983, 23). Creating legitimised spaces to talk about these usually private practices, experiences and issues is itself to challenge the value ascribed mostly to the public, masculine-dominated spheres of knowledge. Honouring spaces for women’s voices to be spoken and listened to also pushes against common cultural constraints which frequently denigrate women’s communicative practices as insignificant “gossip” (McRobbie 1982, 50). So, by actively listening to what women have to say and responding to these discussions in my analysis, this research works to frame women as legitimate creators of knowledge, and their talk as a valuable resource. Indeed, I recall the excitement that women (not just interview participants) frequently express whenever I talk about my research on women’s bodies and beauty ideals, many of them verbally affirming how important they believe this research is. Could it be that just knowing someone was examining these oppressions, being offered the space to talk about their experiences and having someone listen to them was reassuring? Do these responses themselves draw attention to the lack of adequate attention given to women’s experiences and the relatively powerless effects of their voices? (McRobbie 1982; Reinharz and Chase 2001)

As feminist researchers, we must remember the impact of our “everyday knowledge” gained through the positions we hold as women, feminists and social researchers (Stanley and Wise 1983, 206). We understand that *our own* “everyday knowledge” and experiences run alongside those of our participants, and that we need to engage in what Ellis, Kiesinger and Tillmann-Healey (1997) term a “collaborative communication process” (121), wherein our own and participants’ feelings, insights and stories are given equal consideration. By understanding that our responses to our data are necessarily filtered through the lens of our own knowledge and perspectives, feminist scholars approach research less as a process of ‘reporting’ an objective truth gleaned *from* research subjects, and more as a process of discovering “relative truths” as we co-create knowledge *with* research participants (Klein 1983, 95). This very idea of co-creating knowledge is what directs me to use the word ‘participants’ (over terms like ‘subject’ or ‘interviewees’), which captures the notion that these women are *participating* with me in this research.

Klein (1983) advocates reflexivity and “intersubjectivity” (Westkott 1979, in Klein 1983, 94) to prompt us to “open up questions where the answers might have to be recorded in an interactive rather than a linear way” (95), thus facilitating a reciprocal, dialogical process between researcher and participants. She elaborates:

[We have to] open ourselves up to using such resources as intuition, emotions and feelings both in ourselves and in those we want to investigate. In combination with our intellectual capacities for analyzing and interpreting our observations, this open admission of the interaction of facts and feelings might produce a kind of scholarship that encompasses the complexity of reality better than the usual fragmented approach to knowledge.

(95)

At the same time, I am aware that as the researcher of this project, I *do* still hold power in crafting the presentation of the research findings. As Mills, Bonner and Francis (2006) write in a discussion about the use of constructivist approaches in grounded theory: “The worded world that, as author, we create in our text is constituted mainly of *our own words*” (11, my emphasis). I remain alert to the fact that the research is therefore its own contained ‘world’ comprising the very specific words, stories and discourse I – as researcher and author – write into existence. However, this is just one of many possible worded worlds. I do not consider this thesis a final presentation of exclusive ‘findings’ that are separate from myself; rather, I think of my results as being “*narrated* into being. The analyst’s [my] account is another story to be added to the participants’ accounts and stories” (Wetherell 2001, 396).

### **3.5 Writing With/Through Autoethnography**

#### **3.5.1 Who Am I and Who Am I Doing This Research For? Locating Myself within My Fieldwork**

I have taken Klein’s (1983) advice to shift my perception of research as being “on women” to being “for women” (90) in a way that would “[articulate] the individual experience [and promote] women’s collective interests” (Cotterill 1992, 594). Exercising a strong level of reflexivity has been crucial for me to remain alert to how I am positioned in relation to my participants at each stage of the research. Using Stanley and Wise’s writings on feminist research to guide my interviews, I developed a curiosity for the ‘how’ of data collection and the co-creation of meaning and knowledge between myself and participants. They advise:

Feminist research [...] would [...] explore the bases of our everyday knowledge as women, as feminists and as social scientists. It would do this by starting from the experiences of the *researcher as a person in a situation*.

[...] We must say *how we find out what we do*, and not just what we find out.

(Stanley and Wise 1983, 196; my emphasis)

In the case of my interviews, consideration of my own experience as “a person in a situation” was two-fold, referring simultaneously to 1) the wider cultural milieu which promotes and sustain particular beauty ideals; and 2) the particular instance of each interview setting, in which I figure as both researcher and participant. This desire to remain ‘in situation’ as much as possible informed my decision to recruit participants with whom I already shared common circumstances and experiences. Since I was already having informal conversations with these women about our bodies and beauty ideals, it seemed relevant and sensible that I interviewed these same women, thus facilitating a dialogue that would help me better understand how we co-create meanings around beauty.

Regarded as pioneers in interviewing women, feminist researchers Oakley (1981) and Finch (1984) had already argued in the 1980s for the greater degree of empathy that women bring to research around women’s issues, not least when the interview concerns issues experienced by both researcher and participant. I argue that because I involved myself in the interviews as heavily as I did, it was all the more important that my participants and I were similar, or held similar experiences. As Ellingson (1998) argues in her article about conducting research on cancer patients after having been treated for cancer herself, being “contaminated” by our own similar, relatable lived experiences can allow for greater empathy, identification and reflexivity, both in the field and during analysis (494). Kitzinger (1994) also notes that pre-existing groups convened for such interviews might allow for a more “naturally occurring” discussion of topics as participants are interacting in groupings they are already familiar with. I felt that my specific interest in beauty ideals and my own lifelong struggles with body insecurities made me an especially sympathetic listener in these interviews – I shared experiences with my participants not just as a woman but specifically as a woman responding to similar beauty pressures and struggling with bodily anxieties. By investing this aspect of my identity into the interview process, I also hoped to encourage participants to likewise divulge their own experiences and stories.

### 3.5.2 The Self/ves in My Research: Practising Autoethnography and Reflexivity

Finch (1984) warns that while attention to our situatedness can make us more empathetic researchers, our closeness can also be a cause for exploitation of our participants and their data. Simultaneously, insisting too strongly upon our sameness as women can obscure existing differences and power imbalances (Cotterill 1992; Stacey 1988). Reflexivity becomes all the more important. Certainly, one of the defining elements of feminist research is the high degree of reflexivity that should accompany the researcher's work at each stage (Harding 1987; Cotterill and Letherby 1993; Stanley and Wise 1983). As Ellis and Berger (2001) argue, "the feelings, insights, and stories that the primary researcher brings to the interactive [interview] are as important as those of other participants", and the collective understandings that emerge or are co-created by participant(s) and researcher are as important as the stories and insights that are individually shared (857).

A strong degree of reflexivity, however, has not been enough for directing this thesis. Instead, I consider my work to have been predominantly shaped by autoethnographic approaches which engage my personal experiences, beliefs and feelings as both resource and tool within the research. I elaborate upon this approach here. Commonly, autoethnography is described as being "concerned with producing creatively written, detailed, local and evocative first-person accounts of the relationship between personal autobiography and culture" which folds the researcher and researched into one – the researcher conducts research upon herself (Grant, Short, and Turner 2013, 1-2). She thus treats her experiences, beliefs and feelings "as primary data [...] a mode of experimentation, of testing and exploring the ways in which [her] experiences conjoin or connect us with others" (Jackson 1989, 4). Often highly evocative in nature, autoethnographic accounts foreground the researcher/author's experience so as to "take the reader into the intimacies of [the researcher's] world, in a way that [is] evocative and stimulate[s] them to reflect upon their own life in relation to [the researcher's]" (Sparkes 2000). Autoethnographic work can therefore very often take highly creative, literary or even fictionalised forms (Ellis 2000; Ellis and Berger 2001; Ellis and Bochner 2006), such as conversation 'scripts' (Ellis and Bochner 2006; Flemons and Green 2002) or story-like vignettes and narratives (Ellis and Bochner 1992; Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillmann-Healy 1997). These textual forms immerse the reader within the experience itself, and by this interactive element, "autoethnography is both process and product" (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011).

Although I do incorporate some of my own stories throughout the thesis, the narratives are not used in and of themselves, as in these forms of evocative autoethnography. Rather, I engage my experiences through an approach called analytic autoethnography. Specifically, I draw from Anderson's (2006) explanation of what this methodology constitutes. I outline the five key components that he discusses here, then explore how these elements figure in my own research below. Firstly, 1) I acknowledge the "complete member researcher (CMR) status" that I enjoy both as the author of this research and as a "member of the social world under study" (Anderson 2006, 378-9), in this case, that of women who feel affected by or who are responding to contemporary beauty ideals. 2) Anderson lists "analytic reflexivity" as the second key characteristic of analytic autoethnography, which involves continual conscious reflection upon my actions and responses alongside those of my participants (382). This second point is connected to the third and fourth: 3) a visible presence of the author in the text/research and 4) a dialogue with others (participants) that extend the research beyond the researcher's self (383, 386). Finally, 5) the autoethnographer sets out an explicit analytic agenda, and demonstrates clear engagement with developing, refining and extending theoretical standpoints (386). Of course, this definition is not to imply that evocative autoethnography does not engage equally rigorously with analysis and theory (Ellis and Bochner 2006). Rather, I understand the distinction between the two as manifesting in the narrative forms that each respective autoethnography takes: evocative forms are more strongly centred around the storying of personal experience, while analytic ones are like "layered accounts" (Ronai 1995), which switch variously between personal narratives or reflections, engaging with others' data and theorising.

Reinharz (1997) asserts that reflexivity should not be uniformly applied to an assumed monolithic role of researcher; rather, she notes that we bring "a variety of selves" into our research, of which "being a researcher" (3) is only one (see also Mills, Bonner, and Francis 2006). I understand that by including myself as a participant in interviews and sharing my stories throughout the thesis, my involvement extends deeper than just a reflexive awareness of my position. Rather, I must account for the selves and subjective positions I bring to each stage of the research and reflexivity then expands to become, "a dialogue – with others but also within our selves" (Johnson et al. 2004, 58). Primarily, the two selves that I was most aware of during the interviews were of researcher and friend. Although I am aware that I consciously tried to project my identity as a friend more strongly, I realise that the two are inextricable – how participants perceived and responded to me, and how I contributed to discussions were always going to be simultaneously shaped by both selves. With some participants, I am situated first as friend, and second, as researcher; for others (for example,

friends of friends), it is the other way around. This dual positioning necessarily means that while a lot of this research is “grounded in self-experience” or even directed by it, it necessarily “reaches beyond it as well” (Anderson 2006, 386).

The selves present in my research extend past the perimeters of the interviews themselves – they have been pivotal to both the planning and preparatory stages leading up to fieldwork, and the analysis and writing that followed the interviews. It is therefore important that I define what these selves constitute and which voices I speak from (Etherington 2004, 24). I recognise three most prominent selves in this thesis: across almost all my interviews, I evoke 1) my younger child self, whose early encounters with body shaming shaped the lifelong insecurities I have felt around my body. This self brought to the interviews and analysis a particular set of experiences and questions which I drew from to query and critique my participants’ discussions. Then, there are my current 2) fitness-enthusiast and (3) researcher selves. Importantly, as these three selves are present at the time of this research, I am aware that I continually act, speak and write as “the observing and experiencing selves of [‘myself’ as subject] and researcher” (Ellis 1991, 32), and that each are always in dialogue with the others. For example, when I view fitness Instagram posts, my fitness self draws inspiration from them, my child self reacts to them by remembering painful incidences of body shame, and my researcher self critiques them using theoretical perspectives.

I experience these selves as always “being here”, a visible and present “epistemological and ontological nexus upon which the research process turns” (Spry 2001, 708, 710-11). These selves are always allied to find alternative ways to practically and realistically respond to my body anxieties. Simultaneously, the responses of my selves are echoed in and/or challenge the wider community of my participants. I therefore choose not to regard these selves as separate from my participants (as ‘others’), but as collaborative. As Mykhalovskiy (1997) notes, engaging and writing about my own self “involves, at the same time, writing about the ‘other’ and [...] work on the ‘other’ is also about the self of the writer” (231).

Because autoethnographic research often centres around the author’s personal experience, the author’s self becomes the principal lens for making sense of or resisting dominant social narratives ‘beyond’ themselves. The ‘doing’ of autoethnography and telling of these stories is a process for the researcher to dialogically ask questions of her own “polyglot facets of self” (Spry 2001, 709) and to “mak[e] lived experience understandable and meaningful” (Ellis and Bochner 1992). In analytic autoethnographic approaches, self-introspection not only prompts a better understanding of social issues but also constitutes a “transformative

process” (Lionnet 1990, 338) of “the researcher’s own beliefs, actions and sense of self” (Anderson 2006, 383). Again, the autoethnographer’s experience is central, although the reflections in these works can also move the reader through a similar journey, by inviting them to interpret how these stories and reflections mean in their own lives and social worlds (Sparkes 2000).

The autoethnography I ‘do’ in this thesis reverses this principle. My personal stories are central to driving my research, but they do not visibly take centre stage in the way that the self-narratives of, for example, Ellis and Bochner (1992) or Sparkes (2000) do. Instead, my experience remains ‘backstage’ for the majority of the thesis, functioning to ‘make the show go on’, rather than being the show itself. It was not through direct interrogation of my own experience that formed a transformative process for me. Rather, it was the disjuncture that arose between participants’ sharings and my own experiences and beliefs which served to move the research forward in directions that I had not initially anticipated. By “us[ing] [the] empirical data [of my own experience/stories/feelings] to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data [of my participants] themselves” (Anderson 2006, 387), I was able to push my analysis beyond a straightforward show-and-tell of what participants had to say.

Across the following chapters, I variously evoke these three selves, using their stories and questions in order to interrogate (or at times find similarity with) participants’ data. This has led to the development of a central theoretical thread: my fitness and researcher selves question both my own understandings of and responses to beauty ideals, and also what my participants say – for example, these selves are sceptical of claims that beauty practices are pursued solely for health reasons or that the solution to outward body anxieties is to simply redirect our attention inward to self-care (Brown 2006) and ‘inner work’. These doubts eventually led me to explore theoretical critiques of neoliberal and postfeminist ideals of individualisation, which shapes the bulk of my subsequent analysis. I explore the usefulness of these uncertainties and discomfort in the next section.

## **3.6 Using Discomfort and Intuition as a Resource**

### **3.6.1 Discovering Difference: How My Friendships Created Discomfort**

Drawing on writings about women’s friendships, I was interested in the idea advanced by writers such as Coates (Coates and Cameron 1988; Coates 1996), Green (1998), and Johnson



and Aries (1983) that women “[explore] the world”, construct their understandings of it, and find their place within it with their (women) friends (Green 1998, 176, 179). I know from my own experience how important my friendships are to me in processing events and feelings, and I intended for the interviews between myself and these friend-participants to be, as far as possible, an extension of our everyday conversations. Because, in almost all instances, I was friends with at least one, if not all, participants, I was always conscious to reflect upon my own positioning within these group conversations. I was present not just a researcher or interviewer but also as an active conversation participant and friend: I shared my own stories and examples of body anxieties (Reinharz and Chase 2001; Warren 2001), and in some cases, received advice from interviewees. These intimate friendships were a valuable resource during the interviews. They helped to establish trust with participants, encourage the flow of the conversation, and provide entertainment and laughter, which fostered a relaxed environment for approaching more serious discussions. Importantly, being interviewed by or with friends encourages participants to discuss sensitive issues or share experiences and insights they otherwise might not with a stranger (Kitzinger 1994; Farquhar and Das 1999). However, while I often shared stories and interacted spontaneously with participants, as in ordinary conversation, I was also conscious that several of my contributions to the interviews were deliberately planned – via a loosely structured list of topics I sought to cover (Kvale 1996) – and timed. I shared my own experiences or anecdotes to direct the conversation towards particular subjects, and to open avenues for my participants to share similar stories or to comment on related issues (Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillmann-Healy 1997). Interestingly, sharing my stories did not always elicit from participants what I had hoped to be similar experiences or narratives. For instance, I often talked about how badly I had felt about my own body from reading American teenage girl magazines and my adolescent longing to be a tall, thin, white girl. None of my participants shared the same sentiments, which seemed strange to me – how could *none* of them have felt the same way about magazines when they had had such a deep impact on me? However, as I detail below, even these awkward disjunctures eventually became important resources for prompting deeper reflections and questioning, which have, in turn, shaped my analysis.

It was important for me to recognise that in many instances, my friendships and conversations with participants leak beyond the formal parameters of the interview session; the boundaries between what is said in the interview and what is said before or after it become blurred. The data I work with is thus extra rich for the additional knowledge I possess from ‘outside’ of the interview that become inevitably bound into the conversations. For example, in my group interview with Anvesha and Sonia in York, Sonia makes many

references to her previous abusive marriage. Because we had already had many conversations about her ex-husband and the abuse she suffered, we could often refer to these experiences during the interview without need for in-depth explanation; as her friend, I could draw from previous conversations to arrive at deeper understandings of the experiences she discussed in the interview itself.

As I reflect upon interviews like Sonia's, I acknowledge that I am approaching each interview with different weightings of prior knowledge and varying degrees of closeness with my participants. As some participants were friends of friends, whom I had only met for the first time at the interview itself, I would have had no choice but to read their data superficially, without any prior knowledge of them beyond the few hours we spoke. I have since attempted to mitigate potential inconsistencies in readings by choosing to approach almost all my data at the same level by taking the content of discussions at face value. This means that for the most part I have focused more on *what* my participants have said (especially in group interviews where the degree of my closeness to each participant has greatly varied) rather than on trying to postulate *how* they have arrived at these understandings. In practice, of course, this is not always possible; I cannot precisely control the boundaries of how much I know of each participant. So, in cases where my analysis of a participant's particular sharing – and my corresponding analysis – is coloured by our existing friendship, I am careful to clarify this and explain the context of our relationship.

Recruiting friends for research comes with its own challenges and scholars warn of the limitations that friendship obligations can impose upon our research (Ribbens 1989; Stacey 1988). As much as the 'leakiness' of friendships brings certain additional useful knowledge to the interviews, I am also aware that my friendships have borne upon my engagement with my participants and my subsequent reading of their interviews. Paradoxically, my zeal to maintain as much closeness and likeness between myself and my friend-participants eventually worked against me. Instead of enjoying our shared experiences, I found that interviewing 'women like me' served to actually reveal how different and far apart we were in many instances. There is a particular area of discussion which best illustrates how our shared experiences served to simultaneously facilitate sharing and discussion, while also highlighting the inevitable differences between us. In our discussions around individual effort and 'inner work' (see Chapter Six for a full discussion), I recognised in many of my participants the same excitement I felt when I first discovered body positivity campaigns and was doing similar therapeutic work on myself to address my body dissatisfaction. But this is also where one of the most uncomfortable divergences occurs.

Reflecting upon my own beliefs around body and beauty ideals, I recognised that I have become increasingly sceptical of such notions as ‘choice’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘body acceptance’ that are now so prevalent in the body positivity movement (and more generally, in contemporary postfeminist media culture [Baker 2008; Braun 2009; Gill 2007a; Walter 2010]). I realised that prior to conducting the interviews, I had spent almost eighteen months engrossed in feminist beauty theory which had encouraged me to problematise and critique these terms; I had therefore also begun to question my own enthusiasm for body positivity campaigns. Much of my frustration during the interviews stemmed from seeing that these women still drew energetically from these concepts and accepted them without deeper questioning.

I understood that my friends (and many laypeople) may not engage in these same debates, nor have the opportunity nor interest to read the same critical academic texts that I had come to regard as pivotal for understanding women’s responses to beauty ideals. Rather than assuaging my concerns however, this only exacerbated my exasperation that neatly packaged solutions forwarded by capitalist, neoliberal channels were more easily received and enacted than thoughtful critical thinking. Moreover, I was aware that voicing this frustration would likely be read as the arrogance of a patronising, joyless feminist who thinks she ‘knows better’ and is out to quash the positive efforts of self-care and self-help movements (McRobbie 2009). There seemed to exist a fine line between extending debate to (co-)create alternative ways of approaching these issues; and forwarding my own agenda to ‘convert’ participants to critique beauty ideals as I did.

I had to concede, eventually, that as much as I had intended to create ‘natural’ conversations between myself and my friend-participants, this was just not possible. Anderson (2006) warns of this potential disconnection when he talks about how the complete member researcher (CMR) is situated within the social world under study. He notes that although a pre-existing membership allows for connection through similarities with research participants, “the autoethnographer must orient [...] to documenting and analyzing action as well as to purposively engaging in it”. Therefore, this “multiple foci separate[s] them in ways from other participants” (380). Thus, I recognise that although I had often discussed my own body insecurities with these friends, my relationship to these issues were now very different. They were *not* just casual conversations between equals anymore, for as a researcher I was positioned both within and outside the friendship remit (Kvale 1996;

Johnson 2001; Ribbens 1989). Our discussions were now inseparable from the theories and critiques I was so engaged with in my theoretical readings and writing.

I was keen to offer my participants the opportunity to “use words that say what she means” and thereby “avoid naming the interviewee’s experience” for her (Klein 1983, 23-24).

However, given my growing awareness of the distance between myself and my participants, I felt increasingly insincere with my claim that I was co-creating knowledge and meaning with them. I questioned the extent that I could claim to be doing this when I recognised that I was approaching our discussions with a very distinct set of perspectives, motivations and critiques, many of which were formed within a specifically academic context. I became sceptical of how collaborative we can really be when we acknowledge the “contradiction in aiming for ultimate rapport [while] treating the person’s account both critically and sociologically” (Mearns 1985, 63; also discussed in Ribbens 1989 and Stacey 1988).

Further, my participants do not sit in with me as I transcribe, code and analyse my data, select the theories I use, or write. I question: can collaboration only really happen in that limited space of the interview itself?

At this point, I recall McRobbie’s warning that “*representations are interpretations*. They can never be pure mirror images” (McRobbie 1982, 51; original emphasis). I also draw reassurance from grounded theorists’ encouragement that we “develop a theory that accounts for much of the relevant behaviour” rather than to seek to perfectly “know the whole field” (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 30; Dey 2007). I am highly aware that much of the theoretical direction I have since taken has arisen precisely because of my contemplative reflections, (Mills, Bonner, and Francis 2006) and the discomfort I have felt around the interviews, which I investigate below. I return to my earlier discussion about using our own intuition, experiences and emotions as a resource for navigating our research. I have chosen to combine my discomfort as one among many strands of the collective accounts generated by participants and me, understanding that the complete story of this research evolves beyond the limits of the thesis and is something I can never perfectly ‘know’. I thus account for the ‘how’ of doing research (Stanley and Wise 1983, 196) by conducting this research *through* and *with* my own experiences, intuition, feelings and perspectives (Klein 1983).

### **3.6.2 How Discomfort Drove Me Forward**

Intuitive responses I felt during my fieldwork and in my analysis, have provided pivotal moments for advancing my research questions and deserves a full discussion of its own.

Within the analytic autoethnographic framework I use, these intuitive feelings account for three of the five criteria Anderson sets out, namely, analytic reflexivity, a visible presence of the author within the research, and maintaining dialogue with participants to extend the research beyond myself (Anderson 2006, 382-83, 386). The strongest sentiment I experienced around my interviews was discomfort. Despite my initial excitement for beauty stories and the potential offered by beauty dialoguing, I was surprised by my discomfort around the first eight group interviews in KL and Singapore. I was further frustrated by an inability to identify exactly what was informing these feelings. I took my cue from Klein (1983) who advises that we regard intuition, emotions and feelings – both in ourselves and our participants – as resources to be used in the research process. So, if I was paying attention to the beauty dialoguing within each interview and located myself as an active participant, I needed to include my responses within that dialoguing. The uncomfortable feelings I experienced, therefore, could not be ignored but had to be taken as a form of knowledge to direct my study (Reinharz and Chase 2001). Pillow advocates for consciously engaging “reflexivities of discomfort” to “interrupt” commonly accepted practices of reflexivity that reveal only certain kinds of comfortable stories and to, instead, “render the knowing of [the researchers’] selves or their subjects as uncomfortable and uncontainable” (Pillow 2003, 187-88). This uncertainty, she argues, can prompt opportunities for both researcher and reader to question and ‘speak back’ to the research in ways that would differ from straightforward representational accounts of the data.

So I sat with the discomfort that told me that something felt amiss in my data. By exploring this unease more deeply, I was led to making two key decisions in my fieldwork and analysis. One, as a result of these initial frustrations and grappling with data that I felt to be too shallow, I decided eventually to also conduct individual interviews with a new set of participants. I hoped that these individual interviews might draw deeper and more thoughtful reflections from participants. However, as I have eventually focused more on what participants have shared rather than on their interactions, this differentiation has not contributed as significantly to my analysis, and I recommend further study to examine the differences in interaction between individual and group interviews. Still, these individual interviews have provided rich data that has proven useful in my analysis and theorising, and served to complement discussions from the group interviews.

The second decision arose from the strong disconnection I felt between my own lifelong relationship to beauty ideals, and my participants’ accounts. By contrasting their stories against my own experiences, and past and current feelings towards my body, I questioned

why participants did not, for example, recount having the same insecurities as I did from reading teenage girl/women's magazines. If they did talk about media influence, discussion of these concerns seemed to hover at quite a superficial level. I had hoped that the beauty dialoguing would 'dig deeper'. I had anticipated, perhaps unfairly, that my participants might subject beauty ideals to more vigorous deconstruction and analysis, or demonstrate a more impassioned challenge to these ideals. It is not that I believed participants to be disingenuous in their discussions; in fact, I was deeply moved by their stories and surrounding discussions. However, the discussions often still 'felt' to me to be insufficient, that the data was somehow "refusing to do what I thought it should do" (McRobbie 1982, 48). In my own data, I recognised the same disparity that McRobbie found between her "wheeling in" (ibid.) of the subject of class in one of her research projects and the complete absence of this in her participants' talk. I questioned if I too was trying to shoehorn a particular response to beauty ideals among my participants, and how much this was overriding participants' own views.

The discomfort urged me to reconsider, yet again, how I was positioned in relation to my participants and their data. As discussed above, I had to acknowledge my distanced "marginality" as a researcher (Ribbens 1989, 589) and the widening differences between my standpoint and those of my participants. I consciously brought into view the three selves, discussed in Section 3.5.2, to contextualise these uncomfortable feelings. Which self was experiencing discomfort and what exactly was creating the unease for this/ese self/ves? This questioning led me to identify two significant threads. Firstly, the researcher self, who yearned to delve more deeply into a critique of contemporary beauty and neoliberal ideals, felt disheartened by what seemed to be a ready acceptance among some participants to the social beauty oppression. I identified among my participants a prevailing sense that we can do little to change these pressures and that feeling good about our bodies had to therefore come primarily from doing *individual inner* work. Secondly, my younger child and fitness selves were highly sceptical of participants' suggestions that they were either no longer affected by beauty pressures or well on their way to overcoming them. As I reflected upon my own lifelong struggle to reconcile the continuous, conflicting influences upon my own relationship to my body, I was disconcerted by the apparent ease with which many participants were resolving these tensions. This disconnect eventually led me to engage with neoliberal and popular (post) feminist theories around individuality, choice and empowerment, to try to understand the discourses that participants were drawing from to construct these responses to beauty ideals.

I was reassured by what Hertz (1997) says about striving to “integrate both general and particular experiences” by locating the specificity of my stories against the ‘general’ shared experiences of my participants (xiv). Although in this context Hertz discusses how our stories overlap and thus validate those of our participants’, I suggest that the opposite can also occur. We might sometimes struggle to find shared ground between our experiences and those of our participants, and this disconnection should be harnessed to evolve the questions we are asking. The “uncomfortable reflexivity” that I engage thus led me to “to use reflexivity in a way that would continue to challenge the representations we come to while at the same time acknowledging the political need to represent and find meaning” (Pillow 188, 192). My discomfort sustained for me an unwillingness to offer a straightforward ‘show-and-tell’ account of my data; while simultaneously pushing me to uncover other meanings in my own and my participants’ experiences. So, for example, if I was constantly struggling to fully articulate how ‘self-expression’ manifested in my material, daily experiences and relationship to my body, and if I always found myself in a muddle around contemporary notions of ‘choice’ and ‘empowerment’ – then how did my participants define these terms and why did they often refer to them so effortlessly?

Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) suggest:

When researchers do autoethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity.

(4)

I therefore venture to claim that my discomfort has been a form of epiphany – or has led to epiphanies – within the research process, “made possible” by situating my own experiences and identity against my participants’. It is this discomfort that led me to deeply query the discourses around beauty, bodies and femininity that my participants were employing; and to identify two recurring themes:

- 1) The lack of language for talking adequately about beauty in ways that felt worthy, and the subsequent need to ‘translate’ (DeVault 1990) beauty stories into other more valued discourses – this discussion informs Chapter Five.

- 2) The total responsabilisation of the individual towards improving their relationship to their bodies and their affective life (Scharff 2016) – this theme frames most of the thesis and is discussed in depth in Chapter Six.

The combination of these themes has ultimately directed me to shape the thesis primarily around feminist theories and their critiques of neoliberal and postfeminist attitudes towards the body, which primarily argue that women are compelled to assume fully individualised responsibility for overcoming social beauty oppression (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017; Gill and Orgad 2017). I have then proceeded to structure my onward analysis from this perspective, by examining how an increasingly popular neoliberal and postfeminist sensibility shapes my participants' negotiation of and resistance against contemporary beauty ideals.

### **3.7 Summary: Making Room for Agency**

During my data analysis, I often felt very nervous around my possible misinterpretations of my participants' interviews; I dreaded to think they may come back to me upon reading my final thesis and tell me that 'that is not what they meant' in their interview (Kvale 1996, 227). I worried that I might therefore misrepresent them, and that the research would become exploitative, by overlaying my own agendas atop their accounts (Cotterill 1992; Finch 1984; Stacey 1988). Moreover, I have struggled with the notion that I am unfairly imposing a reading upon my participants' data that is patronising and strips them of agency. A large strand of my thesis explores how neoliberal and postfeminist values direct women's contemporary beauty experiences and responses, but I was hesitant about discussing large structural, cultural influences that my participants themselves do not explicitly identify or name. I did not want for my analysis to imply that *I* can identify 'what is really happening' while they cannot, and that their embrace of self-help discourses around self-empowerment, choice and inner work is naïve or lacks critical insight.

Again, I have tried to engage with this unease and use it to propel my research. In this instance, my discomfort with the degree of interference I may have imposed onto the interviews has led me to develop a stronger interest in my participants' agency. Wary of universalising their perspectives and experiences, I began to seek instead for moments when they assert themselves, and talk back to overriding, hegemonic discourses. These might occur, for example, as stories about specific incidences that exemplify how they negotiate



conflicting beauty (and feminist) ideals. In the case of the magazine writers I interviewed, we explored the practical methods they used in their day-to-day work to counter common beauty standards in the fashion and media industries.

Beyond these few examples, I began to conceptualise of the interview itself as a space for my participants to negotiate and express agency (Holstein and Gubrium 2011). Although a certain amount of power ‘follows’ me as the researcher as I go on to analyse, interpret and represent the data, I propose that participants also maintain and perpetuate this agency within the space of the interview and in any of their onward conversations, with each other or in other social networks.

Sonia (28, York) shares in her group interview that she does not believe that online media campaigns bear as much influence upon us, but that “*us talking to each other, us talking to our loved ones [...] I think real people talking to other people, [...] that’s what changes conversations*” (original emphasis) Running alongside my analysis and theorising is a consideration of this potential for conversations between women friends to formulate moments of agency, communal meaning-making and collective empowerment. I developed a curiosity for how women can begin to exercise agency within the very act of talking to each other. Primarily, this serves to counter common cultural devaluations of women’s talk as ‘gossip’ (McRobbie 1982, 50) by honouring it, giving it a space of its own, and bringing into focus a specific subject – bodily beauty – that is frequently dismissed as either self-indulgent, trivial and unproductive. Eventually, I hope, such discussions can lead to further, deconstruction and evaluation, at a higher and broader level, of the overriding structural oppressions and inequalities that sustain this beauty oppression. As well as studying *what* they tell me, this research also considers the onward potential that convened conversations have for women to assert agency and resistance, for creatively making meaning within overriding structural constraints, and ultimately, for bringing these new understandings and knowledge forward to act in their worlds.

## Chapter Four

### Who's Afraid of Vogue? Re-examining the role of the Media on Women's Responses to Beauty Ideals

#### 4.1 Introduction: What Role does the Media Play for Us Today?

I began this research with an interest in the way beauty ideals were being promoted or challenged within the media – specifically, how online body positive material and campaigns were confronting conventional body ideals and offering what I perceived then to be new ways of thinking about beauty. I have since turned to look more broadly at women's responses to beauty ideals and the other influences, discourses and experiences they draw from, but my initial interest in the role of the media was important for directing me to this point. Before I proceed, however, I must clarify the definition of 'media' that I employ in this thesis. By this term, I refer to mainstream commercial media which are primarily visual and include print and online publications, television and film, advertising, and social media. For this chapter, I specifically examine women's glossy fashion magazines<sup>14</sup> and Instagram, as an example of a user-generated, image-centric social media platform. Some feminist theorists have examined how the media constructs its ideal audiences/readers as consumers and directs their audiences, especially women, towards the consumption of commodities (Banet-Weiser 2012; Cronin 2000). Consumerism does not arise as a strong theme within my data; furthermore, as I have found that theories of consumption are more relevant for analysing media content than the responses of my participants, I have chosen not to examine consumer practices in depth. However, I still incorporate some elements of consumption in my definition of media to account for the ways in which magazine production (and to some extent, the practice of reading magazines) are bound up with the business and sales-driven considerations of the magazine and media industries.

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<sup>14</sup> Glossy magazines (sometimes also referred to as 'glossies') get their name from the kind of shiny, coated paper on which they are printed, which is of a markedly higher quality than that used for other magazines, with a higher grammage and, literally, *glossy*. These magazines are distinguished from other women's magazines – which traditionally focused more on practical, domestic issues of housekeeping, cooking and parenting – by their pronounced emphasis on glamour, fashion, beauty and highly stylish, extravagant, 'glossy' lifestyles (Coleridge 2017; Harcup 2014).

To further contextualise my discussion of magazines, I recall my own responses to the beauty ideals propagated by girls' and women's magazines: first, my reading of American or Australian teen magazines, which led to feelings of body inadequacy, and accompanying instances of body shaming during my childhood; and second, my experiences of working for a fashion magazine, where we were still asking if women were 'pretty' enough to be featured in the magazine. It was therefore surprising to me that few of my interview participants spoke about having the same kind of reactions towards magazines as I did. These magazines were such a definitive part of how I had come to think and feel about my body, that I could not understand why so many of the women I spoke to seemed to downplay or deny the impact that the media had had on them. These participants' accounts also clashed with contemporary studies (though mostly in psychology-based research) that argue for the indisputable influence of media exposure on women's negative body image (Fardouly et al. 2015; Holmstrom 2004; Tiggemann and Polivy 2010; Yamamiya et al. 2005).

The ambivalent positions taken by my participants towards media influence may perhaps be attributed to what is known as the "third-person effect", by which people believe that messages promoted by mass communications do influence the attitudes and behaviours of audiences, but that others are affected to a greater degree than themselves (Davison 1983). However, I eventually saw that my interviews revealed something more complex. It was not that participants were explicitly denying the role of media in their lives. Rather, it emerged across almost all of my interviews that the women were more inclined to talk about their other experiences, relationships or interactions, *as entangled with* reflections on the media. This interplay between lived experience and the practice of reading magazines is discussed in some research on women's magazines. For example, in separate studies, McRobbie (1991), Hermes (1995) and Ytre-Arne (2014) examine the complex ways in which girls and women draw from everyday experience to engage with and interpret magazine content. Ballaster et al. (1991) have further demonstrated that women are reflexive and critical of the magazines they choose to read, and aware of the discourses and techniques employed within them.

During the interviews, I began to feel as though talking about the influence of magazines upon body and self-image was so self-evident as to render this an outdated conversation. My participants seemed to have such a ready understanding of the constructed and manipulated nature of glossy magazines that discussing their influence seemed almost naïve. Instead, I

intuited that something else was happening – perhaps a turn towards different aspirations and concerns. I have engaged my own experiences as a resource for probing participants’ interviews, consciously working from my scepticisms to trouble their claims that the media did not play as significant a role in influencing their responses to beauty. The disjuncture I felt between my own responses to media-perpetuated beauty ideals and those of my participants directed me to ask certain questions, during analysis, to understand what else was happening: If they do not feel affected by the media, then what potential role does, or can, the media play for them – if at all? If they are turning away from seeing the media as an influence, what other influences or ideals are they turning towards (whether consciously or not)?

The sections that follow explore how women negotiate this often conflicted relationship with the media, simultaneously as content producers (in magazines and on Instagram) and as readers/audiences. I explore some examples of how they try to make sense of, interact with or resist these messages, and how they locate themselves in relation to the content they both produce and consume. By discursively analysing how they talk about or construct their engagement with the media, I have sought to examine how women contextualise, read or resist the media in forming their responses to beauty ideals. This chapter focuses largely on interviews with women who have worked in women’s fashion magazines, some of whom were my colleagues at the same magazine, and affiliated website, at which I worked. I have found that examining the interviews with media content producers very rich for revealing the particular tensions between production and reception, resistance and pleasure, active agency and passivity. With this group of magazine writers, I am privy not just to insiders’ perspectives about the promotion of beauty ideals in the media; but also to their constructions of an envisaged ‘smart’ readership and the ways they expect or hope for their content to be received by these readers. I also investigate how these women reconcile their own bodily attitudes with their work in fashion magazines, which contribute to perpetuating the ideals that cause their body anxieties in the first place; and how they try to resist or alter definitions of beauty even as they enjoy associated beauty practices.

Additionally, I include some discussions with participants who do not work in the media but are keen readers/audiences, offering insights from the other side and examining how some readers attempt to make sense of and respond to the material they curate, view, enjoy or reject. Finally, by considering the responses of these (other) readers/viewers to their chosen media platforms, I explore the contradictory dialogues and tensions that arise between the

media producers who are seen to be responsible for perpetuating these media beauty ideals, and the audiences who variously find pleasure in and resist these messages.

## **4.2 Women's Conflicted Relationship with Glossy Magazines**

### **4.2.1 "It's Everywhere": The Ubiquity of Media Influence**

In many of my interviews, participants were quick to reference the ubiquity of media influence. During a KL group interview discussion about Hollywood and celebrity influence, Sandra (26) describes Hollywood as "Ground Zero... where a lot of [these standards of beauty] come from". The term 'Ground Zero' may be used here simply to mean that Hollywood is a starting point for many of our ideas about beauty; but it could also speak to the original definition of Ground Zero as a centre of nuclear explosions and subsequently, as sites of massive, violent, physical destruction. Danielle (25) follows Sandra's comment immediately by describing Hollywood as "where we get all our information from about beauty and stuff". The metaphors here are too rich to pass by – combined, these references to 'ground zero' situate Hollywood not only as a space for setting beauty standards but also, as wreaking tremendous damage upon us.

Moreover, not only do my participants regard the media as ubiquitous and harmful, but also as an unsurpassable authority in contemporary culture. When I ask another KL group whether they think that alternative beauty campaigns are making a difference in altering beauty ideals, Karen (29) says, "I feel they do but it's still competing with media [which is saying] 'No, you still need to look like a model'". In the first place, it is significant that she conceives of these alternative campaigns as being separate from and competing with the media, situated as a distinct, oppositional entity. Fara (30) then situates these independent efforts as "fighting against a big machine" and contrasts the limited "lifespan" of such campaigns with the "continual messaging" and "repetition of message" of 'bigger', dominant media forms. Further, she believes that these campaigns would have to be constantly repeated to override and change "an entire mindset that's been ingrained" by larger media platforms. The particular use of the word 'ingrained' implies that this media does not merely have some effect or influence on the way that its audiences think, but that it plays a significant role in shaping "an entire mindset" and deeply embedding certain values into it. By their discussion, Karen and Fara imply that mainstream media and its perceived corresponding influence on our body image are upheld as a distinct, impenetrable authority,

a force that other smaller, newer media forms are not only excluded from, but stand little chance of overriding.

Other participants also highlight the dominating influence that the media can have upon their own or others' ideas around beauty. They point out that "it's everywhere" (Charlotte, 37, London), so that "even when you're not consuming them, they're there" (Suzannah, 39, York). Because of this assumed pervasiveness of media influence, several participants are quick to attribute their body-related anxieties to the media messages they see, although very few of them offer specific examples of which media have affected them or what feelings these media have provoked for them. I therefore question the extent of this supposed media influence on my participants. Is it possible that the swift claims about the damaging nature of the media are a knee-jerk reaction arising out of a larger, commonly accepted (although not necessarily accurate) discourse that the media is (supposed to make us feel) bad, rather than because of any specifically identifiable harmful effects? Do many of us blame the media for how we feel about our bodies simply because that is an expected conversation to have? This blaming of media influence becomes, in itself, an accepted "[it]-goes-without-saying" discourse that becomes self-evident and reproductive (Barthes [1957] 2009, xix).

I read these perceived negative effects of the media in light of Barthes' ([1957] 2009) *Mythologies*, wherein he explains that mass cultural objects or practices come to be endowed with new meanings that are often different from their initial purposes. Barthes often argues that these alternative myths are created in ways designed to specifically enhance certain capitalist practices in society. Although I do not engage the same argument around capitalist motivations, the same principle of taken-for-granted meanings might be employed to understand the immediacy with which my participants point out the negative influence of popular media. In other words, a new myth forms around fashion magazines – because they are part of a ubiquitous media entity that is both "ground zero" and "everywhere", and because of their overt associations with beauty ideals, fashion magazines are automatically correlated as being harmful and responsible for women's negative body image. In turn, this myth of negative media influence becomes a common feature in onward discursive practices around beauty and body ideals (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017).

#### 4.2.2 “I Hold Myself Up to Chrissy Teigan!”: Negotiating the Tension between Magazine Fantasy and ‘Real Life’

Studies on women’s engagement with the media have argued that we are wrong to assume that it exerts a unilateral influence upon its readers, or that women are unwittingly responding directly and only to the messages promoted therein (Ballaster et al. 1991; McRobbie 1991). For example, in her interviews with teenage girls about *Jackie* magazine, Frazer discovered a discrepancy between the traits of the actual girls’ who read and reacted to the magazine content, and the qualities of the implied reader constructed by the magazine (Frazer 1987, 417). This finding is significant for the way we think about how magazines construct certain qualities of imagined readers and how their readers actually exercise agency in interpreting and responding to the content. Considering this fine line between imagined and actual readers, I have focused this chapter upon interviews with women who have worked in the media and who are very precisely located on both sides of this divide – as someone who both *constructs* the reader and *is* a reader herself. In fact, it was often this dual involvement with media messages around beauty that elicited the most interesting contradictions; I wanted to know how these conflicting views arose and what other discourses or resources these women drew upon to negotiate these opposing positions.

Firstly, I was struck by how these women conceived of the ways in which their magazines were read. Hannah (38, KL), deputy editor and, later, editor-in-chief of the magazine I worked for, defines magazines as “kind of a fantasy”, while Trixie (30, KL), the beauty editor of the same magazine, reflects that “a lot of it was just selling a dream”. Hannah speaks to a reader who “even if you’re so young you don’t actually get it intellectually, you kind of know that magazines are often not meant to be real life”. Trixie explicitly says that she believes that her readers are “quite smart” and that she would never “underestimate them or think that they didn’t know otherwise”. There is an assumption in both these definitions that both magazine writer and reader participate in a shared fantasy that is not meant to represent real life. However, I regard these definitions of glossy magazines as fantasy/dream as necessarily contradictory. Magazines may be “selling a dream” but the real financial success of the magazine (and its advertising clients) is predicated upon how convinced their readers are to ‘buy into’ this dream, and aspire towards obtaining some elements of it for their own real lives (McCracken 1993).

Hannah describes magazines as being “like beautiful mini books [...] with some useful information thrown in here”, thus attempting to separate fantasy from the real-life elements

of magazines. However, this description presumes that there is a clear line between what constitutes a fantasy that cannot be translated into practical lived reality, and the “useful information” that can. It also assumes that the ‘smart’ reader readily understands where this line is drawn and how to discern one side from the other. In practice, these demarcations are not so clear. Theorists of women’s magazines such as Ballaster et al. (1991) have noted that although women acknowledge that part of the lure of magazines is the fantasy they proffer, this element is always read alongside their everyday lives; and that even the kinds of magazines, and the distinct fantasies they each offer, are carefully selected by readers according to their individual social identities and aspirations.

In my Masters dissertation, which examined advertising in a 1926 issue of *Vogue* (US) magazine, I drew on Bowlby’s work (2002) on shopping and consumption to examine how the packaging of products becomes conflated with the function or traits of the products themselves (Khoo 2003). I suggest that the same principle occurs in the conflation of fantasy and the ‘real-life elements’ of a magazine: just as packaging ‘sells’ a particular dream that is promised by the purchase and consumption of the product itself, so too are the fantasy elements of the magazine complemented and made real by the accompanying ‘useful information’. So, we may identify the fantasy crafted within a beautiful, styled fashion spread, but the supplementary practical fashion tips or travel guides on adjacent pages – including specific details such as brands and pricing – are ‘useful’ for helping us to achieve (at least in part) that same dream for ourselves. Specifically, Winship points to the example of a feature common to many women’s magazines, which details all the beauty products and clothes used to style the cover model. Thus, “few women readers will make an immediate identification with these cover images: they are too polished and perfect, so *unlike* us ... Paradoxically though, we do respond to them” (Winship 1987, 11). By listing these commodities, the magazine “[sells] us an image to aspire to, [and] persuade[s] us that we, like the model, can...” aspire towards and realise the same success for ourselves (ibid.; see also Duffy 2017).

Contradicting this idea of magazine as fantasy, participant Evie (49, Singapore), the editor-in-chief of the Singaporean edition of a women’s glossy magazine, believes that “fashion magazines are terribly powerful ... in messaging ... ideals of beauty.” She offers the following example:

...the two big ideals of beauty that fashion magazines propagate which are, in turn, fueled by ... audiences who pick up these ... magazines ... are skin



colour and size. So last April, we ran a cover with Rathi Menon who was Miss Singapore Universe 2014. That was a worst-selling cover ever, even though it was the best looking, most internationally-looking, [...] most on-brand blah blah blah cover, that we have produced in a long time, you know? It was... the cover that everyone in the [brand name] magazine empire loved and it tanked on the newsstands, because she's dark-skinned, and she was fat, because she was curvy, she had [a] bigger size.

Thus, while magazines may create and contain elements of fantasy, these fantastical components are still predicated upon very real values and limitations – in this case, existing prejudices and/or bias towards (ideal) skin colour/race and body size. In creating fantastical ideals that the reader might aspire towards, the magazine inevitably also reinforces the unspoken 'real life' limitations (what we *don't* have or *are not*) that encourage us to fantasise in the first place. Though magazines may no longer explicitly state what ideal beauty is, the creation of very particular kinds of fantasy delineate, in converse, what *is not* worthy of aspiration. The repeated "messaging [of] ideals of beauty" that showcase predominantly fair-skinned and thin women on magazine covers, for instance, underscores the desirability of fantasising about this particular kind of appearance and body, such that a magazine featuring a dark-skinned, fat cover "tank[s] on the newsstands" because it jars against the more commonly disseminated fantasy that readers are encouraged towards.

Often, this separation between fantasy and 'real life' is not clear even to my participants. For example, despite their involvement in the day-to-day processes of constructing a magazine, styling photoshoots and selecting images of women/models, these editors and writers still confessed that they compared themselves to these beautiful images and felt bad about their own bodies as a result. Trixie, having served as beauty editor and writer for several women's fashion magazines, would have been familiar with the enormous world of beauty products and the marketing strategies employed to promote these products. She was responsible for creating each beauty article or feature in the magazine – from conceptualising story ideas, to styling models and selecting photographs, to curating collections of beauty products and writing accompanying tips or reviews. Trixie is also an avid user of Instagram and very familiar with photo editing applications. However, despite her many years of professional and personal experience, she professes that she must still apply "conscious effort" to maintain the "certain level of confidence that [she does] have with [her] body" and that there are days when she feels unattractive, "like a potato". When I ask her what triggers these changing feelings towards her body, she says:

Instagram in that sense does my head in a bit ... ‘cos like, on the one hand, like I know that there are– [...] you know, super hot girls on Instagram. I know they take in their– like, they pinch their photos, I know, I can see it because like, my eye is trained enough to actually see the background like, you know, ... out of proportion or distorted [...] but the thing is even though I *know* it’s a distorted image, I *know* they don’t really look like that, it still gets to me somehow.

(Original emphasis)

Trixie makes it clear that she is competent at reading the ways which images are manipulated; even as she admits that this content “gets to [her]”, she locates her anxiety within her knowledge and understanding of content creation. She thus draws attention to the effects that media-generated images can have on self-image and self-confidence – if someone trained to detect distorted images still compares herself to those ideals, what of everyone else *without* this expertise?

It is not just women dealing specifically in the business of beauty who experience these ambiguous feelings towards their bodies. Women who work/ed in women’s magazines with openly feminist intentions to address urgent social and political issues, including the oppression of women’s bodies, also profess similar tensions. Melissa (36, London), who worked as website editor for the same magazine, maintained openly feminist intentions to discuss important current affairs, including sexual assault and unrealistic beauty ideals. And yet, during her interview, she also confesses – somewhat frustrated with herself – to comparing herself to model Chrissy Teigan:

I would be looking at Instagram and you know Chrissy Teigan? [...] she would like– ... she looked *amazing* in her pregnancy, she was *amazing* all the time, and then she looked *amazing* after she gave birth, and I, I hold myself up to Chrissy Teigan! I’d be like, “Why am I not like Chrissy Teigan?!”

(Original emphasis)

Later, she adds:

I know how ludicrous it sounds because, you know, Chrissy Teigan has got like 700 people styling her for one Instagram. You know, Chrissy Teigan has got help so that, you know, she can go to the gym and get her body back. Chrissy Teigan's money maker *is her body*, yeah? Why the fuck are you comparing yourself to Chrissy Teigan? [laughs]

(Original emphasis)

Even as she admits to “hold[ing] [her]self up to Chrissy Teigan”, Melissa finds herself in a conflicted position: she is aware of “how ludicrous it sounds” and, like Trixie, understands the intricacies of producing these images. Yet she still experiences these feelings of inadequacy. To emphasise her awareness of “how ludicrous” these thoughts are, she chides and laughs at herself – “Why the fuck are you comparing yourself to Chrissy Teigan?” and seems almost embarrassed. Melissa also despairs over the trivial content that the magazine was continuing to publish at the time of the interview, highlighting instead that, “children are dying in Syria and [...] we've got refugees on the shores of Greece and– [...] and the government in Malaysia is so corrupt”. In both instances – by laughing at herself and by pointing out more serious issues – Melissa obliquely references an alternative, more acceptable selfhood: a self that would *not* compare herself to models on Instagram and feel bad about it, and would seek instead to develop more useful qualities to be able to effectively address meaningful social and political issues.

To examine this discomfort, I draw from Davis' (2003) reflections upon the ambivalent position that women occupy when electing cosmetic surgery:

[B]y both advocating cosmetic surgery and also “taking the other side,” women can work through their own ambivalences about an action that is neither self-explanatory nor unproblematic for them. More generally, their justifications display what makes cosmetic surgery both desirable and problematic, necessary and optional, constraint and choice – all in one.

(82)

Although Davis does not speak explicitly about media consumption, it is helpful to consider Trixie's and Melissa's experiences in/with the media in light of these same tensions. In the case of these participants, ‘taking the other side’ is not just theoretical musing; as magazine writers, they *are* simultaneously both sides, producer *and* consumer, and their very ambivalence can be read as arising out of dual, simultaneous participation in/with their

chosen media platforms. As with Davis' participants, these women also acknowledge that their interactions with and reactions to magazines or Instagram can be difficult to articulate or explain, even to themselves. Their readings are thus always going to be "both desirable and problematic [...] constraint and choice" (ibid).

Through both Trixie's and Melissa's accounts of their ambivalent relationship to beauty ideals and the media they choose to view, we might better understand why the fantasy of the media and real life cannot be read as completely separate entities. Rather, the fantasy elements of magazines are always read in relation to real life, while 'useful' 'real-life elements' help to ground the fantastical elements of the magazine into readers' everyday lives. This symbiotic relationship between the two discourses then allows each one to perpetuate. Tomrley's work on women's readings of celebrity gossip magazines (CGMs) offers further insight for understanding this tension. She explains:

Interviews I conducted for my research with women who look at CGMs revealed that they were able to be very critical of them and viewed their body-surveillance as oppressive. However, sixteen of the seventeen women I spoke with continued to look at them, despite holding these opinions. Therefore even in cases where the ideology, hegemony and potential problem of a text is transparent to those consuming it, the act of consumption continues and the circulation and re-circulation of the discourses persists.

(Tomrley 2009, 58)

Both the women of Tomrley's study and my participants sustain the same awareness of the potentially oppressive effects of magazines on their body image; simultaneously, they acknowledge the continued pleasure and corresponding "oppressive" feelings from consuming them. Tomrley suggests that continual consumption and reading of these magazines allows harmful discourses to perpetuate. For participants such as Trixie and Melissa, this would mean that the negative feelings they experience towards their bodies are, paradoxically, facilitated and perpetuated by the very act of continued reading/viewing itself.

Although these participants were able to identify these contradictions, and even explicitly acknowledge "how ludicrous it sounds", they were rarely (if ever) able to reconcile these positions clearly during the interviews. Trixie and Melissa do not just view these Instagram posts in a passive and uninformed way. There is also active and sought-after *enjoyment* in the act of consuming and viewing them, even as they know it engenders harm. I therefore

question whether this embarrassment around their reactions is more an attempt to distance themselves from what is perceived to be the comparatively “low status” of women’s media (Hermes 1995, 29). There is the sense among these women (and myself) that with our insider knowledge of the media, our education and awareness of bigger social problems, *we should know better* – we should be able to transcend the petty preoccupation with our bodily appearance and either develop a more stable confidence in ourselves or redirect our focus towards more important current affairs. But who is this ‘we’ who should know better: who decides which issues are more important? And what or whose knowledge is ‘better’? (Smith 1987). One of my arguments in this thesis is precisely that there are few spaces or discourses for women to talk about their bodies in ways that are valued and taken seriously. Rather, the belittling of these issues (not least when it concerns themselves) suggests that women still defer to broader social and political issues as more valuable; and that the masculinised domain of public political, social life continues to be upheld as more respectable than the private, feminised sphere of women’s issues (such as concerns with their bodily appearance) and women’s media platforms (such as fashion magazines) (Thornham 2007).

## **4.3 Negotiating (the Possibilities and Threat of) Media Influence**

### **4.3.1 “I Believe [Our Readers] Are Quite Smart”: Constructing the Intelligent Reader**

I return here to Hannah and Trixie’s separate discussions about their imagined readers. Consider these excerpts:

I’ve never thought that magazines had as much influence over women’s body image as ... tabloid media for instance likes to say they do [...] Magazines are kind of a fantasy and it’s a bit like, I think even if you can’t– even if you’re so young you don’t actually get it intellectually, you kind of know that magazines are often not meant to be real life, they’re meant to be, you know, fantasy and beauty, and there ... are real life elements in terms of the features and shopping pages and things like that, but on the whole it’s, I dunno, I ... never ... read them as newspapers, I ... read them as just like beautiful mini books, really, with some useful information thrown in here.

(Hannah)

[A] lot of it was just selling a dream? [...] I would really like to think that our readers and our audiences were— you know, I mean I believe that they're quite smart. [...] I would never like, underestimate them or think that they didn't know otherwise. That's why whenever I would write, it would be kind of, you know, informative, like yes, give them hacks, tips and stuff like that, but never like— I mean I just tried to not be condescending in any way.

(Trixie)

Hannah locates her understanding of magazines as “a kind of fantasy”, which she explicitly differentiates from ‘real life’. I could argue that fantasies and the practices of daydreaming that create and sustain them, themselves constitute a part of our daily lives, practices and subjectivities. However Hannah's and Trixie's distinction marks fantasy as something contained within an intangible “imaginary space” (Haug 1987, 54), which cannot be applied to our material, lived experiences in the way that “useful information”, “hacks [and] tips” can. Real life in these contexts can be physically and temporally experienced, practised or enacted, while fantasy remains only psychic, a mental visualisation that does not translate into the mundane everyday.

By making this distinction, Hannah contradicts a broader discourse about media having a simplistic, straightforward influence on women's body image. She challenges the cultural authority of tabloid media and what they “like to say” by asserting the opposite: “I've never thought that magazines had as much influence over women's body image”. Her subsequent description of what magazines *are* and what they have meant to her responds to commonly accepted truisms about magazines' influence on women. For example, she clarifies that she “never read [magazines] as newspapers” which demonstrates her understanding that magazines are not meant to fulfil the same factual reportage role as newspapers; by regarding them as “mini books with some useful information”, she positions magazines more as an item of leisure and fanciful imagining. But Hannah does not believe that it is only her who reads magazines as “beautiful mini books [...] with some useful information thrown in”. Her use of the second person nods to a general knowledge that readers of all ages – even those who are “so young” as to “not actually get it intellectually” – understand the fantasy of magazines, that they are “not meant to be real life” but just contain some “real life elements”. Likewise, Trixie assumes in her readers an existing knowledge that the magazine is selling a dream – she asserts, “I would never [...] think that they didn't know

otherwise”. She then locates herself within this paradigm, qualifying what she writes – “hacks, tips and stuff like that” – as “informative”.

By employing these definitions, Hannah and Trixie envision a smart reader who knows how to distinguish and navigate between fantasy and real life. By according their readers this pre-existing knowledge and agency, they therefore seem to lessen their own influence and authority as editors, marking a significant shift away from the ways in which magazines and their editors were previously perceived. In *Forever Feminine*, Ferguson used the trope of cults to explore the authority that women’s magazines (which she calls “oracles”) and their editors (“high priestesses”) held for the “setting of boundaries on the female world” and “in promoting historically specific interpretations of ‘appropriate’ female roles” (Ferguson 1985, 131). Her study considered women’s magazines from the 1950s to the early 1980s so the ideals and constructions of femininity and female success therein would have been markedly different from today’s. Of greater interest here is the strong degree of influence that she attributed to magazine editors and the corresponding reverence she believed readers held for magazines:

[The editors of magazines] are ... powerful in that they exercise influence over their readers to the extent that women rely on them for information, support, guidance, direction about – or distraction from – those things which they equate with their womanliness, and which they choose to read about in that connection.

(ibid.)

Although Ferguson wrote this more than thirty years ago, I argue that this perception of editors and magazine influence has become a “myth” (Barthes [1957] 2009) that editors (and readers) continue to draw on to define their current roles and readers. My participants who are editors seem to suggest that they do not believe they have as much power as we presume to make significant changes within their magazines; however, the way they conceive of and talk about their roles can still be seen to respond to this myth of editors having power. Hannah’s quotation above explicitly references the common idea (as perpetuated by tabloid media) that magazines yield a lot of influence over women’s body image, before she goes on to refute it. More subtly, Trixie assumes a knowingness in her readers such that any explicit assertion of her authority as a beauty editor would be read as “condescending”. Just before the excerpt above, she even expresses a kind of egalitarian approach to crafting her content. She explains:

Hey, I might not be able to like paint the perfect smokey eye but, who knows, maybe you [the reader] can! [laughs] [...] It's like, let's just try this together...

Trixie demonstrates that she does not think of herself as “exercising influence over her readers” nor as an expert who has perfected all beauty practices and techniques. Rather, she constructs herself more as a guide sharing “informative hacks and tips” and as someone trying to figure things out alongside her reader.

I pause here to briefly discuss some of the limitations that my participants describe in trying to redress the beauty ideals promoted within the magazines where they worked. At various points in her interview, Hannah shares the difficulty she has in reconciling her feminist objectives for the magazine or her desire to initiate change, with the various practical constraints of working within this industry. As we talked about representing more diverse bodies in the magazine, for example, she elaborated:

I feel like we're actually really one tiny little cog in the system, like, people think magazines have all the power, and they don't. I mean, it's one thing if you're *Vogue UK*, but even there, Alex[andra] Shulman<sup>15</sup> has talked about how difficult she has found it, you know, to— when designers make samples for tiny, tiny sizes, they specify the kind of model they want them, you to use, like, you know, so many different reasons that it's so hard to have body diversity and beauty diversity.

These constraints are not uncommon in the magazine industry, especially for glossy women's magazines in countries which are not considered fashion capitals or leaders in arts and culture (which those such as London, New York or Paris are). For example, Favaro and Gill (2018) show that editors/writers in Spanish women's magazines are very reluctant to create overtly feminist campaigns because of the financial risk of losing advertisers; or a reticence to disturb an existing status quo, especially within conservative cultures. Both these reasons factored strongly in the magazine Hannah and I worked in too – we frequently deferred to advertisers and, like the Spanish editors, did not feel we had the same authority or resources to initiate the same kinds of changes that the US or UK editions of our

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<sup>15</sup> Editor of the British edition of *Vogue* magazine from 1992 to 2017.



magazine title could. The “system” that Hannah refers to above, however, is one that all magazines globally have to contend with, and comprises several interconnected industries – the magazine publishing industry, the advertising sector and the brands they represent, which include fashion and beauty entities. Although the ‘we’ she uses here references magazines as a whole, it also applies to individual editorial staff – from *Vogue*’s editor to the lone features writer, Hannah suggests that none of us, individually or collectively, have all (or any of) the power to make the necessary decisions to enable greater bodily representation. It is especially significant that Hannah references *Vogue* here. Of all women’s fashion magazines, *Vogue* is known throughout the fashion and magazine industries for leading and setting fashion trends. In spite of *Vogue*’s ‘authority’ and prestige, Hannah points out the difficulties that even they encounter in implementing greater body diversity, which hints at how much worse the situation would be for lesser-known titles.

Below, I discuss the micro-resistances that magazine writers like Hannah enact to attempt to challenge this system. For now, I draw attention again to the importance of imagining an autonomous, intelligent reader who is able to differentiate between the fantasy of magazines and real life, and query these constructions. Given the constraints on how much body diversity and change they are able to initiate from within the magazine, Hannah’s and Trixie’s remarks suggest that they (need to) assume that their readers possess a ready set of knowledge about how magazines work, so as to be able to decipher what is real and useful from what is merely fantastical imagining, and to negotiate between these differences themselves. The myth that regards women’s magazine editors as all-powerful high-priestesses, who set agendas and boundaries for women’s worlds (Ferguson 1985), is thus discarded; instead, magazine content creators shift some degree of authority to their readers to set their own agendas and boundaries. In the excerpts above, Hannah suggests that readers “kind of know that magazines are often not meant to be real life”; Trixie states that she “never [...] think[s] that they didn’t know otherwise”. But what is it exactly that readers should know? Where and how is this knowledge and this media literacy learnt? And even if readers do have an awareness of the fantasy constructed within a magazine, do they all differentiate the fantastical elements from the real-life ones in the same way? Sandra points out that, after all, “you can’t monitor what people see”, suggesting that there are limits for how much influence magazine producers actually have over what readers choose to view or are exposed to, and their subsequent responses.

In the mid-1990s, McRobbie pointed to a growing generation of magazine writers who were disrupting the traditional loci of issues covered in magazines with their own sometimes

radical political leanings and social awareness. She notes that they “refuse... to talk down to readers” (McRobbie 1996, 183-84), just as Trixie says she would not underestimate her readers’ intelligence and tries not to be condescending to them. Use of the colloquial timbre of ‘write-speak’, the chatty, ironic tones frequently found across contemporary glossy magazines, constructs the postfeminist magazine reader as being just like the writer (Ferguson 1985, 165-66) – in other words, the reader is positioned as being just as discerning as the people who have created this content, and as having the resources and intellect to navigate the plural, often conflicting discourses of fantasy and everyday life within the magazine. But she is not just smart in terms of intelligence. For a reader to adequately and ‘smartly’ assess the material she is reading, to appreciate the tone and timbre of each magazine title, and to understand specific social and cultural references, she requires an amount of social and cultural capital only available to people who enjoy certain educational backgrounds, financial standing and exposure to transnational travel and cosmopolitan culture.

Further, while magazine writers may refuse to “talk down to readers”, they are not necessarily trying to understand where their readers come from or how they ‘talk’. Writers take *their own stance* as their starting point – a position that already possesses certain knowledge and enjoys specific privileges. For example, many of the magazine writers among my participants have had a private or international education, or travel widely. Even if they cannot personally afford luxury items, they are exposed to a very glamorous, wealthy world of branded consumer items, champagne-fuelled media events, overseas trips and fancy media gifts; they possess a kind of cultural capital rich in ‘insider’ fashion and celebrity news. Despite a magazine writer’s best efforts to write in a personable, chatty way, it is the reader who must aspire and ‘reach’ upwards to meet the writer’s knowledge and privileges, not the other way around. For the magazine writer, “the capitals already exist” (Skeggs 1997, 91), though the same cannot be assumed for the reader. To address the reader as being ‘like them’ is therefore to assume that they already have these same cultural and social understandings; that they have, as Trixie suggests, the resources at hand to be able to share tips and “try it together”.

We must query how accurate or helpful it is to think of media producers and audiences as possessing the same level of knowledge and as understanding issues from the same perspectives. For many young women, the opportunity to work in a fashion magazine is itself a highly aspiration and coveted one (Duffy 2017). Writers like Hannah and Trixie are *not* just like their readers. By virtue of living the career dream of many a woman, they

occupy a subjective position that, for the reader, is already regarded as elevated and idealised, a fantastical self that possesses greater style acumen and knowledge. In fact, some of these women in the media explicitly see themselves possessing certain industry knowledge and insight that the ordinary person does not. When I ask Beverly (40), Adeline (41) and Louise (45) (all KL) if they feel they have been influenced by media messages about ideal bodies and beauty, Beverly responds:

I think working in media makes us see things from the other way [...] I think, like, if you look at something in a magazine or on TV, like, yes that looks good but you also know the process that happens behind it and that, you know, how it came to be such, and that everything is scripted [...]

Lara (37, Singapore), who has worked in public relations and advertising elaborates that when she sees media content, she is “trained” to determine “whether it’s a good ad[vert], [or] it’s a bad ad, because I know how it works.” She explains that she can assess an advertisement from “any angle”:

Does it tell me what I needed to know as a consumer? Is it useful to me? And then from an industrial point of view – is it effective? What can be done right? What can be ... done better?

These comments serve to consciously position these participants on both sides, as media producer and consumer, and therefore as a trained expert armed with considerably more knowledge and better understanding of “how it works”. Because of their industry experience, Beverly and Lara explicitly highlight that they are *not* like the average viewer and that they understand, at a deeper level, how messages are purposefully crafted and manipulated to effect certain responses. When we converse about body positivity videos from *The What’s Underneath Project*, Beverly’s group (KL) shares that they not especially impressed by the defining feature of the video subjects removing items of clothing as they are interviewed, regarding this strategy as a “gimmick”. Louise, from the same group, sets them apart “from the masses out there” by remarking that “we look beyond what we call the gimmicks”. However, she notes that “if you’re targeting the masses out there [...] it probably works because, you know, 80 per cent of the people are very visually driven.” The citation of a statistic underlines that it is a *majority* of people (“the masses”) who are not likely to identify the stylistic ruses used in content production and will simply be “driven” by what they are shown.

Lara is more strategic in her assessment of advertisements:

not many [ads] will leave an impression, because ... they're just, like, the same ad, like every other ad [...] it helps me ... to keep me on my toes when I come up with, you know, different campaigns and just *to make sure that I do not make the same mistake and do not create ads as just like another ad.*

(My emphasis)

In this case, Lara actively engages and works with, what Louise might call a “gimmick”, in order to better effect an affirmative impression on audiences. Whether it is to call out the deliberate use of tactics in media content, or to work directly with those tactics themselves, Louise, Beverly, Adeline and Lara’s discussions here reveal how media messages are very purposefully constructed and manipulated to evoke certain desired responses in “the masses out there.” In this context, then, readers and viewers are *not* regarded as being at all like media content producers; audiences are constructed as not possessing the same insight and expertise to be able to differentiate between a real message and a mere gimmick. So we may question where and how the ‘smart’ reader figures in these instances: Why is a smart audience able to separate fantasy from real life in some instances, but not be able to decipher the truth of a message from the gimmicks in others?

There is a second contradiction in the discussion around the limitations of working in the media. When Hannah and Trixie talk about selecting models for their photo shoots, they note the non-negotiable restrictions they often encounter in trying to feature more diverse types of bodies and faces. Beverly, Evie and Danielle share in their respective group interviews the intricate manipulations behind photo shoots and digital image editing, in order to present subjects in very particular ways. Hannah and I discuss how large amounts of the editorial content we worked with were determined by advertisers. So, while readers/audiences may have some general understanding of the use of Photoshop, or branding and marketing tactics, these media participants talk about intricate processes and limitations in their work, to a depth and extent that can be known only from having worked inside the media (these discussions and personal anecdotes are explored further in Section 4.4).

Carmen (29, York) highlights this gap when she reveals, as a reader/consumer, that although she knew of photo editing technology, “I didn’t actually think it’s used as widely as it’s now

coming out”. As a doctoral candidate, pursuing research at an established institution, we might very well consider Carmen a ‘smart’ woman; but this intelligence is not necessarily predicated on her also understanding the finer mechanisms in magazine and advertising production. So, while some of my media participants refer widely to an intelligent readership, this assumption sometimes contradicts with audiences’ actual responses to the media they interact with. Media content producers cannot assume that just because their readers may be ‘smart’, that they also share the same insider experience and knowledge to be able to straightforwardly discern the makings of fantasy from the ‘real life’ processes and limitations dealt with from within.

I recall quotations cited earlier in this chapter, where participants note the ubiquitous authority of the media, and its overriding, overwhelming influence in “ingrain[ing]” messages and mindsets (Fara, 30, KL). It is important at this point to reconsider the persistent impact and might of the media, which participants themselves view as being difficult to contest or to fully separate themselves from. As I mentioned briefly above, participants were sometimes quick to attribute their personal bodily struggles, past and present, to undue pressures from the media (although, as discussed above in Section 4.2.1, this swiftness in blaming the media may sometimes also arise out of a taken-for-granted belief [myth] in the implicit harmfulness of the media). For instance, May (29, KL) admits, “I think I’m brainwashed by the media, like, to have a bikini body” when I ask her what determines her fitness goals. Emma (30, London) shares that she grew up thinking of beauty as “being a specimen of physical perfection [...] maybe like along the lines of a sort of Victoria’s Secret model” (images of which are widely disseminated through magazines, advertising and television programmes). Speaking more generally about how a general audience responds to media ideals, Sonia (28, York) notes that “it’s hard to believe [that this stuff is Photoshopped] when you’re seeing it ... You still get sucked into it.”

In all these instances, do we still regard May, Emma and Sonia as the intelligent readers imagined by magazine editors? What does this intelligence comprise? Is it reasonable to assume that they are ‘smart’ enough to know that a magazine features very particular images of very specific kinds of bodies, not because their writers want to promote that type of beauty as desirable, but because they are, as Hannah explains, only a “tiny cog” working within very real constraints set by the larger fashion and advertising industries? Are ‘smart’ readers expected to also have a full understanding of the practical limitations and processes of media content creation, in order to be able to discern between what is idealised fantasy or not? As I discussed in Section 4.2.2, even media producers themselves, such as Trixie and

Melissa, reveal that they are still negatively affected by the media content they view despite having in-depth, insider knowledge of how this content is created. We are led to question: How different are Trixie's 'smart' readers who understand that the magazine is just "selling a dream", from Trixie herself, who still compares herself unfavourably to the Instagram images she sees?

Importantly, I am not suggesting that women read magazines passively without exercising any agency or discernment to receive and interpret the content in ways that are meaningful and intelligible to them. However, this construction of a particular kind of clever, informed reader sets up its own restricted value system. Media producers like Hannah and Trixie accord agency to their readers by presuming their ability to read the magazines in 'smart' ways. However, this autonomy necessarily means that the reader has to assume full responsibility for her reading of and responses to the magazine. She must understand and ascertain what systems are at work, understand the associated limitations, and thus decide what to take as practical information and what to relegate as fantasy. Any consequent inability to discern the fiction of fantasy from the facts of "useful information" is then regarded as personal incompetence – the negative feelings she continues to feel towards her body are consequently attributed to a personal inability to separate the two. The fact that Melissa berates herself for comparing herself to Chrissy Teigan and feeling inadequate ("I know how ludicrous it sounds ... Why the fuck are you comparing yourself ...?"), exemplifies how she still internalises responsibility for engaging with such media in the 'right' way. Despite believing in the pervasiveness of media influence, women may well not lay any blame upon it after all.

Given these examples, we can begin to see how these constructions of the 'smart' reader are again conceptualised in highly neoliberalised terms – it is not enough to just be intelligent, but rather, a reader must exercise cleverness in very specific ways, demonstrating discernment and the ability to generate reflexive, informed responses to the content she views (discussed further in the next section). Is media influence, therefore, only something that happens to those 'others' (Davison 1983) who do not apply their intelligence in this same, specific way?

### 4.3.2 “It’s Your Instagram! It’s Your Space”: Considering the Process and Pleasures of Women’s Media Engagement

I turn my focus from media content producers to readers and audiences. While I have discussed how magazine editors work from within the specific platform of fashion magazines and how they envisage and construct their audiences, I now question how these supposedly ‘smart’ readers themselves curate and engage with their preferred media platforms: How is their smartness enacted? What criteria do they use to select the material they view? And how do they engage with, qualify and respond to the content they read/view? I examine the contributions of two participants – Sonia (28, York) and Carina (36, Singapore) from separate group interviews – who spoke enthusiastically about their use of Instagram. In the first instance, Carina explains:

I was mucking around with my cousin’s Instagram and then I played with mine. And mine is actually just a lot more positive and a lot more happy because of who I’ve chosen to follow. So if someone’s making you [...] feel shitty, unfollow them! It’s *your* Instagram! It’s *your* space. You have that option.

(Original emphasis)

She does not define a positive or happy Instagram account – what is it about an Instagram account or post that makes her feel positive or happy? How, in the first place, does she define happiness? Why is happiness a determining and prioritised factor for how she chooses the content she interacts with? (Chosen over other qualities such as thoughtfulness or activism, for example) (Ahmed 2010; Binkley 2014)<sup>16</sup>. Carina goes on to say, “If someone’s making you feel shitty, unfollow them”. What an Instagram account comprises or shows is of less concern. Instead, for Carina, the feelings it provokes in the viewer are more significant, and because “it’s *your* space [...] *you* have the option” to determine what you see and interact with. Her use of the second person pronoun is important, signalling the agency that each individual Instagram user has to control what she sees. Instagram is not seen here as a neutral form nor one that is controlled by an external entity; to describe it as “*your* space” suggests individual ownership and control of the platform, within which “*you* have [the] option” to curate the content viewed.

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<sup>16</sup> The neoliberal drive towards positivity and happiness is another ideal that must be problematised, which I discuss in Chapter Six.

Sonia describes the type of accounts she follows, which are mostly divided into two genres: 1) “body positive stuff, women ... just being like– have a story of the day where they photograph different women, the women tell their stories”, and 2) fashion – “pictures of models who are super skinny, wearing the perfect pair of jeans that I really, I’m like [sighs], ‘must have’”. Throughout the interview, Sonia talks a lot about her bodily struggles and the pressures she has felt from her family, who maintain a strong preoccupation with weight and health. In many of our personal conversations, we talk frequently about self-love and self-care; we also share a love of shopping and clothes, and often swap links to shopping websites. It therefore seemed logical that she would purposefully choose to populate her chosen media content with these same interests. She explains:

I’m sure that it is a reflection of me to see it, but I– like, I guess what I find beautiful is both of those things, like, the confidence in the one and like, the self-love and confidence. And the other thing is like... I dunno, I think just the- (**Jamie:** Beautiful things) fashion. Yeah, like the– ... the beautiful– like the jewellery [...] [laughs] and the lights, and the perfect apartments that I really want one day...

This instance of media engagement perfectly exemplifies the cross-over between fantasy and real life. Sonia curates her Instagram content as “a reflection of me”, anchored in the things that she “finds beautiful”. However, the beautiful jewellery, lights and apartments are not just part of a fantasy constructed to “sell a dream”, as Trixie describes, above; these are things that Sonia feels she “must have” or “really want[s] one day”, and they foster strongly consumer-driven desires. Duffy calls this “aspirational consumerism”, encouraging “a projection of *who the individual may become*”. This envisioned “future self” can not only afford “an improved life flush with shiny, new products”, but will also possess the necessary cultural capital to be able to live the dream (Duffy 2017, 23). Thus, elements of fantasy and real life, which Hannah suggests are demarcated one from the other, converge in Sonia’s Instagram feed. For Sonia, the aspirational quality of both a body-confident attitude and beautiful fashionable skinny jeans arise out of the very real body insecurities and love of fashion that she experiences in her everyday life. These things may be unattainable at the moment, so in that sense are still fantasy. But in her desire for this lifestyle and these products, she may be led to shaping her everyday practices in particular ways right now, such as dressing and grooming in a certain way, purchasing specific commodities, or pursuing career goals that will enable her to afford that lifestyle. As Duffy notes, in quoting the publisher of Harper’s Bazaar magazine: “we read to dream and aspire, but also to



*acquire*” (ibid. 23, my emphasis), to literally buy into the things we fantasise about. My research does not include studies of participants’ everyday embodied practices, in this sense, so I cannot know if these Instagram posts do explicitly direct Sonia’s daily practices and habits. However, my point here is that there *is not* a clear distinction to be made between what a magazine writer may construe as fantasy and what readers incorporate into their real-life aspirations and activities.

Both Carina and Sonia take responsibility for their enjoyment of Instagram, highlighting the primacy that choice and these self-defined spaces have *for them*. At first, this self-directed media engagement seems evident – after all, why would anyone choose to engage with content that makes them “feel shitty”? However, this highly individuated, self-determined interaction with the media denies, or even absolves, media content producers of responsibility for their creations. Instead, each reader is encouraged to learn for themselves how to select from a vast array of media, read their chosen media with the right lenses, differentiate what is ‘real’ from what is not, and extract only what is useful to them. Magazines differ from social media platforms like Instagram in that users do not have the same “option” of controlling exactly what appears in each issue; however, with the plethora of magazines on offer today (both in print and online), readers can still decide which titles they subscribe to, or determine which content they choose to read fully or skim past in each magazine (Hermes 1995). An individual can even choose *not* to read magazines at all, as indeed some women do. However, we must remember that as much as we *can* exercise control over our chosen media forms, we are simultaneously surrounded by many other forms of media that we *cannot* control, such as public advertising (which is also becoming a regular feature on Instagram and other social media feeds). Before we discover content that is “positive and happy”, how many millions of other images might we have to confront, over which we have no control, and which make us “feel shitty”?

Both the media content producers and the audiences/readers examined in this chapter speak keenly about practicality and usefulness in their discussions of media engagement. Hermes studies at length how women magazine readers draw upon a “repertoire of practical knowledge” not only to legitimise their reading of magazines as a worthwhile activity, but more importantly to “[furnish them] with a temporary fantasy of an ideal self” (Hermes 1995, 36-37), which they may or may not go on to try to actualise using the information offered by the magazine.

Among my participants, this ideal self manifests in two ways. The first revolves specifically around beauty. Trixie says she offers readers practical content such as “hacks [and] tips”. As she is a beauty writer, we can assume these ‘hacks’ revolve around beauty practices and the use of beauty products – for example, an article recommending ten of the best creams for reducing the appearance of cellulite. But, by taking these tips on board and consequently applying them to my own body, am I not brought closer to fulfilling a particular beauty ideal promoted by the magazine? If, upon the magazine’s practical recommendation, I purchase a cellulite cream, am I not implicitly agreeing that cellulite is an unpleasant feature that must be removed? The information may actually be useful and accurate in that the cream *does* effectively reduce the appearance of cellulite on my thighs. But to what ends does this information contribute, if not to an ideal self that is, at least in part, cellulite-free?

Secondly, participants reference a subtler ideal of selfhood. For example, Carina uses Instagram to “get a lot of great ideas of things I can do for breakfast” since, at the time, she was investing more time and energy in health and wellness, while Sonia draws inspiration from the confidence depicted in body positivity Instagram posts. In such cases, the presumed informative usefulness of such posts directs viewers towards a specific kind of ideal subjectivity. For Carina, this ideal self is a healthy woman who is creative with her meals; for Sonia, it is a woman who is confident about her body and enjoys a life filled with “beautiful things”. In both contexts, we must question what this information is in service of – *how and why are these hacks and tips informative and useful?* Real life and fantasy become folded into each other, as the ‘useful information’ to be applied to real life is chosen in order to achieve a particular fantasy, which itself is echoed throughout that media platform, whether magazine or Instagram. Hermes argues:

The ideal self that the repertoire of practical knowledge helps one to fantasize, is pragmatic and solution-oriented, and a person who can take decisions and is an emancipated and rational consumer; but above all *she is a person who is in control.*

(Hermes 1995, 37; my emphasis)

Writing in the mid-1990s, Hermes described a projected fantasy self that countered the perception of women’s magazine readers as silly or narcissistic, and their homemaking activities as trivial or boring. I extend her argument to consider the fantasy self of today’s neoliberal, postfeminist subject. It can be helpful to consider here Duffy’s (2017) work on aspirational labour, the physical and affective work performed by individuals to construct,

brand and make visible an idealised, entrepreneurial self. Duffy defines this type of aspiration as being moored in the belief that by engaging in the right practices of self-branding, self-expression and hard work, one can ultimately “[get] paid to do what you love” and enjoy the same successes social media celebrities, bloggers and vloggers (Duffy 2017, 6). The popular framing of these celebrities as being real people “*just like us*” (99, original emphasis) offers the illusion that that same level of social and financial success can be enjoyed by anyone, if only they apply themselves in the same ways. For audiences seeking to emulate these figures, that fantasy of fame and success appears achievable and real. Subscribing to this ‘fantasy’ might be recast from wishful thinking to necessary goal-setting – you must dream it to achieve it. I am not suggesting that my participants specifically aspire towards being a successful fashion blogger or social media icon themselves. But, rather, when they talk about finding practical ideas and inspiration from the celebrities and accounts they follow, this form of aspirational labour is in service of acquiring similar desirable lifestyles and the subjective positions that are visibly self-made, individuated and autonomous. Through this process of emulation, then, we might see how aspirational labour merges with aesthetic labour, where practices done on and around the presentation of the body are simultaneously directed to the construction of both 1) the present self that is shown to be actively and enterprisingly engaged in building her life; and 2) an idealised future self that has successfully achieved these goals.

The proliferation of user-generated social media like Instagram offer the illusion that the user is in control, not only of the material that she posts but also of what she chooses to see, and how she responds to that content. At all times, the reader/viewer assumes a high degree of discernment, engaging only with content that will help her to succeed in her “individualising project” (McRobbie 2015, 3). Thus, the ability to shape the media we choose and interact with is bound into the neoliberal idea that we *must make our own lives* (Brown 2003; Dardot and Laval 2013). I explore these concepts of self-determination and self-creation further in later chapters, but I offer a brief explanation here. This subject assumes responsibility for her own wellness, success and self-care. She too is in control, although this is a different kind of control from that which was experienced by the women in Hermes’ study – now, she is worldly, self-enterprising, multi-tasking (Rottenberg 2014a), responsible for her own wellness (Brown 2006) and the life she wants to construct. The media platforms she chooses are employed as tools, among others, to construct this ideal motivated and self-actualised self.

Cece (29, KL) underscores this point exactly in a discussion about alternative beauty campaigns. When I ask this group if they follow body positivity campaigns, Cece answers at first that she finds some of them “extreme, as in like, ‘It’s okay to eat ... a bag of potato chips every day, it’s fine, it’s your body’”. However, she adds, “If [...] you’re talking about someone who is working out, educating you to feel good about yourself, [...] yeah, those kind of things I love.” She follows this by saying that she “look[s] up to” plus-size model and body-positive activist Ashley Graham, who “talks a lot about body image – how to be confident, how to not let [...] thinner people [affect you] to think, ‘This is not right, this is ugly’. [...] I have to watch her videos ‘cos sometimes it’s good to just be positive again.” Cece also talks frequently throughout her interview about the importance of “work[ing] on oneself and one’s skill set”, and emphasises more of what the body can do, rather than its appearance. The media she chooses and responds most affirmatively to, therefore, is content that “educat[es]”, emphasises the development of individual confidence and positively motivates. Conversely, content that is just about promoting acceptance of the body just for the sake of the body is regarded as “extreme” and disregarded. Desirable, valuable media, then, is seen as something that can, or must, add to the greater, broader development of the individual *self*; it is employed as an ‘educational’ tool by which the reader can improve her knowledge and the confidence to act and feel ‘positively’ in her world.

Whether readers are imagined by writers and editors to be smart, or whether the readers themselves assert how they purposefully select the media they consume, the bottom line is that responsibility *rests upon the individual*. She must gain the media literacy to discern fantasy from real life and from practical, useful information; she must educate herself, acquire the necessary knowledge to negotiate the content she reads and determine how it will bear on her everyday experiences. More than that, she must manage how she feels in response to this media, selecting only what makes her feel “positive”, and avoiding what makes her feel “shitty”. *How* she learns this media literacy is not always clear in my participants’ accounts – the reader either just *is* a smart reader, or she already has cultural know-how to respond appropriately.

I suggest that it is this emphasis on personal responsibility that causes Melissa and Trixie to feel embarrassed and frustrated around the conflicted attitudes they hold towards beauty ideals and their own bodies, as discussed above. As Trixie highlights, she feels bad not only because she compares herself unfavourably to Instagram models/celebrities, but because she feels this way *despite* knowing how to recognise a “distorted image” (fantasy) and being, by her own definition, informed enough to know the workings of this media platform. There is

less a troubling of why these particular types of images or content are still being promoted by magazines; nor how certain Instagram posts and their accompanying captions are constructed as more valuable and desirable; nor even how and why such material makes them feel the way they do. Moreover, rarely do participants consider how they are able to access, select, enjoy and aspire towards very particular kinds of happy, beautiful media content because of the privileges they enjoy; or which communities are consequently excluded or rendered unfavourable by such material. Instead, by assuming personal responsibility for learning what goes into media content production, and consequently, for knowing how to select the right content and how to respond to it, the individual is almost entirely accountable for her own media consumption – pleasurable or otherwise.

## **4.4 Attempting Resistance**

### **4.4.1 How Resistance to Beauty Ideals Reinforces Neoliberal Pressures**

Having explored how the media producers among my participants talked about their work and their personal responses to beauty ideals perpetuated by the media and fashion industries, I moved to also question how they felt they contributed to or resisted these ideals. What did beauty ideals mean for these women who dealt daily in directing fashion shoots, and whose job it was to decide which women were beautiful enough to feature? I return to Hannah's comment about the magazine being just a "tiny little cog in the system". Although she does discuss how she tries to push back against wider beauty ideals, she also highlights the "practical issues" that often scupper these efforts. For example, she explains the difficulty of expanding the representations of bodies and sizes in the magazine: "The body thing is hard because we can't fit, we can't use any designer clothes on ... anyone who's not a sample size". In a Singapore group interview, another women's fashion magazine editor explicitly outlines the fiscal issues that editors deal with. Penelope, 44, asks her friend Evie, 49, the magazine editor, "why aren't there magazines that help the normal women like us?", which starts a conversation about fashion for plus-sized or "in-between" women<sup>17</sup>. Evie explains that few fashion brands accommodate this group of women, "[b]ecause it's bad for business" before going on to detail, like Hannah, that magazines are only a small part of "an entire eco-system of business". She argues that while there may be a "sizeable number of... larger people, generally speaking, in the US" there is not enough demand – "no critical

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<sup>17</sup> Evie uses the term "in-between sizes" to refer to women "who are between normal size and plus-size [...] between 16 and 20UK".

mass” – for larger sizes in Europe or Asia to support the growth of “in-between fashion”.

She explains:

You need ... to have manufacturing, you need to have signers, you need to have ... samples, you need to have advertising budget to get your ... word out and a magazine, or any kind of media cannot survive without advertising. And what is the point of putting up a website [...] or a magazine of some form, that features all these wonderful clothes, but you can't make money?

Hannah's and Evie's comments synchronise – the impracticalities of featuring greater body diversity in magazines stem from a much wider network of business that is predominantly about making money and in which magazines are, as Hannah summarises, “at the end of the line of the industry; [...] we're kind of the output”. By using these explanations, Hannah and Evie locate magazines within an increasingly neoliberalised economy, where success is gauged primarily by measurable outputs and financial gain, rather than by how they might engage readers in social change, provoke challenges to the inequalities sustained by social and cultural institutions, or even just provide high-quality, thoughtful entertainment.

However, given these limitations, Hannah, Evie and other magazine writers discuss acts of micro-resistance that they try to enact within their roles. In the two examples outlined below, Evie and a fashion writer in a KL group, Danielle, counter a particular feminine beauty ideal that is thin, flawless and hairless by including in their magazines women which they perceive to be more real and normal. Evie talks of a “jeans special” in her magazine, which featured editorial team members in jeans of different sizes. As innocuous as this feature seems (or even positive, for its depiction of real, identifiable women of varying body shapes sizes), it:

pissed off our salespeople because they think our clients are offended because we don't feature– or we say this brand is not good for smaller bodies or bigger bodies, but I call it like it is, you know? So, I don't care, we did it, yeah.

A jeans special hardly seems like a great act of resistance, but I am drawn to this example because of Evie's defiance towards the sales team, who represents the overarching money-making drive behind so much of this business. Her resistance here is two-fold: firstly, in wanting to showcase ‘realness’ – the real shopping/fashion experiences of the people she

knows and works with on the magazine – and, secondly, in being vocal about *not caring* how this decision might hurt the magazine’s sales or client relationships.

My second example comes from Danielle, a fashion stylist and writer who also worked on the same magazine with me. She relays a specific incident around a model who was quite hairy:

**Danielle:** ...the other day, there was this model we used and ... she was hairy, like, her arms and legs were hairy. And then the photographer is like, “Is that going to be a problem? She’s too hairy!” I’m like, “No, that’s not a problem, hair is natural, just let it be, you know.” [Inaudible] Hair is normal, it’s just like her having ... a nose... [...] I mean, seriously, what the heck? How is hair a problem?!

**Jamie:** Did they Photoshop her hair out?

**Danielle:** No.

**Jamie:** Oh, good.

**Danielle:** So I just told them to leave it, it’s normal. It’s just like, ‘Oh, you say so, *ar*<sup>18</sup>.’ Then it’s like, ‘Okay *lah*<sup>19</sup>, yah I said so!’

Like Evie’s jeans special, this excerpt demonstrates Danielle’s attempt to retain realness in the photo shoot. What emerges clearly in their accounts is Evie and Danielle “call[ing] it like it is”. In both instances, they actively counter accepted, common practices or expectations within the industry. Evie prioritises her readers by showcasing realness over pleasing advertising clients, while Danielle’s emphatic declaration that, “No, that’s not a problem, hair is natural” allows what is natural and reframes what is acceptable. Responding to Hannah and Evie’s explanations about magazines being just “a tiny little cog in the system”, Evie’s jeans special and Danielle’s untouched hairy model may constitute stronger resistance than we first assume: if a magazine is positioned “at the end of the line”, often having to answer to industry standards and fiscal targets, then defying these expectations might be

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<sup>18</sup> The affix ‘ar’ (or ‘ah’) at the end of sentences is common in Malaysian English. It does not carry a specific meaning, but is usually used as emphasis, and can change the meaning of a sentence depending on its position within the sentence, or how it is expressed tonally. In this instance, “you say so, ar” can be approximately translated to, “Okay, if that’s what *you say*”, and indirectly attributes responsibility to the other person (i.e. Danielle stating that hairiness is fine).

<sup>19</sup> ‘Lah’ is a very common Malaysian colloquialism that is added to the end of sentences, either for emphasis or as a marker of very informal, casual talk.

interpreted as resistant. If, indeed, magazines are about fantasy, as Hannah suggests, and are in the business of “trad[ing] in dreams”, as Evie notes elsewhere in her interview, then attempts to be more real and normal are also to go against the grain.

I am struck by how these women relay their resistance. It is not just what they do, but how they respond to industry expectations and assume ownership of their decisions. Evie openly defies the sales team and advertising clients by proceeding with her editorial decisions, stating as she does so, “I don’t care”; Danielle emphasises, “Yah, I said so!” in answer to the photographer’s half-hearted acquiescence. In both cases, they not only speak on behalf of the magazine, but as individuals: *I don’t care*, and *I said so*. At first, it felt heartening to hear that my former colleagues and industry peers were still trying to push for change, albeit in small ways. Within the specific contexts of their magazines and the features they are producing, we might see these individual acts *as resistant*, given the overriding limitations and pressures they deal with in their everyday work.

However, we must also question how effective such small acts of resistances are and what they actually achieve in the long term. Elias, Gill and Scharff (2017) draw attention to the way in which “the most minor acts – for example going without mascara or having a visible panty line when wearing leggings – get treated as if they are revolutionary gestures that threaten to bring down patriarchal capitalism as we know it” (28). By referencing Fah’s work on body hair to note “how small the deviations from ‘normative femininity’ must be in order to be read as ‘transgressions’” (27) Elias, Gill and Scharff highlight a paradox in beauty resistance: examples like Evie’s and Danielle’s demonstrate how small pushes against beauty standards are read as transgressive and revolutionary, and offer the illusion that women are taking back control of their bodies and defying beauty expectations. However, what it actually signals is an “intensification of beauty pressures” (26), because, if even very small acts like not editing out a model’s body hair are regarded as resistant, then this only emphasises how deeply these pressures have taken hold and how much more there is yet to overcome.

Furthermore, Evie’s and Danielle’s defiance and assumption of individual responsibility for their editorial decisions may be effective in the moment but, ironically, this same individualism is also what limits broader social change. These acts of resistance are not collective, but come down to context-specific decisions taken by each individual writer or editor; if and when they eventually leave their positions, their spirited moxie, decisions and challenges to taken-for-granted industry standards leave with them.



Danielle and Sandra, from the same KL group, attempt to encourage a similar resistance in their readers. When I asked them what they hoped to create for their readership, Sandra answered, “Normality”, followed by Danielle who said that she would like for people not to feel “dictated [to] by trends”: “... you know how people say if you’re a certain size, don’t wear a mini skirt? Or, if you’re plus-sized, don’t wear a crop top? It’s just like, no, wear whatever the fuck you want.” However, if the success of a magazine is predicated on its ability to sell or trade in dreams, then encouraging readers towards normality or to simply “wear whatever [they] want” is actually *discouraging* them from consuming most of the editorial and advertising content. I read this word ‘normality’ with a large dose of irony for, in their creation of fantasies, are magazines not precisely in the business of collapsing the boundary between fantasy and reality, thus creating new normalities for their readers to aspire towards?

In Davis’ important study of women electing cosmetic surgery, she too discovers that her interviewees wish for normality, although they take approach normality from the opposite end of the spectrum to my participants. Davis’ participants aspire for normality to counter what they perceive to be “too different, too abnormal [...] to be endured” (Davis 2003, 76); while Sandra wishes for normality to temper the expectations and ideals demanded by the fashion and beauty industries. “Normality”, then, sits between a sense of bodily inadequacy or deficiency on the one hand, and heightened ideals of bodily perfection on the other. For Davis’ participants, achieving normality means to actively undergo a potentially drastic surgical procedure; for Sandra and Danielle, it is to do nothing more than “whatever you want”. Is aiming for normality, then, to be *compliant* with a certain body standard, or *resistant* to it? Is normality and “being ordinary” (76) an aspirational fantasy, as it might be for Davis’ interviewees? Or is it a rejection of fantasy to embrace what is realistically and practically already there, as it seems to be for Sandra and Danielle? Importantly, we must ask what these definitions of normality are measured against – whose normality are we talking about? Normal in relation to *what*?

Sandra and Danielle are part of a group that was especially vocal about wanting to allow people to do whatever they want and “not give a fuck” about industry standards. They enact individual resistance to beauty ideals in their personal styles of dress and the attitudes they adopt in their writing. This assertion that you should wear whatever you want is evident not just in the actual content that they write for the magazine (or affiliated website) but also in their attendance at live events as magazine representatives. Danielle, Sandra and the third

group participant, Ellie (22), acknowledge the need to respect dress codes but they also rail against excessive or ridiculous expectations to dress up. Sandra says, “We need to at least look a bit more polished lah, that’s it lah, polished, not saying like, oh, you do outfit changes – no! Hell, no. *Hell, no!*” (original emphasis). As I discuss further in the next chapter, women like Sandra often express a rejection of what are perceived as unnecessarily fussy engagements with beauty practices. But read in the context of resistance, this dismissal is more specifically about rejecting the *expectations* to look, dress or present in particular ways. I had worked with these women for about two years and was always taken by their sense of humour and the ease with which they stood by their sartorial decisions and personal interests. I was impressed by how comfortable they seemed to be with wearing whatever they wanted, even if it did not fit the image of a high-profile fashion magazine – for example, they would often come to work in shorts and sandals, and seldom wore makeup. It therefore seemed inevitable that these attitudes would permeate their own writing/styling and that they would try to impart these same sensibilities to their readers.

However, as much as I admired how relaxed this group seemed, I felt disconcerted by how easily these messages of choice and comfort were conveyed. To begin with, we might question how possible it is for *every woman* to exercise this same level of choice or to defy expectations. Favaro and Gill (2018) identify a similar tendency among women’s magazine writers to sustain an “‘it’s always about doing it for yourself’ rationality [...] as key to the ‘undercurrent of female empowerment’ (44), where simply asserting one’s self-determined, self-directed choices is regarded as enough to be feminist and empowered. Favaro and Gill reflect:

What is also interesting here is how this ‘indignation’ or ‘defiance’ takes up all the discursive space/attention so that there is none to discuss why feminism may critique dominant understandings of femininity and heterosexuality, or to engage in the harder work that is thinking about structural forces rather than individual preferences.

(53)

Further, this kind of palatable, popular feminism which encourages that women just ‘do it for yourself’ (Banet-Weiser 2018) or to ‘not give a fuck’ assumes that the individual enjoys a position that is already socially, culturally, politically and economically secure and comfortable enough for them not to fear any serious consequences of disregarding wider structural pressures. McRobbie explores this tension in her study of the television series

*Girls* (2015). She examines how producer, writer and actor Lena Dunham attempts to “invert the regime of the perfect” by creating “inherently imperfect and thus ... ‘real’” characters (12-13), who are shown to make and live out their own choices, even if – or *because* – they contravene overtly societal and cultural norms. Dunham’s characters endearing *because* of their realness and imperfections. However, McRobbie argues that this discourse of endearing imperfection is made possible precisely because of the privileges that Dunham already enjoys – she can literally (financially) afford to bumble about in an “endless youth[ful]” journey of self-discovery and be ‘brave’ in showcasing her bodily vulnerabilities because her white, Western, middle-class status not only permits it but renders it endearing (15). McRobbie asks if “the perfect and imperfect [are] not mutually entangled and dependent terms?” (13) and points out how closely a (white Western) idea of imperfection intersects with conventional ideals of perfection. Ultimately, by recentering the locus of responsibility on individual (and particularly feminised) striving for success and self-realisation, McRobbie concludes:

Dunham thus inscribes herself within, and implicitly subscribes to, those cultural norms which celebrate the seeming gains of young white womanhood, as if feminism has done its work and everything else is up to the hard work and dedicated striving of the individual girl.

(15)

As Chinese women living in a Southeast Asian country, Danielle, Sandra and Ellie are located within very different geographical, social and cultural contexts from Dunham, but I argue that they enjoy many of the same privileges that McRobbie highlights. Middle-class Chinese families in KL enjoy a certain financial stability, for example; and as slim, able-bodied, cis-gender, heterosexual, non-Muslim women, their bodies and dress would be far less policed in Malaysia than those of, for example, transwomen, lesbians or Muslim-Malay<sup>20</sup> women, and there is far less at stake for them to “not give a fuck” than for peers who embody other social categories.

These magazine writers, at least in the Southeast Asian cities they reside and work in, ‘do not give a fuck’ firstly, because they do not have to. Secondly, their greater class, economic

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<sup>20</sup> I conflate the two as religion and race hold an especially close association in Malaysia, primarily because Malays are also Muslim; while non-Malays, such as the Chinese or Indians, are usually presumed to not be Muslim and are therefore not held to the same religious (Syariah) laws that the Malays are expected to follow.

and educational privileges avail to them other values which they can choose to care more or less about, as they determine for themselves (I explore these values in the next chapter). I would further argue that the envisaged magazine reader is also a woman who enjoys most of these same privileges, who can choose to dress ‘normally’ or plan for multiple outfit changes without either decision having much of a material consequence on her life. Conversely, for readers who are not privy to these privileges, being able to enjoy ‘normality’ or to ‘not give a fuck’ about how they look or dress becomes aspirational – they might only fantasise about inhabiting a social status where they do not have to give a fuck. So, while ‘not caring’ or advocating for normality is framed as resistance for such participants as Danielle and Sandra, this same conception of normality could be, for other less privileged communities of women, a necessary ideal they are exhorted to aspire towards.

At another point in the interview, Danielle says:

...even if you turn up looking less fashionable than everyone at an event, so what? It doesn't, like, discount you from your skills, your ability, I still do a better job than you, so what if I'm not, like, dressed the part? If I *want* to dress the part, I can dress the part, and I can still look better than you, you know what I mean?

(Original emphasis)

There appears to be ready defiance here. Danielle represents a generation of women who recognise the strength of their own skills and ability, and understand that “there’s a lot [of] far more important things than just what you are on the surface.” I read Danielle’s assertions as some expression of agency; despite beauty pressures, Danielle demonstrates an awareness of where she stands, how to locate herself within these expectations and how to leverage upon other qualities. For Danielle, beauty is pursued or rejected not for beauty’s sake, but alongside considerations of everything else she has to offer. Danielle dresses the part “if [she] *want[s]* to dress the part” but it is not always the most important or relevant choice for her. Resistance to beauty ideals is therefore, not to reject these ideals outright but to engage them as one of many tools to be showcased alongside other skills and abilities in the formation of a particular kind of idealised selfhood (I expand this discussion on how beauty is employed as a tool in the next chapter).

The problem with this approach is that it again reduces an engagement with beauty ideals and practices to individual choice (Ferguson 2010; Jovanovski 2015), which itself is largely

enabled by certain privileges and often ignores the very real constraints that continue to be placed upon women's bodies, both in Malaysian contexts and globally. While the assertion of choice appears to offer opportunities for exercising agency, I argue that these choices are also, paradoxically, what trap us – because in exercising that choice, we must then also bear the full responsibility for achieving this compulsory individuality (Cronin 2000). Danielle *can* choose whether to dress up or not but, by the same token, she *has to* make that decision and bear its consequences entirely herself – whether she is lauded or shamed for her appearance. After all, she can assert that she “can still do a better job than you” or that she possesses great confidence in her own abilities and skills; but if surrounding institutionalised structures and communities continue to prioritise and judge her by a specific beauty ideal, then any number of individualistic assertions and choice will mean little. We were fortunate enough to have worked for a publishing house that maintained an informal dress code and with editors who trusted our sartorial judgement when we attended media events. Not all publishers or employers enact the same policies; nor are these options to dress up ‘if they want’ or “wear whatever [they] want” equally available in all sectors in Malaysia.

It is one thing for Danielle to recognise that she can make those choices and to exercise them as and when she wishes. It is quite another to expect that the same choices can be enjoyed and experienced uniformly by other women, or that the continued cultural and social policing of women's bodies can be overridden merely by the assertion of individual choices. Proof of this limitation can be found within my data. For example, Lila, shared an experience of being publicly shamed by Malaysian Indian men, all strangers, for wearing shorts (it is deemed improper for Indian girls to reveal too much skin) and discussed the broader pressures within the Malaysian Indian community for women to be fair. Or, in a magazine feature for which I interviewed a local Malay-Muslim actress, Nur Fazura, she discussed the widespread shaming she still receives for publicly appearing without a headscarf or socialising with transgender friends (Khoo 2015). If a celebrity is still subject to such body shaming, then how can any ordinary layperson realistically expect that the flexing of individual choice is enough to counter persistent and restrictive gendered body ideals? The attitude of “not giving a fuck” or choosing to “wear whatever [they] want” may well be Sandra's and Danielle's version of what it means to enjoy normality or to be resistant. However, this definition of normality is contingent upon very specifically classed, raced and religious privileges that enable them to assert a certain brand of self-determined individuality and make choices from options not equally available to – nor normal for – everyone.

#### 4.4.2 How Magazines Reinforce these Neoliberal Ideals

The shift towards promoting individualised success is further echoed in women’s magazines themselves, even as they attempt to resist the deeply embedded conventional beauty ideals found throughout the fashion, beauty and magazine industries. I shared with Evie my experience and discomfort in editorial discussions where editors would often ask ‘how pretty’ someone was before agreeing to feature them. In response, Evie said, “We [*referring to her specific magazine and editorial team*] curate [our people] according to the entire package” and elaborated:

The objective of a fashion magazine in particular [...] is ... that you do trade in dreams. The moment someone looks ‘ugly’, in print, or on the record in some, in some form – online, or wherever – that person will be judged anyway, so it’s our job to make that person look as good as possible, is my approach. [...] And it’s subjective of course but why should we present this person in a negative when we have everything in our power to make this person look as good as possible? And as comfortable as possible? [...] Yup, that’s always been my approach, ... it’s non-negotiable.

While it may not be the ideal option from a sales or marketing perspective, Evie acknowledges that she has editorial responsibility to present the people featured by the magazine in the best way she can. Of course, what it means to “look as good as possible” needs to be scrutinised. Surely that ‘look’ has to adhere to certain beauty standards; after all, why is there even a need to amplify her looks rather than to photograph her as she is? I remember very clearly the number of people and the amount of effort involved in photo shoots just to make subjects look as ‘natural’ and ‘comfortable’ as possible. In some instances, personalities were photographed in their own homes or work studios and encouraged to relax. This apparent casualness belies the careful selection of locations within each venue, the directed posing within each shot and of course, the not insubstantial hairstyling and makeup that each subject underwent. We may have made her look “as good as possible”, but in relation to what? And how comfortable was she, really? It was not an option for example, to wear no makeup, even if that was truly what would have made someone feel more comfortable (as was sometimes the case). If there were several women in a feature, their pictures would have to complement each other, and their finished ‘look’ would have to adhere to the magazine’s overarching style guide. In short, we were conscious all the time that no matter how relaxed and comfortable we tried to make an interview

subject feel, she still had to be made ‘pretty enough’. I understand that working practices vary between magazines, and it is perhaps unfair to compare my memories of photoshoots with Evie’s. However, this appraisal of effortlessness is common to both our experiences, and I argue that the notion of presenting oneself as comfortable, while being styled and dressed in very particular ways, is itself to constitute a new ideal<sup>21</sup>.

I understood Evie’s discussion of comfort to refer not only to the literal, physical comfort of the women during their photo shoots, but also to making them feel at ease with how they are styled and dressed, and how their image will appear in the magazine. Perhaps this is as close as a magazine writer might realistically and practically be able to get to allowing a woman to ‘be herself’. Evie is adamant about prioritising these subjects’ comfort. Even if this way of working with her interviewees is not in the magazine’s commercial interests, Evie maintains that it is “non-negotiable”. I engage more with Elizabeth Wilson’s (Wilson [1985] 2014) discussion of comfort/function in fashion in the following chapter, but here, I am interested in the way in which comfort almost comes to replace beauty as a new kind of ideal. In this context, the magazine promotes a postfeminist, neoliberal ideal of confidence, *through the quality of comfort*. The magazine subject is thus presented not just as being successful at what she does but, additionally, as being physically happy and comfortable in her bodily presentation. As a postfeminist subject, she does not have to worry about being reduced to her looks or about meeting a specific beauty ideal since these gendered constraints are believed to no longer hinder women’s participation in public life – even though her looks *are* still very carefully styled. Simultaneously, as a neoliberal subject, she need only focus on and prioritise *her own individual* confidence, comfort and balance between her personal and public life. This subject proves that she can be successful while remaining true to herself (being featured by a global fashion magazine brand could itself be seen as a marker of having ‘made it’); but more than that, she demonstrates that she has become successful *because* she is so comfortable being herself.

These efforts to encourage greater self-determination and comfort in dressing and bodily self-presentation coincide with Hannah’s explanation that “there’s a trend now for magazines to be a bit more real”, “more accessible” and to feature “real women”. Although it is unclear exactly what she means by ‘trend’, the word carries a double meaning that refers to: 1) a general tendency or a move in a particular direction and 2) what’s in fashion. Indeed, the body positivity movement, lauded for its attempts to present more ‘real bodies’ (such as

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<sup>21</sup> I discuss the notions of comfort and confidence in more depth in Chapters Five and Six.

in the numerous campaigns by Dove) has often been criticised in academic and popular beauty writing as yet another fashionable trend that companies exploit in order to push sales and encourage consumers to spend more (Cwynar-Horta 2016; Dionne 2017; Mull 2018). I therefore question whether this redirection towards ‘realness’ speaks to the same ‘normality’ that Sandra advocates, which ultimately is neither entirely ‘real’ nor ‘normal’ but a newly constructed ideal subjectivity which knowingly exerts the right choices and effort in order to develop comfort and confidence in herself.

In turn, encouragement towards individualisation is taken up within the language used in contemporary women’s magazines and certain social media platforms. The British edition of *Women’s Health* magazine regularly runs body positive campaigns to help readers “celebrate being the best version of yourself that you can be”<sup>22</sup> (Sanderson 2018) and “learn to love your body”<sup>23</sup>. In user-generated social media platforms such as Instagram, online fitness personalities post beautifully styled photographs of themselves in action (such as at the gym or practising yoga) with accompanying captions that urge their followers to “believe in yourself! It’s YOU VS YOU!”<sup>24</sup> or remind them that “only you get to decide that you are beautiful always”<sup>25</sup>. In all such instances, there is no explicit promotion of a particular physical ideal (although of course the images do mostly feature the same kinds of lithe, toned, slim, white, abled, cisgender, feminine bodies) but rather, the language recentres attention on individual effort, motivation and the self-discipline to manifest one’s self-beliefs into reality. With the almost flippant, postfeminist “can do” attitude referenced by Harris (2004), which requires that each woman rely only upon herself, such media now encourage women to strive towards a self-making, self-defining womanhood that ‘allows’ a woman to do whatever she wants if she only makes the right choices.

That these kinds of campaigns and media seem to gain the most traction and are easily popularised among contemporary audiences is, however, exactly the problem. Banet-Weiser attributes the increasingly popularity and visibility of iterations of contemporary feminism in part, to “the media forms on which [they circulate].” The popularity and accessibility of such content:

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<sup>22</sup> From the “In Shape My Shape” campaign, *Women’s Health* UK magazine, July 2018.

<sup>23</sup> From the “Project Body Love” campaign, *Women’s Health* UK magazine, June 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Kim French (@kimfrench87). Instagram post, 11 April 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Erica Reid (@getfityogagirl). Instagram post, 8 May 2019.



are measured in and through their ability to increase that visibility; popular feminism engages in a feedback loop, where it is more popular when it is more visible, which then authorises it to create ever-increasing visibility [...] Popular feminism thus relies in some ways on ‘platform capitalism’, implying the emptying or flattening out of the content of meaning, emphasising instead the endless traffic and circulation of this content.

(Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg, 2019, 12)

At the same time:

when we look at the substance or content of the forms of feminism that have greatest visibility in mainstream media, this often seems very influenced by individualism, postfeminism and neoliberal corporate culture.

(13)

Thus, while such campaigns show themselves as addressing continuing issues of body shaming, gendered inequalities and oppression, the very means by which they motivate their readers is by emphasising individual effort, self-determined action and self-confidence to overcome these anxieties, not by addressing the source of such pressure. Such content gains popularity precisely because it appeals directly to readers’ sense of autonomous choice and the possibilities for self-empowerment, while at the same time invisibilising the need to address continued structural oppressions and inequalities. Ironically, by showing themselves as ostensibly challenging bodily beauty ideals, such medias merely succeed in shifting the burden of responsibility from the very systems that cause beauty oppression and anxieties in the first place, to bear upon individual women instead.

## 4.6 Summary

This chapter has questioned how women readers and media audiences discursively construct their responses to and interaction with the media they create and/or consume. Notably, I was able to work with data from a unique set of participants who work/have worked within women’s fashion magazines and other forms of media, such as advertising and public relations. I studied what they had to say from both perspectives – as both media content producers and, simultaneously, as media consumers themselves. I was thus able to demonstrate the many ambivalent positions that these women take as they consider, describe

and discuss the role that the media has to play in shaping their responses to and relationship with beauty ideals. An important element to this study has been to examine the ways that magazine editors envisage and construct intelligent readers who are able to discern between fantasy and real life; and how this portrayal contradicts with the responses of readers/audiences (which in some cases include themselves), who discuss the complicated relationship they have with the content they view and the ways in which this material continues to evoke in them unfavourable feelings towards their bodies.

I followed this discussion with a deeper consideration of how readers/audiences select and curate the media content they consume. Through closely studying select women's accounts of the specific media they view and how these interactions inform their aspirations and everyday lives, I troubled the straightforward distinction between fantasy and real life, that some magazine writers assume is clear to their readers. I also problematised the assumption that media content producers make about 'smart' readers, looking at how this presumed intelligence is often conceived of in contradictory ways that make it unclear exactly how much a reader should know about the inner workings of the media and the messages they promote. Finally, I also argue that the envisioned 'smart' reader is a very particular, classed woman, assumed to possess very specific kinds of cultural capital, social, educational and economic privilege; and that the fantastical aspects of a magazine are located within a cultural language that generally only certain privileged readers can access.

While I recognised and discussed some individualised acts of resistance to overriding media- and fashion-industry beauty ideals, from both the side of magazine writers and the perspective of readers and audiences, I have found that, ultimately, the resistance and/or pleasure that women experience with/in the media must be assumed as individual responsibility. Either the individual magazine writer must find ways within her everyday work practices to enact minute resistances against dominant industry demands; or the individual reader/viewer has to learn specific ways of understanding, curating and responding to the content she engages with. Both the media content producers and consumers whom I interviewed construct a smart, self-motivated media viewer/reader who is able to – or must learn how to – discern fantasy from real life and select only the material that will further their individual life or career goals. As such, I read resistance to media-generated beauty ideals not so much as being actually resistant but, in many cases, as redirecting both writers and readers instead towards the updated neoliberal and postfeminist ideals of “compulsory individuality” (Cronin 2000), personal responsibility and self-made confidence.

Significantly, too, I argue that this type of individuality and intelligence is very much classed. For example, to assume that a reader is able to differentiate between the fantastical elements of a magazine and the practical, useful ‘tips’ that can be applied to their real lives is, in the first place, to presume a particular kind of reader for whom these tips are readily accessible and normalised, and to overlook audiences who may otherwise perceive this lifestyle as aspirational, if unattainable, fantasy. Ironically, although magazine writers attempt to conceive of their readers as being ‘just like them’, the familiarity and friendliness with which they craft their content must assume that both writer and reader are privy to the same cultural knowledge and resources.

In the next chapter, I shift away studying from the role of the media, to examine instead other social and cultural discourses that participants draw on to construct their responses and resistances to beauty ideals.

## Chapter Five

### Beauty Talk: Repertoires and Discourses of Beauty

#### 5.1 Introduction: Finding a “Language of Physical Self-Appreciation”

In the previous chapter, I explored how participants talk about the potential role of media in shaping their responses to beauty ideals. I tried to show how complex this relationship is, with participants often expressing some understanding around the mechanisms used in media content creation, while simultaneously still experiencing body anxieties as a result of viewing that content. The contradictions arising out of these discussions around media influence and beauty ideals then prompted me to examine what *other discourses* these women drew from to construct their responses to beauty. If magazines and other (social) media are not referenced as being entirely responsible for “setting boundaries” and agendas for women (Ferguson 1985, 131), I questioned what other social and cultural resources, ‘stories’ and values women were employing to make sense of beauty ideals and their engagement with beauty practices. In the first place, I was intrigued by the directions that many of the interviews took, often shifting from talking directly about beauty to referencing other significant experiences or interactions. I questioned: How did women locate beauty within these instances? Or conversely, how were they using these other experiences and discourses to define, justify or resist their relationship to beauty?

Early on in my fieldwork, I intuited some discomfort among my participants in talking about beauty – there seemed to be either a kind of embarrassment or a desire to disassociate from beauty. Focusing on women, mental health and wellbeing, Frost (1999) provides a helpful way of thinking through this discomfort. She critiques conventional psychiatric and psychological models of assessing women’s wellbeing through their engagement with “doing looks” – i.e. engaging in “looks-related activity” (117) such as applying makeup, dressing up, cosmetic surgery etc. – and notes the ways in which women’s preoccupation with their appearances are often depicted negatively, or even pathologised. By drawing attention to the cultural devaluation of women’s engagement with and talk around beauty, Frost notes that eight women she interviewed were mostly unable to “express appreciation of

their own appearance” (128). Frost suggests that this awkwardness arises because there is “no language of physical self-appreciation, no discursive space for self-admiration” for women; instead, “the only available position women can take in relation to their own looks [is one of self-criticism and discontent]” (129). Her interviewees “distanc[ed] themselves from the discussions, by generalization, or by discussing their teenage self, not the current version. [Her] attempts to focus the discussion in the here and now of our appearances were politely sidestepped” (128). I too felt that something was being ‘sidestepped’ in my interviews. Almost twenty years after the publication of Frost’s article, what was still making it so difficult for my participants to talk about beauty in “the here and now”? I was struck by Frost’s notion of an inadequate language or discursive structure for women to adequately discuss feminine bodily beauty, and I suggest that the contradictions and obscurities I have identified in my own interviews are a result of this lack. Many of my participants told me they were excited to participate in my research, even before I began conducting interviews. *During* the interviews, they demonstrated an enthusiasm to talk about a wide range of body and beauty issues. Yet many of these interviews still felt somehow incomplete or muffled. I began to see this not just as “[a lack of] language of physical self-appreciation, no discursive space for self-admiration” for women, but, more broadly, as an inadequacy of valued language for talking directly about the feminine body and beauty.

DeVault (1990) writes about a “linguistic incongruence” and “the lack of fit between women’s lives and the words available for talking about experience” (97), while Smith (1987), draws attention to the commonly accepted “authority of the male voice” which renders women’s words less valuable and meaningful (30). This incongruence is complicated when we consider that experiences relegated to a predominantly feminine sphere – household routines in DeVault’s study, or beauty in mine – are accorded lower social, cultural value, and often dismissed as insubstantial or frivolous (Bartky 1990; Lakoff 2004). When Robinson, Meah and Hockey (2007) encountered a similar awkwardness during interviews with women about sex, they question whether this discomfort may be attributed only to a lack of language or whether a fear of being judged unfavourably also influences women’s discursive navigations. Thus, even if there *is* language for describing these issues, and an ability to reflect critically, this ‘talk’ and language are themselves overlaid with highly gendered social and cultural meanings which are denigrated and denied, sometimes even by women themselves (McRobbie 1982). In the context of talking about

beauty, for example, Frost reminds us that women<sup>26</sup> are often condemned as vain or prideful for displaying an excessive interest in their looks (Frost 1999, 128; see also Davis 1995 and Wilson [1985] 2014).

I should clarify that this thesis is not a linguistic study. For the purposes of this research, it may therefore be more accurate to reframe DeVault's premise of a 'linguistic incongruence' to a '*discursive* incongruence', a premise I use to examine how my participants negotiate the lack of a socially and culturally valued discourse to situate their responses to beauty ideals. The first half of this chapter employs a model of interpretive repertoires, as developed by discourse analysts Potter and Wetherell (1987), to uncover how participants draw on shared cultural understandings about particular aspects of beauty to describe their own engagements with it. Interestingly, I discover that the repertoires that women commonly reference tend to construct beauty practices within negative terms. I demonstrate how this pejorative approach to beauty creates an uncomfortable space for women to converse within and that this unease is not always easily reconciled.

The second half of the chapter explores how women attempt to replace these repertoires by borrowing from what are perceived to be more respectable discourses to explain or justify their engagement with beauty practices. Predominantly, these alternative discourses are themselves framed within particular discourses of successful feminine citizenship, which underlines my argument that resistance to beauty ideals is often redirected towards fulfilling a highly individuated, neoliberalised and postfeminist ideal. Finally, I examine how the cosmopolitan women from among my participants are able to draw from specific discourses to construct their engagements with or resistances to beauty because of particular privileges that they enjoy as a result of class backgrounds, economic security, education and travel experiences. These considerations are important, for understanding how resistance is conceived of, made possible and enacted by this particular group of women.

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<sup>26</sup> Although Frost refers specifically to a white, heterosexist northern European and Christian context, similar sentiments can be read across most of my interviews, since many of my Asian participants are often exposed to Western culture and media; and/or have spent a significant amount of time studying in or working in the West, or in Western schools and institutions.

## 5.2 Drawing from Beauty Repertoires

In a study of women's magazine reading practices, Hermes uses Potter and Wetherell's (1987) model of interpretative repertoires to discuss "the ways there are of talking about women's magazines" (Hermes 1995, 7). Her analysis examines how women draw from repertoires to explain their practice of reading and to make it meaningful. She summarises, "the repertoires readers employ to interpret *their own practices of use* and to describe *how they read the magazines* are considered in relation to each other" (28; my emphasis). I engage a similar mode of analysis here to study how women dialogue about beauty, considering, like Hermes, how they reference repertoires to simultaneously situate their own relationship to beauty, and to configure their responses and resistances to beauty ideals and practices.

I position this use of repertoires within existing social and cultural 'scripts', using Gagnon and Simon's ([1973] 2005) concept of socially constructed sexual scripts as a foundation. While Gagnon and Simon employ the metaphor of scripts specifically for the context of sexual acts and responses, I propose transposing the same framework onto bodily beauty. Below, I venture to rewrite a part of Gagnon and Simon's explanation of how scripts draw from and create meaning, by substituting their original premise of sexuality/sexual acts with beauty/beauty practices:

Scripts are involved in learning the meaning of internal states, organizing the sequences of specifically *beauty-oriented* acts, decoding novel situations, setting the limits on *responses to bodily appearance and/or adherence to bodily beauty ideals*, and linking meanings from ... aspects of life *that are not specific to physical bodily beauty*, to specifically *embodied beauty* experience.<sup>27</sup>

(Italicised words are my substitutions)

We commonly refer to existing beauty scripts, for example, by the application of physiognomic principles (Finkelstein 1991) or the conflation of women's aesthetic fashion choices with their personalities (Wilson [1985] 2014). We use these scripts to make sense of

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<sup>27</sup> The original text reads: "Scripts are involved in learning the meaning of internal states, organizing the sequences of specifically sexual acts, decoding novel situations, setting the limits on sexual responses, and linking meanings from nonsexual aspects of life to specifically sexual experience" (Gagnon and Simon [1973] 2005, 13).

what we physically see of others' bodies; to anticipate their non-physical characteristics; and to guide our interactions with them. Negotiating these beauty scripts occurs on two levels. Firstly, in the actual conducting of beauty practices and adherence to beauty ideals (Millard 2009). Secondly, I suggest that these scripts are reiterated through the processes of beauty dialoguing, which further (re)constitutes these ideals. In other words, it is not just an engagement with beauty practices or beauty itself that determines a woman's "presentation of self" (Goffman 1969) but also *how she talks* about beauty. Beauty scripts contain within them repertoires and as such, they become mutually reinforcing. The repertoires are formed from culturally shared and accepted beauty scripts, while the actual practice of employing specific repertoires then becomes a beauty script in itself, reinforcing an expected mode of conversing about beauty. I will show that because certain forms of engagement with beauty practices have come to be culturally associated with a devalued subjectivity, women draw on specific repertoires to distinguish themselves from or orient around these perceptions, thus articulating their own stance towards beauty.

As I have already demonstrated, my participants often express an ambivalence around the beauty ideals found in glossy magazines and Instagram, vacillating between their desire to read/view them and their corresponding feelings of bodily insecurity. As participants spoke about their beauty practices, I recognised a similar contradiction in the way that they would overtly proclaim a love of certain beauty practices, but simultaneously distance themselves from them. Examining these contradictions *through repertoires* has been helpful for understanding how women negotiate talking about a subject that is commonly trivialised, but which they themselves enjoy. As Potter and Wetherell explain, subjects commonly draw on conflicting repertoires within the same account and "interpretative repertoires are used to perform different sorts of accounting tasks. Because people go through life faced with an ever-changing kaleidoscope of situations, they will need to draw upon very different repertoires to suit the needs at hand." As such, "what is predicted is exactly variability rather than consensus" (Potter and Wetherell 1987, 156).

Furthermore, I have found that it is often necessary for participants to speak from two or more repertoires simultaneously. So, I explore three repertoires in the following section: the first examines *the repertoire of beauty as frivolous and excessive*, seen to be pursued only by shallow, hyperfeminine 'girly girls'. The second explores the notion of *beauty as requiring great effort and work*. I then consider how participants reference either or both of these repertoires in order to justify the third, which regards *beauty practices as one of many tools employed to engineer self-entrepreneurial, individualistic success*. As participants switch



variously between them, these repertoires collectively reconstitute and reinforce overriding beauty scripts which determine socially and culturally acceptable ways to dialogue about and engage with feminine bodily beauty.

### 5.2.1 Girly Girls and Xiao Mei Meis: The Repertoire of Beauty as Frivolous and Excessive

I begin my exploration of repertoires by discussing participants' eagerness to distinguish themselves from hyperfeminine girls and the beauty practices associated with them. Some participants appear to negate girly-girlyness as a simple way of describing themselves (I use the word 'appear' because, as I argue later, these are not just straightforward descriptions). For example, Beverly (40, KL) says, "I just feel like I'm just not a girly girl" and Sandra (26, KL) declares, "I was never like the girly girl, lah". Both these phrases arose during discussions I had initiated specifically around femininity and which touched upon aspects of being ladylike. By stating that they are "not a girly girl", Beverly and Sandra assert that they are not conventionally feminine, nor engage in activities or (beauty) practices usually associated with (hyper)femininity. However, they are also not saying that they identify with the converse, of being more masculine, as is sometimes found in postfeminist discussions and media portrayals of feminine 'empowerment' (Entwistle 1997; Rickett 2014). Nor do they completely reject all aspects of beauty and related beauty practices commonly associated with women. In fact, they talk enthusiastically about their enjoyment of fashion, skincare and makeup in ways that might also be read as girly, a contradiction I explore below.

The second use of girly girls (and similar terms) marks a more deliberate rejection or mockery of (hyper)femininity and associated practices. Consider these two examples:

I will, whenever I see a girly girl, I just, like, run away [...] Even today, I see some girly girl, very *mahfan*<sup>28</sup> ones, I would just— [...] I would try to talk to you but if you start telling me about stuff that I really think that you are superficial, I'll just walk away.

(Lara [37, Singapore])

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<sup>28</sup> Cantonese (a commonly spoken Chinese dialect in Malaysia and Singapore) for troublesome, or fussy.

I find it very interesting that in ... Singapore – and Malaysia as well– ... correct me if I'm wrong, there are no women role models... All these *xiao mei meis*<sup>29</sup>, they're all just, you know, Lolita types. I mean, there are all these aunties<sup>30</sup>, the older ladies, but there are no, you know, no grown women that you can aspire to.

[...]

The *hua ping*<sup>31</sup> lah. [...] The pretty face, as they call it. Yah. Decorative as best.

[...]

... we have so much artifice. And, you know, what I talked about, the typical *xiao mei mei* beauty ideal with all that fakery going on.

(Evie [49, Singapore])

Both women draw from a repertoire that perceives expressions of femininity – whether in bodily appearance and comportment – as unnecessarily fussy (“mahfan”), “artifice”, or merely “decorative”. These comments reveal the readiness with which these women reject overt displays of femininity and the ways in which they regard preoccupations with being “the pretty face” as lacking in substance. Lara and Evie relegate these women to a space that is not deemed worthy of attention and classify them as unsuitable role models. How these women look thus becomes bound up with their personality traits, values or beliefs which, as Lara points out, are likely to be superficial. Fara (30, KL) makes a more explicit, overt association between being feminine and being a “*hiau por*”, a Hokkien/Chinese word that is typically used disparagingly to describe vain, coquettish, attention-seeking women: “I always don't associate myself as being feminine because when I went to Chinese primary school, there's this term that they use for the *hiau por* [...] It's like really girly girl”.

The denial of girly-girlyness involves a distancing from and ridiculing of associated activities and behaviour. Consider the follow examples, which arose during discussions about excessive practices in makeup, fashion and plastic surgery:

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<sup>29</sup> The literal translation of this Chinese (Mandarin) phrase is ‘small little sisters’ and is generally used to refer to a girl who is younger than the speaker (i.e. an actual younger sister). Colloquially, and in this context, it is the Chinese equivalent of girly girls.

<sup>30</sup> Calling someone an ‘Aunty’ in Singapore/Malaysia is usually quite derisive, and refers to a woman who usually does not have a high level of (overseas) education or a prestigious career; and who spends her time on activities regarded as frivolous – lunching with friends, shopping, going to beauty salons etc.

<sup>31</sup> Literally, ‘hua ping’ means flower pot/vase, but is used colloquially to mean ‘a pretty face’.

I guess it's just like, people who, what I call, you know, the ... shopaholics, they kind of like gather together and, so, they ... think about the same thing, along the same lines, the same interests ... they can talk about you know, fake eyelashes, the ten different types and more.

(Louise [45, KL])

**Ellie:** [E]veryone was like, dressed up *really* fancy and this girl in front of me had like, two outfit changes (**Danielle:** Yeah) for like, one show!

(**Danielle:** Yah, they have outfit changes! Media people.)

[...]

**Danielle:** ...[Y]ah, even Kristen<sup>32</sup> was like– you know back then, in my previous magazine, I would have outfit changes. She was like, “Why aren't you outfit changing?” I'm like, “Huh!?” [all laugh]

**Sandra:** What do you mean? *What do you mean?*

[*Simultaneously*] **Ellie:** No one has time for that! / **Danielle:** No, really /

**Sandra:** What the hell's wrong...

(Ellie, 22; Danielle 25; Sandra, 26 [all KL]; original emphasis)

**Jamie:** Is it quite a big deal now, plastic surgery?

**Penelope:** I think so. There's so many women I see, like the *tai tais*<sup>33</sup> and all that, the ones who hang out and drink champagne, eat lunch. [...]

**Jamie:** Oh, Botoxed to the max?

**Evie:** Yah yah, yah. Don't do that.

(Penelope, 44; Evie, 49 [both Singapore])

In all examples, the women described by my participants are caricatured and their behaviours mocked – they are shopaholics who “gather together” to talk not just about fake eyelashes, but “the ten different types”; they have several outfit changes in a single event; they are women who do not work but “hang out and drink champagne, eat lunch”.

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<sup>32</sup> Other people mentioned by participants in their interviews have also been assigned pseudonyms.

<sup>33</sup> Mandarin and Cantonese for “wife”. This term is used colloquially in Malaysia and Singapore to refer to wealthy married women who do not work and are presumed to spend most of their time socialising and shopping.

Importantly, in each example, they make a clear distinction that these are frivolous things done *by others*, and not themselves. Evie's emphatic, "Don't do that" underscores the point that these are not practices we should adopt and Sandra's disbelieving questioning, "What the hell's wrong [with them]?" portrays these behaviours as abnormal and not to be respected. In another KL group interview, Fara shares an incident where she reacted negatively to being complimented for her looks. Although she had made the effort to dress up for a wedding, being told that she "looked ... tip top" triggered an adverse reaction in her and she started questioning, "Does that mean I'm really anal? That I come across like I'm so pedantic that it must be perfect? Because I would not want to [...] come across that way." Earlier in the interview, Fara had also clarified her position on selfies and displays of vanity, when she said, "My definition of myself is not always my face [...] I found [taking selfies] really narcissistic" and contrasts this immediately with the attitudes of colleagues from a previous job, where "a lot of them do it [take selfies], a lot of them do, 'Look at me, I'm doing this. Look at me, I'm doing that'". So, appearing as if she has paid special attention to her looks – even if she is being paid a compliment – is perceived negatively and equated with the narcissistic behaviour of those girls and *hiau pors*; she worries that this compliment is actually a comment about her character and values, that she is seen as "anal", "pedantic" and caring excessively about her looks.

In the comments I have examined so far, these women do not straightforwardly declare *what they are* or *what they do*; rather, they employ a repertoire that presents beauty as frivolous in order to distinguish what they *are not* or what they *do not do*. Even within a closed discussion focusing on issues around bodily beauty, participants still seem to lack a clear "language of physical self-appreciation" or "discursive space for self-admiration" (Frost 1999, 128). Although we have explicitly convened to talk about bodily beauty, and there is a consensus among participants that talking about these issues is important, there remains among several participants – like those quoted above – a swiftness in denouncing others' engagement with beauty as unrespectable and silly. Correspondingly, there is a persistent need throughout these conversations for impression management (Goffman 1969) so that they themselves are not perceived as being excessively feminine or possessing a vain preoccupation with their looks. Presumably, the most accessible way for women to assert their stances towards beauty is to draw from existing beauty scripts. However, these scripts outline particular ways for women to enact beauty, and engagement with these practices or activities often renders them vain, prideful or frivolous (Bartky 1990; Frost 1999). For the neoliberal feminist, these qualities are incongruent with the traits of an independent, disciplined, enterprising woman. So, participants push against these stereotypes by

expressing instead an individuality and self-determination around beauty, taking pains to distinguish themselves as *not* doing beauty and femininity in the same ways as the girly girls they disparage. It could be argued that these women are bound by the same constraints as the young female student sports teachers of Rich's study (2005) whereby they:

want to live out the ideals of individualism – to challenge, make choices, shape their own lives. However, if they are to express (or be allowed to express) these qualities, they (that is to say the traits) are invariably stereotyped and positioned by gender.

(502)

This paradox occurs among my participants too. By ridiculing these manifestations and practices of feminine beauty, my participants assert their individuality – they claim that they are not like these stereotypes. However, this individuality is made possible by, and further reifies, these very stereotypes. Ironically, denying girly-girlyness serves only to reinforce the broader perception of feminine beauty as unrespectable and frivolous, making it ever more difficult to engage with beauty in ways that can be taken seriously, not least by these women themselves.

It is important to note that the women in these groups also talk excitedly about their love of fashion, makeup and beauty practices. Ellie, Danielle, Sandra and Evie all work for women's fashion magazines and elsewhere in their interviews, they discuss the beauty practices they enjoy; Louise and the women in her group talk about the pleasures of manicures and dressing up for special occasions. At the same time, however, their depictions of girly girls suggest that overt or excessive engagement with or displays of these practices are not to be taken seriously; there are limits to how much engagement is acceptable. Of course, where that line lies or at which point we traverse the line is not clear – what motivations and which beauty practices are more acceptable and intelligible than others?

The parodying of girly girls can be likened to a similar negotiation that Jackson and Vares identify in tween girls as they talk about the sexual representations of celebrities. Jackson and Vares (2011) argue that by expressing disgust and dismissing "slutty" dress as "stupid" or "weird", these girls position themselves "as more smart and sensible than those adopting such dress" (139). Likewise, by their disdain, laughter and labelling of women as "superficial", "fake" or "narcissistic", my participants inadvertently position themselves, their engagements with beauty and the pleasures they derive from these practices, as

somehow more informed and acceptable. Although they too enjoy beauty practices, drawing on a shared repertoire that devalues hyperfemininity and the associated practices of girly girls enables my participants to qualify that they do not engage in these behaviours in the same way.

Significantly, I should note that the ‘othering’ of girly girls or *tai tais* in these instances is not necessarily about looking down upon a lower social class of women. In Asia, especially, the women that my participants mock – including the *tai tais*, aunties and “the ones [...] who have lunch” – are very wealthy and enjoy a great deal of financial privilege, perhaps even more than some participants. Social hierarchy and judgements are therefore not simplistically drawn across lines of social class and I would argue that my participants are not to be regarded simply as ‘catty snobs’ deriding less wealthy women. Rather, these judgements speak to an individual’s *desire* – over ability or privilege – to enact and develop neoliberal and postfeminist attitudes and values. They are about possessing the cultural capital and knowing discernment to be able to *negotiate and select between a range of acceptable practices*, which I explore further in the sections below. Thus, where “[m]eritocracy has become the key means of cultural legitimation for contemporary capitalist culture” (Littler 2018, 2), personal ability, capacity and the ability to exercise or express these attributes is considered more meaningful than class positions or wealth. An individual, whatever their social class – including participants themselves or the people they admire – is better valued for spending their time, resources and energy on personal development and psychic improvement. In contrast, my participants are dismissive about girly girls, aunties and *tai tais* because they are perceived as focusing upon superfluous issues of the body, physical appearance and material possessions, and as not contributing towards anything useful in the development of merit and the enterprising self.

In Sanchez Taylor’s study (2012a) on working-class women’s consumption of cosmetic surgery and beauty practices, she demonstrates that, alongside career aspirations and striving for independence and empowerment, her research subjects “also want to be successful *as ‘women’*” (462, my emphasis), which includes fulfilling particular, gendered ideals of attractiveness. In a similar vein, though from the perspective of upper/middle-class women, Lollini and Dosekun explore how Lebanese and Nigerian women, respectively, make visible their consumption of high-end beauty services and demonstrable attention to fashion and physical appearance to “[enhance] their aesthetic capital and class status” and convey “a significant sense of distinction” (Lollini 2019, 23). By “communicat[ing] the ability to have the time and money to become beautiful” (ibid.) they distinguish themselves as independent,

wealthy, and “already empowered” women (Dosekun 2015, 971). In her study of interactions and ‘body work’ done in hair salons, Gimlin also observes the ways in which a middle-class clientele asserts their class positions by overriding styling advice from the lower/working-class beauticians. She remarks that although the stylists attempt to establish their own hierarchy of technical and fashion expertise in hairstyling, the clients diminish the value of this knowledge by prioritising, instead, the (middle-class) standards demanded by their professional workplace and social lifestyles.

I approach my participants’ rejection of feminine beauty ideals from an opposite perspective, understanding their (postfeminist) desire to succeed and be recognised *not* for their womanliness or feminine appearance, but as a result of their skills and capacities as *individuals* instead. For example, Danielle is defiant about being expected to dress in specific ways, stating that even if she “turn[s] up looking less fashionable than everyone at an event, so what? [...] I still do a better job than you.” Cece (29, KL) is adamant about the importance of individual confidence, countering expectations around femininity and the need for plastic surgery by declaring: “I’m gonna look good, I’m gonna feel good, I’m gonna get out from the house and do my thing [...] I’m not gonna give in to [whether] I should grow my hair a certain length. I’m just gonna be me. Yeah, I’m just gonna do me.” Thus, for both Danielle and Cece, emphasis lies on what *she is going to do*, prioritising autonomous individual action over physical ideals of beauty and femininity expected of women.

### **5.2.1.1 The Asian Girly Girl**

At this juncture, I want to consider the particular situation, and corresponding responses, of my Asian and Asian-located participants. I recognise that these participants were more vocal than most of my participants in the UK about rejecting girly girlyness and declaring their individually directed choices and action. Several Asian participants allude to the belief that attitudes towards gender and personal development are more progressive in the West; I discuss these perspectives further in Section 5.4. For now, I open this discussion with a comparison between that what is regarded as the “more open and more Westernised” (Trixie) upper/middle classes in Malaysia, and the outdated expectations of traditional and rural communities. Trixie explains that in her family:

... [al]though you're a girl, you take care of yourself first. Like, yes you have a husband and all that, but never rely on him. [...] They [*her family*] push you to be your own person, they push you to make sure you go to school [...] get good grades, [...] get a good job.

[...]

But then ... what about the rest of Malaysia? ... those people, I think, are still kind of stuck in, like, 1700s or something, [...] in the sense that like, "Oh no, you're a woman, should stay here and look after kids."

Other Asian participants discuss how they continue to face disapproval or criticism for being "too independent" (Beverly). Louise, from the same group, has been told, "please don't be so smart" and to play dumb: "even if you know how to do it, just pretend you don't". She shares that she is unfavourably nicknamed "dragon lady" for being outspoken and forthright, and group discusses a derogatory Cantonese phrase which suggests that women should not be "too successful [...] too driven." Many such discussions revolve simultaneously around local, cultural expectations for women to "just be pretty" (Louise), often in service of attracting a man and getting married. For example, Beverly shares:

[I have girl friends who'll] look at a girl and say, "Oh she's so pretty, how come she doesn't have a boyfriend?" Like what has that got to do with whether you're in a relationship or not, or ... whether you have a man in your life? [...] this, I find ... tends to *come from the more Chinese-speaking friends*.

(my emphasis, discussed below)

Malaysian-Indian participants remark upon similar gendered beauty expectations for women within the local Indian community, drawing direct parallels between a woman's appearance and her marriage prospects. Radha (43, KL) recalls being told in her childhood that, "You need to look pretty. How else you gonna ... catch a husband?" Today, at 23, Lila (KL) is still told that she should "make [her] skin fairer" or chastised for wearing heels, otherwise, "How you gonna get a husband? You can't find an Indian guy like this." (Munshi 2013)

The distinction that these comments derive from "Chinese-speaking friends" and local Malaysian Indians mirrors what Trixie says above about rural Malay communities. In all these discussions, there is an implied suggestion that traditional cultural expectations for women to "just be pretty" and "catch a husband" are restrictive, oppressive and outdated, something from "the 1700s". Writing specifically about a South Korean perspective, Kim



highlights a cultural neo-Confucian ideology that renders women as “subjectless”, “represented not through their individual bodies but through their male kin”, “traditionally drawing its identity from the family body” (Kim 2003, 106). As such, she argues, even as Korean women engage more actively with beauty practices and cosmetic surgery, this is done with the aim of fulfilling a “requirement of decorum [...] rather than a vanity” (107). The concern to harmonise with the collective means that these women tend to fashion their appearances to conform to a greater norm rather than to visibly express individuality. I cannot purport to speak for all ethnicities and cultures, but I can recall personal experience of Confucian values being embedded within Chinese cultures today – for example, my parents continue to remind me of the importance of respecting (or saving/giving face to) family (Lindridge and Wang 2003); that a girl must keep “decorum” and not present in ways that would attract attention or be perceived as “hiau” (as Fara notes, above).

Participants almost always refer to the girly girls and *xiao mei meis* as a homogenous mass. Portrayals of women who “gather together [...] think about the same thing, along the same lines, the same interests” (Louise, above) depict them as following a herd mentality. I even find myself mocking such women, saying in my interview with Evie and Penelope:

I went to [a] new hip café in KL and honestly, like, every girl there was like ... a cut-out of each other, you know. The whole café, like, all the girls look the same. [...] [A]ll their outfits are, like, similar, and the way they wear their hair and everything [...] I was feeling a bit sad that there’s no, like, originality, and all the girls just become copies of each other.

This (admittedly condescending) observation frames these ‘girls’ as uniform, “copies of each other.” I scoff at their lack of originality, and Penelope and I take our mockery a step further when she asks if I took a picture of all of them together – which I say I did, and we laugh. We can compare these comments with observations from other Asian participants, explored further below, which laud the capacity for individual expression instead, especially as exercised in the West.

Given such perspectives, I question if the mockery of girly girls among this particular group of Asian participants is actually not so much about rejecting practices around beauty and femininity, but a wider resistance to traditional, cultural gendered expectations. I would argue that this resistance can be read as a response to a specific (Southeast) Asian cultural context where gendered expectations for women continue to demand a level of subservience

to male figures in the family (either fathers or husbands), conformity and unquestioning obedience. In this sense, we might not view their resistance not only as postfeminist, neoliberal assertions of individual achievement and confidence. Instead, within these (Southeast) Asian contexts, a conscious rejection of femininity or the will to ‘do’ femininity on their own terms is also expressed as a response to continued gender oppression and shaming that they still confront in their local communities. These assertions might therefore be read as *deliberately resistant* and *feminist*; as intentional expressions of autonomy and agency that explicitly disassociate themselves from the traditional “subjectless” women who submit to gendered ideals of feminine prettiness and deference to men.

In Chen’s (2009) analyses of the (at the time) controversial novel *Shanghai Baby*, she identifies that both the author Wei Hui and her semi-autobiographical protagonist Coco are constructed as belonging to an imagined liberated and empowered “global sisterhood”, found commonly across global chick lit novels, films and other forms of popular culture. Chen writes:

[T]his consumerist discourse of female empowerment seems able to transcend national borders and address, as it were, in a global sisterhood of financially and sexually confident cosmopolitan women. [...] The new type of Chinese women Coco and her friends stand for is actually increasingly conforming to globally defined and locally endorsed standards of what it means to be a modern, confident and sexually attractive woman in the new age. This meaning is predicated on a seemingly pervasive and universally shared consumerist discourse of freedom of choice and individual consumption.

(Chen 2009, 74)

Like the “wom[e]n of empowerment” in *Shanghai Baby*, my participants too are, “not just able to pay [their] own way but [are] also endowed with active ‘freedom,’ making their own ‘independent’ choices about ‘how to live their lives’” (Chen 2012, 220) – or at least this is how they present themselves, as I argue through this thesis. Notably, this independence is not declared and celebrated in and of itself, but set against a history and tradition that is experienced or perceived as oppressive and restricted. Other works on the emergence of this newly independent, self-defining Asian woman contrast these newly envisaged or acquired global ‘freedoms’ with a not-so-distant past and long-standing traditions. For example, Luo and Sun’s study on dating shows in China (2015) locates their research subjects within a

distinctly post-socialist China; as does Chen's work on millennial Chinese chick lit (2009 and 2012). Munshi's (2013) study on the burgeoning beauty industry in India reminds us that although the successful modern Indian beauty achieves international recognition by winning beauty pageants or becoming a media celebrity, she must still emphasise her sincere adherence to "traditional Indian values" and "Westernised-but-Indian-at-heart persona" (89-90). Kinsella (2002) delineates the evolution of the 'high school girl movement' in Japanese society (comprising school girls who are openly engaged in prostitution, and have re-appropriated school uniforms as sexual, fashionable dress) and discusses the perspectives that regarded these girls as representative of social transformation or of displacing older, conservative forms of morality and political power. Studies on the rise of cosmetic surgery consumption in South Korea and China (Kim 2003; Lindridge and Wang 2008; Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012) further explore how novel definitions of self and identity, and decisions taken unto and around the body, are often still influenced by long-standing Confucian values of, for example, filial piety, a concern for family image and reputation, and prioritising the collective over the self.

Of course, the local contexts of each study are distinct and must consider the particularities of each culture, and the ethnicities, communities and castes of/within those cultures and societies. However, my focus here is on how an imagined cosmopolitan, "global sisterhood" invites women to align themselves to and partake in a transnational culture that upholds neoliberal, postfeminist values of individuality, autonomy and self-determination over, and in spite of, these continued traditional and localised expectations. This is not to overlook or bypass the local contexts which these women respond to and resist, as I have discussed above, but to note the importance of locating these culturally-specific responses within and alongside this envisaged 'global sisterhood'. Thus, localised resistances – for example, my participants' specific rejections of *xiao mei meis* and *tai tais* – might be read as a rejection of traditionally gendered, cultural norms in favour of an imagined global sensibility that transcends local particularities and valorises instead, what is perceived as the unfettered, egalitarian freedoms of individual expression and accomplishment found in this chic, progressive cosmopolitan community.

Again, however, we must remember that these participants have had a Western education or spent a significant amount of time living abroad, and frame their experience there as favourable and positive (explored further in Section 5.4). Exposure to the progression and success narratives of a globalised, neoliberal culture, which emphasises individual merit and capability, may cause my participants to regard an adherence to traditional Asian gender

roles and ideals as limiting and backward. But this is a very privileged position to speak from. Financial stability, family support, access to private education and transnational career paths expose these women to more opportunities to escape restrictive local expectations and to more easily acquire membership in a transnational community that applauds and rewards their independence and individuality.

### **5.2.2 Laziness and Incompetence: The Repertoire of Beauty Requiring Great Effort and Work**

Connected to this repertoire of excessive (though frivolous) engagement with beauty is a repertoire that speaks to the substantial effort required of beauty practices. In a KL group, Kim (37) describes what this attention and work entail; I highlight two examples:

[G]rowing up, I realise, right, your brain is only this big, right? If you want to care so much about beauty and how you look, what to dress, what colour to match, right, then a lot of time are spent in doing research and studying and understanding where you can do something else that's a lot more interesting to you...

[Y]ou want to look princess, just to feel princess right? You feel very feminine, however it's very troublesome because [...] you know long hair, you have to wash for a very long time, right? [...] And then after shampoo, some more you do conditioner. Not many people will understand that, when you have long hair until your waist, right, then you understand [that] maintaining [it] is very difficult. So when you want to do sports, right, or anything else, is just too troublesome, so I just– I thought, not worth my time doing all that.

I have chosen these excerpts for the long descriptions Kim gives of the processes involved in “caring so much about how you look” and the exasperation she conveys for the amount of effort and time required for maintaining these beauty standards. The many steps required just for washing long hair, and, more broadly, for “doing research, studying and understanding” beauty ideals smacks of a tedium that the listener/reader recognises, and these long-winded descriptions emphasise how small the returns are in comparison to the

effort invested. Her concluding point underlines that “beauty, and how you look, what to dress” are just “*not worth my time doing all that.*”

Participants commonly respond to this repertoire by professing that they themselves are too lazy or incompetent to take up the effort required for these practices. Kim repeatedly references her own ‘laziness’ throughout her interview, stating, for example, “I’m a very lazy person so I ended up looking normal because to look different means a lot of effort...” What I know of her, however, does not at all fit the profile of a conventionally lazy person – she holds a prominent position in a higher education institution in Malaysia, travels frequently and enjoys outdoor activities and sports, to name only a few characteristics. I therefore read her proclamations of laziness as a *disinterest* or *refutation* of beauty’s many required practices.

Kim also openly cites her interest in certain beauty practices – such as dyeing her hair in bright colours, buying makeup and cosmetics – and openly declares, “I love beauty stuff”. So, again, she does not reject beauty outright. Rather, I liken this purported laziness to the earlier examples of women denying girly-girlyness. By using reasons of laziness and disinterest to explain their lack of engagement with beauty practices, women like Kim can declare a love for beauty-related commodities and practices without appearing to have an excessive interest in them. Across many of the interviews, other participants also qualify the un-importance of beauty and physical appearance by claiming a form of laziness around its incumbent practices. For example, they declare that dressing up, wearing makeup or adopting a strong concern for their looks “is too much effort, really” (Rana [34, London]) or “...oh, too much work!” (Caroline [48, KL]). But like Kim, most of these women are friends or former colleagues whom I know to be very driven, passionate about the causes they are involved in and successful in their careers. Laziness is not at all laziness, but a knowingly ironic means to assert that they have other valuable priorities and interests that are more worthy of their time, effort and work.

Beauty also requires a great deal of effort because individuals must assume the full responsibility for obtaining the necessary knowledge and expertise to successfully perform their selected beauty practices. Participants respond to this repertoire by professing a kind of *incompetence*. I have identified two possible manifestations of this response. In the first, as in some of the examples above, participants conflate this incompetence with laziness. In one of the KL groups, Beverly (40) reflects:

I know that Chinese have a saying like, there are no ugly women in the world, only lazy women. [...] I think some time last year [...] I just kinda, like, realised the sort of wisdom in that saying because I've always been really lazy about facials and [using facial] mask[s], and so one time she showed me a picture of this— her friend who's in her fifties, but she looks like she could be younger than any of us. I was like, "Oh my god, how do you look like that?" So then, she does mask like what, twice a week?

[...]

Yah, so anyway, after seeing it, I was like, "Oh!" you know? And then I started sort of just doing mask for myself, and all that, and immediately, I saw the difference, and I said, "Oh that's all it takes, really."

In a Singapore group, Evie and Penelope discuss similar sentiments:

**Penelope:** ...I go out all the time but I keep wearing the same clothes because (**Evie:** I was gonna say that!) [laughs] but because they are my comfortable default, because the other ones that I've bought actually take a lot more effort to dress, you know, put makeup on... (**Evie:** I roll my eyes) [laughs] I know, I'm looking at you, your eyes!

**Evie:** I roll my eyes because, I quote Coco Chanel, "There are no ugly women, just lazy ones."<sup>34</sup>

**Penelope:** I know, that's true! [Jamie and Penelope laugh]

The message in both instances is clear: a woman's 'ugliness' is her own fault. She is lazy and not making enough of an effort. Beverly underscores this sense of laziness when she realises that looking good is actually quite simple, that "all it takes" to notice a difference is to regularly use facial masks. She suggests that this practice is so easy that *not* engaging in it would be down to individual laziness. So, although Beverly and Evie choose similar quotations about there being no such thing as an ugly woman, these assertions are not really uplifting sentiments about all women being beautiful. Instead, they inadvertently lay full responsibility on each woman to create and maintain her own beauty.

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<sup>34</sup> This quote is often incorrectly attributed to Coco Chanel. It was actually Helena Rubenstein who said these words.

Laziness takes on new significance: while in previous examples laziness stood for disinterest, here it attributes blame to women for their unwillingness to partake in these practices. One KL group participant, Corrie (40) reflects:

[S]o, the, the media started showing us pictures of all this, you know, supposedly perfect looking women and all, and then over time, we draw conclusions that people can look like that if they wanted to? They just didn't make enough effort [...] So when you see someone with pimples and maybe a bit overweight and messy hair, you automatically think, "Oh, it's her fault, she didn't take care of her diet, she didn't clean her face ... so she doesn't deserve any sympathy, she doesn't look good."

Corrie speaks about the perceptions we form of others, by interpreting their unattractiveness as a sign that "they just didn't make enough effort". However, in our judgements of others, we might direct that policing towards ourselves too. Drawing on Foucault's concept of the panopticon, Bartky (1990) argues that within "the regime of institutionalised heterosexuality" women are taught to "[live their bodies] as seen by another" and are constantly "under surveillance" (71, 80) in ways that men are not. Like the panopticon, women learn to hold themselves accountable for how obediently they follow beauty rules. Not looking good, or not demonstrating adequate knowledge of beauty practices, can therefore be seen as transgressing these rules, and as personal failing and negligence that is undeserving of sympathy.

Secondly, some participants resort to making fun of themselves and their lack of expertise, as if to acknowledge their incompetence and to pre-emptively deflect criticism for *not* employing beauty practices. For example, although Louise mocks "the shopaholics [...] [who] can talk about ... fake eyelashes, the 10 different types and more", she later ridicules her own attempt to sport these lashes:

**Louise:** I'm sorry ... I could never tell them apart, so when my makeup artist, like, ask me, do you want this type or this type, I look at her, I'm like, "Belinda, you decide" [laughs]. [...] You know, I would probably like–

**Adeline:** Yeah, ... you'll be plucking it one by one.

**Louise:** You know, I'll pluck it all [...] Half ... of it will just drop off!  
[laughs]

Louise admits and even apologises for her lack of knowledge about fake eyelashes, and eventually defers to a makeup artist. When Adeline makes fun of her, Louise doesn't just agree but emphasises her clumsiness by anticipating that "half of [the eyelashes] will just drop off!" She also laughs at herself throughout this narration, presenting herself as foolish. This exchange may seem like casual banter between friends, but I am interested in how Louise presents herself in relation to this beauty practice: why does a highly capable woman who manages high-profile clients and public relations events, resort to mocking herself for simply not being able to differentiate between various styles of fake eyelashes? The message most frequently inferred by the women across these examples is that they are too 'lazy' or do not possess the necessary know-how for performing these beauty practices adequately. Significantly, these admissions to failure – whether in applying makeup, like Louise, or sustaining a regular skincare regime, like Beverly – are almost always done light-heartedly and with laughter. Their laziness and incompetence are framed as funny, and although they may lightly admonish themselves, these issues are actually nothing to be taken too seriously by them. I read these 'confessions' as suggesting, again, that other things are valued more highly than beauty, and regarded as more deserving of their time, attention, learning and effort.

Additionally, Louise's mention of a make-up artist is itself a significant point to note – she is able to afford a personal makeup artist, and can decide if, when, and where she will engage these services. Louise's mockery of other women's and her own use of fake eyelashes works to place careful distance between herself and her engagement with makeup – these are practices done by other women, or if needed, are done by someone else for her. In this instance, makeup is therefore only one component within a range of skills, tools and (aesthetic) labour that Louise draws on in the construction of herself. Importantly, although she does not specifically allude to class, it is precisely these privileges that allow and entitle (Lazar 2009) her access to these options (Skeggs 1997). Louise also does not need to be overly concerned about how she looks – or the processes to achieve this look – because she has other qualities and resources to show – for example, education, career and skills.

A final word on the engagement of makeup artists: firstly, it is not uncommon for (middle-class) women in Malaysia and Singapore to hire a makeup artist for a few hours to style them for important occasions. Styling services are readily available through freelance makeup artists, or even offered as part of a package at hair salons. For this group of women to talk about occasionally having a makeup artist is nothing extraordinary, nor to be read as deliberate boasting; it is as commonplace as getting one's hair or nails done. In a series of



articles that study the discourses found in beauty advertisements in Singaporean women's magazines, Lazar shows how beauty products and services are constructed as luxuries that women *deserve* (Lazar 2011) and are *entitled* to enjoy and find pleasure in (Lazar 2009). By evoking descriptions of “the modern working woman as leading a ‘hectic lifestyle’ . . . , as maintaining a ‘busy schedule’ . . . , and as living ‘life in the fast lane’”, these beauty advertisements position their products and services as necessary, well-deserved treats for this woman to enact self-care (Lazar 2009, 377). In this sense, “‘treat[ing] yourself’ to the ‘pampering’ services of a makeup artist (376) is not to be seen as laziness or incompetence; but as a ‘necessary luxury’ (377) for the busy, modern woman to experience relaxation.

In this example, Louise does not explicitly talk about her makeup artists as a means of pampering herself (although the group does talk about the occasional process of dressing up as “special” and “fun”). Rather, I am specifically interested in the taken-for-grantedness with which she talks about having a makeup artist. Notably, she does not bring up the subject of hiring a makeup artist as a topic of its own, but as part of the broader anecdote about her supposed incompetence around makeup and beauty products; the makeup artist only holds a peripheral role in her story. However, it is this very absence of attention that is noteworthy: the very fact that employing a makeup artist is not worth special mention is itself a privilege that women like Louise do not have to think twice about. Engaging a makeup artist is a little luxury she can afford so that someone else can perform on/for her what is presented as a frivolous, silly activity (makeup, styling) when done by *other women*. As I demonstrate in the next section, the use of makeup, or the hiring of someone else to do it for her, thus figure as only one part of a bigger toolkit for creating and sustaining a particular kind of neoliberal subjectivity that is always visibly focused on other more valued qualities of individualised personal growth, and economic and social success.

From here, I proceed to show how responses to these two repertoires of 1) beauty as frivolous and excessive, and 2) beauty as requiring much effort parlay into a third repertoire, which formulates beauty as one of many tools to be managed and employed in the construction of successful feminine subjectivity today.

### **5.2.3 The Repertoire of Beauty as a Tool**

Beauty theorists from the eighties and nineties noted that the fulfilment of beauty ideals had become so normalised that women's physical appearances became indications of how well and obediently they adhered to acceptable forms of femininity and social citizenship

(Brownmiller 1985; Bartky 1990; Davis 1995). Consider, further, the broader discourses around cultivating the body as a project, for which each individual is responsible for maintaining, transforming and manufacturing into acceptable, desirable states (Bordo [1993] 2003b; Featherstone 1982; Giddens 1991; Orbach 2009). Not meeting these body standards is then regarded as individual irresponsibility or failure – something I am not doing enough, or too much, of.

More recently, critics of neoliberal feminist discourse also note the growing emphasis on individualistic self-fulfilment and perfection (McRobbie 2015). For example, Rottenberg warns of the increasing requirement for women to “[accept] full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care” (Rottenberg 2014, 420). Within this “individualistic striving” (McRobbie 2015, 4), it is not enough for the neoliberal feminist subject to succeed in any given area. Rather, this postfeminist climate promotes ‘perfected’ work-life balances (McRobbie 2015), and the equal enjoyment of private practices alongside public career and social success. The successful woman today should assume responsibility for excelling at work, having a happy home life *and* looking beautiful. She *can* (must!) have it all!

I have shown that participants respond to the repertoires of 1) beauty as excessive/frivolous and 2) beauty as demanding by using, primarily, derogatory, negative language and tropes, addressed towards both themselves and others. Participants reveal some awkwardness in appraising the practices and enjoyment of beauty without simultaneously resorting to the use of pejorative language, even if in jest. However, I suggest it is too simplistic to read these responses as straightforward resistances against or rejections of beauty ideals and practices. I am interested to examine how these repertoires are used by my participants to formulate responses that point to more than just their relationship to bodily beauty. The disconnection and contradictions that occur in the interviews call for further interrogation: for example, when participants reference the repertoire of beauty as silly and unimportant, this is located within discussions about their personal enjoyment of beauty practices; although they suggest that beauty is hard work, they also talk about certain pleasures in dressing up while also expressing some embarrassment around this engagement. So, I question what *other* subjective stances these contradictions may point to, and how their specific class positioning and privileges allow them to negotiate and take these varying, sometimes contradictory, subjective positions.

I have already argued that participants use these first two repertoires to infer that there are more important things for them to be concerned with; engagements with beauty are not

prioritised. However, the fact that they *do* still talk enthusiastically about their love for particular beauty products or their engagement with certain practices renders beauty not as trivial a subject as they initially suggest. Participants do not reject traditional ideals of bodily beauty and femininity outright. Rather, their resistance to these expectations is expressed, first, as a desire (and ability) to choose *whether or not to* engage with these ideals and practices. Secondly, if they do engage with certain practices, they want to determine, on their own terms, *which practices to employ and when*, whether that involves experimenting with makeup and fashion, or dressing casually for work. Finally, if they employ the same beauty practices that they reject or deride in others, they *qualify their decisions* as being more intelligible and thoughtful. Significantly, all three of these conditions are made possible by their particular class privileges, as discussed below.

To offer an example of how this tri-fold resistance plays out, I return to Danielle's, Sandra's and Ellie's group interview (KL). The strongest theme of their interview can be summarised in their oft used phrase "I don't give a fuck" and their assertions that people should just do or "wear what they want". Danielle clarifies: "I like fashion... I love everything to do with it but [...] I don't like the expectations that come with it." Earlier in the conversation, as we discuss KL Fashion Week, she asserts, "if I *feel* like dressing up, then I guess I'll dress up", contrasting this immediately by pointing out that, "people are always dressing up because that's kind of expected of you to dress up and look good." By qualifying her love of fashion while rejecting any *expectations* to pursue fashion in particular ways, Danielle positions herself as discerning and agentic – she makes the right decisions for herself, as and when she wants to. Thus, Danielle first asserts her right to choose *if* and *when* she will "dress up". Then, secondly, throughout their interview, Danielle, Sandra and Ellie talk variously of the multiple beauty practices and expressions of femininity they enjoy – for example, dressing casually in cheap, high-street brands to fashion events, dressing up for pleasure or sporting ridiculous, even uncomfortable fashion because, "I like it, I'm just gonna wear it anyway!" (Danielle, talking about uncomfortable but "amazing" shoes). Third and finally, they qualify and present these decisions around their beauty practices and choices as thoughtful – not a result of peer pressure or for the vain, decorative reasons assumed in other women, but as well-considered, decisive action.

Gill qualifies emphatic responses such as Danielle's declaration of personal choice – "if I *feel* like [it]" – as a "hollow defiance" and questions the ideological and performative results of such assertions (Banet-Weiser, Gill & Rottenberg 2020, 13-14). In an article that explores how women in magazines (and the magazines themselves) frame and (re)brand

contemporary feminism, Gill and Favaro discover a kind of indignation in the way that their participants defend their allegiances to feminism. In particular, a prominent recurring theme in their interviews with writers/editors of UK-based magazines was that ““You can want to look a certain way, and that’s your prerogative. In it being your prerogative, that is feminist”” (Gill and Favaro 2018, 37). The exercising and assertion of choice alone thus becomes enough to “guarant[ee] ... the ‘feministness’ of anything (Banet-Weiser, Gill & Rottenberg 2020, 13).

Within postfeminist and neoliberal contexts, though, this feminism is far less about confronting and dismantling existing oppressive and patriarchal structures, than it is about demonstrating self-determining autonomy. When Danielle declares her will to dress up against others’ expectations or when she and her peers champion for their readers to “wear what they want”, these encouragements are not just about fashion choices. Instead, they also serve to declare a political stance (or what is thought to be political) – to be (post)feminist, independent – and a belief that their choices and actions are carefully self-directed without being subject to others’ influence. Rottenberg and Banet-Weiser further note that neoliberal and popular feminisms particularly encourage *individualised* success, growth and wellbeing, “constru[ing] women not only as entrepreneurial subjects but also as individual enterprises” (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 2020, 8). Beauty practices – including dressing up or making up – thus become framed as only one of many tools employed to construct these ‘enterprises’. If and when Danielle dresses up, this decision is read not just as a sartorial one, but as an assertion of her willingness and ability to dress in particular ways at her own choosing.

I therefore suggest that this trio of negotiations constitute a third repertoire, which locates beauty as one tool, among many, to be employed at an individual’s informed discretion. This repertoire suggests that beauty should not be pursued for its own sake but engaged as one of many devices carefully selected by the “autonomous, self-improving, self-regulating aesthetic entrepreneur” in order to construct and prove their capable, independent, self-determining subjectivity (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017, 39). Of course, however, it is important to remember this willingness and ability to access a range of ‘tools’ are enabled by particular class conditions and resource, as I have already outlined above. Danielle is able to ‘wear whatever she wants’ because her choice of clothing is only one among several tools available to her to construct a subject that is, by its privileges, already socially and culturally respectable, and regarded as successful. Drawing on Erickson’s work around cultural omnivorousness, Skeggs (2004) outlines:

...time, knowledge, information, bodily investment, mobility across cultural boundaries and social networking, all constitute resources for the formation of the new middle-class omnivorous self. The cultural omnivore, therefore, enables the middle-classes to re-fashion and re-tool themselves.

(144)

Central to this theme of omnivorousness are the possibilities of *choice and option*, themselves products of class, educational and financial privileges that are not equally available to those in lower and working classes. Within the context of beauty, specifically, the option to choose *whether* to engage in beauty practices, and further, *which ones* to adopt or reject, might be read as being more available to those few with certain classed privileges.

Studies on working-class women's relationship to beauty/practices commonly regard the body as central to the women's formation and presentation of their subjectivities and negotiation of social status. For example, Skeggs (1997), draws on Bourdieu's work on class and taste to suggest that the working-class women respondents of her study:

see and invest in their bodies as a form of cultural capital. It is the means by which they can tell others who they are [...] They regulate their bodies to make sure that they cannot be seen to be one who does not or cannot care. [...] The surface of their bodies is the site upon which distinctions can be drawn. Skills and labour such as dressing-up and making-up are used to display the desire to pass as not working class.

(83-84)

Writing more recently, Sanchez Taylor (2012a) remarks that for the working-class women she interviewed:

[p]ossessing fake breasts ... marks the owner as economically successful, hence the desire for breasts to look very obviously artificial. [...] They are a means through which to display their confidence and active, go-getting, self sufficient selves, to 'do gender' in a very particular way, one that they believe gives them power in relation both to men and to other, less fashionable and less ballsy, women. In this way, they sought to perform a

heterosexual working class femininity that they did not subjectively experience as oppressive.

(464)

I suggest that my participants respond to beauty from the opposite end of the spectrum. They do not use their bodies as markers of economic success nor to make their class standing known – they “do not need to pass” (Skeggs 1997, 91) for *they are already there*. This is not to say that working-class women only have their bodies from which to negotiate their social standing; nor is it to suggest that they do not, or are unable to, exercise agency with/over their bodies and beauty practices. Rather, I suggest that the particular class positioning and privileges of my participants encourage them to view the role of the body, and assert agency over their bodies, in different, if opposite, ways.

While Skeggs and Sanchez Taylor suggest that working-class women labour upon the body as a central site of negotiation, to display economic success and upwardly directed social aspirations, I argue that the body does not hold the same importance for my participants. Instead, success for my participants is signaled by how adeptly they shift from fulfilling gendered bodily expectations to focus instead on qualities of self-determination, self-improvement and individual accomplishment. Because the “middle-class omnivorous self” has access to other social and cultural resources, and prioritises other goals, the body and its related beauty practices come to hold less significance and are employed as only one of several tools – including, for example, education and career success – to configure the progressive, enterprising self and prove individual capacity.

Again, this is not to claim that women without these privileges are lacking or unable to assert the same degree of agency; or that my participants have greater opportunities for resistance than other classes of women. There is an important distinction to be made here between whether my participants actually enjoy greater recourse to acts of agency/resistance (which is not what this thesis argues); and *how* they draw from the resources availed to them to construct themselves as making more informed, intelligible decisions than other women towards their bodies, beauty and other goals. Thus, it not just the cultural and economic capital afforded by these women’s class position that allows them to “re-fashion and retool themselves”, but more specifically what Dosekun (2015) refers to as a “material, discursive, and imaginative capital” (966). With these capitals, whether they choose to be a girly girl or to resist those practices altogether is of lesser significance than the ways in which they

practically and discursively negotiate these options and resources to legitimate their decisions as being thoughtful, sensible and a means to achieving more socially valued ends.

In the same article about the consumption of cosmetic surgery among working-class women, Sanchez Taylor (2012a) warns of the dangers of producing simple dichotomies which:

condemn the practices through which some working class women manage and present their bodies and ‘do’ femininity (such as breast augmentation surgery) without also questioning the practices that many middle class women engage in to the same ends (e.g., managing body size and muscle tone by means of expensive gym membership and body maintenance classes, jogging and diet; wearing the clothing and brands that signify a rejection of the kind of hyper-femininity that is deemed ‘vulgar’).

(465)

Therefore, we might question: how is Louise, who hires a makeup artist to style her, different from the women who sit around talking about fake eyelashes? How do my participants’ expensive memberships at gyms and Pilates studios differ from other *tai tais*’ use of Botox? I suggest that the difference resides not in the practices themselves, but primarily in the way these participants *qualify* their engagement with beauty and bodily practices as being more considered, intelligible, and for more respectable and productive purposes (Banet-Weiser 2018) than those of girly-girls and *tai tais*. These reasons are explored in more depth in the next section, where I examine examples of how participants ‘translate’ their engagement with beauty into discourses upheld as more valuable.

Finally, I would like to propose another way of reading participants’ indifference and resistance by studying their use of phrases like “I don’t give a fuck”. I draw on theories around ‘fat talk’, wherein proclamations like “I’m so fat” and derisive talk about their own bodies are enacted by young girls (and, I argue, adult women), to negotiate social identity and peer interactions. Discussing ‘how fat they are’ serves as a means of securing “group affiliation” among friends and marks social conformity to group norms (Nichter and Vuckovic 1994, 112, 116). In most cases, the focus is not actually about fatness but about learning to “talk about [bodies] in the right way” (Ambjörnsson 2005, 120). Fat talk can be seen simultaneously as “a way [...] of making yourself visible and legitimate, of showing people that you have independence, individuality, and style” and as an indication of conformity (ibid). Though my participants do not engage specifically with fat talk, I argue

that the same principles apply in the way they express resistance against conventional beauty ideals. Just as fat talk signals independence and individuality, stating “I don’t give a fuck” or ironically proclaiming how ‘lazy’ they are is also to affect a way of talking about beauty in “the right way”. Within a neoliberal, postfeminist context, this “right way” is reconfigured as a disinterest in beauty ideals, for this shows the speaker to be unaffected by beauty pressures in the way that other shallow girly girls are perceived to be. By employing this kind of talk, these women thus imply that there are other issues more deserving of their attention, and that any engagement with beauty practices is done carefully as a means to more important ends.

Within this third repertoire, beauty is perceived to facilitate the achievement of a neoliberal postfeminist subjectivity that is always self-determining, self-making, competent and informed. I have sought to illustrate how the first two repertoires that women engage with are ultimately directed towards this one. On the one hand, participants either 1) reject the silly superficiality of girly girls or 2) proclaim a laziness or incompetence around required beauty practices. On the other hand, they openly share their love and engagement with these practices. I have argued for reading these conflicting attitudes together, such that other women’s insubstantial, fussy engagements with beauty practices are clearly distinguished from what participants construct as their own informed, agentic and meaningful employments of these same practices in the service of more valuable goals. These goals are then situated within the broader project of attaining and sustaining an ideal neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivity. An individual’s relationship to beauty and its associated practices thus comes to figure as just one of many facets of their selfhood and a calculated means for attaining contemporary standards of enterprising, autonomous, self-actualised success.

In the next section, I progress to examine how women ‘translate’ their beauty talk through and into discourses that are shaped around some of these other goals.

### **5.3 ‘Translating’ Beauty: The Greater Value of Other Discourses**

Studying the repertoires (Potter and Wetherell 1987) associated with beauty is useful for understanding how women situate their own relationship to beauty practices within existing socially and culturally accepted “systems of belief, values and ideas of the world” (Hermes 1995, 26-27). Such a study offers insight not only into how beauty means for these women, but also how these repertoires intersect with each other to form new ways of talking about



beauty that are located within wider contemporary social and cultural values, in this case, neoliberal, postfeminist values of individuality and self-actualisation. To extend this analysis, I now turn to look at how women talk about beauty through or with altogether different discourses.

Many of my participants seemed hesitant to talk openly about ‘doing looks’ (Frost 1999) for the sake of beauty alone. With the exception of a few instances where participants spoke directly about, for example, the pleasures of “play[ing] with my makeup” (Sandra [26, KL]) or wearing bright orange lipstick at home in the middle of the day (Hannah [38, KL]), almost all my participants seem to justify their engagements with beauty practices with a ‘better’ reason. Notably, these reasons primarily revolved around health. As I myself have followed a nutrition and fitness regime for two years of my PhD, I could not help but read many of these interviews against and alongside my own practices and how I feel about them. I acknowledge that losing weight has given me more energy and helped to lessen chronic knee pains that I had been suffering for years. But I also confess that perhaps the more pleasing result has been enjoying my slimmer appearance... although I would rarely openly admit this for fear of being perceived as vain or as conceding to beauty pressures. Likewise, my participants who spoke of dieting or fitness practices would almost always locate them within health-related reasons; rarely, if ever, did they profess to just *prefer the way they looked* when they were thinner. Bordo addresses this same ambiguity when she discusses her experience of losing weight – dropping twenty-five pounds was regarded as inconsistent and hypocritical by her colleagues, while aligning more closely to an “adequately normalized body”, she claims, “diminished my efficacy as an alternative role model for my female students” (Bordo [1993] 2003b, 30-31). More than twenty-five years from the time that Bordo was writing, dieting for the sake of meeting a thin (beauty) ideal, still seems unsubstantiated and trivial.

In my next chapter, I explore the therapeutic beauty narrative (Whitefield-Madrano 2016), which refers to a trajectory that women take from previously having suffered some body anxiety to ostensibly overcoming this struggle through inwardly directly therapeutic work. In many instances, participants claim to have resolved most of their bodily insecurities and are now more accepting of their bodies. Beauty practices they employ are decidedly *not* to fix any flaws or meet any ideals but contextualised by other more noble reasons. I am hesitant to completely deny that my participants may well have healed from past body anxieties and are now exercising some level of agency to discover and enact their own meanings of beauty, health and so forth. Indeed, many of them project a great deal of

confidence in their interviews as they talk about how they have learned to listen to their body's physical needs and respond accordingly, or to deal with body-shaming comments more peacefully. Yet, I am still sceptical of how easily this therapeutic beauty narrative unfolds. I myself know how much appearance still matters to me and this sentiment is echoed in the contradictory 'confessions' that some of my participants share about (still) wanting to look thinner or about comparing themselves to celebrities they see on various media platforms (as discussed in Chapter Four). I thus started to look at *how else* women were talking about and around their relationship to beauty and associated practices.

In her article about interviewing women, DeVault suggests that the predominantly patriarchal language used in the world lacks the adequate linguistic resources to convey women's experiences accurately. Instead, women must scavenge from within this language to find what is available. She writes:

Presumably ... the lack of fit between women's lives and the words available for talking about experience present real difficulties for ordinary women's self-expression in their everyday lives. If words often do not quite fit, then women who want to talk of their experiences must "translate," either saying things that are not quite right, or working at using the language in non-standard ways

(DeVault 1990, 97)

DeVault suggests, therefore, that it is all the more important for researchers to "[listen] around and beyond words" (101). While this study is not a linguistic one, I wish to deploy this concept of 'translating experiences' to consider how women 'translate' into or 'borrow' from other more highly prized discourses to talk favourably about typically devalued subjects such as feminine bodily beauty. Traditionally, women's talk and the issues more commonly associated with the domestic, private sphere of the feminine are often denigrated as unsubstantial "gossip" (McRobbie 1982, 50). For example, I recall my earlier discussion about women's reticence to be associated with an excessive or frivolous engagement with beauty/practices. As such, I read the oblique ways in which my participants talk about beauty as attempts to recast these issues within other discourses that are customarily validated by the 'masculine' public sectors of health (medicine/science) and the workplace, and therefore accorded greater social and cultural recognition. What follows is an examination of how women translate their talk around doing looks by either *defining* or *justifying* their engagement with beauty practices through the use of other more highly

prized discourses. Though participants reference a range of experiences and fields, I focus especially upon two discourses which arose most frequently in the data: 1) health, or physical and mental wellbeing, and 2) professionalism and the workplace.

### **5.3.1 Health and Bodily Care**

#### **5.3.1.1 The Value of Health**

One of the most commonly cited concerns among participants was for and about physical health. While some participants directly addressed critical physical illnesses that they were suffering/had suffered – such as cancer (Caroline [48, KL]), severe migraines and allergies (Anvesha [24, York]) or nutritional deficiencies (Emma [30, London]) – most of them did not sustain any serious health issues and talked mostly about maintaining good physical health or preventing illness and injury. Interestingly, most discussions about health arose without my prompting – participants often brought up the subject of health themselves while talking about their relationship to their bodies and/or associated beauty practices. Consider for example, the following excerpts about skincare regimes:

[W]hen it comes to skincare, I mean my belief is that ... your skin's the largest organ on your, in your body ... [J]ust in the way you feed your body like, vitamins and take supplements, like, shouldn't you take care of your skin? It's the same ... thing. [...] Skincare's not frivolous for me. It ... really isn't, because you know, you're ... giving your skin what it needs and you're taking care of your skin. [...] At the end of the day, your skin's your money maker, you know, it's like, dressing up [...] I take myself seriously enough to actually care about how I look.

(Trixie [30, KL])

[F]or me, one big difference was also, I think, when I was in my teens up to my twenties, I always saw all these things as just being vain, and I didn't want to be vain, so I ... stayed away from that. But it's only, like, in the last few years, I start to say, like, no, it's just about loving yourself and taking better care of yourself. And so you look better and you feel better, so it's not about being vain, it's... really just like, you take care of yourself...

(Beverly [40, KL])

Then, Emma talks about coming to terms with a mineral deficiency that made her lose hair and how upset she initially felt when she cut it very short:

I had to like deal with that [the cultural obsession with youth and beauty] before I could actually, like, truly make up my own mind about what I find attractive and what I'm gonna be happy about. And I was like, you know, I love being thirty, I'm honouring my body the best I can by like treating it well and making sure that I do care about health over everything else and I love the short hair, it looks great.

(Emma [30, London])

It is significant that these three examples clarify in some way that their concerns are not fuelled by “frivolous”, “vain” preoccupations with appearance. Instead, these women assert that, like Emma, they “care about health over everything else”, and prioritise the healthful needs of the body over looks. While these decisions might seem self-directed and empowering, I argue that they are eager to emphasise their healthful choices because discourses of health are given more value, socially and culturally, than those of beauty, even as physical signifiers of health, such as thinness, voluminous hair and a clear complexion, are often equally entangled with beauty. As Petersen and Lupton (1996) remark, the visibly healthy body and the visible demonstrations of working on the body signifies “moral worth [...], a crucial means by which the individual can express publicly such virtues as self-control, self-discipline, self-denial and willpower – in short, those qualifications considered important to being a ‘normal’, ‘healthy’ human being” (25).

Moreover, Featherstone argues that within capitalist, consumer-driven societies, individual bodies are as much measured for their ability to contribute towards production and maintenance of these systems, as they are valued as commodities in themselves to be displayed, ‘marketed’, (sexually) desired and enjoyed. Health connects the twin concerns for beauty and productivity: “the body beautiful comes to be taken as a sign of prudence and prescience in health matters”, while health itself signals one’s productive contributions to society (Featherstone 1982, 24-25). This health-beauty equation also functions in reverse. Some of my participants were keen to do away altogether with that first step of making the body beautiful, eschewing a concern with beauty for the more valued prize of health. When Radha (43, KL) says, “I feel that once I’m comfortable and I feel healthy and stuff, I will

also look good, automatically”, she suggests that health holds such importance now that *it* becomes the cause and marker for beauty, rather than the other way around.

For neoliberal subjects, this concern for health extends beyond the physical body, by also proving qualities of responsibility, self-regulation and self-mastery. The discipline, work and effort that an individual invests in their bodies is therefore read not only as beauty and/or health, but as “responsible, conscientious citizen[ship]” (Lavrence and Lozanski 2014, 84; see also Gilman 2008; Petersen and Lupton 1996). As Trixie suggests, physical looks are as much an indicator of physical health as they are of the *attitude* that she takes towards her body – she “takes herself seriously”.

The emphasis on treating and maintaining the body – and thus, self – as project began with Giddens’ (1991) observation that the modern individual assumes responsibility for the self, made manifest by the body. This concern is especially intensified by the panic around, for example, obesity and correlated illnesses in recent decades (Saguy and Almeling 2008; Saguy and Campos 2011) which reemphasises the importance of individual efforts to meet recommended scientific measures of health (weight, for example) (Bacon 2010 [2008]; Bacon and Aphramor 2014). At the same time, popular culture representations of fitness and exercise perpetuate the idea that the body can (or should) be tamed at will (Bordo 1999a, Orbach 2009). Significantly, responsibility for the body’s health and appearance rests entirely with the individual, and “self-regulating, individualized practices become championed over other forms of well-established knowledge such as the social determinants of health” (Ayo 2012, 102). Becker (1986) already noted in the eighties that discourses of health promotion married notions of wellness to self-actualisation and personal fulfilment. This conflation not only elides the ways in which “social, economic, and environmental issues ... have major impacts on health” but also redirects attention away from the collective goals of societal improvement to inward-facing individual concerns (18-20). Within neoliberal feminism especially, physical health and wellness is positively promoted as one of many strategies for securing wider feminine empowerment and individual success. For instance, in an ethnographic study of a women’s business networking conference, Mickey (2018) relays examples of speakers describing their healthful choices as “empowering”, which implies that professional success and the achievement of a work-life balance comes down to each individual’s “ability to take care of their bodies and minds” and “careful practices of self-management” (13).

Almost all of my participants assume this responsibility such that it is not only normalised but regarded as a positive, self-motivated step in self-care. For example, Stephanie (31, London) talks about the “need to start taking care of myself”, while Emma claims to be “honouring my body the best I can by treating it well”. Stephanie and Emma uttered these statements broadly in relation to discussions about exercise, nutrition and health. However, while diet and fitness regimes might commonly be regarded as measures for shaping and controlling the body, the ways in which my participants talk about these practices present them less as obligations and more as nurturing choices responding to the body’s needs.

It is useful to consider here Turner’s explanation about the overlap between perceived needs and desires:

[W]e live in a socially constructed reality and our pleasures are acquired in a social context, but this is also true of ‘need’. To some extent the contrast between ‘need’ and ‘desire’ is grounded in a distinction between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. Our needs are seen to be real, because they are natural and they are natural because our bodies are a feature of the natural landscape of our existence. By contrast desires are vain, because they are cultivated. [...] While desire is mere luxury, needs are necessities. This distinction is difficult to maintain, because what we perceive as needs are in fact thoroughly penetrated and constituted by culture. (Turner 1996, 57)

Whether participants talk about their body practices by drawing from prominent existing health discourses or as a response to giving their bodies what they need, the underlying message is that their selected practices are not frivolous but necessary. As Turner suggests, however, it is important to interrogate these ‘needs’, questioning what is really a need and what is socially constructed. For example, when discussing the body’s health and needs, we should question whether the body really requires certain practices<sup>35</sup> or whether we just couch these practices as ‘needs’ in order to fulfil an aesthetic/beauty ideal. Further, just as Wilson points out the falsity of regarding fashion and function as dichotomous (discussed further in Section 5.3.1.2) (Wilson [1985] 2014), we risk a similar contradiction by regarding the pursuit of beauty (desire) and the employment of healthful practices (need) as mutually exclusive properties. Indeed, must there be any need at all to justify a skincare regime?

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<sup>35</sup> I acknowledge however, that discussions about the body’s needs encroaches upon physiological and biological domains which can risk trapping us in essentialist arguments.

Could it not be enjoyed for nothing more than the “pointlessness” of the pleasures it affords? (245). Considering Trixie’s comments about the health of her skin, for example, I question what really constitutes healthy skin and whether it really “needs” the kind of treatments we believe it does. What part of that health is actually just about *how that skin looks* and how it meets an ideal that defines ‘healthy’ skin as necessarily fair, smooth, wrinkle-free and flawless?

Researchers of cosmetic surgery extend this debate around beauty/needs by examining the ways in which a concern for bodily aesthetics collapses into and is normalised under medical and/or health discourses. For example, Kaw (1993) discovers in her study of Asian-American women electing cosmetic surgery, that scientific, medical and technological discourses hold such purchase that women’s negative, racialised feelings towards their facial features and their ultimate decision to undergo surgery are normalised and even encouraged by medical authorities. Similarly, Flowers et al., in a study on the changing representations and perceptions of the penis, argue that by the increasing “everyday medicalization” of discourses around the body, “the normative becomes denatured, technologized and managed by the self” (Flowers et al. 2013, 122). They demonstrate that by the biomedicalisation of bodies (Clarke et al. 2003), the function and aesthetic of the penis becomes pathologised and problematised in ways that demand and normalise individual “self-management” strategies upon the body (130). Such needs are then also constructed as requiring the ever-increasing consumption of medical commodities and services, employment of a burgeoning array of ‘newly’ developed scientific technologies and reliance upon the authority of medical ‘expertise’ (Petersen and Lupton 1996). Flowers et al. mainly examine male bodies (and associated notions of masculinity which of course differs considerably from my research. However, the same argument can be applied to examine how, with the rising prominence and normalisation of (bio)medical and scientific discourses, feminine bodily beauty is also often conflated with what are depicted as *necessary* health practices. I argue that my participants’ prioritisation of health is directed precisely by this commonly accepted authority of scientific and medical discourses. Referencing health thus lends greater credibility to decisions that may ultimately still just be motivated by a desire to fulfil a beauty ideal.

Finally, a significant problem with this edification of health and wellness is that although routes to achieving these qualities are frequently promoted as equally available to everyone, what constitutes socially and culturally respectable, healthful options and practices are almost always restricted to and afforded by only a certain few. Healthy foods, gym

memberships, wellness retreats and beauty products are often costly and not accessible to many. Critics of wellness, such as Hendricks and Plummer (2013) call further attention to “intersecting pressures of gender, race, class, and sexual identity on choices made around wellness” (104) highlighting the demands that contemporary health practices make upon bodies to conform to a white, middle-class, heteronormatively feminine and able-bodied ideal. Thus, not only is access not equally enjoyed by all, but the very model of health we are directed to achieve is one that privileges only a very narrow category of individuals. Consequently, wellness becomes bound up in consumption practices, and the drive for health simultaneously urges us to consume the correct services and products needed to maintain this vision of health (Ayo 2012). Of course, it follows that only a small demographic can easily afford these commodities. Physical health thus also becomes an indication of economic and social success, and the possession of valuable cultural capital. Self-care, then, is less about healthful practices or tending to the body as it is about the broader “self-investment” of securing self-made success and social status (Mickey 2018, 19).

### **5.3.1.2 Finding Pleasure, Balance and Success through the Healthy Body**

As well as keeping up with social and cultural expectations of women’s bodies, the discourse surrounding the efficacy and health of the body also renders the body as a tool, something to serve a particular *function* – whether affective, social or physiological/biological (although of course, much of what we perceive as ‘natural’ and biological is overlaid with social meaning, and the two are often inextricable). Practices such as dieting and exercise take on predominantly practical meanings and are regarded as steps for maintaining and optimising the efficient functioning of the body. Since a neoliberal climate encourages the individual development of a disciplined, motivated self that enjoys balance across all areas of her life, the body thus becomes another useful tool to this end (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2016, 22-26; Rottenberg 2014a). Often, participants reveal an appreciation of the body for its use value – “what it does for me” (Carina [35, Singapore]) – and they understand the obligation to fulfil the body’s “actual needs” (Emma) for “practical reasons, for health reasons, truly health reasons” (Beverly). For example, young mothers talked about their changing relationship to dieting and eating, regarding food now as “fuel”. Melissa (36, London) talks about the transition from seeing food as a “treat” to recognising it as necessity: “If I don’t eat, [...] I literally cannot function, my energy drops down, everything just goes horrific, and then I’m not ... the parent that I want to be.” Lara resists



the judgement others placed on her body during her pregnancy by explaining: “You didn’t think about, ‘Oh, this is gonna make me fat, ohhh...’ You just go and listen to your body, what does it need, what is the best for your kid, you do it. The body is really a tool now...”

In neoliberal terms, the body’s health is even more valuable when considered in relation to mental wellbeing. Here, the body is not considered for its own sake but for the greater project of the development of the self. As Elias, Gill and Scharff (2017) note, neoliberal discourses around the nurturing of a healthy psychic life update the concepts of health wellness as aspects of daily life to be affirmatively enjoyed, rather than as a mundane or arduous obligation. Consider these excerpts which demonstrate the value that women invest in holistic health:

**Jamie:** What is health to you? Like the signs of health that you were referring to—

[...]

**Emma:** [L]earning to honour your needs whether that’s, “I need to sleep late today” instead of going to the gym, or whether that’s “I need to go to the gym this morning and not sleep late.” Whether that’s, “I need to eat healthy at the moment” or you know, “I need to have vegetables” ... or if I need to have a bar of chocolate, this second... [T]o not verge to extremes in either direction is undeniably the most difficult thing I’ve ever done because I’m very much an extremist, like very “all or nothing” with everything. [...] So for me, I guess healthiness and honouring is about developing balance.

(Emma [30, London])

I just was on the treadmill, half an hour I ran and I just felt so much better in myself and it wasn’t even that painful, [...] And it was like, I can do it and I haven’t got kids, like hanging off my legs, [...] you know, I’m not cleaning and doing all that stuff, it’s just nice to just clear your head and, I dunno, just get out and ... also for people to see you on your own.

[...]

I think that’s so important for people, [...] ‘cos then, I do think that if you’re doing so much for your kids and ... less for you, ... they go to school and suddenly it’s like, “Oh! My role is redundant, like, what am I? Who am I?” Then it, like, spirals.

(Rana [34, London])

These excerpts exemplify an engagement with two body practices – dieting and exercising – most commonly associated with transforming the physical body to obtain a physical ideal, usually thin and/or muscular. However, Emma and Rana both purposefully construct their practices as enjoyable means for supporting their mental health, rather than just for aesthetic reasons. Emma divulged plenty in her group interview about a long-standing binge-eating disorder and tendency to over-exercise, which originally arose from cultural and familial beauty pressures. In this excerpt, she signals an attempt to redress the balance in eating and exercising, and to consciously value her body’s “healthiness” over appearance. For Rana, going to the gym is not for any bodily transformation to get back her pre-baby body (although we did also talk about the expectations placed on pregnant and mothering bodies), but for the emotional wellbeing that running affords her. In both instances, neither Emma nor Rana mention the effects that these diets or workouts have had on their physical appearance; rather, these practices are reframed from being physical actions done unto the body to fulfil externally imposed expectations of beauty, to having an inextricable influence on their emotional and mental wellbeing.

Having struggled myself with food and exercise throughout my life – veering from extreme dieting to over-eating, and from excessive exercising to very little movement – it was encouraging for me to hear these participants share their attempts to seek better balance. A straightforward reading of these sharings endows the speakers with significant agency – they appear to be denying older, conventional beauty pressures and are determining for themselves how to “honour [their] needs” or figure out ‘who they are’. However, while I am loath to deny my participants of agency, these attitudes cannot be divorced from the overriding neoliberal and postfeminist contexts and values within which they are constructed. For example, I question what is really happening when women *don’t* talk overtly about physical appearance when they discuss their diet and fitness practices. Are they *really* more interested in the other effects of these practices, or is this a response that, again, seeks to (re)position themselves within a discourse of health and wellness that is more socially respected? For a mother like Rana, for instance, a visible concern for overall health and finding balance between her private and public lives may certainly be more respectable (even expected) than a concern for appearances, and helps her establish a distinct emotional space for herself (Moore 2010).

Other participants also talk about achieving better balance between body and mind. For example, Radha talks of a need to be less cerebral – “I tend to live in my head” – and to be

more alert to “what I’m physically feeling, sensation-wise” so as to mitigate the effects of neglect, such as ignoring hunger cues, eating beyond fullness or forgetting to exercise. And, Hannah professes a tendency to overindulge in “all the stuff that feels good” such that self-care should involve “a bit more [of] what my body needs rather than just what I want...” Radha and Hannah indicate that balance is achieved by considering *both* affective and physical needs. However, I question the genderedness of this construction of balance and its inadvertent reinforcement of conventional notions of femininity. Wellness and health as a “gendered moral demand” exerts on women pressures to be, simultaneously, productive good “workers and mothers” (Mickey 2018, 18). Even for women who are not mothers – like Radha and Hannah – “caring for the body and self is [still a responsibility they assume] as the guardians of personal, familial, and civic integrity and wellness” (Lavrence and Lozanski 2014, 86). Rottenberg (2017) underlines that contemporary iterations of neoliberal feminism “[present] balance as its normative frame and ultimate ideal”, with the strategic accomplishment of both career and family goals as the pinnacle of this balance (331). As such, ““doing health”” in the right ways becomes a visible means of also adequately ““doing gender”” (Moore 2010, 112).

As the body is the most visible site for proving self-discipline and self-management, the physical appearance of health and a visible engagement with healthful practices thus becomes the most prominent means for women to demonstrate their alignment to values of successful, feminine subjectivity. Historically, Moore delineates, “women are essentially subject to the vagaries of the body but, at the same time, women should seek to control the body, not just as an idle project, but as a matter of female virtue” (Moore 2010, 109). How healthy she appears and how conscientiously she shows herself to pursue healthful activity, therefore, is an indication of how successfully she enacts those qualities of self-regulation and self-actualisation required of the ideal feminine neoliberal citizen. Her healthy body becomes a tool for proving her successful self.

### **5.3.2 “I Wore a Pencil Skirt! [...] He Approved!”: Professionalism and the Workplace**

#### **5.3.2.1 Blending In and ‘Achieving Outcomes’**

While many of my participants regard girly girls’ pursuit of beauty as unsubstantial and frivolous, they defend their own beauty practices by constructing them as a means for fulfilling other goals perceived to be more useful and valuable. In many cases, these reasons

are for literally *getting a job done* – physical attractiveness serves to help one be taken seriously in the workplace, or to make favourable impressions among colleagues, so as to achieve career progression or to seal a deal (Holliday and Sanchez Taylor 2006). As such, these discussions revolved predominantly around discourses of first impressions, professionalism and workplace relations, as explored below.

Making positive first impressions was cited frequently by participants as a reason for looking good, especially at work or places of business. Some of the women I interviewed held fast to the idea that no matter how qualified and experienced someone might be in their field, first impressions still play a significant part for getting a foot in the door. Fran, (36, London) and Adeline (41, KL) both cited incidents with (male) bosses who hired women on the basis of their looks. Fran recalled her personal experience, saying that she knew she was hired at her current company because of her physical appearance; Adeline discussed a previous boss who would demonstrate obvious signs of favouritism towards women he thought were pretty, and she shared common industry (broadcast media) knowledge that many young women in China would seek cosmetic surgery to secure the attention of potential bosses.

My interview with Radha was very interesting for the prolonged debates we had around the importance of first impressions, something she feels is vital not just for work but also socially and romantically. However, for her, looking good has less to do with bodily beauty, and more to do with dress, makeup and grooming. She shared a conversation she saw in a Facebook group of women entrepreneurs, where members discussed whether the physical appearances of business/life coaches mattered when they conducted online calls or seminars. Though there were strong opinions on both sides of the argument, and Radha and I also debated the different points of view, ultimately, she summarised:

[Being] neat, tidy, ... as cute as you can make yourself to be – man or woman... maximis[ing] your looks, present[ing] yourself [is] something that will serve you [...] [to] mitigate any risk of people making up their minds wrongly about you – like, if you look messy, they think you're stupid, or they think you're messy in your work [...] You will have to work harder to prove yourself.

Paying attention to our looks then, is not just for making good first impressions but also for *curbing* any *bad* impressions. Radha suggests that the effort we put into maximising our

looks is actually to improve working situations and opportunities for ourselves in the long-term; attention to our appearances is a tactical move for achieving greater goals. When we debate the socially constructed nature of first impressions and question the assumptions we make about others' appearances, Radha responds:

I think it all comes back to your outcome – what are you actually trying to do? [...] Are you trying to show that “I’m a ... unique snowflake and ... nobody gets to tell me what to do?” Or are you trying to *achieve an outcome within society, such as it is?*

(My emphasis)

Here, Radha differentiates between two contrasting motivations for managing our physical appearances: one that asserts our individuality and challenges societal expectations; another that complies with these expectations so we can “achieve an outcome”. Although she does not deny that beauty ideals and our consequent judgements are socially constructed, she postulates that it may be more important for some people to work within these parameters to achieve other ends. These efforts come under what Elias, Gill and Scharff (2017) coin as “aesthetic labour” or “aesthetic entrepreneurship” (37-40) which accounts for the intersection between women’s beauty practices and the self-enterprising ‘work’ done to develop her neoliberal subjectivity. Contemporary neoliberal politics now dictate that the former necessarily becomes a part of achieving success in the latter. As discussed earlier, a woman’s body, as the site of aesthetic entrepreneurship, is now regarded as one tool, among others, for developing and proving individuality, self-discipline and success.

I want to examine more closely the distinction that Radha makes between being “a unique snowflake” and “achieving an outcome”. She presents these as two separate, if contrary, positions but I propose reading them as two sides of the same coin. Locating them within a neoliberal context renders both stances as methods by which an individual demonstrates independence, self-management and self-actualisation. For example, this assertive individualism might be seen in Danielle and Sandra of the KL group who frequently proclaimed that they “don’t give a fuck” and will dress however they want. Though Radha mocks the attitudes of ‘snowflakes’, Danielle and Sandra’s attitude of “not giving a fuck” and of refuting expectations within the fashion industry can be read precisely as an example of an individual proclaiming that “nobody gets to tell me what to do.” Therefore, whether one chooses to challenge ideals and assert their individuality *or* one acquiesces to playing by the rules, both stances, within a contemporary neoliberal context, can be read as being

directed towards achieving very similar outcomes: self-directed success, independence, and a branding of the self (Cronin 2000; McNay 2009).

Once a woman makes a favourable first impression and enters the workplace, she then has a different set of aesthetic expectations to negotiate. Kim, who works at a private university in Malaysia, highlights the importance of looking “convincing, confident” and dressing in a way that one’s “credibility” is not questioned, particularly by conservative peers or government officials. In this context, making a good impression comes with looking “neat, tidy” and dressing in a “conventional way”. Rana also speaks of an “unspoken sort of uniform”, a “cut-out, carbon-[copy]” look that women in the corporate sector are expected to adopt should they “want to be a successful woman in banking” and progress within the company: “they’re all gonna get their dresses from L.K. Bennett, you know, all the same shops, look the same, same handbags, same coiffured hair and makeup.”

Maya (35, Singapore) offers examples of the careful negotiation required of aesthetic labour in the corporate world. She explains that she put aside her preferences for colourful fashions by dressing more austere when she previously worked in the financial sector and describes her wardrobe then as “black and grey and browns; I’d always have my hair back, I hardly used to wear makeup”. For her, assumptions behind her appearance held particularly gendered meanings, and dressing “safe” was about being “strong”:

**Maya:** Anything that was more feminine, I saw as a sign of weakness or I [...] I didn’t want my colleagues to see me as a woman...

**Carina:** Too fluff?

**Maya:** ...as too fluffy.

Conforming to an existing and accepted dress code was therefore to position herself and her abilities at a respected level and as an equal to her male colleagues. Any detraction from that – being “more feminine” or dressing more playfully – is regarded as “weakness”. She implies that being ‘seen as a woman’ would not put her on par with the ‘stronger’ and more powerful men within an industry that is traditionally viewed as a masculine domain. Both Rana and Maya demonstrate what Elias, Gill and Scharff (2017) refer to as an “entanglement of gender, aesthetics and authority” (35), an inextricable triad that, as Maya describes, dictates the incompatibility of idealised feminine presentation with respect and workplace credibility.

Maya proceeds to talk about the process of transitioning to a more feminine, playful and experimental style of dressing when she moved to a media company. She says that she begins to appreciate that, “I could still be the power woman while being more feminine in my look”. She claims that she would love to “work towards [being] a bit more playful in my everyday life” but again, remains “still quite safe”, possibly “[still] because of this fear of being taken seriously or not seriously”. Maya’s anxieties demonstrate exactly the bind that traps women within the beauty myth: while most beauty standards demand the right kind of femininity and the successful enactment of a woman’s aesthetic labour is predicated on adherence to these ideals, the actual fulfilment of these expectations puts her at risk of not being taken seriously. Thus, although Maya herself professes a love for more “playful” and “expressive” fashion (and she talks at length about how festival culture has helped her feel more comfortable with these styles), she feels compelled to forego these personal preferences so as not to divert attention away from her work performance and ability. Success, in this context, is acquired by “conforming” to a “cut-out, carbon-[copy]” look (Rana, as above) that is already established and accepted within the workplace, and by discarding individual sartorial preferences. Although it can be argued that the corporate dress code is itself just another beauty ideal that women have to contend with, what is more relevant here are the ways in which these women frame their talk around it. Any attention to dressing is not presented as a demonstration of skill or interest in beauty practices, nor as the fulfilment of an explicitly named beauty ideal; instead, it is reframed simply as a requirement to get ahead.

Connected to discussions of work and professionalism are discourses of comfort and function, which participants often draw on to situate their practices of dressing up (or not). Here, clothes serve the main purpose of helping the wearer get a job done comfortably and effectively. For example:

I look for a second wardrobe that is functional ‘cos I know that I, what I do at work is, I need to be able to work in whatever I wear [...]. It’s all about practicality at the end of the day. And like, the shoes, I’ll have shoes until I run them to the ground ‘cos I walk really badly and you know, ... everything is bought... to last.

(Natalia [35, London])

I'm all about, you know, fucking comfy shoes and comfortable clothes and... how the clothes work and— when I work, you know. I go to work often without makeup because I just can't fucking be bothered, you know. And... I sort of feel that in this day and age, it shouldn't be expected of me unless I work at a beauty counter.

(Stephanie [31, London])

In both instances, comfort and function are prioritised over looks. For Stephanie, especially, this distinction is explicit. Her comments suggest that she purposefully chooses between *either* looks (wearing makeup) *or* comfort and function (donning comfortable clothes and going barefaced). To “be bothered” about their looks is seen as superfluous to what they need to do and should not even be expected of them. Brownmiller (1985) pointed out the irreconcilability between feminine fashion and comfort, for “[f]unctional clothing is a masculine privilege and practicality is a masculine virtue”(60). As such, the fussiness of adhering to feminine modes of dressing up and wearing makeup, as Stephanie references, is likened to the unproductive, unsubstantial frivolity practised by girly girls, as discussed in the previous chapter. By opting instead for functionality and practicality, Natalia and Stephanie ‘translate’ the act of dressing up, which is often associated with a femininised private domain, into the masculinised, public domain of productivity and work.

However, I query the distinction drawn between the two, and consider how the pleasures of making up our appearance can actually intersect with comfort and function. In her important book on historical and modern fashion, Wilson (1985 [2014]) traces the historical tendency among fashion and cultural theorists, and feminists to decry the “pointlessness of fashion” and its associated implications that the “fashionably dressed” are merely “slaves of consumerism” (244). She then argues against the requirement that fashion is always functional and comfortable. Instead, she outlines the many ambivalent positions that the modern individual takes towards their chosen fashions, and the often overlapping and contradictory meanings that fashion can hold. She summarises:

I have argued that to understand all ‘uncomfortable’ dress as merely one aspect of the oppression of women, is fatally to oversimplify; that dress is never primarily functional, and that it is certainly not natural...Precisely because fashion is at one level a game ... it can be played for pleasure.

(ibid.)



Critiquing radical and the Frankfurt School's criticisms of consumerism, which they claim reduces fashion to inauthentic and 'unnatural' means of expressing the self and desires, Wilson argues instead for the potential that fashion carries for being "one among many forms of aesthetic creativity which make possible the exploration of alternative" subjectivities. Indeed, its "pointlessness ... is precisely what makes it value: It is in this marginalized area of the contingent, the decorative, the futile, that not simply a new aesthetic but a new cultural order may seed itself" (245). She presses for a greater embrace of fashion's ambivalent and "contradictory and irreconcilable desires" (246), to move beyond seeing fashion as only *either* useless 'irrational' embellishment (52) *or* as serving strictly utilitarian purposes.

In the following example, Maya attempts to reconcile these contradictory stances towards fashion. She offers the example of a friend whom she regards as successfully marrying the creativity of fashion with the more serious functionality of corporate dress codes:

[S]he's like a fairy, she always dresses beautifully; but what I find interesting is even when she gives corporate talks, she'll be wearing a suit but it'll be with like funky shoes and maybe a strand of a feather in her hair, you know, where she always brings out that playfulness, and her personality, even if she, as she says, is forced to dress like a corporate god.

Significantly, although Maya recognises the possibility for greater creativity within the constraints of a dress code, her description sets up one's playful personality as necessarily being opposite to, and juxtaposed against, the corporate workplace. Playfulness and creativity is not a simple given, but remarkable because it is in spite of ("even if") being "forced" to adhere to a severe dress code. Being able to "bring out [one's] personality" is presented as an exception to the workplace rule and norm. In contrast, Maya reveals her own anxieties around not being taken seriously if she adopts a more playful dress style at work, as outlined above, underlining the ways in which performance and merit is substantially prioritised. Aesthetics then, at least for professional women like Maya, are still often seen as incongruent and secondary to corporate workplace performance and, as explored above in Section 5.2.3, to be employed not for its own sake, but as part of a wider toolkit for furthering one's career and personal development.

### 5.3.2.1 Standing Out and Getting Noticed

The examples cited above speak of a certain conformity that my participants abide by, so as not to mar their credibility at work. In contrast, Louise (45, KL), who works in public relations, talks overtly about the advantages of *drawing attention* to your appearance. She explains:

I can tell you that certainly if you show up in a media office with full of guys and you look good, you certainly get attention first. [...] If you go in there [...] looking good, all dressed up, you know, *like you're somebody that they wanna look at*, then they will talk to you and they will even show you to the right person.

(My emphasis)

Unlike the conservative/corporate sectors that Kim, Rana and Maya discuss, Louise suggests that public relations and media sectors reward individuals who stand out and are noticed for their looks. Louise's act of dressing up is highly strategic – she manufactures the situation so that it appears as if *others* want to look at and help her. On her part, she appears effortless and does not have to initiate contact to request assistance; rather, the media office staff are made to believe that “*they* wanna look at [her]” and, by extension, respond to her query. Louise does not detail what is considered worthy of attention, nor trouble the notion of people receiving preferential treatment for their looks. She also avoids the highly gendered aspect of seeking attention from a “media office full of guys”, which is problematic for the assumption that *women's* appearances exact different expectations, and for the judgement that is performed by men onto women entering their space. Underlying of all these issues though, Louise's point is evident: today's career woman can actively use her sexually marked, attractive, and carefully managed body to “accrue significant benefits” (Holliday and Sanchez Taylor 2006, 191).

Evie, who worked for years as a fashion magazine editor, echoes a similar sentiment in the following story:

**Evie:** So I wore a pencil skirt to– and there was this extremely conservative, extremely ... chauvinistic client who was also deeply Christian and he looked at me and said, “Oh, Evie, you look very nice today ah, very few

women wear pencil skirts nowadays”. I’m like, “Oh my god, you’re so fucking patronising”. I didn’t say that, and he signed off on a master contract – because I wore a pencil skirt! It went back to that. He approved. What the hell, right?

**Jamie:** You think it would’ve been different if you wore like, slouchy pants and like [...]

**Evie:** He wouldn’t have known what to do with me, you see, I think. Yah.

Even as she identifies the client’s sexism and immediately remarks upon how patronising he was, she ends by emphasising that he signed the contract (notably, a *master* contract). I especially like the unwitting double meaning of her statement “He approved” – this might refer to his approval of her skirt and appearance; and/or, more pragmatically, to his approval and signing of the contract. Evie’s example is interesting for the way her dressing garners her attention precisely because she abides by the conservative expectations that this client has of women. Like Radha who questions what is to be gained by being a “unique snowflake”, Evie and Louise also suggest that dressing too unconventionally can sometimes be counterproductive. Instead, meeting expectations, such as showing up at an office dressed to impress, or deliberately performing femininity, can be an effective way of getting more readily noticed and therefore, cementing success.

Whether women adhere to a standard dress code to *deflect* unnecessary attention or they fulfil an attractive ideal to *gain* attention, both approaches ultimately speak to the carefully managed aesthetic labour and entrepreneurship that women perform in the workplace to prove a particular facet successful, self-disciplined neoliberal, postfeminist subjectivity. However that attention is fostered and received, the accounts in this section illustrate that dressing well for work is not to be regarded as vanity or frivolity, but as a means to a productive, measurable, and often fiscal end. Through these examples, I have tried to demonstrate the value that work-related outcomes, credibility and respectability at the workplace holds for women over physical appearance. Attention to one’s looks or adherence to dress codes come second to prioritising work/career success, and as such, aesthetic labour performed upon the body becomes but a ‘powerful tool’ (Evie) to fulfil these goals.

However, although these approaches seem at first *not* to be about feminine beauty, I propose that they still respond to gendered expectations for the most appropriate modes of physical presentation for women. Attention is still directed upon women’s bodies as a primary focus and visible marker for the fulfilment of acceptably gendered social, cultural and even

professional roles. Correspondingly, women themselves turn that objectification upon themselves (Bartky 1990; Bordo, [1993] 2003b) and assume the responsibility to adequately manage their bodily presentations in ways that are not only acceptable but which, more importantly, will help them to accomplish the highly prized objective of attaining and displaying individualistic, self-actualised success.

Moore (2010) explores historical constructions of femininity and health to show that:

Within traditional femininity, the body is something that is to be displayed and preserved; it is, in other words, a good in and of itself, rather than a means of achieving something else. [...] Put differently, hegemonic masculinity involves exerting the body, hegemonic femininity involves transforming the body into an object.

(110)

I move this argument to contemporary neoliberal, postfeminist environments. Through my discussions on health-oriented practices and aesthetic labour in the workplace, I have demonstrated that my participants push back against a traditionally passive, femininised position, where they are seen as objects, by aligning themselves instead to the masculine attributes of ‘exerting the body’ *as a means of achieving something else*. They construct themselves as self-determining, assertive actors in their worlds (Young 1990). However, though the ultimate goal is to move attention *away* from the body, the body itself necessarily remains the central site upon which such transformations can demonstrably occur. Women prove their alignment to valued masculine traits by and through practices that are purposefully shown to be enacted upon and realised by the (feminised) body. So, Rana shows herself to be her own independent person when she describes how freeing it feels to exercise alone at the gym; Natalia and Stephanie select comfort over aesthetics to perform more effectively at work; and Louise and Evie deliberate over the right outfit and grooming to forge connections and seal deals. In all cases, they show themselves to be independent and in pursuit of “*achieving something else*”. However, ultimately, the primary locus from which this assertion is made possible is still through careful management and presentation of *the body* – a historically feminised practice and requirement which women have to account for more frequently and in more complex ways than men. In doing so, they navigate what Young describes as a tension “between subjectivity and being a mere object” (Young 1990, 144), caught in a paradox wherein the means for acquiring social respectability – such as in

the pursuit of health or professionalism – is enacted through and with the very thing they have been so long associated with and denigrated for: their bodies.

## 5.4 – (The Privilege of) Prioritising Other Values Over Beauty

I conclude this chapter with some perspectives around the relative *unimportance* of thinking and talking about beauty and bodily concerns. While it may be personally significant for many of my participants to talk about beauty and their bodies – in addressing previous instances of shame or bullying, for instance – body-centric issues are often discursively constructed as being secondary to other more important concerns. In this section, I argue that these attitudes are very much enabled and directed by class – financial and educational privileges (among others) enable and encourage this set of participants to focus their attentions and resources especially upon the development of competitive, neoliberal merit and marketable traits, both socially and in the workplace.

One such example can be identified in my conversations with former schoolmates from the British/international schools I attended. Reflecting upon our primary school experience (a British school in KL), former classmate Natalia recalls the emphasis that was placed on the development of individuals' strengths and talents:

... we were brought up ... on our best ability.

[...]

I think it was just [...] finding a place for everyone to know where they, their talents are and really making the most of that and saying actually you're really good at this, encouraging this...

Later in the conversation, Natalia also asks, "...do you think it [the emphasis on students' talents and strengths] was because there were so many different diverse backgrounds in that school as well though?" When I ask Maya and Carina (both 35, Singapore), who attended the same international secondary school with me, if they believed that the multicultural population of our school allowed for factors like physical appearance and beauty to diminish in importance, Maya echoes Natalia's thoughts on diversity:

I think it goes back to you just finding other things to focus on, whether it's confidence or empowerment or diversity. I feel you do become much more accepting of different cultures and different looks when you're exposed to it, like from the beginning [...] ... but I think the more you expose to different looks, then, different cultures, different ways of dressing, different concepts of beauty, I think the better it is. [...] So yah, I think, I think the diversity and that multiculturalism definitely helps.

It is only during my analysis that I realise how much this exposure and diversity is taken for granted in many of the interviews. Apart from Rana, Maya and Trixie, few other participants note our class privileges directly.<sup>36</sup> Significantly, across these cases, class does not just refer broadly to a middle or upper-middle social class of a particular country, but more specifically to a transnational, cosmopolitan one which has ready resources for travel, transnational migration or dual-citizenship, and long-term exposure to Western cultural and societal norms. This group of participants (and myself) did not just attend private schools; the additional international aspect of these schools is pertinent for the greater aspirations it fostered in students to pursue their higher education in the West (such as in the UK, North American or Australian universities), and correspondingly, to develop the kinds of educational, career, economic and personal development goals upheld and valued in these societies. In the context of these conversations, the emphasis on individual merit, ability and capacity is foregrounded – what you *do* and *accomplish* as an individual is prioritised. So, although the concepts and exposure to multiculturalism and “diverse backgrounds” is presented here as a panacea for better acceptance of others’ bodies, we must remember that this model of diversity is a very specific one shaped ultimately around Western ideals of individuality, success and neoliberal meritocracy (Littler 2018).

Many of my Asian/Asian-located participants also expressed a belief that attitudes towards beauty standards, expectations for women and the development of individual skills are more progressive in the West. The women who share these views have all spent time abroad, either for education or work (or both). Consider the following examples:

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<sup>36</sup> In answer to Natalia's question above, about exposure to “diverse backgrounds”, Rana, remarks that “you have to pay to go [to that school], so there's that class thing as much as you might not want to think about it”. Maya acknowledges that “not everyone has the opportunity to go to an international school and be in a multicultural environment”. Trixie acknowledges that her partner and family are “more open and more Westernised” “because ...I guess I come from, like, the upper-middle class or like, the upper class”.

Caroline, who spent a considerable number of years studying, working and living in the UK, says:

[UK people] look at you, I think, as a whole person more than here. Here they will tend to dissect you, you know, “Oh, where is she from [...] Who are her parents? What’s she look like? What clothes is she wearing? Oh, look at her shoes”, [...] but in UK, not really. [...] Everyone’s just accepted, you’re kind of on the same playing field, you know, like at university [...] Yeah, you’re just accepted as who you are. [...] Doesn’t matter how rich you are, [...] *how smart you are counts more.*

(My emphasis)

Malaysian Linda (36, KL), who studied, lived and work for more than 10 years in New York, echoes this sentiment when she claims, “Of course, it’s a thousand times worse over here” (Malaysia/Asia). In contrast, in the West, “It’s not all about what car you drive [...] It’s more about ideas and thoughts and more about what you contribute as a person than all the material stuff.” Having studied in Belfast for a year, Malaysian Lila (23, KL) shares:

I just learnt to just be myself [there]. Because you can have your own identity. Everyone is allowed to have their own identity. Like, you know the mindset is different there, [...] there’s that freedom I think of expression there, but when you come back here [Malaysia] [...], like, I dunno [...] I just feel, like, constantly judged.

Finally, Melissa, who grew up in Malaysia but moved to the UK in her childhood and currently resides in London, summed up this view with, “worth here [the UK] is... very different to how it is in Malaysia. There are problems here, of course, but I still think *there’s a bit more enlightenment*, you know, people are slightly *more enlightened*” (my emphasis).

I was interested in the ways these participants construct a distinct dichotomy between the perceived, ‘unenlightened’ superficiality of Asian materialism and judgement towards outer appearances, and the idealised freedoms of the West where, they believe, individuals are equally and better appreciated for “how smart they are”, their “ideas and thoughts” and “freedom of expression”. To distinguish themselves from traditional mores regarded as outdated and “less enlightened”, comments like these align the speakers with a desirable “neoliberal, global sisterhood of chic, empowered, [...] and individualistically minded

women who find [...] progress in following Western commodities and values” (Chen 2012, 215).

As already discussed in Section 5.2.1, my Asian participants especially attempt to distinguish themselves from what are constructed as backwards, traditional pressures that continue to restrict women in their respective local communities. However, I recall what Dosekun says when she reminds us that these postfeminist discourses are “variously available to globally ‘scattered’ feminine subjects *who have the material, discursive, and imaginative capital to access and to buy into it*” (Dosekun 2015, 966; my emphasis) – which is to say, not every woman can partake equally in this sisterhood. An affiliation with this imagined sorority therefore, serves to create a transnational feminine community across geographical borders as much as it implicitly disassociates oneself from other classes of less privileged women within the boundaries of one’s local community.

Further, a perspective that idealises the supposed ‘enlightened’ egalitarianism of the West and homogenises the freedoms there overlooks the many marked characteristics and differences between constituent classes and communities within the very societies that my participants glorify. Nor does it account for cultural specificities, oppressions, individuals’ negotiation of these constraints and assertions of agency and resistance within those communities. For example, Sanchez Taylor’s study (2012a) on the use of cosmetic surgery by British working-class women shows that explicit displays of consumption – using the body and associated beauty practices as the most visible markers – are a key means by which these women construct their identities, do gender, enact class aspirations and exercise agency. I also call on Skeggs’ discussion of working-class women’s purposeful engagements with the practices of dressing-up and using makeup, for “[t]he site of their bodies is the site upon which [class] distinctions can be drawn.” (Skeggs 1997, 84). For these women, “all the material stuff” is actually of a greater importance and “worth” than what my participants perceive as being in the West. In the context of Sanchez Taylor and Skeggs’ studies, such practices are not just superfluous, materialist preoccupations enacted by cultural dupes, but constitute integral components of self-expression, identity construction and agency. So, we might question: How different are these British women’s ‘materialistic’ preoccupations with cosmetic surgery from the practices of girly girls and *tai tais* that my Malaysia and Singapore participants dismiss as superficial and ‘unenlightened’? How can we determine one set of practices in one society – and the motivations behind them – as being more or less ‘enlightened’ than another?



I close this section with a final note about my participants and their awareness and acknowledgement (or not) of class. Only very few participants, such as Rana, Trixie and Maya, overtly acknowledge the role that class has had in making certain opportunities and attitudes possible for them; many of my participants do not explicitly discuss class and privilege, and there are often taken-for-granted assumptions in the interviews about their/our social standing and privileges. Importantly, however, although their perspectives and the ways they talk about or respond to beauty ideals and practices may at first appear to be an expression of snootiness and derision of lower classes of women, I argue that this is not necessarily the case. My participants are not haughty, unsympathetic snobs looking down upon communities of women who have not had the same opportunities of education or exposure to global cultures. Rather, the marked shift from collective (feminist) struggle to an emphasis upon personal responsibility and individual capacities can tend to gloss over social and structural inequalities altogether. Drawing from my data, as discussed throughout this chapter, it can be argued that there is, at least among my participants, not so much a derision of specific social categories of class as there is a disdain for *attitudes* and *cultures* that do not prioritise individual endeavour and enterprise.

Through a process she calls “un-gendered individualization”, Scharff explores the ways in which young British and German women emphasise individual responsibility, choice and experience (Scharff 2011, 122-23). These women, she argues, are very much aware of continued gender inequalities. However, they “[disarticulate] the need for feminism” (128) or the call for collective struggle against social injustices by, first, asserting their own autonomous, individualised subjectivities and secondly, by othering women (for example, Muslim women) who are constructed as not having these same individual freedoms due to continued patriarchal oppression ‘elsewhere’ in these ‘other’ distant societies. Likewise, I argue that my participants also place the assertion of individuality ahead of championing collective social interests. Although my participants’ othering of girly girls and traditional/rural communities is not overtly religious, racial or classed, the ‘othering’ in this context, and expressions of resistance or rejection, are performed instead towards attitudes and practices perceived as restricting individual development and expression. Individuality, autonomous self-expression and self-directed social success is predominantly prioritised and ultimately demarcates such neoliberal, postfeminist women as their own ‘class’, with very specific privileges and means for asserting agency in the distinct ways that they do.

## 5.5 Summary

Throughout this chapter, I have explored the overlapping, and at times contradictory discourses that women draw from and negotiate in talking about and around bodily beauty and beauty practices. Working simultaneously with Frost's (1999) argument that women lack the means for adequately expressing appreciation of their physical appearances, and DeVault's concept of linguistic incongruence (which I rework as 'discursive incongruence'), I have sought to show that women lack access to socially valued language and discourses for describing their beauty-related experiences accurately, confidently, and without some sort of embarrassment or discomfort. Instead, they locate their relationship to beauty and associated practices either by talking through existing, culturally accepted repertoires and scripts of beauty, or by 'translating' their experiences into/through other discourses and activity perceived to be more valuable.

I delineate three repertoires through which my participants dialogue about beauty – the first positions beauty as excessive and frivolous, something that is done by other women and regarded as superficial and silly. The second repertoire responds to beauty as requiring great effort and work, and the corresponding 'laziness' and 'incompetence' that participants proclaim around their own engagements with beauty practices. In both these repertoires, I argue that these women locate the preoccupation with beauty as being of less importance or worth than other values, such as of productivity and personal development. Finally, I demonstrate how the first two repertoires are ultimately directed towards a third, which constructs beauty as one among many tools for achieving successful neoliberal subjectivity, upholding the values of individuality, autonomy and self-actualised success. This third repertoire, especially, enables participants to present their own, sometimes contradictory, love of and engagement with beauty, as more intelligible, thoughtful and substantial than those of other shallow girly girls and *tai tais*.

By considering the contradictions in their beauty dialoguing – for example, women reject the hyperfemininity of girly girls while also expressing a love of and engagement with many of the same practices that these women are associated with – I show that the positions offered to women to talk about beauty are not only limited but also often not well respected or valued. As such, instead of drawing on positive affirmations of their relationship to beauty practices, my participants position themselves by disidentifying with or rejecting common tropes of beauty. Simultaneously, any common beauty practices they share with the same women they disassociate from are justified by borrowing from what are perceived to be

more respectable discourses, including health and work professionalism. Attention, time and effort paid to their looks are thus made more intelligible and worthy if they result ultimately in something that is, especially in neoliberal, postfeminist contexts, socially and culturally held dear, such as health (medical and scientific discourses) or career advancement (public discourses about work and productivity).

I recall here again, Rich's study (2005) of young female sports teachers in training, wherein she draws attention to the ways in which women continue to be constrained within gendered stereotypes, even as they attempt to challenge these expectations by drawing on the ideals and discourses of individualism. She observes that although this bind "does not appear to dissolve the participants' agency for exhibiting alternative forms of identity, it does narrow its scope and likelihood, largely because [these articulations of agency are] *not awarded the same legitimacy as others*" (Rich 2005, 502; my emphasis). I read my participants' negotiation around beauty through this same frame: the ambivalent positions they hold between enjoying beauty practices and apprehending potential ridicule and judgement, and the subsequent means by which they attempt to work around these issues often demonstrate engaged and active processes of reflection. Further, their strong claims to finding other ways of engaging with these beauty practices to fulfil personal needs and desires suggest possibilities of agency. However, as for Rich's participants, these assertions are always already circumscribed and limited, if only because existing cultural discourses around beauty continue to lack the equal legitimacy and credibility accorded to other public discourses.

I have shown that my research participants respond to and resist beauty ideals not by a simple rejection of these expectations, but rather by asserting their desire to choose *whether or not* to engage with them at all; and more precisely, by determining *which* aspects of beauty and associated practices they want to employ, and *how* they will engage with them. Consequently, they justify these decisions as carefully considered and as a calculated means to achieving other more valued outcomes; in the process, this demarcates them from other women perceived to be more superficial and narcissistic. Importantly, however, the ability to navigate around beauty in this way and the engagement of alternative discourses are greatly enabled by a set of privileges not commonly or equally enjoyed by women across all local and global communities. As I have argued throughout this chapter, education, financial stability, global exposure and travel, and the corresponding cultural capital they acquire enables this group of women to negotiate and select between subjective positions in very specific ways, employing beauty as only one of many tools to fulfil the values of

enterprising, self-directed success so frequently encouraged in contemporary neoliberal, postfeminist environments.

In the following chapter, I look more closely at individual autonomy and agency by studying how my participants conceptualise and adopt the affective ‘inner work’ required to address and overcome beauty-related anxieties and pressures. From thinking about discourses as ‘external’ to individuals – something that both shapes their social lives and which they employ to construct their social and cultural understandings of beauty – I now move ‘inwards’ to look at how women internalise beauty and body ideals, and configure their responses to them. I hope to engage the concept of aesthetic entrepreneurship more fully here, to explore how women increasingly assume personal responsibility for labouring upon and fulfilling social and cultural ideals of both physical and psychic aspects of the self.

## Chapter Six

# You Can't Fix the Outside without Fixing the Inside: The Psychic Life of Beauty

### 6.1 Introduction: Feel Good Factor

Midway through my PhD, I started a fitness and nutrition programme to lose weight and develop a regular exercise practice. My motivations for doing this were various and I constantly scrutinised them for whether I was somehow betraying my own research into beauty ideals. It was important to me that I was always sure of exactly *why* I wanted to lose weight, be 'healthier' and develop a better relationship with food and exercise; and to understand how these efforts might either perpetuate the very ideals I was critiquing, or elicit new ways of thinking and talking about women's bodies. To situate myself and my intentions within the current cultural fitness moment, I have also been following many fitness accounts on Instagram including those of online fitness and nutrition coaches (sometimes referred to as 'fitness influencers')<sup>37</sup>.

Across all these platforms, the attitudes and focus around bodies seemed to be changing. This kind of material has even garnered its own name – "fitspiration", or "fitspo" in short, which refers to the inspirational and motivational tone of the content. This approach appears to mark a definitive shift away from older models of beauty and health that highlighted (or created) flaws and the need to fix them, and predominantly emphasised weight loss and slenderness as key preoccupations (Bartky 1990; Bordo [1993] 2003b). For example, we need only think back to the 'feel good, look great' campaigns of the 1980s (Coward 1984) to remember how closely health and fitness was allayed to and represented by aesthetically beautiful and slim celebrity role models such as Jane Fonda (Chapkis 1986). Today, fitspo ostensibly shifts attention away from physical appearances to emphasise instead the development of non-physical, non-aesthetic qualities, such as good mental and physical health, strength, and what is commonly referred to as mindset training, which seeks to

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<sup>37</sup> I started following fitness personalities who shared instructional exercise videos when I first started lifting weights, to ensure I was adopting correct physical form. I garnered favourites whose posts I particularly loved to read/watch, for their helpful, practical advice and for their fun personalities, including women such as Whitney Simmons, (Instagram username @whitneysimmons), Jana Roller (@janarollerfit) and Sohee Lee (@soheefit).

improve our affective and mental relationship to our bodies and fitness practices. For example, an Instagram post by online trainer and nutrition coach Myra Victa purposefully redirects a preoccupation with weight towards a focus on alternative “non-scale victories” that followers can use to track their fitness progress. These include, for example, “Your clothes fit better. You’re stronger. You have more endurance. You feel more energetic. You feel more confident. You’re less stressed. Your mindset towards food has improved. YOU FEEL GOOD”<sup>38</sup>. Online fitness coaches such as Sohee Lee (@soheefit) and Susan Nierbegall (@susanniebergallfitness) focus on posting instructional and informational content about nutrition and workouts (for example, by demonstrating how to safely and correctly perform a particular exercise like push-ups or squats). Others, like Jana Roller (@janarollerfit) and Sarah Duff (@sarahdufflifestyleandfitness) use their posts to share reflective, thoughtful posts about issues like finding and sustaining motivation, improving self-esteem or overcoming negative thinking.

However, underlying almost all of these online fitness communities, coaching advice and fitspiration is still, ultimately, a drive towards achieving or creating a certain visible, physical model of health and fitness, made manifest, of course, through the body. Becoming visibly thinner or exhibiting the visible growth of muscles<sup>39</sup> are the most common measurements for progress. Diverse social media platforms abound with before-and-after photos illustrating individuals’ weight loss progress or muscle gain. Although outwardly, the emphasis may now be on health and strength, the markers for gauging this progress still centre largely around how the body physically appears and transforms.

In their examination of contemporary representations of fitness, Dworkin and Wachs (2009) illustrate how U.S. sports-related and fitness magazines for women have considerably shifted their focus from celebrating the accomplishments of sportswomen and championing greater recognition of women in sport, to promoting very specific body ideals. Through their analysis of these women’s fitness magazines, they demonstrate how physical appearance has become very much the principal gauge for fitness, rather than actual health or sporting performance. Content analyses of fitspiration have also shown that although this material

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<sup>38</sup> Myra Victa (@myravicta). Instagram post, 6 April 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Some researchers identify a gendered divide in fitness ideals, with women aspiring more towards thinness and men towards developing a muscular physique (Boepple et al. 2016; Raggatt et al. 2018). However, many online women coaches and fitness personalities also increasingly promote the benefits of “bulking”, which is to develop a more muscular frame. Notably, these ideals are also often gendered such that women focus on bulking specific parts of the body such as the backside and thighs, which offers the illusion of being curvier.

encourages more ‘positive’ attitudes towards fitness and nutrition in their viewers, they can also exacerbate negative body image, especially in women. These studies argue that despite their motivational approach, fitspiration content continues to objectify (women’s) bodies, emphasise physical appearance (Boepple et al. 2016), and uphold a very narrow body ideal, particularly for women, who constitute the main viewers of these posts (Tiggemann and Zaccardo 2015). In many cases, these posts are even read as engendering unhealthy practices of excessive exercising or highly restrictive dieting (Boepple et al. 2016; Holland and Tiggemann 2017; Raggatt et al. 2018).

I seek to explore how these iterations of aesthetic labour are framed not only as individualised endeavours, addressing “personal obstacles to be overcome” (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2006, 264), but more remarkably as something to be willingly embraced as a holistic<sup>40</sup> enterprise, benefitting not just the body but also the mind (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017; Scharff 2016). Enlisting neoliberal discourses around choice, empowerment and confidence, this approach to working on the body necessarily also includes – or is reliant upon – successful work upon the *self* (Rottenberg 2014a, b; Gill 2009). Mindset training is becoming an increasingly popular phrase in many of the online fitness communities, often touted as a key component that must be included alongside all other fitness and nutrition practices. Commonly, personal trainers and fitness influencers emphasise that all fitness and weight loss goals are achievable so long as we develop the right mindset, self-belief and motivation alongside our practices. Giving up on one’s nutrition and workout routines or returning to bad lifestyle habits is then attributed to not having a consistent or strong enough mindset (Caddy 2016; Sinkler 2014). Crucially, mindset training is presented as being something for which an individual must be wholly responsible; trainers and fitness communities provide support and encouragement, but each individual must determine the “why” behind their health and fitness goals (Bild 2014), and develop their own motivation to stay the course. At first, this practice of ascertaining personal intentions seems empowering and body positive, by offering everyone equal opportunity to achieve their health and fitness goals – they just have to put their minds to it! Paradoxically, however, an emphasis on mindset training also simultaneously and inadvertently reinforces the common cultural belief that it “seems possible to ‘see’ evidence of a person’s mindset by looking at their body”, thus reinforcing “the wider social discourses

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<sup>40</sup> As a word, ‘holistic’ is itself becoming increasingly used in health and wellness industries to promote the notion of achieving balance across all sectors our lives. However, McRobbie regards this drive for balance as damaging for exerting extreme pressures on individuals to achieve some spectre of perfection and of “‘having it all’” (McRobbie 2015).

that produce the lean body as an emblem of responsible self-management” (Donaghue and Allen 2015, 53). Mainstream fitspo rarely challenges persistent overriding social and cultural body pressures, beyond posting fairly superficial statements to decry the damage of beauty ideals and reject them. Any substantial address to continued beauty oppressions is thus mainly to be made by an individual’s own practices or attitudes.

## 6.2 Finding a Place in the Confidence Cult(ure)

### 6.2.1 “Switching On”: How to “Give Off” an Impression of Confidence

Drawing from neoliberal perspectives on the body, I begin this section by thinking about the contemporary tendency to shift attention away from *fixing* bodily flaws to *celebrating* all parts of the body and self. Women are now invited to pay attention to their ‘inner beauty’ qualities that supposedly speak for a more authentic – and therefore beautiful – self. Social media platforms are filled with inspiring, body positive posts featuring stylishly designed quotes like, “Beauty begins the moment you decide to be yourself” (attributed to Coco Chanel) and “Beauty is how you feel inside, and it reflects in your eyes. It is not something physical” (Sophia Loren).

These sentiments are readily echoed by my participants. For example, Reta (21, London) talks about loving others’ imperfections and that “the more raw someone looks to me, the ... more beautiful they are to me”. Almost unanimously, participants reference qualities such as compassion, intelligence and confidence to define beauty in others. I examine specifically how perceptions of confidence are relayed and discussed in some interviews. Participants orient around two distinct manifestations of confidence: 1) firstly, confidence as a recognisable trait in others and which we aspire to acquire for ourselves; and secondly, 2) confidence as an expression of resistance to or rejection of mainstream beauty ideals – in other words, being so sure of oneself and one’s capabilities as to deny the need to pursue physical bodily ideals.

In the first instance, my participants define and identify confidence in others by referencing other desired affective states: for example, as *fearlessness* – “someone who is not afraid of being who she is” (Danielle); “*charisma*” in “the way they carry themselves” (Kim); *self-belief* – “I think when someone feels beautiful, you also sense it from them” (Beverly); *peacefulness* – someone who “is at peace with herself” (Danielle); *comfort with oneself* –



“someone who is ... happy and comfortable ... in themselves” (Rana); being “*effortless*” (Evie); or *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi 2002) – someone being “in [their] element” and “rocking it” (Sonia). All these descriptions suggest that these qualities are intrinsic – something that “comes out from inside” (Louise) and a result of having “a strong sense of self” (Evie). In such descriptions, there is a taken-for-grantedness that these qualities of confidence are naturally occurring, as if the individual does not consciously do anything to project this attitude – they just *are confident* or ‘*have*’ confidence as an essential quality. Several participants even make a point of distinguishing naturalness from inauthenticity, which they claim to be able to identify: For example, Lila (23, KL) believes that, “you can sense when someone’s faking their confidence, but when it comes out naturally, then it’s like, wow!” Similarly, Beverly (40, KL) notes that while she believes she can “smell [people who are fake] from a mile away”, she also believes that “when someone feels beautiful, you also sense it from them.”

I was struck by the frequent references among my participants to naturalness, and the marked differences they identify between an authentic, innate confidence and fakeness. I compare this notion of confidence to that experienced/described by participants of Sanchez Taylor’s studies on cosmetic surgery. Sanchez Taylor notes that it is important for the women of her study that their breasts are “visibly fake” (2012a, 463). It is the very artificiality of their breasts that enhances their confidence and sense of empowerment; signalling economic success, fashionability and social mobility, the fakeness of the breasts is a symbolic conduit for feeling and experiencing increased confidence. In a separate study, Sanchez Taylor also shows how cosmetic surgery marketing strategies employ similar rhetoric to promise “renewed confidence” and share testimonials of satisfied clients for whom getting breast enhancement surgery has “increased their ‘confidence’ and changed their lives for the better” (Sanchez Taylor 2012b, 642). So, I question, how does this ‘fake’ confidence compare with or differ from the ‘natural’ confidence that my participants reference? As discussed in the previous chapter, many participants denounce or dismiss excessive engagements with beauty practices – including, explicitly, cosmetic surgery – as somehow silly and unsubstantial. However, as I explore in this chapter, they too engage in practices that they experience as beneficial for improving their confidence and self-esteem, such as fitness regimes, working with a personal trainer, yoga or therapeutic inner work. Is confidence then, only to be aspired towards or valued if it comes as a result of inner work and inwardly focused mindset training done by the individual? If confidence is outwardly conveyed through physical, material items that are externally applied, such as clothes,

makeup and cosmetic surgery, is that confidence to be considered more “vulgar”, less authentic, and, less respectable? (Sanchez Taylor 2012a, 465).

I argue that the examples and descriptions of confidence cited by my participants, and the access to associated practices for attaining such manifestations of confidence, are necessarily classed. For these women, the definition of innate confidence that “comes out from inside”, possessed by individuals who “[are] not afraid of being who [they are]” or have a “strong sense of self” speaks to and of women with certain privileges and options that promote and encourage a focus on personal development and defines fearlessness in terms of an inwardly developed confidence, as I discuss below.

Banet-Weiser calls attention to the quality of confidence that implies an active, outward-facing process of hard work, “practice, determination and resilience”. In capitalist, neoliberal terms, confidence is a quality that is “acquire[d]” and mastered, not something that is innate (Banet-Weiser 2018, 94-95). The definitions of confidence called upon by my participants presume that the person in question has already ‘acquired’ (or innately possesses) this confidence and mastered it. She is also unperturbed by few practical realities – she is unafraid of being herself because, for example, she does not (have to) fear racial or religious discrimination, does not confront derision for being from a lower social class, nor risk financial hardship (such as losing a job) for expressing herself in the ways she does. The successful neoliberal postfeminist subject has at her disposal a considerable, alternative range of tools – financial stability, education, skilled work experience, opportunities for transnational, cosmopolitan living and cultural capital – to develop a fearless confidence in her “sense of self.” This brand of ‘authentic’ confidence, then, although perceived as ‘naturally occurring’, is actually carefully built and made possible – or at least easier – by a set of resources that are not availed to all in the same way.

In her discussion of authenticity in the context of fashion and dress, Wilson responds to Romantic and puritan Christian traditions which held naturalness as morally superior to any products or practices of artifice (such as in the Industrial revolution or ‘corrupt’ cultural practices); and exalted an adherence to notions of simplicity, as found in nature. However, Wilson notes the incongruence of pitting this conceptualisation of the natural against the false consciousness associated with the “extravagance, self-objectification and snobbery” of modern consumer society (Wilson [1985] 2014, 232). After all, she notes, “[h]uman beings ... are not natural. They do not live primarily by instinct. They live in socially constructed cultures.” (234) Read in this way, the suggestion that someone’s confidence arises

“naturally” therefore is not only inaccurate, but in practical terms, impossible. Just as Wilson has argued that we negotiate constantly between employing fashion for its ‘natural’, utilitarian function and enjoying the ‘artificial’ pleasures of dressing, so too are our authentic, ‘natural’ selves always constituted by and bound into the constructed ‘artifice’ of our self-presentation (244-45).

Furthermore, identifying qualities of confidence as natural and authentic – as my participants suggest above – does not account for what Goffman describes as expressions *that a person gives or gives off*, both of which involve a deliberate conveyance or expression of particular “misinformation” done to affect certain *impressions* upon the viewer (Goffman 1969, 14). Of course, we can never know an individual’s “‘true’ or ‘real’ attitudes, beliefs, and emotions” (13) and it would be inaccurate to assume that every person is deliberately affecting a specific image. However, the assumptions that many of my participants make about the naturalness of a person’s confidence need to be challenged – someone’s confident comportment may not necessarily belie a “true or real attitude, belief” or “emotion” of confidence (ibid.). For example, when Rana (34, London) says that she is impressed by seeing someone “who is ... happy and comfortable ... in themselves”, she makes the leap to assume that seeing someone who *looks* happy and comfortable is an accurate indication that the person also *feels* or *is* intrinsically that way. In fact, in all the descriptions of confidence cited by my participants, it could be argued that those are exactly expressions that an individual could deliberately perform to “give” or “give off”, so as to convey that precise impression upon a viewer.

To illustrate this disjuncture, I highlight my interview with Fran (36, London), who describes how she ‘performs’ an “essence”:

**Fran:** There’s an essence.

**Jamie:** Like– and that– you can’t– no matter how much, like makeup or plastic surgery you put, you can’t create that?

**Fran:** But you know you can turn it on? I do– I’ve– ... it sounds awful but I know how to do it? So, my friend Edie at work, it’s funny because she– I wasn’t as aware as I am now, but she was like, “Fran, you’re doing that thing again”. I was like, “What thing?” She’s like, “That thing when you just switch on this lightbulb and everyone’s like, ‘Who’s that?’ and people talk to you, and they’re like, ‘Fran!’” [...] And I realised what it was, it was just me actually just wanting to really engage with someone and wanting to talk to

them. [...] ... You know, it's true, I can— I know how to do that. And that is what some people do. They ... have this ability to... switch something on to make people want to engage with them.

When I ask her for more detail, she explains this “switch[ing] on” as “almost like making use of what you have, and heightening it. So that people want to be around it... But giving it— like, ... adding your essence and personality to it as well.” Fran openly acknowledges that this perceived “heightened” confidence is deliberate, and although it does build on “what you [already] have”, this projection entails an active ‘switching on’ and a ‘doing’. Fran also identifies this phenomenon in celebrities – “Keira Knightley off screen, you wouldn’t notice her on a street corner. But she switches it on and you’re like, ‘Ooh’” – as if to demonstrate that it is common practice. She also asserts, “I will do it for you and you will see what I mean. Like, ... *it just works*”. This conviction cements it further as a tangible and practical technique that can be practised at will to bring about tangible, visible results. We can use this perspective to reconsider other participants’ perceptions of natural confidence in others. For example, what Rana regards as someone being happy and comfortable could, according to Fran, be “switch[ed] on” to give off that very impression.

If we can never really know how true this confidence is, then we must ask how helpful, inspiring or empowering it really is. Much has been written about the twenty-first-century anxiety around “Facebook Envy” (Appel, Gerlach, and Crusius 2016; Holt 2013; Walker 2016) and about how people consciously compose and curate their social media posts to portray themselves as enjoying covetable lifestyles and embodying stylish, desirable personalities. In these spaces, someone can certainly appear to be highly confident. Many body positive campaigns are specifically crafted around the presentation of self-assured individuals who are “happy and comfortable with themselves”, and lead interesting, colourful lives, in spite of – or perhaps *because of* – their non-normative, non-idealised appearances. But how much of this content is inspiring viewers to find and feel their own (body-)confidence? Or, might such material be instigating more comparisons and increased feelings of inadequacy instead? Social media platforms allow us pause to strategically construct our online personas, a luxury we do not have in real-time social interactions; we can be far more deliberate about what we choose to “switch on”, show and conceal.

There have also been numerous studies upon the deleterious effects upon women’s body image when they are exposed to a vast number of social media images of thin-idealised beauty (Tiggemann and Slater 2013; Fardouly and Vartanian 2015; Fardouly et al. 2015). I

extend such considerations to also include the compulsory confidence that is built into these posts. In exploring manifestations of popular feminism, Banet-Weiser (2018) remarks upon an “economy of visibility” (27-31) to argue that within contemporary neoliberal consumerist cultures and markets, specific classed and raced bodies are made more visible, and in need of – or indeed, *worthy* of – closer attention. In the media and in popular cultural forms, the women’s bodies which are made most visible are predominantly white, middle-class, heteronormative and cis-gender; correspondingly, (media) discourses, policies, practices and campaigns constitute and respond to a perceived need among this dominant group of women to develop qualities like greater self-esteem and confidence. Banet-Weiser elaborates that in neoliberal (and postfeminist) contexts, these qualities are best achieved through highly individualised labour and choice. Effective self-care, confidence, competence and entrepreneurial spirit must not only be accomplished by the individual; that individual must be shown and lauded as freely choosing, enjoying and benefiting from this model of confidence – and its necessary associated self-care practices – herself. In neoliberal, capitalist climates, this image of self-determined, individually chosen confidence is a quality that is most *visibly* circulated, received and celebrated, and simultaneously, constructed as the most valuable quality that *all women* should aspire towards. Ultimately, the acquisition or possession of confidence “becomes an end in itself”, a “personality trait” developed by each individual in a way that is divorced from any structural or social context and history (94).

Therefore, to return to my discussion on social media posts, (or any user-generated media platforms), we no longer just see images of specific types of desirable bodies and beauty ideals. More significantly, we see through these posts the purposeful display of confidence that operates within a framework of heightened, if compulsory, visibility and the ‘switching on’ and ‘giving off’ of very particular impressions. If, as viewers, we feel even more inadequate about ourselves now, it is not simply because we are seeing more images of bodies. It is because those bodies are also constructed as confident, happy and successful, even – or especially – the ones that may not be considered typically beautiful. In this culture of confidence (Gill and Orgad 2017), it is not simply enough to look good. The concern for appearances is replaced by projections of confidence instead – we must (appear to) *feel* good in order to *look* good.

Another motivation for ‘switching on’ these good feelings and confidence is to give validation to oneself, or to discard the need for external validation altogether. Cece (29, KL) asserts:

I've started telling that to myself, I don't need validation. [...] I only post [pictures on social media] when I feel good. Cos I don't need any validation from anyone.

[...]

I'm just gonna do whatever I need to do to *make myself happy* [...]. *I rather work on myself* and my skill sets yeah, instead of focusing on you.

(my emphasis)

(I note here that this form of validation involves concerted effort, something that she must consciously and consistently 'tell herself' and 'work on' – I discuss this individualised struggle further in Section 6.3.1).

Cece also says:

So the education that I got about health and fitness has really made me be more positive when someone says, "Oh my god, you're fat"; I'm like, "Okay, why don't you climb the stairs with me. Let's see who gives up first".

Maybe you can start focusing on like, skillsets [...] like, ... my mum would say things like "Oh, you haven't lost weight, your arm look[s] big, your backside look[s] big lah" [...] I'm like- Imma twerk, man!

I recall here, a comment cited earlier from 25-year-old Danielle from KL, who also defiantly emphasises "your skills, your ability": "I still do a better job than you, so what if I'm not, like, dressed the part?" Whether or not there is physical transformation (in the way of weight loss or increased fashionability), both Danielle and Cece highlight throughout their interviews the importance of other skills and capabilities, often in direct response to criticism received about their bodies and appearances. Resistance to expectations or judgements about their physical bodies manifests here as vocal assertions of what can be *accomplished* with those bodies, thus attributing greater value to their individual capabilities and achievements over physical appearance.

More importantly, in these instances, participants highlight their capacity to reframe external judgement to provide internal validation *for themselves*, to recognise and be proud of their own skills and accomplishments, and assert their will to "just [...] do whatever I need to do

to *make myself happy*". Further, Cece recasts negative criticism into an opportunity for enacting a new skill and for creating even greater visibility for herself: it is not insignificant that she responds to her mother's shaming comments about her body by saying, "Imma twerk, man!" A highly sexualised dance move, twerking emphasises the gyrating movements of the hips and buttocks, and therefore deliberately draws attention to the very part of the body that her mother has criticised. For women like Danielle and Cece, then, to resist negative commentary on the body – or to reject it altogether – is, first, to own their individual capacities and then, to turn the body shaming on itself, reappropriate the criticism and, as Fran describes, to "*switch on*" confidence, capability and validation on their own terms.

### **6.2.2 "I Do Not Give Any Fucks at All" – Affecting Indifference as Confidence**

If looking good is as much about how we feel as it is about our appearances then in the context of beauty, confidence also manifests in a way that, paradoxically, eschews beauty or its associated practices altogether. This nonchalance constitutes the second type of confidence expressed among my participants. In these instances, the qualities that participants praise in the beautiful, confident people they admire is their purported indifference to beauty ideals (or any social and cultural expectations) and an attitude that just "does not give any fucks, at all, whatsoever, what anybody thinks", as Sonia (28, York) uttered when she talked about actress Lena Dunham. I draw again upon my KL group interview with Danielle (25), Sandra (26) and Ellie (22), during which they repeatedly emphasised that they "don't give a fuck" about expectations for their appearances or dress. In both instances, 'not giving a fuck' – which is to say that they *don't care* – speaks for the projection of a kind of natural, innate and effortless confidence. I am reminded, however, that these discussions about confidence are often located within interviews which simultaneously comprise sharings these women's often difficult relationships with beauty and their own struggles to be happy – or even merely 'okay' – with their own bodies. To not care about one's looks within this context is then regarded as the laudable converse to what participants experience/d as long-term anxieties around their bodies. I suggest, therefore, that the qualities they praise are less about their admiration of confidence, and more a revelation of their own desire to be at ease with their bodies (Gill and Elias 2014, 10).

This easeful confidence becomes a kind of ideal in itself. Possessing or displaying an attitude of not caring is aspirational, manifesting as a component of what Gill and Orgad

(2017) refer to as “confidence cult(ure)” wherein women are urged towards an “‘upgraded’ form of selfhood in which there is no space for vulnerability or ambivalence” (26). Women must “recognise that they are being held back not by patriarchal capitalism or institutionalised sexism, but by *their own lack of confidence*” (19; my emphasis). As such, the claims that my participants make about not caring or about being self-confident, regardless of what others think, would suggest that a concern to fulfil externally imposed beauty ideals is being replaced instead with a personal drive to secure *self-determined* body contentment and confidence.

However, despite these many claims of indifference, the attainment and display of this type of confidence is, paradoxically, contingent upon *caring enough* to fix unconfident attitudes and to cultivate a psyche that remains consistently happy and self-motivated (Rottenberg 2014a; Scharff 2016). I therefore see these expressions of nonchalance less as resistance and more as adherence to a contemporary, neoliberalised drive for success that is contingent upon one’s own stoic (display of) self-belief, self-determination and self-actualisation. As a response to beauty and body ideals, specifically, a lack of confidence can thus be understood as caring too much about what others say and/or not taking ownership for how we care for and feel towards our own bodies. In other words, women are encouraged to *not care* (or at the very least, to care less) because to care excessively would disclose a negative reaction to external influences or ideals, and thus reveal “their own lack of confidence”.

Some participants explicitly project an indifference when talking about developing body confidence. For example, when they talk about feeling more comfortable with their bodies or fashion choices, they declare that they do not “[comply] to what other people think” (Kim [37, KL]) nor “bother with what people think about me” (Adeline [41, KL]). This nonchalance is framed as key for them to “just wear what I want [...], do whatever that I want [...]; just [focus] on my life” (Adeline). I do not read such comments as straightforward dismissals of others’ opinions or judgements. Rather, there are two important components to consider. First, this attitude of not caring is itself an *expression given, or given off*, with the intention of evoking an impression of confidence in the viewer. I cite this exchange with Kim as an example, where she talks about wanting to “look different”:

**Kim:** I think, “Okay, yah, so you say that one is not right,” I will purposely do it and I will ... just check on what everybody looks and how everybody thinks and I’ll just– I find it very fun lah to do that.



**Jamie:** This is when you were still a student, like, in school?

**Kim:** Uh, no, even now. So I like to challenge what my colleagues think. So my colleague would say, “Kim, you know, purple not very nice lah, it’s too obvious.” Then I say, “Oh really?” So I’ll dye [my hair] purple in front of her, then I will ... see how, what her expression is.

Although later, and at various points in the interview, she says she does not care what other people think, the deliberate provocation to “purposely do” something that someone has pointed out as “not right” or “not very nice” is, in effect, done to *give off the impression* that she does not care what they think. To the colleagues whom she “likes to challenge”, these displays of dyeing her purple hair could very well impress upon them the idea that she does not care for their suggestions and is not complying with conventional, expected beauty standards; that she is confident enough to do whatever she chooses; and that this confidence is innate and effortless. However, the fact that she repeatedly emphasises that she does exactly what someone has criticised “in front of [them]” suggests that her display of not caring is in fact, its opposite: *she does care*, at least enough to want to affect this impression that she does not. Despite her protestations to the contrary, Kim’s affectation of nonchalance becomes, paradoxically, a very strong stance on/against beauty ideals.

Secondly, although participants often draw from a rhetoric of inner strength and self-confidence to express non-conformity and reject the imperatives to fulfil beauty ideals, this enactment of not caring is enabled by a great deal of privileges. Ironically, the individuals who most often proclaim that they do not care are able to express their indifference because they *do not have to care*. In Section 4.4.1, I referenced McRobbie’s study (2015) of the television series *Girls* and its writer/director/actor Lena Dunham to highlight this paradox. She notes that the playing up of imperfection in self-deprecating and ironic ways, as Dunham does in *Girls*, is made possible precisely because women like her have the privilege to be able, and allowed, to reject perfection and opt for alternative ways of self-presentation. McRobbie points out:

the close proximity this white western idea of imperfection has to the perfect[.] They are both part of the same thing: boundary-marking practices which reinstate social divisions by means of subtle processes of ‘cliquey’ exclusion [...] Dunham can afford to be imperfect at this stage in life...

(McRobbie 2015, 15)

By comparing this description of *Girls* with Kim's account, we can recognise that Kim also speaks and acts from certain privileges that allow her not to care for nor adhere to others' expectations of her appearance. Although she is not located within the same white, Western society that McRobbie discusses, her social position in Malaysia has its own privileges – such as class status, financial standing, and racial/religious identity. As an educated, middle-class woman, she can literally and financially afford to make these fashion choices without them having much of a detrimental affect (if any) on her livelihood or career. Also, as a Chinese and non-Muslim woman, she risks none of the physical abuse, social ostracism or legal, cultural and religious persecution that, for example, Malay Muslim transwomen would for “purposely” dressing in ways just for “fun”, to “challenge what [their] colleagues think.” (This is not to suggest that women like Kim do not have to contend at all with any traditional or cultural gendered expectations or oppressions; I have already previously discussed moments of localised resistance in Section 5.2.1.1. Rather, I am simply pointing out how certain privileges enable these expressions of indifference, confidence and resistance more easily for some women.)

Kim has the privilege to be a part of a non-conventional, almost rebellious “clique” with her off-the-cuff fashion sense and coloured hair, but this deliberate indifference inadvertently serves to “reinstate social divisions” and reify the boundaries for what bodily presentation is deemed acceptable or not for specific communities of women in Malaysia/Asia. In other words, it is not just that she does not care. More so, it is her *performance* and *display* of not caring – affirmed in the examples she shares – that demarcate this presentation of self as its own category. And if she situates herself (even unknowingly) within this category, it thereby also reinforces the existing categories and their incumbent limitations for women who must – and have no option but to – care.

### **6.3 “It’s Really Up to You”: How (Body) Contentment Is An “Individual Affair”**

#### **6.3.1 More Than Weight-Loss: The (Greater) Transformative Potential of Working on the Body**

Popular cultural discourses around confidence are significant for considering the ways in which individuals are encouraged to bear complete responsibility for uncovering and nurturing the qualities of inner beauty; and further, how the accomplishment of these inner,

psychic transformations is then presented as rewarding, pleasurable, deserving of admiration and celebration (Heyes 2006). Instagram posts from online fitness personalities constantly remind their audiences, for example, “that you are perfect just the way you were made and that being YOU is your power”<sup>41</sup>. They encourage – or “challenge” – their followers “to stop the comparisons and to love yourself”<sup>42</sup>, and “show up and take ownership of your dream[s]”<sup>43</sup>. However, the ‘challenges’ in these contexts are less about confronting and transforming social and cultural oppressions than they are about the *individual* project of overcoming personal obstacles to “show up”, develop and display these qualities for ourselves. Gill and Elias (2014) term these as “‘Love Your Body’ discourses”, which transmute body regulation into a psychic one, and function to monitor the development of self-love and confidence. As KL participants Sandra and Danielle proclaim several times throughout their interview, it’s all “really up to you”.

Ironically, the many freedoms and permissions we are offered to ‘love our bodies’ serve only to add further pressure – this time, to always “embrac[e] an affirmative confident disposition, no matter how [you] actually feel” (Gill and Elias 2014, 14). Body insecurities and negative feelings towards the body are reflected back to women as the new flaw to address. By blurring any recognition of continued social and cultural beauty oppression, the only obstacle to a woman’s body contentment is herself; any drive for improvement becomes self-directed (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017; Scharff 2016)<sup>44</sup>. The discourses from a confidence culture (Gill and Orgad 2017) suggest that it is not the *body* that poses a problem to be fixed – “you’re beautiful just the way you are!” – but a woman’s less-than joyful “*attitude to the body*” that now foils her chances at happiness and success (Gill and Elias 2014, 6, 10; my emphasis). Body dissatisfaction is addressed less as a result of systemic, social pressures to fulfil beauty ideals and more as a symptom of “a relationship to the self that has gone bad or been broken” (6); discontentment is reframed as something that “women ‘do ... to themselves’ and can therefore simply ‘stop’ ‘because the power is in [their] hands’” (13-14).

Some feminists are wary of such neoliberal encouragements – or imperatives – to achieve and display a model of self-confidence that is born of a compulsory individualised,

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<sup>41</sup> Jeanne Marie Fitness (@jeannemariefit). Instagram post, 18 February 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Jana Roller (@janarollerfit). Instagram post, 27 August 2019.

<sup>44</sup> A clear example of this sensibility can be read in a popular and oft-cited fitspo quote (of which there are many variations): “Fitness is not about being better than someone else. It’s about being better than you used to be.”

entrepreneurial spirit (Brown 2003; Cronin 2000). In the first place, there is little to no challenge of how and why certain goals persist and often privilege some groups of people over others. It follows that without thorough address of these overriding structures, the burden for fulfilling, or failing to fulfil, these goals become relegated to each individual. Within the context of aesthetic labour, for example, Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2006) note that in makeover TV programmes:

There are no narratives [...] to explain the pressures to conform to a particular (white, middle-class, heterosexual) norm of femininity, so individuals merely see their non-attainment of beauty norms as *personal obstacles* to be overcome.

(264, my emphasis)

So, while aesthetic goals, such as those propagated by makeover programmes or popular fitness cultures, are determined and disseminated by sources external to the individual, she cannot (or does not) contest these structures, but instead, must assume and internalise the correct fulfillment of these ideals as personal responsibility. Just as success has become an individual enterprise, so too has its opposite – every individual must bear the consequences of her own failure and is obliged to resolve it. Rather than confronting these continued structural oppressions, “this [individualised] process of ‘overcoming’ is more important” (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2006, 264) and given greater visibility than the (accomplishment of the) goal itself, be that a physical marker of beauty and style, or the psychic achievement of confidence and contentment. By exhorting women to address their failings as “an individual affair” (Rottenberg 2014b, 420), structural inequalities and oppressions are thereby not only overlooked but permitted to continue and become ever more entrenched.

Further, Heyes’ study of the promotional and programme materials produced by contemporary diet programmes like WeightWatchers underlines how discourses of self-improvement and personal development are often emphasised over the physical practices and results of dieting. Dieters’ positive reflections and testimonials signal notable mental transformations, indicative of increased confidence and ability; in some cases, weight loss “then becomes an outward and visible symbol of other successes” (Heyes 2006, 142). In this context, the body stands in as a proxy, by which the individual can achieve other non-bodily successes and develop the self. However, although the physical body is often overlooked in this rhetoric, we must remember that it remains the central site upon which transformation –

be it physical, emotional or mental – is enacted and reified. As Heyes points out elsewhere, “the very gesture of self-discovery has been deeply implicated in emergent discourses that paradoxically take the disciplined and conformist body as a site of truth reflecting the self within” (Heyes 2007, 5). After all, in this example about dieting, the programme is one geared towards weight loss – an achievement of a slenderness ideal that, as the name WeightWatchers itself suggests, requires constant self-surveillance, discipline and monitoring of *the body*.

In either case, the aesthetic labour performed by makeover programme contestants or WeightWatchers dieters – just as they are ‘done’ by women in many contexts to fulfil beauty ideals – is assigned as individual responsibility and upheld as best practice for developing one’s full potential. Correspondingly, failure to either achieve the desired physical results of prettiness or weight loss, or the greater inability to experience self-esteem or confidence, is directed back to the individual’s lack of “can-do” attitude (Harris 2004), discipline or desire to enact improvement (Scharff 2016). By distracting attention away from the body alone to focus more heavily upon individual endeavour, such rhetoric elides existing overriding beauty oppressions and the structures from which they originate. Wolf had noted almost exactly this same trend in the early 1990s when she argued that the beauty myth is perpetuated to keep women’s attention focused inwardly on their bodies and away from the public spheres of politics and society (Wolf 1992). Has the beauty myth, then, not only intensified but mutated into even more harmful iterations? Now, beauty is not merely physical but recast as a “state of mind” (Gill and Elias 2014, 15); and not only are women’s attention directed to the already narrow locus of their bodies, but drawn even further inwards into their psychic lives (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017).

In a tactic used increasingly in social media posts, social and cultural obstructions to achieving fitness (and therefore body/beauty) goals are acknowledged only to then reiterate the importance of individual responsibility, and, correspondingly, the personal transformative potential that rewards this effort (Heyes 2006). Consider these examples: In an Instagram post, online fitness coach Susan Niebergall recounts instances when others have discouraged her from pursuing her fitness goals. She recalls how discouraged she felt, but then:

Along the way, I discovered something very interesting. Those people that kept sending me that message? They were me. I was sending myself that message. I was the one who was saying I would never lose my belly fat.

She advises in the same post:

What you tell yourself DOES matter. It's not coming from other people "out there", it's coming from you. You CAN do this. It IS scary. But it IS doable [...] stop telling yourself that you can't because of (insert excuse here). You CAN do it.<sup>45</sup>

Jordan Syatt, another online coach that Nierbergall often works with, shares a similar motivational post. He acknowledges that to achieve our fitness goals "[is] going to be hard as all fuck. And there are going to be overwhelmingly hard challenges along the way", then immediately reinforces:

But that doesn't change the fact that you can still fucking do this. No one is stopping you. Not society. Not culture [...] They'll definitely make it harder along the way. But they're not stopping you [...] No one is stopping you. Not unless you allow them to. So it's up to you. Option A: give up and blame society. Option B: or grit your teeth and give it everything you've got.<sup>46</sup>

Both Niebergall and Syatt evoke social and cultural obstructions only to then reinforce the importance of complete individual responsibility. Neither address how we might also work to transform the existing structural inequalities that perpetuate body shaming in the first place and restrict access to these fitness and nutrition practices for many individuals and communities. More worryingly, Nierbergall's realisation that the obstacles she faced were actually "[her] ... sending [her]self that message" that she could not achieve her goals exemplifies the way in which structural pressures are so deeply internalised that they are believed to originate from the individual themselves. So, even as we are always interacting with our surrounding communities and societies, these systems are absolved of any accountability. Instead, since the individual is led to believe that she alone creates these obstacles for herself, she must also assume the responsibility for overcoming them.

Syatt acknowledges that the fitness journey will be difficult, but his emphatic reminder that "[n]o one is stopping you ... unless you allow them to" and that making the right choices is

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<sup>45</sup> Susan Nierbergall (@susanniebergallfitness). Instagram post, 17 June 2019. (Original emphasis).

<sup>46</sup> Jordan Syatt (@syattfitness)). Instagram post, 2 May 2019.

merely “up to you” suggests that the opportunities to resist these obstacles and to meet fitness goals are equally accessible to everyone. This rallying cry, although motivating, obscures the ways in which structural oppressions impede groups in different ways and at varying intensities. While the decision to embark on and maintain a fitness programme may very well be down to each individual, encouragements to just “give it everything you’ve got” ignores how some groups will have to ‘give’ far more than others (Littler 2018) – for example, many will not be able to afford the gym memberships or health foods required to sustain a fitness and nutrition programme as easily as their wealthier peers. Perhaps “no one is stopping you” but continued systemic inequalities can certainly hinder progress for some while facilitating it for others, rendering the playing field a very unequal one.

I want to draw attention to a second, less obvious message that such posts work to disseminate. I use here Heyes’ work on the perceived transformative potential of diet practices (2006). While weight-loss programmes are known to see high rates of failure and recidivism – with dieters commonly ‘falling off the wagon’ and/or gaining back all the weight that they lose in the short-term – Heyes suggests that it is not just the physical practice of dieting, nor even the visible effects of weight loss, that keeps people returning to such programmes. Rather, the *promise of inner* self-transformation, clarity, self-knowledge and increased capacity constructs diet programmes as being about much more than the body – or even, not about the body at all. Heyes recalls Foucault’s argument that increased self-disciplinary practices do not always cause individuals to feel more repressed or restricted. Rather, “with the intensification of power relations comes the increase of capabilities [*capacités*]” (136, original emphasis); heightened surveillance and monitoring can simultaneously evoke “the sense of self-development, mastery, expertise and skill” (137), and an increase in individual psychic capacity, self-esteem and choice.

Having herself participated in a Weight Watchers programme, Heyes references promotional and programme materials (which include Weight Watchers members’ comments and testimonials) to illustrate how the physical practice of dieting is constructed as enabling inner growth and development. So, for example, in these materials (what she refers to as *hupomnemata*<sup>47</sup>), dieting success is defined less by the pounds or inches lost as it is by

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<sup>47</sup> Heyes uses Foucault’s definition of *hupomnemata*: “a copybook, a notebook [...] In the technical sense, the *hupomnemata* could be account books, public registers, individual notebooks serving as memoranda... Into them one entered quotations, fragments of works, examples, and actions to which one had been witness or of which one had read the account, reflections or reasonings one had heard or had come to mind. They constituted a material

deepening self-knowledge and self-reflection; (re)learning the importance of self-care (particularly for women, who are commonly socialised to prioritise the care of others over themselves); transforming into a new and better person who is able to care better for others and accomplish more across various aspects of one's life; and an increased awareness of one's own ability to make the right choices for even further personal transformation and development. Exhortations from online and celebrity fitness coaches, like Niebergall and Syatt, quoted above, speak to this same sense of increased individual psychic capacity and potential that is gained by working on or through the body. Encouragements that "...it IS doable" (Niebergall) or that "... you can still fucking do [this] [...] no one is stopping you" (Syatt) appeals more to the audience's inner strength, determination and motivated 'mindset' to accomplish their goals, than the mere physical goals of weight loss or muscle gain.

My participants share similar realisations about, for example, their chosen fitness practices. When speaking about exercise and Crossfit workouts<sup>48</sup>, Linda (36, KL) shares that she never grew up with sports and suffers "really low" self-esteem in this arena – "I feel weak, I feel scared every time I walk into a gym or something." However, more important than the workouts themselves (Crossfit workouts are known to be physically challenging and demanding), "...Crossfit has really helped me build *mental strength* which is the most important thing for me, and *self-esteem*;" it has helped Linda "*face... what [she] call[s] an irrational fear*" (all my emphasis). Increased capacity in these examples is not about how much weight she can lift, or how many push-ups she can perform. It is about the development of "mental strength" and a heightened self-esteem to be able to overcome an emotional fear.

Also of notable significance is Linda's admiration of other Crossfit members:

I never really had any adult or any real role models that I really looked up to. So now that I'm actually going to Crossfit I see *people who are ... just so centred as humans*, you know, like they're strong, but they also *have very good outlook on their lives and on the world*, and it makes me feel like, wow,

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memory of things read, heard, or thought, thus offering these as an accumulated treasure for rereading and later meditation..." (Heyes 2006, 139)

<sup>48</sup> Crossfit is a high-intensity fitness regimen, focusing on the development of strength through a variety of exercises, using either the practitioner's own body weight, or accessories such as barbells/dumbbells, weighted balls, resistance bands etc.



*that is also possible for me, like, I can also be, you know- not to say emulate them, but I have something to work towards, to be a better person.*

Linda offers a different way of looking up to people within a sports/fitness arena. Where visible signs of physical transformation or achievement are frequently scrutinised and/or commended – for example, in makeover shows or in before-and-after photographs of individuals’ weight loss/fitness progress – the qualities that Linda admires and hopes to “work towards” for herself, are emotional and mental. Her use of the word ‘strong’ here may be deliberately ambivalent, referring either to physical or mental strength, or both. However, as well as, or perhaps *more than*, their strength, Linda lauds how “centred as humans” they are with a “very good outlook” not just for their own lives but “on the world”. Identifying these qualities in others evokes possibilities for her own development – both physically in her fitness journey, and psychically, in facing her fears, building self-esteem and “be[ing] a better person” overall. Work on the body is thus constructed not as the goal itself, but as the central vehicle by which an individual can realise other capacities and attain accomplishments in diverse areas of their lives.

To recall my discussion in the chapter introduction about the rising importance of “mindset training”, I note that we come full circle with the discourse around inner work. Using social media quotations from fitness personalities, I discussed the importance of approaching body-oriented practices (e.g. fitness and weight loss) with the right mindset: possessing or developing the correct mindset is constructed as crucial for determining our physical, bodily goals and our “why”. During the process of working towards our goals, for example by adhering to a nutrition or fitness programme, it is also this steady mindset that will keep us motivated and persevering. Finally, the additional rewards that we can look forward to when we have achieved these goals are centred around the acquisition and attainment of inner, affective attributes – confidence, discipline, heightened positive feelings, and the realisation of our increased capacities. Forming and sustaining the correct mindset is therefore central to all of the beginning, middling and end parts of the process towards physical – and therefore also psychic – transformation.

We must remember, however, that the prioritising of personal development and individual inner work often requires a substantial amount of privilege. It assumes that an individual already possesses a certain level of financial or job stability; that their basic, physical needs are adequately fulfilled such that they can then direct their time and resources to invest in psychic development. In the examples I cite in this chapter, participants talk about how they

engage with specific physical activities or practices in order to work through emotional and mental anxieties. While they do not specifically discuss their financial commitments and expenditure, it is important to note that such activities often require a substantial monetary investment – for example, workout programmes (like Crossfit) in specialty gyms, yoga studio memberships or the hiring of personal coaches/trainers. The means by which one can effectively and successfully do this inner work then, often depends upon having certain financial standing or ready access to such resources, and to do inner work is itself a privilege.

I have already discussed studies on reality makeover television shows. For example, McRobbie (2004a) and Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2006) explore how these shows use working-class women's bodies as a model for affecting physical, gendered transformation, towards respectable, middle-class femininity. I argue that for the cosmopolitan community of women from my study, this 'transformation' shifts from a physical one – often regarded as insubstantial and frivolous – to predominantly psychic ones. This shift arises and is enabled because this group of women have at their disposal a greater range of more tools and resources such that physicality is no longer an important marker or a priority (Sanchez Taylor 2012a). Instead, demonstrable engagement in personal development, an enterprising drive, independent career success, and holistic wellbeing are praised and prioritised. Transformation – of both body and self – is understood and valued by this class of women in very particular ways that prioritise individuality, and which, paradoxically, are often blind to the very privileges that enable and reward this work for some, while restricting access for others.

### **6.3.2 “A Proper Struggle”: The Individual Burden of Body Confidence**

The acceptance and advocacy of body contentment as “an individual affair” (Rottenberg 2014b, 420) is apparent across many of my interviews. Several participants share their attempts to amend their body insecurities or offer suggestions for what others might do to create more peaceful relationships with their bodies. Consider these insights:

I think that *what we tell ourselves* is really important. [...] If I'd had positive messages, I may feel different, like, a lot of *my hang-ups* are from *internalised reactions* to what I would consider to be negative commentary about my body, my person, or my attractiveness.

(Emma [30, London; my emphasis])

I think generically, it's to take that step back and say, again, you know, *try not to let all this affect you too negatively*, find new friends [laughs], find new environment [...] But *if you keep on letting yourself* [...] being ... down and negative about everything, *you'll never get out of it*, and it applies to everything, it's not just about body image.

(Penelope [44, Singapore; my emphasis])

I think *I've learned how to shut off*, like, what people think about plus-size women [...] *I rather work on myself* and my skill sets yeah, instead of focusing on you [...] I think it comes to a point where *we all have to educate oursel[ves]*, like, how to ... counter this, how to respond to people like that, yeah.

(Cece [29, KL; my emphasis])

The phrases I have emphasised in these excerpts suggest that the fault of feeling bad about one's body lies principally with the individual, as does the necessary remedying of those bad feelings. Emma talks about the commentaries around her body in a way that skirts around attributing blame to anyone outside of herself. We are not told what these commentaries comprise, nor whether what is defined as negative in these instances *are negative*; they are just what *she* considers to be negative. Even as she is addressing the supposedly negative effects of others' comments about her body, she almost entirely assumes responsibility for what is happening to her: it is *her* internalised reactions and what *she considers* to be negative that causes her hang-ups, not the social pressures to meet unrealistic beauty standards nor the persistent public shaming of women's bodies. She wonders aloud at the possibility of feeling different had she "had more positive messages", which suggests the potential influence of external positive encouragement. However, when she talks about negative affect, the language becomes self-directed – "my hang-ups", "what *I* consider to be negative."

Penelope's and Cece's comments attribute responsibility to the individual even more explicitly: "if *you keep letting yourself* [be] down and negative about everything, you'll never get out of it" and "*we have to educate ourselves* [on] how to counter this". Comments like these frame negative emotion as an individual burden, something an individual "lets" happen, or not. It is then also her responsibility to do something about it: "step back", "try not to let all this affect you", "find new friends [and] environment[s]", "shut off", "work on

[yourself]”, “educate ourselves”. Such advice suggests that each woman must assume responsibility for learning how to respond to instances of shaming in the correct ways and assigns negative feelings about one’s body as personal problems to be independently managed by each individual. Consequently, the social and cultural structures which perpetuate the beauty ideals that cause us to feel inadequate in the first place are relieved of any accountability.

Moreover, I identified a large disjuncture between what participants cite as *causes* of their bodily dissatisfactions and the consequent *responsibility* for ‘fixing’ them. To examine this tension further, I work with what Whitefield-Madrano (2016) terms the “therapeutic beauty narrative” (202-204), which finds its origins in the therapeutic narrative (commonly found in psychological studies). Drawing on an explanation by sociologist Eva Illouz, Whitefield-Madrano describes the therapeutic narrative as:

(1) a once-whole, one-healthy self that was damaged by (2) a negative incident or pattern, which (3) leads to suffering. But! Luckily we have (4) self-awareness, the key to returning to one’s natural state of pure psychological health through a full understanding of one’s “damage.”

(203)

She rewrites this narrative arc for the context of women’s appearance:

The once-innocent girl, the incident of damage, the bodily self-loathing – and, by the time the tale is told, self-acceptance.

(203)

Some of my participants claim to have found self-acceptance, while many are still in the process of doing the emotional work to acquire it. Commonly, many of my participants attribute some of their current body insecurity to a specific instance of bullying/shaming experienced at a younger age. This might have been, for example, a comment from relatives or friends that first drew their attention to the unfavourable conditions of being overweight (Melissa, Danielle, Emma, Kim, Sonia), having darker skin (Radha, Melissa, Lila, Reta, Suzannah) or having a prominent facial feature (Rhiannon, Emma). Or, an abusive relationship (Sonia, Reta) or peer bullying at school (Stephanie) may have repeatedly highlighted their bodily insecurities. Notably, recounting these stories of body shaming does not always mean the speaker is blaming the bully – many participants explicitly clarify that

talking about these incidents *is not* to attribute blame. Yet, they still express a keen awareness of precise interactions or comments which ignited a bodily self-consciousness and insecurity. Contrarily, however, the responsibility for healing these ruptures, and finding resolution within the therapeutic beauty narrative, is almost exclusively assumed by each individual. So, while the cause(s) of these body-related anxieties often come from a source *external* to the individual – something someone did or said to them – responsibility for overcoming this anxiety is assumed *internally* by that same individual.

I want to draw attention to 29-year-old KL participant, May, who talks about being repeatedly fat-shamed by her family. She shares that she “was very upset that people ke[pt] telling me that I’m fat”, and complained to her husband who then advised, “you shouldn’t complain if you’re not doing anything about it.” Already, we see that instead of addressing the source of body shaming or the factors that allow and encourage this behaviour, blame for feeling bad is redirected to the shamed victim. Worse, May absorbs this responsibility – she says: “Then it hit me, like, oh yeah... [...] I shouldn’t just complain [...] if I feel upset about it, if I think that it’s so important, I should do something about it.” She eventually starts to work out regularly and notes elsewhere in the interview that she lost some weight as a result. However, she concludes by reflecting: “As long as you’re happy with your progress and how you look right now, I think it’s okay. But the thing is, I think if enough people tell me again [that she is fat], I would definitely feel it [again].” I highlight this excerpt because it exemplifies again how negative affect caused by external sources is internalised as personal responsibility. Further, May’s story represents an instance where taking action to ‘fix’ the body – i.e. to “do something” and exercise – still does not adequately resolve the negative feelings experienced as a result of shaming. The fact that she reveals lingering anxieties around the possibilities of continued body shaming; and admits that she “would definitely feel it” if enough people made comments again, points to the fact that, alongside the hard work of physical exercise, she must also consistently work on her own emotional, affective responses to the shaming in order to be fully, finally “happy with [her] progress and how [she] looks”.

While older beauty messaging targeted the need to transform the physical body, the focus is now directed to amending psychic anxieties and taking responsibility to overcome affective or mental struggles, such as those following experiences of abuse, bullying or trauma (Rottenberg 2014a). I identify two approaches to this process of ‘fixing’. One approach used by women to improve their relationship to their bodies is outward facing and encompasses their social interactions. For example, participants talk about taking the right steps to avoid

toxic relationships and to ensure that they are surrounded by supportive networks. As cited above, Penelope advises “find[ing] new friends [and] new environment[s]” to move away from negativity. Caroline (48, KL) reflects upon the influence that friendships have upon how we feel about our bodies: “the most comfortable you are with, like, good friends, then you don’t feel that [...] you are big or small or should be a certain way or anything because you feel like you’re accepted for what, who you are.” Conversely, “if there are people we mix with where we are self-conscious, then they’re the wrong people to be around.” At first, these comments seem emboldening – the women put themselves back in control of how they are talked to (and by whom), what they accept or reject, and who they befriend. However, responsibility for choosing these friends and managing these interactions lies solely with the individual; each woman has to curate and maintain the right – though probably precarious – social environ to feel comfortable in. This solution will always be a tenuous one, contingent upon factors often beyond an individual’s control. It accounts only for each separate interaction and is reliant on the fact that our selected friends and their attitudes will remain unchanging towards us. It assumes a privilege and ease with which we can choose the people we want to interact with or walk away from, which is not always possible. Finally, it does not address the wider social settings, including their negativities and oppressions, within which each interaction or relationship occurs. For example, we may be able to bolster our confidence and comfort by making supportive friends at our place of work, but we cannot control the broader work culture of that organisation or sector, nor the behaviours of other colleagues, all of which may continue to perpetuate harmful beauty pressures.

The second approach to ‘fixing’ body-related anxieties is more internally focused and self-directed. For example, Sonia (28, York) identifies that her levels of body confidence, her love of fashion and the way she dressed were quashed by her controlling ex-husband throughout her marriage. At the time of interviewing, she was dating another man and said:

...being with Oliver helps, but it doesn’t change how I already feel. Like, those issues still have to be worked out but *on my terms*. [...] Like, I don’t think a guy’s gonna fix it. I think I have to fix it and I’m aware that it’s only me.

(Original emphasis)

As in the examples of the therapeutic beauty narrative I discussed above, Sonia deals with insecurities that were first brought on by her ex-husband; however, the subsequent “work[ing] out” of those issues now is to be “fix[ed]” by “only her”. Stating that she wants

to address these issues “on [her] terms” may signal an assertiveness – she exerts the agency to decide how and when she will find resolution. However, ultimately, she is alone in these efforts to fix something that was not caused by her in the first place. In saying “I’m *aware* that it’s only me” (rather than using a word like ‘feel’ or ‘believe’ which is more internally motivated), Sonia references an existing, common-sense truth that these issues are something only she can deal with, and that she must “accept full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care” (Rottenberg 2014b, 420).

Finally, I argue that these two approaches do not only occur separately; often, participants discussed their efforts to surround themselves with the necessary external conditions and people in order to support their individual therapeutic work. Stephanie (31, London), for example, talked about the close friendship she developed with her gym trainer, who gave her plenty of encouragement in her personal development journey, and introduced methods for her to then work independently on emotional issues that extended beyond her immediate concerns around weight loss and fitness (this example is discussed in more detail below).

At times, participants reference an awareness of the broader social ideals that may have contributed to instances of body shaming and their subsequent bodily anxieties, but rarely do they speak of concerted collective efforts to address these pressures. Beverly (40, KL) and Carina (35, Singapore), for example, talk about the expectations to dress a certain way in the workplace, such as in women’s magazines (Beverly) and the cosmetics retail sector (Carina). Such pressures arise out of increasing demands for the performance of aesthetic labour within the workplace, wherein aesthetic presentation – including not only physical appearance, but also voice, dress, bodily comportment and demeanour – forms a part of the job specification (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017; Grugulis, Warhurst, and Keep 2004). However, while Beverly and Carina acknowledge these workplace expectations, they do not seek to challenge or redress these standards at an institutional level; instead they return the responsibility to the individual. Beverly reasons: “If you want to feel that pressure, you will feel it”, before questioning: “Is it really pressure coming from other people or is it you and you feeling insecure...?” Carina goes further. Rather than addressing beauty industry standards for how retail representatives must dress, or the broader societal and work cultures that encourage these expectations, she questions the individual’s life choices and beliefs. She asks, if a woman disagrees with or dislikes the requirements of a “front-line service” job and, if “[she] really feel[s] it’s really out of alignment with [her], then should [she] really be in that line?” She then advises, “You need to look at yourself and what’s in alignment with *you*, and you have to be true to yourself.” Any discomfort is thus framed as an individual’s

problem to manage. The exhortation to “be true” to an authentic self further suggests an intrinsic and natural self that we can all equally call upon as we negotiate social ideals and constraints. However, as discussed above, conceiving of a natural self in this way is erroneous since, as Wilson notes, we are always already located in and constructed by socially constructed worlds and their constituent privileges and inequalities, which cannot be ignored (Wilson [1985] 2014). In neither Beverly nor Carina’s accounts is there active address of how we might collectively challenge or respond to these overriding social and cultural pressures. Rather, by defaulting to individuals’ responsibility to decide whether to “give in to that pressure”, or to make decisions that are “in alignment” with their personal values, there is some resignation to accepting these overarching structural oppressions as ubiquitous and unchangeable. Any transformation therefore, has to be enacted solely by the individual.

Developing “compulsory body love and self-confidence” (Gill and Orgad 2017, 26) also requires hard work. Closer readings of the interviews reveal the difficulty my participants experience in doing this work. Carina, whose family business is in the distribution of beauty products, describes how “easy” it is to use makeup and beauty products now. She outlines the many types of makeup products available for creating any number of looks and effects, and to suit different skin types. But, although she describes bodily ‘problems’ as “very fixable” and “very easy”, the hard work of fixing internal issues “is something that *nobody can fix except yourself*, so you need to get to that place over there” (my emphasis). There are no products for this internal work, and each woman has to find her own way. Moreover, fixing this inner state is configured as vague and intangible – “that place over there” – for which there is no concrete goal or indicator of success. Significantly, both Carina’s discussions around fixing ‘the outside’ and ‘the inside’ reiterate the individual obligation for doing the necessary inner work.

Two key, recurrent themes that frequently arose in participants’ discussions around individual work and responsibility is *struggle* and *effort*. Being happy with, or merely accepting of, one’s own body (and therefore self) is presented as something that has to be “learned” (Lila, Kim, Maya, Emma) and as being the kind of “hard work” that often requires a concerted struggle. Rhiannon (42, London) says, for example, that she’s “fought quite hard to get to a point of feeling happy and content and, you know [laughs], it’s been quite hard work at times”. This struggle is also often framed as a lifelong one that needs to be consistently sustained against the constant onslaught of other messages. Cece recalls receiving many body shaming comments from her family as she was growing up such that



“*my whole life* I... had to like, prove myself [...] It’s like a constant battle whenever someone says anything to me” (my emphasis). She goes on to say that she has had to “*psycho* myself to say, ‘You know what? I feel great, I feel great’” (my emphasis), suggesting the need for psychological, therapeutic work that she “constantly [has] to do [...]”. She repeats, stressing the effort she must continually muster: “Even today ... I would constantly have to do that.”

Consider also the following excerpts from Melissa (36, London) as she talks about beauty ideals, and note the emphasised phrases:

It’s a mindset that even today *I struggle with* because it’s a *dismantling* of these ... ideas that have been *lodged so firmly* in my head, from such a young age, that it *is a proper struggle*

... I just had to *pull myself up on this* and, like I said, you know, it’s a *dismantling* of very old, *very firmly and deeply lodged constructions*. I’ve had to just *pull them apart almost* and *rebuild* certain parts of my brain.

This is, this is how *entrenched* it is, you know, inside... us that we don’t even, like, you know— to *go that far back* to try and get rid of that, *I don’t even know how, where I would start*, you know?

(All my emphasis)

Like Rhiannon, Melissa’s attempts to find body acceptance and confidence, and her responses to beauty ideals are portrayed as a “struggle”, something that has to be ‘fought for’. These excerpts draw on a battle-like discourse, involving metaphors of “dismantling” and “pulling apart” something so “firmly lodged” and “entrenched” that it requires extraordinary psychic effort to even “know how, where I would start”. Melissa refers to the conscious effort needed to overthrow what are depicted as regimes which have colonised the body (and mind), and in turn have become so deeply embedded that they now require total “rebuild[ing]”. These metaphors of battle, reclamation and reconstruction are so strongly repeated in these excerpts that they may be likened to the narratives of countries striving to uproot colonising rule and recast their independent national identities. Likewise, these culturally pervasive beauty messages can be regarded as ‘colonising’ women’s psyches and sense of self, and require a great deal of effort to overcome.

Finally, beneath this rhetoric of struggle lies a correspondingly troubling belief: that happiness – with our bodies and our selves – is not a given nor a natural state of being. It is an affective result that has to be acquired, “learned” or “fought quite hard for” (Robinson 2017). Unhappiness or dissatisfaction with one’s body is thus framed as a normative state, and undoing this paradigm is understood to require tremendous effort. Importantly too, although the emphasis of these discussions are not directly about the body – since the struggle is a *mental* and *emotional* one – the discursive platform for fixing these psychic anxieties remains situated upon the site of the body. It is only through our relationship with and to the body – one fraught with struggle and conflict, no less – that we finally “learn” the non-bodily values of confidence and contentment.

### **6.3.3 You Can’t Fix the Outside without Fixing the Inside: Joyful Inner Work**

Some participants speak at length about the steps they have taken to “do a lot of [...] personal development work, [...] a lot of reflection” (Radha [43, KL]) and to “work through” (Sara [26, London]) their body-related anxieties. In these cases, the insecurities they feel around their bodies become bound up with other emotional issues. Attempts to ‘fix the outside’ of physical appearance are deemed futile if made without equal effort to ‘fix the inside’. At times, a preoccupation with looks is even read as a distraction from dealing with deeper, more troubling mental or emotional problems – Beverly regards extreme beauty practices (such as cosmetic surgery) as a way of “running away from [...] problems”, while Emma believes that using our perceived unattractiveness to justify others’ (romantic or sexual) disinterest in us is actually a “protective” tactic employed to “[avoid facing] that, actually, no, it’s who you are as a person” or that “we’re just ... not getting on with that person or whatever...”

Binkley (2014) writes about the neoliberal imperative to be happy, wherein happiness itself is deployed as a “figure of enterprise” for cultivating and realising an individual’s self-directed potential and opportunities for success (3-5). He argues that this notion of “happiness ... as a technology but also as an enterprise of self-development” (4) is most readily promoted today as “an asset cultivated by a solitary, psychologically truncated subject, for whom emotional self-manipulation is a simple technique” (2). With the concurrent rise of positive psychology – especially when cast within neoliberal encouragements towards self-care and self-investment (Brown 2006; Rottenberg 2014b; Scharff 2016) – the development of positive affect towards any aspect of our lives is

regarded as a state that is accessible and achievable by “every man” (Binkley 2014, 2). Correspondingly, any dissatisfaction with external appearances and/or deeper, associated emotional issues is to be regarded as straightforwardly and necessarily remedied by the individual.

The responsabilisation of the individual may seem evident within a neoliberal context, but what interests me is the way in which some participants present this self-directed, inner work not as a chore nor as a prescriptive method recommended by a professional (such as a therapist), but as something to be *positively embraced and enjoyed*. Evidently, seeing such work as joyful contradicts earlier examples that construct it as a struggle but I argue that these two views are actually not incongruous. Inner work is hard work, but it is also regarded as ultimately rewarding: participants believe that this work provokes profound realisations and improves one’s overall quality of life (which includes an improved relationship to the body). Internal struggle might also be regarded as something positive, when presented as an alternative to harsh comparisons, or competition with others. For example, in a discussion about the extreme competitiveness and politics found in their previous gyms, Linda and Cece extol the collective support found within Crossfit communities instead. There, competition is experienced very differently, if not at all, because, as Linda explains, “It’s internal [...] It’s more like your own battle with yourself, it’s up to you to challenge yourself and how far you want to get”. Further, this hard work is not seen as being enforced by the external authority of the gym or their fitness peers; instead, the Crossfit box<sup>49</sup> and its community “just create that space for you”, for each member to determine how they want to do “battle” with themselves and to set their own limits for “how far [they] want to get”.

Next, I examine two excerpts from an interview with Stephanie (31, London) to illustrate this willing, happy acceptance of the body and self as enterprise. Throughout her interview, Stephanie reveals several difficult experiences from her childhood – including being bullied at school and an uncomfortable relationship with her parents – and suggests that they affected her relationship to her body. She then details the steps she has taken as an adult to reconcile these issues with herself, with her parents and with her school bullies – for example, trying to speak to her mother about weight-related issues and incidences that upset her as a child; meeting with one of her bullies and confronting her about the bullying; and

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<sup>49</sup> The venues (like gyms) where Crossfit workouts are conducted are commonly known as ‘boxes’.

applying therapeutic practices to address and overcome painful past incidents. Ultimately, although Stephanie does confront some of the people with whom she had troubled interactions, she suggests that the greatest resolution to these issues have come from the work she has done on her own. Two instances stand out. The first is her decision to work with a personal gym trainer who starts Stephanie's training programme by urging her to explore her inner motivations and attitudes:

... I was sort of at the stage where I felt like— something just clicked and it sort of felt like, no, I need to start taking care of myself and ... I found my personal trainer that I'm still with 'til today and ... I know this sounds like such a fucking first-world thing to have a personal trainer but ... she isn't a personal trainer in the common sense, in the sense like, you know, do 20 squats and all of that. It's more she— the way we sort of started, it was just talking for the first, like, two months [...] We just talked and she wanted to know the whole history about me, why I wanted to lose weight, she made me, like, go home and write her an email why I wanted to lose weight and genuinely think about it and, like ... find the reasons that motivate you towards it and ... she wanted to know about, like, how I deal with food otherwise, you know, where I was and all of that. [...] And then, we didn't do, like, probably any exercise for the first sort of four months and then I started getting a little bit, like, come on, [...] And then we started doing exercises and then suddenly, I was really hooked, like, you know, there was— we did weights and ... like proper gym workouts and since then, I have been going to the gym consistently, like at least once a week [...] And ... that sort of made me think then really quickly that actually, no, I can do stuff and I can overcome if I genuinely think about it, if I have the right motivation about it and I work for it [...] I think the ... weight sort of came off ... as an extra bonus [...] It was more about the psychological aspect of it, of sticking to something and noticing how, what it does to your body.

In the second instance, Stephanie talks about a commitment she makes to self-care, using a trinket on a bracelet that she wears daily to remind herself of this "promise:

... [T]here was this thing where I found this ... one, which is the ... Om sign [...] And then I had this one day where I felt like I really needed to sit down [and be] genuinely honest. So I sat in front of the mirror at home and I just

suddenly started crying, really, like out of nowhere, and I felt like I have been really mean to myself in the last sort of half a year, I was being really nasty and that I would never say that to a friend, you know? And then, there and then, I promised to myself that I will take care of myself, I will listen to myself, and that's why I have this [bracelet] on every day, 24-7 'cos that reminds me.

There is a turning point in the trajectory of both these examples – a point at which something clicks and Stephanie makes a decision to “take care of [her]self”. However, this decision is not enough. Prompted by her personal trainer, she has to evaluate *why* she wants to enact this decision to lose weight or to develop a better relationship with food. As Stephanie reflects later in the interview, both she and her trainer work with the belief that “all of the outside stuff will come off later on if you're doing work on the inner stuff”. She even provides evidence that this approach works: once she settled on the “right motivation” and understood the “psychological aspect [of] sticking to something and noticing ... what it does to your body”, then “the weight sort of came off”. The “genuine” reflections “about why [she] wanted to lose weight”, her motivations and “the whole history about me” are presented as (more) significant factors that must be addressed first before proceeding to the physical workouts. That she goes on to describe this weight loss as “an extra bonus” underlines that the “psychological aspect” comes to take primary importance over her initial desire for weight loss. In fact, although she begins her journey with the personal trainer to lose weight, it is her improved self-knowledge, ability to self-reflect, attention to self-care and the inner therapeutic work that are the greater reward – evidenced in the way that she talks about these developments and “expand[ed] ... capacities” (Heyes 2006, 138) in far greater depth and with more enthusiasm than her physical weight loss.

This same attitude is paramount in the fitness communities I follow. Mindset training, as discussed earlier in this chapter, is advocated as key to accomplishing all other nutrition and fitness goals – that is, primarily, to clarify our motivations for wanting to lose weight or gain muscle, and to simultaneously address the mental or emotional blocks or fears that prevent us from achieving these goals. Consider as examples the quotations from online coaches Jeanne Marie, Jana Roller, Susan Niebergall and Jordan Syatt discussed above in Sections 6.1 and 6.3.1. Contemporary concerns are therefore focused not only upon the body as a project, but on *selfhood as a wholly encompassing enterprise*. It is not enough to simply make the decision to take care of herself; Stephanie has to make a *promise* to herself to do so, and now wears a bracelet for an “every-day, 24-7” reminder of this promise. Self-care is

not a given nor a normal state, but something Stephanie makes a *commitment to do*. Care towards the self, entailing both affective responses and the physical practices of diet and exercise, is reconstituted as something to be worked on, a project that is external to ourselves and which we need to consciously commit to and engage with continuously.

It is important to note too that throughout all these discussions, the ‘outside stuff’ of bodily insecurities becomes very much intertwined with the ‘inside stuff’ of self-reflection and contemplation. For example, Stephanie’s excerpt above about the Om bracelet is preceded by a discussion between the both of us about developing body confidence and acceptance. We drift into talking about more general notions of self-confidence before Stephanie shares some advice that her personal trainer had given to her about dealing with inner child issues (that “everyone has a child in themselves, that really needs looking after ... that needs nurturing”). This sharing eventually leads to the comments above about self-kindness and self-care. Instances like this one occur throughout many of the interviews, where participants switch between talking about the ‘outside’, physical body and discussing emotional struggles perceived to be embedded ‘inside’. However, I suggest that it is not enough to simply identify the inextricability between talking about the body and talking about the self. The overlap between ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ is not just a uniform two-way dialogue wherein each equally informs the other. Just as neoliberal feminist self-help literature, body positive campaigns and fitness influencers promote the rhetoric of mind over matter – that you can think yourself to happiness and success – securing control over the internal workings of the *mind* now holds primacy over, and is regarded as pivotal to achieving, a rewarding relationship with the body (*matter*).

## 6.4 Summary

In this chapter, I have examined contemporary discourses around doing inner work to address beauty and body concerns, looking specifically at the significance that my participants attribute to inwardly nurtured qualities, such as confidence, and the necessary personal developmental and psychic work needed to enhance these traits. Importantly, however, I argue that these efforts to negotiate around, or even resist, conventional beauty ideals *through* the deployment of inner beauty and inner work discourses inadvertently reinforce yet another neoliberal, postfeminist ideal of highly individuated, self-actualised success and happiness: each individual must assume the full responsibility for overcoming obstacles and securing their own body contentment and peace of mind. Consequently, the

construction and fulfilment of this highly individualistic ideal obscures structural social and cultural body pressures that continue to dictate acceptable modes of bodily presentation and comportment for women, and to bear upon the decisions that women (are able to) take towards their bodies (Thompson and Donaghue 2014).

At times, the responsabilisation of the individual may seem to be empowering. Individual women appear to enjoy freedoms to express and work through their responses to beauty ideals on their own terms, either by developing confidence or by healing old wounds that scarred their relationship to their bodies. However, this chapter has argued that these self-directed responses might also often be experienced more as imperatives than freedoms. Thanks to the increasing glut of ‘positive’ encouragement to “love your body” (Gill and Elias 2014), any negative affect experienced towards or around the body is consequently recast as personal failure, a lack of confidence, or an unwillingness to do the necessary inner work.

This emphasis on individual effort can create more isolating effects than it does with empowering collective support and action. As more and more women take on the whole burden of responsibility for amending any difficult relationship to their bodies, the onus for achieving happiness and success increasingly becomes the remit of each individual alone; she may not count on collective societal or cultural support to redress these pressures. We might argue that online body positivity or fitness groups are creating communities for people to support each other and collectively challenge the might of institutional beauty pressures (such as in mainstream media channels like women’s glossy magazines or the fashion industry). However, although membership within some of these groups can and does offer support and advice, these communities still often promote the notion that the *individual* must do the necessary work to overcome beauty pressures, develop the right inner mindset and find/create body contentment for herself. We are more frequently enjoined to simply “love our bodies” than to critically examine what it even means to love our bodies within societies and structures that still privilege very particular bodies and purposefully exclude others.

Despite the increasing pressures of “compulsory individuality” (Cronin 2000), however, this chapter also explores how, within these given limitations, women assert some active agency, through their discursive negotiations, in responding to or resisting ideals of beauty and selfhood. I have studied here some of the inwardly-determined motivations that drive these decisions to engage in particular practices – including the more obvious practices of, for example, dieting and exercising, and the less visible, such as therapeutic work with coaches.

Where there are still overriding social and cultural exhortations to ‘be confident’ and “give it everything you’ve got”<sup>50</sup>, participants qualify for themselves, through their discursive exchanges with me and each other how and why their chosen practices are meaningful for themselves – be that the development of mental strength and self-esteem, the extension of personal capacity, or transformation of attitudes and perspectives. Of course, *why* these specific ‘mindset’ goals of confidence, discipline and ‘natural’ positivity are so valued cannot be determined in and of themselves, and should be considered alongside wider neoliberal and postfeminist encouragements towards the attainment of such affects. However, within the discursive space of the interview, at least, we might read these accounts and justifications as some means by which these women contend with externally enforced expectations of beauty to construct their own understandings and appreciations of the actions they take, or resist, around their bodies and subjectivities.

Finally, we cannot ignore the ways in which participants construct their inner work as a “struggle” (Melissa) requiring an immense amount of effort. By articulating their “constant battle” (Cece) with and against beauty pressures, my participants demonstrate a considered awareness of and reflection upon the ideals that confront them, and discuss their endeavours to address these pressures with(in) the resources and structures available to them. I would suggest that even describing this inner work as “a constant battle” and “a proper struggle” renders the work as an active, if resistant, process of negotiating what these beauty ideals can mean and how they can be transformed for themselves, even if this transformation occurs and is located within (other) structural constraints.

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<sup>50</sup> Jordan Syatt (@syattfitness). Instagram post, 2 May 2019.



## Chapter Seven

### Conclusion: Talking Back Through Our Beauty and Body Stories

#### 7.1 Thinking Back: A Summary of Chapters

I have primarily explored the ways in which women respond to, negotiate and resist beauty ideals through their talk. However, although my participants often convey an ostensibly strong stance against conventional beauty ideals, I argue that these assertions cannot always be read as simple, straightforward resistance. Rather, by analysing participants' discursive reflections and sharings, I have shown how, in many instances, expressions of resistance are simultaneously redirected towards fulfilling updated neoliberal, postfeminist ideals of self-management and individualised success. I have argued that the turning away from mainstream beauty and body ideals is, instead, often in service of perfecting the psychic dimensions of self-directed success (Scharff 2016), and the individualistic achievement of confidence and empowerment as encouraged in post- and neoliberal feminist cultures. In other words, previous approaches to the *body (as)* project have become subsumed by the much larger project of becoming a highly individuated, ideal *self*, the definition of which is itself very narrow and possible for only a privileged few.

Importantly, having interviewed a group of women who are 'like me' and share similar backgrounds and characteristics, this thesis has sought to show how a particular community of cosmopolitan women – what Chen (2009) refers to as an imagined "global sisterhood" – (is able to) draw on certain experiences, privileges, cultural and social capital, in their negotiations around beauty, and in the very construction of resistance. I have attempted to show how the drive towards, and fulfillment of, postfeminist, neoliberal values, especially around constructions of the body and self, are enabled and further reified by these very privileges, and that resistance to social beauty ideals is constructed and enacted in specifically classed and individualised ways that are always possible or the same for every woman.

I began with examining existing writings on beauty in Chapter Two. I was especially interested in the work of feminists such as Sandra Bartky and Susan Bordo, who argue that

women are subject to very particular beauty and body oppressions that arise from gendered inequalities and hierarchies. More so, these Foucauldian/feminist texts argue that women themselves assume a self-policing gaze to monitor their adherence to beauty ideals. The latter half of this chapter updated and extended these arguments to include perspectives from critics of post-, neoliberal and popular feminism. Using Elias, Gill and Scharff's definitions of aesthetic labour/entrepreneurship (2017) as a basis, this discussion explored how the responsabilisation of individuals for finding both body and self-love and confidence has intensified in contemporary neoliberal, postfeminist contexts. I also incorporated the work of other (post)feminist critics such as McRobbie, Rottenberg and Banet-Weiser to examine the increasing social and cultural imperatives for women to undertake aesthetic labour, which involves managing not only their relationship to their bodies but also their psychic wellbeing and visible displays of confidence. From these debates, I began to think about how we might locate women's expressions of agency and resistance vis-à-vis beauty ideals within continued overriding structural inequalities and beauty oppression. Finally, arguing that manifestations of agency and resistance are often enabled and encouraged by certain social privileges, I introduced a discussion around feminist texts that consider the intersections between beauty, gender and class (for example, McRobbie 2004a, Skeggs 1997, and Sanchez Taylor 2012a and b), and how women engage with and respond to beauty to negotiate, transform or obscure class identities and privileges.

Next, Chapter Three introduced the methodological approaches I took throughout this research. The chapter was divided in two parts. One half of this chapter outlined:

- 1) the main qualitative method I employed – individual and group interviews with women, most of whom were my friends, or friends of friends.
- 2) the tools I employed for my analysis, including grounded theory and discourse analysis. The chapter was divided in two parts. One half of this chapter outlined:

The second half of this chapter was dedicated to explaining how a feminist concern for researcher reflexivity and autoethnographic contemplations have informed and directed the analysis and theoretical frameworks I have selected for the thesis – namely, critiques of neoliberal and postfeminist values around the body and selfhood. Taking a reflexive approach also called for consideration of potential issues that may arise from my chosen methods and analytical approaches, including the difficulties of working with friends as research participants, the limitations of employing a primarily discursive approach and the challenges of including autoethnographic elements in my research. Importantly, I explained

how I have engaged my personal reflections and experiences – including my own body stories, intuitive responses and feelings of discomfort I experienced during my interviews and analysis – to interrogate and explore participants’ discussions and stories.

I began my analysis and discussion in Chapter Four, where I addressed my first research question: How do women, as both media producers and media audience/consumers, conceptualise the (potential) role that the media plays in shaping their interactions with and responses to beauty ideals? The bulk of this chapter focused on interviews with women who have worked in women’s fashion magazines, exploring the tensions that they experience as both media content producers and consumers. I explored how magazine editors and writers construct their envisioned readers as ‘smart’ women who would be able to differentiate between the fantasies of beauty ideals within the magazine, and ‘real life’. These women also delineated the limitations of working in fashion magazines and the very restricted opportunities they have within the industry to realistically challenge existing beauty ideals.

In spite of these restrictions, I explored some of the ways in which the media producers try to resist beauty ideals within their editorial work. While these efforts are encouraging, however, such attempts are still often restricted by overarching industry expectations, fiscal demands and broader social and cultural ideals; resistance to and from within the media are therefore always going to be constrained and ambivalent. The role of the *individual magazine reader*, then, comes to the forefront: discussions from both media producers and viewers point to the responsibility that each media consumer must assume for reading such content in the correct ways. However, I also show that this definition of the ‘smart’ individual reader is a tenuous and sometimes contradictory one – where one magazine writer may conceive of her reader as being ‘like her’, with the same cultural capital and knowledge, another may distinguish herself as possessing deeper understandings of the inner workings of a magazine than the ‘average’ person.

Along with studying how media producers conceptualised their readers and the content they create, I also examined how readers/viewer discussed their engagements with and responses to their chosen media platforms and content; these included responses from both the media producers themselves and other non-media participants. This focus on audiences’ responses offered further insight into the tenuous, contradictory stances that readers themselves adopt towards the content they read/view. For example, while one reader asserts clear autonomy and discernment in choosing how to populate her news feed in positive, uplifting ways, another confesses to comparing her body with media images and feeling badly for it. Thus,

again, it is the *individual* and her *personal responsibility* to engage with media content in the ‘right’ ways that are emphasised. Simultaneously, I argued that both media producers and their ‘smart’ readers/viewers must possess certain cultural capital in order to create and read this media content ‘correctly’; and to respond to the constructions of beauty within these platforms in positive and ‘intelligent’ ways. Importantly, since this cultural capital is enabled by very particular classed and financial privileges, the corresponding readings of such media is reliant upon the reader possessing these same privileges too.

From investigating how women conceive of and position the role of media in their personal engagements with beauty, I proceeded in Chapter Five to explore other significant repertoires and discourses that women draw upon to construct their understandings of and responses to beauty ideals. In the first half of the chapter, I examined the repertoires of beauty that women reference in their interviews, namely: 1) beauty as frivolous and excessive, 2) beauty practices as requiring much effort and work and 3) beauty as a tool for achieving other more valued ends. I demonstrated that women are uncomfortable expressing a clear and direct appreciation for beauty, and often couch their discussions with mockery or disdain. Paradoxically, however, the rejection of certain beauty stereotypes – such as hyperfeminine girly girls – constitutes in itself a particular stance on beauty; and often draws upon, and is constituted by, a set of privileges that enable and encourage the development of other non-physical attributes and skills instead. Significantly, I highlighted that these participants maintain that they themselves love certain beauty practices, but they make their engagement with these practices more meaningful and intelligible either by referring to the repertoire that speaks of beauty as a tool for accomplishing other more desirable outcomes, or, as I explore in the second half of the chapter, by ‘translating’ the value of beauty into other discourses altogether.

In the second half of this chapter, I discussed two discourses that were most commonly referenced by participants – health (including medical and scientific discourses) and professionalism or the workplace. Across all these negotiations of beauty/practices, I discovered that individual responsibility and effort are key – the individual woman must manage and talk about her engagement with beauty practices in ‘correct’ ways that ensure not just an acceptable display of body-acceptance and confidence but also successful, self-regulating and enterprising citizenship. Finally, I argued that recourse to what are perceived as more ‘respectable’ discourses; the situating of beauty within/against wider discourses of, for example, diversity; or the prioritisation of intelligence and skill are made possible by the kinds of “material, discursive, and imaginative capital” (Dosekun 2015, 966) available to an

elite, global community of women privy to a unique set of privileges. In other words, to be able to even reference and defer to other discourses over beauty is itself a privilege.

My discussion chapters took a trajectory that traverse progressively ‘inwards’. From looking at the potential ‘external’ influences of the media in Chapter Four, I moved ‘inwards’ to study the discursive practices that women employ among themselves to discuss beauty ideals. Then, I delved even further ‘inwards’ in Chapter Six, to study the inner affective work that participants talk about doing to heal their bodily anxieties. I showed that participants conceptualise of this psychic work in two ways: either by cultivating a form of confidence that disregards the opinions of others and is comfortable in oneself; or by conducting therapeutic, psychic ‘inner work’ to address the longstanding emotional issues they perceive to have arisen from body shaming and anxieties. Acts of resistance and agency are more definitively asserted here: women talked about “[not] giv[ing] a fuck” about what others think, or about actively taking the steps to nurture physical and mental wellbeing for themselves. But, can these acts be considered resistant or agentful? And how? I have argued that in many instances, these discursive constructions of self-determined action and emotional labour realign with neoliberal, postfeminist exhortations to women to create their own happiness and attain a perfected, self-determined, self-actualised model of success. So, while women may present themselves as resolving some of these bodily anxieties, I questioned if they are actually, instead, inadvertently shouldering new pressures to fulfil updated ideals of compulsory individuality and confident selfhood, while overlooking and eliding continued structural and global oppressions.

The trajectory that I take across these three discussion chapters also explores the intersections between beauty, bodies, and self, which I summarise here. I argue that although, historically, beauty ideals tended to focus directly upon the body (to beautify it or to fix its flaws), contemporary post- and neoliberal feminist cultures extend these ideals to women’s emotional and psychic lives too. Beauty then, is identified not just in terms of physical appearance but in the comportment of confidence and comfort, expressions of individuality and the visible, effective management of the self. However, while women speak enthusiastically about these non-physical qualities, they seldom acknowledge how the body itself remains a central site from which these traits are negotiated and displayed. The way the body is dressed, the “switching on” of a particular “essence” that can be visibly detected (as participant Fran describes) and the physical activity that the body engages in, such as dressing up and exercise, are just some examples of *modes of bodily presentation* that participants employ to *convey inner psychic qualities* like confidence, independence and

ease with oneself. By this transition, *beauty ideals* fold into *body ideals*, since it is the adequate management of both that ultimately speak for the most desirable values of autonomous, self-enterprising, confident, successful selfhood.

## 7.2 Talking Back: How Resistant Are These Resistances to Beauty?

I revisit my research questions here. When I began this research, I asked:

- How do women, as both media producers and media audience/consumers, conceptualise the (potential) role that the media plays in shaping their interactions with and responses to beauty ideals?
- How (else), besides the media, do women discursively construct and express their understanding of and resistance to hegemonic beauty ideals?
- What potential forms does this resistance take?
- How can we conceive of these articulations of resistance as actually resisting beauty ideals?

I addressed the first question about women's perceptions of the role of the media in Chapter Four. I hope that by demonstrating the ambivalent positions that magazine writers take towards the content they simultaneously create and consume, I have been able to show how difficult it is to ascertain exactly whether their responses are resistant or collusive with the beauty ideals they appear to challenge. Importantly, I have also examined how media audiences and consumers are envisaged by media producers, and how such constructions either converge or differ from what readers themselves have to say about their engagements with the media. From studying the discourses of both media content producers and consumers, I show that the authority and responsibility for shaping 'smart' thoughtful engagements with the media are shifting from media institutions to the individual herself. I suggest that while structural constraints persist for women both within and beyond the magazine office, resistance to overarching ideals of beauty and selfhood are enabled primarily by context-specific interventions taken by individual magazine editors or writers; while the actual media content viewed and consumed must be carefully negotiated and deciphered by each individual reader/viewer alone.

The proceeding three questions extended my study beyond the media, to examine more closely how women themselves discursively negotiated, responded to and resisted beauty

ideals in their conversations, and what these assertions of resistance can mean. In my three analysis and discussion chapters, I learned that my participants appeared at first to express resistance through an outright rejection of particular stereotypes or engagements with beauty. Beauty ideals were not deemed acceptable if they were thought to be pursued for superficial, shallow reasons and participants often resisted the idea of employing beauty practices purely for beauty's sake. This is not to say that participants reject beauty altogether; many of them disclose how much they enjoy such practices as dressing up and using makeup or cosmetics. Rather, participants differentiate their own engagements with such practices as discerning, thoughtful, sensible and most importantly, in service of other more respectable, socially valued goals, such as to improve their physical and mental health, or for career advancement. Resistance in these contexts then, might be better conceptualized as a *specific resistance* against tropes of beauty-obsessed girly girls or vain and superficial behaviours.

Participants often constructed and justified their decisions around their chosen beauty practices and/or their responses to beauty ideals as self-determined and self-selected – they resisted having ideals enforced upon them, being judged for their looks or shamed for the choices they make towards their bodies. In these instances, they resisted and challenged not the beauty ideals themselves, but the *expectations* to fulfil these ideals. The individual and her confident, self-motivated decisions and actions thus become central to these assertions. One of the most prominent themes arising in this study is the shift from a preoccupation with bodily beauty ideals to a concern for fulfilling updated ideals of confidence and autonomous selfhood. Therefore, I have sought to demonstrate how participants are often less concerned with striving for bodily beauty – whatever those ideals and expectations may be – and more with proving the ‘inner’ qualities of personal development and self-sufficiency, and their ability to craft and achieve their own goals, physical or otherwise.

I have argued that because of the heightened emphasis on individuality in neoliberal, postfeminist cultures, these expressions of resistance contribute to and reinforce a sensibility that places full responsibility upon the individual to make the ‘right’ choices for and around her body and self; and subsequently, to regard any continued bodily anxiety as personal failure. So, in my last question, I asked, how can we understand these expressions of resistance as actually *being resistant*? Or, are they inadvertently in service of other ideals instead? I propose that these assertions can be considered resistant, but only in resisting very specific elements or tropes of beauty. They might also be understood as resistant in very particular individual or classed contexts and situations that cannot always translate to

collective resistance or transformation at a higher, structural level, and through means that cannot be equally accessed or replicated by every woman.

On that note, this thesis contributes important insights into the motivations, practices and discursive responses of a community of upper/middle-class, cosmopolitan women that has received less academic attention. Existing work on the intersections of class and beauty (for example, studies by Sanchez Taylor [2012a and b] on the consumption of plastic surgery by working class women; or McRobbie (2004a), and Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer's (2006) work on the transformation of working class women on television makeover shows) have more commonly focused upon on the ways in which working-class women are either coercively transformed into 'respectable' middle-class aesthetics (Skeggs 1997), or actively engage with beauty practices to negotiate their class positions. Other work on middle-class women, including, for example studies by Dosekun (2015) and Lollini (2019), examine how these women employ certain beauty practices (expensive beauty treatments at high-end salons) to maintain physical bodily ideals as a means of proving and declaring membership to a valued middle/upper class.

Instead of looking at how they employ beauty practices as a means of negotiating class, this thesis takes a different approach by examining how these women's class privileges and resources enable or encourage them to express specific resistant perspectives against beauty ideals and practices, and to draw from, engage with and prioritise other aesthetic and self-development values instead. I have shown how these other goals and priorities largely align with the values of individuality, confidence and self-actualisation encouraged by neoliberal, post- and popular feminist cultures, and that the attainment of these values are not only facilitated by their class privileges, but normalised as aspirational, even compulsory.

I understand that this stance may appear to suggest that the women of my study 'have it easier', with access to resources and privileges that endow and enable in them greater possibilities for agency and resistance. I clarify two points here. Firstly, I am not suggesting that these women have and are able to exercise resistance in more knowing and informed ways than women without these privileges; or that other women are merely cultural dupes without any means for resistance. Rather, I have tried to explore how the acts of agency and resistance are articulated by my participants in remarkably *different* ways than those of women in other classes (see Section 5.2.3). Such assertions are not 'better' nor carry more agency, but are directed towards other sets of priorities, motivations and aspirations as shaped by the very privileges they possess. It is also not to say that my participants 'have'



more agency, but that recourse to certain resources and privileges encourage them to discursively construct themselves as somehow making more discerning and thoughtful decisions towards bodily beauty than other imagined shallow and vain ‘girly girls’. Of course, how much more thoughtful, intelligible or different these decisions are than those of other women must also be queried, which I have done in Section 5.2.3.

Secondly, I also stress that I am not arguing that, because of their privileges, these cosmopolitan women are free of constraints. As I discuss in Sections 5.2.1.1 and 5.4, although this community of cosmopolitan women (mostly Asian or located in Asia) enjoy certain freedoms that come with varied international experiences and exposure, they still contend with oppressive gendered ideals and expectations within their respective cultures, and are often subjected to shaming, ridicule or exclusion by members of their local community. In fact, in some instances, their deference to the ‘more enlightened’ Western emphasis on individuality and self-confidence can be read as arising directly in response to the continued cultural oppressions they face as women within their local communities. Further, I have also argued that what initially appears to be privileged assertions of resistance and a ready recourse to other options may often be circumscribed within or redirected towards yet other (gendered) pressures in diverse contemporary societies, both in the East and West. So, for example, the very freedoms that enable a woman to prioritise her professional development over beauty may also compel her towards increasing pressures to achieve self-actualised, entrepreneurial success and the consistent ‘perfection’ of work-family balance (McRobbie 2015; Rottenberg 2014a).

I have drawn from existing debates on neoliberal and postfeminism to show how participants’ individualised assertions of resistance often fail to address wider social and cultural inequalities that persist and which create the need for that resistance in the first place. Nor do they explicitly acknowledge and discuss how the combinations and permutations of privilege enable them to declare or enact resistances in these specific ways, which that are not available to all women in the same way. As Gill (2007b) points out, we cannot only consider women’s choices and resistances without also paying attention to how the construction and enactment of actions continue to be circumscribed by “the individualizing, neoliberal paradigm that requires our trenchant critique” (72).

I am not conceding that there is no resistance, or that the resistance articulated by my participants is somehow disingenuous. Rather, I highlight the importance of distinguishing between *what* participants construct as resistance through their everyday practices and

accounts of these acts, and *how* they discursively describe and justify these resistances. The discursive approach I took has been helpful here, for understanding which (other) discourses and structures shape – and constrain – these constructions and articulations of resistance.

So, for instance, when magazine writers insist on taking editorial decisions that contravene directives from the publishers' sales and marketing teams, so as to include more diverse and realistic representation of women's bodies, these actions might be read as context-specific instances of resistance against overriding industry pressures. Or, when my Asian participants emphasise their skills and abilities over their looks, or explicitly voice their objections to traditional cultural expectations of women, we might see them as taking a deliberately resistant stance to their continued experiences of cultural or community-specific gendered bodily oppression.

However, I argue that to study only the reported acts or expressions of resistance is to offer an incomplete picture. Importantly, we must also examine *how* these resistances are articulated and/or what discourses are employed by participants to describe and converse about their resistant actions and beliefs. As Davis remarks, assertions of resistance and the exercising of agency are “invariably linked to social structures and yet never entirely reducible to them” (Davis 2003, 12) and it is important to always also consider which structures continue to inform and constitute these assertions. I have demonstrated that in many instances, participants draw primarily from popular neoliberal and/or postfeminist discourses of individuality, self-determined confidence and self-management to locate their resistance. Thus, in particular contexts, we may very well agree that the examples and scenarios that these women recount are, on one level, resistant to beauty ideals. However, *how* they conceive of these resistances and *how* they construct and present these actions are forged by, (re)align with and even constrained by other sets of neoliberal, postfeminist pressures, and, significantly, facilitated by particular kinds of class privilege.

In summary, this thesis has sought to contribute to existing feminist debates on beauty by examining how women's resistances to beauty ideals coincide with other arising ideals, structures and pressures. I have also offered novel perspectives from a relatively understudied community of middle/upper-middle class women with notable international exposure. By illustrating the complexities and contradictions within women's responses to beauty, this thesis has attempted to move discussions forward to underline the importance of simultaneously reading women's discursive resistances alongside other contemporary neoliberal, post- and popular feminist ideals and pressures. Further, by studying the

discussions and talk of this group of women, this thesis has also shown how intricately these neoliberal, post- and popular feminist manifestations and assertions of resistance are tied into class privileges. We must therefore look not just at the articulations of resistance against beauty, but also at the structures that inform these classed constructions; and how these assertions continue to constitute and be constituted by other dominant discourses around beauty and bodies.

### **7.3 Tell Me More: Asserting Agency and Resistance in the Interview Space**

Running parallel to my study of resistance has been an intention to explore the ways in which discursive events, including the research interview, can themselves provide space for the articulation of resistance, and for women to reclaim, (re)negotiate, (co)-create and share agency. I have sought to study how the very process of either telling one's beauty stories to others, or beauty dialoguing between two or more women within these discursive spaces can constitute active responses and resistance towards and around beauty ideals. Having now reached the end of the thesis, I offer some insights into the usefulness (and some limitations) of the discursive/interview space for moving forward the debates around resistance, agency and beauty.

During the stages of coding and analysis, I identified moments within the interviews where participants were being prompted towards deeper reflections, not just about beauty ideals more generally, but in their own responses and understandings. For example, some participants appreciated that their interview shed light on issues they had not previously considered. Radha (43, KL) shares: "I think these are great questions because I never think about these things" and later adds: "I'm really, for the first time ever actually really thinking about this". Stevie (43, KL) reflected towards the end of her group interview: "It ... got us to think about stuff, which, you know, it's so part of us sometimes we don't even realise". I was most heartened by Stephanie's (31, London) closing reflections, as she outlined the difference between the specific interview space and more general body-positivity campaigns:

I find it really great what you're doing, I genuinely do because I think it's important that ... you know, the focus is brought to these sort of things. Because even though, you know, with all of this, like, body positivity going

on, [...] it's very seldomly concentrated on *how we talk about it ourselves*, you know? And what the internal voice is saying.

(My emphasis)

Stephanie emphasises the importance of our individual narratives and discussions, recognising that the interview heeds special attention to “what the internal voice is saying”. I propose that, especially in group interviews, this discursive space extends inner, personal reflections so that they can occur collectively between participants (and researcher). As Kitzinger (1994) remarks on the potential of collaborative efforts, “group work is invaluable in enabling people to articulate experiences in ways which break away from the clichés of dominant cultural constructions” (112). In fact, I had initially intended to study how women construct their understandings around beauty ideals *with each other*, especially with the friends and family they already interact with on a regular basis. Unfortunately, it has been beyond the remit of this thesis to examine these dynamics in detail, but I suggest that further study would greatly benefit from deeper analysis of group interactions and the co-construction of meaning around beauty.

Still, I take this opportunity to briefly consider some examples of these interactions, and how they can begin to offer us some insight into the ways that women use these conversational spaces to reconsider, problematise and deconstruct existing beauty and body ideals; and to co-create new understandings and meanings around bodily beauty ideals, both personally and collectively. For example, in two KL groups, participants actively disagree, debate and confront each other on certain taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions. In one, when Sandra (26), Ellie (22) and I talk about women wearing tight clothes or uncomfortable shoes, Danielle directly calls us out for “policing what [they wear]”. In turn, Sandra reveals the conflicting inner dialogue she has when thinking about or reacting to others’ bodies. She questions: “Yah, am I being judgey?”, before saying, in the same breath: “But at the same time ... I feel like I wanna... know what's going on in [those women’s minds].”

In another group, Kim (37) and Corrie (40) query what it means to “stand out, look better than the next person”:

**Jamie:** I guess then the question is like why is it so important to look better than someone else?

**Kim:** Yourself. You want to look good.

**Corrie:** You can look good without having to look better than someone else.

**Kim:** Oh. Yah, or not better than someone else, just look good, it doesn't matter- I don't care about how other people look.

**Corrie:** Yah, but 'standing out', you see. To... stand out means you look better.

I draw attention specifically to the interaction between participants here, where Corrie begins to question common phrases and attitudes around beauty, and to counter Kim's statements. I am interested in these moments of discordance, when participants not only share common understandings and responses to beauty ideals, but also trouble and push against accepted discourses with each other. In this process of beauty dialoguing, around both beauty and other related issues, I suggest that there is space and possibility for creating and/or reclaiming some agency and resistance, a means for women to talk back to beauty discourses otherwise felt to be imposed upon them (Mills 1997; Smith 1990). By exploring these moments of intra-group debate, reflection and questioning – of each other and even of oneself – we can begin to examine how, within the active space of group conversation, women contend with the “push/pull” (Robinson 2015, 909) of wider overarching social pressures to arrive at and create meaningful responses to and understandings of beauty for themselves.

I return to Davis, who offers a useful perspective of the ways in which women exercise agency in their engagement with beauty ideals. She calls on Giddens' reminder that “every competent actor has a wide-ranging, but intimate and subtle, knowledge of the society of which he or she is a member” before noting:

By underlining this knowledgeability, social action does not suddenly become a matter of “doing one's own thing.” But neither can it be reduced to a simple knee-jerk reflex of social forces, imposed upon unwitting or deluded individuals. [...] Against my own inclination to view women who have cosmetic surgery as “cultural dopes,” I positioned them as “competent actors” with an “intimate and subtle knowledge of society,” including the dominant discourses and practices of feminine beauty. This approach enabled me to understand what I had not been able to understand before – namely why, *given their specific experiences with their bodies and the possibilities*

*available to them for alleviating their suffering, cosmetic surgery could be an action of choice, solution and problem, empowering and disempowering, all at once.*

(Davis 2003, 12-13; my emphasis)

Davis captures exactly the ‘push/pull’ process (Robinson 2015) that comprises an engagement with beauty/practices as simultaneously choice/imperative, solution/problem and empowerment/disempowerment. Importantly, by acknowledging that these dichotomous states can occur “all at once”, and that the process of discovering agency involves working through these contradictions, we are unburdened of the need to ally ourselves exclusively to one side or the other – to embrace beauty ideals or to reject them; to enjoy the pleasure of them or to experience them as oppressive; to do it ‘only’ for ourselves or only for others or no one at all. This is to say the messiness of these tensions *is itself* the process, as they are shared, articulated, negotiated, and debated within the interview.

Of course, I am not suggesting that the interview space alone is enough to dismantle continuing structural oppressions; nor will individual exchanges that occur within the interview necessarily translate into collective social, cultural action or change. I have already outlined the limitations of the discursive event in Chapter Three (Section 3.3.3), when I discussed my chosen methodologies; and I offer recommendations for further study in the next section. However, despite these limitations, I still propose that the interview space can be, at the very least, a useful starting point for women to question taken-for-granted ideals and to initiate a deeper process of debating, deconstructing and articulating their own attitudes. In the first place, the formalised ‘event’ of the interview recentres a subject typically dismissed as inconsequential and seeks to receive and honour what women have to say about their own bodies. As argued above, it accords attention and importance to the messy process of negotiation, offering safe and supported spaces for women to exercise some level of agency as they work out, redefine or resist the meanings that beauty hold for them. By first according this beauty talk with social and cultural importance, we might encourage more serious attention to the issues and questions discussed therein, and eventually move these conversations beyond the remit of the interview itself to, for example, larger public spaces and forums (Robinson 2010).

## 7.4 Moving Forwards: Considering the Limitations and Future Directions of this Research

I have only scratched the surface of my interviews and been able to share only a fraction of the beauty stories that my participants have entrusted to me. While I have mostly employed a discourse analysis, I recognise that this study would be greatly enriched by a parallel in-depth *narrative analysis* of specific stories shared by participants. There simply was not enough space to include this component but I suggest that such an analysis would open even richer understandings of women's embodied experiences with beauty and their selected practices. I understand that closer investigations of these stories would also help to clarify the links between specific body-related incidences, embodied social experiences, interactions and relationships, and the wider social, cultural and political structures that bear upon women's everyday lives.

I acknowledge that the predominantly discursive focus of this thesis risked precluding deeper examination of women's material, embodied experiences of beauty practices. Because I had set out to investigate, more broadly, the understandings of and responses towards mainstream beauty ideals, I maintain that a discursive study still offers many useful insights and perspectives into the ways that such values are received, read, resisted or reinforced (particularly, in the context of this study, by a specific class of women). However, such a focus is only to offer one part of the story, and future studies would strongly benefit from also including closer empirical studies of women's physical, embodied engagements with specific practices and the physical contexts they act in. For example, I briefly examined participants Danielle's, Sandra's and Ellie's discussions about resisting expectations to dress up during KL fashion week events. Without further examination of, for example, their accounts of dressing up or participant observation of the women at such events, I can only take their word for how this resistance is enacted and experienced. Given more time and words, I suggest that future research could be enriched by a closer examination of narratives of embodied experience; and/or by concurrently engaging methods of participant observation and ethnography (which may also include embodied autoethnographic reflections of the researcher) to study how women interact, enjoy pleasure, and perform resistance through and with their bodies within the discursive worlds of beauty they "build" in conversation (Gee 2014, 31).

It is helpful here to also consider other works that combine discursive studies with empirical investigations into embodied experience. For example, Robinson's (2015) investigation into

women's footwear practices analyses narratives from focus groups alongside individual case studies (comprising shoe logs, scrapbooks and shopping trips with the researcher) so as to "investigat[e] people's everyday identification as an embodied social process explored through a situated bodily practice [...]" (907). I have also already discussed in Section 2.2.1 the usefulness of considering empirical studies of beauty, such as Gimlin's (2002) multiple examinations of 'body work' done in the varying contexts of the hair salon, aerobics classes or cosmetic surgery clinics; Woodward's (2009) research on sporting bodies; or Glapka's (2018) careful analysis of women's narratives around the embodied experience of being 'looked at' by men. Such works can provide helpful models to emulate for future further study around women's discursive and embodied responses to beauty.

Further, as I have acknowledged in my discussion on methodology in Chapter Three, I had begun this research with a special interest in the ways that women co-create their understandings of beauty ideals *with each other* in their existing friendship circles and social networks. My data abounds in many dynamic and interesting exchanges, debates and interactions between my group interview participants – there were debates, disagreements, even, at times, personal affronts, questioning, expressions of commiseration and empathy, and plenty of laughter. I touched on some of these exchanges above, but to explore them in more depth, and with closer attention also to their embodied interactions would be useful for gaining clearer insight into how women co-create these meanings around beauty within their existing social networks or assert their own individual perspectives and experiences against the group. However, to thoroughly replicate and analyse these many exchanges would have cut heavily into my word count and an extensive study would have rendered this a very different thesis. I recommend that analysis of these group interactions deserves its own full study and discussion.

I move to also consider how this research can be expanded to study other diverse aspects of beauty ideals. I suggest that a more detailed thematic analysis might be applied alongside the current study to investigate women's responses to specifically defined beauty ideals or beauty practices. For example, some of my most heavily populated codes were of insecurities around fat, weight and the desire for slenderness, and issues of race, ethnicity and colourism, which I did not have space to explore more fully. As my own body anxieties have long centred around a terror of fat, and as a woman who has spent all her life among diverse international ethnic and racial communities, I have maintained strong interests in the intersections between beauty, fat/slenderness and race, and regret that there was not space nor time to also interrogate these themes further.



Finally, having recognised that a majority the women in the groups I interviewed constitute a very particular kind of woman, comprising a specifically demarcated set of social categories and privileges, I would also recommend that studies into the collective creation of meaning around beauty incorporate interviews with other groups of women across varying social categories of class, educational background, age, ability, sexuality, religion, race and ethnicity.

## **7.5 The Last Say on Beauty**

Before I even began my PhD, almost every woman I talked to about my intention to research women's responses to beauty ideals expressed some form of excitement for the work I would be doing. In many cases, these women would then also share an anecdote or 'confess' a story to illustrate their own body anxieties – a flabby post-partum belly, scarred skin, or, as I knew so well myself, a life-long fear of weight-gain. Perhaps I imagined it, but there seemed almost some relief from these women as they revealed these personal stories to me. It already occurred to me then how powerful these conversations around beauty and bodies could be, and how helpful it could be for some women just to know that these anxieties were being discussed and taken seriously.

This research has sought to refocus attention upon women's talk about their bodies and the beauty practices they enact upon these bodies; to validate the talk itself as well as attempt to gain better insight into the ways that women 'talk back' and respond to, negotiate and resist, the numerous beauty pressures they confront. I have argued that examination of women's discursive practices around beauty can offer us a better understanding of how women construct meaning and assert agency around their engagements with beauty practices and/or their resistances against specific aspects of beauty ideals. By considering the interview as a medium that facilitates a processual (re)discovery of knowledge, perspectives and experience, we can also begin to regard interview participants as active agents working through this process. The course of dialoguing, debating, problematising and embracing overarching beauty ideals through collective talk enables women to "become the subject of [their] own enquiry rather than the object of someone else's, where [they] act rather than [be] acted upon" (Spence 1995, 163). To illuminate and investigate what women have to say is also to reframe their talk from being regarded as mere "gossip" (McRobbie 1982, 50) to being valued as sites of knowledge production, agentful action and resistance to gendered

ideals. Finally, to take beauty seriously within such conversational spaces is to give value to a subject so frequently dismissed as unsubstantial; to reframe it as a significant and worthy of deeper investigation in its own right; and to harness it as a lens by which to understand women's many other overlapping and complex, lived experiences.

Of course, these conversations are not confined to the formal situation of the interview alone. The processes of discovering agency around our bodies and beauty practices are continuous, occurring in every moment that we converse about our bodies. The conversations, in turn, intersect with the lives and experiences of the many people we interact with, and remind us to pay attention to each interaction where we are able to tell our beauty stories to others and beauty dialogue with them. Because of these connections, we are thus always in situation, always in process, always provided with moments by which to (re)negotiate our understandings and responses to beauty ideals and to (re)act anew with agency and/or resistance. As I first explained in the introduction, so much of this thesis has been informed by my conversations with friends or research colleagues. These discursive occasions have been crucial to my own process of critiquing broader notions of beauty and situating myself within these debates. More importantly, they have alerted to me the deep potential that such conversational exchanges can hold for others too, to critically problematise, make sense of and act from our individual and shared understandings of beauty.

As to whether this beauty talk is resistant – I hope that I have shown through this thesis that resistance does not occur in a simple, single instance; nor is resistance permanent and static. My participants do indeed attempt to resist beauty ideals in their discussions, but this resistance is complex, contradictory and so often also layered with pleasure and guilt, confidence and shame. I conclude by arguing that it is not enough to consider only whether their resistance is resistant. Rather, it is more relevant – and interesting – to examine *how* they negotiate, enjoy or feel conflicted about these acts of resistance, namely through the processes of talking about and around beauty. Bringing beauty talk into focus alerts us to the possibilities that any and every conversation can have for women to work through and resist the beauty pressures they encounter, and to reshape the meaning of body ideals for both themselves, and the social and cultural environment of their immediate communities. I suggest that if we wish to encourage resistance to conventional beauty ideals, then we need to create the safe, supportive avenues for inciting and sustaining this talk; and to encourage women to partake in these conversations, share their stories and perspectives and, in turn, receive what others have to say.

I conclude this thesis not with an 'ending' but a call to begin anew these conversations and to keep them going.

So, let's talk about beauty...

## Appendices

## Appendix I: Participants' details<sup>51</sup> – Group Interviews

Location and date of interview	Pseudonym	Age	Race	Nationality	Profession/Sector	Places lived
Kuala Lumpur 6 August 2016	Lila	23	Indian	Malaysian	Student	Malaysia: KL
	Veronica	23	Chinese-Indian	Malaysian	HR manager, food delivery	Malaysia: KL
	Sam	23	Chinese	Malaysian	Student	Malaysia: KL Singapore
Kuala Lumpur 7 Aug 2016	Corrie	40	Chinese	Malaysian	Director of operations, education	Malaysia: Penang, KL
	Kim	37	Chinese	Malaysian	Director of corporate marketing, education	Malaysia: Sabah, KL
	Stevie	43	Chinese	Malaysian	IT, corporate marketing, education	Malaysia: Penang, KL, Canada: Toronto US: Dallas (Texas), Mobile (Alabama), Denver (Colorado)

<sup>51</sup> All details of participants are at the time of interview.

<b>Location and date of interview</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Profession/Sector</b>	<b>Places lived</b>
Kuala Lumpur 11 Aug 2016	Karen	29	Eurasian	Malaysian	Marketing executive	Brunei Malaysia: KL
		30				
	May	29	Chinese	Malaysian	Web designer	Malaysia: KL
	Fara	30	Eurasian	Malaysian	Personal assistant to CEO	Australia: Brisbane, Sydney UK: London Malaysia: KL
Kuala Lumpur 14 Aug 2016	Adeline	41	Chinese	Malaysian	Freelance TV producer	Malaysia: KL China: Shanghai
	Beverly	40	Chinese	Malaysian	Freelance journalist	Malaysia: KL
	Louise	45	Chinese	Malaysian	Public relations	Malaysia: KL
Kuala Lumpur 27 Aug 2016	Danielle	25	Chinese	Malaysian	Senior fashion magazine writer	Malaysia: KL
	Ellie	22	Chinese	Malaysian	Magazine writer	Malaysia: KL
	Sandra	26	Chinese	Malaysian	Associate web editor, magazine writer	Malaysia: KL Australia: Perth

<b>Location and date of interview</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Profession/Sector</b>	<b>Places lived</b>
Kuala Lumpur 28 Aug 2016	Linda	36	Chinese	Malaysian	Research&development	Malaysia: KL; Singapore; U.SA: New York; Russia: Vladivostok Malaysia: KL Malaysia: Penang, KL US: San Francisco Canada: Vancouver
		29	Chinese-Indian	Malaysian	Recruitment consultant	
		54	Chinese	Malaysian	Retired	
	Cece	29	Chinese-Indian	Malaysian	Recruitment consultant	
	Nancy	54	Chinese	Malaysian	Retired	
Singapore 20 Aug 2016	Evie	49	Chinese-Indian	Singaporean	Magazine editor	Singapore
	Penelope	44	Chinese	Malaysian	Lawyer	Malaysia: KL UK: London Singapore
Singapore 22 Aug 2016	Carina	35	Ceylonese/ Sri Lankan	Singaporean	Business owner/director - distributor of cosmetics, fragrances and personal care	Sri Lanka: Colombo Singapore Australia: Melbourne
	Maya	35	Indian	Indian	Business development, broadcast media	India: Rourkela Singapore Hong Kong US: Boston, Philadelphia, New York

<b>Location and date of interview</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Profession/Sector</b>	<b>Places lived</b>
London 15 Oct 2016	Charlotte	37	Caucasian	French	Managing artists (business), music	UK: London France: Paris Germany: Dusseldorf
	Emma	30	Caucasian/Cypriot	British	Head of marketing, music	US: New York, New Jersey UK: London
	Georgina	35	Caucasian	British	Journalist	UK: London, York, Sheffield
London 23 Apr 2017	Natalia	35	Malay	Malaysian	Financial services	Malaysia: KL UK: Cheltenham, London
	Rana	34	Malay	Malaysian	Graduate recruitment / HR	Malaysia: KL UK: Cheltenham, London
York 22 Jul 2016	Carmen	29	African	Kenyan	PhD student	Kenya: Nairobi UK: York
	Sonia	28	Indian	American	PhD student	US: Philadelphia, Albuquerque, New Orleans, Tallahassee, Atlanta, Houston Spain: Barcelona Ireland: Dublin UK: York
	Suzannah	39	African	Kenyan	PhD student	Kenya: Nairobi South Africa: Cape Town UK: York



Location and date of interview	Pseudonym	Age	Race	Nationality	Profession/Sector	Places lived
York 22 Jan 2017	Anvesha	24	Indian	Indian	PhD student	India: Hyderabad, Bangalore, New Delhi, Gurgaon Singapore UK: York, London
	Sonia	28	Indian	American	PhD student	US: Philadelphia, Albuquerque, New Orleans, Tallahassee, Atlanta, Houston Spain: Barcelona Ireland: Dublin UK: York

## Appendix II: Participants' Details<sup>52</sup> – Individual Interviews

Location and date of interview	Pseudonym	Age	Race	Nationality	Profession/Sector	Places lived
Singapore 3 October 2016	Lara	37	Chinese	Malaysian	Director of Corporate Communications and Sponsorship	Malaysia: Johor Bahru, KL Singapore Australia: Perth
London 16 October 2016	Reta	21	African	British	University student	UK: London
London 25 November 2016	Fran	36	Caucasian	German	Corporate communications	Malaysia: KL Singapore UK: London
London 26 November 2016	Sara	26	Pakistani	British	PhD student	UK: Bradford, London
London 26 Nov 2016	Stephanie	31	Caucasian	Finnish	General manager, photography business	Germany: Frankfurt am Main Finland: Salo, Lohja, Karjalohja, Helsinki, Karjaa UK: Rochester, London
London 11 Feb 2017	Rhiannon	42	Caucasian	British	Business coach	UK: London, Hull Japan: Ichinohe (Iwate prefecture)
London 26 Apr 2017	Melissa	36	Indian	Malaysian	Journalist	Malaysia: Ipoh, KL UK: London

<sup>52</sup> All details of participants are at the time of interview.

<b>Location and date of interview</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Profession/Sector</b>	<b>Places lived</b>
Kuala Lumpur 28 Dec 2016	Radha	43	Indian	Malaysian	Coach, Writer and Entrepreneur	Malaysia: Teluk Intan, Ipoh, KL Austria: Zurich China: Shanghai Tanzania: Dar Es Salaam
Kuala Lumpur 29 Dec 2016	Caroline	48	Chinese	Malaysian	Writer	Malaysia: Penang, KL UK: Cambridge, London
Kuala Lumpur 19 Feb 2017	Hannah	38	Caucasian	Australian	Magazine editor, journalist	Australia: Melbourne, Sydney UK: London Malaysia: KL
Kuala Lumpur 20 Mar 2017	Trixie	30	Malay/Filipina	Malaysian	Magazine writer	Malaysia: Kota Bharu, KL

## **Appendix III a: Information Sheet (Group Interviews)**

PhD Research Project:

How women construct meaning and knowledge of feminine beauty  
within their social networks

### **Information for participants**

#### **Introduction**

My name is Jamie Khoo and I am a PhD researcher based at the Centre for Women's Studies (CWS) at the University of York, UK. Below are contact details for myself, my Supervisor and the Director of the CWS. Should you have any queries or concerns about this project, please contact me as the researcher in the first instance. My academic profile can be accessed here:

[www.york.ac.uk/inst/cws/researchst/jamiek.htm](http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/cws/researchst/jamiek.htm)

My email address: [jpfk500@york.ac.uk](mailto:jpfk500@york.ac.uk)

My Supervisor is Dr Ann Kaloski-Naylor<sup>53</sup> and her email address is: [ann.kaloski-naylor@york.ac.uk](mailto:ann.kaloski-naylor@york.ac.uk)

The Director of the Centre for Women's Studies is Prof. Vicki Robinson and her email address is: [vicki.robinson@york.ac.uk](mailto:vicki.robinson@york.ac.uk)

#### **What is the research about?**

\*Please note that the focus group<sup>54</sup> sessions will be both audio and video recorded.

More details of this are outlined below\*

My research will examine how women talk about and construct meanings and knowledge around feminine beauty and their bodies through their social networks,

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<sup>53</sup> At the time of preparing for and conducting fieldwork (April 2016 – April 2017), I only had Dr. Ann Kaloski-Naylor as my supervisor. Prof. Victoria Robinson became my second supervisor in March 2017.

<sup>54</sup> During recruitment and fieldwork, I was still referring to these interviews as 'focus groups'. I only changed the term to 'group interviews' during my analysis and writing-up.

both online and offline. This will be done in two ways – first, I will study how women talk and generate meanings about feminine beauty with each other in their friendship groups. Secondly, I will examine how they respond to two particular online beauty-related projects and how exposure to such media does or does not influence or change the way they think and talk about feminine beauty.

In addition, I will be textually analysing specific posts from two online projects: *The What's Underneath Project* (<http://stylelikeu.com/category/the-whats-underneath-project-2/>) and *A Beautiful Body Project* (<http://www.abeautifulbodyproject.org>).

Topics broadly covered in the research also include:

- How women engage in beauty practices (e.g. cosmetic surgery, hair removal, make-up, fashion)
- Dieting, weight, eating disorders
- Slenderness, thinness
- Fat, fat activism
- Femininity: feminine beauty, feminine behaviour
- Body image issues, including body dysmorphic disorders
- The intersection between sex / sexuality / sexual desire and beauty
- Feminist writings and theories about female beauty
- Contemporary notions and discourse around health and fitness
- 'Body positivity' movements, online and offline
- The influence of conventional media (magazines, billboards, advertising) on contemporary notions of feminine beauty
- The rise of social media platforms in challenging conventional beauty norms – e.g. Facebook, selfie culture, Instagram, Tumblr, blogs.

### **What is involved for participants?**

I will be conducting focus groups with women aged 18 – 50. The women in each group should already know each other and interact / talk to each other on a regular basis – either as friends, colleagues, housemates, family etc. Each participant should have a strong knowledge of social media and use it regularly (at least five times a week).

The focus group sessions will be divided into two sections: first I will facilitate a semi-structured discussion among participants to talk about their thoughts on beauty. Secondly, I will show you some posts from the two websites mentioned above, followed by further group discussion in response to these posts.

These focus groups will take place at a time and location to be arranged at the convenience of the participants. Each focus group interview will take 2 — 3 hours depending on how much the participants wish to discuss.

Following the focus group, you can contact me via email if you had additional thoughts you wanted to share with me. At the same time, I may also contact you via email if I require any further information, clarification or expansion of your answers.

If you have or are involved with a beauty-related business, you are welcome to talk about how this influences your personal life and views. However, please refrain from overt selling or promotion of products or business during the focus group, either to other participants or to myself, the researcher. I am interested in your personal views on beauty, which are not influenced by any monetary or business initiatives you are involved with.

The anticipated time frame for this stage of the project is between June and December 2016, but there may be some additional focus groups in early 2017 if necessary.

### **Important information about the process**

As a PhD researcher I abide by the University policies and good, ethical research practice. This project has been reviewed by the University's ethics committee. The following information will help you make a fully informed decision about whether to participate. Once you have read and understood all the information, you will be asked to sign the accompanying consent form before or at the time of the focus group. If you have any questions you'd like to ask about this or any part of the research process before you sign the consent form, please email me. Your emails will be kept confidential.

**The focus groups will be audio and video recorded**, where participants give consent to being recorded. Unfortunately, if you choose not to be recorded, you will not be able to participate in the focus group. These recordings will not only help me to focus on what you are saying during the discussions, but having an accurate record of the focus group is essential for later transcription and analysis. The recordings will not be retained beyond this project and will be deleted from portable recording devices at the very earliest opportunity. Recordings will be stored in secure, password-protected

University servers and storage devices (e.g. external hard drives) to which only I have access.

Transcripts will be made of the recordings by me. No other person will have access to either the recordings or the transcripts. **The transcripts will not be published (however, please see below about archiving)**, though some verbatim quotes may be used as part of the thesis and in a publicly available account of the research (e.g. when the thesis is published online on White Rose E-Thesis Online (see below), in journal articles or at public talks).

**I offer guaranteed anonymity.** Any information I collect about you (i.e., your contact details and the interview recording and transcript) will be stored securely and kept only for as long as required for this project. When the interviews are transcribed they will be made anonymous, and any findings which are published will also be anonymous. Pseudonyms will be assigned to participants and used throughout the research in place of the use of real names; thus, no identifying details will be made public or published.

Please be aware that the discussions we may have in the focus groups **may raise certain sensitive topics**, particularly those related to eating disorders and body image concerns. If you feel that these topics may be too upsetting for you, you may choose not to participate in the focus groups at all. Contact details for support groups for eating disorders and body image concerns are also attached with this information sheet for your private perusal. Alternatively, please feel free to contact me if you wish to discuss any part of this further, before committing your participation.

#### **How your data will be used**

The information collected from the focus group interviews will be used for a published PhD thesis (the thesis will, in due course, be published on White Rose E-theses Online ([etheses.whiterose.ac.uk](http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk)), an open access, non-commercial platform. Elements of this final thesis will be submitted for journal publications, and public talks and events to disseminate findings. Nothing that identifies you as a participant will be included in the final thesis or any public dissemination.

With your permission, the anonymised transcripts will be offered to the National Archive ([www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)) at the end of the project. This is a government online repository for research information that is accessible to other researchers. On the consent form there is an opportunity to give your permission for your transcript to be archived in this way, which can be withdrawn any time up to three months after the focus group (date to be confirmed).

Once the data is collected and analysed I will send you a summary of the key research findings and conclusions.

By signing the consent form you are agreeing to participate. However, **you may withdraw this consent at any time before, during and after the interviews up to three months after the date of your focus group (date to be confirmed).**

Withdrawing consent means none of your personal information or comments/information shared during the focus group will be included in the project.



## **Support centres for eating disorders and/or body image concerns**

### **United Kingdom**

#### **BEAT (Beating Eating Disorders)**

<https://www.b-eat.co.uk>

Helpline: 0345 634 1414

#### **National Centre for Eating Disorders**

<http://eating-disorders.org.uk>

Helpline: 0845 838 2040

#### **Body Dysmorphic Disorder Foundation**

<http://bddfoundation.org/helping-you/getting-help-in-the-uk>

#### **Mind – a mental health charity**

<http://www.mind.org.uk/>

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### **United States<sup>55</sup>**

#### **National Eating Disorders Association**

<http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/>

Helpline: 1 800 931 2237

#### **Eating Disorder Hope**

<http://www.eatingdisorderhope.com/>

#### **The Bella Vita**

<http://www.thebellavita.com/>

Helpline: 1 818 585 1775

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### **Singapore**

#### **Aware**

<http://www.aware.org.sg/>

Helpline: 1800 774 593

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### **Malaysia Befrienders**

<http://www.befrienders.org.my>

Helpline: 03 7956 8144 or 03 7956 8145

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<sup>55</sup> I had initially intended to also recruit participants from the United States, but eventually found that I had enough participants from the UK, Malaysia and Singapore and decided to limit my focus to these three countries which I had personally also lived in.

## **Appendix III b: Information Sheet (Individual Interviews)**

PhD Research Project:

How women construct meaning and knowledge of feminine beauty  
within their social networks

### **Information for interview participants**

#### **Introduction**

My name is Jamie Khoo and I am a PhD researcher based at the Centre for Women's Studies (CWS) at the University of York, UK. Below are contact details for myself, my Supervisor and the Director of the CWS. Should you have any queries or concerns about this project, please contact me as the researcher in the first instance. My academic profile can be accessed here:

[www.york.ac.uk/inst/cws/researchst/jamiek.htm](http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/cws/researchst/jamiek.htm)

My email address: [jpfk500@york.ac.uk](mailto:jpfk500@york.ac.uk)

My Supervisor is Dr Ann Kaloski-Naylor<sup>56</sup> and her email address is: [ann.kaloski-naylor@york.ac.uk](mailto:ann.kaloski-naylor@york.ac.uk)

The Director of the Centre for Women's Studies is Prof. Vicki Robinson and her email address is: [vicki.robinson@york.ac.uk](mailto:vicki.robinson@york.ac.uk)

The Chair of the Ethics Committee (from which ethics approval is granted for this project) is Prof. Tony Royle and his email address is [tony.royle@york.ac.uk](mailto:tony.royle@york.ac.uk)

#### **What is the research about?**

My research will examine how women talk about and construct meaning and knowledge around feminine beauty and their bodies through their social networks, both online and offline. This will be done in two ways – first, I will study how women

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<sup>56</sup> At the time of preparing for and conducting fieldwork (April 2016 – April 2017), I only had Dr. Ann Kaloski-Naylor as my supervisor. Prof. Victoria Robinson became my second supervisor in March 2017.

talk and generate meanings about feminine beauty. Secondly, I will examine how they respond to a particular online beauty-related project, *The What's Underneath Project* (<http://stylelikeu.com/category/the-whats-underneath-project-2/>) and how exposure to such media does or does not influence the way they think and talk about feminine beauty.

In addition, I will be analysing specific posts from *The What's Underneath Project* using critical discourse analysis.

Topics broadly covered in the research also include:

- How women engage in beauty practices (e.g. cosmetic surgery, hair removal, make-up, fashion)
- Dieting, weight, eating disorders
- Slenderness, thinness
- Fat, fat activism
- Femininity: feminine beauty, feminine behaviour
- Body image issues, including body dysmorphic disorders
- The intersection between sex / sexuality / sexual desire and beauty
- Feminist writings and theories about female beauty
- Contemporary notions and discourse around health and fitness
- 'Body positivity' movements, online and offline
- The influence of conventional media (magazines, billboards, advertising) on contemporary notions of feminine beauty
- The rise of social media platforms in challenging conventional beauty norms – e.g. Facebook, selfie culture, Instagram, Tumblr, blogs.

### **What is involved for interview participants?**

I will be conducting interviews with women aged 18 – 50 from Los Angeles, London, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. Interviews will be conducted either in person, or via Skype / Google Hangouts.

The interview sessions will be divided into two sections: first I will facilitate a semi-structured discussion with you to talk about various issues related to feminine beauty and body image. This may include but is not limited to the subjects listed above.

Secondly, we will view some videos from *The What's Underneath Project*, and this will be followed by further discussion in response to these posts.

I will arrange for interviews to take place at a time and location that is convenient to you. Each interview will take 1 – 3 hours, depending on how much you would like to share/discuss.

Following the interview, you can contact me via email if you had additional thoughts you wanted to share or discuss. At the same time, I may also contact you via email if I require any further information, clarification or expansion of your answers.

If you have or are involved with a beauty-related business, you are welcome to talk about how this influences your personal life and views. However, please refrain from overt selling or promotion of products or business during the interview. I am interested in your personal views on beauty, which are not influenced by any monetary or business initiatives you are involved with.

The anticipated time frame for this stage of the project is between October 2016 and March 2017.

### **Important information about the process**

As a PhD researcher I abide by the University policies and good, ethical research practice. This project has been reviewed by the University's ethics committee. The following information will help you make a fully informed decision about whether to participate. Once you have read and understood all the information, you will be asked to sign the accompanying consent form before or at the time of the interview. If you have any questions you'd like to ask about this or any part of the research process before you sign the consent form, please email me. Your emails will be kept confidential.

**The interview will be audio recorded**, where participants give consent to being recorded. These recordings will not only help me to focus on what you are saying during the discussions, but having an accurate record of the interview is essential for later transcription and analysis. The recordings will not be retained beyond this project and will be deleted from portable recording devices at the very earliest opportunity. Recordings will be stored in secure, encrypted password-protected University servers and storage devices (e.g. external hard drives) to which only I have access.

Transcripts will be made of the recordings by me. No other person will have access to either the recordings or the transcripts. **The transcripts will not be published (however, please see below about archiving)**, though some verbatim quotes may be used as part of the thesis and in a publicly available account of the research (e.g. when

the thesis is published online on White Rose E-Thesis Online (see below), in journal articles or at public talks).

**I make every effort to ensure anonymity.** I will not reveal your identity – either verbally or in any written communication – to anyone outside of the interview. Any information I collect about you (i.e., your contact details and the interview recording and transcript) will be stored securely and kept only for as long as required for this project. When the interviews are transcribed they will be made anonymous, and any findings which are published will also be anonymous. Pseudonyms will be assigned to participants and used throughout the research in place of the use of real names; thus, no identifying details will be made public or published.

However, if we already have a prior friendship/relationship and/or mutual friends, **absolute anonymity may sometimes not be possible** – for example, if you refer me to or have been referred by another of our friends for the interview. Also, due to the personal nature of our existing friendship, some details discussed between us during the interview may identify you indirectly. I will however, make every effort possible to maintain anonymity throughout the process of working with the interview transcript and/or using any of your quotations – as described above. Please feel free to discuss this with me further if you have any concerns.

Please be aware that the discussions we have in the interview **may raise certain sensitive topics**, including but not limited to those related to eating disorders and body image concerns. If there is anything you are concerned about, or feel there is something I should know before the interview, please feel free to contact me to discuss any part of this further, before committing your participation. Contact details for support groups for eating disorders, body image concerns and mental health are also attached with this information sheet for your private perusal.

#### **How your data will be used**

The information collected from the interviews will be used for a published PhD thesis (the thesis will, in due course, be published on White Rose E-theses Online ([etheses.whiterose.ac.uk](http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk)), an open access, non-commercial platform. Elements of this final thesis will be submitted for journal publications, and public talks and events to

disseminate findings. Nothing that identifies you as a participant will be included in the final thesis or any public dissemination.

With your permission, the anonymised transcripts will be offered to the National Archive ([www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)) at the end of the project. This is a government online repository for research information that is accessible to other researchers. On the consent form there is an opportunity to give your permission for your transcript to be archived in this way, which can be withdrawn any time up to three months after the interview (date to be confirmed).

Once the data is collected and analysed I will send you a summary of the key research findings and conclusions.

By signing the consent form you are agreeing to participate. However, **you may withdraw this consent at any time before, during and after the interviews up to three months after the date of your interview (date to be confirmed)**. Withdrawing consent means none of your personal information or comments/information shared during the interview will be included in the project.

## **Support centres for eating disorders and/or body image concerns**

### **United Kingdom**

#### **BEAT (Beating Eating Disorders)**

<https://www.b-eat.co.uk>

Helpline: 0345 634 1414

#### **National Centre for Eating Disorders**

<http://eating-disorders.org.uk>

Helpline: 0845 838 2040

#### **Body Dysmorphic Disorder Foundation**

<http://bddfoundation.org/helping-you/getting-help-in-the-uk>

#### **Mind – a mental health charity**

<http://www.mind.org.uk/>

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### **United States<sup>57</sup>**

#### **National Eating Disorders Association**

<http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/>

Helpline: 1 800 931 2237

#### **Eating Disorder Hope**

<http://www.eatingdisorderhope.com/>

#### **The Bella Vita**

<http://www.thebellavita.com/>

Helpline: 1 818 585 1775

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### **Singapore**

#### **Aware**

<http://www.aware.org.sg/>

Helpline: 1800 774 593

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### **Malaysia Befrienders**

<http://www.befrienders.org.my>

Helpline: 03 7956 8144 or 03 7956 8145

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<sup>57</sup> I had initially intended to also recruit participants from the United States, but eventually found that I had enough participants from the UK, Malaysia and Singapore and decided to limit my focus to these three countries which I had personally also lived in.

## Appendix IV a: Consent Form (Group Interviews)

PhD Research Project:

How women construct meaning and knowledge of beauty  
within their social networks

Consent form

Researcher: Jamie Khoo (jpfk500@york.ac.uk)

This form is for you to state whether or not you agree to take part in the study detailed on the information sheet accompanying this form. **Please read and answer every question.** If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, you will find contact details for the researcher on the information sheet.

Please circle 'yes' or 'no' for each question.

Have you read and understood the information sheet about the study?

Yes          No

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the study?

Yes      No

Do you understand that the information you provide will be held in confidence by the researcher?

Yes      No

Are you aware that sensitive topics regarding issues such as eating disorders and body image concerns may arise during the focus groups<sup>58</sup>?

Yes          No

Do you consent to being audio and video recorded for the focus group?

Yes          No

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<sup>58</sup> During recruitment and fieldwork, I was still referring to these interviews as 'focus groups'. I only changed the term to 'group interviews' during my analysis and writing-up.



Are you aware that you may contact the researcher up to 3 months after the focus group (\_\_\_\_\_) should you have any further thoughts you would like to share?

Yes                  No

Are you agreeable to the researcher contacting you via email after the focus group should she require further clarification to your answers?

Yes                  No

Do you understand that you may withdraw from the study for any reason, at any time up until 3 months after the focus group (\_\_\_\_\_)?

Yes      No

Do you understand that the information you provide may be used in future research?

Yes      No

Do you agree to take part in the study?

Yes                  No

Do you give permission for the transcript of the interview to be offered the National Archive after the project has been completed?

Yes      No

All data is held in accordance with the Data Protection Act.

Your name (in BLOCK letters):

\_\_\_\_\_

Your signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer's name:     Jamie Khoo    

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix IV b: Consent Form (Individual Interviews)

PhD Research Project:

How women construct meaning and knowledge of beauty  
within their social networks

Consent form

Researcher: Jamie Khoo (jpfk500@york.ac.uk)

This form is for you to state whether or not you agree to take part in the study detailed on the information sheet accompanying this form. **Please read and answer every question.** If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, you will find contact details for the researcher on the information sheet.

Please circle 'yes' or 'no' for each question.

Have you read and understood the information sheet about the study?

Yes          No

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the study?

Yes      No

Do you understand that the information you provide will be held in confidence by the researcher?

Yes      No

Are you aware that sensitive topics regarding issues such as eating disorders and body image concerns may arise during the interview?

Yes          No

Do you consent to your interview being audio recorded?

Yes          No

Are you aware that you may contact the researcher up to 3 months after the interview (\_\_\_\_\_ ) should you have any further thoughts you would like to share?

Yes          No

Are you agreeable to the researcher contacting you via email after the interview should she require further clarification to your answers?

Yes                      No

Do you understand that you may withdraw from the study for any reason, at any time up until 3 months after the interview (\_\_\_\_\_)?

Yes      No

Do you understand that the information you provide may be used in future research?

Yes      No

Do you agree to take part in the study?

Yes                      No

Do you give permission for the transcript of the interview to be offered the National Archive after the project has been completed?

Yes                      No

All data is held in accordance with the Data Protection Act.

Your name (in BLOCK letters):

\_\_\_\_\_

Your signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer's name:     Jamie Khoo    

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix V: Transcribing Conventions

The following list defines the abbreviations and codes I have used in quotations from the interviews.

Abbreviation / code	Meaning
...	Stuttering, verbal repetition of syllable or word
[...]	One or more words or sentences, or a section of the interview which has/ve been omitted from the quotation
dash at the end of words e.g. I was– I think– I don't think	Dash indicates that there is a break in thought or clause and speaker does not finish that phrase or sentence
[(action)] e.g. [laughs]	Indication of an action that a participant takes while speaking, for example, laughing.
[(name of participant): (cited speech)] e.g. <b>Ann:</b> The cake was ( <b>Jane:</b> Excellent, the best I've tasted) truly exceptional.	When a second participant's name and quotation appears within a participant's speech, this indicates that second participant interrupts / speaks over or simultaneously with the first.

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