SOCIAL MEDIA, BEDROOM CULTURES AND FEMININITY: EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF CULTURE, POLITICS AND IDENTITY IN THE DIGITAL MEDIA PRACTICES OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN IN ENGLAND

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Abstract

In recent years, the position of (post-)millennial girls and young women within the digital landscape of social media has proven to be a topic of much interest to a number of feminists, journalists and cultural commentators. On the one hand, girls' (social) media practices are presented as a key site of concern, wherein new digital technologies are said to have produced an intensification of individualized, neoliberal and post-feminist identities. At the same time, others have championed access to social media for young people as a revolutionary political tool, wherein previously marginalised political subjects (such as girls) can access and participate within new and exciting political cultures. This thesis offers an original contribution to these debates by locating itself at the intersection of these two approaches and examining the role of social media in the production of girls' cultural and political identities. I present my findings from focus groups carried out with girls (aged 12-18) in three urban locations in England. This data is organised around the three overriding themes of space, surveillance and visibility. Ultimately, my thesis argues that social media should be conceptualised as an important terrain upon which neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivities can be both reproduced and subverted.

Dedication

To my mum and dad, for proving Philip Larkin wrong.
Thank you for everything.

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Contents

Introduction ……...8

What does this thesis do? 11

Framework, rationale and research questions …….....12

Thesis structure……15

Literature Review Part 1: (Post-)Millennial Girls and Women: youth, femininity and culture in a digital age……22

1.0 Introduction: the ever-present backdrops of postfeminism, neoliberalism and reflexive projects of the self ……22

1.1 (Post)-Millennials: cultural, constructions of youth in a digital age…..25

1.2 (Post)-Millennials: social media's contemporary relationship to youth culture and why it matters ……29

1.3 Reflective projects of the self(ie): new (neoliberal) femininities in a digital age…….....34

1.4 The (fe)male gaze: visibility, social surveillance, and femininity online……...……..41

1.5 Bedrooms: Youth (sub)cultures, gender, and spatial politics…….....47

Literature Review Part 2: (Post-)Millennial Girls and Women: youth, femininity and politics in a digital age……55

2.0 Introduction: Generation Apathetic or Generation Snowflake? Revisiting narcissism in the context of the political.…….....55

2.1 "Politics": What does it mean to be political?.....……58

2.2 Bedroom Cultures, Border Space(s) and Subaltern Counterpublics: Girls' activism, engagement and participation….……..66

2.3 Alternative Engagements? Silence, non-participation and anti-politics…….....73

Chapter 3 Methodology: Feminist framework, epistemologies and ethics……...78

3.1 Introduction: "doing (which?) feminism" in social science research…….80

3.1.1 Methodological approach and framework(s): feminist epistemologies and the subject(ivity) of objectivity..……...83

3.2 Methods and methodological approach(es): Focus groups, critical discourse analysis and online ethnography……..89

3.2.1 Focus Groups…….....91

3.2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis……102

3.3.3 Online (auto)ethnography: the self-reflexive researcher……106

3.3 Ethics and Limitations: Reflexivity, concerns and the future……108

Chapter 4 Bedrooms, Bodies and Beauty: Exploring the gendered politics of space, surveillance and visibility in a digital age…….……..113

4.1 A phone of one's own: (new) bedroom cultures and the reconfiguration of space in digital contexts……...……..…….114

4.2 Men Act, Women Appear? Surveillance, visibility and the politics of looking in contemporary digital contexts…….…….….132

4.3 "Digitally Doing Looks": femininity, visibility and spectrums of beautification in contemporary digital cultures……....….143

4.3.1 Big Sister is Watching You: "surveillant sisterhood" and the feminisation of the gaze in digital contexts…….…149

Chapter 5 New femininities in a digital world: Aesthetic labour and (micro)celebrity in postfeminist and neoliberal contexts ……158

5.1 Selfies, likes and comments: gendered symbolic capital on visual social media platform …….....159

5.2 Self(ie)-Branding: Aesthetic labour, celebrity culture and social media……...167

5.3 #Goals: Consumerism, micro-celebrity and theories of "democratization"…….…...180

5.3.1 Changing the world one body project at a time: constructions of neoliberal femininity within Instagram's female fitness community……185

5.3.2 "Get ready with me": bedrooms and self-branding in the beauty vlogger community…….…..193

Chapter 6 "It's a man's job": Investigating understandings of and attitudes towards political people and political space amongst girls and young women in England…….…….…….....204

6.1 Kardashians or Camerons: Binary discourses in discussions of political interest and aspiration amongst girls and England……206

6.2 "What are you shouting at each other for?!" exploring understandings of and attitudes towards "political space" amongst girls and young women in England…….....212

6.2.1 "Whenever you see them on the news it's always men": exploring understandings of and attitudes towards "political people" amongst girls and young women in England…….…….218

6.3 #MoreWomen: addressing online approaches to issues of representation within normative conceptions of "the political"…….….....223

Chapter 7 (Post-)Millennial Girls and Young Women: Apolitical or E-Political? (Sl)activism, border space and counterpublics.……...237

7.1 Y versus X + Z: Youth, "slacktivism" and generational differences in political participation…….238

7.2 KONY 2012: slacktivism in (in)action……..……..248

7.2.1 SlutWalk, social media and transcending the real/virtual binary.....255

7.3 Locating spaces to Learn: subverting (?) the regulatory gaze and navigating the politics of social media……...…..258

Conclusion…….....272

Revisiting the Research Questions……..…….274

Contribution and Finding Space: So what?.....281

Limitations and closing reflections…….……284

The everchanging (digital) landscape: opportunities for future research…….…..287

Appendix 1…….290

Appendix 2…….297

Appendix 3…….301

Appendix 4…….302

Appendix 5…….314

Appendix 6…….323

Bibliography……...350

Introduction

Exploring the cultural[1] and political relationship between girls and young women in England and social media

In recent years, many feminist academics have been grappling with what Angela McRobbie (2009) has called "the undoing of feminism". Identifying popular culture as a political landscape in which feminism is undermined and undone, McRobbie highlights the complex difficulties that face feminism in contemporary Western societies, most of which have been characterised as being structured primarily by neoliberal and postfeminist values (see also Phipps 2014a; Griffin 2015, and chapter one of this thesis). By highlighting the ways in which feminist rhetoric has been co-opted by neoliberalism and capitalism (see also Fraser 2013a & 2013b; Rottenberg 2014), McRobbie outlines a "double entanglement". Within this double entanglement, feminism is constructed as common sense while being simultaneously rejected (and, indeed, reviled). The anti-feminist sentiment that McRobbie identifies differs from the "backlash" against feminism that had been recognised by some feminists in the early 1990s (Faludi 1991; Wolf 1991; French 1992) in that it appropriates some forms of feminist rhetoric in order to prove that a wider political feminist movement is no longer relevant. It does this primarily by championing and perpetuating fragmented and non-threatening forms of individualised empowerment. Within contexts of neoliberalism and postfeminism, then, women gain symbolic equality, in which they seemingly achieve socio-cultural, political and economic parity not through collective action or fundamental political change, but through individualized participation in the (free) market, undergoing extensive "body projects" (Brumberg 1997) and "looking good". Television shows such as *Friends* (Rockler 2006), *Sex and the City* (Gerhard 2006) and *Ally McBeal* (Ouellette 2002), and cultural figures found within books and film franchises such *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Harzewski

[1] Within this thesis, I use Stuart Hall's definition of culture, where he argues that it is concerned with "the production and the exchange of meanings – the 'giving and taking of meaning' between the members of a society or group…Thus culture depends on its participants…'making sense' of the world in broadly similar ways" (Hall 1997: 2)

2011) serve to reiterate these messages, which both depoliticise and historicise the feminist movement (see also McRobbie 2004; 2007; 2008; 2009).

The rise of social media has proven an interesting site of enquiry in debates around the "undoing of feminism", not least because of its cultural association with both (young) women and notions of the body, (self-)surveillance and visibility (Dobson 2015; Elias & Gill 2017; Gill, forthcoming). As shall be discussed in chapters one and two, social media has often been understood as a useful tool in the promotion of individualistic and neoliberal values (Gershon 2011; Fuchs 2014) and, specifically, the mainstreaming of postfeminist or neoliberal femininities (Dobson 2015; Duffy & Hund 2015; McRobbie 2015). Recent popular and political discourse surrounding young women and social media also appear to frame this relationship as centring the reproduction of dominant notions of (hetero)normative femininity. News outlets often focus on women's (rather than men's)[2] tendency to take stylised or sexualised selfies, with some reports claiming that young British women between 16 and 25 spend "5 hours and 36 minutes a week" (48 minutes per day) on the activity, often with the primary hope of attracting love interests or "making ex-partners jealous" (Strick 2015). The selfie has become a key site of concern in popular discourse, with journalists, writers and commentators frequently trying to make sense of the reasons behind or consequences of girls' and young women's digital media practices (Sanghani 2014; Sales 2016). Within these discussions, there seems to a specific desire to uncover whether selfies and other such outputs of social media are essentially oppressive or empowering (Bates 2016).

[2] It is women who are almost always at the forefront of these conversations. When news outlets do discuss men taking "selfies", it is often understood as a deviation from gendered masculine norms and has been framed as both "cringeworthy" and "feminine" (Leigh Smith 2015; Simcox 2016). A recent academic study (widely reported in the popular press) also suggested that men who take and post pictures of themselves on social media "have higher than average traits of psychopathy" (Fox & Rooney 2015).

However, while some feminists have focused on the rise of neoliberal femininity, and social media's role within that via the mainstreaming of celebrity feminism and selfie-taking, others have examined social media as a potential space for political resistance and collective action amongst girls and women (Keller 2012, 2016a, 2016b; Schuster 2013; Loza 2014; Park & Leonard 2014; Khoja-Moolji 2016; Clark 2016). Indeed, far from being *separate* from issues of the body, these political uses of social media are often focused predominantly on body politics. It has been pointed out that social media sites such as Twitter are often utilised in an attempt to subvert dominant myths regarding domestic/gender-based violence, sexual assault and rape culture (Salter 2013; Rentschler 2014; Baer 2015; Keller et. al. 2016; Sills et. al. 2016). This raises a lot of difficult, seemingly unanswerable questions. How can we unpack young women's use of social media when it is simultaneously positioned as a tool for the promotion of individualistic narcissism and as a site of collective political resistance? Must social media be characterised as either an oppressive or liberating terrain in order for feminists to be able to make sense of it? Why do women outnumber men on social media sites (Harris 2008; Schuster 2013; Pew Research Centre 2015), and what are the implications of this feminisation? Can social media be championed as a progressive political force for women, when it is simultaneously accused of contributing to a rise in the (self-)surveillance and (self-)regulation of women's bodies (Elias & Gill 2017)? This thesis aims to deal with and unpack some of these questions and move away from a technological deterministic view of social media as being either "good" or "bad" for young women by offering a more nuanced analysis of the various ways that girls and young women engage with cultural and political practices in their everyday digital lives.

In light of the pervasive gendered discourse that surrounds social media, one might reasonably reject the claims made by Johanna Blakley (2010; 2012), who argues that social media may mark "the end of gender". Blakley, arguing that social media is a more democratic, collective and egalitarian form of media, suggests that it presents women an unprecedented opportunity to "build

the new media system in our own image, to our own specifications, customised for us" (2012: 328). However, this approach does little to examine the wider structures that shape and influence girls' and women's (gendered) media practices, and it is these issues that I shall examine throughout this thesis.

What does this thesis do?

This thesis offers an original contribution to the debates which I have briefly highlighted above, and which will be investigated in more detail during chapters one and two. Contextually, my work can be understood to contribute to Western gendered perspectives on social media. Previous studies of Western girls' and young women's use(s) of social media have tended to focus on cultural self-representation (Dobson 2015; Elis & Gill 2017) *or* political activism (Clark 2016; Keller 2016a; Keller 2016b). My original contribution comes from situating my work at the intersection of these two approaches. I do this by laying out the findings from my own empirical research into the lived experiences of 63 girls and young women in England and how they negotiate both their cultural and political identities within the digital landscape. I am specifically interested in how these issues can be located within the wider contexts of neoliberalism and postfeminism.

Social media blurs the lines between the traditionally gendered binary of the public and the private (Albrechtslund 2013), which makes it an important contemporary landscape for feminist analysis. However, it should be reiterated that this thesis rejects Blakley's (2010; 2012) understanding that social media signals "the end of gender". Rather, I understand social media and the Internet more generally as highly gendered landscapes, which can be informed by wider cultural, political and economic frameworks. It is the purpose of this thesis, then, to investigate the cultural and political

relationship that girls and young women in England have with social media. I look at the ways in which it is used in the construction of cultural identities for young women, and how this can intersect with young women's negotiation of political space (both real and virtual). Ultimately, this thesis aims to examine the ways in which social media can be used as a tool to both reproduce and (sometimes simultaneously) resist culturally and politically dominant constructions of (young) femininity. My empirical data is laid out in chapters four, five, six and seven around the themes of space, surveillance and visibility, which inform and shape the discussion and analysis of my data.

Below, I highlight my primary research questions and introduce my theoretical framework and rationale. My work focuses specifically on girls and young women between the ages of 12 and 18, who are currently residing in three different urban locations in England. I chose to focus my research on this age group because they make up one of the first "digital native" generations (Prensky 2001) and are often the target demographic of moral panics related to social media in public discourse, as outlined above. Further justification for these methodological choices will be made in chapter three.

Framework, rationale and research questions

This thesis is placed at the intersection of cultural girlhood/youth studies, media studies, (digital) sociology of gender and political science. I draw on scholarship from a range of disciplines and theoretical traditions in order to gain a more holistic understanding of young women's complex political and socio-cultural relationship with social media, and the Internet more generally. As I examine this relationship through a feminist lens, it is important to clarify the main features of the feminist framework that I am working within – essentially, to identify what types of feminism

I am informed by. In a wider sense, my work is indebted to feminist cultural theorists such as Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill, who have long examined popular cultures, gender representations and media practices. In line with this, I am also informed by feminist literatures that examine the ways in which macro political and economic structures and systems impact upon gender politics, by examining their influence on everyday micro interactions (Phipps 2014a; Phipps & Young 2015). I am particularly interested in how these wider structures come to impact gendered identity and the construction (or deconstruction) of new femininities (Harris 2004; Gill & Scharff 2011; Elias et. al. 2017). I am predominantly interested in examining how arguments laid out by the aforementioned scholars can be applied in contemporary digital contexts. My work, therefore, can also contribute to the emerging field of digital sociology (Orton-Johnson & Prior 2013; Carrigan 2013; Lupton 2015), which "provides a lens through which to understand both the individual and society after digitization" (Gregory et. al. 2017: xviii).

Within the sub-discipline of digital sociology, I am particularly influenced by a recent swathe of feminist literature that explores both femininity and feminism in various digital contexts, and highlights the centrality of gender within digital cultures, transformations and activisms (Keller 2012; Ringrose et. al. 2013; Mendes 2015; Dobson 2015; Renold & Ringrose 2016; Keller et. al. 2016; Retallack et. al. 2016; Handyside & Ringrose 2017). I am interested specifically in looking at how social media can come to be a site of both conformity and resistance for girls and young women within neoliberal, postfeminist contexts. I offer an original contribution to these debates by locating my research at the intersection of cultural and political uses of social media, as opposed to focusing solely on one or the other. In an even more specific sense, then, this thesis can be located between the recent publications of Dobson (2015) and Keller (2016b). While Dobson examines self-representations of girls in postfeminist digital contexts, Keller explores the ways in which girls utilise the tools of social media in political (particularly feminist) ways. As well as contributing to new discussions on digital femininities, my work also attempts to build on

key feminist theories (such as “bedroom cultures”) and place them within the context of a contemporary digital culture.

Throughout my research, I tackle three primary questions which underpin the structure of the work as a whole:

1. **How do girls and young women in England understand their relationship with social media?**

Here, I examine how important social media is to girls and young women in their cultural and political lives. What are the varying social media sites used for? Do different sites have different roles in their lives? Do they understand their virtual identity as being fundamentally different to the ways in which they construct their identities offline?

2. **In what ways and to what extent can social media be considered a site of political and cultural resistance for girls and young women in England?**

Within this question, I am interested in looking at how my participants might subvert dominant discourses surrounding girls and young women and their relationship with social media. How do they understand “selfie culture”? Do they conceive of their social media use as being entirely about individualistic productions of self, or are there other elements involved in their digital media practices? For example, do they see themselves as political and, if so, do they utilise social media in the construction of a political identity?

3. **What are the gendered political and cultural implications of the above?**

This final question examines how far social media has the potential to challenge our traditional understandings of both femininity and politics. Can social media be understood as a useful tool for girls and young women, who often struggle to locate unregulated space in which they can express themselves freely (Harris 2004)?

It is not the purpose of this thesis to offer definitive "truths" or to claim that social media is inherently or essentially oppressive or empowering for girls and women. While I attempt to deconstruct and problematize some of the more common or dominant claims that surround gender and social media in public, political and academic discourse, it is not my aim to do this by claiming to offer politically neutral "facts" (Phipps 2014a: 5 – 6). Rather, it is my aim to offer an interpretation of major contemporary debates in the fields of gender, social media, culture and politics as they evolve within neoliberal and postfeminist contexts. As I do this partly by examining the lived experiences of a small number of girls and young women in urban areas of England, it is important to note that my discussions will be limited in their generalisability and cannot claim to touch every girl or young woman in the UK, nor the West more generally. Again, these discussions will be built upon in chapter three, where I discuss my methodology and justifications in greater detail.

Thesis structure

In this final section of my introduction, I lay out the basic structure of the remainder of this thesis and offer a justification for its organisation. In order to tackle the research questions outlined above, I will firstly map the extensive collection of literature that deals with both the wider and more specific issues surrounding my research. As there is such a wealth of scholarship to navigate

within this particular field, the literature review for this thesis has been split into two chapters: the first of which deals primarily with contemporary young women and femininity and how they are popularly constructed in a digital age. Within this chapter, I examine the cultural and political backdrops of postfeminism and neoliberalism and how these structures inform contemporary understandings of young people. I look at the ways in which these narratives are often closely linked to youth culture's association with social media and offer a justification as to why social media research is important in youth studies generally and girlhood studies more specifically. I go on to examine the ways in which constructions of young people as overly invested in technology and social media are gendered, and how women are disproportionately targeted in discussions of social media, negative side effects and "risk". I examine notions of postfeminist and neoliberal femininities and how they are played out online before examining theories of spatial politics that underpin young women's use of and association with social media.

In chapter two, I explore these constructions further by examining them in direct relation to the political. I look at the political implications of reductive narratives of young people, and how normative constructions are often used to dismiss, silence and marginalise this particular demographic. This also opens up conversations about what it *means* to be "political" in contemporary contexts, and I map out some literature that deals with these questions. I critique traditional survey-based research that suggests that contemporary young people are more disengaged and uninterested in politics than previous generations, before visiting other works that highlight the theoretical and methodological flaws of such research. I look again at the gendered nature of these arguments by examining the traditional ways in which girls in particular have been produced as apolitical subjects. In response to this, I examine some of the ways in which girls and young women use the Internet and social media to locate space for themselves in which to carve out political identities. I end these two chapters by offering an explanation of the connected nature of these cultural and political constructions of young women in contemporary contexts,

and how it is important to examine social media as a space that can both reproduce and disrupt postfeminist and neoliberal values and identities.

After mapping out some of the vast scholarship in these areas, I outline my research design and methodology in chapter three. Within this chapter, I explain and outline the rationale and justification for my chosen research methods, primarily focus groups and critical discourse analysis. Here, I deliver a reflexive and detailed account of my fieldwork, and the reasons for conducting it in the way that I did. As well as justifying my chosen methods, I also unpack some of the wider issues that arise from the use of various research methods within feminist fieldwork. I outline feminism's epistemological contribution to the methodological literature and discuss whether or not there is such a thing as "feminist" research methods (or, indeed, "unfeminist" research methods). This includes looking at the qualitative/quantitative divide as it is understood and situated within specifically feminist research. This methodological chapter will help to frame the rationale behind my wider research project. I also outline the ethical considerations of my research and look reflexively at the drawbacks and limitations of my data collection and fieldwork experiences.

After setting out the methodological justifications for my project, I will outline the findings from my research in four separate empirical chapters. These chapters are split into two parts: chapters four and five can largely be described as discussing the "politics of culture", whereas chapters five and six speak to "the culture(s) of politics". They are laid out as follows:

Chapter 4: The Politics of Culture Part I

Bedrooms, Bodies and Beauty: Exploring the gendered politics of space, surveillance and visibility in a digital age

Chapter 5: The Politics of Culture Part II

New femininities in a digital world: Aesthetic labour and (micro)celebrity in postfeminist and neoliberal contexts

Chapter 6: The Cultures of Politics Part I

"It's a man's job": Investigating understandings of and attitudes towards political people and political space amongst girls and young women in England

Chapter 7: The Cultures of Politics Part II

(Post-)Millennial Girls: Apolitical or E-political? (Sl)acktivism, border space and counterpublics

Chapters four and five consider my participants' relationship with social media in relation to the production of their cultural image, (self-)representation and visual identity. In chapter four, I establish the overriding themes of space, surveillance and visibility and outline some of the general ways in which these issues were discussed and conceived of amongst my participants. I offer a reconfiguration of the theory of "bedroom cultures" (McRobbie and Garber 1976) and examine how it can be reread and reworked within digital contexts, examining the ways in which gendered discourses of space also underpin contemporary constructions of the real and the virtual. This chapter looks at dominant perceptions of social media as specifically feminine and theorises some of the reasons for this supposed feminisation in relation to my own data. I also examine the

ways in which my participants negotiate increased levels of visibility within digital contexts, and how this intersects with notions of (self-)surveillance.

Chapter five examines these themes further, specifically in relation to wider political and public discourse(s) surrounding digital femininity and the impact of social media on young women's body image. I situate this within a wider academic debate concerning new femininities and body projects, particularly within neoliberal and postfeminist contexts. I examine online communities that are body-centric and largely dominated by young women, such as the beauty vlogger and fitspo communities. I use theories of (self-)surveillance and visibility in order to examine the ways in which social media can be used as a tool in the production of self-disciplined neoliberal and postfeminist identities. These chapters serve to look at some of the ways in which social media can be perceived as a political landscape in relation to issues of the body.

Chapters six and seven of my data and analysis section interrogate assertions that young British women are apolitical and disengaged, largely off the back of claims that they are too concerned with the production of their individual (visual) identities (as discussed in chapters four and five). These chapters challenge the dominant public and political rhetoric of the (post-)millennial generation(s) as apathetic. I focus specifically on the ways in which these assumptions disproportionately target (post-)millennial girls and young women. In chapter six, I discuss the ways in which my participants understand notions of the political and the ways in which they actively reject politics in the Westminster model. I examine how they view public political spaces in order to further contextualise and make sense of girls' dominance of digital media cultures.

Chapter seven examines changing understandings of political activism within the context of digital media, and analyses criticisms of online politics as amounting to nothing more than "slacktivism". I examine my participants' attitudes towards using social media as a form of political engagement and use the examples of KONY 2012 and SlutWalk to frame these discussions. Chapter seven also discusses the possibility of girls and young women locating "hidden" spaces for themselves within the digital landscape as a way in which to subvert and resist the hyper-visibility and surveillance they face online. Within this chapter, I examine the potential for e-activism to have "real world" impact, but also challenge the dominant claim that this is the only way for digital engagement to be considered worthwhile or "activist". This involves challenging prevailing assumptions regarding the measurement of impact and usefulness.

Throughout my thesis I outline how social media can be viewed as a political space in ways that might deviate from normative understandings of the political. While these two uses of social media (cultural and political) are often constructed as two separate practices, I argue that they often overlap and exist alongside one another, rather than as two separate diametrically opposed spheres, occupied and inhabited by different "types" of girls and women. Again, I use my findings to complicate popular understandings of (self-)representation, femininity and social media, and look at social networking sites (SNS) in order to see how they can be utilised as a site of both collaborative resistance and individualist productions of self, sometimes simultaneously. Throughout my thesis I conceptualise the ways in which both of these uses of social media can be understood as "political" under a widened understanding and definition of the term.

I end my thesis by offering a conclusion, where I reiterate the overall contributions of my research and the ways in which it adds to contemporary debates surrounding gender, (post)feminism, (social) media and political activism. My conclusion also highlights some issues that arose from my research that did not make it into my thesis discussions and outlines potential areas for future research. My conclusion recaps on the arguments made throughout my work and offers a final justification for the importance of the research itself.

Chapter One

Literature Review Part I

(Post-)Millennial Girls and Women: youth, femininity and culture in a digital age

1.0 Introduction: the ever-present backdrops of postfeminism, neoliberalism and reflexive projects of the self

It has been noted by many feminists that the political, social and cultural landscape of contemporary Britain can largely be described as both neoliberal (Phipps 2014a) and postfeminist (McRobbie 2009). Phipps and Young define neoliberalism as "a value system in which the economic has replaced the intellectual and the political and in which the competitive, rational individual predominates over the collective" (2015: 306). Neoliberalism, then, is no longer understood simply as a political economy, but rather a mode of governmentality and control that impacts every aspect of social, cultural and political life (Brown 2003; 2006). Neoliberalism, rather than operating as a single political or economic power, becomes a way of positioning and defining human beings via the market by ensuring that (free) market forces and values organise and regulate every aspect of society. The relentless promotion of self-interest over social need that neoliberalism perpetuates ensures that structural inequalities are marginalised and trivialised in place of a strong focus on personal responsibility and free choice (see also Giroux 2004; 2008; Hall 2011).

Postfeminism, on the other hand, can be defined as a cultural and political landscape that constructs a collective feminist resistance as outdated and unnecessary. While some feminists have understood this as being a "backlash" against the gains of the women's liberation movement(s) of the 1960s and 1970s (Faludi 1991; Wolf 1991; French 1992), Angela McRobbie has suggested that, rather than reject it outright, postfeminism adopts and co-opts certain feminist rhetoric in order to undermine and undo it. This "complexification of backlash" (2009: 11) suggests that broadly feminist notions of choice and empowerment are employed within postfeminist contexts in order to suggest that feminism has largely achieved its goals and does not need to be maintained as a collective political force. This is usually played out in popular culture through television shows, films and "chick lit" (see also Gill & Herdieckerhoff 2006). Gill (2009) also highlights sex and relationship advice columns in women's magazines as drawing simultaneously on sexist and feminist discourses, building on McRobbie's assertion that a presence of feminism does not automatically mean an absence of postfeminism.

Postfeminism is closely tied to neoliberalism, then, in that both are deeply rooted in the promotion of individualism, unrestricted "choice" and consumer culture. Indeed, as Gill (forthcoming) suggests, the links between neoliberal values and postfeminist sensibility are so strong that one might reasonably suggest that postfeminism is the gendered facet of neoliberalism (see also Gill & Scharff 2011). It becomes impossible to disentangle the two when we consider the ways in which both are structured by a heightened focus on self-improvement, self-discipline and supposedly "free" choice (Gill 2007a: 163 – 164). This has profound implications for gender politics, and the changing position of femininity within these contexts has been a central focus of recent academic research (McRobbie 2004; Harris 2004; Tasker & Negra 2007; Budgeon 2011; Gill & Scharff 2011; Negra & Tasker 2013; Evans & Riley 2015; Elias et. al. 2017).

Debates around individualism and personal responsibility and the ways in which they now intersect with the self are also largely informed by sociologists who examine changing models of social and personal identity in late modernity (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995 & 2002; Bauman 2003). In this scholarship, changes in social and personal relationships from the mid-to-late twentieth century are explained through the lens of individualism. This means that community-ties have declined at the expense of a heightened interest in the achievements and successes (or failures) of the individual. Within these contexts, the self becomes less about a set of fixed traits or membership of a particular group (class, gender, 'race', for example) and is, instead, constantly "made" or produced as one's biography is incessantly created and revised (Giddens 1991: 53; Beck 1992: 135).

When the self is framed in these ways, there becomes a greater emphasis on the body as a central site in the production of identity (Giddens 1991; Bauman 1992). The body, as a site of identity construction, is now a continuous, self-reflexive *project*, which demands one's active and ongoing engagement and participation (Shilling 1993: 112). This is particularly interesting in gendered terms, of course, when we consider the tendency of both neoliberal and postfeminist discourses to encourage (mostly privileged) women to find "empowerment" by working on or transforming one's body. Within neoliberal and postfeminist frameworks, the body is shaped by consumer cultures, and women are often expected to produce their bodies by participating heavily within them (Evans & Riley 2013: 270). This cultural obsession with women's body projects" has been noted as specific to a social, cultural and political milieu in which the individual is paramount (Brumberg 1997)[3]. These arguments underpin much of the first half of my analysis, as I examine girls' and young women's relationship with their bodies through the contemporary lens of social media. Noting social media here is important, as these debates can now be situated

[3] For a discussion of men's "body projects" within these contexts, see Gill et. al. 2005; Hakim 2016

within more recent conversations about a (supposedly) "uniquely" narcissistic, self-involved and individualistic generation of "millennials" and "post-millennials[4]".

1.1

(Post-)Millennials: cultural constructions of youth in a digital age

On 21st December 2016, a video was posted online which quickly went viral; by 3rd January 2017, it had already been viewed over 50 million times (Lattier 2017). The video was a twenty-minute interview with American author, marketing consultant and motivational speaker, Simon Sinek. Its' focal topic was "millennials in the workplace", and the ways in which a combination of "failed parenting techniques" and an over-reliance on technology has created a generation who are "tough to manage", and who can largely be described as "entitled, narcissistic, self-interested, unfocused and lazy". The video was hugely popular and faced very little backlash as it made the rounds (ironically) on Facebook and Twitter. The overall message perfectly encapsulated the well-trodden argument that millennials are considerably more entitled, individualistic and self-interested than any other previous generation. The monologue is reductive in numerous ways, often drawing on scientific rhetoric to declare that young people now fundamentally lack certain emotional skillsets and are becoming somehow "hard-wired" to have "superficial" relationships. Sinek's monologue followed a popular pattern of drawing on statistics, science and tenuous and vague links between "depression" and "technology" to perpetuate a certain narrative about contemporary young people and their distinct individualism. As has been highlighted earlier in

[4] Millennials (or Generation Y) are a demographic cohort made up of those born between the early 1980s to around the year 2000. Post-millennials (or Generation Z) are largely considered to be those born after the turn of the millennium. Generation Z has also been referred to as "iGen" as a result of their technological knowledge and widespread use of the Internet from an early age. These categories will be discussed more in chapter three.

this chapter, however, there have long been debates regarding changing social structures and their resulting impact on relationships, community-ties and constructions of the self. This understanding of contemporary young people as *specifically* more self-absorbed and less community-driven as a result of their "over-reliance on technology" is problematic in that it ignores a huge body of scholarship that pre-dates the mainstreaming of the Internet and social media, and examines this alleged individualism alongside various social, cultural and political changes.

Sinek's viral monologue contained absolutely nothing new: it is only one of the most recent in a long line of popular outputs that depict (post-)millennials in precisely this way. In May 2013, for example, American journalist Joel Stein wrote a cover article for *Time* magazine. The piece was entitled 'Millennials: the Me Me Me Generation', and the cover showed a young woman lying on her front, taking a selfie with a mobile phone. The messages coded into the front cover alone are clear: technology has made us more vain, more stupid and more narcissistic. The use of a young woman as the cover model for this piece is also interesting and provides a neat example of the several ways in which social media/Internet use is discursively feminised, and this will be discussed more later in this chapter. Within the article itself, Stein (like Sinek) relies on statistics or, what he calls "cold hard data", to highlight several reasons he believes millennials to be "lazy, entitled, selfish and shallow"[5].

[5] "58% more college students scored higher on a narcissism scale in 2009 than in 1982. Millennials got so many participations trophies growing up that a recent study showed that 40% believe they should be promoted every two years, regardless of performance. They are fame-obsessed: three times as many middle school girls want to grow up to be a personal assistant to a famous person as want to be a senator, according to a 2007 survey; four times as many would pick the assistant job over a CEO of a major corporation. They're so convinced of their own greatness that the National Study of Youth and Religion found the guiding morality of 60% of millennials in any situation is that they'll just be able to feel what's right. Their development is stunted: more people ages 18 to 29 live with their parents than with a spouse, according to the 2012 Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults. And they are lazy. In 1992, the non-profit Families and Work Institute reported that 80% of people under 23 wanted to one day have a job with greater responsibility; 10 years later, only 60% did" (Stein 2013).

Despite its numerous theoretical and methodological flaws, Stein's article (like Sinek's interview) presents a widely accepted and readily digested narrative in both popular and academic discourse: that millennials are a "relatively unique generation of young people" (Trzesniewski & Donnellan 2010: 58). In popular psychology publications, this is often understood to be the result of "failed parenting techniques" (such as "helicopter parenting"[6]), through which millennial children have supposedly been over-praised, over-rewarded and over-protected (Brummelman et. al. 2015).[7] In the social sciences, however, it is largely assumed that these generational differences are more likely the result of wider social, cultural, political and economic changes that have taken place since the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s. These changes include the rise of new technologies, fundamental differences in family structure, a heightened focus on the individual and a supposed widespread decline in social connectedness (Putnam 2000).

Psychologist Jean Twenge is one of the most prominent scholars working on the alleged rise of "narcissism" amongst millennials and has released numerous publications outlining the perceived link between millennials/narcissism (the two terms are almost interchangeable in research such as this), a rise in aggression (Twenge & Campbell 2003), a decline in "social" and "intrinsic" values (Twenge et. al. 2010) and a marked difference in workplace attitudes (Twenge & Campbell

[6] A term that is used both colloquially and academically to describe parents who "hover" over their child's life and pay extremely close attention to their needs, worries and concerns (see Cline and Fay 1990: 23 – 25; Henderson 2013)

[7] This narrative is certainly not ubiquitous, and often finds itself located within specific disciplines (often psychology). Elsewhere, for example, bell hooks has highlighted the disadvantaged position of children in "white supremacist capitalist patriarchal cultures of domination" (2000: 73), by highlighting the rates of verbal, physical and emotional abuse levelled towards children by both men and women in cultures where they are granted no civil or political rights and are, instead, considered the "property" of their parents. Highlighting the wider community's responsibility to challenge children's vulnerable position, hooks indirectly challenges the often-pedalled assertion that children are now "over-protected" and "over-praised" (as is the dominant message in works by Twenge etc.). In stark contrast to these generalised and over-simplified assertions, hooks argues instead that "adult violence against children is a norm" (ibid.), bringing a much needed intersectional analysis to discussions of young people's position within contemporary Western societies.

2008; Twenge 2010; Twenge et. al. 2012). In one of her most well-known publications, Twenge, along with co-author Keith Campbell, argues that we have now entered "the Age of Entitlement" (2009). While Twenge appears to be the dominant voice in these debates, these arguments are supported by several other psychology scholars, such as Greenberger et. al. (2008), who have highlighted the alleged relationship between narcissism and "academic entitlement" amongst millennial college students in the USA (for similar arguments see Stout 2000; Harvey & Dasborough 2015).

These cultural constructions are inherently political and speak to wider narratives of contemporary young people as politically disengaged and disconnected. This will be returned to in the following chapter, where I locate these constructions within wider understandings of (post-)millennials as less politically engaged and active than previous generations. In the following chapter, I will also examine some criticism of these dominant narratives by academics, often sociologists, who highlight "the dangers of generational myth-making" (Arnett et. al. 2013: 17). Here, however, it is simply important to map some of the academic literature that underpins contemporary constructions of young people as uniquely narcissistic and individualistic. It is important to note that (post-)millennials' contemporary association with narcissism is intimately tied to their regular use of social media, and the heightened awareness of their image and appearance that this supposedly brings. The growing importance of gender in these debates will be discussed further in section 1.3 of this chapter, where I look in more detail at new femininities and their position within popular culture and digital media. Firstly, however, I will briefly discuss why social media is central to these debates.

1.2

(Post-)Millennials: social media's contemporary relationship to youth culture and why it matters

In this section, I will outline some of the statistics that are often cited when discussing the recent rise and current pervasiveness of social media. While I present some of these figures, it seems unnecessary here to dwell on numbers for too long. After all, this thesis does not offer a quantitative analysis of social media – in fact, it often rejects quantitative perspectives as extremely limited in understanding people's lived experiences of (and relationships with) social media. This will be discussed more in chapter three, where I outline my research methodology. It would be inconsistent, then, to spend too long dissecting and analysing figures of Internet consumption. Despite this, they serve some purpose in that they broadly outline the integral nature of the Internet and social media to the lives of many young people both globally and, specifically in relation to this research, within the UK.

In a "2016 Internet minute", it was estimated that – globally – there were 701,389 Facebook logins, 20.8 million WhatsApp messages sent, 2.78 million YouTube videos watched, 38,194 pictures posted to Instagram, 347,222 tweets posted and 527,760 Snapchats sent (Leboeuf 2016). While the concept of "the media" is certainly not new, these figures point towards a fundamental change in the amount of media that has become available to us in recent years. Until the Second World War, the media was really restricted to print (newspapers, books, magazines), motion pictures and the radio. The introduction and popularity of the television set post-World War Two was an important turning point in the development of the media and signalled an obvious and

significant change in both our cultural practices and the ways in which we consume and convey information (Roberts & Foehr 2008: 12). The technological boom of the late twentieth century saw the development of laptop computers, digital cameras, smart phones, video games and consoles. However, arguably the most drastic change in media consumption and habits came with the introduction of the Internet into homes in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Computer and Internet use spread more rapidly than any other previous technology (Brown 2002: 42) and, according to the 2016 Communications Market Report (CMR) published by Ofcom, 86% of all adults in the UK now have constant daily access to the Internet, either via a fixed PC/laptop, or mobile phone/other mobile device. This figure actually stands at between 91% and 94% for 16 – 54 year olds and only drastically decreases in the 75+ group (40%) (Ofcom 2016).

Even in the early days of what might now be characterised as Internet Studies, age played an important role in the emerging theory. Marc Prensky's (2001 n.p.) concept of the "digital immigrant/digital native", for example, was predicated entirely on generational differences in early access to the World Wide Web. For Prensky, these differences have problematic consequences, arguing that "today's students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors. These differences go further and deeper than most educators suspect or realise". This digital gap is, today, demonstrated most obviously by social media use which, according to the 2016 CMR, declines significantly with age. The report showed that use of social media was near-universal among 16 – 24-year olds in the UK, with 99% claiming to use it, while only 24% of those 65+ claimed the same. The report suggests that, on average, 16 – 24-year olds spend 2 hours 26 minutes per day using social media, noticeably higher than the average time spent by all adults, 1 hour and 16 minutes (Ofcom 2016: 7).

There is, unsurprisingly, much interest (both academic and popular) in this new field of media consumption. There are often a number of headlines in mainstream newspapers regarding the "risks" of social media, which are sometimes loosely based on academic studies regarding the ways in which "excessive" Internet use or "misuse" can explicitly impact academic performance (Kubey et. al. 2001), interpersonal relationships (Bastani & Fazel-Zarandi 2008; Tokunaga 2011; Gershon 2011) and mental health (Sanders et. al. 2000; Niemz et. al. 2005; Morrison & Gore 2010; Bamford 2015; Royal Society for Public Health 2017). The Internet and social media are often considered sites of "risk" for young people and research that supposedly "proves" or emphasises this negative impact is often circulated widely in the popular press. This is indicative of the moral panic that dominates public discourses around (post-)millennials and their supposed overuse or misuse of new technologies (see Harris 2011; Gabbatt 2010).

These concerns about "risk" in relation to social media have been critiqued by some academics, who argue that such an essentialist view of technology ignores many important nuances. Mesch (2009), for example, highlights the importance of locating social media within wider social, cultural and political contexts, rather than seeing it as something that exists outside of any material reality. While some studies have done this, most seem to suggest that it is impossible to separate the alleged individualistic and narcissistic character of social media from wider contexts of neoliberalism (Gershon 2011; Fuchs 2014). However, researchers such as Miller et. al. (2016) have warned against these approaches, which tend to lean towards technological determinism. They highlight how many early forms of social media, such as Friendster or Orkut, did not achieve success in the individualistic culture of the USA (as is ordinarily presumed), but only "fully flourished when they migrated to more group-orientated societies" such as China, south-east Asia and Brazil. It seems insufficient, then, to simply dismiss social media as a product of neoliberalism, particularly when one considers that it has its origins in "develop[ing] and maintain[ing] social connections" (p. 14)

Despite some attempts to situate their use within wider social, cultural and political contexts, the Internet and social media are still regularly discussed as somehow separate from – and incompatible with – abstract notions of "the real" (see, for example, Turkle 2011; 2015). This understanding has been rejected by academics such as Rainie and Wellman (2012) and Miller (2016) who argue that there is no such distinction between the virtual and the real, and that social media and the Internet can now generally be accepted as something that is "incorporated into the everyday life of individuals" (Mesch 2009: 55). This is an important point, and one that underpins the foundation of my thesis: I do not understand social media and the Internet more generally as existing in some "other", separate realm. Instead, I see it as deeply embedded within the mundane realities of everyday life. However, as shall be discussed in chapter four, this was not necessarily the attitude of my participants, who sometimes understood the virtual and the real as operating within separate worlds. This distinction between the virtual and the real and how these spaces become gendered will be discussed during my data analysis.

Discourses that perpetuate alleged digital risks are sometimes criticised as generalising and over-simplifying the relationship that young people have with social media. For example, where academics such as Marwick and boyd (2014) have expressed concerns about young people's privacy on social media, Hodkinson (2017) draws attention to the ways in which these widespread concerns are often not supported by the day to day realities of most young people. He notes that through "increased use of access controls and a range of informal strategies" (p. 272), young people are generally far more aware of privacy concerns and further in control of their content than they are often given credit for. It is clear, however, that technological determinism underpins much of the popular discourse surrounding social media, and that concerns about risk and inappropriate use are often levelled towards young people, specifically young women. Recent

debates around online risk and SNS, for example, have often been gendered, and suggest that girls and women are in particular danger online. These conversations often focus on the sexual risks that girls are said to face through exposure to hardcore pornography, grooming and sexting (Livingstone & Haddon 2009; Dines 2010; Ringrose et. al. 2012). In order to make clearer sense of these debates around social media, this thesis aims to centre the voices of girls and young women themselves, as it is them who are most often constructed as "damaged" by its use.

The many gendered facets of the Internet – and social media more specifically – make them important and fruitful exploration spaces for contemporary feminist researchers. Digital cultures are also interesting when looking at concepts of new femininities, particularly when we contextualise this within wider constructions of young (post-)millennials being perceived as narcissistic, individualistic and self-serving. In the following section, I look at the ways in which these constructions play out further in gendered terms, by examining what have been termed "new femininities" within the context of neoliberalism, postfeminism and digital cultures. Young women are often positioned as particularly susceptible to the draws of media imagery (Kilbourne 1996; Henderson-King et. al. 2001), and it is important to consider this in relation to social and digital media.

1.3

Reflexive projects of the self(ie): new (neoliberal) femininities in a digital age

As has been highlighted previously, younger people being constructed as individualistic and narcissistic is closely tied to a general rise in neoliberal ideologies that emphasise the value of personal choice and self-determination. Since the 1990s, there has been much scholarly discussion around the ways in which wider social change has specifically impacted gender relations and the construction of femininity (McRobbie 1993; Sharpe 1994). Within these contexts, femininity is constructed as less passive and submissive than it once was, but is now dominated by discourses of "girl power" that rest solely on neoliberal ideals of empowerment, choice, individualism and self-fulfilment (Harris 2004; Nayak and Kehily 2008). This spread of neoliberal individualism has been discussed at length across a range of academic disciplines, and it is widely understood that the self-determining sovereign individual is now held up as a cultural ideal (Budgeon 2011: 49). It has also been noted, however, that these neoliberalized concepts of self-actualisation and choice are extremely limited for women, and continue to be heavily influenced and organised by social structures (Phipps 2014a: 134 – 135; Budgeon 2016: 402). Many feminist scholars such as Harris (2004) and McRobbie (2004; 2007) argue that these neoliberal notions of "choice" and "freedom" have become specifically (ideologically) tied to the category of the young woman. Since the 1990s, young women have become metaphors for social change and social progress. This is demonstrated through a heightened focus on young women's education and employment, and a marked change in family, sexual and reproductive practices (Harris 2014: 134). An obvious shift has taken place, wherein girls and young women are the primary focus of many public policies, non-governmental programmes and cultural markets.

Within these contexts, then, young women become positioned as ideal consumers and skilled choice makers, "the stakes upon which the future depends" (McRobbie 2000a: 201).

As educational and employment opportunities became more readily available for women, the focus on them (and, specifically, girls and young women) as an important consumer group began to grow. This led to the construction of what Harris terms the "can-do girl", who is culturally characterised by "exceptional careers and career planning, their belief in their capacity to invent themselves and succeed, and their display of a consumer lifestyle" (2004: 14). This image is distinctly at odds with the "at-risk girl" who, while existing simultaneously, is unable to achieve in the same way as the "can-do girl", and is culturally characterised as an example of failed femininity: she is recast as (individually) unambitious, incompetent and, above all, a poor decision maker. Within neoliberal discourses, then, the "at-risk girl" is not "at risk" as the result of deeply entrenched structural inequalities, but rather as the result of "misaligned occupational ambitions, a lack of a sense of power…and inappropriate consumption behaviours" (ibid). These contemporary discourses of femininity are deeply rooted in class and racial inequalities but are recast as individual successes and failures (Francombe-Webb & Silk 2015).

The political implications of this are clear – the dovetailing of postfeminist and neoliberal discourses ensures that large-scale, collective social justice movements are seemingly rendered unnecessary. In many ways, prevalent postfeminist and neoliberal discourses suggest that young women no longer have a requirement to understand themselves as political subjects at all. As McRobbie notes, within these contexts "political identity" has been replaced by "consumer citizenship" (2007: 734). These explicitly political implications will be picked up again in the following chapter, where I examine the potential for social media to offer a space in which neoliberalism and postfeminism can be subverted and disrupted, as well as sustained and

reproduced. Here, however, I wish to examine the ways in which these new femininities play out in online spaces, and why social media is often considered a useful tool in the facilitation and promotion of these neoliberal and postfeminist values.

To draw on one particular moment, in March 2016, Kim Kardashian and Emily Ratajkowski sparked a public and social media debate about the "state of feminism"[8] when they simultaneously posted the same picture on their Instagram accounts. The picture was a topless selfie and model and actress Emily Ratajkowski captioned hers with a seemingly feminist statement:

> We are more than just our bodies, but that doesn't mean we have to be shamed for them or our sexuality #liberated @kimkardashian" (Ratajkowski 2016a)

Both women, at various times in their careers, have been held up as examples of both the decline and the future of the feminist movement (see Bianco 2016; Woodward 2016; Vogue 2016; Gill, C. 2016). The picture was seemingly an attempt to position themselves as feminist subjects – particularly for Ratajkowski, who has publicly announced her "feminism" on numerous occasions, and has previously written an essay about the ways in which young women should be encouraged to consider their sexuality a tool of empowerment, rather than as something dictated by "shame and silent apologies" (Ratajkowski 2016b). It is possible to contextualise this specific cultural moment within the wider debates already discussed.

[8] Ratajkowski subsequently became embroiled in a "twitter spat" with journalist and broadcaster Piers Morgan, who retweeted the picture with the caption "RIP feminism" (Morgan 2016)

Harris notes the ways in which the image of the can-do girl becomes an integral part of marketing female celebrity within consumer cultures (2004: 21 - 22). It has also been noted that, for girls, contemporary identities (which can be understood as "reflexive projects of the self") are often informed by discourses of celebrity (Dults & van Romondt Vis 2009). This has become particularly pronounced with the rise of social media and the associated concept of "microcelebrity", which implies that *all* individuals now have (or can have) access to an audience within digital contexts (Senft 2008, 2013). Marwick (2015: 137) argues that the possibility of building up "thousands, or even hundreds of thousands, of followers can be a motivating force" for young people who use the photo-sharing app Instagram, suggesting that fame and celebrity are becoming increasingly popular ambitions amongst young people who exist within what she terms an "attention economy".

When discussing celebrity culture and its impact on productions of the self for girls and women, it is important to return to discourses of the body, particularly what has been termed "the neoliberal body". A neoliberal body is one that express and embodies neoliberal values, such as productivity, efficiency and self-discipline (Harjunen 2017: 8). Within these contexts, bodies (particularly bodies that are read as female) must appear to be well-controlled and worked upon – those that are seen as out of control or excessive are socially and morally reviled (ibid.). The body has, therefore, become a key site of identity construction in contemporary contexts (Giddens 1991: 102; Gill et. al. 2005) and, within the framework of social media, the body is often understood as an integral part of self-production and self-marketing for female celebrities and non-celebrities alike. For Kim Kardashian and Emily Ratajkowski, then, their topless selfie was presented as a feminist statement through discourses of individual feelings of empowerment and choice over their own individual bodies. Indeed, Kardashian herself has been discussed by academics as the epitome of contemporary "neoliberal femininity" (Klazas 2015; Wissinger 2016). Like her sisters, she utilises the tools of social media and calls upon the neoliberal

discourse of reinvention via body make-overs to convey prevailing standards of both femininity and messages of success and achievement (for further discussion on the "body makeover" in popular culture and its relationship with neoliberalism and postfeminism see McRobbie 2004; Roberts 2007; Ringrose & Walkerdine 2008; Weber 2009; Tsaousi 2017). While these messages aren't new per se[9], social media arguably gives individual statements such as these a larger platform and a much wider audience than they would previously be afforded, and collapses the celebrity/fandom divide that was previously much more clearly drawn.

Often digital medias (and social media in particular) are understood as sites of self-branding, something that is closely tied to the notion of celebrity and microcelebrity (Page 2012; Khamis et. al. 2017). This causes some concern for feminists, who suggest that this plays into wider issues, such as the ever-increasing commodification and neoliberalization of femininity. McRobbie (2015: 5), for example, has alluded to the ways in which the increased visibility that social media affords young women has the ability to re-traditionalise old notions of women being the objects of "the gaze". I will discuss this in more detail in chapter four, where I argue that rather than reproducing the *male* gaze, digital cultures are often underpinned by a new, reciprocal, *feminised* gaze. It has also been noted that, within the context of new media landscapes, what have previously been termed "new femininities" (Gill & Scharff 2011) take on even *newer* forms. Identities are now able to be constructed through metricized quantification, often through the use of apps pertaining to the body. It is said that the popularity of self-tracking technologies such as Fitbits, and weight loss apps have led to an increased monitoring of the self and reinforces and exacerbates notions of self-scrutiny and self-discipline (Nafus & Sherman 2014; Lupton 2016; Wissinger 2017). Again, the use of these apps and self-trackers is often understood as

[9] As has already been highlighted, many feminist scholars examined the terrain of popular culture in the 1990s and 2000s, prior to the rise of social media. Television shows, books, film and advertising have all been noted as perpetuating postfeminist and neoliberal ideals of femininity (McRobbie 2009).

predominantly neoliberal in nature, where positioning oneself as a "self-tracker" is to perform "a certain type of subject: the entrepreneurial, self-optimising subject" (Lupton 2014, n.p.). Here, then, "the neoliberal body" becomes "the quantified self" (Lupton 2016). Recent research by Elias and Gill (2017) has also begun to explore the existence of beauty apps within these contexts, which can be utilised to photoshop the body in an increasing number of ways. I will add to this emerging body of research in chapters four and five where I examine my participants' own response to the alleged normalisation of photo editing and how it relates to contemporary reflexive projects of the self.

In line with these concerns, some feminist scholars have examined the predominance of beauty, fashion and lifestyle cultures which are aimed at girls online. Banet-Weiser (2017) examines the ways in which beauty b/vlogging is successful in producing media that brings the central focus of femininity back to the body. Banet-Weiser highlights the labour involved in the production of beauty and suggests that this is somewhat heightened in digital cultures of neoliberalism and postfeminism. In digital contexts, then, the feminine body is further entrenched as the source of "aesthetic labour" (Elias et. al. 2017). On these vlogs, complex make-up techniques such as contouring are shown as popular disciplinary procedures which (re)produce dominant notions of heterosexual femininity. The beauty vlogger, in this context, then, becomes the disciplinarian master. While make-up tutorials can often be constructed as the mundane or the banal (there is, for example, an abundance of "everyday make-up routines" on YouTube), they are usually highly stylised and spectacular, involving both skill and access to a wide range of (often expensive) materials. This is closely tied to what Wissinger (2015) has termed "glamour labour". Drawing attention to the ways in which social media has blurred the lines between the celebrity and the everyday, Wissinger argues that *all* women are now called upon to undergo extensive glamour

labour to fit narrow standards of culturally constructed beauty[10]. While particular cultural practices relating to physical aesthetics have traditionally been undertaken by women (Frost 1999), glamour labour is something that is specifically related to emulating current cultural ideals on both an individual and a *public* level. I will examine some of these online figures, such as the beauty vlogger and the female fitness guru in chapter five.

The concepts above can all be informed by McRobbie's recent work on "the perfect" (2015), which she claims is a "leitmotif for contemporary femininity" (pp. 3 – 4). The "perfect" becomes operationalized through feminine self-regulation, wherein women attempt to meet cultural expectations that are constructed around ideas of consumption, celebrity and self-branding. This breeds female competition and, thus, continues to neoliberalize and commodify both femininity and feminism in the name of individual empowerment. In many ways, this builds on McRobbie's earlier theorisation of "the postfeminist masquerade" (2007: 725), where she argues that women in contemporary consumer cultures are encouraged to reinstate "the spectacle of excessive femininity" through "the mask of make-up and the crafting of a highly-styled mode of personal appearance". McRobbie claims that both "the postfeminist masquerade" and the cultural expectation of "the perfect" reinforce male structures of power, even though the "voluntaristic structure works to conceal that patriarchy is still in place" (2007: 726).

[10] As many feminist scholars have pointed out, while "doing looks" (and, by extension, "glamour labour") is often framed via discourses of "choice", it is not always possible for women to "opt out" of these practices, which are generally understood as societal expectations. Stinson (2001), Bartky (1997) and Frost (2001) all make this point: that women who "do not cooperate and fully participate in the disciplining of their bodies face a variety of sanctions, including ostracism, public harassment, and structural discrimination" (Stinson 2001: 10). It is also important to highlight that not all women have access to the time and resources to undergo extensive "glamour labour", which make theories of "democratization" innately flawed.

Many feminist concerns about various uses of social media, then, lie in the heightened visibility that it affords girls and young women, and the ways in which this becomes bound up with new digitised body projects. In my own research, I found that this increased visibility often went alongside discussions of surveillance, and so I will now briefly turn to some of the debates surrounding contemporary forms of surveillance and scrutiny. I focus particularly on peer-to-peer (or "social") surveillance, and how this is said to differ from contemporary notions of surveillance and scrutiny.

1.4

The (fe)male gaze: Visibility, social surveillance, and femininity online

The concepts discussed in the previous section speak to wider issues regarding what Banet-Weiser has termed the "economy of visibility" (2015a)[11] and its gendered implications. As girls and young women are now positioned as one of the most powerful consumer groups in Western neoliberal democracies, there is an overt command through media discourses for them to "make themselves visible" (p. 55). It is possible to see how the mainstreaming of social media has led to increased visibility for young women, and how this becomes bound up with working on the body. This will be explored in relation to my participants in chapters four and five. Women's bodies are relentlessly policed and evaluated, and an economy of visibility functions to make the feminine body central in all aspects of social, cultural and political life. Within these economies of visibility, then, Banet-Weiser argues that it is "empowerment" femininity that is granted the

[11] This is different from "politics of visibility", which tends to suggest a struggle for collective recognition of marginalised groups and an acknowledgment of power dynamics. Economies of visibility, on the other hand, privilege and give value to the individual.

most prominence (such as the kind of feminism/femininity embodied by Kardashian and Ratajkowski). Again, this completely negates an exploration of the ways in which certain femininities are privileged or marginalised as they are produced within the parameters of sexualised celebrity/consumerist feminism and femininity (see Levy 2005; Evans et. al 2010; Walter 2010).

Within economies of visibility, then, women are relentlessly encouraged to self-regulate in order to avoid a "crisis of confidence" (Banet-Weiser 2015a & 2015b). Gill and Orgad (2015) also note the ways in which discourses of "confidence" are specifically used as a way in which to encourage and champion postfeminist, neoliberal femininities. Emphasising notions of compulsory confidence (body confidence, confidence at work, sexual confidence) within popular culture suggests that anyone can succeed if they have "confidence", and so it becomes a required trait of entrepreneurial can-do femininities. For many feminists, then, the visibility that social media offers can essentially be positioned as "a trap" that is characterised by extensive surveillance and commodification. Works by those such as Gregg (2011), Wissinger (2015) and Elias et. al. (2017) have highlighted the labour involved in producing a visible self within these contexts. These economies of visibility can be considered a form of what Lauren Berlant has labelled "cruel optimism" (2011), in that they present highly demanding (and perhaps harmful) disciplinary practices as both desirable and an empowering tool of success. For example, performing and documenting disciplinary practices (such as weight loss and beauty regimes) online has become a source of visibility (and, sometimes, even fame and income) for girls and women, and these shall be examined more closely in chapter five.

It is not enough to merely note visibility online, but also how this intersects with new forms of surveillance. It is important here to address how this thesis understands the term, particularly in

relation to new digital technologies. It has been noted by Gill (forthcoming) that surveillance as both a concept and an academic field of study has traditionally been masculinised. Even within new digital contexts, figures such as Julian Assange[12] and Edward Snowden dominate contemporary discussions of surveillance and "watching", which in mainstream and political discourse appears to be focused primarily around political and corporate establishments and their access to citizens' personal data and interactions. This aggregation of users' personal data has been termed academically as "dataveillance" (Clarke 1997) and this supposedly new type of scrutiny has been a topic of fascination for many political and computer scientists, technology academics and cultural critics (Cranor et. al. 2000; Lyon 2014). In some ways, this understanding of surveillance offers a continuation of traditional Orwellian notions of "big brother" governments (and, in contemporary contexts, corporations) observing and scrutinising the actions and thoughts of a population or, at least, particular members within that population.

This thesis, however, is more concerned with what Marwick (2012) has termed "social surveillance" (see also Tokunaga 2011). Marwick argues that social surveillance clearly differs from traditional notions of surveillance along three important axes: power, hierarchy and reciprocity. Firstly, then, the notion of social surveillance presumes a Foucauldian conceptualisation of power in that it understands power as micro-level and present in all human and social relationships/interactions (see Foucault 1977, 1980). It is not something that is inherently possessed by large entities or governments, as is supposed in traditional notions of power and surveillance. Marwick also points out that, because social surveillance takes place between individuals, rather than between structural entities and individuals, *social* hierarchy is more important than *structural* hierarchy in online relationships and practices. This was certainly

[12] This becomes particularly problematic when we consider the accusations of rape and sexual assault that have been levelled at Assange. As Phipps (2014a: 29 – 30) has pointed out, these accusations have been largely trivialised and dismissed by commentators from across the political spectrum and, perhaps most surprisingly, noted feminists such as Naomi Wolf.

true of my own participants, who were predominantly concerned with the ways in which they were viewed and perceived by their peers, rather than by authority figures (although I would challenge the suggestion that this is exclusive or somehow radically unique to contemporary digital contexts). Finally, the notion of reciprocity distinguishes social surveillance from other more traditional forms of surveillance by assuming that those who socially survey are also open to scrutiny by others in return. Albrechtslund (2008) made similar points when utilising the term "participatory surveillance".

Giroux (2015: 155) has criticised these new forms of surveillance and has suggested that they work in tandem with wider capitalist and neoliberal cultures, in that they "replace any viable notion of the social by reinforcing the notion that the personal is the only viable form of agency". For Giroux, selfies in particular become symbols of standardised self-monitoring and self-commodification. He likens participation within this culture to the Catholic confessional (TeleSUR English 2015 [online video]), drawing on the work of Michel Foucault (1990) to demonstrate the ways in which social media now encourages us to publicly confess personal and intimate details about ourselves for a wider (and often unknown) audience.[13] This becomes a form of power and control, ensuring that we "willingly" enter into "normalised surveillance" by policing both one another and ourselves (Giroux 2015: 158). Approaches such as Giroux's, however, do not properly engage with the everyday lived experiences of social media use and simply understand it as a tool of capitalistic and neoliberal governmentality. Approaches such as these have been critiqued by Miller et. al. (2016: 166), who argue that this interpretation offers a simplistic and reductive understanding of both social media, the people who use it and capitalism

[13] These discussions, however, pre-date the mainstreaming of social media. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Brian McNair examined the role of talk shows and the emerging popularity of reality television in relation to what he termed "the culture of confession" (McNair 2002: 97 – 105).

itself[14]. Elsewhere, for example, Miller (2016: 37) has used the early example of work email and office instant messengers to demonstrate how digital communications, far from being merely a tool of capitalism, have actually been employed to demolish "one of the most solidly entrenched rules of capitalist enterprise: the expulsion of the personal".

Giroux is not the only theorist to draw on the work of Foucault in order to make sense of contemporary social media practices. Foucault's theory of panopticism and how it might be re-theorised in relation to new technologies has also been discussed (Marwick 2012: 379). According to Foucault, people are taught to regulate their behaviour as if they were in a Panopticon prison (a ring of cells surrounding a central guard tower). For Foucault, the "major effect of the Panopticon [is] to induce…a state of conscious and permanent visibility" (1977: 200). This conscious and permanent visibility ensures that "an inspecting gaze" is internalised – individuals then become their own "overseer", disciplining and controlling oneself in line with external expectations. If we look at this in relation to social media, we can perhaps see some parallels between Foucauldian panopticism and the current online practices that dominate the lives of younger generations. However, these theories of panopticism, discipline and surveillance cannot be applied perfectly to these new cultural contexts. As has been noted by Albrechtslund (2008), Tokunaga (2011) and Marwick (2012), contemporary notions of "surveillance" in the context of social media relies heavily on reciprocity, which means that the roles of "guards" and "prisoners" are disrupted and blurred – users of social media are able to embody both of these roles simultaneously in a kind of fluid and participatory "social surveillance", and this will be discussed in greater detail in relation to my fieldwork later on.

[14] This is in line with much of Miller's earlier work, which includes ethnographies of both capitalism (1997) and shopping (1998), where he has highlighted the ways in which cultures of consumption operate in complicated and often contradictory ways.

In a digital world where the self is increasingly visible, then, discussions and definitions of surveillance have become progressively more complex and difficult to negotiate. I shall examine my participants' attitudes and concerns regarding contemporary notions of social surveillance and visibility during my data analysis, focusing specifically on their often highly gendered understandings of these concepts. Like Gill (forthcoming), I attempt to make sense of the gendered implications of this rising level of surveillance by analysing it through a feminist lens. Contributing to an emerging discipline of "feminist surveillance studies" (Dubrofsky & Magnet 2015), Gill suggests that feminist issues such as the "male gaze" (Mulvey 1975) and the "quantified self" (Lupton 2016) are inseparable from issues of (social) surveillance within online contexts. Gill argues that these concerns are intimately bound up with postfeminist subjectivities and suggests that all of these issues combined produce extremely powerful regulatory notions of control that disproportionately affect women. It is these arguments that I shall address in chapters four and five of this thesis, exploring the lived experiences of girls and young women in relation to these emerging forms of surveillance and visibility. However, I also examine ways in which this surveillance is subverted, resisted or critiqued by my participants, and some previous works examining these tactics will be outlined in chapter two.

In order to further contextualise these debates, it is important to note that gendered notions of surveillance and visibility have often intersected with spatial politics. In the following section, I further contextualise the concept of social media and its relationship with gender by examining the ways in which gender has traditionally intersected with youth culture, and how notions of social media can be located within more traditional understandings of gendered spatial politics. Where we have so far examined the alleged risks of these gendered digital cultures, it is important to add another facet to the debate. Below I visit some key theory surrounding youth culture and femininity and how social media might offer a space for girls and women who have historically been marginalised in various cultural contexts.

1.5

Bedrooms: Youth (sub)cultures, gender, and spatial politics

That social media is dominated by both young people and by women has disrupted early constructions of the "typical Web user as a middle-class (white) male 'techie'" (Harcourt 2000: 150) but has also led to the feminisation (and, therefore, trivialisation) of the Internet generally and social media more specifically (Harris 2008; Nakamura 2015). As we have seen in the previous section, criticisms of and concerns about social media often operate via a gendered lens. This can be explicit – for example, through heightened emphasis on the specific risks posed to young women via access to social media, or specific criticisms of the ways in which girls and women make use of these new technologies. However, these gendered constructions can also be implicit – for example, there seems to be a pervasive view that social media encourages traits of vanity and narcissism, characteristics which have historically been tied to the construction of femininity (Tanner et. al. 2013: 5). Burns (2015) has noted the ways in which these traditional constructions become coded into criticisms of selfie cultures – these criticisms serve to continue traditional modes of discipline and control of women by regulating their practices and behaviours. Positioning selfie culture as narcissistic, self-obsessed and crass is, then, a specifically gendered construction and follows a tradition of devaluing and ridiculing feminised behaviours or pastimes (Dobson 2015: 2). There are closely linked implications here, also, for online political participation and activism (or, "slacktivism"), which shall be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter (and again in chapter six and seven). However, here, it is simply important to note that social media *as a space* becomes discursively feminised.

There is now a popular concern that young people do not "spend enough time playing outside", and this has partly been attributed to the recent rise in digital technologies, television and video games (Carter 2014; Carrington 2016). However, young women have traditionally lived out their (sub)cultural lives in the private sphere and have often been ignored in much of the seminal academic research into street-based youth subcultures (see, for example, Fyvel 1961, 1964; Willis 1977; Hebdige 1979). This erasure or reduction of girls' involvement in subcultures led to challenges from feminist cultural critics such as McRobbie and Garber (1976) and McFarland and Cole (1988). In their seminal works on girlhood and subcultures, McRobbie and Garber focused on what they termed "cultures of the bedroom". They suggested that young women, who are traditionally excluded from the street-based activities of most subcultures, often live their cultural lives out in the home, with their friends and in their bedrooms. This was in contrast to other cultural studies scholars at the time, who discussed women's roles in subcultural life only as peripheral hangers-on or (potential) girlfriends. By focusing on those subcultures that are (largely) lived out on the street, early researchers ignored the private spaces, such as bedrooms, in which girls and young women often carve out their own identities. In many ways, the Internet and social media now becomes the place in which girls and young women locate space for themselves, and so it is important to acknowledge this body of work on youth culture and space, and how it can be reread in contemporary digital cultures.

There has been some debate amongst scholars about how far the bedroom analogy can be comfortably transferred to social media. Some have compared teenager's webpages, blogs and social media profiles themselves to "virtual bedrooms". While researching the identity formation of British teenagers on the website LiveJournal, for example, Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) noted that online journals and blogs can be understood as intimate personal space(s) for young people in much the same way that bedrooms can. For example, when it comes to the

mapping/reflexive performance of identity, such sites often provide a space similar to bedroom wall (see also boyd 2007: 6).

Some, then, seem to be concerned with making the contemporary bedroom analogy a perfect fit – attempting to shift the space of the bedroom onto the space of the SNS profile/blog/webpage. However, others note that the collapse of the private/public divide means that social media can never really be considered a "virtual bedroom" as it does not offer the same private, intimate space that a physical bedroom does (Reid-Walsh & Mitchell 2004: 181; Dobson 2008: 130). Pearson (2009) has theorised this as "the glass bedroom", acknowledging that many private, intimate exchanges do take place within the realms of SNS, but positing that a potential audience is always present. Hodkinson (2017: 272) notes that while it is "an awkward fit", drawing on the bedroom analogy can still be useful in thinking about the ways in which "social networking sites can function as vital personal home territories" for young people. Interestingly, however, some of these recent accounts ignore or marginalise the issue of gender that was so central to the original theorisation of bedroom cultures. This may be down to the fact that the rise of video games in the home (as opposed to arcades) means that boys now have a bedroom culture of their own (Williams 2006). Bovill and Livingstone (2001) also argue that a more pervasive and gender-neutral bedroom culture has developed as a result of the perceived failures of outdoor leisure cultures (see also Livingstone 2007). However, in this work, I revisit the gendered nature of bedroom culture and how it may be repositioned through a digital lens.

In relation to my own work, it is not so important to map contemporary social media cultures *exactly* onto the feminised bedroom cultures of the 1970s. I am more concerned with acknowledging that the relationship between gendered spatial politics and youth culture still appears to be important when we look at the dominance of women (particularly young women)

as the primary users of social media. Why is this the case? Indeed, there are some possible parallels (as well as differences) to be drawn with earlier works on female bedroom cultures. The first of these relates to the private/public divide, as the distinction between the two is much more blurred in contemporary contexts than it was when McRobbie and Garber were writing in the 1970s. As they understood it, the bedroom was a space that "protected" girls from the perceived dangers that were present in street-based cultures. They acted as a place in which young women could avoid sexual pressure, sexual politics and the "male gaze" that so often characterises girls' and young women's experiences of public space(s). In the 1970s, however, the public sphere was clearly distinct from that of the private, despite the constant interplay of the two realms. It has been noted that the rise of communication technologies has fundamentally changed these traditional understandings (see Marwick 2012; Rainie and Wellman 2012; Hermida 2014; Ford 2011). It seems that current panics around the risk that social media poses to young women appear because it is impossible to really categorise social media or the Internet as either fully public *or* private. Here, then, families and parents are unable to fully "know" where their children are spending their time. For young women in particular, this causes familial and social anxiety. The bedroom no longer serves as a "protective" space away from the "risks" of the public realm, but instead can operate as a space in which to *access* the public realm. This has caused great anxiety in the West, particularly as much of Western history has been dependent upon "the great divide" between public and private (Davidoff 2003). The blurring of the public/private divide is particularly relevant for feminists, who often argue that "the dichotomy between the private and the public … is ultimately what the feminist movement is about" (Pateman 1989: 118). If public/private domains have now essentially collapsed into one another, what are the implications for the cultural lives of girls and young women? This will be explored in relation to my own fieldwork in chapter four.

There are some important critiques of McRobbie's early work on bedroom cultures that should be noted here. It has, for example, been accused of homogenizing girls' experiences and relying on narrow conceptions of gender and, specifically, femininity (Dimitriadis 2008: ix). Kearney (2007) has offered a particularly thorough and useful critique of McRobbie and Garber's bedroom cultures by highlighting the power dynamics that take place within the home, and how bedrooms mean different things to different girls, particularly those who have to share rooms, or face high levels of domestic/parental surveillance (p. 138). How girls in contemporary contexts negotiate parental surveillance in relation to their (theoretically public) social media accounts will, again, be examined in chapter four.

Kearney's biggest critique of McRobbie and Garber's work, however, lies in exposing the disproportionate focus it places on girls' cultures of *consumption* (of records, of magazines, of make-up etc) without acknowledging the ways in which the bedroom has also been an important site of *production* for girls. Elsewhere, Kearney (2006) has examined the ways in which girls across time have produced their own media, and this is particularly pertinent in digital contexts, where the dovetailing of production and consumption has been widely noted (Williams & Marquez 2015). Girls no longer construct their identities only (or even primarily) through modes of consumption, but also through modes of production (production of selfies, of blogs, of vlogs, of social networking profiles, for example). This means that girls are now positioned as "produsers" (Bruns 2008), not merely passive consumers.

Critiques are also made by Lincoln (2012) who notes that, for McRobbie, teenage girls' bedrooms are designed almost entirely through discourses of (heterosexual) love, romance and femininity. As Lincoln notes, within these boundaries we do not get to know much about girls' and young women's own experiences of clothes, make-up and stylistic experimentation (p. 111). As we have

seen in the previous areas of this chapter, this is a common problem in theoretical works regarding young women's association with and participation in digital cultures (what *pleasures* are there for women who participate in online cultures, and why are these so consistently overlooked?).

All of these issues are particularly important for my own work. Later in this thesis, I offer an analysis of some different types of (sub)cultures that are dominated by girls and young women online. For example, in chapter five, I examine some examples of content produced by the fitspo and beauty vlogging communities. For beauty vloggers in particular, the bedroom becomes an interesting site of both production and consumption. By examining the bedroom through the lens of the young female vlogger, I look at the specific ways in which "private" space now transcends binaries of personal/private, passive/active and production/consumption. In chapter seven, I also examine different online political subcultures that exist on the Internet, particularly in relation to Tumblr blogs. These various pockets of the Internet that are produced and populated by girls and women demonstrate how cultural (and political) possibilities are somewhat wider and more complex than they were during McRobbie and Garber's original theorisations.

While it is clear that the private/public divide has changed significantly since the early writings of McRobbie and Garber, the bedroom is still a useful site of exploration when examining the lives of young British women. I am not interested, then, in measuring how far older notions of bedroom cultures can be smoothly applied to the online cultures of today. Instead, I am interested in looking at how the bedroom *is* used by young women – both as a space in which to consume social media, and as a space in which to produce user generated content. As Mesch (2009) notes, online communities and cultures are large and diverse and I am not interested in presenting a homogenised interpretation of the ways in which *all* girls and young women use or inhabit them. Rather, I am interested in looking in specific detail at the ways in which some young women use

social media within particular digital communities and how this can contribute to wider debates on gender and spatial politics. This also speaks to Dobson's (2015: 1) calls to take young women seriously as producers of cultural content.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated the ways in which young people generally, and young women in particular, are read, understood and constructed within neoliberal and postfeminist (digital) frameworks. I have highlighted some of the criticisms and concerns that feminists and wider critics of neoliberal governmentalities have in relation to social media and increased individualisation, visibility and surveillance. However, I have also complexified these debates somewhat, by examining the ways in which social media often provides a space for girls and young women who have been previously excluded from wider public participation. This chapter has dealt with these issues in a largely cultural context, and in the following chapter I will go on to examine the ways in which these representations play out in relation to the political. While I do not understand the political and the cultural to be fundamentally separate spheres, they have been laid out separately here for two reasons. Firstly, it allows me to clearly present the impact these representations have on both culture and politics. Secondly, it is important to note that my participants often understood the cultural and political as separate entities, and so they have been laid out separately in my thesis in order to fully do justice to my participants' responses and experiences. As I acknowledge constant interplay between culture and politics, links will be drawn throughout.

I will return to many of the key texts that I have examined here, by looking at the ways in which many young women have found platforms on social media to carve out both their cultural *and* their political identities, in much the same way as the bedroom provided this space in the 1970s. In some ways, then, the following chapter maps further some of the counter arguments to

dominant narratives regarding social media as a somewhat dangerous tool in the perpetuation of (depoliticised) postfeminist and neoliberal values and sensibilities.

Chapter Two

Literature Review Part II

(Post-)Millennial Girls and Women: youth, femininity and politics in a digital age

2.0 Introduction: Generation Apathetic or Generation Snowflake? Revisiting narcissism in the context of the political

As I have highlighted in the previous chapter, there is a perceived link between (post-)millennials and narcissism, and this is central to the construction of "the youth" in popular (and, often, academic) narratives. These assumptions have been challenged by academics such as Jeffrey J. Arnett, Kali H. Trzesniewski and M. Brent Donnellan (2013), who reject the notion that millennials and younger generations are more inward-looking and selfish than previous generations. Their research suggests that millennials' values are not markedly different to previous generations, but where they are different they actually express *less* selfishness and more engagement in both community and global issues. Arnett et. al. (2013: 19) highlight the ways in which Twenge consistently over-interprets and misrepresents her own data and ignores a substantial body of work that contradicts her findings. These scholars also express concern over older, middle-upper class academics contributing to negative and harmful constructions of young people as a monolith, which can have damaging material consequences in relation to public policy and state protection for children and young people (see also Trzesniewski & Donnellan 2010; Arnett 2013).

The constructions laid out (and challenged) in chapter one, then, are deeply political as they are bound up with the understanding that contemporary young people are decisively less politically engaged and active than in previous generations. This will be discussed in greater detail in the following section. However, it must also be noted that, even within the same moment, these narratives also work to construct millennials as somehow *too* political. Bushman and Baumeister (1998) have previously made links to narcissism and hypersensitivity which is interesting in this particular context, as another accusation that is often levelled towards (post-)millennials is that they are far more easily offended and less "resilient" or "thick-skinned" than previous generations. Indeed, there have been a barrage of opinion pieces and news articles in recent years that suggest that millennials are "offended by, like, literally everything" (Halls 2016. For similar pieces see Fox 2016a; Gordon 2016; Chumley 2017; Waugh 2017).[15] These narratives have led to the (post-)millennial cohort often being referred to as "generation snowflake" – "snowflake" being a derogatory term for "someone deemed too emotionally vulnerable to cope with the views that challenge their own, particularly in universities and other forums once known for robust debate" (Green 2016). The popularity of the term "snowflake" to describe (post-)millennials was demonstrated when Collins Dictionary named it one of their 2016 words of the year (Stolworthy 2016). This went alongside the publication of popular books such as *I Find That Offensive!* by Claire Fox (2016b) and *Trigger Warning: Is the fear of being offensive Killing Free Speech?* by Mick Hume (2015), which construct (post-)millennials as hypersensitive and unable or unwilling to listen to opinions that contradict their own.

[15] In a particularly bizarre article published on Sky News in April 2017, Foreign Affairs Editor Sam Kiley stated that "Thin-skinned millennials need a spanking", because "the British are now too wet to work in agriculture".

Sara Ahmed (2016a) points to "the figure of the no-platforming student" as a particularly pertinent construction within these debates. The "no-platforming student" is a reference to those who frequently boycott or protest platforms that are given to people who have expressed problematic opinions on issues such as race, gender and sexuality.[16] These young people (often students) are understood as censorious and too invested in identity politics. Like Ahmed, I understand these constructions as ideologically motivated. They work to generalize and mainstream understandings of (post-)millennials as somehow politically immature, incapable and unworthy. By positioning the young (and particularly the student) as over-sensitive (Ahmed 2016b), they continue to be constructed as somehow in opposition to normative political spheres (which are, in contrast, understood to be "rational", "unemotional", "reasoned"). It is interesting, then, that constructions of (post-)millennials as narcissistic and individualistic work to simultaneously produce them as both apolitical (too concerned with their own identity *construction*, as discussed in chapter one) and overly political (too concerned with their own identity *categories*). While these categories are often applied differently across the lines of class, gender and education, it is important to note that both constructions continue to obscure any conceivable notion of the young being engaged and "worthy" citizens within "rational" political contexts. This speaks to wider conversations regarding what it actually *means* to be "political" in contemporary British society. The following section will discuss these issues in more depth, by highlighting some of the methodological and theoretical flaws in popular works regarding youth, politics and apathy.

[16] Germaine Greer (Quinn 2015) and Peter Tatchell (McVeigh 2016) are some recent examples of those who have supposedly been "no platformed" by students, despite neither actually losing their platform (see Packham 2016).

2.1

"Politics": what does it mean to be political?

In this section, I unpack what it means to be "political" by examining and problematizing normative conceptions of politics and political space(s). I look specifically at the ways in which traditional understandings of politics in both popular and academic discourses have served to maintain the marginalisation, disenfranchisement and silencing of young people, particularly young women. This chapter, then, also considers the ways in which notions of politics and political space are often gendered[17], and how these issues are often overlooked or underestimated in research on politics, young people and apathy. As well as questioning and complicating widely-held assumptions about politics and what it means to be politically active, this section also looks at the works of those who call for a wider, less rigid conception of the political in order to establish a more inclusive definition of the term. While offering a review of the literature, then, this section will also begin to establish a particular understanding of the political that will be used later in this thesis.

In December 2013, Rowena Mason wrote an article for *The Guardian* entitled "Apathetic and disaffected: the generation who may never vote". Within this article, Mason examines some of the reasons why there is a consistently low turnout amongst young people in UK elections. While the article highlights some of the reasons that young people feel marginalised and disengaged

[17] It is important to note that political space is also racialized and classed. As my thesis focuses specifically on gender, it is this literature that I examine here.

from British politics, the headline itself exposes some of the problematic narratives that surround young people, apathy and mainstream understandings of the political. The headline suggests that the number of young voters can simply be translated into the number of young politically engaged people. Here, the political is understood in very specific terms: being politically active is constructed as participating in traditional forms of the political process, ones which are directly linked to traditional political spaces (namely, in a British context, Westminster and, perhaps, in relation to the 2016 referendum, the European Union). These understandings of what it means to be political are fairly commonplace in popular discourse, and they are often used to amplify the problematic construction of young people as apathetic or disinterested (see BBC News 2014; Lewis 2015; Dalton 2016). While young people have historically been understood as "less active" than their older counterparts in a political sense (Stradling 1977; Furnham & Gunter 1987; Grasso 2014a; Grasso 2014b), it seems that contemporary young people face this accusation to a much greater extent. This is largely due to accusations from both academics and social commentators that technology and/or social change have created a generation of self-interested, individualistic narcissists (see previous chapter). They are, apparently, "more interested in Netflix and Instagram" (Cuskelly 2017).

It is clear to see, then, that voter turnout is often used within the mainstream media as an indicator of how politically active a particular demographic is, and the relationship between voting and being political has also been highlighted in various academic works. Several studies from the late 1990s and early 2000s conclude that young British people are less interested in political issues than older demographics and know less about political processes (White et. al. 2000; Bromley & Curtice 2002; Russell et. al. 2002). Survey research, such as that of Pirie and Worcester (2000), often suggests that those between the ages of 18 and 24 are more disinterested in politics and are less likely to vote or participate in mainstream political affairs than older age groups. This research also asserts that contemporary young people are more detached from politics than the

same demographic was thirty years ago.[18] For Pirie and Worcester, then, it is unproblematic to conclude that millennials are more apolitical than previous generations (see also Park 1999). Others, such as Mulgan and Wilkinson (1997), also appear to take turnout statistics at face-value, by presuming that contemporary young people's political attitudes and behaviours are informed by their lack of responsibility or experience of adulthood. For Mulgan and Wilkinson, the differences in young people's political behaviours across time can be indicative of a more selfish or individually-orientated generation.[19]

When discussing youth political participation or political interest, then, researchers and reporters often draw from statistics regarding "active participation" in what one might consider "formal" politics (see Pirie & Worcester 1998; Park 1999; Grasso 2015). Often, this means quantifying and comparing figures in terms of voter turnout and drawing conclusions from surveys that, according to researchers such as Therese O'Toole (2003) and David Marsh et. al. (2007) ask questions that serve only to reinforce our narrow definitions of the political. There are fundamental methodological issues, then, with taking these assertions at face value. The dominant messages that are constructed from them may actually serve to reproduce and naturalise seemingly entrenched social and political inequalities in regard to age, gender and other axes of political exclusion such as 'race', social class, (dis)ability or religion. These arguments have previously been made by those who examine the relationship between formal politics and those who are traditionally excluded from its processes (women, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and young people, for example). Researchers such as O'Toole (2003) have outlined

[18] It must be noted that this is by no means an uncontested claim. Furlong and Cartmel (1997) have argued that reliable figures of the voting behaviour of cohorts of voters throughout their lives cannot be found. Indeed, others have argued that actual participation/non-participation at general elections is "almost impossible" to quantify (Johnston & Pattie 1997: 280)

[19] While my work is located within a British context, it is important to note that these conclusions have been supported by studies in other Western (neo)liberal democracies, such as Canada (Anderson & Goodyear-Grant 2008) and the United States (Putnam 2000).

the methodological limitations of much research into youth politics and political activism. O'Toole takes particular issue with the ways in which this research operates within a "rather narrow conception of 'the political', which is effectively imposed on the respondents, due to the dominance of quantitative survey research methods" (p. 72, see also O'Toole et. al. 2003). Elsewhere, for example, Gale and O'Toole (2009) challenge popular discourses about young British Muslims being insular and self-segregating by exploring the faith-based political activism of young Muslims in British cities such as Birmingham and Bradford. Continuing to locate participation as happening only within the confines of the traditional political process, then, erases much of the political and community work carried out by people of colour. As Gale and O'Toole point out, much Black and Minority Ethnic political engagement has often taken place in grassroots community organisations and social movements.

Narrow definitions of the political, then, may often serve to reify negative stereotypes about young people, rather than raise questions about *why* young people are seemingly rejecting or disengaging from traditional political processes. The fact that voter turnout amongst young people (18 - 24 years old) fell from over 60% in the early 1990s to an average of 41.5% during the 2001, 2005, 2010 and 2015 elections (Sloam 2016) tells us only part of a very complex story. The Office for National Statistics' (2014) claim that 42.4% of those aged between 16 and 24 have "no interest in politics" (in comparison to only 21% of over-65s) is similarly limited. For example, it is also important to note that at the same time as discourses of the "apathetic youth" were being constructed, young people were coming out in mass numbers to support political causes. As has been noted by Christine Griffin (2012), young people were an integral part of the 'Stop the War' campaign, which gained global traction in 2003 and was, at the time, the largest global protest movement in history. School students staged classroom walkouts, had heated political debates and joined rallies (Griffin 2012: 151). Similarly, in November and December 2010, there were mass student demonstrations against the coalition government's intention to raise university

tuition fees. Such incidences posed a strong challenge to the notion that contemporary young people in Britain are somehow switched off, disengaged and apathetic.

This is not to say that young people as a demographic *are* interested in engaging with normative political spheres, but rather problematising what is being "discovered" by quantitative research. Scholars such as White et. al. have previously highlighted many young people's perception of politics as "boring" and "irrelevant" (2000: iv), which in turn leads to their disinterest and alienation. White et. al. draw attention to their participants' "rather narrow conception of politics" (2000: 34), which seems inevitable when dominant discourses so often equate "politics" with formal processes such as actively aligning oneself to a political party or voting. Such processes are directly linked to the formal political space(s) and "career politicians", to whom many young people cannot relate. Studies by Banaji (2008) and Pachi and Barrett (2012) highlight negative perceptions of British politicians as uncaring, insincere and unwilling to listen (see also Jenkins 2017). During their research on youth social action groups in Britain, Eden and Roker (2002) note that most of the young people involved distrusted politicians, did not align themselves with any particular party and did not necessarily view their actions as political.

Following this, then, it is important to note the work of Gauthier (2003), who highlights how political engagement can be measured in a variety of ways, and that taking someone's assertion that they are "not interested in politics" at face value doesn't always depict a true representation of political participation or concern. Similarly, if voter turnout amongst young people has decreased drastically since the early 1990s, this may well be down to a growing sense of frustration and disillusionment with a neoliberal system that appears to be failing (and, specifically, failing them). Supposed disillusionment is unsurprising when one looks at recent public policy, where young people have borne the brunt of cuts in public spending: the abolition

of the Education Maintenance Allowance, the tripling of university tuition fees, the removal of housing benefit for young adults and the closure of local youth centres all appear to highlight a political agenda that serves to exclude and limit young people (especially those from economically poorer backgrounds) (Sloam 2016). In October 2015, Conservative Cabinet Officer Matthew Hancock made comments that appeared to readily encapsulate his government's contentious relationship with the young when he defended the governmental decision not to include workers under the age of 25 in the new National Living Wage. Hancock asserted that younger workers were simply "not as productive" as older workers and that, as a result, excluding under-25s from the National Living Wage was "an active choice" (Dathan 2015). This construction of both the millennial and post-millennial generations as unproductive goes hand-in-hand with the constructions of them as politically lazy (and therefore undeserving). This speaks to the work of Henn et. al. (2005), who have previously argued that if young people are signalling a disengagement from formal politics, this may well reflect their distaste for how the political system is organised, rather than necessarily proving a lack of political interest in and of itself.

Following this line of thought, there has recently been a push in some academic disciplines to widen our conception of political activism beyond voting and joining political parties or special interest groups. Bourne (2010) points towards protests and demonstrations, boycotting and blogging as more unconventional forms of activism, while Waldner and Dobratz (2013) examine the ways in which graffiti and street art can be considered a form of serious and important micro-level political participation and expression. Central to recent debates is the expansion of social media use, which has led academics, journalists and commentators to question how far it can be used as a vehicle for meaningful political involvement and social change (see Gerbaudo 2012; Shirky 2011; Khan-Ibarra 2014). In the previous chapter, I highlighted some the ways in which social media has been positioned as the handmaiden of neoliberal governmentality (Giroux 2015). However, these arguments do little to examine the role of social media in political activism and

resistance, and in galvanising support for campaigns that are distinctly anti-neoliberal in their ideologies.

Coleman (2013), for example, highlights the potential of social media and the Internet in challenging the "stage-managed and rehearsed" style of politics that became popular in the UK at the turn of the 21st century. He argues that, unlike traditional models of political commentary and broadcasting, the Internet is made up of millions of active users. These users no longer simply receive and consume information about the world. Rather, they increasingly *interact* with this information (p. 379). Again, the notion of "produsage" (Bruns 2008) is helpful here. Users of the Internet and social media are no longer confined to just reading newspaper articles or watching the news. Although, of course, many still do those things, they are also now able to read an article, share it, comment on it, tweet the journalist, write a rejoinder, and find alternative viewpoints far more easily than they were able to even fifteen or twenty years ago. Those who do not ordinarily watch the news or read newspapers may see a particular clip or article shared on Facebook or Twitter, which opens up access to a wider range of people. Coleman (2013: 380) argues that this directly challenges the "cosy relationships" media broadcasters and journalists often have with politicians, as it allows for more diverse, challenging counter-narratives to become mainstreamed.

The idea of social media as a means for enacting real change has been debated. When it is considered a useful tool, it is most frequently linked with the events of the Arab Spring, where online revolutionary conversations preceded major events on the ground (Howard et. al. 2011). This is a particularly popular case study, because it demonstrates how activists' use of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other SNS is not always divorced from physical reality (or, in this case, physical political protest). As is argued by Gerbaudo (2012), social media is often used as part of a wider project which often involves the re-appropriation of public space, such as Cairo's Tahrir

Square in the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, or New York's Zuccotti Park in the Occupy Wall Street protests. However, it is not always the aim of online politics to appropriate public space or mobilise in this way, and this shall be discussed in more detail in chapter seven

This section has examined some of the ways in which political activism has been measured by some academics interested in young people and apathy. I have demonstrated some of the ways in which these understandings of activism can be problematic, as they ignore or trivialise a multitude of political activities that can take place outside of normative political processes. However, it is important to note the ways in which this construction of politics is particularly damaging to girls and young women. Women's historical relationship with the public sphere has been noted as particularly contentious (Pateman 1988; Fraser 1990). Both their historical disenfranchisement and their continued under-representation in political bodies has contributed to women's construction as political outsiders. While the 2017 general election saw a record number of women elected to the House of Commons (208), this figure still makes up just 32% of all MPs (Khomami 2017). This underrepresentation is much more pronounced for women who are not white, middle-upper class, able-bodied, cis-gender and heterosexual (Wilson 2017). Young women are at a particular disadvantage in discussions around "politics" as they are constructed as somehow incompatible with politics both as a result of their age, and as a result of their gender.

As a result of these continued gendered (and adultist) constructions of the political sphere, feminists such as Schuster (2013) and Harris (2008) argue that contemporary young women are rejecting normative constructions of femininity and politics put forward by the mainstream media and, are, instead, turning to digital media. It is interesting to think about social media, then, not as a virtual world, but rather as a "real" space that allows girls and women a platform for organisation and collaboration. Even prior to the rise of social media, it had been noted by Harris

(2004: 157) that young women had begun to develop new forms of and spaces for political expression. Harris suggests that young women have responded to the hyper-scrutiny they face in contemporary neoliberal contexts by "going underground" – moving further away from the mainstream of civic and political life, and positioning themselves, instead, on the margins. While in the past these "marginal spaces" may have been alternative media productions or music scenes, these spaces now exist largely online (see also Harris 2008, 2012). This negotiation/reconfiguration of digital space shall be explored more in the following section.

2.2

Bedroom Cultures, Border Space[s] and Subaltern Counterpublics: Girls' activism, engagement and participation online

While the use of digital media as a political platform has been criticised as amounting to nothing more than "slacktivism" or narcissistic image-management (Stein 2013; Kristoffersen et. al. 2014; Morozov 2009), others have argued that it is, in fact, extremely important in disrupting and subverting normative exclusionary political discourses (Kahne & Middaugh 2012; Guillard 2016). Discussions around online political participation as being self-serving or characterised by "slacktivism" fail to acknowledge the impact they can have for those ordinarily marginalised by traditional models of politics and excluded from traditional spaces of activism. This section will examine recent feminist scholarship around the political uses of social media amongst girls and women. It is important to locate these debates alongside those that were laid out in chapter one, particularly in relation to girls and women producing space(s) for themselves in which to engage with their own interests and construct their own identities.

Rosemary Clark (2016) has looked specifically at the ways in which (primarily) women have used hashtags to challenge dominant victim-blaming discourses prevalent in mainstream news stories about domestic violence and sexual assault. Sexual violence against girls and women has historically been viewed a "private", rather than a "political" matter (Pateman 1988), and continues to be discussed in both the media and criminal justice system in ways that demonstrates an "entrenched masculine bias that is antagonist to female concerns" (Salter 2013: 226, see also North 2009). Both the mainstream media and the criminal justice system are, of course, considered integral parts of the public sphere, from which women have traditionally been excluded. Feminists have begun to examine the possibility of social media, then, as an alternative public sphere in which these traditional approaches can be challenged. Clark looks specifically at the hashtag #WhyIStayed, which was sparked by the domestic violence controversy involving NFL running back Ray Rice in September 2014. Clark outlines the way in which over 90,000 Twitter users responded to the event in a single day by using the aforementioned hashtag to narrate their reasons for staying in violent/abusive relationships. These tweets directly challenged dominant discourses surrounding domestic violence, and became a powerful example of the collective resistance that can be facilitated by social media: "One hundred thousand voices reverberating in the streets would surely be powerful, but, in the age of social media, they would be no less powerful if they were to rumble through the Twittersphere" (Clark 2016: 788). This was echoed by Erin Matson (2016), who drew on her own experiences as a contributor to the #WhyIStayed hashtag. Matson argued that this, along with other explicitly feminist online activism(s), such as abortion storytelling, demonstrated the ways in which women are "using the Internet to continue a feminist tradition of supporting one another and changing social systems (and even ourselves) by taking the risk of sharing our own stories, on our own terms" (p. 207).

This highlights the potential for online activism to be considered politically powerful without needing to appropriate public/physical space in the form of normative protests/demonstrations. Indeed, this is particularly true for what might be termed e-feminism, or the "fourth wave" of feminism which is said to have flourished primarily online (Cochrane 2013; Munro 2014; Chamberlain 2017). While some forms of feminist activism online *have* led to the re-appropriation of public space, Clark's qualitative in-depth study of one hashtag phenomenon demonstrates the ability to produce and connect individual stories online, contributing to the political growth of (in this case, feminist) ideas. #WhyIStayed is just one example in a long line of hashtag activisms that have been specifically attributed to feminist causes: #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, #EverydaySexism, #FreeKe$ha, #YesAllWomen, #IStandWithStoya, #TakeDownJulienBlanc, #IBelieveHer and #StopStreetHarassment are other such examples. That online spaces are so often utilised by feminist movements is no surprise, given the movement's historical emphasis on discourse, language and storytelling (Clark 2016: 789, see also Shaw 2012).

Rentschler (2015), Thrift (2014) and Horeck (2014) have also looked at feminist hashtag activist movements such as #SafetyTipsForLadies, #YesAllWomen and #AskThicke, which often directly combat discourses of victim blaming and rape culture. These studies have begun to highlight the importance of online spaces in the practicing of feminism at the micro-level of everyday life. A recent study by Sills et. al. (2016) is particularly valuable in beginning to understand social media as a useful political space, particularly for girls and young women. Like Rentschler (2014), they note that social media is a complicated and often complex terrain which can simultaneously facilitate online misogyny[20] *and* provide important spaces for feminist

[20] It is noted, for example, that social media can be a site of "victim-blaming, slut-shaming, rape jokes, the celebration of male sexual contest and demeaning sexualised representations of women" (Sills et. al. 2016: 935). Online misogyny has also been approached by Jane (2014; 2016) and Lewis et. al. (2016)

education and activism. The study focuses on the ways in which young women engage in peer-to-peer education and solidarity by carving out safe online spaces which can constitute a type of feminist counter-public (Fraser 1990: 67). The seventeen participants in Sills et. al.'s study highlighted social media as a particularly valuable space because it provided them with access to a feminist education that is "accessible, user-orientated and widely disseminated" (2016: 943). These spaces tend to explicitly call out and resist misogyny, victim-blaming and rape culture(s) (see also Keller et. al. 2016) and are valuable tools for girls and young women in the construction of political (and, specifically, feminist) identities. It is the notion of social media as a "feminist counter-public" that is particularly interesting here.

Some feminist scholars have utilised Fraser's notion of the "subaltern counter-public" (1990: 67) when discussing girls' and women's use(s) of social media (see Kearney 2007; Keller 2012; Salter 2013; Sills et. al. 2016). Drawing on the influential work of Gayatri Spivak (1988), Fraser argued that what is generally understood as the "public sphere" is largely inhospitable and exclusionary to marginalised groups. As a result of this, she posited that such groups locate and produce their own public spheres, or "subaltern counterpublics", a theory which has proved useful to feminists studying the Internet and social media. As has been noted by Salter (2013: 225 – 226), social media often affords girls and women a space in which to discuss feminist issues (particularly around gender-based/sexual violence) in ways that run "contrary to established social and legal norms" – norms which are "implicitly masculine", despite being positioned as "gender-neutral" and "universalist". Such feminist scholars recognise the possibilities that social media can provide girls and women, who are able to carve out digital spaces in which to communicate, mobilise, and learn from one another. This also opens up questions about the ways in which girls learn about politics and construct their political and social identities. As Taft and Gordon (2011) have noted, much existing literature regarding political socialisation focuses on the ways in which these processes take place between adults (positioned as more experienced and

knowing) and young people (constructed as less experienced and more naïve). For example, it is often assumed that young people learn about politics from (and, consequently construct their political identities around) their parents, other adult relatives or teachers. However, little research has been done into the ways in which young people learn from *each other*. My work will address some of these issues in chapters six and seven.

Jessalynn Keller's recent work also demonstrates the political significance of feminist blogging practices amongst girls and young women (2012; 2016a; 2016b). By talking to bloggers themselves, Keller doesn't automatically assume that girls and young women prefer individuality over collectivism, or see themselves primarily as neoliberal or postfeminist subjects. Instead, by talking directly to those who participate within these cultures, she is able to highlight the ways in which digital media has carved out new possibilities for feminism and political activism more generally. Online, then, girls and young women are able to organise in order to resist and subvert dominant discourses, particularly about gender and sexuality. Social media and the Internet becomes a space in which teenage girls in particular can be understood as politically active, an identity that they are usually denied.

It is worth considering much of what has been discussed here in the context of what was laid out in the previous chapter. The debates set out here are inextricably tied to concepts of space and place, and many of these issues are reminiscent of McRobbie and Garber's "bedroom cultures" (1976). The notion that women outnumber men on social media sites is usually understood as indicative of women being more vain, frivolous or trivial than men. However, if we move beyond these essentialist understandings of gender, how does this speak to wider conversations about gendered spatial politics? McRobbie noted that young women in the 1970s often lived their cultural lives out in their bedrooms, in private. The bedroom was, then, understood as a "safe"

space in which girls could avoid the risks of street-based public activity. Locating their (sub)cultural lives within the home (and not "on the streets") ensured that girls could also negotiate familial and cultural pressures to live up to culturally dominant conceptions of femininity. What, then, does the current dominance of social media by girls and young women contribute to these debates in a contemporary context? Are we seeing the emergence of a new kind of "bedroom culture", one which is no longer underpinned by rigid conceptions of public and private? Keller (2016b: 157) notes the importance of the bedroom in girls' blogging practices and highlights that the bedroom can now more easily become a site of activism – further complicating the notion that bedrooms are primarily sites of *consumption* for girls and young women.

These conversations about space are also interesting if we look at work on young women's political activism that has previously taken place offline. Gordon (2008) suggests that young women in contemporary contexts still face obstacles to their engagement in street-based political protest. Gordon highlights that young women are far more likely to be restricted by their families from fully participating in these movements, suggesting that parental concerns around risk and street-based cultural/political lives are still very present. We should also consider other obstacles that women continue to face when participating in male-dominated political circles in the public sphere. This often includes negotiating sexism and feelings of dismissal and silencing. Girls' exclusion from and/or marginalisation within political/activist spaces has also been noted by Taft and Gordon (2011: 1515) who argue that

> when something is adult dominated (or male-dominated), youth (or girls) will not feel it is a space for them, a space that they can be involved in. If there are not enough youth involved…then youth will not feel welcome.

The participants in Taft and Gordon's study (all young political activists) demonstrated how adultism and sexism often work simultaneously to exclude girls *in particular* from political spaces. This does not just apply to normative decision-making spaces (councils/governments) but also grassroots activist spaces. If we apply this knowledge to our study of digital cultures, it is possible to see how the Internet and social media provides a space that is generally *not* adult- and male-dominated (see chapter one). This provides a space, then, for girls and young women to challenge and subvert various political discourses on their own terms and, often, without needing to negotiate access to (often exclusionary) physical public spaces.

Recent research has also highlighted the levels of gender-based violence that takes place in left-wing activist spaces, suggesting that even in spaces that supposedly champion progressive, socialist or even feminist politics, women's participation and presence is still policed and controlled by misogyny and patriarchy (Downes et. al. 2016). Phipps (2014a: 46) has also noted "left-wing ambivalence towards feminist sexual violence politics" and this has been highlighted in recent years with some journalists calling for the Socialist Worker's Party (SWP) to be held to account for the levels of sexism and sexual violence that have taken place within the party (Malik & Cohen 2013; Penny 2013a; Penny 2013b). A former SWP member explained that feminism "is used effectively as a swear word by the leadership's supporters…it is deployed against anyone who seems 'too concerned' about issues of gender" (Penny 2013a). These issues further highlight the obstacles that women face when participating in political cultures across the political spectrum, and the widespread trivialisation of gender concerns.

While much of the work around girls, women and participation online has often focused on active engagement with (particularly feminist) politics, there are also other issues to consider. When

discussions of political activism or political identities take place, there is often still a central understanding that performing politics pertains to active engagement with issues that can be understood as "serious". However, political identities can take many forms. In the following section, I briefly examine some literature around alternative activisms, particularly the politics of *non*-participation or micro-participation.

2.3

Alternative Engagements? Silence, non-participation and anti-politics

Earlier in this chapter, I outlined how measuring a disinterest in politics is extremely difficult, if not impossible. It is not always possible to take an assertion that one does not care about politics at face value – rather than being accepted as statements of mere apathy, these declarations and feelings need exploring more rigorously. For example, Taft (2006: 329) has examined the ways in which American teenage girls often vehemently reject politics in order to perform their "consciousness of inequality and commitments to social justice". Therefore, a lack of engagement with politics in the normative sense can actually signal a critical analysis of power relations and inequality. This speaks to wider discussions around youth "anti-politics". Farthing (2010: 181) argues that much literature on youth activism is flawed because it positions young people in one of two ways: it understands them as either "passive and devoid of political interest" or "actively political in new forms". However, neither of these categories fully explain young people's engagement in political spheres, or allow the possibility for *both* constructions to be, in some way, true. Drawing on the work of Beck (2002), Farthing notes how "rejection is a powerful new form of action" (2010: 190). By actively *rejecting* politics, young people engage in "anti-politics" which should be equally appreciated and engaged with as worthy of scholarly attention. This

general lack of engagement with these forms of action tends to reproduce limited understandings of what and who can be understood as political.

It is important, then, not only to examine girls and young women's conscious political engagements (as discussed in the previous section), but also to examine their conscious *dis*engagements. Harris (2004: 178 – 179) suggests that silence can sometimes be an "alternative to speaking out" for young people, a way to "own their own voice", particularly in contexts where their voices, actions and bodies are under near-constant surveillance (see chapter one). In line with this, then, how far can we assess the meaning(s) of non-participation and inaction, and what can this tell us about political and civic engagement more generally? I will discuss this in more detail later in the thesis, particularly in chapter four, where I examine my participants' critique of beauty apps and consumerist discourses that circulate online. Indeed, if we focus solely on girls' engagements with these phenomena (as discussed in chapter one), we lose sight of the ways in which they are also critiqued, ignored or resisted. In turn, we run the risk of categorising young women as monolithically postfeminist or neoliberal, without fully engaging with their own thoughtful critiques or rejections of these categories.

These arguments can also be informed by the notion of "micropolitics". Budgeon (2001) uses this term when examining the identities of the young women in her study in the late 1990s. Micropolitics, in this sense refers to the ways in which young women "engage in a resistant fashion with the choices they have available at the micro-level of everyday life" (p. 7). Budgeon highlights how her participants draw on feminist discourses in their day to day lives, despite not locating this within a wider collective political tradition. These young women are aware of gender inequality and utilise feminist rhetoric in order to challenge it at an individual micro-level (i.e. within their own everyday interactions). This "mixture of individualism wedded to feminist

ideals" (p. 18) is interesting, particularly in relation to the new collectivist possibilities that social media has potentially opened up. How do contemporary young women practice micro-politics, where possibilities for political participation are much wider than they were two decades ago?

Conclusion: the complex terrain of social media for girls and young women

In the last two chapters, I have outlined some of the ways in which girls and young women utilise social media, and some of the scholarly and popular discourses that surround these uses. I have examined some of the potential reasons for girls' and young women's dominance of social media, drawing on the notions of "bedroom cultures" and "counterpublics" to make sense of the ways in which gendered spatial politics have been transformed by social media. It is also clear to see that both the cultural and political construction of young people generally and young women specifically are intimately linked. Constructing young people as apathetic, narcissistic and entitled has political implications for the ways in which they are researched and discussed. While backdrops of neoliberalism and postfeminism are of the utmost importance, it is imperative to examine social media not as a monolith that aids the growth of these structures and sensibilities, but also as a space in which traditionally marginalised people can organise, collaborate and resist them. It is the purpose of my own research to examine young women's cultural and political relationship with social media and how the binaries that are often laid out in relation to it (good/bad) can be transcended. Cultural and political issues for young women are not separate spheres. Often, we talk about young women using social media as an either/or option. Either they use it to post selfies and engage in cultural communities *or* they use it to engage in e-activism and political communities. However, these two spheres do not operate separately and the

perceived separation of them speaks to wider binaries of the "active/passive" youth (Harris et. al. 2010) (either young women are passively consuming neoliberal and postfeminist agendas by engaging in cultures of beauty and femininity, or they are actively engaging in futile online political protest). However, this plays into the wider (false) dichotomy of beauty politics and/or "real" politics[21] and does not allow for the possibility of girls and young women engaging in (and often critiquing) both of these spheres simultaneously.

Perhaps the greatest contemporary metaphor for this is *Teen Vogue*, the sister magazine of *Vogue* targeted at teenage girls. *Teen Vogue* has recently been lauded for their coverage of political issues and current affairs. The magazine has been praised as "doing a better job of covering important stories in 2016 than legacy news publications" (Gilbert 2016a), particularly in regard to international relations and the rise of Donald Trump and far-right populism. This has attracted some surprise, with many more traditional news outlets such as *The Financial Times, The Guardian* and *The New York Times* running stories about *Teen Vogue's* "surprise" political coverage (Roy 2017; Warrington 2017; Butterly 2016). The editors at *Teen Vogue* have specifically outlined the ways in which their readers consider themselves activists and how their political coverage is simply a response to the realities of contemporary girlhood (Warrington 2017; Gilbert 2016a). This problematizes historically entrenched stereotypes that pigeonhole young women into a certain "type" of femininity (interested in current affairs *or* fashion). The

[21] Indeed, these spaces can also be used to challenge politics of beauty and representation. As discussed in chapter one, critics of neoliberalism such as Giroux (2015) have criticised "narcissistic" uses of social media, such as selfie-taking. These digital cultural practices are often positioned as somehow furthering individualistic and competitive neoliberal sensibilities. However, this needs more thoughtful investigation. Indeed, research suggests that it is often those from marginalised groups who participate most frequently within selfie culture. During their research in the USA, Williams and Marquez (2015) note that while White participants were more likely to express an aversion for selfie cultures, those who were Black or Latinx generally had a more positive attitude towards them, and admitted to participating in them more regularly (see also Williams 2014). Interpretations such as Giroux's, then, does nothing to examine *why* those who are often under/misrepresented in wider media cultures chose to carve spaces out for their own self-representation online.

reality of this was signalled in an image that was circulated on Twitter at the end of 2016 which mapped *Teen Vogue's* most-read stories of the year (Gilbert 2016b). The list read as follows:

1) Donald Trump is Gaslighting America
2) How to Apply Glitter Nail Polish the Right Way
3) Netlix Arrivals October 2016: See the Full List
4) Mike Pence's Record on Reproductive and LGBTQ Rights Is Seriously Concerning
5) Dark Marks and Acne Scars: Your Complete Guide

In order to transcend these perceived binaries and map out the relationship that young British women have with culture and politics online, a range of methods need to be considered. The following chapter outlines the chosen methods that have been employed during this research and offers a justification for the ways in which the study was carried out. I also set out debates around feminist epistemologies and methodologies and discuss how feminism can be "done" in social science research. The following chapter, then, will serve to underpin the framework of my thesis before setting out the analysis of my research data.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Feminist frameworks, epistemologies and ethics

> Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them…Stick to Facts, sir!
>
> - Thomas Gradgrind, *Hard Times* (Dickens 1989 [1854]: 1)

I have often returned to these lines from Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* when discussing my doctoral research in academic spaces. I was frequently surprised at how often positivist notions of research were perpetuated, even by those who claimed not to be positivist researchers themselves. I have repeatedly been asked for my hypothesis and when asked about my findings, I have often had the distinct feeling that my answers have fallen short of the desired response, as I refuse to offer conclusive facts about the "real consequences" of social media, but rather attempt to make sense of girls' relationship with digital media(s) and some of their online practices by locating them within wider political and cultural structures. Despite social media becoming a growing site of interest to social scientists and, specifically, feminists in recent years, it has been noted by Miller et. al. (2016: 12) that the majority of current studies on social media "are more directed to methods and perspectives influenced by the natural sciences…the testing of hypotheses and models". That so many studies attempt to legitimise social media as a site of research through the use of science and facts is interesting and has often reminded me of the

school board Superintendent Thomas Gradgrind who, in *Hard Times*, is concerned only with cold, hard facts and numbers (*"You are extremely deficient in your facts. Your acquaintance with figures is very limited. You are altogether backward, and below the mark")*. When contemplating my methodology and the feminist frameworks that would underpin it, I regularly returned to the pervasive nature of alleged truths that circulated in the mainstream media regarding social media, and wondered how it would be possible to move beyond the binary rhetoric that is often so dominant in these debates. It became clear early on in my research that I could not offer facts and did not wish to do so. Instead, I hoped to move beyond the binaries of the positive/negative impacts of digital media and interrogate the various relationships that young British women have with it. It came as a shock to many that by examining the politics of these cultural relationships, I did not aim to declare them essentially empowering or oppressive.

Feminist scholars such as Sarah Banet-Weiser (1999) and Crystal Abidin (2016) have previously highlighted instances of dismissal by fellow colleagues when sharing stories about their research. Their work, covering beauty pageants and social media influencers respectively, can be contextualised within wider feminist discourses of the body, beauty, self-branding, new femininities and their relationship with postfeminism and neoliberalism. Outside feminist spaces, however, such research can be conceptualised as "frivolous" (Abidin 2016: 1) or "fun" (Banet-Weiser 1999: 4). This type of work is very rarely considered political, despite an abundance of feminist literature highlighting the innately political nature of beauty and embodiment. Banet-Weiser highlights the concerning nature of these academic dismissals, because they "immediately and apparently unconsciously define particular cultural sites as worthy of intellectual attention and others…as junk" (ibid). This seemingly non-reflexive categorisation of particular research as effectively unimportant, easy or trivial appears to be particularly persistent when the research has women, femininity or issues of the body at its centre. As the topic of my research often focuses on qualitative interpretations of social media, young women and (often) issues of the body, it has

sometimes been positioned as less political than work that covers more normatively (or accepted) political institutions and structures. In this chapter, then, I aim to discuss the feminist methodologies that have informed my work, and how obtaining facts is neither possible nor desirable in this particular research.

3.1

Introduction: "doing (which?) feminism" in social science research

As feminism itself is not easily defined and does not have a universally subscribed-to set of rules, it seems unrealistic to expect those working within a feminist framework to adhere to a specific set of feminist research methods. Indeed, the very notion that there should be such a set of methods suggests a level of universalism that does not and cannot exist within feminism itself. Since the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) entered into the feminist canon (and, indeed, long before – see hooks 1981; Mohanty 1984; Hill Collins 1984), feminists researching along a variety of oppressions rejected the notion of the universal women's experience. This work explains how women's experiences are situated along a range of intersecting identities and feminism itself has often been guilty of 'othering' women who do not mirror specific images of white, middle-class, heterosexual femininity. Feminists have continually complicated the notion of a shared experience of femininity, by examining issues of gender identity, social class, race, ethnicity, religion, (dis)ability, age, sexuality, geographical location and education (Wendell 1989; Skeggs 1997; Budgeon 2001; Tyler 2008; Rashid 2014; Phipps 2014a; Mock 2014;

Francombe-Webb & Silk 2015). It also important to note the ways in which these axes of oppression are interlaced and enmeshed (May 2015: ix) – women often negotiate oppression along a number of varying axes (not just one or two) (see Rashid 2014: 590).

Despite the myth of sisterhood that has been exposed by intersectional theory, there continues to be debates around whether or not particular research strategies and methods are somehow inherently more "feminist" than others (see Oakley 1974; Pugh 1990; Reinharz 1992; Westmarland 2001**).** It is the purpose of this chapter to outline the methods that were employed during my own research, and to provide the justifications for why these were chosen above others. Within this chapter, however, I also attempt to negotiate and unpack the wider issues surrounding the justification for these methods. Here, I return to familiar questions regarding feminist research and how one might ensure that they are "doing feminism" within their wider research practices. For example, are certain methods more appropriate for feminist research and, if so, why? Are any research methods inherently feminist or, indeed, anti-feminist? What can certain methods tell us about the power relations between the researcher and the researched? These questions have been routinely tackled by feminist researchers since the 1970s (Smith 1974; McCormack 1975; Acker et. al. 1983; Mies 1991) and remain important considerations in contemporary feminist fieldwork (Wolf 1996; Madge et. al. 1997; Doucet & Mauthner 2002 & 2007; Mauthner & Doucuet 2003; Bowleg 2008; Christensen & Jensen 2012; Phipps 2016a).

I am working specifically from the belief that gender itself is a social construct, and that learned behaviour through socialisation is fundamental when discussing the idea of "doing gender" in social interactions. Gender is, therefore, something that is achieved through "doing", not something that one inherently possesses (West and Zimmerman 1987). This is complicated by digital media cultures, wherein new ways of doing gender are arguably presented, and this shall

be explored later in this thesis. My work understands the traditional mainstream media as a structured institution which shapes discourses of representation and power. I therefore examine feminist conceptions of the Internet and social media and the ways in which (or the extent to which) digital space can provide opportunities to disrupt the structural inequality perpetrated by more traditional forms of institutionalised media.

Rather than generate an overriding causal link between gender, [online] identity and political participation, it is my aim to look more closely at these issues in order to carry out an in-depth analysis and understanding of girls' relationship with social media. While previous studies have looked at the utilisation of social media and the Internet for political purposes (Harris 2008; Keller 2015; Clark 2016) and as a tool in the construction of social and cultural identities (Marwick 2015; Dobson 2015), they have often tended to treat these as two separate uses/spheres. Existing literature has (perhaps inadvertently) created a binary between the socio-cultural and political uses of social media, which may lead to the continued depoliticisation of issues that disproportionately impact women (such as body image). As has been highlighted in my literature review, culture has a long history of being closely tied to political movements. My work aims to bridge the gap between socio-cultural uses of social media and its capacity as a political platform, in order to provide a holistic, in-depth, qualitative study of girls and young women in England, and their relationships with and experiences of social media.

3.1.1

Methodological approach and framework(s): feminist epistemologies and the subject(ivity) of objectivity

My methodological and epistemological approach draws on many existing works on feminist research methods, and I consulted much literature in the task of researching what it means for research to be feminist prior to conducting my fieldwork. As previously touched upon, there has been much written about the ways in which one might appropriately carry out research within a feminist framework. In the 1980s, many feminist scholars expressed scepticism regarding the existing dominant (often quantitative) research methods widely employed within the social sciences (see, for example, Reinharz 1985; Griffin 1986) and this opened up discussions regarding alternative, specifically feminist, methods. Sandra Harding (1991) challenged the previously widely accepted assumption that research had to be "scientific…[or] at the very least…objective, controlled and checkable" (Coolican 1994: 4). Indeed, Harding questioned the very notion of a feminist research rooted in "traditional" science by asking whether it was possible to use "for liberatory ends sciences that are apparently so intimately involved in Western, bourgeois, and masculine projects" (1991: vii). Feminists such as Griffin and Phoenix (1994: 288) have also highlighted that research is never value-free or apolitical, but rather situated within a range of personal, political and professional contexts. These interventions raise questions about the validity of impartiality and objective truth in all/any academic research.

Not taking into account women's varying and intersectional subjective experiences of oppressive social structures ensures that women's experiences continue to be over-generalised at best and

completely silenced at worst. Not only is the assumption that objectivity is desirable problematic in terms of the assumed necessity of an objective factual truth that is universally applicable, but it also assumes that such research is obtainable. As has been highlighted by McRobbie (1982: 51), quantitative data (just like qualitative data) is open to interpretation and manipulation by the researcher, yet the subjective *acts* that are always involved in "objective" analyses are often overlooked, marginalised or presumed not to exist. Furthermore, what is considered acceptable or appropriate research is historically and culturally specific which, again, suggests that research can never objectively exist outside of wider social, cultural and academic subjectivities.

In line with these feminist methodological interventions, theorists such as Ramazanoglu (1992) argue that human subjective interpretation should be embraced rather than repressed within social science research as this approach encourages an open, deeper dialogue with research participants. It has been argued that qualitative research encourages discussions about the experiences of the researched and lends itself to intensive, in-depth and rich dialogue in a way that quantitative research does not (and cannot) (Pilcher & Coffey 1996). Furthermore, it is argued that subjectivity and dialogue are intrinsic features of feminist analyses of gendered experience (Sarantakos 2004: 64). Qualitative methods appear to directly address wider issues of power and representation and, because, of this, seem to embody a favourable feminist alternative to the quantitative practices traditionally favoured in social science research (DeVault 1996: 31).

As DeVault (1996) posits, the primary aim of much feminist research has been to "bring women in" – that is, to find what has often been ignored, censored and suppressed in positivist research, and to reveal both the diversity of actual women's lives and the ideological mechanisms that have made so many of those lives invisible. Cynthia Enloe (1990) addressed this traditional invisibility of women in the field of international politics and argued that, despite the terrain of international

relations being heavily gendered, women and their concerns were frequently omitted from the research surrounding it. According to Enloe, the consequences of "women not being able to speak" are clear: that we may have an "inaccurate understanding" of how power relations are created and perpetuated (1990: 3 – 4). Enloe's conceptualisation of visibility is interesting here. Contemporary feminist arguments suggest that women are now more visible than ever, particularly within popular culture and with the rise and widespread use of social media (Levy 2005; Marwick 2015). It is important here to also examine the notion of audibility – girls and young women are being seen, but are they being heard and listened to? This also relates to my work in a more general sense - how (and why) do women make themselves both visible and audible in online spaces? How do they negotiate visibility and audibility in relation to gendered norms and expectations?

While it is possible to say that in the contexts within which my research is situated, women are no longer invisible, these debates are far from over. This notion of visibility will be discussed in greater detail during my empirical chapters, where I look at who is visible and audible (and who to) and the processes through which this becomes possible. However, while women are now utilising tools to assert both their visibility and audibility, their presence has not necessarily become less trivialised in more mainstream discourses. The traditional trivialisation of women in social science research mirrors some of the wider issues that underpin my work. I look not only at the ways in which women are trivialised, but also at the ways in which issues and spaces that are discursively feminised (such as social media, popular culture and body image) become trivialised also. My research looks at how these issues and spaces are depoliticised by wider and more mainstream conceptions of the political, which ensures the continued political marginalisation of (particularly young) women and their lives.

It is, then, primarily qualitative, rather than quantitative, research methods that I employed during my own research. While there are dilemmas in qualitative research (as with all research), it is reasonable to say that the flexible approach of qualitative techniques addresses feminists' frequent epistemological and ethical concerns in a way that more positivist research does not. Nielsen (1990) asserts that the purpose of feminist research is not only to know about women, but to provide a fuller and more accurate account of society by involving women actively in the research of it. As Budgeon (2001: 12) and Keller (2016b: 3) note, the voices and concerns of girls and young women in particular are marginalised within academic debates. In line with this, I have already highlighted the necessity of bringing girls' and young women's voices to the forefront of this research, particularly as the study is situated within a digital context. However, there are also some limitations of this approach, as shall be examined below.

My work draws on both feminist standpoint and poststructuralist feminist perspectives. While these two traditions have often been understood as dichotomous, scholars such as Hirschmann (1997) have instead advocated for their reconciliation, suggesting that a combination of postmodern and standpoint strategies can help aid the construction of feminist knowledge. Feminist standpoint theorists suggest that feminists have a unique ability as researchers to uncover women's actual experience in everyday life (Harstock 1983; Harding 1993; Smith 1997). Recognising the central and subjective role of the researcher, they note that "all research is done from a particular standpoint or location in the social system" (Anderson 1994: 372). For women, this location is one of oppression and marginalization. As a result of this, standpoint theorists argue that women have a different type of knowledge and, indeed, are more likely to spot androcentric bias in more traditional, supposedly "objective" research. The goal of research undertaken from a feminist standpoint perspective is to amplify women's voices in order to "provide explanations, for women, of social phenomena that affect their lives so that they can understand themselves and our gendered world better" (Ardovini-Brooker 2002 [online]).

While this perspective holds value and speaks to my own aims to centre the experiences of girls and young women in relation to their digital lives, there are important limitations to note. Many key critiques of standpoint theory have been made, particularly by poststructuralists who argue that standpoint feminism verges on universalism and essentialism in claiming that there is any such thing as one unifying "women's standpoint" to uncover (Koblitz 1987). This is an important issue to note in relation to my own research, as it cannot be assumed that my participants identify primarily as girls or women rather than as members of any other oppressed group within society. As outlined previously, one of the most fundamental aims of feminist research (and, indeed, the wider feminist movement) has been to provide "voices" for women (DeVault 1999). This has led to feminism's relatively long-standing affinity with qualitative research methods such as interviewing (Atkinson et. al. 2003: 80). However, it should be noted that the concept of "giving voice" has been somewhat problematized. While it is important to bring in voices that have previously been marginalized and/or silenced, significant critiques have been made of those who "privilege and capture 'silenced voices in research" (Chadderton 2011: 73). These critiques are informed by poststructuralist perspectives, which both highlight the impossibility of uncovering any true "authentic" voice from research participants and draw attention to the power imbalances that are embedded into claims of "giving voice" (Stanley & Wise 1983; Wolf 1992; Ashby 2011; Varga-Dobai 2012). St. Pierre (2008) argues that the voices/words of research participants are highly dependent on context and cannot necessarily represent anything beyond a set of responses to a particular set of questions at a particular point in time (see also Trinh 1989; Wolf 1992; Scheurich 1995). Poststructuralist approaches, instead, focus on the analysis of language and power of discourse.

These discussions highlighted above underpin the methodology for this research project. It has been suggested by Millen (1997) that a dual role, where both postmodernist and standpoint perspectives are drawn upon, can be possible. While I provide a space for my participants to voice their thoughts around digital media, I am also aware of the limitations of claiming that the responses gathered during my fieldwork represent some kind of authentic voice or truth. Instead, it is useful to understand this data as a set of responses to a particular set of questions within a particular cultural and political moment. This combination of perspectives allows me to make claims from the responses given, while also taking into consideration the significant and numerous contradictions embedded in individual and group responses. In order to contextualise responses within wider social, cultural and economic contexts, my research also makes use of critical discourse analysis. As Weiler (2001) and Crozier (2003) point out, while privileging experience is useful, participant responses do not necessarily indicate a wider understanding of how these experiences might be contextualised within broader contexts. Supplementing focus groups with critical discourse analysis enables the researcher to situate participant responses within wider discourses of, for example, postfeminism and neoliberalism.

During my research, I made use of focus groups and critical discourse analysis. There have been many defences for these particular types of methods from a feminist perspective, and these will be looked at in more depth in the following sections of this chapter. As feminist researchers are working within the wider feminist movement, it is clearly of the utmost importance to carefully consider the ways in which participants are positioned and treated within feminist fieldwork. Simply employing qualitative research methods alone does not make a piece of research inherently feminist – qualitative research employed in "non-feminist ways" can "easily reproduce the mainstream failure to notice women and their concerns" (DeVault 1996: 33). This will be discussed more in the following section, where I justify my use of focus groups and critical discourse analysis and examine some of the specific issues around researching girls and young

women. After discussing my use of these methods, I will also highlight how my own position as a (millennial) woman using social media informed my study in a more general sense. Through the lens of online (auto)ethnography, I explain how my own experiences of social media may have impacted and underpinned my work.

3.2

Methods and methodological approach(es)

Focus groups, critical discourse analysis and online ethnography

In order to examine the issues highlighted thus far in my thesis, I felt it was necessary to first speak directly to young women who use social media regularly in order to understand how they utilise it in the construction of their social, cultural and political identities. The subjective world of my participants was central to my research – their perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and feelings were of the utmost importance in uncovering the various ways in which an ever-changing cultural and political world is absorbed, viewed and negotiated by a generation who are so often maligned. I collected much of my data through focus groups in schools and sixth form colleges. However, before these focus groups were conducted I circulated an online questionnaire to girls and young women aged between 12 – 21. This questionnaire asked some broad questions regarding social media use, gendered self-representations and identity construction. While I do not directly analyse this data in my thesis, the questionnaire aided my research in two ways. Firstly, it served as a pilot study which allowed me to get a sense of some general trends amongst girls and young

women in relation to their social media use. This allowed me to prepare for my focus groups while access to schools was being secured and parental consent was being sought. Secondly, I was able to draw on the questionnaire data later on when deciding which areas of social media to analyse in more detail. By corroborating some of the comments in focus groups with the responses from questionnaires, I was able to draw on responses from a wider set of girls and young women. As the questionnaire data is not analysed in any real detail in my thesis, I will not discuss its use at length here. However, for more information regarding the questionnaire and for a copy of the questions circulated, see Appendix 1.

After my focus groups were completed, I undertook a critical discourse analysis of some of the sites, pages and trends that were highlighted as particularly important during my conversations with girls and young women. This was in order to employ a more thorough and rigorous analysis of some particular pockets of social media that my participants highlighted as culturally important, such as the beauty vlogger community (Zoella) and the Fitspo community (Kayla Itsines). In the previous discussions throughout this chapter, I have unpacked some of the issues surrounding feminist research methods, and some of the reasons why a qualitative approach was considered to be the most appropriate for this particular study. Below is a justification for my chosen methods, and a deeper discussion around the methodological and epistemological considerations that were taken into account during the planning and undertaking of my fieldwork.

3.2.1 Focus Groups

I carried out nine focus groups between May and July 2015. Each focus group consisted of between five and eleven girls, with a total of 63 participants in total. Further information regarding the breakdown of my focus groups can be found in Appendix 2. While it may have been preferable to have a more consistent number in all groups, this came down to the practicalities of conducting fieldwork in schools and these limitations will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. I carried out focus groups in three urban geographical locations – one town in Essex (located in the South-East of England), one town in the West Midlands and one town in Greater Manchester (North-West of England). All schools and colleges were located either within – or within close proximity to – large cities. The urban nature of the study means that it cannot speak to the experiences of all girls within an English context, and rural studies of a similar nature may be useful in future research. Despite the urban nature of my research sites, there was a political mix, with one town being represented by a Conservative MP, one town being represented by a Liberal Democrat MP and the other town being represented by a Labour MP at the time the focus groups took place. My focus groups were also carried out in comprehensive schools and sixth forms. While full representativeness is impossible in such a small-scale study, I felt that conducting my research in comprehensive schools would allow me access to a more diverse set of participants.

In each location three focus groups were conducted. In the South East, one group was made up of Year 8 students (12 – 13 years old), one of Year 10 students (14 – 15 years old) and one of sixth form students (16 – 18 years old). In the North West, one group was made up of Year 8 students (12 – 13 years old) and two groups were made up of AS and A Level students attending a sixth form college (16 – 18 years old). In the Midlands, all three groups were made up of sixth

form students. While it would have been desirable to carry out the same focus groups in regard to age in each location, access to schools can be difficult and it was important to cooperate with the gatekeepers in regard to which students were available and willing to take part in the research, particularly as some of my focus groups took place around exam periods.

I chose to speak to those between the ages of 12 and 18 because of their generational position. As has been highlighted previously in this thesis, girls in contemporary postfeminist, neoliberal states such as the UK are often characterised as being particularly amenable to these structures, and tend to be understood as embodying particularly individualistic, non-political identities. Therefore, it followed that I should talk to girls who are currently constructing and negotiating their identities within these specific (and highly complex) political, social and cultural milieus. As I have already outlined, these constructions around new femininities can also be located within wider discussions regarding generational differences. There is little consensus on when the millennial generation ends and the post-millennial generation begins. However, there seems to be some cross-over around the mid-1990s and early 2000s (Johnson & Johnson 2010; Twenge 2017; Blair 2017). The post-millennial generation, therefore, is said to have started with those who were born somewhere between 1995 and 2005[22], and are defined by their widespread usage of the Internet from a very young age and their use of social media to conduct much of their socialising (Prensky 2001; Henderson 2013; Blair 2017). As a result of this, post-millennials have been referred to as "Linksters" (Johnson & Johnson 2010) and "iGen" (Twenge 2017). While millennials are sometimes "credited" with remembering a time before social media and the

[22] There is no consensus in the existing literature regarding when the post-millennial generation "began". While some mark it as around the mid-1990s (Twenge 2017), others such as Neil Howe (2014) define post-millennials as those born from 2005 onwards. However, Howe concedes that demarcating lines between "millennials" and "post-millennials" are currently unclear. Indeed, it is likely that these dividers will only clearly be drawn in retrospect – when the current generation fully comes of age.

Internet (or, at least, before broadband), post-millennials are characterised by their unique position as the first "true" digital natives.

My participants were born between 1997 and 2003 – the older participants, then, are those who were born at the very end of the millennial generation/beginning of the post-millennial generation, and might be what Johnson and Johnson (2010: 8) and Lancaster and Stillman (2002: 32) refer to as "cuspers" (those who are born very close to the beginning/end of a generation, and are considered to identify and sympathise with two generations simultaneously). This straddling of two generations is interesting in relation to my own research, as while none of my participants could remember a time before the Internet, the older ones did occasionally make reference to a time before digital media was as mainstreamed and portable as it now is. They would sometimes make reference to early versions of the social media they are now so used to, such as the use of MSN messenger, Bebo, MySpace or Pixo, which were often used on shared PC computers in the early-to-mid 2000s. Older participants often expressed concern about the amount of access younger people had to social media and the Internet, signalling that they saw themselves as belonging to a different time or generation than younger participants. Some of these differences will be highlighted further in my empirical chapters.

While my research participants can broadly be categorised as either late millennials, or post-millennials depending on their age, it must be noted that these strict demarcating lines in regard to birth date are not overly important in relation to the positioning of the millennial within wider media cultures. As outlined in chapter one, the term "millennial" is still widely employed in popular culture as a shorthand for referring to "young people" generally, regardless of age or birthdate. The subjectivity of the millennial, then, is discursively produced as well as being defined by specific and rigorously adhered to birth dates. This is also true of girlhood specifically.

As Keller (2016b: 3) points out, girlhood cannot solely be characterised by fixed biological age categories that are universally valid. Rather, it is discursively produced within historical, cultural and social contexts (see also Walkerdine 1993; Griffin 2004; Pomerantz 2009). However, within this research I often refer to "girls and young women", which notes the variation in ages between my participants and, as some of my participants were 18, attempts to avoid the common trope of infantilising women who are legally considered to be adults (Parkinson 2015).

I opted to conduct focus groups rather than individual one-on-one interviews. Barbour and Kitzinger have suggested that focus groups "enable researchers to examine people's different perspectives as they operate within a social network" (1999: 5). This social network creates a group effect that cannot be created in interviews or other forms of one-on-one research. Berg has also justified the use of focus groups by arguing that they encourage group dynamics which can produce "totally different understandings" of an issue or subject (2001: 115). As Rubin & Rubin (1995: 140) argue: by allowing participants to "spark off one another", the researcher is allowing room for a more open and less structured discussion. As focus groups are traditionally less controlled and less dominated by the researcher than individual interviews, Wilkinson (1999) has suggested that they are particularly well-suited to research in the feminist canon. This relates to the reduction of the traditional power gap between the researcher and the researched. This was particularly important to me considering the context and location of my focus groups, and the age of some of my participants. As my focus groups were conducted in schools, I wanted to alleviate any feeling of uneasiness or anxiety amongst my participants, as I was aware that there would likely be a perceived power imbalance between my participants (as students in a school) and myself (an adult/researcher). It is worth exploring my own navigation (and attempted minimisation) of these power relations in more detail here.

Context, Location and Positionality: Researching in schools

As well as the methodological issues that have been considered from a feminist perspective in an earlier part of this chapter, there are also many issues (both ethical and functional) that need to be considered in terms of the age gap between the researcher and the researched in this particular study. I have previously highlighted the tendency of feminism to over-simplify the category "woman" and marginalise the concerns of those who fall outside of specific constructions of femininity. Budgeon (2001: 11 – 12) notes how age is an important but under-theorised and often overlooked source of difference between women. This is particularly relevant in contemporary British contexts where age is now considered to be the biggest political divider, particularly amongst women (Curtis 2017). My work attempts to both centre and analyse the lived experiences of girls and young women, whose voices have often been curiously absent from both feminist research and research on social media. The need for girls' voices to be amplified in feminist research has been highlighted by Keller et. al. (2015: 533), who argue that granting girls the ability to speak of their own experiences can challenge hierarchies of knowledge and can highlight their identities as critical thinkers and active citizens. Elsewhere, Keller (2016b: 3) has drawn attention to the ways in which girls' (broadly those under the age of 21) traditional marginalisation within feminist research has led to a dearth of knowledge around the construction of their identities. The need for these voices is particularly salient in the current moment, where girls' identities are understood as particularly amenable to neoliberalism (Winch et. al. 2016: 565 – 566). By making room for the voices of "neoliberal natives", my work examines how far accusations levelled at contemporary young women resonate with how they see (and produce) themselves.

The work of Mayall (2000) suggests that there is always an imbalance of power involved in research with young people as a result of more general cultural attitudes that exist between them and adults. There are also, Mayall argues, generational differences which ensure that different experiences and attitudes are held by the researcher and the researched during this type of research (p. 121). As has been highlighted earlier in this thesis, perceived generational differences are central to my own work. As a result of general socialisation, young people tend to assume that there is a hierarchical relationship in any adult/child interaction – that the adult holds some kind of moral superiority. It is important, then, to address and unpack the issues surrounding the perceived power gap that is at play during my research, especially as my fieldwork took place in schools and colleges, sites where age-related power relations are traditionally rigorously outlined and adhered to (Green & Hart 1999: 27). It has also been noted that schools are often structured in ways that continually reassert gender binaries (Woolley 2016: 90 – 91). Within classroom contexts, then, girls are often expected to adhere to particular models of femininity and their behaviour is consequently policed in gender-specific ways. Girls in schools are often expected to be more quiet, obedient and "sensible" than boys (Robinson 1992; Francis 2000; Garrahy 2002). Before starting my fieldwork, then, I was aware that learned norms regarding how to behave and conduct oneself within a school environment can pose challenges to academics conducting research within these particular spaces (Ringrose & Renold 2012: 337 – 338). It was one of my aims to ensure that focus groups were understood as being outside of the school day and were not taking place with an authoritative teacher-like adult.

The location of the fieldwork being in schools and colleges, then, is important and is one of the reasons I chose to conduct focus groups rather than one-on-one interviews. I felt that this was one of the best ways to ensure a relaxed, understanding and non-judgemental environment in a setting that is predicated upon teacher/student power relations and adherence to rules and regulations. In focus groups, the researcher is outnumbered and this may have gone some way to ensuring a

comfortable and supportive atmosphere for my participants. Similarly, as group-sharing and story-telling has long had a place in feminist movements (Matson 2016: 205), it seemed appropriate to create the kind of space that allowed and encouraged this in my (feminist) research process. Encouraging a friendly and informal group atmosphere also seemed like the most effective way to research *with* (rather than simply *on*) both young people and women. Setting the tone of the focus group as being outside of the school day helped to build an interaction that was not akin to a generic adult/child or teacher/student relationship, but rather an interaction between a group of people whose opinions, attitudes and experiences were all valid. That many of the groups were made up of girls and young women who were already friends (or at least familiar acquaintances) may have further ensured that feelings of discomfort or alienation were minimised (Phipps & Young 2015: 308).

While some have argued that issues of peer identification might ensure that young people in focus groups only provide answers which show support for the dominant opinion (see Morgan 1988), I found that the majority of respondents were keen to consider a range of different attitudes and approaches to the various topics that were discussed. It is often suggested that fieldwork with teenagers is particularly difficult, because they tend to be more hesitant in "revealing their secrets to an adult" (Scott 2008: 91). My own position as a millennial woman should be noted here – during my focus groups, I attempted to minimise any socially constructed barriers around age and authority by being open with my participants about my own use of social media. I made clear assertions at the beginning of each focus group that my aim was not to judge their practices but to learn more about them. As a young or "early career" researcher, the age gap in my research is also not as large as it ordinarily might be when conducting research in schools. Indeed, when carrying out my focus groups with my oldest participants, the age gap was only around seven years. This often allowed me greater freedom in terms of communication, but there were still

issues and concepts to consider in regard to generational differences between myself as the researcher and the younger participants of the research.

In the same way that it has been argued that qualitative research employed in "non-feminist ways" can "easily reproduce the mainstream failure to notice women and their concerns" (DeVault 1996: 33), it is also true that research with young people can be carried out in ways that reify rather than challenge young people's marginalised position with society (Parker 1984: 18). Punch (2002) argues that, due to children and young people's marginalised position in an adult society (and also as a result of adult perceptions of children and adolescents), research is often considered to be "different" when it involves those who aren't understood to be adults. It is important to note that my participants range from the ages of 12 to 18, and so the literature consulted here is not always applicable to all groups simultaneously. As has been outlined by Qvortrup (1994), there is much diversity amongst young people themselves. In line with this, Punch (2002: 338) warns against forgetting the inevitable multitude of youth experiences by emphasising the fact that there is no one hegemonic experience. As with all human-centred research, the fundamental requirement of those conducting it is to respect the individuality of each participant and any major group differences that become apparent.

I had presumed that the focus groups with younger participants might be more difficult in terms of establishing the desired rapport as outlined above. I assumed this might be the case as not only did the age gap between researcher/researched increase, but those in their late teens were interviewed in sixth forms and colleges, where students are usually less constricted by the traditional power relations imposed by schools. However, I found that my concerns did not manifest in practice. I found that all groups were responsive and, indeed, there were very few obvious differences between the responses of those in year eight and those in year thirteen. The

homogeneity of the discussions surprised me – there were several topics and issues that were highlighted in each group, regardless of year group or geographical location. Of course, there were some differences, nuances and much complexity involved in analysing them, and these issues shall be laid out more clearly in chapters four – seven.

My own position as a young woman who uses social media may well have heightened the potential for a comfortable, non-judgemental atmosphere. However, how can one ever be sure? Despite efforts to minimise any differences between myself and my participants, it is unwise to assume that power dynamics are this easy to erase or even obscure. This demands that the researcher continue to be reflexive regarding their position after interviews/focus groups have taken place and during the analysis of their fieldwork data. Again, this is something that is largely absent from popular academic accounts of social media and young people. This is particularly true in popular research publications such as that of Sherry Turkle (2015), who forms the basis of her theories on what young people have "told her" without reflecting at all on that research relationship, or the ways in which dominant journalistic discourse(s) can (re)produce cultural "truths". By failing to deconstruct both this discourse and her position as a researcher (and one who is very public in her dismissive and critical attitude towards social media and its impact on young people), Turkle fails to acknowledge the limitations of her own data and her interpretation of it. It is not enough, then, to simply talk to girls and young women. It is also important to be continually reflexive about the power structures at play in my research. This speaks to the work of Currie et. al. (2007), who outline the ways in which listening to girls does not always mean that they have been heard correctly. This is a complex terrain, and the voices of any research are always ultimately in the hands of those who analyse and relay them.

As Phipps (2016b) has pointed out, “there is no pure ‘voice’ prior to politics”. This also demands that the researcher not just passively listen to and transmit the experiences of participants, but rather place them within wider political, social and cultural contexts. What contexts are my participants operating within, and how might their responses be informed by these wider structures? In order to avoid simply taking my participants’ responses at face-value without locating them more specifically, I have also made use of critical discourse analysis (CDA). This helped me to gain a deeper and more rigorous understanding of some of the issues that were brought up within my focus groups. My use of CDA will be discussed and justified in more detail in section 3.2.2 of this chapter. Firstly, I will outline in more detail the structures and organisation of my focus groups, in order to lay out the specific ways in which they were run.

Structure

Each focus group lasted between 50 and 55 minutes – again, a product of conducting my research in schools during school hours (this ensured that students only had to miss one lesson by participating). The focus groups took place in classrooms that weren’t being used, and tables were pushed together so that my participants were seated in a roundtable position. This has been highlighted as a good format for focus groups, as it allows the opportunity for eye contact and helps to facilitate discussion (Aurini et. al. 2016: 128 – 129). My focus groups followed a semi-structured approach, where I aimed to discuss a variety of general topics while allowing the group conversation(s) to take a natural course as much as possible. During the discussions, I was keen to discuss the following broad topics:

- Attitudes towards traditional media and social media – what media the participants consumed, how often and why? How do they understand contemporary media cultures, particularly in relation to gender? Are they critical?
- Experiences of both traditional media and social media – are these experiences expressed generally in positive or negative ways? What is it used for? Are different types of media used for different things? Does it offer up certain role models, and if so in what contexts? I was particularly interested in looking at the ways in which responses transcended the binaries of these debates (or, indeed, if they did at all)
- Attitudes towards contemporary femininities – how do they understand femininity, and how do they locate themselves within these understandings? How do uses of social media intersect with these understandings of femininity?
- Politics – do they consider themselves political actors? Are they interested in politics? What do they consider to be political? Do their politics and (social) media use crossover?

These general topics of conversation were facilitated by a list of questions that I constructed prior to the focus groups taking place. A copy of these questions is available in Appendix 3. I ensured that I let the conversation progress naturally, rather than steering it too heavily. While I asked questions when I felt a particular topic had run its course, I otherwise joined in on the conversation that was being directed by my participants, offering my own experiences where appropriate. This is because I wanted to understand the complexities of the relationship between young women and social media and didn't want to impose my own understandings or assumptions about what was important into the discussion. Again, this is a vital part of "doing feminism" in research – I was conscious not to assume that, as an academic researcher, I was in possession of some kind of truth, or that my own biases and attitudes were the correct ones. I positioned myself within the conversation, rather than positioning myself at an "arm's length" from it, as has been common in traditional social science research interviews (Greed 1990: 145). The conversations were laid-

back and informal and participants often made use of humour which helped create a relaxed and informal atmosphere. This, in turn, ensured that the conversation flowed naturally and didn't feel forced or uncomfortable. While I aimed to let each conversation take its own natural course, interestingly, the issues discussed, opinions expressed, and examples provided were often similar across all focus groups, as will be discussed at greater length during my data and analysis chapters.

The focus groups were recorded and later transcribed and analysed by the researcher. The participants were anonymised with pseudonyms.[23] During my analysis, I looked for similarities across groups and searched for prevailing themes and issues that came out of the data. I also looked for specific examples of specific social media outputs that were understood as particularly popular and/or culturally significant. I then employed CDA in order to understand and critically examine these spaces in more detail.

3.2.2 *Critical Discourse Analysis*

During my focus groups, and from the data collected in my questionnaires, I was interested in finding out what types of media the girls and young women in question were consuming (particularly what social media accounts they interacted most often with). I then carried out a critical discourse analysis of some of these social media pages, such as beauty vlogs and

[23] These were chosen by the researcher, although some academics have encouraged younger participants to choose their own pseudonym names. In this study, I chose the pseudonyms myself in order to prevent any identifiable information being used. As Morrow (2008: 58) has pointed out, young people choosing their own pseudonyms can sometimes lead to them using derivatives of their own names, or nicknames that might be recognised by teachers and other students.

Instagram fitness guru accounts. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a method which regards language as social practice (Fairclough and Wodack 1997). CDA is an approach used by scholars who believe text and language[24] to be the basic unit of communication, and who believe that both meaning and power relations can be unpacked from carrying out critical evaluations of various texts. Indeed, a basic assumption of CDA is that language only becomes powerful through its use and implementation (Wodak and Meyer 2001). These assumptions have been particularly important when critically analysing the media. The work of Theo van Leeuwen, for example, looks specifically at the relationship between the verbal and the visual – understanding the various ways that both words and images are used by the media to socially construct a particular version of reality (1993: 193). The mainstream media has traditionally been understood as a structured site of power, and also a site where language is important in "disclosing the discursive nature of much contemporary social and cultural change" (Wodak and Meyer 2001: 6). For Weiss and Wodak "language is not powerful on its own – it gains power by the use powerful people make of it" (2003: 14). This is demonstrated most obviously when understanding that CDA often "chooses the perspective of those who suffer and critically analyses the language use of those in power" (ibid). For example, feminist CDA scholars, such as Michelle Lazar, have highlighted the media's discourse as being particularly important in abstracting "feminist politics away from the actual domains of policy making, redefining it as some form of merely cultural activity" (2005: 216). Here, then, media/cultural discourse has the potential to depoliticise feminism and the concerns of women and other marginalised groups, having wider political implications in regard to power and inequality (see Mendes 2011). It is here that Habermas' claim that "language is also ideological" (1977 [quoted in Wodak and Meyer 2001]) becomes apparent.

[24] This is not limited to the written word, but can also include images, symbols, films/videos etc.

Much CDA in relation to the media focuses on the mainstream, traditional media. Here, then, studies unpack linguistic structures of power within texts published by the media as an institution. This involves looking at linguistics and lexical structures and deriving ways in which the words that are used establish, manipulate and naturalise social hierarchies and institutions in fields such as education (Rogers 2004), politics (Christensen 2011) and gender (Turner 2008). However, much of my CDA takes place in online spaces, which raises some interesting questions about how we go about theorising CDA in these fields. In this study, I will not primarily be looking at the language used by structured institutions, such as the mainstream traditional media. Instead, I will primarily be looking at how various discourses are presented by various actors on social media and how they contribute to the creation, perpetuation or subversion of the power relations that have traditionally been embedded in more mainstream media texts. In my study, I look at the ways in which culturally powerful people use social media and the ways in which this intersects with the identity construction of girls and young women in England. While there is not much written on how we go about conducting CDA on social media, there have been some attempts towards theory building (see Bouvier 2013; Jone et. al. 2015). Albert and Salam, for example, have highlighted social media as a "discursive system reflecting social practices such as online sexual predation, cyber bullying and social movements" (2013: 1) and they express the importance of not ignoring the various instances on social media which demonstrate "power differences among social actors as manifested in communication and language" (ibid). Benson (2015) also looks specifically at how CDA can be employed on YouTube and these works will prove useful during the discussions of my data in chapters five and seven.

This also moves away from the assumption that "powerful people" are always those in positions of governmental or managerial power. On social media, people are given the space to voice whatever they like (within reason), to a much wider audience than has previously been possible. This suggests that the outputs of "ordinary" people now have the potential to be far more

"powerful" and destabilizing than in previous generations – challenging the dominant discourses of the institutionalised media in ways that had previously not been open to them (see chapter two). Indeed, mainstream media institutions are often critiqued or ridiculed by users of social media as out of touch (Bates 2013). Similarly, when discussing powerful or prominent people in my focus groups, my respondents were far more likely to talk in depth about culturally dominant figures such as Kim Kardashian, Beyoncé or Kylie Jenner than they were to talk about politicians or media moguls. While this is not entirely surprising, it is often the case that figures such as these are ignored in academic research – particularly in discussions regarding power. The feminisation of the figure of the celebrity ensures that they are often trivialised in both popular and academic discourse. This is not to underestimate the control that is held by those in traditional positions of power, but rather to employ a Foucauldian understanding of power in the sense that it is omnipresent, multi-directional and productive. I use CDA to examine the social media posts of those figures who were understood as socially and culturally prominent in my focus groups. Working from the understanding that large amounts of socio-cultural power can be operationalized by celebrity[25] and culturally prominent figures, I examine the ways in which power is discursively embedded in their social media posts and how these can be situated within wider neoliberal and postfeminist contexts. Examining these can help contribute to wider debates regarding identity, gender and power, and moves away from the traditional understanding that powerful people in regard to language are always those in positions of traditional authority and command.

[25] Because the thesis is centred on social media, "celebrity figures" relates to both mainstream "macro" celebrities such as Kim Kardashian and Kylie Jenner and "micro" celebrities who have initiated and sustained their own online communities and (sub)cultures. This includes figures such as Jen Selter and Kayla Itsines of the online "female fitness" community, and the YouTube beauty fandom of those such as Zoella.

3.3.3 Online (auto)ethnography: the self-reflexive researcher

Underpinning much of my work is my own position as both a (millennial) woman and a user of social media. This means that it was impossible to completely separate my own personal uses and experiences of social media from my research and work. During the course of my study, I used the Internet and social media on an almost daily basis. My research, in many ways, then, was aided by a kind of continuous online autoethnography, where I realised that large amounts of data were available to me just by being present and active in online spaces. While it is a relatively new concept, ethnographic fieldwork in computer-based research is becoming increasingly accepted amongst contemporary ethnographic researchers (Garcia et. al. 2009). Online ethnography can utilise a number of traditional ethnographic research methods in new spaces, such as online participant observation (see Stone 1996).[26]

I thought it was helpful and useful to be active on social media and keep track of particular social media campaigns that took place (those that might widely be described as cultural and those that might be described as political). While I planned to take much of this information from my focus groups, I quickly became aware of the ways in which the fast-paced, ever-changing nature of social media can prove a hindrance in the research process. My focus groups took place over the course of a two-month period in 2015, and numerous relevant issues and campaigns would become prevalent in the time after my focus groups had been conducted. For example, my focus group participants were keen to discuss the implications of various social media campaigns and "challenges" that had been prominent around the time that the focus groups took place. However,

[26] Miller and Slater (2000) argue that, when conducting Internet-based research – particularly when looking at Internet-based communities – it is important to fully participate as members of these communities. While I was not previously an active user of all the SNS that came up in discussion (Tumblr, for example), I attempted to gain as much information as possible about these sites and what they were used for, both from general observation and by directly asking focus group participants to share their specialised knowledge.

such campaigns and challenges are continually changing – this means that issues of significance arose outside of that two-month time period in 2015 in which my focus groups took place.[27] Ensuring an online presence meant that I was able to keep up to date with issues and concerns that proved relevant to my discussions, allowing me to build on the data collected in my focus groups and questionnaires. There continued (and continues) to be various social media campaigns after my focus groups, demonstrating how research continues to be a process and that it is not always necessary to box it into specific and rigid time periods.

For ethical reasons, I did not follow or watch any specific "ordinary" social media users, although I did keep track of the posts made by particular celebrities or well-known figures. The ethical considerations behind this are clear: while ordinary social media users have not agreed to their posts being under academic surveillance, celebrities and well-known social media personalities are likely to be aware of the possibility of their posts being discussed more widely in relation to their social and cultural implications, whether this be in the popular press or elsewhere. For example, the relationship between the Kardashians, culture and social media has been discussed in academic spaces previously, where the social media posts of Kim Kardashian have been reproduced and analysed (see Jones 2015 and Marwick 2015 for example).

The Internet and particularly social media are new sites of research and therefore carry complex ethical considerations. While there is not a specifically agreed upon comprehensive set of rules in relation to online research of this kind, there are general ethical considerations to take into

[27] This is true of the political climate also. Since starting my research, there have been two general elections and a referendum in Britain, and a much publicised presidential election in the United States. When discussing politics in my focus groups, there was much talk about the 2015 general election. One might reasonably assume that if the focus groups had taken place in September 2016, the focal topic of conversation might have been Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, considering they dominated much of the political news coverage around this time (similarly, if the discussions took place in Spring of 2016, the conversations may well have been centred around the Brexit referendum).

account – indeed, this is the case for my research process more generally. These issues provide limitations to my research which shall be discussed below, where I reflect on my research fieldwork and discuss my thoughts in regard to the ethics and restrictions of my study.

3.3

Ethics and Limitations: Reflexivity, concerns and the future

Prior to conducting my fieldwork, ethical clearance for my study was granted by the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee. Access to my schools and colleges were secured via a gatekeeper in each institution, usually a teacher in a senior position (such as Head Teacher, Head of Department or Deputy Head). I gained access to these gatekeepers in Essex and the North West via my own family and personal links with those working within education. As I am based in the Midlands, securing access to a local sixth form was a relatively straightforward procedure. While I requested that groups be as diverse as possible in relation to background, 'race', ethnicity and personality type, recruitment for participants was ultimately left to the gatekeeper, who circulated a Call for Participants poster to various classes and students. Because a number of my students were under 18, it was necessary to gain the consent of both the participants and their parents. When enough volunteers had come forward, information sheets were sent home to parents with parental consent forms. Some of these approaches have been problematised in discussions around ethics and young people. For example, the categories of "under 18/over 18" as a way of defining who is and isn't an adult and therefore able to consent to their own participation has been questioned (Te Riele 2012). However, as my fieldwork was taking place within a school, it was important to ensure parental consent was received, as per widely accepted school/parent expectations.

Prior to visiting the schools and colleges or meeting and communicating directly with the students, I ensured that participant information sheets and consent forms had been circulated to and returned by the parents or guardians of those who were participating. The gatekeeper who had granted me access (always with the consent of the Head Teacher) also signed a consent form, which further ensured ethical practice. Individual consent forms were signed by the participants before the beginning of the focus group also. They had already been given participant information sheets outlining the main aims of the study and the intended structure of the focus group, but I ensured that this was relayed verbally prior to the signing of forms. I therefore spent ten minutes before each group introducing myself and explaining why I was interested in talking to them about their social media habits. I made this introduction as informal as possible to minimise the possibility of immediately establishing a teacher/student relationship, while still ensuring that I was relaying all the necessary information. Here, I outlined all of the issues that were highlighted on the information sheet – such as the fact that I would be audio recording the group and what would happen to this recording. I also ensured that I gave the opportunity for any questions to be asked (or for the students to change their mind) before I started the recording. For further information in this regard, see examples of my Participant Information Sheets and consent forms attached in Appendix 4.

As with all methods, there are, of course, limitations to using focus groups. While some (myself included) see the lack of control by the researcher in focus groups as a positive characteristic, some have argued otherwise. Morgan (1988) argues that this lack of control can contribute to large amounts of time being wasted to conversations that, ultimately, prove to be unrelated to the direct research question(s). While it is certainly true that particular discussion points were not directly related to my research question(s), I would argue that this didn't make these contributions

any less valuable in aiding my wider understanding of the ways in which young women construct and negotiate their own (and others') identities in a digital age. In fact, I would argue it had the opposite effect – it allowed me to think in more detail about issues and topics I had previously ignored or been unaware of. Being concerned about going "off-topic" suggests that there is only a limited selection of issues worth discussing or, more troublingly, a limited set of responses that are desired. There have also been criticisms levelled at focus groups in regard to group dynamics and the ways in which conversations are usually controlled by one or two dominant voices. Indeed, this is a particularly important point in relation to feminist research – it would not be acceptable to conduct a focus group where dominant voices played a part in marginalising and silencing others', particularly if this mirrored and reflected wider inequalities in the feminist movement. For example, a focus group where one or two middle-class, white girls dominated a conversation, leaving other voices marginalised would need to be steered far more carefully by the researcher, otherwise they would risk their research reproducing inequalities rather than minimising them. I did not notice this within my groups. Again, because my groups were often already friends and/or familiar acquaintances, it made these issues far easier to navigate – while there were several incidents of interrupting, this was widespread across the participants and was more akin to general, comfortable and humorous "chit chat" amongst friends rather than demonstrative of any specific wider power relations.

Leading questions are, of course, always a primary concern of a researcher, but they are particularly important when considering the power relations between an adult researcher and adolescent participants. Rich has argued that errors of assessment are "more likely to occur when the questions are direct and/or closed" (1968: 45. See also Punch 2002 & Phoenix 2016). Direct, closed questions offer little chance for younger respondents to explain if you are off the mark in evaluating their answers. It is better, often, to mix these questions with a range of open and indirect questions, allowing the respondent to bring in their own experiences and allowing them

to be explained in a way that will limit the scope for miscommunication/misunderstanding. While I ensured that I used open and indirect questions, I found that, when talking to my respondents, they were surprisingly eager to answer the questions I put forward. Even the younger participants had plenty of contributions to make to the discussions, and I found that giving them as much space as possible to bounce off one another and collectively brainstorm allowed the conversation to become as fruitful and informative as possible.

While my participants appeared far less uncomfortable than I might have expected, there were some interesting points raised in the literature that were consistent with my fieldwork experiences. It has been argued, for example, that it is important to give young respondents the opportunity to represent their peer group rather than solely represent themselves. So, rather than asking "how do you feel about…", it is a good idea to ask "I want to know how girls your age might feel about…" (Parker 1984: 27). This was something that became important during my fieldwork, and an issue that proved to be an interesting limitation of my study in the sense that the girls and young women I spoke to were far more likely to express their feelings about what "other" or "most" girls used social media for, rather than what they themselves used it for. This raised several interesting questions – it was not clear whether my participants were using the figure of "other girls" to describe their own feelings and attitudes. It became clear throughout my discussions that excessive use of social media was culturally synonymous with vanity and self-absorption, and my participants were keen to distance themselves from this conception. The real/virtual divide was also very pronounced within my discussions – the idea that spending too much time online meant not having a "real" life was something that came up on several occasions. The feminisation of social media as a space (e.g. the pervasive assumption that excessive use equates to vanity and narcissism) and the idea that virtual spaces were separate from real spaces may well have influenced some of my respondents to construct their own relationship with social media as separate from these dominant understandings (which, as we have seen, are often peddled

by mainstream media outlets). For example, it was widely understood that “most” people use social media excessively and “most” young women gain feelings of validation from “likes”, “shares” and “comments” but few if any expressed these opinions in the form of a personal narrative (just in the sense that this is what they had “seen” rather than what they themselves had “done”). While I am uneasy with applying my own assumptions to the responses of my participants, these limitations will be theorised at greater length in the following chapters, where I lay out and analyse the findings from my study of social media and young women in contemporary England.

Over the course of the next four chapters, I lay out an analysis of my fieldwork data, and what this research can tell us about the contemporary relationship between girls and young women in England and social media. I examine my data in relation to issues of identity construction and new femininities, and how they intersect with cultural production and political activism. I draw on the theoretical works laid out in chapters one and two and my own fieldwork data to conceptualise the ways in which my participants utilise social media to carve out cultural and political spaces of participation and production against a backdrop of neoliberalism and postfeminism. The next four chapters will shed some light on the ways in which girls and young women often simultaneously conform to, critique and resist neoliberal and postfeminist sensibilities through their uses of social media.

Chapter Four: The Politics of Culture I

Bedrooms, Bodies and Beauty: Exploring the gendered politics of space, surveillance and visibility in a digital age

This specific chapter serves to establish some of the general ways in which notions of space, surveillance and visibility were understood, discussed and negotiated by my participants. These were three overriding themes that came out of my focus group discussions and appeared to be central to contemporary understandings of self and identity construction amongst my participants. These themes also underpin chapters five, six and seven and so it is useful to first establish some of the ways in which they emerged during my fieldwork. I begin this chapter by examining the changing nature of the public/private divide and how this shift lends itself to an updated reading of previous feminist works on spatial politics, particularly McRobbie and Garber's (1976) bedroom cultures. I look at the ways in which gendered social/spatial norms traditionally apparent in so much of youth culture can inform our current understandings of social media use amongst girls and young women in a digital context. The purpose of this section is to establish that, while social media is not a monolithic space, it has been broadly constructed in gendered (and age-based) ways and has become largely understood as the domain of the girl, in much the same way that the bedroom once was.

After establishing some of the ways in which social media has become constructed as a gendered space, I look more closely at the ways in which this often intersects with notions of surveillance and visibility. Surveillance and visibility have been central themes in many works on young women; they are prevalent subjects in many formative works on girlhood, from McRobbie and Garber's (1976) original theorisation of bedroom cultures to Anita Harris' seminal work on the

cultural constructions of the can-do and at-risk girl (2004). I explore these themes of surveillance and visibility in relation to a specific cultural moment, in which the aforementioned shift in the public/private divide seemingly causes widespread anxiety regarding the now pervasive nature of (self-)surveillance and (self-)regulation. In many ways, this chapter speaks to the work of Harris (2004: 121) who, at the beginning of the twenty first century, argued that young women were being continually called upon to "make their private selves…highly visible in public". I examine how this claim plays out in increasingly complicated ways as digital media cultures become more prevalent and the demarcating lines between public and private become more ambiguous. This also builds on Gill's (forthcoming) assertions that surveillance is increasingly becoming a feminist issue within contemporary digital contexts, which are often presumed to be neoliberal and postfeminist in character. I examine the high levels of visibility that contemporary young women face and how my participants negotiated and managed their social media use as a result. I highlight the complexity of responses and explore the contradictory feelings my participants expressed when discussing these issues.

4.1

A phone of one's own: (new) bedroom cultures and the reconfiguration of space in digital contexts

For McRobbie and Garber, bedroom cultures in the 1970s consisted of "experimenting with make-up, listening to records, reading the mags, sizing up the boyfriends, chatting, jiving" (1976: 213). While we must be careful not to homogenise experiences of girlhood and femininity, as has been discussed in chapter one, I found this comment interesting in relation to current digital girl culture. When examining my focus group data, it became clear that there were many features of

social media that crossed over with the bedroom cultures of the 1970s – experimenting with make-up became consuming and producing make-up tutorials via beauty blogs/vlogs, reading magazines became visiting or contributing to blogs, websites or forums, sizing up the boyfriends became "Instagram flirting", chatting became creating "group chat" WhatsApp messages, listening to records became utilising YouTube, SoundCloud and/or Spotify. Where the bedroom had previously been theorised as a site of consumption, however, new modes of communication, connectivity and production demonstrate how it is now perhaps more useful to understand it as a site of produsage (Bruns 2008). Where young women in the 1970s had supposedly retreated to their bedrooms to live out their cultural lives "safely", young women in contemporary contexts are able to rework and reconfigure these spaces in new ways. In the following subsections, I focus on two specific ways in which the original formation of bedroom cultures can be re-read and reworked within contemporary digital contexts: 1) the changing nature of public/private (and real/virtual) space and 2) surveillance and the parental/adult gaze.

4.1.1 Where are the girls? Gendered politics of public/private, real/virtual space

The concept of bedroom cultures is particularly interesting in the context of social media because it is a site where issues of public and private, visibility and audibility are continually negotiated by young women. For young people today, social media has disturbed some of the traditionally gendered lines which have previously established firm boundaries between that which is culturally understood as public and that which is considered private (Marwick & boyd 2010; McLean & Maalsen 2013; Chambers 2016). In many ways, this has opened up more participatory possibilities for young women, as they are no longer necessarily confined to the private even when their bodies are physically present in domestic spaces. As shall be seen increasingly throughout the remainder of this thesis, within digital contexts, the private smartphone and

computer can become tools of public connectivity and production for contemporary girls and young women (Kearney 2007). Many of my participants said that most of their prolonged use of social media took place either at home or in their room. When asked when or how often they used social media, responses like the ones below were common:

> *Harriet:* Probably straight after school until like nine o'clock…like, as soon as I get home at 4, I'll go up to my room and just sit there on it (year eight, Greater Manchester)

> *Adele:* As soon as I get up in the morning and then as soon as I get home from school, I'm in my room on it until I go to bed (year eight, Great Manchester)

> *Daisy:* Yeah. I use it most when I get in from school, I kind of get my phone, go upstairs and I'm like that for the rest of the night maybe until dinner then back on it until I go to sleep (year eight, Essex)

> *Charlie*: Even when I get into bed, I just stay up refreshing pages (year ten, Essex)

While these may seem like ordinary or banal comments, they become interesting in relation to what they can tell us about the changing nature of the bedroom in contemporary contexts. These statements hint at the ways in which the bedroom – or the private sphere more generally – is no longer a space that can be comfortably siphoned off from the public (specifically in relation to girlhood). So, while academics such as Hodkinson & Lincoln (2008) and Hodkinson (2017) are concerned with comparing online space and social networking profiles themselves to a kind of

virtual bedroom, it is also important to consider that the scope of the private bedroom itself is now much wider than it was during McRobbie's original conceptualisation of "teenybopper" or "bedroom" cultures. It is not that girls necessarily spend less time in their bedrooms, but rather that the opportunities of the bedroom are now much wider. Indeed, the notion of the bedroom as a primarily private space was also thrown into question by my participants, as they highlighted the trend for taking pictures or videos of one's bedroom and posting them online. This was understood as a particularly "girlish" trend, and one which was generally derided outside of girl culture. Leanne, a year eight student in Essex explained: "there's a new insult now when you're being all cutesy and post a picture of your bedroom or something people say 'oh you're so Tumblr'". This was an interesting comment for a number of reasons. Firstly, it demonstrated the ways in which the private bedroom can become produced for public audiences, and the significance of the bedroom in girls' cultural production will be discussed more in chapter five. Secondly, the gendered language used by Leanne ("cutesy") demonstrated the ways in which both the bedroom and certain pockets of social media (in this instance, Tumblr) become understood as particularly feminine spaces.

It is important to note that while the binary of the private and public has become less pronounced (or, at least, more blurred) with the rise of digital technologies, there has been an increased focus on another spatial boundary: space which is understood as real and space which is understood as virtual. There was an overwhelming belief amongst my participants that a strong distinction existed between real and virtual world(s), although where one finished and the other began was much less clear-cut. As I have touched upon previously, I follow those such as Rainie and Wellman (2012) and Miller et. al. (2016), who argue that there is no such distinction – the Internet and social media are simply spaces in which many of us now spend a (usually significant) portion of our time. However, for my participants, the virtual world was sometimes conceptualised as a

hindrance to living a real life. The below comments, taken from a focus group with year ten students in Essex, sheds some more light on this:

> *Emily:* Like some girls can definitely get addicted and forget about real life. Like you see less people outside hanging out with their mates, and even if they are they're looking at their phones or taking Snapchats
>
> *All:* [Laughs] Yeah
>
> *Emily:* Like they're not actually doing anything but they'll take a Snapchat and pretend they're doing stuff
>
> *Darcy:* [Laughs] Yeah, they will
>
> *Emily:* Because they want to look like they're having a good time[28]
>
> *Charlie:* [Laughs] Yeah to add to their story
>
> *Emily:* It's like…how many times have I seen something like "out with the girls" and they're just sitting round McDonald's on their phones?

Here, Charlie highlighted the social media story as a key site for girls and young women who use social media. "Stories" are features of various SNS, which allow users to post photos and/or short videos which expire and disappear after 24 hours. It is most frequently associated with the photo-messaging app Snapchat. Indeed, when these focus groups took place in 2015, Snapchat was the

[28] The idea that girls and young women "want to look like they're having a good time" when constructing identities online can also be located within wider theories regarding the ubiquity of celebrity culture and the production of new femininities, all issues which shall be examined more closely in chapter five. The ways in which young women within neoliberal and postfeminist contexts are called upon to perform confident, active, fun-loving identities has been outlined in chapter one and the more specific forms this can take on social media will be examined in more detail in the following chapter.

only SNS to offer the function, with Instagram and Facebook following in 2016 and 2017 respectively. In the comments above, the story was discussed as a specific site upon which girls could reflexively produce and present their biographies. As has been highlighted in chapter one, the emergence of individual "reflexive projects of self" (Giddens 1991) has been a significant topic of inquiry in sociological theory since the 1990s. What is interesting here is the new ways in which these projects and stories become produced, and the new platforms upon which they can be performed. The story here was discussed in a disparaging way – it is used when people (but particularly girls) "want to look like they're having a good time" or try too hard to create a particular image/identity. During their research with teenagers in the UK, Handyside and Ringrose (2017: 352) point out that, "showing off" on Snapchat was a particularly feminised trait. Performatively "showing off" classifies a user as a girl whilst, equally, "being a female user of Snapchat means that one's stories are more likely to be trivialised as showing off". This is interesting in relation to the comments above, as while the participants occasionally referred to "people", they made two direct references to "girls" (and none to boys).

The construction of these identities was also treated with some scepticism by my participants above because the Snapchat story was understood as virtual (and not real) space. The distinction that Emily drew between the produced "image of fun" posted on young women's SNS and the seemingly much more mundane material reality suggested that she saw this use of social media as inauthentic – it was not "real life". Emily stated that young people miss out on "real life" by using their phones too often, even when in the "real" company of friends. This followed the arguments of Turkle (2011: 295), who suggests that social media somehow produces a crisis of intimacy by undermining "genuine" human connections and attachments. Seemingly following this line of thought, Emily saw Snapchat and social media stories as existing outside of real life and relationships, not something that could be comfortably integrated into them. For Emily, then, it seemed that Snapchat hindered the development of friendships and the enjoyment of free time

when others use it, despite previously discussing her own (almost constant) use of social media within her day to day life ("I just keep refreshing it and going on it all the time. Like before dinner, refresh it, after dinner, refresh it, before a bath, refresh it…as soon as it gets a bit later, refresh it").[29]

While participants often referred to the real world as being different from the world that exists on their smartphones, it was clear that the two spheres often overlapped even for those who were particularly critical of social media use. It became difficult for my participants to clearly draw the line of distinction between uses of social media that were social, real and acceptable, versus those which often seemed to be understood as antisocial, inauthentic and unacceptable. When asked, Emily offered an explanation, saying "when it [social media use] gets too much, it gets *too* much", but it wasn't entirely clear what this meant or how one knows when their social media use is becoming "too much". For many of my participants, what Emily termed "too much" was something that *others* did, but rarely (if ever) themselves. As already pointed out, it seemed to be something girls were more likely to do than boys. This is something that was repeatedly brought to my attention; often, denunciations of social media that followed the popular journalistic discourses outlined in chapter one were very much made through criticisms of *other* young women's use(s) of it. They rarely saw their own uses of digital media as problematic – while some said they thought they probably spent too long using social media when they should be doing schoolwork, revision or sleeping, none of them stated that they *personally* no longer had a

[29] The idea that inauthenticity is central to social media use is, of course, particularly interesting when one considers the amount of time that almost **all** my participants admitted spending inhabiting these online spaces. When asked how long they spend on social media each day, Danielle, a sixth form student from Greater Manchester, was representative in her response: "I think I spend every - like, I get home from college and I just spend all night on it. So, like five or six hours". This estimation of spending five to six hours per day on social media or using social media "whenever I get a chance" was not unusual. Most members of my focus groups accepted that their social media use was "on and off" throughout the day, with a long period spent on it at home in the evenings or at weekends. Despite often expressing the opinion that social media was not "real life", Emily also stated that she spent a lot of time on social media herself.

real life as a result. This disconnect between what they presumed others did and what they did themselves was a common theme that ran throughout my fieldwork data.

While it was common for my respondents to draw a distinction between the real and the virtual, some participants, particularly younger ones, understood the relationship between online and offline differently and made connections between the two worlds in interesting ways. A year eight student from Essex named Leanne said that the connectivity that her social media use afforded her sometimes meant that she would go outside with her friends more, not less: "I think with social media you follow people and you can see what they're doing. So, like, if I saw Nicki was up the high street, I'd be like 'oh great, I'll come and meet you'". Similarly, Aisling, a year ten student in the same focus group as Emily, felt that social media gave people her age the opportunity and freedom to bond with friends and build relationships that might otherwise not be possible. She stated:

> Maybe if I was old enough to drive, I'd just drive round and see my friends and talk to them in person so maybe it'll change when we're all a bit older. But for now, it's nice that you can be in quick contact with all of your mates

These comments from Leanne and Aisling confronted the notion that social media and technology is somehow contributing to the decline of "real" human interaction and replacing face-to-face conversation (Turkle 2011, 2015). Interpretations such as these, of course, rest on the implicit understanding that human interaction and virtual interaction are, by definition, separate entities. However, this assumption must be challenged – Leanne and Aisling's comments resonate with previous feminist literatures that highlight the importance of female friendships within girl (and

bedroom) cultures (Hey 1997; Winch 2013) and, for the participants above, digital communications allowed friendships to be *more* accessible, not less.

It is useful again here to draw on the work of Harris (2004: 123), who argues that access to public leisure space is becoming increasingly restricted for young people (and young women in particular). White and Wyn (2007: 240 – 241) also note the ways in which mass privatisation of public space, the required level of spending power in order to be present in that space, and the intensified regulation of it has led to a "considerable narrowing of places where young people can comfortably hang out freely". We also saw this coded into Emily's earlier comments, when she asserted that young women 'perform fun' for a digital audience when "they're just sitting round McDonald's on their phones". This, again, related to the claims of many youth scholars who note the shrinking number of public spaces within which young people can freely socialise (and also resonates with Emily's allegations that young people now hang out less outside). When this is considered, utilising social media as a space in which to "hang out" and catch up away from the adult gaze of teachers (in school) and parents/guardians (at home) becomes almost inherently social and political.

This perceived distinction between the real/virtual spheres is interesting in gendered terms. The discursive feminisation of social media has been highlighted previously, and the fact that women outnumber men on social media sites is well documented (Blakely 2012: 342; Duggan & Brenner 2013; Clifford 2014). While recent figures suggest that this digital divide is beginning to decrease, with more men using SNS such as Reddit, Twitter and LinkedIn (Pew Research Centre 2015), there is an understanding that women generally spend more time on and/or have more use for the majority of social media sites (Harris 2008; Blakley 2012; Schuster 2013). It is particularly clear

that more visual[30] SNS such as Pinterest (Almjeld 2015) and Instagram (Miller 2016: 196) are generally dominated by young female users. Burns (2015: 1716) has pointed out that public commentary around the perceived narcissism of visual digital media practices serves a regulatory social function, in that it perpetuates and reproduces long-standing understandings of the ways in which women's behaviours and identities should be disciplined: "the denigration of the selfie is then used to enforce hierarchies and express prejudices and thus fosters an acceptance of discipline especially targeted at young women".

Indeed, some comments from my participants suggested that such targeted discipline does not just revolve around the selfie but can also be directed towards *all* online behaviours and expressions. In Greater Manchester, a participant named Freya stated that

> […] All you see is women posting stuff on Facebook and it's pointless, and they're putting a status and an opinion every two minutes and then you go on men's social media pages and they're hardly putting anything and when they do put something it actually means something.

This comment will be discussed more in chapter seven. However, here we see some of the ways in which social media becomes discursively produced and understood as a feminine space. This does not just relate to the gendered numerical make-up of users, but also to the ways in which women's and men's uses of social media are understood and regulated differently. While Burns

[30] This refers to apps which are (generally) based around pictures/images/photographs/gifs. This is not to say that text is entirely absent from these apps (indeed, it was highlighted by my participants that often pictures *include* texts, particularly when posting quotes and/or poems), but that the main focus centres around visual/pictorial output.

(2015) specifically refers to the selfie, I have highlighted how other practices such as the story and the status are also more likely to be disparaged if they are produced by girls and women. If we return to issues of spatial politics, it is easy to see why girls and women may be the dominant users of social media. Historically, they have been excluded from the public sphere and the opportunities of social media to provide a counter-public for girls has already been discussed in chapter two. While this opens up possibilities for girls and women, it is also important to note the ways in which these spaces become maligned or ridiculed *because* of their feminisation. While social media has blurred previous conceptions of private and public, notions of gendered spatial politics remain important in understanding the socio-political and cultural lives of contemporary girls and young women. In many ways, social media can be understood as transforming bedroom culture for girls – it has not only provided a new, much wider space in which girls can "hang out" and construct identities in the face of a shrinking public leisure sphere, but it has also ensured that public participation and connectivity can be carried out from the bedroom *itself*. As a result of the mainstreaming of smartphones and other technologies, the bedroom can no longer be understood as belonging entirely to the private sphere, in the way that it could for McRobbie and Garber (1976). In the following section, I examine the implications this has for parental surveillance – another defining feature of girlhood (Frith 1978).

4.1.2 The parental gaze and the production and utilisation of "marginal space"

When examining the possibility of social media and the Internet contributing to a more complex form of bedroom culture, it is impossible to overlook the traditional role of parental/adult surveillance in the experiences of girls and young women. This was central to McRobbie and Garber's original thesis and has since been touched upon by girlhood scholars such as Kearney (2007) and Keller (2016a, 2016b), who have offered valuable critiques and reconfigurations of the original formation of bedroom cultures in light of recent technological developments. The

body of work that originally began to recognise the bedroom as a privileged place in girl-centred media and cultural studies rested heavily on the idea that young women faced more familial surveillance and regulation than did young men (McRobbie & Garber 1976; Frith 1978). Confining girls and young women to the private sphere was an easy way to keep tabs on what young women were doing, and who they were doing it with, while also fulfilling a wider political and ideological demand in relation to integrating girls more closely into family life. While young people's unstructured free time is constructed as unproductive and socially problematic in general (Griffin 1993: 134), managed scrutiny and surveillance to mitigate this has traditionally been considered an important part of "growing up right" for girls in particular (Harris 2004: 15). As I have already highlighted, young women's use of social media obscures a previously well-drawn line between public and private. The division was previously relatively easy to negotiate for parents, in that when young women were at home they were protected from the risks posed by "the street".[31] This, of course, is no longer the case.

That social media and the Internet are largely considered risky spaces for young women is well documented (Livingstone 2008; Dines 2010). This is demonstrated by the panics and anxieties that often circulate in mainstream newspapers regarding issues such as grooming, sexting and easily accessible pornography (Marshall 2009; Johnson 2012; Davis 2016). Prensky (2001) has highlighted that the Internet creates a language barrier between the digital natives (young people) and the digital immigrants (adults), suggesting that parents cannot always keep tabs on their children's online activity due to a marked difference in computer literacy. However, parental surveillance of online activity was occasionally highlighted as something that needed to be

[31] One of the key oversights of McRobbie's work, however, is the implicit assumption that girls are only (or even primarily) vulnerable in the public sphere. As has been pointed out by Kearney (2007: 130), McRobbie fails to properly address the power dynamics of domestic relationships, meaning that she overlooks the possibility of physical, emotional or sexual abuse occurring in the bedrooms of girls and young women, and therefore the ways in which the bedroom can also be understood as a space of pain, trauma and violence.

managed by my participants. In the early stages of carrying out my focus groups, I noticed that the once omnipresent Facebook was noticeably absent from the lists of most used social media sites. I asked a group of sixth formers in Essex why they thought this was:

> *Interviewer*: Facebook definitely seemed to be the most popular social media platform a few years ago. What's changed do you think? Why have people moved onto Twitter and Instagram and things?
>
> *Jasmine*: It's our parents, all our parents are on it, we need somewhere else
>
> *Chloe*: Yeah, my mum
>
> *Lily*: That's it, it's that all our mums and dads are on it watching us

This migration from Facebook amongst young people began to be noted in 2013, when Miller stated that "Facebook is not just on the slide – it is basically dead and buried…What appears to be the most seminal moment in a young person's decision to leave Facebook [is] surely that dreaded day your mum sends you a friend request" [online]. The above comments from Jasmine, Chloe and Lily suggested that, by 2015, this was certainly the case – while many said they still had Facebook and used it frequently, it was not their SNS of choice. Indeed, Facebook became largely understood as the site of parental surveillance and their Facebook identity would therefore be managed and performed accordingly. It was certainly not imagined as a "safe" space in which they could carve out their identities free from scrutiny. In Essex, sixth former Chloe highlighted the ways in which young people often use emojis in order to communicate with each other or align themselves with particular (sub)cultures. She considered this to be risky:

Chloe: I do think it's quite risky as well. Like some of the things people put up…like the eyes emoji

Numerous: Oh my God yeah

Chloe: So using the eye emoji is basically like an indication that you are doing drugs. And some people use the pill emoji as well or the little explosion and you're just like…you know, employers or families or anyone can see that

Chloe still understood adult surveillance as being potentially omnipresent despite new technological spaces that are largely considered to be the domain of the young ("employers or families or anyone can see that"). She was aware that all social media has the potential to be infiltrated by adults, and that online behaviour may have real world sanctions and consequences (by being "found out" by parents, or by being refused a job). Building on this notion that adult surveillance is a concern, Emily, a year ten student in Essex spoke of how her parents monitor her Facebook by looking at it once a week. When she first got a profile, her dad told her to remove it after just a few days. Leanne, a year eight student from Essex, also told of how her mum checks her iPad weekly to make sure she isn't being harassed or targeted by "people saying 'can I have a picture' or stuff like that". Another student in the same focus group told of a time when her mum had read her text messages without consent, and how this had made her feel:

Fern: My mum went through my text messages. Like one time she was searching something on the computer and she couldn't find it so I searched it on my phone and showed her and I went off to get a drink and I came back and she was on the home menu and when I got my phone back I could see that the last open app was my messages so I

knew she'd been reading them but she didn't say anything. She probably went and told my stepdad but didn't say anything to me

Leanne: My mum does that

Interviewer: Did that annoy you?

Fern: Yeah, I'd rather she said something because if there's something she's not happy with and she ends up reading my messages again and finds out that whatever happened last time happened again then she'll be angry with me but I have to pretend that I don't know why because I have to pretend that I don't know that she's read my messages. Because she doesn't have an iPhone she doesn't realise that I can see what my last opened app was

I was struck here by how this intersected with previous works on girlhood and surveillance. As previously noted, being at home was traditionally a way in which to retain knowledge and control of a daughter's actions and whereabouts. However, many of my participants highlighted the ways in which their online world – as a space which was neither public nor private – caused their parents some obvious anxiety, suggesting that the parental/adult gaze had the potential to be *more* pervasive in digital contexts. At the root of these comments seemed to be parents' lack of ability to fully regulate and control their daughter's personal space and free time and/or protect them from perceived risk. As sixth former Jasmine stated in a comment quoted earlier, this surveillance of known sites such as text messages or Facebook meant that young women now "need somewhere else" in which to carve out their own identities and find places of self-expression outside of a parental and/or familial gaze.

Other sites that were frequented less by parents, such as Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat, were considered to fall outside this parental gaze, and were therefore spaces which could be considered more "underground", to borrow a term used by Harris (2004: 175).[32] Despite the still-public nature of some of their profiles, it was largely understood that their parents either didn't know about or didn't understand how to use Instagram or Snapchat, and therefore would be unlikely to ever see what they were posting:

> *Interviewer:* Do you think parents are always aware of what's on social media?
>
> *All:* No
>
> *Daisy:* My mum and dad don't have a clue what Instagram or Snapchat even is
>
> *Bonnie:* Yeah and if my parents don't know something even exists, how are they going to control it?

If we examine these quotes (from year eight students in Essex) in relation to what Harris has called "border space", we can identify the ways in which young women move from the mainstream (or, at least, what is understood by their parents to be mainstream – Facebook) and instead carve out spaces on other SNS that are less open to an adult regulatory gaze. This can also be understood through the lens of Fraser's "subaltern counterpublics" (1990: 67), as discussed in chapter two. Rather than passively retreating to social media, young women are actively seeking out "safe" spaces that allow them to exercise more control over their identity construction. The fact that all participants had their own phones (rather than needing to use a family-shared

[32] Indeed, carving out marginal spaces such as these also ensures that young women are less scrutinised by their peers – if we consider Freya's comments earlier regarding women's statuses and the way that they are conceptualised as "going off on one" and "pointless", we can see the ways in which different social media sites can offer different levels of privacy and surveillance. This will be discussed more in chapter seven.

computer or laptop) also suggested that they were able to retain some privacy about what they were using, where and when. This meant that the space my participants were inhabiting had become portable and intimate in new and unprecedented ways.

As well as Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat, blogging sites such as Tumblr were cited as spaces that were open to much less scrutiny from adults. I have already highlighted the ways in which Tumblr becomes culturally feminised and is sometimes used as an insult to disparage girls who are considered too "cutesy". Despite this, in the West Midlands, sites such as Tumblr were understood as particularly important in developing both a cultural and a political identity or learning about experiences outside of their own (this will be discussed more in chapter seven). This was echoed in Greater Manchester where there seemed to be an understanding that Tumblr was by far the most uncensored of social media sites. While this lack of censorship usually indicated a space free from parental and centralised surveillance, however, sites such as Tumblr caused conflicting feelings amongst these participants. While there were lively blogs and communities dedicated to television shows they liked (particularly female-led shows such as *Orange is the New Black, Pretty Little Liars* and *Orphan Black)*, there were also neo-Nazi blogs, or blogs and communities dedicated to self-harm or eating disorders. This meant that social media was rarely conceptualised as a monolithically safe space for young women, but something that required continuous negotiation. Indeed, they suggested that they were often subjected to seeing things they found offensive or uncomfortable, even if they did not choose to follow those particular sites or pages themselves. In Greater Manchester, some participants suggested that Tumblr in particular should be subject to *more* centralised regulation:

> *Caeleigh*: There's just a lot of weird stuff of there [Tumblr]. There's pages and blogs for people who self-harm

Brianna: Yeah there is

Danielle: It's definitely the most controversial

Caeliegh: Yeah and Tumblr almost encourages it. I'm not really sure because I've never looked at them, but I'm sure these pages encourage stuff like that

[…]

Brianna: Yeah and there's loads of dark pictures and stuff, pictures of people hurting themselves and things like that […] I think that sort of stuff should be regulated

Danielle: There's no real age limit so yeah

Caeleigh: Yeah and it creates influence and more problems for other people

Brianna: And it really glamourizes bad stuff

These remarks resonated with Dobson's previous assertions that girls who narrate and mediate pain become imagined as a key concern in regard to online cultures, as it is feared that "their pathologies and emotions will spread virally and contagiously and infect or 'trigger' other girls in networked places" (2015: 15, see also Kramer et. al. 2014). SNS such as Tumblr can become visual and public diaries for girls whose bedrooms have been sources of pain and trauma. Drawing on Harris' work denoting the cultural construction of the at-risk girl, Dobson examines how girls and young women in digital cultures are constructed as particularly fragile and vulnerable. Following observations made by boyd et. al (2010) and Johansson (2014: 17), some of my participants seemed to think the best way in which to deal with these "visible girls in pain" was to implement comprehensive bans on blogs and vlogs that are seen to be "promoting" self-harm. These messy and conflicting feelings around surveillance and regulation (wanting to escape it, while simultaneously wanting to enforce it for others) were commonplace throughout my focus

group discussions and will be returned to in various places throughout my thesis. This also conflicted with earlier comments from other participants who suggested that social media was often utilised by girls to perform inauthentic bouts of "fun". Both girls who perform fun and girls who perform pain were highlighted by my participants as concerns. This begins to highlight the heightened visibility of identities in digital contexts and begins to demonstrate the ways in which peer-to-peer surveillance becomes operationalised on social media, which will be discussed more in the following section.

This section has served to establish some of the general ways in which social media as a space is feminised, and how key theoretical works can inform our understanding of contemporary digital cultures and girlhood. The next section of this chapter continues this discussion regarding spaces of control and regulation by further examining my participants' understanding of surveillance and visibility. This section will deal with attitudes surrounding the scrutiny that takes place amongst peers, rather than between adults and young people.

4.2

Men Act, Women Appear? Surveillance, visibility and the politics of looking in contemporary digital contexts

In the next two sections, I delve further into the issue of surveillance, which has re-emerged as a topic of interest to feminists in recent years (Dubrofsky & Magnet 2015; Elias & Gill 2017). Academics in this field often reject the androcentric nature of many of the debates that take place in more traditional canons of surveillance studies, and instead look at the ways in which

surveillance is becoming an increasingly feminist issue. I follow Gill (forthcoming) in arguing that theories from media and cultural studies have a lot to contribute to feminist surveillance studies, by transgressing the top-down approach that most surveillance scholars use. This involves moving away from traditional notions of surveillance (i.e. thinking of how governments survey and keep tabs on individuals or groups) and, instead, examining the ways in which we survey and scrutinise one another. This notion of social surveillance (Marwick 2012) as discussed in chapter one is particularly important in relation to this research, as it is primarily through this lens that my participants understood and discussed notions of surveillance and visibility.

Throughout all nine of my focus groups, my participants, in various ways, verbalised a clear and distinct awareness of both social surveillance and intense visibility. In the previous section, I discussed some of the ways in which various participants were concerned about their online practices being regulated by an authoritative adult (often parental) gaze, and often negotiated and managed their social media practices as a result, locating and making use of spaces that were positioned outside of these "adult-aware" places. However, they were also acutely mindful of the potential of being watched by both one another (their friends) and also by a wider assumed but unknown audience (Litt & Hargittai 2016). This suggested that forms of surveillance could potentially be present even in the border spaces that specifically subvert and resist the *parental* gaze. In this section, I lay out some of the ways in which these forms of surveillance were again both embraced and rejected by my participants, before later discussing some of the specific ways in which this surveillance became operationalised in acutely gendered ways. Popular discourses around the internet have traditionally been characterised by concerns regarding young people being watched by dangerous adult individuals, such as groomers, traffickers and paedophiles (Davis 2016). However, when talking to young women themselves, the majority of trepidations around surveillance and being watched did not come from what has been termed "stranger danger" (Paddick 2015). Rather, their conversations revolved around the idea of being watched

(being "stalked") or, indeed, watching ("stalking")[33] members of their own peer group. Sometimes this was something they enjoyed, particularly as a way in which to acquire information about their friends and peers from a comfortable distance:

> *Jasmine:* I think it's quite cool the way you just get to know stuff from Instagram. Like you get to see who is flirting with who because you get to see who has liked each other's pictures and that
>
> *Chloe:* Oh my God, that's my favourite. Like Snapchat best friends[34] - bring them back
>
> […]
>
> *Jasmine:* And regular likers. I always think if someone likes every picture that someone posts I actually think that's flirting. I'm not joking. Like if a boy likes loads of my pictures, I would definitely think –
>
> *Stacey* and *Chloe:* Yeah Instagram flirting
>
> *Jasmine:* Yeah that's a thing, everyone knows it

Marwick has suggested that social media use has signalled an increased level of "eavesdropping, investigation, gossip and inquiry" (2012: 379) within social life. This discussion between sixth

[33] Throughout my focus groups, the term "stalking" was used freely as synonymous with the word "looking". While the term "cyberstalking" can still have negative (and criminal) connotations and consequences (see Wykes 2007), amongst my participants it was used in a light-hearted way, and was widely accepted as something that everyone does (although to varying extents). It was clear, then, that for my participants, the connotations of "stalking" online often have very different connotations from "stalking" in the material world.

[34] This was a previous feature of Snapchat, in which a user's top three "best friends" (i.e. those they communicated with the most) were visible to the user's entire contact list. Such features are considered to have had a negative impact on interpersonal relationships, with Snapchat supposedly eliciting particularly high levels of jealousy (Utz et. al. 2015; Vaterlaus et. al. 2016)

form students in Essex certainly highlighted this as an issue, although I would contend that it is near impossible to quantify (or even define) levels of "eavesdropping, investigation, gossip and inquiry" and, therefore, it cannot be stated that there is now more of it, but perhaps more varied ways in which it can be carried out. Stacey, Jasmine and Chloe, however, outlined some of the ways in which these social interactions operated online. The gendered interpretation of this will be discussed in greater detail later, when I look more closely at the visibility of femininities on various pockets of social media. Firstly, however, it is important to unpack this new type of surveillance in greater detail. As stated previously, there has been some debate about how far online practices, particularly personal practices on social media, mirror more traditional and politically charged forms of surveillance and scrutiny. As discussed earlier, previous works have discussed the idea of a type of "surveillance 2.0" as markedly different to what we might understand as traditional forms of governmental surveillance and scrutiny (Albrechtslund 2008; Marwick 2012).

The discussion quoted above between Chloe, Stacey and Jasmine highlighted the ways in which this new form of surveillance placed a perhaps hitherto unprecedented gaze upon young people and their identities, relationships and experiences. The mention of "likes" here as a new form of symbolic language that can contribute to the construction of social identities by helping to decode particular relationships is interesting. Due to their visibility, social media interactions such as likes become a tool in the production of social subjectivities and can also denote the development (or downfall) of offline (often romantic or sexual) relationships ("If someone likes every picture that someone posts I actually think it's flirting, I'm not joking"). Social media's visibility and the measurable nature of interactions (such as likes and comments) ensured that they were considered an important tool in the construction of both individual and social identity amongst my participants. The neoliberalism that underpins what has been termed the "quantified self" has

been discussed by academics such as Lupton (2014) and Rettberg (2014) and will be picked up again in chapter five, where I examine some of these practices in more detail.

While the participants above discussed this social information-gathering as a fun or interesting pastime, there were other instances where it became obvious that this mundane normalisation of surveillance was experienced in far more complex ways. Participants from the same focus group as above outlined how personal relationships become impacted by (or are played out upon) social media. Jasmine mentioned the ways in which social media posts and interactions "causes loads of arguments" between "relationships and friends". Stacey agrees ("Know all about it. Been there!"). Amongst my participants, then, there seemed to be an understanding that almost all of their experiences and actions were somehow documented within what might be understood as a new "panopticon" (Marwick 2012: 379) – consensually or otherwise. During one such discussion with year tens in Essex, a student named Emily stated that social media creates an environment in which "everything is just out there…like if you was to do something with your boyfriend, everyone would know about it in an instant". In this comment, Emily alluded to the ways in which experiences of girlhood become commodified and produced within digital frameworks of surveillance and visibility. For Emily, the notions of both privacy and intimacy have become reworked in online contexts – she suggested that social media has compromised the possibility for private intimate relationships, believing instead that any such intimacy almost immediately becomes public property, although the processes through which this occurs are less clear. While Emily did not explicitly refer to revenge porn, it is coded into her response and is an issue worth noting here.

The phrase "revenge porn" is used as an umbrella term for any form of non-consensual pornography (Kamal & Newman 2016: 359), although it most frequently refers to the circulation

of personal and/or explicit photographs and videos of young women by their partners and ex-partners. There have been many high-profile cases of revenge porn reported in the media in recent years – for example, it was a central focus in the well-publicised suicides of Amanda Todd (Dobson 2015: 145 – 157), Tiziana Cantone (Mortimer & Forster 2016) and Audrie Pott (Audrie & Daisy 2016) and in July 2017, when Rob Kardashian became aware of his partner Blac Chyna's alleged infidelity, he posted explicit personal photographs of her on his Instagram and Twitter accounts in a supposed act of vengeance (Oppenheim 2017; Revesz 2017).[35] Revenge porn is a form of sexual abuse; it is a regulatory tactic that is used to shame, humiliate and control women's behaviours, emotions and sexualities. However, Emily's comments raised another issue – it is not just revenge porn itself that disciplines and controls women but rather the knowledge that it *could* happen to them. This is an example of how digital space can become structured by gender in much the same way as the material world, by demonstrating how the traditional and long-standing regulation of young women's sexuality is able to play out in digital cultures. Ringrose et. al. (2013) have highlighted the anxieties and contradictions that are bound up with exchanging sexually explicit photographs for young women: while they are called upon by postfeminist media cultures to produce and perform sexually knowing and autonomous femininities, they face moral (and potentially legal) repercussions when they do so. They also point out that sharing self-images is understood as a site of potential risk, blame and guilt for young women.

I was struck by the ways in which Emily's comments seemed to suggest that there was an implicit awareness of personal intimacies being somehow immediately "leaked". This awareness suggested that micro-level forms of self-surveillance and self-regulation were required in order

[35] It must be noted here that while revenge porn disproportionately affects (young) women (Hilly & Allmann 2015), attitudes towards this non-consensual leaking of photographs are also produced in racialized and classed ways. For example, the leaking of Blac Chyna's photos by Rob Kardashian was not met with the same public outrage as the iCloud hack which saw photos of white celebrities such as Jennifer Lawrence leaked into public forums. Blac Chyna, a Black woman and former stripper who had allegedly been unfaithful to her partner was constructed as somehow less deserving of empathy and bodily autonomy.

not to fall victim to this apparent public ownership of personal relationships. While Emily did not cite revenge porn itself, it was interesting to note her understanding that intimacies may well become public, and her perceived need to manage her actions and relationships accordingly. This was also interesting in comparison to the comments made earlier by Chloe, Stacey and Jasmine, who understood the blurring of the public/private divide in terms of relationships in a different, less problematic way ("I think it's quite cool the way you just get to know stuff from Instagram. Like you get to see who is flirting with who…"). Interestingly, Emily made her comments in a discussion regarding celebrity culture, drawing thought-provoking parallels between the ways in which women are portrayed and positioned within popular culture and the ways in which young women use digital technologies in their own lives. It quickly became obvious that surveillance is not simply about watching and looking or being watched and looked at in return. Rather, it becomes about the production and reconfiguration of bodies and identities. While Chloe, Stacey and Jasmine in one group and Emily in another expressed different concerns and issues regarding the potentially public nature of relationships and sexualities, they both rested on an understanding that social surveillance is both widespread, normalised and uncontroversial.

Increased social surveillance is, of course, closely bound up with increased visibility. Within my focus groups, my respondents highlighted the ways in which the Internet and social media were used as vehicles for the construction, production and presentation of (predominantly visual) identities and subjectivities. In Essex, a group of year ten girls discussed the levels of visibility they feel they face, and the below comment neatly encapsulated this prevailing understanding:

> *Charlie:* … these days it's not that weird to have your picture taken almost every day. With phones and stuff, like that can easily happen

They spoke, also, about the use of Skype and FaceTime replacing regular voice telephone calls, resulting in further visibility. In the same focus group, a student named Darcy summarised her feelings about this by saying "people just want to see you all the time now…so you've always got to look good". Here, my participants highlighted the almost mundane and banal ways in which visibility had become (further) embedded into their everyday lives. The gendered relationship between visibility, surveillance and "looking good" is significant. It is important to examine what this increased visibility can tell us specifically about contemporary young femininities, and how these discussions can contribute to previous feminist discourses of the body. Marwick asserts that social media is "characterised by both watching and a high awareness of being watched" (2012: 379), but it is important to remember the ways in which being watched has historically been highly gendered (Berger 1972). This has been particularly central to academic discussions of girlhood. Liz Frost (2001), for example, asserts that an acute awareness of being looked at is one of the fundamental differences between the embodied experiences of young women and young men. This, of course, speaks to McRobbie and Garber's assertion that young women are more likely to retreat to the private sphere at a young age. While these are broad generalisations and don't take into account numerous intersectional issues that affect young people of all genders, "the woman as spectacle" is something that has long been drawn on in a number of academic disciplines. Indeed, it was this notion of being looked at that was seminally theorised by feminist film critic Laura Mulvey as "the male gaze" (1975). Mulvey referred to the patriarchal structures of visual arts and the ways in which they are built around the culturally normative desires of an assumed (heterosexual) male spectator.

This idea that women are depicted by and constructed in the media from a masculine point of view is one which still dominates discussions of femininity today. There have, however, been

numerous attempts to challenge this as a fixed and essential truth. For example, there has been a heightened interest in men as the objects, rather than the bearers, of the sexualised gaze in postmodern and contemporary culture. Cultural critics have noted how men's sexualised bodies are joining women's in advertisements, on billboards and in films. It is likely, of course, that this transition from "invisibility to hypervisibility" (Gill et. al. 2005: 39) of men's bodies since the 1990s runs parallel to the rise of a sexualised consumerist culture, the targeting of women as the primary consumers in neoliberal political contexts and the commodification of female (hetero)sexual desire. Gill et. al. note how this cultural change has disrupted "conventional patterns in which men look at women and women watch themselves being looked at" (ibid. See also Tasker 1993; Nixon 1996; Edwards 1997; Turner 2000; Rohlinger 2002). This begins to disrupt John Berger's (1972) famous assertion that "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" as a static fact.

This cultural shift was noted to some extent in many of my focus groups. Jenna, a year eight student from Greater Manchester, argued that "the media implies that all women like men with six packs and muscles so men are starting to feel the pressure as well". Jenna and her friend Harriet also suggested that this media image of idealised masculinity becomes coded into young men's selfie practices:

> *Jenna:* They take selfies and they take them from a weird angle
>
> *Harriet:* Trying to show their six pack!

There was a certain acknowledgement, then, from some of the girls and young women I spoke to, that the body was seen as a significant site for the creation of modern identities (both masculine

and feminine).[36] This tendency for contemporary identities to be constructed around the body has been highlighted in chapter one. However, these comments also highlighted the ways in which the body intersects with social media use, and how SNS become highly important terrains of identity construction. Some participants believed that social and cultural pressure in regard to physical appearance was increasingly an issue for men as well as women. However, there was, again, an understanding that there were real differences in the ways that men and women use social media to construct and constitute these physical identities. These gendered differences were highlighted by Daisy and her friends, a group of year eight students in Essex:

> *Daisy:* ...I think girls post more but boys stalk more
>
> [Laughs]
>
> *Fern:* I think that's true. I think they're on there just as much but they don't make it obvious that they are
>
> *Interviewer:* Why do you think girls post more?
>
> *Bonnie:* I think it's because they want to be attractive
>
> *Daisy:* And a lot of girls care about the amount of likes and comments that they get because it gives them like a nice image
>
> *Fern:* I think it comes down to insecurity as well

[36] Importantly, while these young women are concerned about the impact of societal and cultural pressures in regard to one's physicality, these discussions were still based on binary understandings of both gender and sexuality. Throughout the majority of my focus groups (with the exception of the West Midlands), there was no discussion of non-binary gender identities and an assumed heterosexuality underpinned all of the discussions regarding romantic/sexual relationships. Future research would benefit from looking at the experiences of non-binary and non-heterosexual people in relation to their digitised identity construction.

Here, Daisy, Fern and Bonnie highlighted a perceived gendered difference in the use(s) of social media, which drew some parallels with previous academic discussions of femininity and masculinity and the ways in which they are constructed. What the girls above were saying was essentially a new "digitised" way of rephrasing Berger's understanding that women's experience of being an object of vision determines both their (presumed heterosexual) relationships with men, and their relationships with themselves. The idea that women are more likely to post pictures is in line with Miller's recent ethnographic research in England, where he followed twelve male and seventeen female school pupils aged 16 to 18 on Instagram. He found that, during his research period, the males averaged 33 posts, whereas the females averaged 147 posts each (2016: 13). Elsewhere, his collaborative research has highlighted a "statistically significant trend" for women to prefer visual platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat (Miller et. al. 2016: 196). These statistical trends speak to the more interpretive discussions laid out in the previous section, where I have highlighted the construction of social media as a largely feminised space. Despite these spaces often being read as feminine, then, Daisy explicitly masculinised the online *gaze* by suggesting that while girls post more, "boys stalk more". This, again, can be read as re-establishing traditional gendered norms in digital contexts. McRobbie (2015: 5 – 6) has suggested this, by arguing that social media (specifically Facebook) has an explicit "capacity for gender re-traditionalism in the form of women being 'looked at'". She draws comparisons between Facebook and the Miss World Beauty Pageants, arguing that "one of the most frequently posted images is that of the young woman in a bikini" (p. 6).

Daisy and Fern's suggestion that "boys stalk more" wasn't unanimously shared across the groups, however, and there was often discussion of surveillance amongst groups of girls themselves, as we shall see in section 4.3.1. Fern's assertion that girls' selfie practices "come down to insecurity"

pathologized young women's social media use and suggested that their primary motivation for taking or posting pictures was to receive online (male) validation. Again, this presents a complicated terrain for girls and young women: while they are called upon to present confidence and independence, they are simultaneously conceptualised as insecure (the cardinal sin) and "desperate" if they are seen to be performing this incorrectly (i.e. by participating in "selfie culture" too often, or in the wrong way). In the following section, I study this contradiction in a little more detail, examining how it played out in my focus groups. It should be noted that one of the most overwhelming findings from my focus groups was that looks, appearance and physical attractiveness *were* understood to be of primary importance to the (online) identities of young women. In the following section and subsection, then, I unpack some of the responses my participants had to questions regarding female physicality and social media.

4.3

"Digitally Doing Looks": femininity, visibility and spectrums of beautification in contemporary digital cultures

It is impossible to examine contemporary notions of visibility and surveillance in relation to girls' and young women's identity construction without considering the traditional pervasiveness of "doing looks" or "doing beauty" as a fundamental part of "doing femininity" (Lazar 2011: 37). The notion of "doing looks" refers to the numerous ritualistic practices that women undertake to perform and embody a particular type of femininity. This can include the everyday application of make-up and cosmetics, the selection of certain clothes, hairstyles and beauty products, or even the undergoing of surgical procedures such as breast augmentations, Botox and facelifts. Within my focus groups, the concept of "doing looks" was closely associated with the idea of "being a woman". In Greater Manchester, a year eight student named Amira argued that women are under

far more pressure than men in regard to their physical appearance, "because [women] always have to have all these new products and beauty items and surgeries". Beauty practices such as these have long been a topic of interest for feminist academics, with radical feminists often arguing that they are inherently oppressive products of a patriarchal culture – that they are, essentially "created from and serve to maintain, women's subordinate status" (Jeffreys 2015: xi). Others, such as Frost (1999) and Davis (1995) have challenged the radical feminist position on femininity and appearance by arguing that doing looks can be a "potential source of pleasure and even power and may contribute positively to women's mental health" (Frost 1999: 117).

The relationship between femininity, identity and physical appearance was a complex and ever-present one in my focus groups. As noted previously, in many of the groups, there was a clear belief that increased visibility of bodies in online spaces disproportionately impacts girls and women, despite several acknowledgements that men's bodies are also becoming more noticeable in wider media cultures. The example below, from a conversation with year eight girls in Essex, highlighted this:

> *Bonnie:* You see like a load of photos of girls, like perfect girls that you want to be like and everyone posts pictures of models and stuff […] It's just loads of pressure
>
> […]
>
> *Daisy:* I think it's way worse for girls
>
> *Ayesha:* Yeah it's more for girls, even though it is increasing in boys as well

In Greater Manchester, similar comments were made by sixth formers:

Chantelle: A lot of girls get upset about it. I know I do. If I look through my Instagram or the Internet and there's loads of edited photos…I don't know, it's just annoying. That sort of stuff is everywhere

Mel: Yeah edited photos so everyone looks good and thin

Chantelle: Yeah and then girls are really pressured to look the same

Interviewer: And do you think girls and young women do feel that pressure?

Marnie: Yeah

Chantelle: Yeah definitely. I feel it.

That the female body has historically been the site of numerous disciplinary practices (such as extensive beautification or extreme dieting) is not a new concept (see Morgan 1991; Bordo 1993; Kilbourne 1996; Bartky 1997; Stinson 2001). However, this physical management of the body is now seemingly accompanied by a technological management of the body in contemporary cultures, something that has recently been highlighted in the work of Elizabeth Wissinger (2015). Wissinger lays out what she has termed "glamour labour": the routine practice of self-styling and "glamourising" the body in order to embody or present a celebrity or model-like appearance and/or lifestyle. While particular cultural practices relating to physical aesthetics have long been undertaken by women, glamour labour is something that is specifically related to emulating current cultural ideals on both an individual and a public level. Again, this also resonates with McRobbie's (2015) recent work, where she argues that as feminism has re-entered political culture and civil society, there has been a simultaneous but contradictory demand placed upon women, wherein they are encouraged to attain what she terms "the perfect" (see chapter one for

further discussion). The ubiquity of "the perfect" is clearly embedded in the comments above. Both Bonnie in Essex and Chantelle in Greater Manchester, for example, referenced the abundant pressure to look like "other" women. Bonnie specifically referred to such women as "perfect", literally echoing McRobbie's claims that young women are now called upon to aspire to such an image.

There was an acknowledgment amongst my participants that girls and women do undergo extensive glamour labour, which they argue is particularly visible in girls' selfie practices. However, girls that did undergo extensive glamour labour were very often subject to criticism amongst my participants. A discussion between year ten girls in Essex highlighted the thin line young women tread between caring too much and not caring enough about their physical appearance:

> *Emily*: Sometimes when I look at people on social media I do just think "really? That must have taken hours to do." When I wake up in the morning, I'm straight out the house, I do not have time
>
> *Charlie*: Yeah but, come on, if there's a bad picture of you, you won't post it, or you'll put a filter on it to make it look better or whatever
>
> *Emily*: Yeah I guess

It is important to note that my respondent's attitudes towards issues of beauty and embodiment were framed in a number of ways. It was rare for my participants to accept that they spent

excessive time doing their own looks[37], and as such there was a clear resistance to excessive self-styling. There was an obvious desire not to be perceived as vain or attention-seeking, and this has previously been noted by Frost (1999: 119), who argues that, for women, "over beautification" suggests that one has spent "too much time in the process of constructing appearance", and this is often read as "indicative of an obsessional disorder". However, there was also an acceptance amongst my participants that they were concerned about "looking good" themselves, despite their enthusiasm to distance themselves from those who, they believed, spent too much time "producing" beauty. The above comments from Emily neatly encapsulated the contradictions that are often involved in the processes of identity construction for young women, as there was simultaneously an acceptance that she wanted to look good while positioning herself in opposition to those who "have the time" to do so.

The contradictions encapsulated by Emily's comments above were so ubiquitous in my focus groups that I will delve deeper into them in chapter five. Here, it is simply important to note that, often, the responses I received were based around what my participants presumed *other young women* thought, felt and did. Despite not emphasising their own behaviours, there was a constant implicit assumption that being "pretty" was highly important on SNS, particularly on visual platforms like Instagram or Snapchat. When asked outright if "being pretty is important on things like Instagram", sixth form students in Essex were emphatic in their response (*Amie:* Oh my God, yes / *Jasmine:* Yes!).

[37] Although, questions were rarely framed in a way that asked participants to talk in depth about their own individual experiences relating to the body. Rather, they were asked to offer their thoughts and attitudes around particular issues that concerned people their age. Asking "do you think X is common amongst people your age?" rather than "do you do X yourself, and why?" allowed the participants to offer their outlooks without being pressured to provide overly private accounts of sensitive personal issues in a group setting. The reasons for this are varied (methodology, age, ethics) and have been explained at greater length in my methodology chapter.

The comments laid out in this section from various participants suggest that, once a photograph is taken, there is a spectrum of practices that can take place before one posts it for public (or even semi-public) consumption. This digital spectrum of beautification appears to begin at utilising the filters that are provided on apps such as Instagram, which almost all of my participants reported to use. Indeed, Instagram's rise in popularity arguably marked the beginning of this widespread employment of photo editing tools. In the words of sixth former Emi in the West Midlands, "the purpose of a lot of things like Instagram are to look good. The whole point of that app is that you have filters to make you look good". However, at the more extreme end of this spectrum lies the employment of separate photoshop style apps such as FaceTune, which allow users to operate a much more finetuned digital makeover. These apps allow users to smooth the skin, to emphasise or brighten their eyes, to resize parts of their body such as their waist, their legs, their nose or their neck. However, these two types of digital beautification do not always operate separately – Instagram now also has built in features that allows users to edit the brightness or contrast or sharpness of their pictures, permitting more specific and technological editing beyond the simple application of a filter.

In the following subsection, I discuss the phenomenon of photoshopping amongst "regular" (i.e. non-celebrity) users of social media and lay out my participants' attitudes towards this. Earlier in this section, I outlined some comments from Chantelle and Mel, two sixth formers in Greater Manchester, who highlighted the pervasiveness of photo editing amongst their peers (e.g. their assertion that social media is dominated by "edited photos so everyone looks good and thin"). In section 4.2, I highlighted year eight Daisy's assertion that "boys stalk more", reasserting the male gaze within digital contexts. However, in the below subsection, I complicate this understanding of the digital gaze by looking more closely at the ways in which my participants discussed surveying *one another*. Many of my participants believed social media to be integral to the identities and lifestyles of those within their generation. They also believed that the visibility

social media provided them was heavily tied to a presumed rising acceptability of policing one's own (and others') appearance(s). This shall be discussed further below.

4.3.1

Big Sister Is Watching You: "surveillant sisterhood" and the feminisation of the gaze in digital contexts

The comments from participants laid out in the previous section have provided some further context to the recent claim by Elias and Gill that digital technologies have "produce[d] a hitherto unprecedented regulatory gaze upon women" (2017: 1). Chantelle stated that images of perfected beauty are now "everywhere" – this is interesting if we consider what the term "everywhere" means in contemporary contexts, in comparison to what this meant even ten or fifteen years ago. Again, the idea that widespread and pervasive images of beauty impact women's relationship with their bodies is not new and is an argument that certainly pre-dates the use of social media (Wolf 1991). However, it should be noted that when Chantelle stated "that sort of stuff is everywhere", she was referring specifically to her experiences of digital media. Chantelle and Mel spoke of their Instagram feeds, and noted the large presence of girls' and women's own edited photos (rather than those of celebrities in magazines or on billboards). This signalled some of the changes that have taken place in the last decade. The "era of 360 branding" that Gill (2007: 75) referred to in the mid-2000s has now found its way onto smartphones, meaning that photoshopped images of perfected beauty are no longer solely the domain of advertising companies or the entertainment industry, but rather something that girls and women are

encouraged to do to their *own* digital images[38]. This speaks to issues of self-branding and micro-celebrity, which shall be explored more in chapter five.

We have seen that the hypervisibility that so often comes hand in hand with social media use is an important factor in the minds of young women. It has been noted earlier in this chapter that some participants were conscious that they may now have their picture taken every day. In 2013, an American study found that 92% of teenagers who use Facebook upload photos of themselves (Madden et. al. 2013). However, despite selfies being a huge part of online culture, in my focus groups they were often considered to be inauthentic representations of a "real" subject (a counterfeit virtual representation of one's real body). There were often long discussions about the ways in which girls and women in particular use social media to present a particular, heavily constructed version of themselves. While no one admitted that they themselves posted what they termed "fake" pictures or content, it was generally understood that this was commonplace for girls and women online. There was an assumption, then, that online presentations of the self lacked authenticity, a viewpoint which was often centred around a "false" and heavily stylised presentation of the body. Year eight students in Essex discussed some of the ways in which this is done[39]:

> *Leanne:* And selfies…some girls just like –
>
> *Nicki:* Cleavage

[38] Indeed, the aforementioned app FaceTune markets itself thus: "FaceTune helps you look your Hollywood best, even in photos taken on mobile phones […] Professional photographers and graphic designers constantly photoshop models to perfection, and now so can you!" (FaceTune n.d.)

[39]Issues of (constructed) authenticity are important to online personalities and identities, particularly for those who are "Internet famous". We will see how notions of authenticity are sometimes painstakingly produced, specifically by female beauty vloggers on YouTube, highlighting the ways in which it becomes important to appear "real" and "natural", even when producing a brand, identity and image for a living

Leanne: Yeah they just get them out

[Laughs]

Bonnie: Yeah you might not even recognise them in real life

We have seen that the hypervisibility that so often comes hand in hand with social media use was an important factor in the minds of my participants. Here, they highlighted that such visibility may lead girls and young women to perform and produce femininity in particular ways – to the point that "you might not even recognise them in real life". This real/virtual split sometimes appeared to be rooted in a perceived normalisation of technological photo editing. This was alluded to earlier by sixth formers in Greater Manchester, and was picked up again by sixth form participants in Essex:

Amie: And everyone has got really into editing their pictures now haven't they?

All: Yeah

Amie: There's so many people editing their photos before they put them on Instagram

Chloe: Yeah, it's not even just a filter anymore, people are digitally stretching their legs, making themselves look skinnier

Stacey: Making their friends look fatter!

[Laughs]

Elias and Gill (2017), who offer a broad conceptualisation and overview of beauty apps, argue that research is urgently needed into how beauty apps are taken up and used (p. 17). It is interesting to note here that no questions were posed in any of the focus groups regarding beauty/photoshopping apps, but they were often brought up as an ordinary part of online selfie cultures. My data can, therefore, contribute to these emerging discussions by highlighting their perceived normalisation and how they contribute to the construction of contemporary (digital) identities. Amie referred to the scale of their use by arguing that "everyone" or "so many people" utilised editing apps before posting their pictures online. Chloe also referred to what I earlier termed the "spectrum of beautification" by highlighting the recent evolution of digital photo editing tools. Chloe stated that photo editing is "not even just a filter anymore", again suggesting that filters are more acceptable (or less radical) forms of editing one's digital appearance.

What is potentially unique about doing looks in contemporary contexts, then, is both the ability and willingness to regularly edit photos of oneself before making them visible (even if it is apparent that the photo has been edited, as is highlighted by the comments above). This demands a level of reflexivity that is absent from West and Zimmerman's original theorisation of doing gender (1987), and also adds an interesting facet to Giddens' notion of the "reflexive project of self" (1991). If self-identity is understood as an endeavour which is continually worked and reflected upon (p. 53 – 54), it becomes interesting to examine how new technological tools can be utilised to further carry out these (body) projects and, again, this shall be examined more closely in chapter five.

The comments from focus groups that have been laid out in the last two sections also offer some complexification of the old assertion that women are simply looked at by men (Berger 1972;

Mulvey 1975). In online contexts, we begin to see a feminisation of the gaze – where women are positioned against and judged by one another. This has been noted by Winch (2013), who examines the ways in which girls and women are increasingly encouraged to control one another's body image through what she terms "the girlfriend gaze". In their recent work on beauty apps, Elias and Gill (2017) also refer to this as the "surveillant sisterhood". They argue that this "surveillant sisterhood" can be seen through the modes of address and authority that are deployed in smartphone beauty apps which, as I have highlighted previously, allow users to edit their photos, "try out" cosmetic surgery and facilitate virtual makeovers. Elias and Gill's is one of the first pieces of academic work to focus solely on beauty apps, and my research can contribute further to this early scholarship by drawing on my focus group data in order to outline how my participants understood and explained the significant and pervasive nature of beauty/photoshopping apps in relation to their own everyday uses of social media. The below comments from sixth formers in Essex also sheds some light on the ways in which a form of "surveillant sisterhood" or "girlfriend gaze" can become operationalized between peers:

> *Victoria*: You can definitely tell that there are girls that have taken about 100 selfies on the same day, in the same hour, before picking the best one so they can post it online
>
> *Jasmine:* [Laughing] Why is everyone looking at me? Ok, look. I know this is going to sound vain but I know everyone thinks it. You know there's some days when you think "I look better than I did yesterday" and then you take a picture and you think "I don't look like that at the moment. Stop making me look like I did yesterday"
>
> *Stacey:* Yeah when it's not capturing how you actually look, that's annoying
>
> *Lily:* Or there's the times when you think you've taken a really good selfie but the more you look at it…

Jasmine: Oh my god, yes! It gets uglier and uglier!

Lily: Yeah you're like "oh my God, no" and you have to delete it because you're just thinking "oh my God, I look so ugly in that!"

Chloe: [Laughing] That's so funny but true

A few minutes later, the following:

Jasmine: I mean, like on Instagram you don't just casually scroll through, you do actually look at everything

Stacey: Yeah and you're like "how has she edited that? Are her legs really that long?"

Jasmine: Did you see Faith's[40] photo yesterday?

Stacey: That was so fake

[…]

Amie: She always airbrushes photos […] it's so embarrassing

The conversation once again focused on the ways in which girls and young women use photo editing tools to doctor their bodies before posting them on social networking profiles. Here the participants asserted that another female student regularly edited her photos and this was something that was widespread amongst their peers. Amie later reiterated this by stating: "I see

[40] This was in reference to a peer who was not present in the focus group, but has also been anonymised with a pseudonym here

loads of girls who post pictures online and they look completely different in real life". Once again, the distinction between an online world and a virtual world becomes clear – the notion that women become "unrecognisable" in their selfies seemed to contribute to this online/offline distinction. This dissociation from one's real body was touched upon by Jasmine and Stacey, when they highlighted their irritation at their camera "not capturing how [they] actually look".

One's body (and, therefore, identity) is read differently in online/offline contexts – the real person was juxtaposed with the edited image often presented on SNS. Another participant in the above focus group named Naomi summed this up as "It's a bit like creating two lives…It's like there's the person you actually look like, and then creating the person you want to look like online". Amongst my participants, then, the trend for photo editing tended to be understood as a signal of a "fake" or "overdone" femininity. The comments above are particularly interesting in this regard. During a conversation which largely disparaged "fake" productions of beauty (Faith's photo editing was "so embarrassing"), Jasmine simultaneously acknowledged the high levels of scrutiny that exist on visual platforms such as Instagram (*"you do actually look at everything")*. Nevertheless, there doesn't seem to be an understanding of the ways in which this scrutiny might contribute to a climate in which young women *are* regularly editing their photos. Here, for example, Stacey explained how when she looked through Instagram she was looking to see if other women had edited their pictures before posting them. Scrutiny and surveillance in this context are depicted as existing *after* the editing of a photo, rather than being a contributing factor to the act of editing it in the first place. Some even admitted to using the editing apps themselves, but only as "a bit of a joke". Others, they believed, used them to attract more likes and comments, which were considered to be forms of symbolic capital in the construction of online identities, as shall be discussed in the following chapter.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined notions of space, surveillance and visibility through a gendered lens, and have drawn on my data to highlight how these issues were understood amongst my participants in relation to their own digital practices. In the 1970s, McRobbie and Garber (1976) demonstrated the significance of the bedroom in relation to the spatial politics of girlhood. This chapter began by offering a rereading of this seminal text by locating it within contemporary contexts, where new digital medias have significantly disrupted traditional understandings of gendered space (public/private, real/virtual). Social media as a place becomes constructed in both gender- and age-based ways and becomes understood as the current domain of "the girl". This means that girls are no longer aligned only to the private, as even when present *in* the domestic sphere, girls and young women make use of social media to talk with others, "hang out", and construct public, visible identities. While this has opened up possibilities for girls and young women in terms of connectivity, participation and spatial politics, it also poses some issues for them in relation to hyper-visibility and (self-)surveillance.

By drawing on my focus group data, I have highlighted how the relationship between femininity, identity and physical appearance was a complex and ever-present one in my focus groups. For my participants, productions of beauty were specifically discussed in terms of constructing an *online* persona, which suggested that feminist theorisations regarding beauty and the body urgently need to be reread and reworked in relation to contemporary online practices. I have noted the heightened awareness my participants had of being watched and placed these within wider longer-standing debates about femininity and visibility. I revisited works that suggest that this surveillance and visibility for women perpetuates neoliberal and postfeminist values, such as the

centrality of the body to women's identity, and the pursuit of "the perfect" within these identity constructions. I also demonstrated how this heightened visibility has intersected with self-styling and beautification in contemporary contexts by exploring the ways in which doing looks both physically and digitally becomes central to online identity construction. Many of my participants believed social media to be integral to the identities and lifestyles of those within their generation, and also believed that the visibility of social media was heavily tied to an increasing acceptability of policing one's own (and others) appearance(s). In chapter five, I continue these discussions by further interrogating how the issues above can specifically inform our understandings of (new) femininities in the twenty first century.

Chapter Five: The Politics of Culture II

New femininities in a digital world: Aesthetic labour and (micro)celebrity in postfeminist and neoliberal contexts

For Lazar (2011: 49), new femininities are underpinned by "maintaining the normalization of beauty practices as fundamentally constitutive of feminine selves", and we have seen in chapter four how social media and digital cultures provide an interesting terrain through which to examine these shifting subjectivities. In many ways, this chapter picks up on some of the conversations outlined in chapter four, by looking in more detail at new femininities and the centrality of the body and reflexive projects of self. In chapter four, I examined some of the ways in which the girls and young women I spoke to negotiated and understood issues of visibility and surveillance within digital contexts. I highlighted the ways in which my participants were aware of a continuous, almost mundane feeling of being watched or looked at online, and how particular practices (such as photo editing) might be best understood as ways in which to mitigate some of the anxieties conjured up by this pervasive hyper-visibility. However, I also highlighted my participants' own attitudes towards "over beautification", and some of the ways in which they distanced themselves from those who, they believed, courted "too much" attention. I drew on theories of doing looks (Frost 2001) and glamour labour (Wissinger 2015), and the ways in which my participants understood these practices to be deeply embedded into women's selfie cultures. In this chapter, I look in greater detail at the ways in which attractiveness was almost unanimously believed to be the most important and desirable trait for women to have in online contexts and what this can tell us about wider issues of neoliberal femininity and the alleged de-politicisation of feminism.

I start this chapter by discussing the ways in which quantifiable markers of approval, such as likes and comments on SNS were often simultaneously sought out and rejected by my participants, further laying out some of the contradictions that underpinned their use(s) of and relationship with social media. I examine how these markers of approval intersect with issues of the neoliberal body. The neoliberal body has been described in chapter one as one which performs and projects neoliberal values, such as the ability to (re)invent oneself through self-discipline and productivity. Against a backdrop of neoliberalism, then, bodies (particularly those read as female) must appear to be under control – they should be continually worked upon and "improved". Within the contexts of neoliberalism and postfeminism, women's bodies are largely shaped by consumer and celebrity culture(s), and how these issues play out in digital cultures will also be discussed in this chapter, focusing specifically on notions of microcelebrity and self-branding. Later in the chapter, I examine these issues further by offering analyses of both female fitness gurus on Instagram and beauty vloggers on YouTube via the lens of neoliberalism and postfeminism.

5.1

Selfies, "likes" and "comments": gendered symbolic capital on visual social media platforms

In chapter four, I presented a comment from a year eight student from Essex named Daisy. She stated that "a lot of girls care about the amount of likes and comments that they get because it gives them like a nice image". The term "likes and comments" came up numerous times throughout my focus group discussions, and it is the purpose of this section to unpack this data

in more detail. My participants appeared to have a contested relationship with likes and comments on social media platforms. They seemed to consider these visual markers of approval a form of social capital (Bourdieu 1986) for young women, but their deeper feelings about them were not always clear. Often, they were rejected as shallow or hollow markers of one's popularity (or, more specifically, attractiveness - these two terms often appear to be interchangeable), but they also spoke about liking and commenting on their friends' pictures in order to heighten their friends' visible societal approval, as shall be discussed later in this section. Daisy's above comments were not isolated. When asked why they felt social media was important to girls of their generation, one group of sixth formers in the West Midlands answered as follows:

> *Grace:* Girls are very attention-seeking
>
> *Interviewer:* In what way?
>
> *Grace:* They just want to be like…noticed

When asked a similar question in Essex, other sixth formers said the same thing:

> *Amie:* It's all about the attention-seeking

Younger year eight students in Greater Manchester had a similar line of reasoning:

> *Lydia:* I guess that some people, depending on how many likes they get or how many comments they get, they think that actually matters. Like they think that's gunna make

> them think like "oh I'm pretty" because someone commented on a photo or liked it or whatever

The above quotes were particularly interesting in that they further signified the gendered nature of this alleged epidemic of "attention-seeking". The notion of "attention as currency" in an "online attention economy" has been addressed by Marwick (2015: 139) and Chambers (2017: 31). But while Lydia used the term "people", the use of gendered terminology such as "pretty" suggests that it is young women specifically who acquire value via attention which, in this context, is symbolised through the acquisition of likes and comments. This was corroborated by Grace, who explicitly stated that "girls are very attention seeking". This related to more general arguments regarding the feminisation of social media platforms and online space and, again, speaks to the research of Handyside and Ringrose (2017), who found that, amongst teenagers, "showing off" was conceptualised as a specifically feminine online practice. Young women's online behaviours were far more likely to be read and understood as searching for outside validation and/or attention, and there are strong parallels to be found here in my own research.

Feminist scholars have previously adapted Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital (1986) in regard to femininity and the body. Skeggs (1997), for example, has outlined the ways in which physical appearance and "looking good", which can be defined as corporeal capital (p. 102), can be used to make distinctions between women in regard to social class (looking specifically at the various ways in which working-class femininity and middle-class femininity are inscribed on the body), but also how it can be used to make distinctions *within* social groups and classes. Skeggs' work understands the practice of "looking good" as something more than a trivial activity and theorises it as a highly complex terrain for women. As she explains in regard to her own ethnographic study of working-class women in the North of England, "'looking good'" was central to the women's

sense of value. “Looking good”, then, is a “complicated site of pleasure and fear: it is a ‘structure of feeling’ which makes them feel good and bad about themselves” (p. 104). This complex relationship with physical appearance, this constructed site of pleasure and fear, is paralleled in my own findings. As has been outlined in the previous chapter, social media images are often used by my participants to make distinctions between them and “other” girls/women. “Other” women are positioned as “fake” and are only using social media for “attention”, despite it being apparent that social media and selfies were also used in the attainment of their own value. Within a digital culture, approval of one’s constructed identity is now visibly displayed through likes, comments, favourites, shares and retweets (Lupton 2016). It seems that this adds further structures to the complexity of the relationship between young women and physical appearance that has previously been highlighted by key feminist academics, such as Skeggs (1997) and McRobbie (2000b).

Despite this apparent complexity, “looking good” or doing looks/doing appearance have long been feminised and, therefore, devalued and constructed as culturally trivial activities (Skeggs 2001: 303). It has been noted elsewhere that young women experience their own appearance as a vital tool for establishing social acceptance (Frost 2005: 77). My participants seemed to generally agree that, for women, likes and comments on social media specifically signified how attractive they are and courting likes and comments from people you didn’t know by presenting a particular (usually sexualised) image of yourself was considered vain or shallow. Producing a visual identity was something that they all did, but producing beauty was only considered to be acceptable when working within the framework of “natural” beauty. Therefore, if one’s production of beauty was “overdone” through the use of excessive make up or the obvious use of photo editing tools (as discussed in chapter four), they were denounced as “fake”. Again, there was a clear line drawn between themselves and others, which is demonstrated above by the assertion that those who post numerous selfies or heavily edited photos were “all about the attention-seeking”. However,

occasionally the same participants admitted to using tactics to get more likes and comments themselves, complicating the above interpretations and highlighting the clear contradictions that underpinned my participants' attitudes towards social media practices:

Interviewer: So you really do think that there's a lot of value in having "likes"?

Chloe: Yeah

Jasmine: It is, it's attention

Stacey: And people put their pictures up at specific times so they can get more likes. There's like a prime time

Jasmine: Yeah the prime time is a thing. 7:30pm normally

Naomi: Yeah 7:30pm til 10pm

Chloe: So if you want a lot of likes you just put them up at the right time. And then you've got to tell everyone

Lily: Yeah. Get straight on to your friends

Amie: Oh yeah. If any of our friends puts up a picture, they'll go straight into the group chat like 'Instagram support please' and then you'll all go off and –

Stacey: Like and comment!

Similar comments were made at another point in the focus group:

Interviewer: So you think that's a specific reason that people use social media?

Jasmine: Yeah

Lily: Just to get likes? Definitely

[Sounds of agreement]

Chloe: I know girls who are like "right I need to put this picture up to see if a certain person likes it"

Stacey: Yeah, I do that

It was moments like this that exposed the truly contentious relationship between my participants and likes and comments as capital (and their dualistic attitudes to social media more generally). Visual markers of approval were both valued and courted by my participants, as outlined in the comments above, but there seemed to be strict rules over how to obtain them. Privately asking your friends for "Instagram support", or strategically posting a picture during "prime time" were acceptable (and less explicit) ways of heightening the interaction rates on your photos. Garnering these likes and comments through what they seemed to understand as explicit vanity, attention-seeking or by taking yourself "too seriously", however, was frowned upon, as was baring too much flesh. The below extract from a later point in the conversation is particularly telling in this regard:

Stacey: Girls are uploading really - right, I stalked this girl. Well, I didn't stalk her, I got told to stalk her. Jake Richards[41] gave me his phone basically and I was looking at this girl's Instagram and I've honestly never seen anything more disgusting to be honest. She was basically naked in all her pictures, like fully naked

Naomi: Oh my God

[41] This was in reference to a male student in their year and has been anonymised with a pseudonym.

Stacey: And she had like a denim gilet covering her nipples and bottom underwear on but she was taking all these really explicit pictures and then there was another picture where she was topless with emojis over her nipples. And there's another girl I've stalked a few times and she uploads constant bikini pictures but you can clearly see she's not on holiday and she's not getting in any form of swimming pool so she's basically putting her bikini on purely so she can take a picture

Lily: Again, it's all for likes

The above extract provides an example of the ways in which some participants categorised women and distanced themselves from those who they believed to be excessive in their selfie posting. Here "excessive" refers to both the number of pictures posted and the *types* of pictures posted. The policing of one's own actions and the act of policing other's actions was considered entirely appropriate and unproblematic. The young woman that Stacey referred to was heavily criticised for posting "really explicit" pictures – Stacey said that she has "never seen anything more disgusting", and Lily agreed that this performance of doing looks was "all for likes". Again, we can see the ways in which surveillance operated between the girls and young women themselves – performances of "excessive", "overdone" or "hyper-sexualised" femininity were maligned and understood as attention-seeking. My participants distanced themselves from these types of femininity wherever possible. That they had, just minutes earlier, highlighted their own tactics for "getting likes" was seemingly forgotten. The explicit nature of the "other" girl's pictures meant that she could be *seen* to be "trying" too hard or performing femininity incorrectly. Her photos signified a "bad" or "excessive" type of hypersexualised femininity, which becomes a symbol for the worst of feminine transgressions. Here, it is possible to see how women's online identities and behaviours are socially disciplined by both themselves and each other.

This is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it draws a distinction between particular types of women and femininities and serves to categorise women on the basis of how they perform their gender. We can see from the comments made by Stacey, Naomi and Lily that a distinction was made between women who produced "natural" or "respectable" femininity (as all displays of gender *are* produced) and women who produced what was often described as a "fake" femininity. It has previously been noted that the signifiers of excess that were mentioned by my participants (revealing clothing, excessive make-up) are particularly devalued because of their traditional associations with working-class femininity (Skeggs 2001: 302). Many of these discussions were underpinned by a type of virgin/whore dichotomy, expressing a shared understanding of what constitutes "good" and "bad" women, although the line between the two seemed quite unclear. My participants certainly did not dismiss physical appearance or the production of beauty as being entirely shallow or uninteresting to them. For example, when talking about "screenshotting" people's social media posts and sending them around in group WhatsApp messages to dissect and discuss, sixth formers in Essex explained:

> *Stacey:* It's not always in a bad way though to be fair. This make it sound like we're being horrible! It's normally stuff we see on Instagram and someone is really pretty and we're like "dear God look how pretty she is" and then we all cry
>
> [Laughs]
>
> *Chloe:* [Laughing] That's pretty much the basis of our group chat yeah

Throughout our conversations, participants did not understand "looking good" as an entirely monolithic (vain or shallow) concept, and its importance for young women was acknowledged in all groups. While "overdone" productions of beauty were rejected as "fake", they were more

likely to respect or be envious of beauty that was produced insofar as it could be seen as natural. Feminists will know that this is not new. Women being perceived as fitting into rigid and culturally constructed categories (virgin/whore) has its roots in the beginnings of Judeo-Christianity and has underpinned constructions of gender since (Feldman 1994; Pheterson 1996). It is interesting, then, that social media is often blamed for girls being overly-invested in their physical appearance. While it has certainly made the tools to edit one's appearance more widely accessible, is it not more likely that the actual act of photo editing has been more heavily influenced by the beauty and advertising industries and by the celebrity culture(s) in which the trend has flourished? Indeed, of particular significance within my focus groups was the ways in which discourses of femininity were scripted onto the female celebrity within consumer cultures. Indeed, the importance of likes and comments discussed in this section can be placed within the wider context of microcelebrity (Senft 2008). The next section of this chapter examines notions of celebrity in the digital age and how my focus group participants understood the relationship between femininity, embodiment, identity and consumer culture in online contexts.

5.2

Self(ie)-Branding: Aesthetic labour, celebrity culture and social media

In the last section (and section 4.3), I highlighted some of the ways in which young women who edit their own pictures online were often subject to criticism by their peers. This idea of "regular people" (as in, those outside the world of celebrity or professional modelling) photo-shopping their own pictures relates to much wider academic debates around self-branding, the pervasive nature of celebrity culture and the (often invisible) labour involved in the production of a visible self. According to Khamis et. al. (2017: 191), self-branding "involves individuals developing a distinctive public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital". They, along with other

scholars (see Labrecque et. al. 2011), believe that a culture of self/personal branding has risen due to the growth in digital technologies, which they suggest are entrenched in the current political climate of neoliberal individualism. It is here that notions of microcelebrity become important. This term was first employed by Theresa Senft (2008) as a way to describe the camgirls she was researching at the turn of the millennium. This research, which took place during the early stages of widespread Internet access, highlighted the ways in which new technologies could be employed by "ordinary" people as a way to accumulate fan-like followings by using digital technologies such as webcams/videos, blogs, webpages and SNS.[42] Since then, however, the notion of microcelebrity has become somewhat of a cultural phenomenon. The expansion of SNS and apps has ensured that opportunities to access a microcelebrity status have exponentially increased and have fundamentally altered the logic of celebrity to which we were previously accustomed. It is these issues that I shall explore in the remainder of this chapter.

It is reasonable to say that "celebrity" is no longer restricted to models, film stars and musicians with large entourages and agents, but is now a far more complex and diverse terrain. Indeed, it has been argued that (post-)millennials largely find their idols within social media communities. These idols often take the form of bloggers, vloggers, personal trainers, singers, models and "influencers" who (at least initially) build up huge fanbases by attracting large followings on their social media accounts (Saul 2016). While they may be completely unrecognisable to older generations, names such as Zoella and Tanya Burr are entirely recognisable to many teenage girls. This generational divide has been noticed in the popular press with Zoella, a popular beauty and lifestyle vlogger, being described as "the most famous person you've never heard of" (Taylor

[42] This can be situated within a wider shift in celebrity rhetoric and discourse that focuses on the "everyday" person attaining celebrity status. Within this new celebrity culture, ordinary people attain celebrity status through a type of media documentation that tracks and celebrates personal and individualised projects of self-improvement. The rise of television shows such as *Pop Idol*, *Big Brother*, *X Factor*, *Survivor* and *MasterChef* are examples of this change.

2014; Retter 2014). With almost 12 million YouTube subscribers[43], her lifestyle and beauty videos have amassed hundreds of millions of views, with her most viewed video having over 21 million views alone (Zoella 2014).

Marwick and boyd (2010: 121) suggest that the logic of microcelebrity structures the behaviour of ordinary users of social media by implying that "all individuals have an audience that they can strategically maintain through ongoing communication and interaction". Whether or not one is a microcelebrity is seemingly quantifiable – it is registered and measured through the number of interactions (likes, comments, followers) that a user's posts/profile garners. This "new metric of fame and, by implication, value and reputation" is noted by celebrity scholar Marshall (2014: xxxiv). If we assume, as Marwick (2015) and Marwick and boyd (2010) do, that micro-celebrity is attained through this accumulation of likes, comments and followers, how do young women understand their opportunities for success within these contexts? As has been discussed in the previous section, my participants assumed that likes and comments were given to girls and women predominantly on the basis of aesthetic appearance. It is little wonder, then, that many prominent female microcelebrities tend to achieve their status through what has been termed "aesthetic labour" (Elias et. al. 2017).

It is, again, appropriate to return to Wissinger's (2015) work on glamour labour, a concept that has been previously discussed in chapter one and chapter four. Glamour labour, according to Wissinger, is traditionally something that models do to fit narrow standards of culturally constructed beauty ideals. However, in the age of social media, glamour labour, as Wissinger understands it, is now something that all women are obliged to do. The relationship between

[43] At the time of writing, Zoella has 11,979,717 subscribers on her main YouTube channel, 'Zoella'. On her second channel, 'MoreZoella', she has 4,727,859 subscribers.

glamour labour and the celebrity culture discussed above was outlined by sixth former Deana in the West Midlands:

> Instagram is like…it's whole thing is to look good. That's the point of it. So that definitely makes you want to look nice because like everyone is following loads of celebrities and stuff and people want to be kind of similar to them or take their fashion ideas and stuff

Deana suggested that the need to "look good" is specifically linked to social media and celebrity culture, and this was something that was discussed in many of my focus groups. This was often understood as the perceived need or desire to emulate female celebrities, such as Kim Kardashian or Kylie Jenner who are widely famed for their extensive glamour labour and social media presence. This comment above, along with the discussions set out in the previous section, seemingly endorsed Wissinger's claims that glamour labour is becoming an integral part of women's virtual online identities. However, it is unclear how far a line can be drawn between offline and online identities in this regard. After all, glamour labour is a facet of doing looks, which has long played an important role in doing gender for women, particularly within consumer capitalist societies. Wissinger herself acknowledges the contemporary desire for visibility as being a continuation of the rise of fashion (and celebrity) cultures that began to emerge in the 1960s (2015: 28). It is, therefore, important to situate social media and discussions in regard to glamour, celebrity/consumer culture and gender within wider cultural, political and economic contexts. As many feminist scholars have pointed out, while doing looks (and, by extension, glamour labour) is often depoliticised via discourses of choice, it is not always possible for women to opt out of what are essentially societal expectations. Stinson (2001), Bartky (1997) and Frost (2001) all make this point: women who "do not cooperate and fully participate in the

disciplining of their bodies face a variety of sanctions, including ostracism, public harassment and structural discrimination" (Stinson 2001: 10).

As has been highlighted previously, young women are imagined and produced as ideal consumers in contemporary neoliberal contexts (Harris 2004: 121). Discourses of "girl power" that have emerged since the late 1980s are often contingent on notions of confidence, choice and, perhaps most importantly, financial independence. As girlhood became increasingly associated with consumerism, feminists critiqued the ways in which messages of "girl power" tended to encourage young women to focus their attention on style and aesthetics, rather than larger social or political issues, particularly those in relation to gender inequalities (Douglas 1994; Taft 2004). This has meant that neoliberalism and postfeminism have often relied on celebrity culture to mainstream discourses of individual empowerment, enterprise and success. Evans and Riley, for example, have highlighted the ways in which the figure of the female celebrity in particular is "produced within a context of postfeminism, sexualised culture, consumerism and neoliberalism" (2013: 268). How, then, do these issues play out on social media, according to my data?

According to my participants, the physical feminine "ideal" of the contemporary moment (i.e. at the time of research) was embodied by Kim Kardashian and her four sisters, Kourtney Kardashian, Khloe Kardashian, Kylie Jenner and Kendall Jenner. When asked who they considered to be the most prominent and powerful women in the public eye at the current time, participants in all nine of my focus groups almost immediately responded with the name(s) of one or more of these five women. This was a surprising finding from my data, largely down to the consistent and emphatic nature of the responses. Other women mentioned across the focus groups included Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj, Rihanna, Michelle Keegan, Emma Watson, Taylor Swift and various Victoria Secret models (known colloquially as "VS Angels"). However, the

Kardashians were the only figures mentioned consistently across all focus groups. While this was perhaps surprising to me, it was less so to my participants - their position as cultural icons was articulated by a sixth former in the West Midlands:

> *Donna:* I just think Kim Kardashian is like taking over the world
>
> *Interviewer:* Taking over the world?
>
> *Donna:* Well she's got probably like the most Instagram followers out of the big celebrities, like she's got more than Beyoncé who's a superstar[44]

Year ten students in Essex echoed this understanding of Kim Kardashian's cultural significance:

> *Charlie:* worldwide known as well. Like if you ask someone if they know Kim Kardashian, nine times out of ten they'll say yes
>
> *Emily:* Yeah and if they don't then…well, something is wrong

For Donna, "taking over the world" was understood through the lens of social media, and the acquirement of large numbers of followers. It was social media, then, that was considered to be the dominant terrain of celebrity in contemporary contexts. When asked more specifically why

[44] At the time of writing, Kim Kardashian held the fifth most "followed" Instagram account in the world, with 101 million followers. This placed her just behind Beyoncé, Ariana Grande, Taylor Swift and Selena Gomez. Kim Kardashians' half-sister Kylie Jenner was the sixth most followed. Out of the top ten "most followed" Instagram accounts in December 2016, just two were male (Dwayne "the Rock" Johnson and Christiano Ronaldo), again demonstrating the ways in which the platform is largely feminised (Bishop 2016)

they thought the Kardashians and Jenners were such culturally dominant figures, my participants often focussed on their production of beauty and the perceived cultural privileging of this specific type of femininity. In Greater Manchester, a sixth form student expressed this as "the Kardashian look":

> *Danielle:* I think it's just the look to go for at the moment - it's like the Kardashian look - / - and that's what everyone's aiming for so like the clothes that they wear and the make-up and everything, everyone is determined to go for that look

Year ten girls in Essex echoed these sentiments:

> *Emily:* I don't know I just think that men are different from each other, they all look different but the women all look exactly the same. There's like categories and they fit into one of them. Like Selena Gomez and Kylie Jenner, they look exactly alike. It's the look to go for
>
> *Interviewer:* And what is that look?
>
> *Charlie:* Like perfect skin, no flaws on their skin whatsoever
>
> *Emily:* Really silky hair, really styled and nice… and you don't see that many girls who have like a "rock" image, it's all very glamorous and girlie, that's what I see

The Kardashians/Jenners produce their fame and image around their glamour labour, and Emily highlighted that being "glamorous" was a culturally desirable and aspirational trait for many

young British women. Popular discourses surrounding the Kardashians suggest that they are "talentless" or "famous for being famous". While this type of fame was ridiculed by many of my participants, it seemed, in many ways, to make them more ordinary or, in some ways, more accessible to them. Because their fame is largely produced through aesthetic labour and body projects, it constructs their lifestyle as available to anyone who knows how to get it. Fascination with the celebrity lifestyle that is often played out on social media was a central focus in many of my focus group discussions. As was outlined by some of the previous quotes lifted from participants, notions of consumerism, fashion and glamour were inextricably tied to the Kardashian name ("*so like the clothes that they wear and the make-up and everything, everyone is determined to go for that look"*). In this respect, there have been arguments made that the Kardashians (like social media itself) represent a certain democratisation of success and beauty - that beauty previously reserved for supermodels and film stars is now available to anyone (Jones 2015). This argument is heavily linked to social media and the ways in which it blurs the line between celebrity and normalcy. These arguments are, of course, deeply flawed if we note the basic truism that not all women have access to the time or resources (or, indeed, have the inclination) to undergo extensive glamour labour. However, it is this notion that underpins much of Marwick's work on "Instafame" or "microcelebrity" (2015).

Before delving into these avenues of microcelebrity, however, it is important to examine some of the wider theoretical work regarding gender and celebrity and how they can inform my data. Celebrity culture is often trivialised and constructed as a vacuous symbol of everything that is "wrong" with society - it is usually discussed as symbolising excess, frivolity and superficiality (Holmes & Redmond 2010). Despite these pervasive constructions, Marshall (2010) has argued that celebrity culture is actually underpinned by a clear cultural duality: "collectively, we disdain the public focus on celebrity at the same time as we continue to watch, discuss and participate"

(2010: 35)[45]. This contradiction is particularly interesting in relation to the figure of the female celebrity, who is regularly positioned in a number of conflicting and complicated ways. Often, female celebrities are scorned and denigrated – particularly if their fame was obtained through appearing on reality television, or they are perceived to have self-destructive tendencies (Williamson 2010). However, the figure of the female celebrity is often simultaneously positioned as the solution to the presumed problem of girls' disempowerment. Indeed, it is through discourses of female celebrity that popular discussions of feminism are often mapped out (Hamad & Taylor 2015; Weidhase 2015). While some celebrities are celebrated as "good" role models, then, others are rejected as "bad" or a type of "failed" femininity. This maps onto the construction of can-do/at-risk girls (Harris 2004), which are often underpinned by class and racial prejudices (Skeggs 2001; Williamson 2010; Weidhase 2015). While celebrity culture is often trivialised as hollow or unworthy of academic interrogation, others have highlighted the ways in which it can be used to tell us more about the wider make up of our society. For example, Tyler and Bennett argue that "celebrity is an increasingly significant means by which reactionary class attitudes, allegiances and judgements are communicated" (2009: 2). This has also been highlighted by Skeggs and Wood (2012) in their work on reality television (see also Skeggs et. al. 2008). Scholars such as these identify the ways in which celebrity culture can constitute dualistic understandings of femininity (or femininities), and can also speak to wider political attitudes.

This juxtaposition between the "proper" and the "improper" female celebrity has been highlighted by Allen and Mendick (2013) and in my focus groups the figure of "the Kardashian" or "the Jenner" became the site upon which this duality was played out. It became clear that a singular

[45] Indeed, this duality was similar to the contradictions often uncovered during conversations about "the political". While it could not comfortably be rejected entirely by my participants, it was understood as something they could not reasonably claim to relate to or resonate with.

female celebrity can inhabit the figure of both "proper" and "improper" celebrity simultaneously. These two exchanges taken from different focus groups with sixth form students in Greater Manchester are interesting in mapping this complicated dichotomy:

> *Briana:* Yeah they have a lot of Instagram followers because of the photos they put up and it's the lifestyle, like, the rich lifestyle
>
> *Interviewer:* So is it an aspirational lifestyle, do you think?
>
> *Caeleigh:* Yeah, parties and stuff like that
>
> *Briana:* It's not just Kim, it's models as well. Like Taylor Swift and her friends are really followed as well
>
> *Interviewer:* So, are these women portrayed as role models for young people, do you think?
>
> *Adrienne:* I think they're given a bit too much stick. I think Kim Kardashian's been really successful. Like, she's managed to make a brilliant life for herself and whatever. And people, they often just think, you know, that she's only famous because she got her body out and everything but I think that she was successful doing that
>
> *Briana:* They are like businesswomen as well behind the image as well, but you don't see that as much

And:

> *Claire:* The Kardashians, I'm sick of them

Chantelle: Oh God, yeah

Interviewer: That always seems to be the first name that comes up

Bridget: I don't mind some of them, but I cannot stand Kim Kardashian

Mel: She's just, ergh. I hate her so much

Interviewer: Why is that?

Bridget: She's just full of herself

Mel: And she's famous for nothing

Freya: Well she is famous for something but not something you want to be famous for

[Laughs]

Freya: I wouldn't be proud

As highlighted previously, the cultural hegemony of Kim Kardashian was outlined quite often in my focus groups and so she becomes an interesting figure through which to discuss various understandings of celebrity culture and (new) femininity. The two excerpts above from two different focus groups in Greater Manchester highlighted how "the Kardashian" (particularly Kim Kardashian) is broadly understood in two ways. The first excerpt outlined above encapsulated her as a successful businesswoman – a positive embodiment of neoliberal entrepreneurialism. Adrienne understood Kim Kardashian as someone who is "really successful" – she has made "a brilliant life for herself". Adrienne also appeared to allude to Kim Kardashian's sex tape, so that entrepreneurship was understood as being secured through successful use(s) of the body and knowing how to change a "bad thing" (sex) into a "good thing" (money/fame). However, in the second exchange, Kim Kardashian was discussed with disdain, she is "full of herself", "famous

for nothing" or famous for something you wouldn't "want to be famous for". These dualisms were routinely taken up in focus groups, but they were not always taken up separately. Indeed, often they were fulfilled simultaneously - while there was an obvious interest in the lifestyle Kim Kardashian represents, an interest in her clothes, her money, her make-up, she was routinely constructed as shallow, self-involved and famous for either "nothing" or for "something bad". The simultaneous nature of these positions is highlighted below, taken from a conversation with year ten students in Essex:

Billie: The Kardashians are just something to laugh at

Imogen: I do think people want to be like them though

Aisling: I don't think people want to be like them, I think they just want to laugh at them

Billie: I do want their money but that's about it

Charlie: They do look like they have a nice life, and you want that amazing life as well. Everything just seems so easy, like no hard work

Emily: They're a bit self-involved because one of them was doing their make-up on the way to pick their sister up from prison

Imogen: I do think Khloe would be the one I'd want to be if I had to pick out of all of them because they all seem really fake and Khloe just seems a little…less fake and a little more, you know, like normal

Charlie: It's just weird how Kylie is the youngest and she's already living in her own mansion with all these massive cars and stuff and she's like seventeen

Emily: If everything was taken away from them they wouldn't know what to do though. I doubt they'd even know how to work a cooker

Billie: And if we're honest what they're famous for isn't a very good reason so…

Charlie: No it's not

These comments above accurately encapsulate the conflicted relationship that my participants had with celebrity culture, embodied here by the Kardashian-Jenner family. Billie, for example, asserted that they are "just something to laugh at", but also admitted she'd "like their money", shortly before concluding that "what they're famous for isn't a very good reason". Imogen believed that young women want to emulate them, while Aisling disagreed. All five young women, however, clearly had strong opinions that could only be gained from participating within the culture itself. They discussed specific parts of the reality television show *Keeping Up With The Kardashians*, spoke about their material possessions and shared opinions on their individual personalities (*"I do think Khloe is the one I'd be"*). This neatly demonstrated Marshall's assertion that celebrity culture is often underpinned by a strange mix of fascination and disdain. It was a mix that was also present in my participants' discussions of social media - on one hand dismissing it as "fake", a kind of vacuous distraction from real life, and on the other framing it as inextricably important to the construction and maintenance of their identities and relationships. As we can see above, approaches to fame and celebrity in my focus groups (whether positive or negative) specifically centred around consumerism and a particular (extravagant) lifestyle. Indeed, consumption is often closely linked to body projects and beauty production for women, as it is often through successful participation in the market that women undergo such transformations. It is interesting to examine my participants' attitudes towards consumption in a little more detail, particularly as girls and young women are often so closely tied to consumerism in postfeminist neoliberal contexts.

5.3

#Goals: consumerism, micro-celebrity and theories of "democratization"

One of the most interesting interactions in regard to consumption and aspiration came out of a conversation with year ten students in Essex. We were discussing Kim Kardashian and other female celebrities as figures of aspiration (or even "role models") for young women, when the below exchange took place:

> *Charlie*: And on social media now there's thing called #goals
>
> *Billie*: Oh yeah
>
> *Charlie*: And it's used for everything
>
> *Imogen*: Yeah
>
> *Aisling*: Like #relationshipgoals, #bodygoals
>
> *Billie*: I've even seen #foodgoals
>
> *Interviewer*: And what does all of this mean?
>
> *Charlie*: It's like what people want to be. So writing #squadgoals under a picture of the Victoria's Secret models is like "this is what I want my life to be, I want me and all of my friends to look like this and I want to be this"
>
> *Aisling*: It's like you want what they have…so you might post a picture of a boy and a girl looking cute and in love and be like #relationshipgoals

Imogen: Yeah

Interviewer: And what does "goals" mean for you?

Billie: Most of the time when I write it I just mean it as a joke but most people take it seriously

Emily: Yeah most people just want more stuff…#goals is wanting more stuff, wanting a better life and it's like they've lost any sense of appreciation. They don't appreciate what they've got, they want something better, something new. Social media is about what you have in that moment but then as soon as someone else has it, it's not new anymore and it's like a cycle of always wanting new stuff because you see everyone else with new stuff

The students highlighted how they would see pictures, social media posts or read articles and share them with their friends with the caption "goals" or "#goals". As the girls outlined above, the term "goals" is intended to casually express a desire to emulate the relationships, bodies, material acquisition or friendships of (usually, although not exclusively) celebrities. This exchange speaks directly to the ways in which identities are conventionally constructed within consumerist societies ("people just want more stuff"), and how this is usually mapped onto the construction of young femininity and the body as has been previously discussed by Harris (2004) and McRobbie (2009). The understanding here seemed to be that "goal" status for young women was something that must be bought. Victoria's Secret models were provided as a popular embodiment of what young women might call "squad goals". However, this seemed less about an element of friendship, and more about the emulation of a particular aesthetic body type ("I want me and all of my friends to look like this and I want to be this") that could only be achieved through a careful and considered disciplining and regulation of the body. It must also be noted

that Victoria's Secret is a premium lingerie brand, which carefully links performances of idealised femininity with overt displays of sexuality and mass spending power.

However, it is, once again, important to note the "othering" discourse that underpinned much of this discussion. Billie stated that her own utilisation of the word or hashtag "goals" was an offhand joke, but she believed that others took it far more seriously. As no one can really know the true intention behind someone else's social media use, we must be careful in drawing conclusions from this. Indeed, it is unclear whether my participants actually took the trend more seriously than they suggested, or whether the "other" young girls they spoke about were also participating within the culture in a "tongue-in-cheek" way (or, indeed, if both were true simultaneously). However, the term "goals" is something that resonates with previous literature on postfeminism and neoliberal femininity and is worth exploring here.

Charlie highlighted "goals" as exclusive to social media and, in some ways, it is. For example, Emily highlighted social media platforms as opportunities for people to display their material possessions which, in her view, contributes to a cycle of never-ending competition and consumption. Berlant's theory of cruel optimism (2011) is useful here − these participants suggested that what they are supposed to want or aspire to actually produces a cyclical trap of always wanting more ("it's like a cycle of always wanting new stuff because you see everyone else with new stuff"). McRobbie (2015) also discusses this, by highlighting how neoliberal consumer cultures breed what she calls "competitive femininity". However, my focus group data actually raises questions about the claim that young women have uncritically internalised neoliberal discourses of femininity (McMahon & Batsleer 2017), in that many of my participants occasionally *did* raise concerns about and were able to verbalise their discomfort with privileging femininity through displays of consumption and perceived material success. Despite their own

ability to critique the contexts within which they live, these girls expressed concern for those younger than themselves. They seemed especially concerned about the normalisation of cosmetic surgery amongst young women and the wider impact that this might have. Often this wider debate was projected onto the figure of Kylie Jenner, who underwent cosmetic surgery in her teenage years. However, later in the conversation, Emily and Aisling discussed how when *they* were young, the pinnacle of aspirational femininity was Barbie, complicating their concern that the commodification of femininity is something entirely new or related specifically to wider access to social media. As Aisling concisely put it, "It's like when we were younger, Barbie and Ken were #goals and now Kim and Kanye are #goals".

Referring back to the previous section, it seems that much of the existing literature around celebrity and social media suggests that celebrity status itself has become "goals" for many young women. As has been previously highlighted, Marwick (2015: 137) argues that the possibility of building up "thousands, or even hundreds of thousands, of followers can be a motivating force" for young people who use Instagram, suggesting that fame and celebrity are becoming increasingly popular ambitions amongst young people who exist within what she terms an "attention economy". The data that I have previously laid out, however, raises some different questions. None of the girls or young women I spoke to during my research appeared to consider the accumulation of followers a primary (or even secondary) aim of their own social media use. As has been highlighted, many actually seemed entirely uninterested in the idea, claiming that it was shallow or attention-seeking. In the West Midlands, one participant said that she had "a few thousand" followers on her Tumblr blog before she deleted because she had simply "stopped using it". Another participant in the same group said she had 4,000 followers but didn't "really keep track". Indeed, none of my participants seemed particularly passionate about or even marginally concerned with "building up thousands, or even hundreds of thousands, of followers". While this study is small-scale and not generalisable, it highlights some of the wider issues that

underpin much of the existing literature on young women's attitudes and relationships with social media – very few of these works actually examine the attitudes and experiences of young women while analysing the wider structures that impact constructions of (particularly young) femininity.

Despite not noting an interest in "achieving" microcelebrity status themselves, some of my focus group participants *did* highlight the popular or influential nature of some already-established female microcelebrities. In the following two sections I examine some examples of Instafame (Marwick 2015) or microcelebrity (Senft 2008; Marwick 2016) by looking specifically at fitspo pages and beauty vlogs, both of which were highlighted by some of my participants as being particularly abundant and popular on social media:

> *Grace:* There's loads of accounts that are there to like inspire you to get like –
>
> *Farrah:* Like fitspos -
>
> *Grace:* Yeah, loads of fitspos
>
> *Samara:* Motivating you
>
> *Dominique:* And there's a lot of beauty blogs and beauty…things

Following these assertions from sixth formers in the West Midlands, the subsequent section focuses on fitspo pages, before moving on to look at the role of the beauty vlogger in section 5.3.2. Both sections lay out how an examination of these wide-reaching (sub)cultural communities can contribute to previous literatures on neoliberalism, postfeminism and new femininities.

5.3.1

Changing the world one body project at a time: constructions of neoliberal femininity within Instagram's female fitness community

Sixth form students from the West Midlands Grace, Farrah, Samara and Dominique alluded to the ways in which "inspiration" and "motivation" are often framed through discourses of the body and how this is played out on social media (see quote above). The term "fitspo" is interesting here. To contextualise the conversation a little, the students were asked if they believed the visual platforms that we had been speaking about (particularly, in this instance, Instagram) "make young people, particularly young women, more aware of their image", as has been suggested by some academic research studies (Tiggemann & Slater 2013; Fardouly et. al. 2015; Hendrickes et. al. 2017). The link made here between image and fitspo blogs is particularly interesting. "Fitspo" is a derivative of the word "thinspo" or "thinspiration" - a term often used by women who aim to emulate a particular (extremely thin) body type, and use images of other "inspirationally" thin women to make the disciplinary practices taken to undergo this weight loss more bearable. Despite not originating on the Internet, the word "thinspiration" is often closely related to "cyberspace" in that it is quite often linked to pro-anorexia (pro-ana) or pro-bulimia (pro-mia) websites (Norris et. al. 2006; Sharpe et. al. 2011; Knapton 2013). Unpacking the term "fitspo" (or "fitspiration") is a complicated and difficult task. Despite the fact that it is often framed as a healthy counter-narrative, it is impossible to extract it completely from previous discourses of "thinspiration", which themselves can be located within wider cultural attitudes towards women's bodies and a pervasive "tyranny of slenderness" (Bartky 1997; Chernin 1994). When situating the term within wider political and cultural contexts, then, we can see the ways in which the fitspo

phenomenon contributes to the continuing privileging of certain bodies over others. Recent research by Cobb (2016) suggests that discourses of "fitspiration" are often used as a way in which to disguise spaces that are essentially pro-ana or "thinspirational" in nature. For Cobb, then, by reframing extreme disciplinary practices (excessive dieting/exercise) as "fitspo" rather than "thinspo", we do nothing to examine or challenge the widespread surveillance and disciplining of bodies that exists. Against the backdrops of postfeminism and neoliberalism, then, "pro-ana" and the espousal and glorification of thinness become increasingly difficult to separate.

Unlike "thinspo", the term "fitspo" does not immediately suggest intrinsic feminisation. Indeed, some have explored young males' interactions with fitspo content and the impact it has on body satisfaction, exercise behaviour and attitudes towards masculinity (see Palmer 2015). However, a recent quantitative analysis of fitspo content on social media highlighted the ways in which gendered differences manifest in practice. Not only were women more likely to be the subjects of fitspo posts, they were also more likely to have their whole bodies visible, in contrast to men who were more likely to have their faces appear. Women were also more likely to be "sexualised" and have their buttocks emphasised (Carrotte et. al. 2017). Other academics have begun exploring the relationship between fitspo pages and female body image, with some suggesting that Instagram's #fitspiration trend can negatively impact women's self-esteem (Goldstraw and Keegan 2016).

The term "fitspo" is extremely popular on social media platforms and Instagram has a plethora of female fitness gurus that have obtained celebrity-like followings. These "Insta-celebrities" have used the supposed "democratising" nature of social media to create a platform for themselves and build a strong social media following. Jen Selter, who at the time of writing has amassed some 11.5 million followers, is particularly prominent in this community. Emily Skye

(2.1M followers), Izabel Goulart (3.8M followers) and Kayla Itsines (7.3M followers) are other figureheads of the female fitness Instagram community. The comments made by Grace, Farrah and Samara about fitspo blogs being there to "inspire" and "motivate" are interesting because they play into the notion that success and empowerment comes from working on the body. This, in turn, is heavily related to the idea that the body is a project or a process, a canvas to be continually and individually (re)worked upon (Brumberg 1997; Budgeon 2003).[46] Thus, while the body often defines the self, it is also separate from the self; a surface to be constantly developed and improved. Although individualised ideas of the body as a project are becoming more prominent for men in British society (as has been highlighted by some of my participants previously, see also Gill et. al. 2005), it is women who must grapple with the longer socio-cultural history of "a pervasive sense of bodily deficiency" (Bartky 1997).

When looking at the images found on so many of these fitspo pages, one can see that, often, the women inhabiting these spaces fit a particular cultural beauty ideal. The images are often hyper-stylised and always poised - despite operating as fitness blogs, the images rarely depict appearances one might traditionally associate with high intensity workouts and exercises (sweat, dishevelment, a lack of make-up). Rather, the images display the opposite - they are touched up, made up, embodying the pinnacle of normative heterosexualised feminine beauty, while allegedly

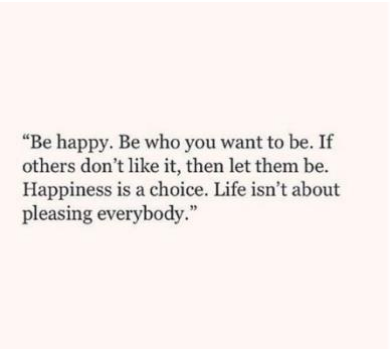
[46] Tying in earlier discussions about issues of the body, celebrity and cultural icons of femininity, it is interesting to note that the notion of the body as a fitness "project" is contemporarily neatly embodied by Khloe Kardashian, who was traditionally framed as "the fat sister" by the mainstream media (Parker 2016). After her divorce in 2016, she underwent a public "body transformation". When she was featured on the front of *Shape* magazine she tweeted "But how f—king crazy that me… 'The fat one' is on the cover of Shape!!! Ha!' She now has a television programme called "Revenge Body", in which she "inspires" people who have been "heartbroken" or otherwise badly treated by others to get their "revenge" through the avenue of losing weight, because "looking good is the best revenge". Messages of fatphobia, empowerment and individual responsibility are all coded into these cultural outputs – this essentially suggests that women are treated badly because their bodies are unacceptable and need to be "fixed". That Khloe Kardashian has amassed book deals, television shows and sponsorships as a result of her "new" body demonstrates our cultural obsession with women "fixing" themselves through weight loss and cosmetic surgery. This is only the latest in a long line of such television shows such as *What Not to Wear, Ten Years Younger* and *How to Look Good Naked* (see Richardson & Locks 2014: 20 – 22).

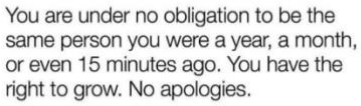
challenging traditional assumptions about "docile" or deficient female bodies. These women also embody temporal and cultural ideals in regard to body type and shape. Jen Selter's "fitness fame", for example, is constructed almost entirely around her "bum selfies". A simple google search for Selter shows how much her identity is constructed around her "perky butt": "How Jen Built Her Booty" (bodybuilding.com 2017), "Instagram fitness model Jen Selter shares butt workout tips" (Buchanan 2016), "Instagram Sensation Jen Selter and Her Glorious Glutes" (Beggs 2015). A conversation with sixth formers in Essex suggested that this this may mirror a wider cultural ideal (and may also intersect with girls' own photo editing practices):

> *Amie:* I've heard rumours about certain girls using apps to make their friends' bums smaller so they look flat
>
> *Interviewer:* Why? Is having a flat bum considered a "bad" thing?
>
> *Amie:* I don't know if it's a bad thing but –
>
> *Numerous:* It is
>
> *Stacey:* Come on, it is

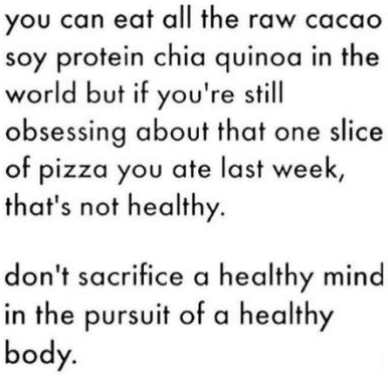
An analysis of the pages of Instagram fitspo celebrities generally reveals the dominance of neoliberal discourses and how they become tied to bodies, which are invariably based on notions of individual empowerment. The pictures of these accounts can broadly be grouped into five main categories: 1) selfies or body pictures (pictures of face, full length body shots or zoomed in pictures of toned body parts, usually stomachs or buttocks), 2) short videos of workouts, 3) 'before and after' ("results") pictures of fans/followers that have transformed their bodies, 4) food pictures/recipes and 5) inspirational quotes. All five of these categories place the body at the forefront of self-improvement. Below are some examples of "inspirational quotes" posted by

Kayla Itsines, a hugely successful online fitness guru who has amassed some 7.3 million followers on her Instagram fitspo account:

1. 

2. 

3.

4. 

Here, we can see how neoliberal discourses of empowerment and health become tied to the physical body. To varying extents, notions of choice, opportunity and happiness underpin the messages of all four of these images. All four quotes suggest that health (both physical and mental) is specifically tied to individual choice, rather than structural inequality. Resource-based inequality and mental health are entirely erased from any discussion(s) about both the mind and body that takes place on mainstream fitspo pages - instead, we are offered easily digestible, non-

political reasons for people being overweight, unhappy or "remaining the same". Image three is particularly interesting - "you can change the world, girl (you really, truly can)" mirrors the kind of "girl power" discourses that have previously been highlighted by Harris (2004). Here, the assumption is that every young woman consuming Kayla Itsines' Instagram page has the resources, power and desire to capitalise on neoliberal discourses of opportunity and choice in order to lose weight, undergo extensive exercise regimes and "renovate" their bodies.

It is possible to see how Foucault's theory of the panopitcon might inform these current debates. The discourses embedded within these images amount to "a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight, will end by *interiorizing* to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself" (1980: 155). If we look at Amie and Stacey's earlier comments, then, we can see how this disciplinary gaze becomes operationalised on social media. These fitspo pages serve to remind those who are consuming them that the body should be disciplined in certain ways – refusing to turn the gaze inward by "correcting" your own body will result in an inability to achieve "appropriate" levels of beauty, health and, ultimately, happiness. These messages aren't always explicit – while fitness gurus such as Selter or Itsines fall short of outright *demanding* that women regulate their bodies, these messages are clearly coded into the images presented in an attempt to govern women's attitudes and behaviours. This, again, speaks to Gill and Elias' (2017) notion of the "surveillant sisterhood" and Winch's (2013) "girlfriend gaze". By promising to "help" women "improve" their lives, fitspo pages attempt to obscure the deeply embedded discourses of surveillance and discipline that underpin their success.

For example, the "inspirational" quotes that are posted are usually sandwiched between photos of Itsines' own perfectly toned stomach and before and after pictures of transformed bodies.[47] This ensures that these messages about self-empowerment and "choosing" to be happy are intimately tied to working on the body, becoming smaller and more toned. The consumer of these images is invariably imagined as a young woman who wishes beyond anything else to "change". Itsines' group of followers are constructed as a monolith - their lives are not affected by structural inequality and they each have the same access to the resources and time required to undergo the change they want (because the only resource required is will and self-control, which everyone seemingly has equal access to). What makes the post which claims "you can change the world, girl" specifically interesting is that it is captioned with a link to the 'Sweat with Kayla' app. This is a subscription-based app, which costs £14.99 per month and generated more revenue than any other fitness app in 2016, including Nike+ and MyFitnessPal (Suddath 2016). A summary of the app describes it as follow:

> Join the world's biggest female fitness community and fast track your journey to Bikini Body Confidence today. Female personal trainer, Kayla Itsines, has touched the lives of millions of women worldwide with her Bikini Body Guides (BBG), helping them achieve their health, lifestyle and fitness goals with exercise and workouts completed in just 28 minutes. For Kayla, the goal isn't weight loss, it's to make women around the world be happy in their own bodies and be bikini body confident.

Here, "changing the world" is linked not to collective political action or problematizing socially structured hierarchies of the body, but to singular transformations of individual bodies. The link

[47] These pictures cannot be reproduced here for copyright reasons. However, the account can be found at https://www.instagram.com/kayla_itsines/?hl=en

takes you to an app that costs money, which suggests that the path to "self-improvement" is not simply embedded in abstract notions of "self-control", "free choice" or "desire to change" but is also closely tied to the market and spending power. That "the goal isn't weight loss" is a common narrative that is frequently coded into the "inspirational quotes" (see image 4 above), but that message is rarely (if ever) coded into the surrounding images (usually selfies/body pictures or "before and after" pictures of consumers). All the "body transformations" featured document an obvious decrease in body size, suggesting that "bikini body confidence" in this context does indeed come from weight loss. This is in line with recent research by Boepple et. al. (2016), who found that the majority of messages found on fitspiration websites promoted exercise and dietary restraint for "appearance-motivated reasons" (p. 132).

Here, we can see the ways in which neoliberal femininities become mainstreamed within particular online communities. Examining online cultures that are specifically devoted to body projects is useful in that it illuminates how neoliberal messages of dedication and "hard-work" become intimately tied to the body. However, it is also possible to see how these pages and images are tangled with contradictions and mixed messages, and how this might impact young women's confusion in regard to their own identities and attitudes. This section has highlighted the ways in which fitspo pages simultaneously insist that health and the body are about more than appearance, while inundating their subscribers with images of very specific types of "successful" bodies. As highlighted earlier, these contradictions are central to the experiences of young women in contemporary contexts (see Griffin et. al. 2013) and I will examine how these inconsistent and ambiguous messages also play out in the online beauty industry. To do this, I examine contemporary contexts of beauty through the figure of the online beauty vlogger.

5.3.2

"Get ready with me": bedrooms and self-branding in the beauty vlogger community

Some of the contradictions exposed in the last section closely resemble discourses surrounding the beauty industry and beauty vloggers. Since Dove's well-known "real beauty" campaign, many beauty companies have adopted discourses rooted in concerns about "natural beauty", "real women" and "embracing diversity". Dove's campaign was originally launched in 2004, and later found a welcoming platform on social media when videos detailing the extent to which images of models are routinely photoshopped and edited went viral. In 2013, one video was labelled "the most viral ad ever", when it received over 114 million views in just one month (Stampler 2013). These messages can, in some ways, be set in stark contrast to the rise and success of many online make-up artists and beauty vloggers, who demonstrate various ways in which to achieve flawless make-up (often based on the "look" of a celebrity). This contradiction has been highlighted by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2017: 275) – as beauty vloggers highlight how to use make-up to contour and reshape one's face, corporate campaigns (at least explicitly) suggest that women resist the cultural demands of the "unobtainable" beauty ideal they helped to create.

Gendered narratives are integral to the figure of the vlogger for a number of reasons. Issues of neoliberal femininity, self-realisation and individual enterprise will be discussed later on. Firstly, I want to return to gendered notions of spatial politics and how this underpins the construction of the female vlogger. Jerslev (2016: 5240) highlights the ways in which successful vloggers continue to make claims about being "ordinary", even after they have been successful in their entrepreneurial endeavours and achieved a microcelebrity status. It is these claims of normalcy

that are integral to their continued success *after* they secure corporate sponsorships and deals. In what is now considered a highly competitive environment, personal branding is central to the construction of YouTube personalities, because it presents a sense of individuality that "can help to differentiate a personal brand from its competitors" (Chen 2013: 334). For make-up vloggers, it appears that one of the ways that this is done is to film their video blogs in their own houses - specifically, their own bedrooms. By filming their vlogs in their bedrooms, young female vloggers not only offer a sense of personal closeness to their watchers, but they also draw upon long established connections between young women, cultural performance and "private" space. McRobbie and Garber's (1976) theory of bedroom culture has previously been outlined, and here I look at the specific ways in which the bedroom has become an important space of cultural production for young female YouTubers, with a specific focus on beauty vloggers.

The bedroom is utilised by female vloggers in a number of different ways. Often, vloggers construct their videos as personal conversation. In one example, British beauty and lifestyle vlogger Zoella discusses her experience of anxiety and panic attacks with her subscribers. In this video, the backdrop is her bedroom and her bed, which is decorated with fairy lights, is visible. Next to her bed are flowers and candles. Despite the fact that her subscribers alone amount to almost 12 million people, the backdrop of the bedroom ensures that the conversation continues to appear as an intimate and personal discussion between friends. She continually uses phrases such as "you guys", establishing a familiar and close relationship that differs from the traditional celebrity/fan dichotomy (Zoella 2014). In other videos, viewers are given make-up tutorials in the vloggers' bedroom (Tanya Burr 2016), shown around bedrooms and make-up collections (Jaclynhill 2015a), or invited to "get ready" with the vlogger (Fancy Vlogs By Gab 2016). There is also a popular trend for young women to do "room tour" videos, where they show the viewer around their bedroom. A search for "bedroom tour" on YouTube at the time of writing produced about 5,650,000 results and showed videos that were largely filmed by girls and young women.

Again, these images draw on discourses that have previously been embedded within the private lives of young British women and their bedrooms. These discourses are interesting when drawing on the work of McRobbie (1991), who has previously looked at the ways in which ideologies of (passive) femininity are mapped onto the bedrooms of teenage girls. We see codes of femininity in the bedrooms on YouTube also, with flowers, pink duvet covers and huge make-up collections presented. Associating femininity with passivity in this contemporary context, however, is far more complex, particularly when we think of the ways in which these bedroom performances are so often the avenue to huge financial success. The bedroom can now become a space of neoliberal entrepreneurship for young women. As Kearney (2007: 127) had previously predicted, the Internet now allows for wider possibilities in regard to the bedroom as a site of cultural production and disrupts the public/private binary that has historically limited girls' experiences and opportunities.

The rise of social media has ensured that bedrooms are no longer entirely private spaces of cultural participation. Lincoln (2012: 189) has argued that, in recent years, the bedroom has inhabited "physical, virtual, public and private spheres". Here, the female beauty vlogger inhabits each of these spaces, often simultaneously. For YouTube make-up/beauty vloggers, the bedroom is often integral. This has occasionally been noted in the limited available literature on the online beauty community. For example, Jeffries (2011: 59) notes that a typical beauty vlog is "under ten minutes long and is filmed…in the…vlogger's bedroom". However, there has been little to no interrogation of this, or the gendered spatial politics that underpins it. As a space, the bedroom is welcoming and personal, and the link between girls' bedrooms, friendships and make-up as a form of cultural performance continues to be drawn. It is important to look at the ways in which these vlogs concurrently subvert and reinforce traditional understandings of femininity. YouTube

make-up tutorials are a good example of glamour labour – the tutorials often require great skill and access to a range of (usually expensive) make-up and equipment such as brushes, blenders and sprays. Within individual videos, beauty is both produced and democratized - the underlying message of popular "celebrity make-up tutorials" is that you can be (or quickly become) anyone.

For the beauty vlogger and their audience, this beauty transformation is acquired through both aesthetic labour and material acquisition, although this is rarely how it is framed within the videos themselves. Often, the discourses embedded within the vlogs suggest that this is something that *anyone* can do. During a "Question & Answer" video on YouTube, Jaclyn Hill[48], a make-up artist and successful vlogger based in Florida, was asked by one of her followers whether or not she ever saw herself being in the (successful) position she found herself in. Her answer ("yes and no") was interesting in terms of looking at the dominant discourses that are embedded in the identities of beauty vloggers and social media microcelebrities more generally:

> …Even when our life was miserable and even when – I mean, we couldn't afford wifi and cable for years. We didn't have those things until we'd been married for like three, three and a half years, we could not afford wifi and cable, that was a very big luxury to us… We had no money to do anything, no money to go anywhere… And I remember, even then, saying to Jon like, 'this is going to get better, things are going to get better, things are going to be amazing one day, like, Jon I'm telling you one day we're going to be driving in a Mercedes, we're going to have a beautiful home, like it's going to happen'. Like I always believed in myself and I always believed in us, and I looked at other people and was like 'well they're working their asses off and they're making it work, so I can

[48] Jaclyn Hill was highlighted by some of my questionnaire respondents as someone who they engaged with.

> too', you know what I'm saying? That's why I'm always saying that to you guys, I'm always trying to remind you, don't look at me and think 'oh my God she's just so lucky or she's just so this', like you can have this too. Like I am not "special", I am not like God's gift to the world… You are God's gift to the world too and you can do the exact same thing as me. You can have a product in Sephora, you can make YouTube videos. You know, I started using a lamp as my lighting and like a $40 camera from China so you can do it too. So to answer that question, did I see myself here, no not really, but at the same time I always believed in myself, I've always believed that hard work pays off and believing in yourself pays off and having a positive attitude pays off (Jaclynhill 2015b)

The quote above is useful in illustrating the ways in which the beauty vlogger becomes the contemporary symbol of neoliberal entrepreneurship. Their creativity has been utilised to carve out a space in the neoliberal market through their own determination and hard work. They also position their bodies as a vehicle with which to achieve this success. Above, Jaclyn Hill's assertion that "anyone" can become a successful, wealthy vlogger by "just having a lamp and a camera" is also closely tied to neoliberal subjectivity. This buys into the notion that everyone has the same access to equal choice and opportunity and suggests that a positive attitude and determination are the only ingredients for success in a neoliberal market. The "rags to riches" narrative rooted in the construction of Jacyln Hill's YouTube persona further adds to the story of self-empowerment. Only a few years ago when she was working in a Mac store, and her husband was a waiter, she had "no money to do anything, no money to go anywhere". That they were unable to pays bills, despite both being in fulltime work, isn't framed as politically problematic - instead, the story is centred around their successful "escape" from this life into the (better) one that they "worked their asses off" for.

Like Zoella, Jaclyn Hill went to great lengths to minimise any distance between herself and her subscribers ("you guys"). Many successful vloggers make money from their videos and academics such as Jerslev (2016) and Banet-Weiser (2017) discuss the tactics employed by vloggers to make this fact seem as non-threatening as possible. Notions of "connectedness, accessibility and intimacy" have been discussed in relation to the videos of Zoella (Jerslev 2016: 5246). Authenticity is also particularly important (p. 5239), and this has been discussed further by Banet-Weiser (2017). Above, Jaclyn Hill used particular devices to construct herself as "one of us". The fact that she makes an enormous amount of money from her YouTube sponsorships, her deals with cosmetics brands and her product placements was dismissed as being of minimal significance. It was not important to this narrative of *self*-empowerment and *self*-improvement. In this regard, then, beauty vloggers are consistent with the wider beauty industry in that they rely on notions of self-improvement and empowerment in order to achieve happiness, which is invariably achieved through the acquisition of money and material possessions and sufficient labour being carried out on the body.

These discourses ensure that there are some parallels to be drawn between the figure of the vlogger and the figure of the Kardashian. Interestingly, Fern, a year eight student from Essex, rejected the Kardashians as role models, but "looks up to" Zoella. Again, this subtly drew on discourses of the "proper" and "improper" celebrity:

> *Fern:* I don't really follow anyone like that [the Kardashians] to be honest. For me, someone that I'd look up to would be like Zoella, because she's really big. I don't really care much about the Kardashians or anything

Interviewer: And Zoella is a YouTuber, isn't she?

Fern: Yeah

Interviewer: And why do you think that she would be a better role model than, say, Kim Kardashian?

Fern: Just because everyone thinks she's really pretty and everyone kind of looks up to her because she's got this image of a perfect lifestyle

Fern distanced herself from the Kardashians by saying that she doesn't follow "anyone like that". Instead, she chose Zoella as someone that she would aspire to be like. The reasons for this are interesting in that she drew on the fact that Zoella is "really pretty" with a "perfect lifestyle", which were almost identical to the reasons people had earlier given for the Kardashians being aspirational figures. When asked if "looking good" was of primary importance, Fern reconsidered this:

Hmm. I think it's more about confidence and fitting in because if you look like your true self it's completely different to if you smothered your face in make-up and were fake. I mean if you wear make-up for confidence and you're happy with it then it's ok but if you're wearing make-up for someone else then it's not as attractive

This echoed the previously discussed "cult(ure) of confidence" that flourishes in neoliberal and postfeminist contexts (Gill and Orgad 2015). In relation to Fern's comments, the perceived dichotomy between Zoella and Kim Kardashian rested again on conceptions of the "natural" versus the "fake" - a "natural" beauty suggested more self-assurance and confidence. For Fern,

then, the production of beauty was only acceptable and appealing insofar as it could be considered as appearing natural - despite the fact that it was no less manufactured than the images of "beauty" that the Kardashians produced. Indeed, Zoealla speaks at length about make-up in her videos, and even has her own make-up and beauty range. She has make-up sponsorships and outlines her own meticulous make-up routines in her videos. When examining two of her "Everyday Makeup Routine" videos (Zoella 2013 and Zoella 2016), the extent of Zoella's beauty production became clear. In her 2013 "everyday" makeup tutorial, she made use of 27 products, costing a total of £536.14. In the 2016 "everyday" tutorial, she made use of 21 products, costing a total of £373.35 (see Appendix 5 for full breakdown of products and costs). For Fern, Zoella's success was understood as a more "natural", less "fake" success than Kim Kardashian's, despite it also being framed around neoliberal discourses of the body. Indeed, both women's strand of celebrity is framed around meticulous beautification, self-branding and individual enterprise.

It seems, then, that YouTube can offer a space for individual "success" and self-actualisation which can be situated within more general shifts in celebrity rhetoric and the image of the "ordinary person". This "success" is perhaps most obvious in regard to financial gain - that YouTube and vloggers are now incredibly important in the marketing strategies of beauty brands is well documented (Kito 2014; Bishop 2016). Lee and Watkins (2016) recently utilised quantitative methods to demonstrate how vloggers tend to positively impact consumers' perceptions of brands, and often heighten their intentions to purchase from said brand. This is consistent with the ways in which brands and vloggers often have extremely close relationships, which demonstrates the ways in which larger (macro) economic and political structures can come to influence (and be influenced by) social media. While (particularly beauty) vlogs are often understood as being personal, non-political and independent, corporations, companies and brands often have a stake in what is being produced (particularly by those with the largest followings).

This challenges the notion that vlogs are non-political, as they are often tied to (and funded/dictated by) big brands.[49]

These examinations of both fitness gurus and beauty vloggers demonstrate the ways in which discourses of postfeminist and neoliberal femininity become operationalized in online communities. However, this still leaves some important questions unanswered. While my participants highlighted the cultural importance of these communities, they were not unanimous proponents of them. When examining my data, then, it became increasingly obvious that there was a disconnect between some academic feminisms and the actual lived experiences of contemporary girlhood as expressed by my participants. My analyses of YouTube videos and Instagram pages demonstrate how these arguments came to be made. Indeed, there often *is* an over-emphasis on individual self-improvement and a repeated centring of the body as a vehicle of personal transformation in these media outputs. However, when looking at the attitudes of my participants towards celebrity culture, micro-celebrity and Instafame, I could not categorically identify any unanimous and uncritical internalisation of these messages. While many participants noted that celebrity culture was an important site of gender discourse and the construction of role models, they sometimes offered some thoughtful criticism of this also.

[49] Despite this, much of the limited available work on beauty vloggers erases the voices of the young people who follow these channels. This erases discussion about them as potential sites of pleasure and community for many young people and this should be a topic of future research. While theory building is important in these contexts, it would also be useful to empirically examine the subcultural lives of the young people who engage with these online communities in order to understand their cultural attraction and significance.

Conclusion

Over the last two chapters, I have examined some of the dominant discourses that have been established in relation to social media, the politics of the body and my participants' attitudes towards them. While chapter four served to establish some of the general themes that underpinned my data (space/surveillance/visibility), this chapter has built on those theories by looking more closely at new femininities and the centrality of the body within processes of digital identity construction. By examining the notion of new femininities, it has been possible to call upon wider structures of postfeminism and neoliberal individualism in order to contextualise some of the prevailing issues that arose from my data. Due to their focus on self-tracking, self-branding and individual enterprise and success, issues of the "quantified self", (micro)celebrity culture and consumerism can all be situated within these wider frameworks. This chapter has served to further highlight some of the ways in which femininities become produced and surveilled on social media, and the many contradictions that underpin the identity construction of girls and young women in contemporary contexts.

These messy and complicated responses can be difficult to unpick. Often, it can be easy to assert that girls and young women have internalised messages of postfeminism and neoliberal femininity due to their ubiquitous nature. However, as I have highlighted towards the end of this chapter, many of my participants offered interesting critiques of these constructions of femininity, particularly in relation to consumer culture. While these criticisms were often made via the lens of social media specifically, rather than the culture more generally, it is still interesting and important to note these micro-level criticisms in order to make sense of girls' and young women's relationship(s) with digital media. Similarly, while it is certainly true that being able to arbitrarily measure or quantify attractiveness or popularity through the acquisition of likes and comments

may contribute to the anxieties of contemporary girlhood (and this is something my participants expressed repeated concern about), there is no reliable evidence to suggest that there is a causal link between the two. Indeed, our cultural, political and ideological obsession with controlling femininity has long predated social media, and it appears that some of the ways in which girls and young women utilise and consume digital media mirrors these longstanding cultural constructions and understandings of both femininity and how it should be performed.

In some ways, it appears that our cultural obsession with relegating femininity to issues of the body has simply found a new platform on certain pockets of social media. In my focus groups, Instagram in particular was considered to be a site upon which the body was routinely "corrected" and surveilled. While it is difficult to convincingly argue that social media has, therefore, *caused* or increased retro-sexist or postfeminist attitudes, my participants sometimes acknowledged the ways in which it had become a vehicle upon which to reproduce them. These chapters highlight some of the key findings from my data. However, they do not offer a "full" or complete story in regard to the ways in which my participants used and negotiated technology in their day-to-day lives. As has been highlighted in chapter two, social media can also act a platform for girls and young women to transgress dominant understandings of femininity, which will be interrogated in more detail in chapters six and seven. Girls' and women's perceived over-investment in their bodies has often been linked to their "low political efficacy" (Heldman 2007) and, consequently, their supposed disengagement from "serious" political issues. This is particularly true of girls and young women, who have often been excluded from both feminist political analyses and wider political spheres. The following two chapters serve to problematise the issues discussed thus far by interrogating my participants' attitudes towards politics and how these attitudes also speak to the themes of space, surveillance and visibility.

Chapter 6: The Culture of Politics I

"It's a man's job"

Investigating understandings of and attitudes towards political people and political space amongst girls and young women in England

In the previous two chapters, I examined the ways in which social media became bound up with discussions around bodies, neoliberal femininity and aesthetic labour during my research. I used my focus group data to examine some of the primary concerns that the young women in my study had regarding the changing nature of space, surveillance and visibility within digital contexts. For these young women, those concerns were often closely tied to physical appearance and a constant (almost mundane) awareness of being looked at. As I have highlighted previously, these dominant understandings become culturally associated with young people's (particularly young women's) perceived apathy in relation to normative political issues, and their assumed lack of concern about structural gender inequality. Some feminists such as Heldman (2007: 1) suggest that dominant discourses of femininity and the body are "negatively related to both internal and external political efficacy". Heldman argues that a continued focus on the body within media outputs (and here we can include social media) ensures that women are less politically active and are more likely to believe that their voice is unimportant. Women's continued under-representation in western (neo)liberal democracies is often cited as proof of these claims (see also Newsom 2011). These approaches, however, construct girls and young women as passive media consumers, and ignore forms of engagement which may fall outside of normative definitions of participation.

In these next two chapters, I interrogate these concerns by examining the wider and far more complex debates that surround them. As I have outlined previously, (young) women's perceived political disinterest is constructed through a range of discourses that marginalise, dismiss and trivialise their interests, concerns and pleasures. In this chapter, then, I revisit traditional conceptions of the political by examining the ways in which political actors and political spaces become gendered and reproduce political inequalities. Here, the term "political" is used in a formal and traditional sense – referring to the sites, artefacts and bodies who largely make up political spaces and institutions. This definition of politics emerged from my discussions with participants – their understanding of what is and is not political closely mirrors these normative definitions discussed in chapter two. Drawing on my focus group data, I examine how the young women in my study understood the normatively political, which they largely associate with politicians, Westminster and performances of debate. This chapter serves to interrogate the spaces that young women are excluded from, in order to further contextualise their supposed retreat to social media. Later in this chapter, I analyse an online campaign (*Elle* magazine's #MoreWomen) which focused on "empowering" more women to enter male-dominated fields such as politics. Within this analysis, I draw on comments from my focus group participants regarding notions of representation and how far corporate campaigns such as #MoreWomen really speak to and address the material concerns of the girls and young women they are aimed at.

In chapter seven, I go on to examine more grassroots uses of social media as a new form of political activism, protest and participation, and critically assess claims that this type of activism signals a decline in "useful" or "productive" political engagement. Here, I focus specifically on the methodological and conceptual limitations of previous research, and how much of this literature serves to reinforce narrow (often masculine) definitions of both power and the political.

Throughout my analysis, then, I attempt to deconstruct the notion of the political and our traditional assumptions regarding political hierarchies, looking specifically at the reasons why it may be problematic to create discursive dichotomies between "real" and "trivial" politics. Rather than assuming that women are less politically engaged as a result of heightened surveillance and scrutiny (as Heldman does), I examine how young women are reconfiguring spaces that are available to them in order to construct and disseminate ideas, opinions and discourses that are more closely aligned with their own experiences of the world.

6.1

Kardashians or Camerons: Binary discourses in discussions of political interest and aspiration amongst girls and young women in England

In chapter two, I highlighted some of the ways in which young people are generally constructed as self-involved and apathetic. Despite these blanket cultural constructions of young people as a whole, it is young women in particular who are most likely to face accusations of political indifference. For example, it has been noted that young women are both less likely to vote than young men (Briggs 2008: 583; Briggs 2014) and less likely to engage in forms of visible political protest (McDowell et. al. 2014: 42). In contrast to their female counterparts, then, young men are still generally considered "key actors in most forms of public unrest" (ibid.). As has been previously noted, political interest is often conflated with normative political participation, which means that it is often measured and quantified by drawing direct conclusions from voter (or protest) turnout statistics. Young women, then, are considered to be less interested in politics because they are, statistically, less likely to engage in normative political activism.

For girls and young women, then, the production of the narcissistic and apolitical (post-)millennial creates a double bind: they are constructed as uninterested and politically apathetic both as a result of their age, and as a result of their gender.[50] As highlighted previously, girls' perceived disengagement with politics has often been situated within wider structures of postfeminism, wherein young women are encouraged to distance themselves from the political struggles of the second-wave feminist movement, and concentrate instead on individualised forms of empowerment and success (Munford 2004). Young women's supposed embrace of consumerism and "self-improvement" over collective political action has meant that girls and young women are *also* subject to critique from the within the feminist movement. McRobbie (2008) argues that the commodification of (white, middle-class) women's "success" in television shows such as *Sex and the City* in the late 1990s and early 2000s led to widespread attempts to marketize and sell a brand of feminism to girls which both celebrates and reproduces consumer capitalist and neoliberal sensibilities. The popularity of shows such as *Sex and the City* with specifically *young* women has been highlighted by feminists concerned about an increasingly "hyper-sexualised" or "raunch" culture (Walter 2010: 92; Levy 2005: 170 – 176).

This alleged depoliticization of feminism is what Dicker and Piepmeier refer to as "free-for-all feminism", wherein fixed and collectivist political goals are deprioritized and replaced by individualist and fluid "beliefs and ideas" (2003: 17). This privileging of the individual over the collective has ensured that young people (and young women in particular) are understood and constructed as too invested in their own projects of self to have strong political commitments and allegiances. During my focus groups, these issues played out in a number of interesting and

[50] This relationship becomes increasingly problematized when considering young women of colour, young queer women or young working-class women who are further marginalised by "formal" political discourses.

complex ways. When asked about their attitudes towards girls' and young women's relationship with politics, a year eight student in Greater Manchester said the following:

> *Susanna:* I think most girls just want to be like the Kardashians now. They want to be really rich and have loads of nice clothes, I don't really think they want to be like David Cameron

Very similar comments were made by year ten students in Essex:

> *Billie:* I don't think they [women] were [interested in politics] in the past. Like my nan, she don't care. She's just a bit like "yeah whatever"[51] but even now I do think girls just want to be famous. And yeah obviously that's not going to happen for everyone, but I think if people do become famous they want to be like the Kardashians or something like that
>
> *Charlie:* Yeah
>
> Interviewer: So you think people have that kind of aspiration rather than a political one?
>
> *All:* Yeah
>
> *Interviewer:* Why do you think that?
>
> *Aisling:* Because celebrities look better!

[51] Billie's comments are also interesting in that they disrupt the political binary that is often asserted between "older" women and "younger" women. Her understanding is not exactly that girls her age are *less* interested in politics, but rather that women across generations have tended to be less "political" for various reasons. This speaks to an important point made by McKay (2015) and Gill (2016) that *political* differences, as opposed to generational ones are more important when examining feminism across time.

Billie: And they're rich as well and people want to be rich

Aisling: Yeah it's the lifestyle I think, and that people just want to be known

Susanna's gendered understanding of both politics and popular culture is fascinating. The belief that masculinity was considered to be the "default setting" in political spaces was something that was repeatedly brought to my attention throughout these discussions, and the contentious relationship between femininity and politics will be explored in more detail in the following section of this chapter. Here, however, it is interesting to note the dichotomy of political culture (as embodied by David Cameron) and celebrity/consumer culture (as embodied by Kim Kardashian). This isn't altogether surprising, as it plays into long-held assumptions regarding both femininity and wider popular/celebrity cultures as being frivolous, trivial and entirely apolitical. However, in their study of celebrity and youth aspiration, Mendick et. al. (2015) found that the notion of "celebrity" was an incredibly important terrain for young people in both their individual identity constructions and in regard to informing their wider understandings of notions such as success and/or failure. I would argue that this was particularly true for (some of) the young women in my study. Occasionally, women's aspiration was seen primarily through the lens of consumer/celebrity cultures, and the comments above suggested that this understanding led some of my participants to depoliticise and dismiss their peers as uninterested in anything *but* fame, glamour and celebrity.

Mapping women's political disinterest onto celebrity and/or cultural figures is not new. Both McRobbie (2008) and Levy (2005: 195) have highlighted Carrie Bradshaw's[52] problematic position as an aspirational figure for women in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These criticisms

[52] Carrie Bradshaw was the leading character in the television programme *Sex and the City*, which ran from 1998 – 2004.

have largely been made through the lens of what McRobbie calls the "feminine masquerade" – i.e. Bradshaw's "spectacular femininity", her girlishness and her over-investment in fashion and consumption, which "surely undercut[s] any authority she might have as a writer on a reputable newspaper" (2008: 541). It is interesting to note how these readings of cultural female figures were echoed so clearly in my own research in relation to women's position in "serious" political spheres. In Greater Manchester, year eight students discussed the dichotomy between "the feminine masquerade" and politics. Many believed that women performing femininity in this way while present in political space(s) would be ridiculed and not taken seriously. Within these conversations, performing femininity was discussed primarily through the lens of beautification, i.e. wearing make-up and investing "too much" in one's physical appearance. Jenna, a year eight student from Greater Manchester said, "If you did that in the Houses of Parliament, they'd just think you were just like...some *gir*l, like, wandering in off the streets". Again, these discussions continued to draw on examples from celebrity culture, mapping women's perceived lack of authority and power onto the specific cultural figure of the Kardashian. For example, a student named Harriet said the following:

> I feel like I'm quite open-minded but if I had someone who looked like, say, Kim Kardashian in power I wouldn't take them seriously at all. And I think you don't make a conscious decision to judge somebody like that, you just do

Harriet's comments were interesting. She was honest in her admission that she judged women who performed the type of "excessive" femininity examined in chapter five. She admitted that she didn't take them seriously and understood them as existing outside the realms of "power". This is interesting considering that when I asked every single group who they considered to be the most "powerful women in the public eye", they *all* named Kim Kardashian. Hall et. al. (2013:

19) have noted the importance of consumer and celebrity cultures in constructing new identities, suggesting that "these 'soft' forms of power are as effective in changing social attitudes as are 'hard' forms of power'". Harriet's comments suggested that while my participants understood celebrity women as powerful within their own lives and experiences, they still conceived of "real" power as existing outside of their reach. It also demonstrated how discourses of femininity are so often situated within the logic of celebrity culture. However, she also acknowledged that her judgements of women are not necessarily intentional: "I think you don't make a conscious decision to judge somebody, you just do". This can be read two ways. Here, Harriet could have been suggesting that there is some innate reason as to why she judges women differently to men – that her understandings of gender are biologically determined. However, she could have also been suggesting that her judgements were not entirely logical, in the sense that she doesn't feel she has made a "conscious decision" to feel this way, she "just does". This speaks to the ways in which discourses of gender inform our understandings of the world, and structure our perceptions of bodies and space. Many of my participants found women's "difficult" relationship with politics hard to explain or their attitudes hard to justify or substantiate. Often, students would acknowledge that women are less present in political spaces but, notwithstanding the previous comments laid out above, were generally reluctant to categorically state that women are *essentially* less interested in politics than men. When referring to a lack of women MPs, for example, Aisling (year ten, Essex) stated: "I think women definitely are interested, it's just...I don't know, I don't really know how to explain it".

In the following section and subsection, I interrogate my focus groups in more detail, and lay out some of my data to demonstrate how women generally (and femininity specifically) were understood by my participants in relation to political spheres. I examine some of the obstacles girls and young women face in relation to gaining access to political space, and how this contributed to my participants' belief that politics is "not for them".

6.2

"What are you shouting at each other for?!": exploring understandings of and attitudes towards "political space" amongst girls and young women in England

Amongst my participants, politics was broadly understood as revolving around political people (prominent politicians, usually male party leaders) and political spaces (Westminster). In line with previous research on young people's attitudes towards the political (see Henn et. al. 2005), my participants' understanding of politics operated within a rigidly prescriptive framework – the term was most often related to Prime Ministers, parliamentary debates, and party manifestos. Significantly, it was also a term they perceived to be heavily gendered. The discussion below amongst year ten students in Essex illustrated some common issues that were raised in various focus groups regarding this gendering of the political:

> *Darcy:* I think people see it as like…they see it as a man's job sort of thing. Not necessarily at our age because I think if you asked a boy about politics they probably wouldn't know much either, but as you get older yeah, I think it's seen as a man's job
>
> *Imogen:* I don't know, in my PD class they know everything! I'm in the same class as them but somehow they've learnt more stuff than I have. Like when Sir was asking us all these questions, all the boys hands were up and all the girls were sitting there like…
>
> […]

Darcy: Yeah it is so confusing - they [politicians] all just shout at each other and insult each other and I just don't understand it

Charlie: Yeah like when you have to watch those debate things it's like confusing because they're just shouting

Billie: Yeah

Emily: And it's like "what are you shouting at each other for?!"

Charlie: And if you don't already know what each party is arguing against or for or whatever, it's just like a big blur, it's impossible to follow and you don't know what's going on

Billie: What makes me laugh when they're arguing is their hand gestures, it makes me laugh so much

The participants above clearly conceived of politics as a masculine space. This was highlighted firstly and most obviously by Darcy, who twice asserted that politics is "a man's job". This was developed further by Imogen's assertion that the boys in her class were more likely to participate in political conversations during Personal Development (PD) lessons. This is in line with previous research which suggests that young men are more likely to both engage in public speaking and to believe that they "know a lot" about politics (Lawless & Fox 2013: 13). The socialisation that underpins these claims suggests that culturally ingrained views of masculinity and femininity ensure that young women are far less likely than young men to speak out in public space about political issues (p. 6). Beyond this, however, Darcy, Charlie, Imogen and Billie also seemed to draw attention to what has been termed the "institutionalised masculinity" that dominates normative political space in Britain. This understanding of the Westminster system as aggressive, adversarial and hyper-masculine has been a key criticism levelled at the British political process,

particularly by feminist scholars (see Shaw 2000; Lovenduski 2005). Elsewhere, Lovenduski (2014) highlights how this "institutionalised masculinity" comes to be especially ritualised during PMQs, arguing that the "standards of good performance at PMQs [are] designed by and are best suited to particular kinds of male political actor… Its performance standard is one saturated with ideals of traditional masculinity and is difficult for most women and some men to emulate".

Interestingly, however, a recent study of PMQs by Bates et. al. (2014: 274) suggests that the House of Commons has arguably become more raucous "precisely at the time when there is a sharp increase in female representation". They observe a sharp increase in interruptions from 1997 – a year when the number of female MPs almost doubled. Despite this, the authors also note that women MPs remain less likely to ask polarising, adversarial questions and suggest that the presence of more women in the chamber may have led male members to intensify or increase performances of hyper-masculinity. This response to women's bodies in traditionally masculine spaces has been explored elsewhere. Phipps (2016c), for example, examines "middle-class laddism" in higher education, and outlines the way in which sexist practices and behaviours are often employed in an attempt to reassert male superiority. This exploration of "middle-class laddism" disturbs prevailing cultural stereotypes surrounding working-class masculinity and sexist behaviours (see also Phipps 2014b) and highlights the ways in which middle- and upper-class masculinities often operate to reclaim power and space from women, who are regularly said to be "winning the battle of the sexes" (Phipps and Young 2015: 57). These theorisations are also interesting in relation to political spaces, where we can arguably see increased performances of hyper-masculinity just as women's physical representation is increasing.

These (gendered) performances so frequently seen in the House of Commons seemed alien to my participants, who often referred to the antagonism that so frequently dominates public images of

Westminster. This exclusionary nature of British political protocol was also highlighted by a group of sixth formers in Greater Manchester, who referred to recent events to highlight the issue (*Claire*: …didn't someone get told off for clapping?). Claire highlighted how, in May 2015, the Speaker of the House, John Bercow, instructed new SNP MPs not to clap, stating that "the convention that we don't clap in this chamber is very, very, very long-established and widely respected" (Riley-Smith 2015). Demanding that the swathe of SNP politicians that had been recently elected "show some respect for the traditions of this chamber of the House of Commons" highlighted how rigidly bodies are policed in normatively political spaces, and how absurd and out of touch this seemed to my participants. Bercow's remarks imply that doing something for a "very, very, very long" time within a political space is enough of a reason to continue doing it, mirroring the understandings of many of my participants, who conceptualised Westminster as a fixed, static and "unchangeable" space. This conceptualisation of Westminster as unchanging is particularly interesting when one considers that fixed elections actually ensure that the physical make-up of parliament is (in some ways) adjusted at least every five years. Despite this, the House of Commons as a space (and the culture within it) were continually discussed as almost "standing still", rooted in the past, unable and unwilling to change. In Essex, for example, year eight Bonnie referred to the House of Commons as being "like a museum". After Claire highlighted the clapping incident, another participant in Greater Manchester named Mel said she understood these protocols as a way of telling "outsiders" that Westminster is "basically…reserved for the upper class". The "traditions" that are signaled by certain parliamentary protocols and rituals became understood as ideological tactics, which are routinely employed to exclude and "ward off" those whose presence is perceived to threaten and challenge the existing status quo.[53]

[53] This system of exclusion was highlighted by Labour MP Laura Pidcock, when she made her maiden speech in June 2017. Of the House of Commons she said "This building is intimidating. It reeks of the establishment and of power. Its systems are confusing – some may say archaic – and it was built at a time when my class and my sex would have been denied a place within it because we are deemed unworthy. And I believe that the intimidating nature of this place is not accidental. The clothes, the language, the obsession with hierarchies, control and domination is symbolic of the system at large" (Khan 2017)

In a focus group in the West Midlands, participants discussed their own disinterest in entering political spheres, drawing on the aforementioned perceptions of political space and political people as reasons for this:

> *Fay:* So like if you took me as like an example. Ethnic, hasn't gone to a private school, hasn't gone to a grammar school, a woman, a place at a redbrick university yeah but not Oxbridge…like, you immediately feel intimidated by these guys that have gone to Eton, that have gone to Oxbridge, that have gone to Harrow. And they're coming up through the ranks because their dads were politicians and they own this amount of money and you come in and you really *feel* like a minority. And then in the press they treat you the way they do, it's just, is it worth it?
>
> *Kimberley:* Yeah. In their eyes, you're inferior to them
>
> […]
>
> *Nadia:* Yeah. I think you'd struggle to actually get anything done. Like I think you'd waste so much time just defending your reputation –
>
> *Fay:* Trying not to be a joke
>
> *Nadia:* - And being seen a certain way that –
>
> *Fay:* You have to build something up first
>
> *Interviewer:* So someone just said being seen as a "joke" –
>
> *Fay:* A joke yeah
>
> *Kimberley:* You'd be like a novelty act, like "look at this, look at them trying to get through"

Fay: And then they throw what you're wearing into it

This group of sixth form students in the West Midlands outlined their reasons for rejecting a career in the traditional political mold. Despite some of these students wishing to pursue Political Science or International Relations at university, none of them would have considered pursuing politics as a career, especially not in Westminster. They noticed and acknowledged the gendered and racialized political coverage that dominated the mainstream media, and explicitly provided it as a reason for avoiding parliamentary party politics. They also hinted at the emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) that would be demanded of them in order to exist within these political spaces. They suggested that they would find it difficult to "actually get anything done", believing that they would need to allocate a lot of time and emotional resources to negotiating sexism, racism and class/educational differences before being able to carry out any aspects of a political job. Fay, as a young woman of colour, highlighted the multiple intersecting barriers that she would face in participating fully in a political space such as Westminster. She also pointed out the hostile press coverage that was often levelled towards women, specifically women of colour, in political space. It is important here to point towards the misogynoir (Bailey 2010) that has been levelled at Diane Abbott, the highest profile Black woman in British politics, across her political career (Minamore 2016; Goodfellow 2017). These abuses have arguably become more ubiquitous with the rise of social media (Dhrodia 2017), and it has been suggested that such abuse (particularly online abuse or "trolling") puts young women off entering politics (Ryall 2017; Mason 2017). While the negative media portrayal of women as political candidates generally (and feminist women specifically) has been well documented in existing academic literature (Braden 1996; Baker Beck 1998; Carlin & Winfrey 2009; Wasburn & Wasburn 2011), it is also important to note the acutely racialized sexism that is faced by non-white women in political space, further excluding them from normative political processes (see Puwar 2004; Brown & Gershon 2016; Amnesty International UK).

6.2.1

"Whenever you see them on the news it's always men": exploring understandings of and attitudes towards "political people" amongst girls and young women in England

When asked if they thought that they, or any of their female friends, might consider a career in politics the answers across all groups were almost always negative. Some of the reasons for this have already been highlighted above by Fay, Kimberley and Nadia. Fay touched upon the treatment of women politicians in the mainstream media, and how this contributed to the construction of the default politician as white, privately educated and male. This was also touched upon by Ayesha, a year eight student from Essex:

> *Ayesha:* I don't think many girls would [go into politics]
>
> *Interviewer:* Why do you think that?
>
> *Ayesha:* I don't know. Whenever you see them on the news it's mostly men

This figure of the default politician is interesting. When I asked who they thought of when I said the term "politician", almost all of my groups immediately made reference to David Cameron and/or Ed Miliband. This is unsurprising considering they were, at the time, the leaders of the two biggest political parties in British politics (Conservatives and Labour respectively). When my participants went on to name other politicians, they would usually list Nick Clegg, Nigel Farage or even Barack Obama. In Essex, rather than offer any specific name, sixth former Chloe

simply said "A man. Middle aged. Always". When pushed on whether they could name any *women* in politics, many groups struggled to immediately come up with anyone except Margaret Thatcher. Some groups referred to Nicola Sturgeon, but perhaps less than expected considering the time the focus groups were held (just before and just after the general election of 2015). Indeed, despite being widely positioned in the mainstream press at the time as a key player in British politics (Deerin 2015), only one focus group (in the West Midlands) named her before being specifically asked if they could name any *female* politicians. Even then, she was often referred to as "the SNP woman" (Emi in the West Midlands) or "the one from Scotland" (Stacey in Essex). This was a common occurrence when discussing female politicians – my participants were often unable to name them directly or fully:

> "The Welsh lady one" (Caeleigh, sixth form, Greater Manchester)
>
> "Does that Hillary person count?" (Bridget, sixth form, Greater Manchester)
>
> "The one who does Bethnal Green and Bow" (Jasmine, sixth form, Essex)
>
> "What's that woman in Scotland?" (Zara, year eight, Greater Manchester)
>
> "Who's that one who was on *I'm A Celebrity?"* (Nicki, year eight, Essex)

In Essex, sixth former Lily was surprised by her own inability to name and discuss women in British politics: "Wow, we find it so much easier to name the guys". These responses were interesting in that they further demonstrated how both political space *and* the figure of the politician become gendered (and, indeed, classed and racialized). This was further complexified by noticing that some focus groups mentioned female politicians in other parts of the conversation, but when specifically asked who they thought of when the term "politician" was mentioned, could not (or at least *did* not) name any women except Margaret Thatcher. The

following exchange from a focus group with sixth formers in the West Midlands provides an example of this:

> *Interviewer:* So when I say "politician" who do you think of?
>
> *Emi:* Specifically women? Just Margaret Thatcher…
>
> *Charlotte:* Yeah, Thatcher and she's dead
>
> *Emi:* The milk snatcher!
>
> *Charlotte:* That's it, just Thatcher

This exchange was interesting in that, elsewhere in the conversation, the participants of this focus group mentioned the names of Theresa May, Angela Merkel and Natalie Bennet. However, there seemed to be something specific about the term "politician" that was reserved for a very specific "type" of political actor. It is clear from the responses of my participants that they understood men and, beyond this, *masculinity*, to be the default in political spaces. The embodiment of female politicians was an interesting topic, as "successful" female politicians such as Margaret Thatcher were discussed in terms of their masculinisation[54]. For example, Emi in the West Midlands recalled that Margaret Thatcher had undergone speech training to lower the pitch of her voice in an attempt to present as less feminine. While this is a particularly famous instance of the self-masculinisation of female politicians, Baxter (2012) has highlighted the ways in which numerous

[54] Within political institutions, it is important to understand gender as a "scale of attributes ranging from masculinity to femininity". While men are more likely than women to perform "masculine" characteristics, these attributes do not belong exclusively to men. Similarly, feminine characteristics do not belong exclusively to women (Lovenduski 2005: 20). This was most often highlighted by my participants in relation to Margaret Thatcher's perceived "masculinity". However, there were also interesting conversations in Greater Manchester which briefly touched upon the ways in which Ed Miliband was depicted in the popular press as a figure who seemed to be read as more "feminine" (and, therefore, more often ridiculed) than other male political leaders.

“senior” women have regulated and “corrected” their language in order to be considered less feminine and, therefore, taken more seriously in male-dominated arenas (see Cameron 1995 for a further discussion). It is interesting that Thatcher, who was largely understood by my participants as a characteristically “masculine” figure, was often the most likely to be associated directly with the term “politician”.

The sections laid out thus far in this chapter have served to examine the ways in which my participants understood and negotiated the term “politics”. The discussions that took place during my focus groups demonstrated some of the ways in which the girls and young women in my study felt excluded from spaces dedicated to politics and public office. My participants’ comments highlighted the ways in which political space cannot be conceived of as neutral, but rather as deeply infused with meaning, power and tradition. Indeed, despite equality legislation now ensuring women’s theoretical “equality”, women’s historical exclusion from political space continues to operate, as male-centred institutional practices which evolved during women’s absence continue to “evolve without comment or protest” (Lovenduski 2005: 27). This was highlighted by my participants, who touched upon some of the ways in which certain bodies are almost “naturally” privileged in specific (political) spaces, while others become understood as an aberration (see also Lister 1997: 70 – 71). This contributed to their own dismissals of “politics” as a kind of institution that did not (and, in many ways, could not) speak to them.

As these discussions are not *directly* associated with my participants’ use of social media, I have kept this discussion shorter than it may otherwise have been. I have provided further snippets of my focus group data in relation to these issues in Appendix 6, in order to provide a more thorough overview of my participants’ attitudes and understandings of politics, political space and political people. However, briefly signposting these discussions serves a specific purpose in relation to my

wider thesis: in chapter four, I highlighted some of the ways in which contemporary young women largely carve out space(s) for themselves online. I highlighted how this can be located within an extended reading of bedroom cultures, wherein girls and young women are excluded from public spaces and, therefore, locate sites of identity construction elsewhere. The discussions laid out so far in this chapter have served to contextualise this further – rather than simply assuming that girls and young women continue to feel excluded from the public sphere, I have outlined (some of) their own experiences and explanations of these barriers.

There was a general agreement within my focus groups that they would like to see more political representation of women, ethnic minorities and those from more varied class and educational backgrounds. Some of these incidences have been outlined above (again, see Appendix 6 for further examples). For example, in Essex, there was some discussion amongst year tens regarding the need for more visible young people and more people from a range of socio-economic backgrounds in political spaces:

> *Billie*: It would help if there were more people that relate to us and we relate to them…like if there were younger people or more women or people from the same background as us because that's definitely not how it is now

There was a general enthusiasm across my groups for diversifying the figure of the politician and many agreed that this would encourage more young people to get involved in politics. In Greater Manchester, one year eight student named Zaina received widespread agreement when she said that she "really hoped" that more women would enter politics as time went on. During these conversations, it was interesting to see the ways in which young women encouraged political or cultural pushes to include women in male-dominated spaces, despite their own acknowledgement

of the discursive gendered barriers that continue to operate, and their own reluctance to participate within those spaces themselves. However, my participants also occasionally expressed concern about simplistically assuming that including "more women" in politics always meant better outcomes for women in general. In the next section, I look at popular discourses which aim to encourage more women to "step up" and get involved in politics. I look at the ways in which businesses, organisations and corporations have utilised social media to champion and campaign for "more women". Building on the discussions laid out here, I analyse *Elle* magazine's #MoreWomen campaign alongside my own focus group data in order to examine how far corporate campaigns such as these really serve the interests of those they claim to represent.

6.3

#MoreWomen: addressing online approaches to issues of representation within normative conceptions of "the political"

In 2015, *Elle* magazine launched an online campaign which aimed to highlight how few women hold "important" roles in both politics and the media. The campaign, entitled #MoreWomen, involved circulating photos and videos in which men had been photoshopped out of (amongst other places) the House of Commons, the UN, MaterChef finals, the G20 Summit, University Challenge teams and Question Time panels. The results were clearly designed to shock: when men are removed from such images, rooms that are near-full suddenly appear near-empty. The campaign aimed to encourage more women to enter these male-dominated spheres by targeting young women and claiming that "there's more room for us at the top". In this section, I will examine how far this campaign can speak to the concerns of the participants in my focus groups who were largely passionate about seeing more women in political positions but were often

simultaneously sceptical that this was enough to fully disrupt exclusionary and alienating political cultures. Indeed, campaigns such as #MoreWomen often ignore dominant political cultures and ensure a one-dimensional understanding of representation by putting forward a monolithic understanding of "woman" and "womanhood" which has long been challenged, primarily by Black and postcolonial feminists and queer theorists (see hooks 1981; Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 2000; Halberstam 1998). Campaigns like #MoreWomen highlight gender as the only axis of oppression worth noting, and ignore other inequalities surrounding 'race', ethnicity, social class, sexuality, age and (dis)ability. The campaign also ignored that women in normatively powerful positions have been (and continue to be) complicit in the oppression of working-class women, women of colour, transwomen, immigrant women, queer women, disabled women, sex workers and other marginalised groups[55].

While *Elle's* campaign claimed to challenge the stereotype that "successful women are…fierce individualists concerned with their own success", it continued to draw on neoliberal "can-do", "top girl" rhetoric that has been highlighted as problematic by the likes of Harris (2004) and McRobbie (2007).[56] *Elle* stated that the campaign aimed to "celebrate the global power of women's collectives in a playful, engaging way" and encouraged women to "support and empower each other" (Elle UK 2015a). By drawing on the rhetoric of empowerment, *Elle* invoked discourses that erased or marginalised structural inequalities that exist along a wide range of axes,

[55] There are many women who are in positions of power and visibility who are complicit in the reproduction of class and racial inequalities and structural violence against women. As hooks (The New School 2014) argues, "patriarchy has no gender, and people's allegiance to patriarchy isn't static". Women are often able to utilise (particularly white supremacist) patriarchy for their own ends while simultaneously employing feminist rhetoric for other purposes/means.

[56] This is largely consistent with the rhetoric of women's beauty and lifestyle magazines, which occasionally appropriates broadly feminist language but tends to have a problematic relationship with feminist politics in a wider sense. Female beauty magazines, such as *Elle*, *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan* often present specific constructions of (usually white, heterosexual, middle-class) femininity within their publications (Budgeon & Currie 1995). These constructions often rely on discourses of neoliberal, consumer "girl power" and focus disproportionately on "the body", often relating "success" to corporate power and "fashion".

and both depoliticised and fetishized feminism as "fun" and "playful". The strap line for the campaign was "Let's not let women be airbrushed out of history, or prevented from staking a claim on the future" (Elle UK 2015b) – seemingly an ironic take on women's magazines' traditional tendency to heavily airbrush the women featured on their pages.

The campaign was geared towards an online audience and employed rhetorical devices that clearly capitalised on girls' and young women's dominance of social media. It did this not by simply *existing* online, but by continually drawing on discourses of digital girlhood, some of which have been outlined in chapters four and five. The campaign borrowed largely from popular online trends, outputs and terminology. For instance, *Elle* called #MoreWomen a "celebration of today's new 'girl squads'" (Elle UK 2015a). If one returns to the discussion laid out in chapter five, it is possible to see how *Elle* drew on the celebrity discourse that often circulates online in order to "glamorise" a particular understanding of "success".[57] The term "girl squad" was chosen purposefully: the popularity of the term and its cultural association with female celebrities such as Taylor Swift (Forrester 2016) ensured that the campaign conjured a very specific *type* of "powerful" femininity. At the heart of the girl squad trend is the celebrification and commercialisation of female friendship (see London 2015). This was touched upon by participants in Essex in chapter five, who suggested that positioning these celebrity "squads" as

[57] This assumption that "attracting" women to male-dominated spheres must be done through the "glamorisation" of said careers is not new; in fact, there have been a number of incidents that have attempted to "entice" women into male-dominated professional spaces by using more explicit glamorisation tactics. In 2014, Conservative MP Esther McVey responded to a controversial *Daily Mail* headline entitled 'The Downing Street Catwalk' by saying it was "fine if it inspired girls to go into politics" (Williams & Letts 2014). In 2015, the Labour Party controversially attempted to "attract" women voters with a pink campaign bus, which was denounced as "sexist" and "patronising" by a number of the target demographic (Richards 2015). In December 2015, IBM were forced to discontinue their "Hack a Hairdryer" campaign, which had intended to encourage more women to enter STEM careers, after a huge social media backlash from women in the industry (Cresci 2015). Just two months earlier, EDF received similar criticism for its campaign "Pretty Curious" (Lock and Niemtus 2015).

“aspirational” (or “#goals”) for young women intersected with dominant discourses of consumer culture.

As highlighted earlier in this thesis, McRobbie (2009) has outlined how taking feminism “into account” is an important feature of postfeminism. We can see this operating here, albeit in a slightly different way. *Elle’s* #MoreWomen did more than take feminism into account. Indeed, it openly declared itself a feminist campaign, and it dealt with the broadly feminist issue of representation. However, the feminism that was depicted was non-threatening and “playful” – women were called upon to simply enter male-dominated spheres and occupy the space that was waiting for them “at the top”. There was no discussion of wider structures of power, or the hostile environments discussed earlier in this chapter, which often work to exclude girls and women. Rather than simply taking feminism “into account” it *co-opted* feminism and rebranded it as fun, innocuous and fashionable. Indeed, this seems to be one of the fundamental differences between postfeminism and what has more recently been termed “neoliberal feminism” (Rottenberg 2014; Oksala 2011). While postfeminism might occasionally draw on broadly feminist notions of female empowerment, it tends to dismiss or historicize the need for an actual feminist movement or label (Tasker & Negra 2007: 1). Neoliberal feminism, on the other hand, tends to explicitly *claim* the feminist title while doing little to challenge (or even acknowledge) the neoliberal paradigm within which much gendered inequality flourishes. Neoliberal feminism tends to focus its efforts on encouraging women to “get to the top”, to “take a seat at the table”, to “lean in” (see, for example, Sandberg 2013) and *Elle’*s #MoreWomen appeared to be a specific example of this.

There is another interesting point to be made about #MoreWomen and “taking feminism into account”. McRobbie claims that popular culture regularly pays lip service to broadly feminist

notions ("empowerment", "girl power") while simultaneously constructing the movement itself as irrelevant and out of touch. It has been noted above that this specific campaign did *more* than take feminism into account, and actively claimed and promoted the feminist title. However, it is interesting to utilise this theory of "taking-into-account" when examining the ways in which #MoreWoman seemed to specifically promote *collectivism*. One of the biggest criticisms of neoliberal feminism (and, indeed, postfeminism) is that they operate as individualistic discourses that encourage self-empowerment and individual projects of self (as has been discussed previously). *Elle's* campaign seemingly responded to these criticisms by drawing on collectivist language: the campaign website spoke of "women's collectives", "girl squads" and women "empowering" *one another* rather than specifically "empowering" themselves. However, this rhetoric seemingly still operated to champion and elevate specific notions of femininity. Within this campaign, "collectivism" amounted to individual acts of "support" between groups of friends and like-minded women, rather than being understood as and rooted within a specific left-wing political (and economic) ideology. Similarly, "collectivism" was simplistically interpreted as support for *any* ("successful") woman. This was neatly summed up by their campaign call to arms: "Please post a photo of yourself with your powerful group of women on Instagram/Twitter/FB, along with this pledge: 'One woman's success makes EVERY WOMAN STRONGER. More women for #morewomen #ELLEFeminism" (Elle UK 2015a). Here, I will examine this claim by drawing on my focus group data and analysing girls' and young women's complex attitudes towards the idea that "one woman's success makes EVERY WOMAN STRONGER". I scrutinise my participants' attitudes towards claims such as these, by highlighting the ways in which they generally welcomed the idea of more women in politics, but sometimes raised concerns about its *inherent* ability to challenge dominant structures.

Despite their overwhelming rejection of political career paths for themselves, there was generally a passionate belief amongst my participants that more women in parliament would be a positive step. In a sixth form focus group in the West Midlands the following was said:

> *Deana:* Wow, it would be nice if there was 50% women in parliament. I think that would inspire a lot of people…it would be amazing, more people would be interested. I think there's a huge deficit…like now coming up to the general election there's so many tweets and Tumblr posts from young people. They care. And if there was like 50% or more of women in the public eye I think a lot more people would vote especially amongst minority groups and politics would be a much bigger issue
>
> *Charlotte:* Yeah I actually agree with that

Here, Deana and Charlotte discussed the merits of descriptive representation – the notion that elected representatives will represent the interests of demographic(s) they are drawn from (Pitkin 1967). They suggested that the descriptive characteristics of elected officials (specifically gender, 'race' and ethnicity) are politically significant. It was, perhaps, unsurprising that many of my focus group conversations around politics focused on concepts of descriptive representation and often championed notions of numerical gender parity in parliament. As has been highlighted earlier in this section, there was a heavy focus on such quantitative representation in both traditional forms of media and digital campaigns at the time the focus groups took place. However, some of my participants questioned the usefulness of simply putting women in positions of power and assuming it is qualitatively "different", often using Margaret Thatcher as

an example.[58] Year eight students in Greater Manchester, for example, had the following conversation:

> *Sarah-Louise*: … it's like the only major female politician that I'm aware of is Margaret Thatcher and she was really bad so –
>
> *Jenna*: Yeah I think that she just ruined it for the women there. She just like…trashed it up
>
> *Interviewer*: Do you think Thatcher's legacy has specifically damaged women in politics?
>
> *Sarah-Louise*: Yeah!
>
> *Tina*: Not really. Because it doesn't speak for all women or how women see politics
>
> *Johanna*: I wouldn't think that it would really have a massive impact on women because a lot of men still helped her run the country so it wasn't all her fault

Here, Sarah-Louise, Jenna, Tina and Johanna discussed the ways in which Thatcher's legacy can complicate conversations around women's political presence, and the potential limitations of descriptive representation. As touched upon earlier in this chapter, throughout my focus groups there were several instances where Thatcher's "masculine" characteristics were highlighted. I have already outlined, for example, how this was purposefully demonstrated through her embodiment, voice and style, and how some of my focus group participants noted that she wittingly distanced herself from culturally-ingrained understandings of femininity. However, the above conversation also highlighted the ways in which women in general (regardless of

[58] At the time, Margaret Thatcher was the only female Prime Minister in British history. However, it is possible to see similar debates circulating at the current moment regarding Theresa May (Livingston 2016; Sisters Uncut 2017)

masculinisation/feminisation) were more likely to be perceived as "figurehead representatives" than are men. The notion that Thatcher's destructive policies meant that she had "ruined it for women" once more suggested that female politicians are judged primarily as women and that political spaces are almost naturally reserved for men (it is unlikely that George W. Bush or Tony Blair, for example, are considered to have "ruined it for men"). Johanna's comment is also interesting – she noted that, despite Thatcher being Prime Minister, her government was still largely dominated by men. Having a woman in political leadership, then, does not necessarily mean that the "critical mass"[59] (Childs & Krook 2005) of women in political institutions increases (Childs 2006). Failing to note the wider structures and institutions within parliament ensures that disproportionate attention is placed on leaders and prominent members of parties and obscures our ability to interrogate the potential for other women (who are often *not* in leadership roles) to challenge normative structures. Discussions about the structures of institutions are significant – which women MPs are feasibly able to shape and influence legislation?

Similar conversations were had in sixth form groups in Greater Manchester. The below conversation highlighted similar issues of representation, specifically when it came in the form of one dominating figure:

> *Brianna*: [on notions of women's political leadership] I don't know, what about Margaret Thatcher? That didn't help

[59] Critical mass theory relates to the notion that a "critical mass" of women is required to enact meaningful political change, suggesting a relationship between the number of women in political institutions and the outcome of policy that positively impacts women's lives (Studlar & McAllister 2002; Childs & Krook 2005; Dahlreup 2006). The limitations of this have been outlined by Childs (2006: 16), who argues that "[critical mass theorists] maintain that women representatives will act for women when there are enough of them present – although the point when this is supposed to happen is unclear".

Monique: Yeah I think she really put people off because she's just known as being the worst Prime Minister ever. It's bad. The only British female Prime Minister and she's just known as being…

Brianna: They've seen her and they might have been put off because she was presented as like – you know like a man when he's dictating stuff over the table – she was seen like that, really forceful. She was bossy, like that old woman stereotype. That was made a lot worse by newspapers and TV shows and everything, they made fun of her being bossy and stuff so maybe people think "why don't we stick to the way we are, to tradition, instead of electing women," you know? […] That's exactly how women are described. Men are described as authoritative or something, but women are "bossy", like they don't have a place to be authoritative

Ruby: Yeah

Caeleigh: I do think if Thatcher was a man, she might have been seen as decisive

Monique: She was quite masculine in a lot of ways though wasn't she?

These discussions proved interesting for a number of reasons. There again seemed to be some suspicion around focusing too heavily on the role of women in leadership, and some participants rejected the idea that more women necessarily led to more feminism or "better" conditions for women on a larger scale (again, refer to Appendix 6 for more thorough focus group excerpts). Despite this, there was still a vocal agreement amongst the majority of my participants that they would like to see more descriptive representation, specifically of women, ethnic minorities and those from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The comments quoted from Deana in the West Midlands earlier in this section summed up the ways in which many of my participants felt about more women being involved in politics. Despite this, it seemed that there was a real lack of contemporary politicians (of any gender) with whom my participants could relate. As there *were*

women in politics at the time of research, this suggested that something more needs to be done than simply demanding “more women” get “involved”.

Discussions with my participants, then, helped to further highlight the limitations of corporate campaigns such as #MoreWomen. Although campaigns such as these appeared to be aimed at young women, there seemed to be little engagement with some of the more nuanced concerns regarding representation that were regularly expressed by my participants. While there appeared to be broad support for having “more women” in parliament, there was some reluctance to immediately conceptualise this as some kind of feminist “win”. They did not necessarily see that “one woman’s success makes EVERY WOMAN STRONGER”. While they noted the gendered constructions of politicians such as Margaret Thatcher, they also understood her position as a highly contentious and divisive figure in British politics. It is also important to return to the fact that while many of my participants seemed to be passionate about seeing more women in the public sphere, they were largely reluctant to enter politics themselves (even when they had a strong interest in it). Campaigns that focus solely on getting more women into male-dominated spheres, then, do little to question or challenge the dominant cultures that create and sustain spaces that discursively exclude those who have traditionally been absent. Alongside this, campaigns that focus solely on one structure of oppression tend to erase, trivialise or marginalise other identities that also contribute to political disaffection. In my focus groups, some participants highlighted ‘race’ and class disparities, and many felt particularly alienated by the inequalities in age. This raised questions about *which women* are likely to “reach the top”, which systems of under-representation are likely to continue even if “women” are numerically equally represented, and precisely how they will combat the “intimidating” traditionalism that has been highlighted as problematic earlier in this chapter.

The Internet, social media and feminist rhetoric, then, can be employed by powerful corporations in order to make more money, reinforce the status quo and, ironically, depoliticise inequality. Campaigns such as #MoreWomen echo the "lean in" brand of feminism that has been perpetuated by those such as Sheryl Sandberg (2013). This form of feminism has been critiqued by academic feminists as kotowing to neoliberalism (Fraser 2013; Rottenberg 2014; Phipps 2014a), encouraging women to "speak up", "make themselves heard" and "proceed and be bold" rather than analysing patriarchal structures that perpetuate women's inequality. Other examples of these online corporate campaigns include Always' #LikeAGirl and Nike's 'Girl Effect'.[60] This type of "feminism" is devoid of any structural analysis and sustains the neoliberal paradigm by demanding that women simply find their power. Noting that social media and the Internet can be used as a tool in perpetrating neoliberal corporate feminism is interesting. While these campaigns often *do* find their support online, there are important issues to be noted. Unlike traditional structures of media, social media offers a space in which feminist organisations (or, indeed, individuals) can visibly challenge and subvert these appropriative, corporate "feminist" discourses. In the following chapter, I look at how online activism can be (and is) used at a more grassroots level in order to challenge dominant political discourses, and to construct "counterpublics" in opposition to some of the exclusionary and inaccessible normative publics that have been laid out here.

[60] Maria Hengeveld's (2016) recent report on Nike and their 'Girl Effect' campaign is significant here. This campaign focuses on "empowering" girls in the Global South with "skills, ideas and knowledge". It talks of encouraging women in countries such as Ethiopia, Rwanda, Pakistan and Ghana to "reach their full potential", to "break the cycle of poverty", "to challenge discriminatory gender norms and start conversations about how girls are viewed in society" (GirlEffect.org). However, Hengeveld (2016) highlights the ways in which these campaigns actually serve to depoliticise poverty and global inequality. By employing feminist rhetoric in advertising campaigns, transnational corporations such as Nike are able to ignore their own position in global capitalist systems and free-market regimes that are at the centre of international (gender) inequality. That Nike's powerful and wealthy position is largely propped up by the use of women's cheap labour is also ignored (see also Eistenstein 2009).

Conclusion

This chapter has begun to respond to criticisms of young people generally (and girls and young women specifically) as apolitical or apathetic. Current conversations around girls' perceived disengagement are often underpinned by an assumption that they have internalised neoliberal and postfeminist discourses of femininity, which are predicated upon notions of individualism and are generally more concerned with productions of self than structural inequality. I have examined these constructions of femininity in chapters four and five and have highlighted some of the ways in which these discourses were both embraced and critiqued by my participants, often simultaneously. At the beginning of this chapter, I outlined the ways in which year ten students in Essex accused their peers (but not themselves) of being more interested in consumption, beautification and celebrification than political participation or civic engagement. This conversation highlighted the popular binary of the "active" or "apathetic" youth, and the discussions set out in this chapter have served to investigate these constructions in a little more detail.

I began by examining my participants' attitudes towards notions of the political – how they understood politics and what they considered to fall within its scope. While they themselves rarely claimed the term "political", they spoke thoughtfully about issues of gender and other axes of political oppression, particularly in relation to representation, scrutiny and surveillance. They conceptualised political space (such as Westminster, or spaces of political broadcast) as classist, racist and sexist, and often explained how discourses of parliamentary debate produced their own feelings of alienation. This alienation contributed to their self-proclaimed dissociation from political space (and, indeed, "political people"). However, a more nuanced reading of my data suggested that taking this vocalized disinterest or "lack of knowledge" at face value and equating

it to wholesale political apathy would be problematic. Indeed, it seemed that my participants had a specific dislike for Westminster and political broadcasting. However, as outlined in chapter two of this thesis, understanding notions of the political through this prescriptive lens can reproduce inequalities and lead to overly simplistic interpretations of youth (particularly girls') attitudes and engagement. This is not to say that my participants were, on the whole, "political" – they largely rejected the label, and this should be respected. However, it *is* to say that they had political opinions, and they often proposed thoughtful critiques of systems they felt unrepresented by and uninterested in. Their comments were particularly useful in highlighting the numerous ways in which they felt excluded from normative political space(s).

In the final section of this chapter, I have examined my participants' attitudes towards women and politics by situating them within an analysis of *Elle* magazine's #MoreWomen campaign. This analysis speaks to the concerns of those who have highlighted feminism's worrying tendency to place emphasis on neoliberal notions of "agency, 'empowerment', and individual choice" (Phipps 2014a: 3 – 4). I questioned how far these campaigns around "representation" and "empowerment" really challenge dominant patriarchal structures, particularly when they are orchestrated by organizations that can be considered problematic in their wider relationship to feminist politics (female beauty magazines, for example). I examined my participants' complex attitudes towards representation, and how campaigns such as #MoreWomen, despite capitalizing on girls' and young women's dominance of social media, often fail to really engage with their material concerns. This discussion served to highlight the ways in which both social media and female representation have become profitable (digital) marketing tools within neoliberal contexts, and how both online space and feminist discourse can be (re)appropriated in ways that reaffirm (rather than challenge) dominant political and economic structures.

However, unlike the mainstream media, social media (and its potential for produsage) offers space in which these discourses can be deconstructed and challenged. In the following chapter, I look at how online activism can be used at a more "grassroots" level in order to challenge dominant political discourses, and to *re*politicise (rather than depoliticise) issues that can be understood as broadly "feminist". I draw on some of the theories laid out in chapter two, specifically the notion of social media as a counterpublic for girls and women, in order to re-examine notions of apathy and participation. This chapter, then, has served to examine the "publics" that girls and young women are excluded from, in order to properly contextualise the notion of *counter*publics, which will be discussed in chapter seven.

Chapter 7 The Culture of Politics II

(Post-)Millennial Girls and Young Women: Apolitical or E-political? (Sl)acktivism, border space and counterpublics

In chapter six, I explored the limitations of narrow conceptions of the political and some of the ways in which they serve to exclude marginalised people from traditional forms of politics which, in turn, reproduces various gendered social, political and economic inequalities. Despite post-feminist beliefs that women have achieved social, political and economic parity simply through the granting of "equal rights" and the passing of equality legislations, it seems that "femininity" and "the political" are still continually constructed as dichotomous spheres. In a post-feminist age, then, these constructions serve to naturalise the apparent incompatibility of women and politics. This chapter revisits some of the literature laid out earlier in this thesis, by further interrogating how normative conceptions of the political (as discussed in chapter six), in turn, shape our understanding of activism and apathy. I look at how and why young people have been considered inactive in political terms, and use the data collected during my focus groups to outline the ways in which young women are carving out new (often online) spaces to construct and perform their political identities (even if they reject the label). This chapter serves to explain the role of social media in political activism, and examines the ways in which (post-)millennial girls and women may negotiate the alleged gap between social media as a supposed symbol of individualistic narcissism (as discussed in chapters four and five) and social media as a platform of collective, unifying political action.

In this chapter, then, I highlight some of the ways in which my participants negotiated their exclusion from public (political) spaces by examining new methods of activism in the form of e-politics. I locate my empirical data within wider discussions regarding the Internet and social media as an activist space and focus particularly on the ways in which this type of engagement is often dismissed as "slacktivism" or accused of being about image management over actual political concern. This chapter starts by interrogating debates around online activism and claims that it signals a decline in useful, substantial or real political engagement. This can be situated within the wider debates around youth, apathy and participation which have been outlined more comprehensively in chapter two. I examine why online activism is utilised by young people and, more importantly, how (and when) it is conceptualised as "helpful" or "unhelpful". I look at the examples of *KONY2012* and SlutWalk in order to contextualise these issues and also to highlight the demographic disparities in regard to who tends to utilise online methods of engagement. I then go onto examine the more specific ways in which my participants discussed using digital medias to reconfigure online space to meet their own political ends. Issues of bedroom cultures will be revisited within this context, as well as a closer engagement with "border space" (Harris 2004: 157) and feminist counterpublics (Fraser 1990: 67).

7.1

Y versus X + Z: Youth, "slacktivism" and generational differences in political participation

In chapter one, I made reference to an article written for *Time* magazine in 2013. The article, entitled 'Generation Me Me Me', served to construct millennials as narcissistic, lazy and entitled, and towards the end of the article, the author, Joel Stein, suggested millennial's alleged narcissism

is clearly reflected in their political and civic engagement(s): “They [millennials] are informed but inactive: they hate Joseph Kony, but aren’t going to do anything about Joseph Kony”. It appears as a throwaway comment – no evidence or “cold hard data” (as he calls it) is provided to prove this claim. However, it is an important point and one that appears to continuously emerge in conversations regarding the young and contemporary political activism. There is a growing canon of literature regarding online forums and their political uses, particularly amongst young people. As highlighted in chapter two, Kahne and Middaugh (2012) outline the ways in which the Internet can provide ample space for young people (and those who are otherwise alienated from traditional forms of politics) to engage with various political issues. In my focus groups, e-petitions, Facebook events, viral tweets/videos and “trending” topics were all considered ways in which young people were said to engage with politics online, particularly through the use of SNS such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Tumblr. Kahne and Middaugh highlight that these can be distinguished from previous forms of youth activism as they are “peer created and directed, and they rely on social media [which is] a phenomenon that could dramatically change how and how much young people participate civically, including voting” (2012: 52). This report argues that “substantial members of youth” are engaging in political life through online participatory politics. Online participatory politics is similar to other forms of participatory activism (such as protest marches, picketing, lobbying and joining pressure groups) in the sense that they address particular issues of political concern. However, online participatory activism is also decidedly different in a number of ways: “it is interactive, peer-based and not guided by traditional institutions like political parties or newspaper editors” (ibid).

While my participants could not reasonably be characterised as apolitical, there was often a clear and obvious rejections of what one might call formal or traditional politics, as has been highlighted in chapter six. Across all nine focus groups, there was a strong understanding that the political was reserved for a particular “type” of person (namely white, upper-middle class,

privately educated, middle-aged and male). During my various discussions with students, there was a continued understanding that Parliament was, as a participant in the West Midlands named Alice put it, "still very much an old boys' club"[61]. In many of my focus groups, it was obvious that politics in its formal sense was understood as gendered, classed and racialized in various ways. In line with their views about political space, my participants often understood activism to be about voting, or engaging in "aggressive" formal debates about "serious" and "complex" political issues. Issues that might impact young people (tuition fees, education or public transport) were trivialised - framed as less important than "real" political issues and concerns. For example, sixth former Caeleigh in Greater Manchester said:

> I think [young people] care about, say, tuition fees and stuff – things that affect them. But as we get older real things will start to affect us too, like taxes and stuff so we'll be more inclined to get involved with the bigger picture. But now, because the things that affect us are such small issues, it doesn't affect everyone and so our voices aren't heard so we don't bother

Here, Caeleigh referred to tuition fees and issues that directly impact young people as "small issues" – they were understood as somehow niche or not as widely significant as the "real" political concerns of "taxes and stuff". Some participants in the West Midlands also highlighted specific issues that young people seemed to be concerned about and were suspicious of the claim that (post-)millennials were unpolitical or uninterested. Moving beyond the traditional binary of the "apathetic" or "activist" youth (Harris et. al. 2010), the conversation below highlighted the

[61] This was echoed by other participants. Deana, in the West Midlands, stated "I still think we have, like, the patriarchal and sexist view that masculinity equals power". Danielle, a sixth former in Greater Manchester summed up Westminster by saying "it's an elitist sort of place", while Fay, another sixth former from the West Midlands said "They're just middle-class men. There's not even really any, like, ethnic minority men – just white men".

specific ways in which social media provided a platform for (sometimes unintentional) micro-level political engagement:

> *Donna:* Yeah like everyone in our year is tweeting like 'we don't care about politics' then they'll moan about tuition fees or say like 'Miliband is lying' and it's like –
>
> *Jayde:* Or even public transport. Like these are political things and they just don't notice that they're posting political things

Here, Donna and Jayde highlighted the ways in which their peers often expressed concern regarding certain political issues, even if they didn't draw on political language to do so (so while they might not have discussed austerity politics per se, they highlighted some of the ways in which austerity might have impacted their lives). Young people passionately dismissing politics while expressing strong political opinions is something that has been highlighted by Taft (2006), who notes that, during her research, American teenage girls often strongly rejected "politics" as a fundamental part of their (political) identities. This rejection of politics signalled the girls' recognition of the deep inequality normative political institutions seem to perpetuate. This is interesting in relation to my own work, wherein girls were reluctant to claim the term "political" due to their distaste for the normative Westminster model (see chapter six).

In line with previous research (Bakker & Vresse 2011), social media was sometimes framed by my participants as a space for young people in general (and young women in particular) to voice opinions, hash out disagreements and learn. This also speaks to Coleman's (2013) claims that political commentary is no longer created by a specific journalistic and political elite and watched, received and consumed by the public. Rather, it is actively produced, directed and shaped by a

mass of active Internet users (Coleman 2013: 379; Coleman & Blumler 2009). This will be explored in more detail in a later section of this chapter. It seems, then, that online activism or e-activism marks a new form of political participation, often characterised by its quick and accessible nature. It includes (but is not limited to) signing e-petitions, taking part in online debates (with both acquaintances and strangers), posting or sharing political statements/tweets or actively engaging in online communities with a specific political identity. People may also read (or write) blogs, or try to organise protests, marches or meets. While online campaigns can lead to activism in physical spaces (such as SlutWalk, the Occupy Wall Street movement, or the Women's March), this is not always the case. According to my participants, online activism also includes micro-level (or, perhaps, micro-micro level) activity, such as liking, retweeting, sharing, reposting, favouriting or joining a post or page. The comedic (yet political) nature of meme-sharing has also been noted (Miller 2016: 164), particularly in relation to feminist politics, wherein memes are understood to generate humour and energise current feminisms (Rentschler & Thrift 2015). Social media as a platform for expressing political opinion in various forms was discussed in the West Midlands, where sixth formers spoke of their own experiences of clashing with peers over their views:

> *Emi*: … I do use it [Facebook] for arguing quite a lot
>
> [Laughter]
>
> *Donna:* Yep!
>
> *Interviewer*: Ok, so what do you mean by that?
>
> *Emi*: I don't know, just if someone posts something I disagree with I'll be like… "here's my side"
>
> *Interviewer*: So it's kind of a good platform to have a debate?

Donna: She'll post a status that's really left-wing and socialist and calling stuff out –

Emi: - and bare people will –

Donna: - and then Hugh[62], who's UKIP, will be like jumping on it

Emi: and bare people will get involved

Charlotte: I think people put a lot of controversial things on Facebook more than anything

Charlotte suggested that social media was a useful space for those who wanted to post extreme views in order to be "controversial". It has been argued that social media and the Internet are contributing to a general rise in extremist radical rhetoric from across the political spectrum (Coen 2016)[63]. The conversation above between Emi, Donna and Charlotte demonstrated how young people are able to utilise digital spaces to offer their own opinions and "call out" others that they disagree with. Miller has argued that, while people are likely to unfriend or block people whose views offend them, they are generally unlikely to use social media as a means to seek out or engage with alternate views. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1984), Miller argues that expressing political sentiments on Facebook or other SNS is, instead, now a way in which to signal one's own personal taste or identity (2016: 165). The above conversation supports this to some extent, as the word "argument" was used, as opposed to "debate", and the participants pointed towards another student (not present) who often "jumps on" their statuses due to a fundamental difference in political opinion. Indeed, it is true that social media makes it more likely for classmates, workmates, neighbours and even family members and friends to be more acutely aware of each other's politics. This has led to the assumption that social media is

[62] A fellow student, not present but also anonymised

[63] This speaks to wider contemporary discussions about "online terrorism" and social media being used in methods of radicalisation. Studies have demonstrated the Internet's alleged role in terroristic school shootings in America (Markward et. al. 2001), Anders Breivik's terrorist attack in Norway (Ravndal 2013) and recruitment strategies for terrorist organisations such as ISIS (Klausen 2014; Huey 2015; Awan 2017).

contributing to the breakdown of "real" or "intellectual" political debate and engagement. However, my data suggests far more nuance is required in order to examine these issues in any real depth.

As it is so often associated with young people and social media, it is unsurprising that this new brand of e-politics has not found itself short of critics. Branded "slacktivism" by academics, commentators and charities alike (see Christensen 2011; Robertson 2014; UNAIDS 2010), this form of participation is very often trivialised, ridiculed and placed in dichotomous opposition to traditional or "real" forms of protest. It is dismissed for being minimalistic, non-committal and performative: essentially another form of the narcissism so often associated with the millennial and post-millennial generations. Morozov (2011: 179) outlines the practical issues with e-activism by citing the Colding-Jorgensen experiment. In 2009, Anders Colding-Jorgensen created a Facebook group and posted a (fabricated) announcement suggesting that Copenhagen city authorities would be demolishing the historical Stork fountain. Colding-Jorgensen called for people to join the group as a form of protest against the authorities that were planning to carry the demolition out. Despite the fact that no such demolition was taking place, the page eventually reached 27,500 members. This experiment supposedly demonstrates how it might be problematic to consider Facebook activist pages a "real" or "true" indication of political participation. However, throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will complicate these arguments by asking whether or not the mythical nature of the fountain demolition is really what matters.

The idea of the Internet as a breeding ground for "slacktivism" was occasionally debated by some of my participants. In the West Midlands, when discussing whether or not social media provided a useful political platform for young people, the below exchange took place:

Kimberley: I think it's really good

Fiona: For our generation, yeah I think it's really good

Alice: I think it educates people a lot

Gemma: You say educate but it's all done as gimmick. Like how many policies do you actually get from social media? It's just pictures of Nigel Farage drinking a pint

A few minutes later in the discussion, Gemma continued her critique of online politics:

Fay: Things like petitions

Maria: Yeah you get a lot of support and people can share the petition and that generates more interest

Gemma: Petitions are shit

Priya: But it still gets people involved

Gemma: Yeah but it makes people think that they work rather than voting, like the ballot box and getting outside your house doesn't

Kimberley: Yeah but if people aren't already involved in politics it might spark that interest

Gemma: But it interests them in a way that doesn't work in our country

Gemma's comments outlined a binary of activism that is culturally prevalent - traditional forms and new forms were framed here as two entirely different entities. Gemma suggested that

traditional activism, along with being traditionally engaged is what "works". She seemed to suggest that online activism is futile, and that abandoning traditional formal politics "doesn't work" in the UK. This binary is an interesting one, especially as these participants had already outlined the material obstacles that women face in entering political spaces (see chapter six). The arguments surrounding e-activism often focus on the issues that Gemma highlighted here - the idea that moving all political activism online essentially diverts young people's attention away from where political power actually lies. In their study of British trade union activists, Fenton and Barassi (2011: 186) argue that political group leaders often believe that social media undermines collective action in favour of self-serving individual acts of expression. However, this understanding fails to ask important questions: *why* are young people (and young women in particular) turning towards social media as a platform for political expression, at a time when they are routinely constructed as politically disengaged and apathetic? According to Kahne and Middaugh (2012: 54), acts of participatory politics online often "supplement rather than supplant traditional political activity", challenging the idea that e-activism and traditional activism are dichotomous and positing, instead, that the two positions can be (and, indeed, often are) taken up simultaneously (see also de Vreese 2007). This is both an important and timely point. In the aftermath of the 2017 general election, there was much discussion of the Labour Party's use of social media and the ways in which it was successful in encouraging young citizens to vote (Cecil 2017; Roddy 2017; Booth & Hern 2017). These shifts demonstrate how social media can no longer be dismissed as a trivial space for faux-engagement, but must be taken seriously as a part of the wider democratic process.

Gemma's comments in regard to "getting outside your house" were particularly interesting in gendered terms. If we return to McRobbie and Garber's work on bedroom culture, and their assertion that young women are "predispose[d] to retreat", it is possible to problematize the notion that everyone has equal access to public space as a political activist. As Gordon (2008) has

previously noted, young women who want to engage in street-based political communities often have to negotiate familial concern and public space in ways that (white) men do not. In response to the Trade Union activists in Fenton and Barassi's study in particular, it could also be useful to keep in mind the work of Downes et. al. (2016) who highlight the invisibilization of gendered violence and sexual assault in left-wing activist spaces.

It is unsurprising that despite some of the comments above from young people themselves (as well as previous researchers' assertions that significant numbers of young people *are* participating in political cultures) accusations such as Stein's (that millennials are "informed but inactive") continue to linger. The implication here is clear: that millennials may have access to a wider array of information, they may be "hyper-connected", and they may well "perform" political identities. However, these performances are shallow, self-serving and ineffectual: acts of narcissism masquerading as genuine engagement. It is useful, then, to look in more detail at various instances of popular online movements and examine these accusations more closely, attempting to move beyond the traditional binaries of online activism being either "good" or "bad" and, instead, situating it within wider political structures in order to make sense of it. It seems appropriate to look firstly at *KONY 2012,* the example that Stein (2013) cites to bolster his claim that online activism is symptomatic of wider generational issues of narcissism.

7.2

KONY 2012: slacktivism in (in)action?

On March 5th 2012, the organisation 'Invisible Children' launched an online video entitled *KONY 2012*. The video aimed to raise widespread awareness about the actions of Joseph Kony, the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, a guerrilla group that formerly operated in Uganda. The video highlighted the ways in which Kony, a known war criminal and International Criminal Court fugitive, abducted children and forced them into both sexual slavery and armed warfare. The aim of 'Invisible Children's' campaign was clear: bring Joseph Kony to justice by using social media to "make him famous". The filmmakers believed that by getting his name into the world via the power of a globalised social media machine, they could easily ensure and facilitate Kony's swift overthrow and arrest. They hoped that by using social media as a platform to "make him famous" they could easily contact twenty powerful celebrities and twelve influential policy makers to put this overthrow into action. Amongst these targeted individuals were Angelina Jolie, Barack Obama, Bono, Taylor Swift and Ban Ki Moon (Invisible Children 2012). As Meikle has pointed out, the strapline "make him famous" was "a bizarre inversion of the cultural logic of media celebrity" (2014: 373), a strange subversion of social media's association with fame, glamour and celebrity as previously discussed in chapters four and five. This led to some questioning the ethical considerations behind the campaign's tactics - summarised by Victor Ochen, founder and director of the Ugandan rehabilitation NGO Ayinet, who asked "How do you think Americans would have reacted if people in another country wore Osama Bin Laden T-Shirts?" (Rauxloh 2017: 75)

The KONY 2012 campaign was controversial for a number of reasons - it attracted widespread criticism for oversimplifying the complex social and political history of the region, for misrepresenting important information and for pedalling "false and dangerous stereotypes" about the current political landscape of Uganda (Zuckerman 2012). There were (rightfully) accusations of White Saviour Complex and the Orientalist narrative of the film was heavily questioned and criticised by numerous online blogs, national newspapers, academics and users of social media (see Curtis & McCarthy 2012; Mackey 2012; Kagumire 2012; Finnegan 2013). It is certainly true that the video concentrated largely on the white American men who made the film rather than the victims of Kony's atrocities, and important questions were also posed about the use of funds raised from the campaign. Interestingly, it was a 19-year old Canadian student named Grant Oyston who launched the blog 'Visible Children' on Tumblr two days after the video launch. This blog, which became almost as famous as the campaign itself, outlined some major criticisms of *KONY 2012* (Visible Children 2012a) and became a viral sensation in its' own right. In line with previously highlighted constructions of youth politics, criticism was levelled at the author of the blog for being too young to be involved in such complex political debates. In a blogpost entitled "Young people changing the world", Oyston wrote

> …because I'm a young person, my opinion is less valuable or 'misinformed or naive', as Invisible Children's PR firm eloquently described it. Actually, the best and most thought-provoking questions I've received came from 'young people' in a series discussion I had over Skype with students in Pennsylvania (Visible Children 2012b)

However, despite its many criticisms, by August 2012, 'Invisible Children's' video had been viewed over 104 million times, with many of those views coming within the first 24 hours of its initial posting (Durrington 2012). Because of this, and the online (and offline) conversation that

followed, it was considered "the most successful launch of a social media campaign in the history of these movements" (ibid). When discussing the benefits and limitations of online political activism, *KONY 2012* is an important starting point not only because it was "the most successful viral campaign video of all time" (Garber 2012), but also because of the ways in which it raised wider questions about the usefulness of social media as a platform for political activism and a facilitator of social change. The campaign itself also neatly encapsulated the generational and gendered divide in online political activism. Digital advertising agency Nanigans used Facebook data to chart the demographics of those interested in the 'Invisible Children' campaign in 2012. By looking at those who had liked Invisible Children's Facebook page, Nanigans showed that 87% were between the ages of 13 and 30 (59% were between 13 and 20) and 72% were female (Noam 2012). While it is not always useful to rely on quantitative analyses of social media (as has been discussed in my methodology), these figures are particularly interesting when considering how these cohorts are some of the ones that are likely to fall outside the remit of traditional politics. While it is taken for granted that young people often use social media as a political platform (see Kahne et. al. 2012; Meikle 2014), it is rarely acknowledged that e-activism is also largely feminised (for further discussions of this, see chapter two).

As previously touched upon, the criticisms levelled at 'Invisible Children' were wide and varied. They came from charities, NGOs, politicians, academics, and even some of the film's Ugandan participants (see Curtis and McCarthy 2012). While these flaws certainly existed, the discussion here is less about the accuracies or inaccuracies of the *KONY 2012* campaign, and more to do with what it can tell us about attitudes surrounding online activism. The notion of slacktivism is one that emerged continuously during discussions of *KONY 2012* (Babu 2012), where it was suggested that micro-level action such as that enacted on social media has no effect beyond "making one feel like one has contributed" (Bailyn 2012). Here, questions were asked about the effectiveness of the campaign - while it is certainly true that the campaign had been a statistical

success in terms of the number of people who had viewed the video, shared the video on social media, or posted favourably about the video on the Internet, this success never translated into collective or widespread street activism (Carroll 2012). The fervour that surrounded the campaign in the first few weeks of its online launch appeared to dissipate rapidly. The global "Cover the Night" event that was heavily pushed in the video (encouraging viewers to cover their hometowns and cities in posters of Joseph Kony) was largely unsuccessful (Carroll 2012; Garber 2012).

However, rather than automatically conceptualising this as a failure of online activism, or proof that the target audience is undeniably narcissistic, self-interested and politically lazy (as Joel Stein did in his 2013 article), it is important to look at the surrounding issues in a more nuanced way. Indeed, the reliance on quantitative tools of measurement here is interesting. There was an assumption that, because millions of people had engaged with the campaign online, that this should automatically translate into offline (read "real") activism. When it didn't, the campaign (specifically) and online activism (generally) were positioned as failures. When we shift our focus from quantitative measurement to qualitative investigation, however, we become exposed to some questions that are not easily answered and outcomes that are not easily measured. The Cover the Night event was due to take place on 20th April 2012, over six weeks after the initial launch date of the campaign and the heated political discussion that took place during this time cannot be overestimated. The assumption is that because the campaign was almost solely an online one and never crossed the line from virtual to real, it was ultimately a "flop" (Garber 2012). Somewhat predictably, the inability of 'Invisible Children' to translate initial phenomenal social media support to widespread street support has been put down to the "non-existent attention span of the target age demographic" (Durrington 2012). However, the conversation that dominated political conversations in the weeks following the video's launch may suggest that *not* turning out to the Cover the Night event was a political act in and of itself.

Harris (2004: 179) has previously highlighted the importance of acknowledging silence as a political alternative to the much more revered "speaking out". She ties this to previously outlined notions of space and surveillance – the policing of young women's voices and participation in contemporary contexts can mean that silence is sometimes employed as a considered and appropriate political response. Indeed, it is possible to see how these arguments may be useful here. The weeks that separated *KONY 2012*'s online launch and the Cover the Night event were filled with thoughtful (and impassioned) political debates on social media, in newspapers and on television about the usefulness of white American men narrating and directing Ugandan history in a thirty-minute film, and the helpfulness of diluting complex political histories into easily digestible narratives of "bad" (Kony) versus "good" (everyone else). The interest in *KONY 2012* was so intense that it culminated with the public breakdown of the film's narrator, Jason Russell, two weeks after the film's release (Meikle 2014: 374). The apparent decline in support that took place between March and April 2012 can also be read as political reflection. In this sense, then, inaction can be reread as a form of action itself.

Far from being constructed as an isolated failure, the story of *KONY 2012* appears to fall into a more generic narrative of online campaigns. Recent research into online activism suggests that online charitable campaigns are also ultimately unsuccessful in their aims. This research attempts to give weight to the term "slacktivism" by highlighting the ways in which online visibility of a cause or campaign rarely translates into actual donations or higher rates of success. A recent study by Lacetera et. al. (2016) suggests that social media coverage does not positively affect the success of charitable campaigns. This research analysed 3,500 pledges made via HelpAttack, an app that facilitates donations and shares donors' activities with their contacts on Facebook and Twitter. Lacetera et. al. are explicit in their assumption that costless forms of charitable

involvement are “less impactful” (p. 202). The study showed that users are likely to opportunistically broadcast pledges without donating. Despite the analysed campaigns reaching 6.4 million users and generating considerable attention in the forms of clicks and likes, only 30 donations were actually made. This suggests that users are far more concerned with (costless) reputational gain and homophily than actually donating to the causes they claim to support. This follows Kristofferson’s (2014) claim that public online political/charitable pledges are more to do with impression management (read: narcissism) than genuine political concern/activism. Lewis et. al. (2014) also question how “active” the average online activist is. Using the Save Darfur campaign as a case study, this research suggests that the vast majority of online users who pledge to support a cause “recruit no one else into the cause and contribute no money to it” (p. 1), suggesting that Facebook (and, presumably, other social networking sites like it) “conjure a false illusion of activism rather than facilitating the real thing” (p. 2). This mirrors both popular and academic discourse around the *KONY 2012* campaign.

However, while the supposed failure of *KONY 2012* to move the online campaign into “real” space can be read as indicative of the “non-existent attention span” of the targeted demographic (millennials and post-millennials), it may also signpost a widespread shift in public opinion as the result of collective and peer-based learning throughout the period between 5th March 2012, when the video was first posted and 20th April 2012, when the Cover the Night event was due to take place. During my discussion with sixth form students in the West Midlands, a sixth form student named Charlotte highlighted the peer-led educational nature of social media by identifying the ways in which social media could be used as a space for collective learning and developing understandings of different perspectives that may otherwise be inaccessible. In contrast to Gemma’s comments highlighted earlier, Charlotte saw benefits in using social media to educate oneself about the complexities of particular issues. The idea that social media opens up space for a “different” kind of education was echoed in other groups. In Greater Manchester,

sixth form students had similar thoughts, with a student named Monique stating that social media has "definitely changed the way people grow up and learn…in some respects it's good, because obviously technology is the way the world is going and it makes learning about things easier and quicker". This is an indication of the ways in which social media and the Internet has provided access to information that might otherwise be hard to find, demonstrating how peer-to-peer education can be a fundamental component of online spaces.

Despite sparking a huge international conversation about activism, Western sensationalism and privilege, then, *KONY 2012* is largely considered a failure (Garber 2012; Durrington 2012; Finnegan 2013). While the aims of the campaign itself may not have been successful, the conversation it initiated can hardly be labelled "ineffective" or "apathetic". The notion that awareness is necessary but insufficient is important. However, Charlotte's comments above indicated the ways in which awareness for particular social movements, such as feminism (particularly intersectional feminism) and trans rights is, in fact, extremely important in disrupting and subverting normative exclusionary political (and academic) discourses. For Charlotte (and some of her peers), then, some social media platforms were seen as a space for "educating each other in a 'new' acceptance in society". Conversations around online campaigns as being primarily self-serving, or characterised by slacktivism fail to acknowledge the impact they can have for those ordinarily marginalised or turned off by traditional models of politics.

In the following subsection, I briefly touch upon the SlutWalk movement, which was sparked in Toronto in 2011 after a police officer told students at York University that if women wanted to avoid rape and sexual violence, they should avoid "dressing like sluts" (Ringrose & Renold 2012: 333). The SlutWalk is an interesting starting point when discussing the intersection between young women's activism and social media use, and it is important to acknowledge its significance

within these debates, before moving on to look at the ways in which my own participants utilised social media in their day to day lives.

7.2.1

SlutWalk, social media and the transcendence of the real/virtual binary

In January 2011, Heather Jarvis, a resident of Toronto, read an article she found on Facebook highlighting the police officer's comments outlined above. Sharing the article on her own Facebook page, Jarvis was immediately able to begin an online dialogue with her friends about the comments and how they might go about effectively challenging them (Mendes 2015: 3 – 4). From the outset, then, social media was integral to the formation, development and organisation of the SlutWalk movement (Mendes 2015: 34). Indeed, the plans for the first march began with the creation of a website, a Facebook page and a Twitter account (Jarvis 2012). The first march, organised online by Jarvis and a friend, took place in Toronto and was widely reported in the mainstream press both nationally and internationally. More importantly, however, the movement went "viral" online, ensuring that new media technologies were subsequently utilised to organise further marches across Canada, the USA, Australia, Argentina, India, Sweden, the UK and elsewhere.

In discussions around young women's activism in contemporary contexts and the role of social media, SlutWalk is often central and its significance to contemporary feminism has been widely discussed and hotly debated (Crunk Feminist Collective 2011; Dines & Murphy 2011; Ringrose & Renold 2012; Miriam 2012; O'Keefe 2014; Phipps 2014a: 46 – 47; Reger 2014; Mendes 2015).

There is not space here to revisit these discussions by assessing whether or not SlutWalk offers any real challenge to (racialized) patriarchal structures of power. However, what I do want to (briefly) address in this subsection is the central role that digital media and spatial politics played in shaping the SlutWalk movement, and how this can speak to other discussions that will be laid out later in this chapter

While the reaction to SlutWalk from feminists was largely divided, the very fact that these impassioned discussions and debates took place highlighted the ways in which new digital media allows small, localised protests to become large-scale, widespread movements. This helps to contextualise some of the conversations that I will lay out later in this chapter. Why did social media become the meeting point for girls and young women rallying against comments which seemed to confirm the long-held postulation that public space is inhospitable for them? As outlined in chapter two, online spaces can be theorised as a form of what Fraser (1990: 67) refers to as "subaltern counterpublics". These are places where "subordinated social groups [can] invent and circulate counterdiscoures to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs". Sills et. al. (2016) have specifically applied this theory to digital spaces that challenge and subvert dominant rape cultures. In their study, they note that their participants specifically outline social media as a vehicle through which young people in particular can carve out accessible "safe" spaces in which to discuss and challenge dominant discourses around sexual and gender-based violence. These spaces allow users to create, consume and distribute counter-discourses which challenge the dominant victim-blaming messages that are often circulated in mainstream media and popular culture.

The SlutWalk movement provided online spaces in which people could mobilise protests and offer support and solidarity to their counterparts in other countries. Online mobilisation such as

this allows activists to talk to one another and/or observe the organisation of an event before attending. Again, this is important for girls and young women who have previously felt excluded from (or unsafe within) political and activist spaces. This is not to suggest that feminists did not mobilise public protests prior to the use of the Internet. Indeed, SlutWalk has often been loosely compared to the Take Back the Night/Reclaim the Night events that began in Europe and North America in the 1970s (Phipps 2014a: 47; Mendes 2015: 31). However, the rapid spread of the SlutWalk movement and its mass support was due in no small part to the widespread utilisation of social media. It also signals the ways in which online activism can be used to achieve aims that include the re-appropriation of public space. It is useful here to return to criticisms of the *KONY2012* campaign, and how its inability to translate its online support into street-based activism became synonymous with millennials' apathy and inability to form meaningful political resistance. However, SlutWalk which was formed a year before *KONY2012,* clearly *did* translate their support from online to offline.

This transcending of the virtual/real binary also works in other ways. The movement was not simply online and then offline – the two spheres operated alongside one another, often concurrently. In other words, the campaign was not simply a street-based protest which originated on Facebook, but rather one which continuously and simultaneously relied on support from *both* spheres. This has been pointed out by Keller (2016a: 270), whose feminist-blogger research participants highlighted the ways in which online community-building allowed the SlutWalks to take place. Those who were unable to attend a SlutWalk for various reasons still felt as though they were an integral part of the movement because of their participation in the blogging communities that had made the marches possible. The role of blogs and social media in the reporting of these events is significant, and has been noted by Mendes (2015: 87), who argues that international mainstream media coverage was limited in relation to the coverage and discussion that was taking place on "the feminist blogosphere". Darmon (2014) also offers a

comparison of the reporting offered by the mainstream media and the blogs/reporting offered online, specifically in relation to the SlutWalk in London. She notes how the mainstream media offered personal, non-political, postfeminist accounts of the SlutWalk, in comparison to the political, fiercely feminist accounts simultaneously posted on blogs and websites.

Here, then, I have established some of the ways in which the politics of (young) women (particularly feminists) become compatible with social media. This has usefully set up some of the arguments that I lay out below, where I aim to examine some of the more hidden ways in which the girls and young women I encountered during my research utilised social media in order to carve out their own (less visible) counterpublics. Of course, when discussing girls and young women, notions of counterpublics can be located within the wider theory of bedroom cultures, wherein girls and young women have differential access to public spaces.

7.3

Locating spaces to Learn: subverting(?) the regulatory gaze and navigating the politics of social media

So far in this chapter I have highlighted some of the contemporary debates surrounding online political activism. As I have explored above, the digital activisms that gain the most scholarly and popular attention are usually those that have, as their aim, the incorporation of public space through marches, protests and demonstrations. It is often through this lens that online activism is evaluated and declared fundamentally successful or unsuccessful. We can see this centrality of space and the real/virtual divide operating in the two examples above. While *KONY 2012* is

ultimately conceptualised as a failure due to its inability to transfer its online support to offline rallies, the SlutWalk movement is often understood as a good example of the role that digital media can play in transforming small, localised protests into larger-scale, collective movements. These campaigns are some of the most visible and widely discussed in popular and academic discourse because they generally present themselves as functioning within the logic of normative politics. For example, while SlutWalk has been criticised as depoliticising or 'sexualising' women's bodies, it still operates within the broadly recognisable frameworks of both activism and feminism – i.e. marching on the streets, holding placards, and explicitly challenging dominant discourses that surround women's bodies and actions. Within my focus groups, however, I noticed that digital political participation was rarely discussed in these terms. This is not altogether surprising considering the age of my participants, and the ways in which normative or public political/activist spaces are particularly difficult for young women to gain access to (Gordon 2008). For my participants, then, digital activism was often more likely to be discussed in terms of using social media as a tool for learning and reflecting at an individual, everyday level.

This also speaks to the alleged individualism at the heart of contemporary political activism and consciousness. It must be reiterated here that the terrain within which girls and young women in England are forming their political identities can be largely understood as neoliberal. This means that my participants' political identities were likely informed by the material conditions with which they are faced, and the values that are promoted within the wider social, cultural, political and economic milieu. As has already been outlined in chapter one, these values include market fundamentalism, the rolling back of the welfare state, and the positioning of the individual as sovereign (Winch et. al. 2016: 562). Neoliberalism, then, places both state intervention and social collectives as highly suspicious and a threat to the mechanisms of free market capitalism (Theodore et. al. 2011: 15). The impact this growing individualism has had on counter-culture

and political resistance has been noted by singer Patti Smith, who argued that she reached a point where she could no longer resonate with "all of the manic activity on the streets", as she began to understand political movements as "yet another form of bureaucracy" (Smith 2011: 65). The rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, then, promoted a powerful individualism that saw an erosion of the collective political action that had been central to the counter-cultures of the 1960s and 1970s (Curtis 2015). This is not to say that young people passively internalise neoliberal sensibilities, but to acknowledge and appreciate that the girls and young women in my study "only have the cultural resources within which they are embedded as tools for resistance" (Budgeon 2011: 108). In the context of my research, this relates specifically to social media.

It has been noted that young women's status as neoliberal natives has resulted in older feminists, who have a "'pre-neoliberal' political formation", failing to take those who grew up in different cultural and political contexts seriously (Winch et al 2016: 565). Young women are often presented as the willing handmaidens of neoliberalism, and older women have frequently been seen to blame those younger than them for accepting neoliberalized and commodified versions of femininity (Levy 2005; Dines & Murphy 2011; O'Connor 2013). As has already been highlighted, (post-)millennial identities will inevitably be informed by the pervasive nature of neoliberal and post-feminist discourses. However, it is important not to simply take for granted that they have played such a key role in the formation of cultural and political subjectivities for young women that they are now unwilling (or unable) to offer serious critiques or resistance to these wider structures. This has also been highlighted by Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012), who argue that academics who hail from different cultural and political contexts must recognise these differences when studying contemporary young women within neoliberal, consumer capitalist frameworks. Again, this resonates with calls from Dobson (2015) to learn from young women and take them seriously, while offering thoughtful critiques of the wider structures they often operate within.

The remainder of this chapter, then, examines online activisms and participations that are less visible – those that take place in the marginal border spaces and counterpublics that girls and young women carve out for themselves online. There is often a focus on the celebrification of contemporary feminism, wherein celebrity feminists come to be culturally understood as representations of the wider feminist movement (Hamad & Taylor 2015). However, within my focus groups, there was little reference to celebrity feminism, except for one particular instance when Deana, a sixth former in the West Midlands, highlighted how she had recently come across a speech made by Cecily Strong at the White House Correspondents' Dinner, which she thought was "brilliant". This was a speech within which Cecily Strong, an American actress and comedian, touched upon broadly feminist issues such as the Republican's "War on Women"[64] and the traditionally sexist coverage of Hillary Clinton[65]. Deana interestingly highlighted the role social media sites can have in sharing such content, which might previously have only been available to a political or "elite" audience. She stated that she only gained access to this video "on Tumblr", once again emphasising the tendency of the blogging platform to take an explicitly political tone. For Deana, then, social media had a role to play in circulating views that ran counter to those constructed and disseminated by journalistic and broadcasting elites. However, most references to feminist politics did not centre around celebrity feminism which is, perhaps, surprising considering the ubiquity of celebrity culture on social media (as has been discussed in chapter five) and, indeed, the long-standing relationship feminism has with notions of celebrity (Taylor 2014; Hamad & Taylor 2015). Indeed, it has recently been suggested that girls and young

[64] "Since I'm only a comedian, I'm not going to tell you politicians how to do politics or whatever. That's not my job. That would be like you guys telling me what to do with my body. I mean, could you even image?"
[65] "I want all the media to put their hands up and swear something this election season: I solemnly swear not to talk about Hillary's appearance, because that is not journalism"

women are perhaps less seduced by notions of celebrity feminism than is often assumed (see Keller & Ringrose 2015).

My data actually led me to investigate the more micro-level politics that girls and young women engage with in everyday situations. I focus more closely on the ways in which my participants navigated their own political subjectivities in digital contexts and how *their* cultural and political uses of social media did not necessarily reflect more widely accepted definitions of these terms. I specifically examine the importance of understanding social media as both an educational tool and a space of peer-led learning for girls and young women. As has been highlighted at various points throughout this thesis, public space for women (and particularly girls) is highly ambivalent, and access is not always easy and/or possible. I examine how girls and young women respond to this contentious relationship by locating and reconfiguring more accessible spaces for themselves in order to engage with (counter-)discourses that challenge dominant public rhetoric around political topics, particularly feminism. This, again, challenges the notion that political activism and participation must be visible, quantifiable and easily reconciled with simplistic definitions of politics. Returning to the literatures laid out in chapter two, these micro-level and often (semi-)private forms of engagement and participation frequently fall outside of normative measurements and are, therefore, mostly invisibilized within wider conversations about youth engagement.

In my focus groups, it became clear that social media was often utilised as a space in which to learn and form collaborative and supportive communities. In Greater Manchester, sixth form students made the following comments that neatly summarised this:

Monique: It's definitely changed the way people grow up and learn

Interviewer: Do you think that's a good thing?

Monique: I think in some respects it's really good, because obviously technology is the way the world is going and it makes learning about things easier and quicker

Ruby: Yeah and it does kind of put news into your own hands. So you can hear things from other parts of the world and it doesn't always have to come from like the news or a newspaper

Monique: Yeah that's it. Like, I get most of my news and information from Tumblr and Twitter. I don't even watch the news but I still feel like I know what's going on in the world

Ruby: Yeah I wouldn't know about loads of stuff if it wasn't for Tumblr you know

Interviewer: Like what?

Ruby: Just, like, things about feminism and racism and stuff that's going on in the world. I wouldn't get to talk to people from other parts of the world, and get different perspectives on all these things

This conversation between Ruby and Monique highlighted the ways in which social media can be utilised by girls and young women in contemporary contexts in order to seek out, produce and consume discourses that counter or challenge those that are presented by dominant mainstream media outlets. Again, this speaks to the issues laid out in chapter four, whereby (post-)millennial girls are utilising the tools of social media to reconfigure notions of bedroom cultures. As I have highlighted in section 4.1.2, Tumblr was often brought to my attention as a space that is largely located outside of the adult gaze. Indeed, while it was a site that was widely used and discussed

by my participants, it was understood as something that adults didn't really "know" about and, therefore, as a space in which identities could be explored and constructed more freely. The comments above from Ruby and Monique add an extra dimension to these arguments. Not only can Tumblr be located away from a regulatory parental gaze, but it also comes to be understood as a site that exists as a way in which to counter, challenge or subvert pervasive (mainstream) media discourse.

Harris (2004: 184) notes the lack of "free spaces in which young women can position themselves differently" and construct narratives about (young) femininity that run counter to the dominant narratives of "can-do" and "at-risk". Indeed, as I have highlighted in chapter four, even online spaces that are largely considered the domain of the young (e.g. Facebook) are now subject to the gaze of pervasive and authoritative (often adult) audiences. Therefore, it must be noted that it was specifically sites such as Tumblr that were understood to offer spaces for micro-level resistance. I have highlighted elsewhere in this thesis (particularly in chapters four and five) that girls' and young women's online practices are often subject to ridicule and criticism, and it is worth reiterating this here in order to make sense of Tumblr's significance within these debates. In section 4.1.1, I explained how a sixth form participant in Greater Manchester named Freya was hostile towards women's statuses and opinions on Facebook. Below is the full conversation:

> *Freya:* […] Like on Facebook, all you see when you're scrolling is woman, woman, woman, woman, man, woman. Men don't post
>
> *Claire:* I think men post more things that are about objects or something, not actually about themselves or pictures of themselves, whereas women it's usually pictures of themselves

Freya: And statuses, always going off on one.

[Laughs]

Freya: They do! Seriously, all you see is women putting stuff on Facebook and it's pointless, and they're putting a status and an opinion every two minutes and then you go on men's Facebook pages and they're hardly putting anything and when they do put something it actually means something […] I mean on Facebook, when you see men putting something on there it's actually something you want to be seeing. You just get fed up of what women put on. I do anyway.

Freya's comments speak (once again) to the feminisation of online space, and the ways in which this feminisation contributes to its cultural dismissal and trivialisation. Here, Freya stated that she got "fed up" of women's "statuses" and "opinions" on Facebook, which she largely considered to be "pointless". I have previously highlighted the work of Burns (2015), who has argued that the cultural denigration of the selfie contributes to an increased acceptance of discipline that is targeted specifically at young women. I also highlighted in chapter four the ways in which other social media practices that are associated with young women (such as the Snapchat story and the status) also become sites of derision. The relationship between Freya's comments above, and the comments of Ruby and Monique earlier is key. On mainstream sites such as Facebook, girls and young women seem to be under ever-increasing levels surveillance. As highlighted in chapter five, this surveillance becomes particularly operationalized through discourses of the body and increasingly pervasive and digitised standards of beauty. However, Freya's comments demonstrated that the surveillance and disciplining of women's online practices does not stop at the denigration of the selfie, but also becomes levelled at their online speech. Girls and young women expressing opinions on mainstreamed sites such as Facebook, then, leaves them open to mockery and dismissal (as evidenced by Freya's comments above).

As a response to the regulation they face on SNS such as Facebook, the girls and young women in my study often migrated to sites such as Tumblr, which were understood to be far less regulated by and accessible to adults. In the West Midlands, sixth former Fay highlighted the range of blogs and communities that can be found on Tumblr, asserting that "it's not censored at all". While this caused some concern amongst my participants, as demonstrated in section 4.1.2, this also gave them the opportunity to locate (and build) supportive communities, wherein girls' opinions were more widely welcomed and engaged with as serious and important. This presented significant possibilities for a number of my participants, and spoke to the assertions of Carlisle and Patton (2013: 892), who have highlighted the ways in which social media is opening up political space, and allowing "those who might lack the resources to participate in a conventional sense, the ability to participate in a digital sense".[66]

It appears that the production of Tumblr blogs (as noted by Ruby and Monique) follows a long feminist tradition of consciousness-raising and creating counter-discourses through alternative media publications. The production of underground magazines or "zines" as a key tool in disseminating radial politics and circulating dissent, critique and anti-establishment discourse has been noted (Duncombe 1998). Feminists have also highlighted the importance of zines within the (particularly third-wave) feminist movement (Harris 2004: 160 – 161). Piepmeier (2009: 121) draws comparisons between third-wave zines and second-wave "consciousness-raising", wherein

[66] It is important, however, not to suggest that this equates to full-blown democratization. While Carlisle and Patton (2013) highlight that social media networking sites are largely "free resources" (the only barriers to which are having access to the Internet and an email address), this certainly doesn't make it universally accessible. Many people still lack the resources to access the Internet (Alaoui 2015: 51). Kearney (2007) has also noted the ways in which access to media technologies continues to be structured by gender, class and 'race'. For example, working-class girls are often "called upon more to help with childcare and household chores, and thus have little undistracted leisure time" (p. 37) and this must be kept in mind when thinking about *who* has access to the resources and time needed to participate fully in online political communities.

"individual girls and women…recognise inequities in their own lives and then begin to articulate them to others so that outrage – and then activism – can emerge". Here, parallels can clearly be drawn to the ways in which Tumblr blogs were said to be utilised by some of my participants. Ruby and Monique highlighted the ways in which their knowledge of certain issues such as feminism and racism was largely down to the consumption (and, potentially, production) of Tumblr pages. For Piepmeier, zines can be conceptualised as "laying the foundation for activism". However, within my focus groups, Tumblr blogs were often understood to be a form of activism in and of themselves. The below conversation between sixth formers in the West Midlands sheds some further light on this:

> *Charlotte:* There's a lot of, I don't know what to call it, social activism or whatever where everyone is very accepting. There's a lot of correcting other people on – I dunno – gender pronouns and stuff –
>
> *Emi:* Yeah
>
> […]
>
> *Charlotte:* It's kind of educating people in a new acceptance in society
>
> *Numerous*: Yeah
>
> *Charlotte*: It's very feminist

Here, Charlotte explicitly pointed towards the "social activism" that operated on Tumblr specifically. She highlighted what she perceived to be inclusive feminist communities, wherein users could educate and learn from one another. Another participant in Charlotte's focus group added to this understanding of Tumblr as a space for learning:

Donna: Yeah. Like, the group of people I'm in with on Tumblr I kind of know a lot of them and I talk to a lot of them. And it's like…you all share the same views and it's just that you can grow together and learn together about different things. So you'll see posts that other people have put and it'll increase your understanding and I don't really express my views on there, I more just re-blog stuff and learn from other people. It's interesting more than anything. And I think people have been putting more sources recently as well after their posts. So if there's a post without a source people will say "where is the source for this?"

[…]

Numerous: Yeah

Deana: You kind of re-blog more things than you post yourself

This exchange between Donna and Deana was particularly interesting in the way that it subverted a number of dominant discourses around young people and social media and, indeed, challenged some of the attitudes outlined by participants in earlier chapters of this thesis. Firstly, both participants said that they re-blogged others' posts more frequently than they posted their own. However, this should not be read as a reassertion of girls as passive media consumers, but rather should be examined as contributing to a supportive and encouraging environment in which girls learn from and share with one another. This speaks to the work of Taft and Gordon (2011), who highlight the need for academics to engage with the ways in which girls learn about politics from one another and shape each other's political identities. This challenges discourses around the individualistic narcissism that underpins girls' social media use, and highlights the ways in which they actively seek out perspectives that may exist outside of their own individual experiences.

Donna's comments also demonstrated an awareness of critical thinking as she mentioned that members of her Tumblr community would often ask for "sources" if they felt that a certain post was lacking the relevant evidence or grounding.

This was also interesting when considering how much these comments corroborated with the responses from the pilot questionnaire I ran before my focus groups. For example, one respondent stated "Thanks to social media I can now talk about things like feminism and racism and ableism and transmisogyny in depth. It's given me a new perspective". Responses such as these were common and highlighted the ways in which social media has provided an opportunity for young women to construct and participate in spaces that would otherwise be difficult to locate (see Appendix 1 for more examples of questionnaire responses). This presents positive possibilities for girls and young women, who have long been positioned as marginalized political subjects, and are often depicted as apolitical and apathetic.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an insight into the ways in which my participants understood and navigated the politics of social media in their everyday lives. In the first half of this chapter, I laid out the ways in which politics, young people and social media are usually understood in mainstream discourse. Here, I critiqued some of the popular approaches to these issues, which tend to conceptualise e-activism as being futile and narcissistic forms of "slacktivism". I located the comments of my participants within these debates, highlighting how social media has opened up political space to young people – particularly girls and young women – who are ordinarily excluded from or marginalised within political discourse. I contend that both adultism and sexism are coded into many popular accusations of "slacktivism". My participants largely celebrated the

ways in which normative political processes became more accessible to them in online contexts, often citing e-petitions, tweeting and engaging in political arguments as examples of the ways in which young people could now engage in political participation. It is possible that these topics of discussions were particularly prominent as a result of the time these focus groups took place, which was just before and just after the 2015 General Election.

I then examined the criticisms of online activism more closely through an analysis of the *KONY 2012* campaign, which has become largely synonymous with the "slacktivism" label. Popular journalist and academic discourse that circulated at the time suggested that the failure of the 'Invisible Children' campaign was down to millennials' narcissistic over-investment in image management and their lack of desire for pursuing "real" political change. I provided a counter to these arguments by suggesting that the thoughtful conversations that took place on the counterpublics of social media during the height of the *KONY 2012* campaign contributed to a rapid decline in support. I also briefly highlighted the SlutWalk movement as an example of an online campaign that *did* "succeed" in re-appropriating public space. In many ways, this highlights the compatibility that is often found between feminist politics and social media, particularly because social media provides a space within which women can meet and collectively disrupt the spatial politics that have long structured women's lives.

In the latter half of this chapter, I examined more closely some of the ways in which my participants discussed using social media for political purposes that might not fall under the more widely accepted definitions of the political. Here, I examined the ways in which border spaces were located to construct or participate within feminist counterpublics. These counterpublics are often hidden from the gaze(s) of those who tend to ridicule and mock girls' social media use, and therefore provide environments that are far more supportive, collaborative and welcoming. These

are significant spaces for girls and young women, as it allows them space to learn about issues they might otherwise be unaware of. It was common for my participants to say that these spaces had given them “another perspective” on issues such as feminism and racism, which again demonstrates the ways in which these are able to disrupt the understanding of social media as a space for self-involved narcissism.

Conclusion

The Politics of Social Media: oppressive, empowering, both or neither?

In the early 2000s, Anita Harris argued that young women, who are frequently positioned as the vanguards of social change and self-invention, now live under increasing levels of surveillance and regulation. As a result, she notes the diminishing number of spaces wherein girls and young women can operate outside of a monitoring and regulatory gaze, arguing that:

> spaces for young women to express complexity, to interrupt hegemonic constructions of young female subjectivity, and to organise together have diminished or been reconfigured as sites for…adult surveillance, and commercialization (2004: 151)

As young women become increasingly important to the operation of contemporary neoliberal paradigms, then, the surveillance and regulation placed upon them becomes more and more pervasive. These claims have arguably become both more salient and complex with the development and mainstreaming of new digital technologies as new sites of identity and image construction. This thesis, then, has explored uses of social media amongst girls and young women in England, particularly those between the ages of twelve and eighteen, and the ways in which cultural and political identities are constructed and negotiated against a complex backdrop of neoliberalism and post-feminism. I have examined how far social media can be conceptualised

as a terrain upon which both new femininities and new politics are performed and enacted. I have focused specifically on notions of space, surveillance and visibility, locating the everyday digital practices of girls and young women within these overarching themes.

Phipps (2014a: 3) has noted that, while feminism is currently enjoying a resurgence, it has "perhaps never operated in a more complex political and cultural milieu". This claim is particularly pertinent to my own research, wherein my participants expressed a range of dichotomous and seemingly contradictory claims surrounding the meaning of social media and what it can offer girls and young women within contemporary contexts. Indeed, it seems that there are few sites that symbolise this "complex political and cultural milieu" more than social media, and this thesis has served to demonstrate some of the ways in which these complexities and contradictions can be understood. I have located girls' digital practices within wider structures, and have examined the ways in which social media use can both reproduce and subvert neoliberal and post-feminist values. While social media can often produce environments that make hyper-visibility and (self-)surveillance more pervasive, there are also opportunities for girls and young women to subvert or resist these environments by locating themselves on the "borders" of social media. For example, while they might have and upkeep a Facebook account so that their parents can "keep tabs" on them, they may also simultaneously carve out other border spaces (on sites such as Tumblr) that fall outside of monitoring and regulatory gazes. Below, I revisit the research questions laid out in my introduction before offering a contribution statement, some limitations and reflexive remarks and, finally, some opportunities for future research.

Revisiting the Research Questions

At the beginning of this thesis, I set out three overriding research questions that have underpinned the main body of my work. Here, I will revisit them individually and offer a brief summary of the ways in which this thesis has approached and evaluated them.

1. **How do girls and young women in England understand their relationship with social media?**

It is clear that my participants had an incredibly complicated relationship with social media, wherein they both embraced and rejected the possibilities it offers. I have examined these contradictions through the overarching themes of space, surveillance and visibility, which were seen as significant to girls' and young women's uses of (and relationship with) social media. As highlighted in chapters four and five, my participants were often keen to distance themselves from those who use digital medias in the "wrong" way – i.e. those who become "too" visible and invite "too much" (male) attention. As outlined in chapter five, my participants discussed the heightened levels of visibility and surveillance that women face in digital contexts, as they believed the body to be absolutely central to many online constructions of identity. However, while they largely acknowledged that productions of beauty were important within these contexts, this was only considered acceptable if the beauty produced could be read as "natural". This tended to draw upon old discourses of "respectable" femininity and suggested that women could be pigeon-holed into specific cultural categories, establishing a kind of digital virgin/whore

dichotomy. These binaries were often discussed via the lens of celebrity culture, wherein "proper" and "improper" aspirational figures were discussed (Allen & Mendick 2013).

The difference between real and virtual identities was also considered a key site of concern in my participants' discussions about social media. As discussed in chapter four, virtual identities were largely considered to be "separate from" real identities, and online productions of the self were largely discussed around notions of "showing off" and presenting "fake" and heavily edited versions of oneself. It is important to note that virtual identities being understood as "fake" was almost always discussed in relation to *women's* uses of social media. This suggests that the real/virtual divide becomes discursively gendered and it is women in particular who are constructed as having difficulty reconciling their "digital" and "real" lives/identities.

Despite being critical of social media as a terrain upon which (other) girls and young women (re)constructed and (re)produced dominant femininities, many of my participants also highlighted the importance of social media in positively contributing to their lives in a variety of other ways. While ever-present issues of surveillance and visibility were highlighted as key concerns, it is important to note the ways in which my participants were also able to rework digital space(s) in order to subvert or resist these seemingly dominant facets of digital culture. In these regards, photo-sharing apps such as Instagram were considered to be where body projects were located, whereas blogging sites such as Tumblr were often understood to be where political projects were carved out. In chapter seven, I outlined the ways in which many of my participants understood social media as a significant political landscape, wherein they could locate sites of alternative news and find supportive communities that resist dominant discourses of surveillance, hyper-visibility and regulation. Indeed, social media was often considered the *only* site of political knowledge, participation and engagement that was available to them, and the construction of

marginal spaces on blogging sites such as Tumblr were understood as important tactics in the resistance and subversion of visibility and surveillance. Locating these spaces allowed girls and young women to disrupt the regulatory gaze, which is understood to operate more pervasively on other SNS such as Instagram and Facebook. In this regard, then, it is important to note the multitude of sites that fall under the umbrella term "social media" and how they can be taken up in a host of (sometimes contradictory) ways.

There is no doubt that social media was understood an extremely powerful and pervasive tool in the everyday lives of girls and young women. While it was often discussed as a key site of anxiety, it was also presented in more nuanced ways, and was often also understood as a site upon which girls and young women could locate much needed space for themselves.

2. **In what ways and to what extent can social media be considered a site of political and cultural resistance for girls and young women in England?**

Despite expressing concerns about individualistic productions of the digital self (particularly in chapters four and five), my participants did not *only* understand social media through this lens. While they noted (and stipulated their concerns about) the heightened levels of visibility and surveillance that girls and young women face in digital contexts, they also discussed some of the ways in which this can be subverted and/or resisted. Indeed, there was clearly potential for social media to be conceptualised as a site of collaborative learning and resistance, particularly in the arguments laid out in chapter seven. In this regard, I have built upon theories of bedroom cultures (McRobbie & Garber 1976), border spaces (Harris 2004) and subaltern counterpublics (Fraser 1990) to suggest that girls and young women are locating and carving out their own online

space(s) for political and cultural purposes. This includes finding sites for self-expression, engaging in peer-led learning and seeking out information about issues they would otherwise have little to no exposure to.

However, as highlighted in chapter six, it is important to note that my participants largely rejected the term "political" and did not always understand their uses of social media as constituting political or cultural activism. Indeed, this came down to their own understandings and conceptualisation of notions of politics and activism, which they often (although not always) discussed through a rigid and prescriptive framework. This meant that "politics" was largely understood as being about Westminster, "confusing" debates and (usually male) politicians. Their alienation from traditional forms of politics such as this was highlighted in chapter six, wherein I examined the ways in which girls and young women continue to be discursively excluded from normative political space. I have highlighted the potential relationship between girls' continued position as marginalized political subjects and their use(s) of social media. I suggest that girls' apparent dominance of digital culture stems from their historical and contemporary exclusion from public spaces. As girls and young women are so often restricted by their differential access to this public space (McRobbie & Garber 1976), social media has become an incredibly important tool in connecting with others, building communities and constructing identities.

It is important to note, however, that my participants often did not intend these sites of engagement to be seen by adults. Indeed, the very construction of these spaces was understood as a way in which to escape the regulatory adult gaze. This suggests that these sites are not necessarily locations of resistance or activism in ways that might comfortably fit with more traditional definitions of the terms. By this, I mean that these sites and instances of engagement and participation are usually hidden away from those within positions of normative political

power. Indeed, those who exist within these spaces may wish for them never to become public in the normative sense. This may raise concerns for some feminists, in that girls' and young women's political resistance is being enacted at an individual, micro (indeed, almost imperceptible) level, which contributes to feminism's invisibilizaton within wider political contexts (Schuster 2013). However, this is a potentially problematic interpretation. The opportunities that these spaces provide for new politics are extremely important for girls and women, who have traditionally been marginalised and erased within political cultures and the wider feminist movement. Equally, as Rentschler and Thrift (2015b: 239) point out, contemporary feminism (including academic feminism) is becoming increasingly defined by what is "declared and registered across media platforms, especially those on social media" (see also Phipps 2016d: 307).

As has been noted in other academic works, girls and young women within contemporary contexts only have specific resources available to them as tools for resistance (Budgeon 2011:108). This is key. While it is possible to reject social media's potential as operating at an individual and decentralised level, this ignores the structures that contemporary girls and young women are operating within. Girls' and young women's political and cultural uses of social media can be understood as a utilisation of the spaces that are available to them and the importance of this cannot be overstated.

3. What are the gendered political and cultural implications of the above?

As highlighted in chapters four and five, my participants expressed repeated concern regarding the levels of surveillance and visibility that girls and women face within digital contexts. Indeed, some of the concerns that were expressed by my participants in relation to social media centred

around a belief that it is often utilised as a tool in the production of contemporary unobtainable beauty standards. The ways in which girls' lives and identities continue to intersect with celebrity and consumer cultures is also important. This, my participants argued, re-establishes gender norms and perpetuates feelings of body dissatisfaction amongst girls and young women. This, of course, is highly troubling in that it continually brings women's focus back to the body and it is possible to see that, within a society structured by neoliberal and post-feminist values, intensified and increasingly pervasive forms of surveillance and visibility can become all-consuming (Elias & Gill 2017).

This can be linked back to the points made under research question one. Girls and young women who explicitly complied with these demands to make the body visible were often discussed in ways that were reproachful, disparaging or disproving. These girls and women were often accused of doing "too much" to gain (usually male) attention and were criticised for placing too much value on their visual digital identities. Girls or women who posted overtly (hetero)sexualised selfies, or who wore too much make-up/heavily edited their photos were often critiqued as representing a particularly "bad" form of contemporary femininity. As highlighted in chapter five, these constructions of "other" girls within my focus group can be located within existing debates around classed and racialized femininities. In general terms, these comments drew a distinction between particular types of women and femininities and served to categorise women on the basis of how they perform their gender. More specifically, however, a distinction was clearly drawn throughout my focus groups between girls and women who produced "natural" or "respectable" femininity and girls and women who produced what was often described as a "fake" femininity. The signifiers of excess that were mentioned by my participants can be understood as particularly transgressive because of their traditional cultural associations with working-class femininity (Skeggs 2001: 302; Skeggs 1997). Consultation with Black feminist thought also highlights the racialized element of these constructions. For example, Black feminists have highlighted the

tendency for black female sexuality to be presented as inherently "excessive" and "deviant" within mainstream cultural outputs (Jha 2016: 48. See also Hill Collins 1991). It can be argued that the comments from my participants about "other" girls and women, then, were likely influenced by culturally prevalent constructions of "respectable" femininity, which are heavily underpinned and influenced by discourses of sexism, classism and racism and serve to reiterate and reproduce white, middle-class femininity as the cultural ideal.

My participants suggested that this focus on the body and celebrity and consumer cultures is likely to draw girls' attention away from "real" politics. Having said that, as I have outlined in the previous section, my participants also highlighted the ways in which they employed strategies to subvert or resist these surveillant and regulatory gazes. These spaces often provide a location for girls and young women to enact and engage in new politics. As I have outlined above, these spaces usually operate outside of the adult gaze and, indeed, outside of alienating and intimidating political systems. This offered the potential for the girls and young women in my study to challenge traditional masculine conceptions of the political (as described in chapter six) and to participate in ways that were structured around the issues they cared about and related to. It also offered them the possibility of locating spaces for themselves outside of the restrictive and heavily managed space(s) of normative politics.

While social media has recently been lauded as a key factor in influencing people's voting behaviours and, therefore, political institutions (Wendling 2017), it is imperative also to think about the ways in which political and cultural engagement amongst girls and women often operates outside of the normatively political. Indeed, my participants often rejected politics in the Westminster model, preferring instead to locate their political and cultural engagements at the more micro level of their everyday lives. It is also important, here, to recognise those who did not

see themselves as political at all and how they also located space for themselves away from the regulatory and monitoring gaze of, particularly, adults. For example, some participants highlighted their tendency to use Snapchat, Instagram, WhatsApp or Tumblr to simply talk to and "hang out" with their friends. This is still worth noting, however, as it suggests that spaces are, again, being carved out wherein girls and young women can express themselves and construct identities that are able to resist dominant notions of visibility and surveillance.

It must be noted that the cultural and political landscape is becoming increasingly fraught and complex and this inevitably leads to more questions being posed regarding the role of social media within these changing contexts. This also opens up questions about future research, and this shall be discussed in the final section of this chapter.

Contribution and Finding Space: So what?

This thesis has contributed to a number of timely academic debates around contemporary constructions of girlhood, digital media cultures and new politics. Firstly, it provides new knowledge on the construction and lived experiences of femininity for girls and young women within contemporary digital contexts. This builds on a previous feminist works that have examined the lives of girls and how they navigate complex political and cultural terrains in order to locate space for themselves (Harris 2004). In particular, my work contributes to recent academic studies that examine the gendered meaning(s) of social media within contemporary contexts of postfeminism and neoliberalism (Dobson 2015; Keller 2016b). My work fills a specific gap in the literature in that it occupies the space between political uses of social media (Keller 2012; 2016a; 2016b) and cultural uses of social media (Dobson 2015; Elias & Gill 2017).

This work might be particularly useful to those who are concerned about increasing levels of surveillance and visibility that the mainstreaming of new technologies has seemingly contributed to (McRobbie 2015; Elias & Gill 2017), and how girls and young women are able to critique, subvert and even resist some of the demands placed upon them in this regard. Similarly, my work also offers new ways in which to conceive of politics within digital contexts, and the ways in which girls and young women interact with this style of engagement. I offer examples of the ways in which academic studies of online activism need to engage with more imperceptible, "hidden" methods of engagement in order to fully interrogate what "online politics" really means.

Below, I highlight four ways that my thesis has provided an original contribution to knowledge:

1) My work has offered an understanding of the ways in which gendered spatial politics continues to structure the lives of girls and young women online. To do this, I have employed (and reconfigured) the theory of bedroom cultures as a lens through which to make sense of social media. My work offers an original and updated contribution to bedroom cultures by not just examining how websites, blogs and SNS profiles can become much like bedrooms in and of themselves in the way that they provide spaces for identity mapping, but also the ways in which the physical bedroom itself (or the domestic sphere more generally) as a space can be transformed and reconstituted by digital culture. This space, which is neither public or private, should be central in updating feminist critiques of normative notions of citizenship and the associated definitions of politics and participation (Lister 2003). SNS are important spaces within which girls and young women are challenging and negotiating traditional constructions of (politically passive, apathetic) femininity and should be central within current debates on their citizenship practices. My work offers new and interesting data in relation to the performance of citizenship for girls and young women in contemporary digital cultures, within which

they are developing new models of activism and political engagement. These models do not always fit comfortably alongside normative understandings of these terms, and my work suggests that traditionally gendered lines between that which is public and that which is private are not just unhelpful but also impossible in current debates on citizenship. My work provides empirical data to corroborate Harris' claim that, for girls and young women, "participating in online cultures and networks is a form of developing citizenship skills, regardless of any specific involvement in political causes" (2008: 492).

2) My work has specifically examined both cultural body politics and normative politics. I have empirically examined popular claims that girls and young women within contemporary neoliberal and postfeminist contexts are disengaged and apathetic, by discussing their own views and lived experiences of these claims.

3) My work has also offered new knowledge on the ways in which contradictions of femininity are navigated, negotiated and enacted within contemporary digital cultures. The significance of "contradiction" here is not particularly new. Feminist scholars have often noted the irreconcilable demands that are placed on young women within the context of contemporary gender relations (Budgeon 2011: 88) and, indeed, it has been noted that contradiction is at the heart of contemporary feminine subjectivity (Gonick 2006; Baker 2010; Griffin et. al. 2013). Negotiating these complex subject positions becomes a dilemmatic process for girls and young women. My work, however, contributes new knowledge to these debates by exploring how these contradictions play out on the highly gendered terrains of social media.

4) My study also provides an empirical study to the field. While this study is not the first to utilise focus groups in feminist research related to youth digital media use (see Ringrose et. al. 2012; Harvey et. al. 2013; Handyside and Ringrose 2017), it is the only study that combines focus group data and critical discourse analysis to examine girls and young women's cultural and political uses of social media in a range of urban locations in England. My study offers a larger and more geographically varied dataset than previous

studies and provides a clear empirical contribution to young women's usage of social media in Western contexts.

Limitations and closing reflections

No PhD thesis is able to cover everything that might fall under the scope of its research topic. It is, therefore, important to reiterate what this thesis *doesn't* do, as much as what it *does* do (see above). Deciding what to leave out is always a difficult task, and there is no easy way to decide what should be included and what should be pushed aside. There were many things I could have discussed (indeed, many things I wanted to discuss), but was unable to justify their place in my thesis due to their lack of sufficient presence in my fieldwork data, or a lack of direct relevance to my research questions.

For example, I am particularly aware that I have been unable to offer a thorough investigation of the reasons *behind* some of the online practices discussed, particularly those that relate directly to beautification, glamour labour and body projects. While my research has highlighted my participants' attitudes toward these "feminine" digital behaviours, my data did not really allow me to investigate what pleasures or feelings of community these practices can provide for girls and young women in digital contexts. Despite this, I have attempted to challenge conceptions of girls' and women's beauty practices as somehow "trivial" and apolitical by locating them within wider debates regarding new femininities, neoliberalism and post-feminism. My research has, then, been able to identify some key trends in girls' and young women's online body projects, and offers some fruitful sites for future inquiry. Indeed, this is something I would like to carry on in my own future research projects, as will be discussed in the following section.

I also became more aware, as my research progressed, of the need for more work into digital sexisms and the ways in which my own research has not been able to address this. Again, this is largely due to the issue not being present in my fieldwork data and, therefore, I was unable to reasonably interrogate it at the expense of other topics that were of greater concern to the participants in my study. While I have noted that social media can become structured by gender in much the same way as the material world, I have not had space within this thesis to fully examine the ways in which online misogyny and abuse/trolling of women can seriously jeopardise and limit women's digital opportunities and practices. Indeed, online abuse of women can be conceptualised as a retaliation or backlash to some of the things I have laid out in this thesis – namely, girls' and women's dominance of – and visibility within – digital spaces. While some scholars have begun to pay attention to digital misogyny (Jane 2014 & 2016; Cole 2015; Sobieraj 2017), it is also important to think about exactly *which* girls and women this abuse is likely to be levelled at. The online abuse of Diane Abbott during the 2017 general election, for example, was not only about her being a woman, but specifically about being a visible Black woman in a political system that is overwhelmingly male and overwhelmingly white. Therefore, it might be useful for future research to examine how far digital border spaces and counterpublics are accessible to all girls and young women and whether these spaces are shrinking or thriving in the face of trolling and online abuse.

I am also aware of the irony that operates in championing space(s) for girls and young women that operate outside of an adult gaze while simultaneously researching and analysing these spaces for academic consumption. I hope I am careful in not exploiting girls' and young women's private or "marginal" spaces, but rather providing opportunities for their engagements to be considered serious and important forms of civic, cultural and political participation.

One of the biggest (and most frustrating) challenges of researching and writing on social media is that it is an everchanging and continuously evolving landscape. Things that were important and impassioned topics of conversations amongst my participants in June and July 2015 may well not be the same things that would be discussed if I held the focus groups again today, two years later. For example, it has recently been noted that British politics is currently witnessing a kind of "renaissance" of youth political activism and participation, wherein young people are engaging more actively with the Westminster system (Bulman 2017; Coyle 2017; Hart 2017; Warrell et. al. 2017). This is largely considered to be related to the success of Jeremy Corbyn in reviving left-wing politics, and offering a genuine alternative to the once impenetrable neoliberal consensus (Fishwick 2017; Jacques 2017).

This speaks to a limitation of the focus group method, in that it is only able to offer data from a very specific period of time. Writing a PhD with a focus on politics during a period of such momentous political instability and tension has often been difficult, and analysing focus group data from one particular (and limited) snapshot of time has sometimes proven challenging. It has been impossible to do justice to the amount of political changes that have taken place since I first began thinking about this project in 2013. Two UK general elections, a Scottish referendum, a Brexit referendum, the election of Donald Trump in the USA, and the revival of far-right politics will inevitably have impacted my participants' relationship with the political and I am only disappointed that I was not able to discuss the majority of these issues with my participants, who had already given me so much to think about. The changed political landscape does, of course, pose some challenges, but it also proves that more research is urgently required into the role of young people in subverting and resisting (rather than simply reproducing) neoliberal and depoliticized subjectivities.

Finally, it is important to, once again, reassert the limitations that were laid out earlier in my thesis. My study is small-scale and urban-centred and cannot speak to the experiences of all girls and women in England (or the West more generally). The various intersectional experiences that structure girls and young women's digital experiences should be important sites for future research.

The ever-changing (digital) landscape: opportunities for future research

One of the limitations of social media research also provides one of its most valuable opportunities. That the terrain of academic research into digital technologies is relatively new, and that it is everchanging and constantly evolving provides researchers an opportunity to be involved in the shaping of new directions for and approaches to the many issues that arise within the discipline. My research is interdisciplinary and sits at the intersection of cultural girlhood/youth studies, media studies, (digital) sociology of gender and political science. There are, therefore, a number of ways that this research can be continued and developed.

I am particularly interested in further examining online subcultural communities, such as the Instagram fitspo community and, specifically, the YouTube beauty community, particularly in relation to the pleasures that girls and young women find within them. This moves away from analysing only the microcelebrities at the forefront of these groups, as it calls upon us to engage with and examine those who follow these figures and build digital communities around their

online content. Keller et. al. (2015) have recently called on girlhood scholars to make more use of ethnographic methods, and this would be a perfect opportunity to respond to this call. It is important to examine the pleasures that girls and women get from operating within these spaces and to highlight what these communities offer beyond an emphasis on body projects and aesthetic labour.

As I have highlighted in the previous section, the changing political and cultural landscape is also of the utmost importance, and I would be interested to see how I could potentially track these changes through a continuing longitudinal study. I have already suggested that my research took place at a particularly important time – just before the politically and culturally disruptive year of 2016 – and that, even since my fieldwork took place, the political landscape has become increasingly fraught. That neoliberalism is in "crisis" is something that has been regularly discussed since the financial crash of 2007/2008 (Chorev & Babb 2009; Dumenil & Levy 2011) and the current political climate is said to signal its inevitable death (Jacques 2016). Fraser (2013a) has already highlighted the ways in which this offers some important opportunities for feminism, and the recent resurgence of feminist discourse in popular and media culture(s) offers an opportunity to examine the ways in which girls and young women locate and make use of sites of resistance in the coming years. Alongside this, Gill (2016) has recently explored the possibility of an increased visibility of feminism producing a new cultural paradigm that can be conceptualised as "post-postfeminist". While Gill is ultimately sceptical about the idea that we now have moved beyond postfeminism, it is important for feminist academics to engage seriously with current and emerging feminisms (both popular and academic) in order to understand what role they will play in these complex and often deeply troubling political times. Indeed, if we understand postfeminism as the gendered facet of neoliberalism (as highlighted in chapter one), what does the "crisis of neoliberalism" mean for (post)feminism?

I would be interested to use this research as a springboard for a study that touches upon some of the issues laid out above. Such research would not have to be limited to a British context, but could also be collaborative and carried out in other neoliberal democracies in order to examine any connections and differences that take place. Ultimately, my data provides reasons to be both concerned and hopeful about girls' futures. Examining the ways in which these issues play out over the coming years would be incredibly useful for feminists who are interested in examining the lives of girls and young women and how they navigate complicated political terrains at both an individual and collective level.

Appendix 1 – Pilot Questionnaire

Responses – 49

Age Range – 14 – 23

1. What types of media do you consume on a day-to-day basis? On average, how many hours do you think you spend using these per day? Please state in the comments box

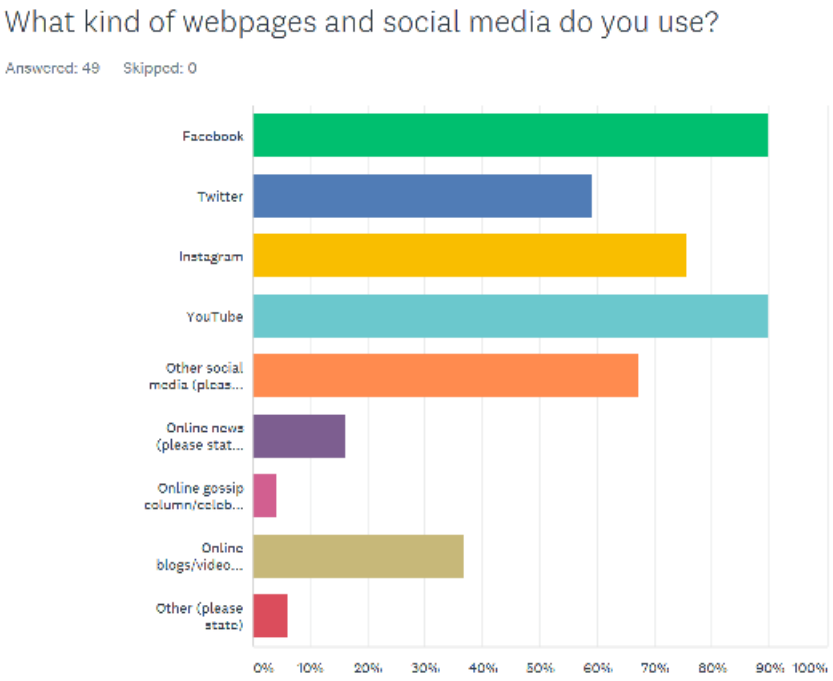
2. What kind of webpages and social media do you use?

3. How important do you think the media/social media is to your generation? If possible, please explain why.

4. Do you think the media/social media helps people of your generation create or shape an identity? If possible, please explain why/why not.

5. Do you have any other thoughts regarding girls, women and social media?

2. **<u>What kind of webpages and social media do you use?</u>**



Snapchat, buzzfeed

3/10/2015 7:24 PM

Online blogs/video blogs (Tumblr)

3/10/2015 7:24 PM

Tumblr

3/10/2015 7:11 PM

Fanfiction websites

3/10/2015 7:06 PM

snapchat and tumblr

3/10/2015 6:55 PM

Tumblr!

3. How important do you think the media/social media is to your generation? If possible, please explain why.

Its a way for news to get across to younger generations, and is also a way to educate us about various issuea we wouldve not been subjected to eg. Transgender

4/12/2015 10:55 PM View respondent's answers

My generation rely on social media for everything, from communicating with one another to showing off about what they are doing.

4/12/2015 9:25 PM View respondent's answers

It's how people communicate

4/12/2015 9:02 PM View respondent's answers

it is the only way information about the world is really consumed by young people as they rarely watch the news. it is an easy form of communication.

4/12/2015 9:00 PM View respondent's answers

We have been brought up on it and some people would say that we are practically addicted to it, I think it's changed our generation as a whole and seems to separate us from the older generation because it's such a huge part of our lives that they don't fully understand and are not involved in

It's how young people connect with so many other people across the world from them, also especially with Tumblr new stories are spread fast and a lot of things can be discovered. For example i would never know about Micheal Brown unless it was for tumblr, also it helps campaigns to be started and get changed.

3/12/2015 6:52 PM

View respondent's answers

Easiest and sufficient way to communicate quickly, whilst being far apart

3/11/2015 11:12 PM

View respondent's answers

our lives revolve around it---it entertains us, connects us, educates us

3/11/2015 8:10 PM

View respondent's answers

It's a way we connect and spread our knowledge amongst each other. There are quite a few things I would never know about if it weren't for the internet/social media. Unfortunately the general media plays a huge role and effects how many of these things operate, but that is a side effect.

3/11/2015 12:25 AM

View respondent's answers

I feel like yes, everyone uses it, but I do not believe it is true that kids today "don't know how to communicate or play outside".

3/10/2015 10:35 PM

View respondent's answers

Social media is the primary method of communication for people my age. Teenagers rely on social media for all daily plans and as a means of communicating while at home.

3/10/2015 7:11 PM

View respondent's answers

It's a way for me to connect with the world beyond myself. I can tell you all about the feud between two suburban high schools, but thanks to social media I can now also talk about things like feminism and racism and ableism and transmisogyny in depth. It's given me a new perspective.

3/10/2015 3:28 PM

View respondent's answers

Social media now is used to tell people how to dress, how to act, and all the general norms of the society, even if they're not good.

3/10/2015 2:45 PM

View respondent's answers

4. Do you think the media/social media helps people of your generation create or shape an identity? If possible, please explain why/why not.

If they find a group of people they belong to online they will become more like those people for example if you like a certain band and become friends online with people who also like that band you feel like you belong and become more like them. The media/social media also makes certain looks/things seem fashionable and people want to change themselves to fit into that.

4/12/2015 8:53 PM View respondent's answers

I would not have discovered my sexuality if not for the social media i use

3/12/2015 6:52 PM View respondent's answers

increases exposure to different types of people

3/11/2015 8:10 PM View respondent's answers

One way I know it helps create an identity is through the growth of awareness and knowledge of sexuality and gender orientation. It's served as a way for many people to learn more about themselves.

3/11/2015 12:25 AM View respondent's answers

You can create an Internet presence that represents only the parts of yourself and your life that you want people to see.

3/10/2015 10:35 PM View respondent's answers

People who are introverted feel much more comfortable coming out of their shell online, so one can see the true them.

3/10/2015 9:01 PM View respondent's answers

As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, seeing characters represent our community on screen and within the media is very inspiring.

3/10/2015 8:51 PM View respondent's answers

You can create a persona on social media that only reflects the best aspects of yourself. You can create media that projects your identity and communicate it with others.

3/10/2015 8:00 PM View respondent's answers

Tumblr is a huge part of shaping my identity, because I learned more about social issues and new books/tv than anywhere else.

3/10/2015 7:24 PM View respondent's answers

We are never truly apart from each other. You never have to say goodbye to someone and wait to see them again. That's a really significant thing in the development of a person, considering they rarely have to take time to self-reflect, and don't necessarily spend as much time with their families.

Without tumblr I would have had no idea there was more than two genders, and being non-binary is a huge part of my identity.

3/10/2015 6:23 PM View respondent's answers

Yes, you can be anything you want online and a lot of people use that as a starting point to find themselves through their interests, which can be easily explored online with a few clicks.

3/10/2015 6:09 PM View respondent's answers

Yes, because it allows them to hear the opinions of others and then form their own ideas about the world.

3/10/2015 5:01 PM View respondent's answers

We are the Technology Gen. Unless you're saying individually, then social media forms our self-ideology and how we view others; you can create yourself based upon what others say online.

3/10/2015 4:13 PM View respondent's answers

A lot of my beliefs were undeveloped. I knew what I believed, but I couldn't put it into words or give informed responses. But now I can.

3/10/2015 3:28 PM View respondent's answers

I believe that it is giving our generation the ability to learn about the things they are interested in without having the block of having to go through biased educators.

3/10/2015 1:25 PM View respondent's answers

With social media we can share and explore who are are in the present, which of course is always changing, but sharing what we like, what we're interested in or just our thoughts can be very important in affirming who we are, not only to ourselves but to other people on social media. However I think that can have negative effects, the media can easily influence people to think differently, especially with expectations of how we should look and behave, so in that respect I feel its harder for our generation to find our own identity and be ourselves.

3/10/2015 12:53 PM View respondent's answers

We are the first generation with social media. It shapes the way out generations interacts with each other. It's significantly different than the previous generation. We are the Internet Era.

3/10/2015 12:44 PM View respondent's answers

We're thought of as the ones who grew up with social media

3/10/2015 12:13 PM View respondent's answers

5. Do you have any other thoughts regarding girls, women and social media?

Young girls are forced to look at 'perfect' women in the media and it makes them self-conscious about themselves and their confidence is depleted.

4/12/2015 9:25 PM

View respondent's answers

there is a constant comparison to other women.

4/12/2015 9:00 PM

View respondent's answers

Media is full of all these airbrushed beautiful thin woman and this makes people extremely self conscious when they don't look like that. All those red carpet etc events feature women who have spent hours with professional make up artists/hair dressers just so they can look flawless and this embeds the idea in girls that there's something wrong with them if they don't look like that whether they consciously realise it or not

3/10/2015 7:06 PM

View respondent's answers

Makes it easier to compare yourself

3/10/2015 6:23 PM

View respondent's answers

I think young girls often go on social media and say, "I wish I looked like her." This is problematic because it is, however minuscule it seems, making the girl want to be somebody else. It is making another girl's body seem ideal rather than her own.

3/10/2015 12:44 PM

View respondent's answers

I think young girls often go on social media and say, "I wish I looked like her." This is problematic because it is, however minuscule it seems, making the girl want to be somebody else. It is making another girl's body seem ideal rather than her own.

3/10/2015 12:44 PM

View respondent's answers

Appendix 2 – Focus Group Breakdowns

Essex Year 8

Name	Age	Ethnic Origin
Daisy	13	White British
Leanne	13	White British
Nicki	12	White British
Bonnie	13	White British
Ayesha	13	Mixed Race
Fern	12	White British

Essex Year 10

Name	Age	Ethnic Origin
Charlie	14	White British
Emily	15	White British
Darcy	15	Mixed Race
Aisling	15	White Irish
Billie	15	White British
Imogen	14	White British

Essex Sixth Form

Name	Age	Ethnic Origin
Jasmine	18	British Iranian

Chloe	17	White British
Stacey	18	White British
Amie	18	White British
Victoria	18	White British
Lily	17	White British
Naomi	18	White European (Cypriot)

Greater Manchester Year 8

Name	**Age**	**Ethnic Origin**
Harriet	13	White British
Zara	13	Asian British
Lydia	12	White British
Zaina	13	Asian British
Amira	13	Asian British
Susanna	12	Black Caribbean
Jenna	13	White British
Tina	12	White British
Adele	13	Asian British
Sarah-Louise	13	White British
Johanna	13	Mixed Race (Black Caribbean & White)

Greater Manchester Sixth Form 1

Name	**Age**	**Ethnic Origin**
Brianna	16	Mixed Race (Black African & White)
Caeleigh	17	White British
Danielle	17	White British

Ruby	17	White British
Adrienne	16	Iranian
Monique	17	Black African
Lorna	17	White British

Greater Manchester Sixth Form 2

Name	**Age**	**Ethnic Origin**
Claire	17	Asian British
Chantelle	18	White British
Bridget	18	Asian British
Mel	18	Asian British
Freya	17	White British
Marnie	18	White European

West Midlands Sixth Form 1

Name	**Age**	**Ethnic Origin**
Emi	18	Mixed Race (White British & Black Caribbean)
Charlotte	18	Mixed Race (White British & Indian)
Deana	18	Asian British
India	17	White European
Donna	18	White British
Jayde	18	Black African
Michelle	18	White British

West Midlands Sixth Form 2

Name	Age	Ethnic Origin
Maria	17	White British
Fay	18	Mixed Race
Kimberley	18	Mixed Race (Black Caribbean & White)
Nadia	18	Asian British
Alice	17	White British
Gemma	18	White British
Fiona	18	White British
Priya	18	Asian British

West Midlands Sixth Form 3

Name	Age	Ethnic Origin
Clara	17	White British
Dominique	16	Asian British
Grace	17	White British
Samara	17	Asian British
Farrah	17	Black Caribbean

Appendix 3 – Interview Schedule

These interviews took a semi-structured format. This means that, while these topics were generally discussed in each focus group, there was some opportunity for the participants to enter into a relatively free and open dialogue. The order of these topics varied from group to group depending on the flow of conversation).

What kinds of webpages and social media do you use? (alternative news stories, regular news pages, Facebook, Twitter, other social networking sites?) How long, on average, do you spend doing these things each day? Do different SNS have different roles?
How important do you think social media is for your generation? What do you think its primary role is in your life/the lives of girls your age?
What do you feel some of the good things and bad things are about social media?
Do you think that social media makes girls and young women more aware of the way that they look? In what ways?
Can you name some "powerful" women in the public eye? Why are these women considered important? Are these women considered "role models", aspirational or something else?
How do you think women are portrayed in the mainstream media generally?
What are your thoughts around the relationship your generation has with "politics"? What does "politics" mean to you? Do you think people your age are (dis)interested in "politics"?
What role does social media play in politics for your generation? Does it help or hinder political engagement and participation?
Would you ever consider a career in politics? If so, why? If not, why not?

Appendix 4 – Ethics: Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms

1. School Gatekeeper Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form
2. Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form
3. Parent Permission Letter, Parent Information Sheet and Consent Form

1. School Gatekeeper Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms

Participant Information Sheet: School Gatekeepers

My name is Frankie Rogan and I am a PhD candidate at the University of Birmingham. This information sheet will give you a greater insight into the research I am carrying out, my aims and objectives, and the ways in which you can help.

Aims of Research

The primary aim of my research is to investigate girls' and young women's sense of self in a "digital age". I am specifically interested in looking at the ways in which girls aged 12 – 18 use social media to form cultural and political identities. As this generation is the first to have really "grown up" truly surrounded by the products of the technological revolution of the late 1990s and 2000s, I believe it is important to speak directly to girls and young women about their attitudes towards and experiences of social media.

My work will build on previous academic debates regarding popular culture and politics in the digital age and the ways in which digital media can both reaffirm and challenge gender stereotypes.

What is required from you?

- For you to allow me to enter your school and talk to a number of your female pupils about their social media habits
- For you to allow me to conduct the below, or as close to it as possible:
    - One interactive focus group made up of between 7 – 10 female students from year 8
    - One interactive focus group made up of between 7 – 10 female students from year 10

    - One interactive focus group made up of between 7 – 10 female students from year 12
- The research will take place during the summer term of the 2014/2015 academic year (April –July 2015)
- You are welcome to opt out of the research at any time – this can be during the research taking place or prior to thesis submission (any time up until March 2016)

Anonymity and Confidentiality

All data is entirely confidential and all names will be replaced with pseudonyms in any write up or publication of the research. You will be welcome to view and comment on any transcripts of the research. You are entitled to withdraw your participation in the research at any time prior to March 2016.

As outlined in the University of Birmingham's Code of Practice for Research, all notes that are used for the final research thesis will be stored for ten years for verification purposes. These notes will only be accessible by the University. If a subject withdraws participation, all notes and data relating to the participant will be destroyed and will no longer be accessible.

Participation and Contact

If you would like your students to be involved in this research, please contact me on , or via email at . You are also welcome to contact my supervisors with any queries regarding the research, Dr Emma Foster ( ) or Dr Jill Steans ( ).

School Participation Consent Form

1. I have volunteered for my school to participate in a research project conducted by Frankie Rogan, a PhD candidate at the University of Birmingham. I understand that the research focuses on cultural and political uses of social media amongst girls and young women aged 12 – 18

2. I can confirm that I have seen a provisional interview schedule for the research and can confirm that I am happy with these questions, and have been given the opportunity to discuss anything I am unsure about

3. I understand that the interviews and focus groups will take a semi-structured approach, and this may mean that conversation veers naturally from the provisional interview schedule. I understand that the researcher will use her own discretion to ensure that the conversations do not become inappropriate

4. I have been issued with a participation information sheet, outlining the general aims of the research, and have been given the opportunity to discuss this further with the researcher

5. I understand that I may withdraw my school from participation at any time up until March 2016, and the individual participants have been informed that they may also withdraw their participation at any time before this date. If withdrawal does occur, any notes taken before withdrawal will be destroyed and disposed of

6. I understand that this research is entirely confidential. Neither the name of the school nor the names of the individual students will be disclosed in any future write up of the research. I understand that I will be able to view a transcript of the research if I wish and will be given every opportunity to address anything I am unhappy with

I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have read and understood the participation information sheet.

Signed:

Position:

Date:

2. Participant Information Sheets / Consent Forms

Participant Information Sheet: Participants

My name is Frankie Rogan. I am studying for a PhD at the University of Birmingham and I am doing some research around the ways in which girls and women use social media. I would love the opportunity to talk to you about your social media habits, and how far social media is used in relation to your identity construction and political engagement.

In the last 15 – 20 years, we have seen a massive increase in the types of media available for our use. Your generation is unique in the sense that you have grown up with such an incredible amount of media at your disposable. There are some people who believe that this much exposure to media must mean that it changes the way you learn and develop as young adults.

In order to know whether or not this is correct, I think it is important to talk to members of your generation to know what you think and how you feel about these issues.

What do I have to do?

- Participate in a group discussion with other girls in your year group about social media. There will be some questions asked to guide the discussion
- You do not have to answer any questions you don't want to
- You are allowed to change your mind about participating in these discussions at any point

Confidentiality

While the results of these conversations may be typed up and published, you (or your school) will not be identified by name. All conversations will be kept entirely private and confidential and you are allowed to change your mind about participating before, during or after the discussions. If you change your mind, all notes and recordings of your conversations will be destroyed and disposed of.

Participation

If you would like to participate, please let the teacher who gave you this form know. If you are under 18, both you and your parents will need to sign a consent form to allow you to take part.

Participant Consent Form

1. I have volunteered to take part in a research project conducted by Frankie Rogan, a PhD candidate at the University of Birmingham. I understand that the research focuses on cultural and political uses of social media amongst girls and young women aged 12 – 18

2. I have been given the chance to read the information sheet and to ask any questions I may have about the study

3. I understand that by taking part in this study I may be observed, interviewed and audio recorded

4. I understand that my taking part in this study is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time

5. I understand that my name and personal details will be kept confidential and will not be published in any write up of this research

6. I understand that all notes and recordings from this research will be kept private and confidential and will not be accessed by anyone except the researcher, Frankie Rogan

Signed:

Name:

Age:

Ethnic Origin:

Date:

3. Parental Participant Information Letter / Consent Forms

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Frankie Rogan. I am currently studying for a PhD at the University of Birmingham and I am doing some research around the ways in which girls and young women use social media. I am particularly interested in how social media is used by girls aged 12 – 18 in the construction of their cultural and political identities. Your daughter's school has kindly allowed me to visit and talk to some of their female students about these issues.

As I'm sure you are aware, the last 15 – 20 years have seen a massive increase in the types of media available for our use. Your daughter's generation is perhaps unique in the sense that they are the first to have grown up with such an incredible amount of media at their constant disposable. There are some researchers who believe that this much exposure to media will change the way this generation (and, indeed, all future generations) will learn and develop as young adults.

In order to know whether or not this is true, I think it is important to talk to members of this generation to know what they think and how they feel about these issues. Your daughter has volunteered to be part of this study and, as she is under the age of 18, it is obviously appropriate to get your consent.

The research will involve holding some interactive group discussions. The groups will be made up of around 7 – 10 female students from the same year group.

If you are happy for your daughter to participate in this research, I ask that you read and sign the consent form and return to the school office. I would be more than happy to discuss any issues or questions you may have, and am contactable via email on [redacted].

Thank you very much for taking the time to read these sheets.

Yours faithfully,
Frankie Rogan
PhD Candidate
University of Birmingham
Department of Political Science and International Relations
[redacted]

Information Sheet for Parents

What will my daughter be doing?

- Participating in a group discussion with other girls in her year group about social media use and identity. There will be some questions asked to guide the discussion
- No one will be forced to answer all (or, indeed, any) of the questions
- You or your daughter are allowed to withdraw your consent at any time

Confidentiality and anonymity

While the results of these conversations may be typed up and published, your daughter (or her school) will not be identified by name. All conversations will be kept entirely private and confidential and you/your daughter are allowed to change your mind about her participation before, during or after the discussions. If consent is withdrawn, all notes and recordings of the conversations will be destroyed and disposed of.

Parent Consent Form

1. I give my consent for my daughter to participate in a research project conducted by Frankie Rogan, a PhD candidate at the University of Birmingham. I understand that the research focuses on cultural and political uses of social media amongst girls and young women aged 12 – 18

2. I understand that interviews and group discussions may be audio recorded. All notes and audio recordings will be kept private and confidential and will not be shared with anyone aside from the researcher, Frankie Rogan

3. I understand that the interviews and focus groups will take a semi-structured approach, and this may mean that conversation occasionally veers naturally from the provisional interview schedule. I understand that the researcher will use her own discretion to ensure that the conversations do not become inappropriate

4. I have been issued with a participation information sheet, outlining the general aims of the research, and have been given the contact details of the researcher in case of any queries, questions or concerns

5. I understand that I (or my daughter) may withdraw her participation at any time prior to March 2016. If withdrawal does occur, any notes or audio recordings taken before withdrawal will be destroyed and disposed of

6. I understand that this research is entirely confidential. Neither the name of the school nor the names of the individual students will be disclosed in any future write up of the research

7. I understand that primary data – field notes, interview recordings and transcripts – will be stored for ten years for verification purposes. During this time, this data will be accessible only by the University. After this time period has elapsed, all primary data will be destroyed. This is line with the University of Birmingham research policy.

Signed:

Name:

Name of student:

Date:

Appendix 5: Zoella "Everyday Makeup Routine"

Example 1

Video Title: My Everyday Makeup Routine | Zoella

Date Posted: June 23rd 2013

Views at time of writing: 10,142,953

Link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CrOAVLICvhw

Name of Product	Price
1. Collection Lasting Perfection Concealer	£4.19
2. Real Techniques Expert Face Brush	£8.99
3. Nars Sheer Glow Foundation Mont Blanc	£32
4. Nars Sheer Glow Foundation Santa Fe	£32
5. Burts Bees Mango Lip Balm	£3.99
6. Laura Mercier Secret Concealer	£21
7. Laura Mercier Loose Setting Powder	£29
8. Real Techniques Contour Brush	£21.99[67]
9. Nars Eyeshadow Primer	£19.50
10. Mac Charcoal Brown Eyeshadow	£13.50
11. Mac Angled Brush 266	£16.50
12. Estee Lauder Eyeshadow	£17
13. Mac Eyeshadow Brush 239	£21
14. Mac Blending Brush 217	£21
15. Mac Eye Pencil "Coffee"	£14.50
16. Mac Smudge Brush 228	£16.50
17. Benefit "They're Real" Mascara	£20.50
18. Bare Mineral Foundation Medium Beige	£27

[67] Only available as part of the "Core Collection 1403" set with detailer brush, pointed foundation brush, puffing brush and contour brush together.

19. Real Techniques Blush Brush	£9.99
20. Mac Angled Contour Brush 168	£28
21. Sleek Contour Kit Light	£6.99
22. Mac Contour Brush 109	£28
23. Estee Lauder Illuminating Powder Gelee "Tease"	£34[68]
24. Mac Mineralize SkinFinish "So Ceylon"	£24.50
25. Mac Vanilla Pigment	£16
26. Mac Blending Brush 222	£23.50[69]
27. YSL Lipstick No. 13 Peach Passion	£25
Total Amount	**£536.14**

[68] Shade was limited edition and no longer on sale at time of writing. Price was found by locating "Bronze Goddess Illuminating Poweder Gelee" on Estee Lauder website
[69] Brush discontinued – price worked out from blending brush 224

Example 2

Video Title: My Everyday Makeup Routine | Zoella **Date Posted:** January 18th 2016

Views at time of writing: 6,907,554

Link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNidbHZBPxU

Name of Product	Price
1. Rimmel Lasting Finish Foundation	£7.99
2. Sigma Kabuki Round Brush	£20
3. Urban Decay Naked Skin Concealer	£19
4. Collection Concealer	£4.19
5. By Terry Hyaluronic Hydra-Powder	£42
6. Sigma Blush F92	£20
7. Nars Laguna	£29
8. Guerlain Terracota Bronzing Powder	£36.50
9. Maestro 24 Brush	£8.99
10. Bourjois Rose D'Or Golden Rose Blusher	£7.99
11. Maestro 143 Brush	£8.60
12. Becca Shimmering Skin Perfecter	£32
13. Urban Decay Eyeshadow Primer (Anti-Aging Edition)	£19
14. Too Faced Chocolate Bar Palette	£39
15. Maestro Eyeshadow Brush	£3.00
16. Mac Charcoal Eyeshadow	£13.50
17. Mac Nylon Eyeshadow	£13.50
18. Sigma E65 Small Angle Brush	£12
19. Sigma E40 Tapered Blending Brush	£13.60
20. Maybelline Lash Sensational Mascara	£8.99
21. Wild About Beauty Lip Crayon Due 01Fiona	£14.50
Total Amount	**£373.35**

Appendix 6 – Focus Group Quotes

Essex Year 10

E.g.1

Aisling: David Cameron

Charlie: Ed Miliband

Emily: David Cameron, I hate him. I really hate him, sorry

Charlie: Yeah that's all I can think of

INTERVIEWER: What about any female politicians?

Billie: Margaret Thatcher

Emily: She was the only one wasn't she?

Interviewer: The only female Prime Minister

Emily: That's sad

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that is "sad"?

All: Yeah

Billie: I think it's changing now slightly

Emily: I think it's because in older times women were portrayed as really dumb, like housewives and they were only supposed to cook and clean and look after the children and they got really poor education so men were always at the top of the hierarchy. But now times have moved on so women have got to be able to do more stuff. I think politics is the one thing we're holding back on really

Charlie: Yeah it's taking a *long* time for it to progress I think

E.g.2

INTERVIEWER: But do you think that young people care about politics as well?

Aisling: Not really

Charlie: To be honest I do want to be interested but I find it really confusing and it's not that I'm not bothered by it but I'm not as bothered because I don't understand it

Billie: I probably will care in the future when we can vote and stuff but right now we don't vote so what's the point

Darcy: Yeah if we could vote then I feel like I'd be more interested because it's like then we'd have a say in our future and so I'd care more. But because we can't I'd feel like there's no point getting involved really

Emily: Yeah do you ever hear your parents talking about it and you overhear all these big words and they're like "I can't believe they're doing this" and "I can't believe they're doing that" and "oh my God we have to do something" and I'm just like "what?"

Aisling: Yeah I was watching the news yesterday and they were talking about money going up and down and I had no idea what was going on

Billie: Like I want to care but no one is talking to us about it so it's hard to

INTERVIEWER: So do you think that people should have the vote younger?

All: Yeah

Darcy: I feel like it should be 16

Charlie: Can't you have a job at 16 so you can be taxed so if you can be paying money to the government you should have a say in how everything is run

Emily: And it's our future as well so why can't we vote for our future?

Billie: They might make it less boring if we could vote

INTERVIEWER: So when you think of politics, is that what you think, that it's quite boring or quite dry?

Charlie: Yeah it's confusing and so it's boring

Billie: It would help if there were more people that relate to us and we relate to them…like if there were younger people or more women or people from the same background as us because that's definitely not how it is now. You'd listen to someone you relate to more but now it's just always old men and you see them and you just think "oh God"

INTERVIEWER: So do you think any of you might consider doing it? Consider a career in politics?

All: No

Darcy: I definitely don't think I'm brainy enough for that

E.g.3

INTERVIEWER: So do you study politics in PD?

Emily: Yeah we do

INTERVIEWER: Do you find it helpful or…?

Charlie: It's helpful but I still get confused

Imogen: Yeah

Aisling: Yeah it is so confusing – they all just shout at each other and insult each other and I just don't understand it

Charlie: Yeah like when you have to watch those debate things it's like confusing because they're just shouting

Billie: Yeah

[…]

INTERVIEWER: So do you think parliament seems like quite an aggressive place?

Charlie: Yeah definitely and I think that girls aren't as aggressive as boys so if they did go into they would need to be ready to argue. I'm really bad at arguing and I think to be in politics you have to be quite good at that and I don't think that many girls are. Obviously there's a few who love to argue but men are just more…aggressive like that

Darcy: Yeah. I feel like in that kind of situation in politics if there's a man and a woman going up against each other, people will think the man is more powerful and just better

Imogen: What's the word…is it "dominant"?

Darcy: Yeah!

INTERVIEWER: Does that annoy you?

Darcy: Yeah…if I was going up for a job and they gave it to the man instead just because they assumed that he was more powerful, I would be sad about that

Emily: I'd be angry! I'd definitely write a letter of complaint!

[Laughs]

Darcy: I do think it will get better over time…

Charlie: I do think it's still there a little bit in society, that men are better than women

Billie: Yeah but people don't like to say it as much now because they know that women will say something about it but it's still there

Essex Year 8

E.g. 1

INTERVIEWER: Ok. So moving on into a slightly different area. We've spoken about people in "celebrity culture" but I just want to ask who you can think of in the public eye in regards to politics. Can you think of any politicians that you see a lot of?

Leanne: David Cameron

[Pause]

Ayesha: Nick Clegg

INTERVIEWER: Any women?

Nicki: Who's that one that was on *I'm a Celebrity?*

Bonnie: Oh yeah. It begins with E

INTERVIEWER: Edwina Currie?

Nicki: That's it!

Daisy: I can only think of Margaret Thatcher

Bonnie: [Laughing] I don't know what a politician is!

Leanne: Someone that works in politics, like David Cameron the Prime Minister

Bonnie: Ohh ok, I get it now

INTERVIEWER: So do you think the people you're age aren't particularly interested in politics?

All: Hmm

Daisy: Not really

Fern: I think some parents talk about it quite a lot, and we learnt some stuff in a PD lesson and we had a class vote sort of thing

Leanne: Oh yeah [talking to Nicki] and we were the only ones who got it wrong!

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean?

Leanne: In our PD class we had this mini vote thing for the election and me and Nicki voted for someone and the whole class voted for someone else and it was just me and Nicki voting for the other person

INTERVIEWER: So was it other students that were standing for "election"?

Fern: Yeah we had all the actual parties and we learnt facts about all of them and then we had to do our own class vote

Leanne: Yeah and everyone voted for the Conservatives and me and [D] did the Liberal Democrats and we were like "arghh" because we were the only ones!

Daisy: I think people know who their parents vote for and just voted for them

Fern: In my class I think Miss was saying she voted for Labour so some people voted Labour because it was the easy option because that's what Miss said

[Laughs]

E.g. 2

Bonnie: It is mostly men

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think that is?

Daisy: I think maybe we're just not interested

INTERVIEWER: You think women are maybe less interested in politics than men?

Bonnie: That could be true but I don't think it is

Fern: I think some countries are just further behind. Because obviously ages ago women had a lot less rights than men did so some countries still kind of just stick to that, like they don't believe in women like being in charge and everything

INTERVIEWER: Do you think the UK still thinks that?

Leanne: I think it's nowhere near as bad but people do still think that men are the stronger and more confident ones

INTERVIEWER: How does that make you feel?

Leanne: It's annoying

Fern: It makes you want to prove them wrong. I think what we want to do is achievable but we will have to work really hard for it

INTERVIEWER: What do you think would make you more engaged in politics, or more interested?

Bonnie: If there were younger people involved in it or more people that don't look all the same

Ayesha: Yeah because they'd have different views that are closer to ours

Fern: Honestly, in lessons, at least with me, I listen more to younger teachers than I do to older ones because I feel like…I don't know, that they'll be like "back in my day, this is how we did it" but the younger ones are more aware of how you feel and they understand more and that. They also use more...

Leanne: Words we understand

Fern: Yeah. My old English teacher was older and most of the stuff he said and the words he used no one could understand. They weren't words we would use and what he said wasn't put the way we would put it now

Essex Year 12

E.g. 1

Interviewer: Why do you think there are still much fewer women MPs than there are men?

Naomi: I honestly think because they've been deemed less important and less capable

Chloe: I still think it's just seen as a male role, a man's job

Naomi: Yeah because men are always seen as more clever and it's going back to what we've just been talking about for the last hour, about women being valued just for their appearance

Chloe: Yeah women just don't get the same treatment as men in that area. Like we would never talk about David Cameron's suit

Jasmine: What? That would be weird

Victoria: I think people would listen to male politicians more than they would women

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think that?

Victoria: I don't know, it's just…

Lily: Probably because women have always been seen as kind of just less…less…just less than men. We never used to be able to vote, we never used to have rights to do things that men did. So if we couldn't even vote, historically we could hardly be seen as politicians

Jasmine: Yeah

Chloe: A lot of other things have improved so hopefully it'll get better with time

INTERVIEWER: So do you think that there will be a lot of young women now growing up with an ambition to go into politics to break those stereotypes?

Stacey: I don't think I know one single girl that would go into politics

INTERVIEWER: Would any of you

Numerous: No

Naomi: It's too hard

Amie: I think that it will get better though. One of my friends, she's really interested in politics and she tried to apply for a placement in the House of Commons so she's passionate about it. I think there's like…I don't know, I just think women are judged if they're like strong characters. Like they'll get called bossy

Stacey: Yeah you get called high maintenance

Chloe: God, I get called high maintenance all the time

INTERVIEWER: If there were more women or young people in politics, do you think that would engage young people or engage young women more?

Jasmine: Yeah but I feel like they wouldn't be taken seriously

Chloe: Yeah stereotypically the idea of a politician is a middle-aged male, usually white, there's very few people from minority groups in UK parliament and having that as standard when you're growing up then you're going to get used to it. It's going to be like "why would I vote for her, when I can vote for him?" Why would I vote this person, when I can vote the man that's gone to Eton, then straight to Oxford to study politics, then straight into the Commons? That's how it is, that's the normality for everyone's voting behaviour. Unless there's a huge shift in the way we think, everyone is just going to follow suit

Greater Manchester Year 8

E.g.1

Sarah-Louise: Politicians are mostly men

Interviewer: And why do you think that is?

Sarah-Louise: Because of the past, people think that women are untrustworthy compared to the men, like the men are stronger so they're going to make a stronger country

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that there is still that assumption today?

Adele: Yeah

Lydia: I do

Zara: I think it's quite a stereotypical thing that it's quite a manly job

INTERVIEWER: And why is it seen as a manly job do you think?

Zara: Because…no, I don't know why

Jenna: Because people think that men are cleverer than women, that they know more about what's going on in the world

INTERVIEWER: How does that assumption make you feel?

Susanna: Annoyed

Harriet: Yeah

Amira: Yeah it's bad

Sarah-Louise: I think when you see politicians on TV they're all kind of middle to upper class and, maybe apart from Obama, white men and it's like the only major female politician that I'm aware of is Margaret Thatcher and she was really bad so…

Jenna: Yeah I think that she just ruined it for the women there. She just like…trashed it up

INTERVIEWER: So do you think that the memory of Margaret Thatcher has specifically damaged women's opportunities to go into politics?

Sarah-Louise: Yeah!

Tina: Not really. Because it doesn't speak for all women or how women see politics

Johanna: I wouldn't think that it would really have a massive impact on women because a lot of men still helped her run the country so it wasn't all her fault

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that there will be more women in government as the years progress?

Zaina: I really hope so

[…]

Tina: I think it's history that influences the way we see women, especially in politics, because it always used to be men and so maybe people think it should still be men…like the "traditional" way of doing things

Greater Manchester Sixth Form 1

E.g.1

INTERVIEWER: The general election has just been and gone so around that sort of time, who were the politicians you saw a lot of?

Brianna: Ed Miliband but people made loads of fun of him. There were so many memes made about him and videos and stuff

INTERVIEWER: They did make a lot of fun of him didn't they?! And why was that, do you think?

Brianna: I think it was the sandwich…

[Laughs]

Brianna: The coverage isn't even politics anymore, it was about his face and his expressions. That was the coverage of the general election, it wasn't really on policy or anything. Like we didn't see as much of the policies or anything or speeches or things, I think we just saw people making fun of them

INTERVIEWER: And what about female politicians, did you see much coverage there?

Monique: That Scottish nationalist woman

Brianna: Yeah, she had a really large following the day after the BBC debate like everyone was following her around and stuff. Because everyone watched it on YouTube and whatever and it was tweeted about loads, it gave her and the SNP loads of exposure I think

Lorna: The only other female politician I know is like Theresa May

INTERVIEWER: Is it rare for you to see women in politics then?

Numerous: Yeah

INTERVIEWER: So if I say 'female politician', is it just Nicola Sturgeon and Theresa May that you can think of?

Brianna: The only ones I know are them two

[…]

Ruby: It's a very small amount compared to the men

INTERVIEWER: Why is that?

Adrienne: I think women are portrayed as less educated than men, that's why. We're known for our looks and the way we're meant to dress and our make-up and stuff.

Danielle: Yeah even Nicola Sturgeon, they're not really talking about her policies all the time are they?

Caeleigh: Yeah you don't see with men what suits they're wearing, what shoes they're wearing, how they look better or worse than before, how much weight they've lost or gained, you see it with women only

INTERVIEWER: Is that kind of reporting a dangerous route for the media to go down?

Brianna: Yeah, of course it makes people take you less seriously. It makes her [Nicola Sturgeon] seem like she's not focused if everyone's thinking about her looks and stuff and they're not really looking in to her policies and stuff. It could make other people not want to go into that career as well.

E.g. 2

INTERVIEWER: There's always the cliché that young people aren't interested in politics. Do you think young people around your age are politically active, or are interested in politics?

Caeleigh: Hmm not as much but I think it would help, like, I think they'd be more active if there were younger politicians and they weren't mostly men who are middle aged

Adrienne: Yeah

Ruby: Because I don't think that's engaging for people

INTERVIEWER: Do you think young people engage in politics in a different way?

Brianna: I think this year especially, this year more than other years, because of the media coverage, everyone was talking about the general election on social media. It wasn't necessarily just about policies but it was about politicians themselves

Lorna: Yeah I think people our age relate more to people than policies

Adrienne: Yeah and you always see pictures of politicians with their wives, like, trying to give a certain Image

Monique: Like the "family image". And I don't think that's representative of everyone. Not everyone is in that family unit, that's just how it is in tradition. Like Miliband had children before marriage and some people even attacked him for that but not everyone gets married before they have kids

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think those personal choices were highlighted so much in the media?

Caeleigh: I don't think it's our generation that makes a fuss of it

Brianna: Yeah it's not our generation, it's the older generations and the traditions of the middle or upper class and stuff.

Caeleigh: It's like they're still dictating what's normal. I think some people our age like they aren't interested at all, but I think a lot of young people are. And it's becoming more and more that people are interested and they want to have a say and stuff

INTERVIEWER: So do you think that the image around politics will change then? If more and more young people are becoming politically engaged, do you think that the traditional make-up of parliament, for example, might change or do you think it's to do with more deeply embedded traditions?

Monique: I think it'll change

Caeleigh: It'll change soon, yeah

INTERVIEWER: Why?

Caeleigh: I think, because, like, this generation, they care about, say, tuition fees and stuff – things that affect them. But as we get older real things will start to affect us too, like taxes and stuff so we'll be more inclined to get involved with the bigger picture. But now, because the things that affect us are such small issues, it doesn't affect everyone and so our voices aren't heard so we don't bother. But as more things start to affect us we'll want to change more and get louder

Monique: Yeah. Or maybe as we see more women, or more young people, or more people from different races and backgrounds it might get better.

Brianna: I dunno, what about Margaret Thatcher? That didn't help

Monique: Yeah I think she really put people off because she's just known as being the worst Prime Minister ever. It's bad. The only British female Prime Minister and she's just known as being…

Brianna: They've seen her and they might have been put off because she was presented as like – you know like a man when he's dictating stuff over the table – she was seen like that, really forceful. She was bossy, like that old woman stereotype. That was made a lot worse by newspapers and TV shows and everything, they made fun of her being bossy and stuff so maybe people think "why don't we stick to the way we are, to tradition, instead of electing women," you know?

INTERVIEWER: And, “bossy”, is that a word that’s reserved for women, do you think?

Brianna: Yeah, that’s exactly how women are described. Men are described as authoritative or something, but women are “bossy”, like they don’t have a place to be authoritative

Ruby: Yeah

Caeleigh: I do think if Thatcher was a man, she might have been seen as decisive

Monique: She was quite masculine in a lot of ways though wasn’t she?

INTERVIEWER: Is Thatcher’s success down to her embracing a masculine type of power then?

Caeleigh: I think she probably got used to being around men. When she walked into meetings, she would have been surrounded by men so she’d have to maybe bring herself to the level that society sees men as being at. Maybe she thought she’d be treated less seriously if she was acting all feminine so she had to almost “fit in” to get her voice heard and to get respect, sort of. The men there would have already had it because, you know, they’re men. But she came into that world needing to prove something

Monique: Women always need to prove that they are focused and dedicated to the job. Like if they have children, that’s almost a bad thing, but earlier we were saying for the men how they, like, need children to give that family image off

Adrienne: Yeah, it’s like if you have children as a woman you’re not completely focused, but if the Prime Minister has a family, it’s their wife that take care of the kids and stuff and they can completely focus on, you know, politics.

Lorna: Yeah!

Adrienne: But the women…they have to prove themselves differently, definitely

Greater Manchester Sixth Form 2

E.g.1

INTERVIEWER: What about in politics? The general election has been and gone so who were the politicians you saw most of?

Bridget: Ed Miliband. There were loads of memes of him

INTERVIEWER: Making fun of him, then?

Bridget: Yeah, saying he looks funny and stuff like that, and that Nigel person as well, I see him a lot

Freya: Nigel Farage yeah

INTERVIEWER: Any women?

All: No

INTERVIEWER: Any female politicians you can think of?

Freya: You don't see women for being smart, you see them for being naked and whatever

Marnie: I can think of Theresa May and Harriet Harman [thinks] Nicola Sturgeon

Chantelle: I don't know any of these people

Bridget: Does that Hillary person count?

[…]

Chantelle: I can only think of Thatcher

INTERVIEWER: And why do you think it is that you can't think of many women in politics? Are women less interested in politics?

Numerous: No

Marnie: Let's be honest, they don't think they can

INTERVIEWER: Why not?

Chantelle: I think it's just harder. Like when they're choosing people they want to represent the party, they think that people are less likely to vote for a woman than they are for a man

INTERVIEWER: Why is that?

Chantelle: I think it's partly because it's always been that way

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that's changing? Do you think it will change?

Marnie: I don't think it will because it's been like that for ages now. If it is going to change it will take a really long while to progress

Freya: It's just boring, I wouldn't be doing it

INTERVIEWER: Would anyone else?

Mel: Probably not…

Marnie: I think it's something you do later on, you have to get a bit of real life experience first so that you actually know what you're talking about

INTERVIEWER: So it's something that's more suited to people later on in life? Do you think that the clichés about young people not being interested in politics are true?

Mel: No, I think everyone has a certain amount of interest because like if someone says something to you about women's rights, for example, you're not just going to stand there and let them say anything they want, you are going to stand up for it. So everyone does have a basic interest, it just depends what extent it goes to

Claire: Yeah and I think social media can help for young people getting involved

West Midlands Sixth Form 1

E.g. 1

Charlotte: I think you have to be like really strong and hardline. Like I think Margaret Thatcher made it because she was very…cutthroat and kind of aggressive in her ways of getting in. I think that's the only reason Theresa May is kind of up there as well because she's slightly more Thatcherite isn't she, Theresa May?

Donna: She is

Charlotte: And I think you kind of have to take that approach to get in […] I don't think there's anyone who's kind of middle ground who is a woman …you have to either be strongly left or strongly right

INTERVIEWER: So to be a woman you have to be almost more extreme to be heard?

All: Yeah

Charlotte: That's how it appears. I mean I'm not sure if that's how it happens in practice but it kind of looks like that

Emi: It's about being more masculine as well. Like Thatcher and Angela Merkel in Germany they both have like lowered their voices and things like that to try and seem kind of more powerful and to have more power in their parties and stuff.

INTERVIEWER: So politics is still associated with the masculine, even if it is a woman –

All: Yes, definitely

E.g. 2

INTERVIEWER: And you think people your age are politically active? Because there's that cliché that young people don't care about politics, they're not interested. Do you think that's true?

Emi: It depends. Because I think our form of participation it's mostly going to be through like social media

INTERVIEWER: Yeah

Michelle: Yeah social media

INTERVIEWER: Yeah and that's interesting isn't it because you're that first generation really that's grown up with this kind of social media. So, like you said earlier, you battle your political arguments out online even, you learn online. But that's still a type of political activism, isn't it?

Charlotte: People think they're not politically active or they think that they don't know much about politics but they'll be expressing political views online which they don't realise corresponds to political things. So they'll talk about like tuition fees but not really realise how politics has an impact on that. They kind of disconnect the parts and talk about like separate events without combining them into politics. So I think that young people are very politically active in a way just not in…traditional forms

India: Yeah like everyone is tweeting like "we don't care about politics" then they'll moan about tuition fees or say like "Miliband is lying" and it's like –

Charlotte: Or even public transport! Like these are political things and they just don't notice that they're posting political things

INTERVIEWER: So it's a kind of politically active generation maybe but almost unaware –

All: Yeah

E.g. 3

INTERVIEWER: So you'll be voting on Thursday?

Emi: Oh definitely

INTERVIEWER: Ok, so you're "politically active" in that sense then yeah? You'd vote. But what other forms of political participation do you think that your generation is involved in?

India: People join groups. Even if it's just like a group on Facebook –

Emi: Social networks' pressure groups

Charlotte: They'll join a group about a specific thing

INTERVIEWER: So single-issue politics?

Charlotte: Yeah they'll express their views within a group on social media. But I think going back to the voting thing like we are the generation of instant gratification, instant reward. And if people can't see that straight away from voting then they don't wanna vote. But if you were to click a button and instantly things would change then they'd do it. And that's probably the issue. The fact that we've grown up with everything being instant and being able to see it straight away and see a result and because we don't see a result straight away people become disengaged

INTERVIEWER: So it's almost like a rejection of an old system? Is that system becoming outdated?

Charlotte: Yeah, they want an instant policy reward and we don't get that because we vote in a party who do things kind of in stages and they don't always put in exactly their

policies but I think if we voted individually on each policy people would definitely engage because they'd see that as something more that they could influence

E.g. 4

Charlotte: Yeah. And if you get people more interested from a younger age they'll get older and actually want to find out more about it

Donna: There'd be like a bigger turn out I think. If you know about something from a young age then you're a lot more likely to interested in it and think about it in the future so it would probably increase the turn out and there'd be a lot more political participation from young people

INTERVIEWER: Do you think it would make more people want to run for office? Would more people see it as a possibility?

All: Yeah

INTERVIEWER: So if it carries on only being reserved for certain people then you might not feel that desire to run for office?

Charlotte: Yeah but I think we might be ignoring the fact that political parties kind of elect their leaders and I think there might well be a lot of elitism within political parties. Because I think there's a lot of people that would like to go into politics who are from these different backgrounds but the political parties we don't control so in a way we're not really being given that much of a choice of who we elect as Prime Minister because it's whoever the political parties put up and they themselves – I don't think they have to be particularly democratic. They can just what they want so I think we need to get political parties to be more democratic and more representative before we can move forward and look at the leaders if that makes sense.

E.g. 5

Donna: Like what you said I kind of don't wanna go into it. Like I'm gunna do hopefully a politics degree but when I think of the future though I can't see myself running for office or anything like that

INTERVIEWER: Why not?

Donna: I think it's just like…I wouldn't fit in. Like it's an elitist sort of place

Emi: Yeah. I think that the stereotype of the politician really does put people off of really being at the forefront of politics

West Midlands Sixth Form 2

E.g. 1

Priya: I guess it's starting to change though

Gemma: I don't know, because when they did the cabinet reshuffle they did focus a lot on what the women were wearing

Fay: Yeah and they will always pit women against each other

Alice: Yeah and you never see that about Ed Milliband, like what colour tie he's wearing

Fay: And the wives as well, they pit the wives against each other

Priya: Yeah you see the wives as part of the politician, it's like a package with the men, like the wives are part of them. But you don't see that with the women, you don't care about their partners. It's not relevant but we're told that it is

INTERVIEWER: And why do you think it's considered relevant to see the male party leaders' wives?

Maria: Because they probably want to see them as nurturing or –

Gemma: It's not relevant

Alice: It's really not relevant

Kimberley: It's part of the campaign isn't it, the wife and the family

Nadia: Yeah like they're all like loving and

Priya: Perfect little England

INTERVIEWER: So what does that say do you think about women's role in politics?

Kimberley: It's weak

Maria: We're just bystanders

Nadia: Token female

Fay: I think … especially leaders of parties being women it's definitely given us more of a leg up in politics

Gemma: It's still "token women" though

Fiona: It's still – yeah –

Gemma: It's like joke parties. Like no one takes the Green Party seriously

INTERVIEWER: So you think that women ARE portrayed differently to men?

Maria: Yeah or just not as professional as men

Priya: Yeah

Kimberley: Yeah

Nadia: Yeah their clothes

Alice: Their hair

INTERVIEWER: And why do you think that is? Why do you think we might look at female politicians and be more inclined to look at what they're wearing?

Maria: It's weird because who's that politician whose wife was posting selfies and everyone judged her because "that's not what politicians do" and stuff so in some aspects we do and in some aspects we don't

INTERVIEWER: So what do you think about that idea of a politician's wife being ridiculed for taking photos of herself?

Gemma: She was a politician herself, I think she sat on a council

INTERVIEWER: So is that something politicians shouldn't do, then?

Kimberley: Obama does it all the time!

E.g. 2

Alice: It's definitely still an old boys club here, like women are still breaking through into politics whereas in America they might have I guess it's unlikely but they might have their first female President

Gemma: We've had a female Prime Minister

Fay: Yeah but she wasn't a big thing for women

Gemma: Come on! She was arguably the most powerful Prime Minister we've had!

Fiona: And the longest serving of the twentieth century

Fay: She still didn't do a lot for women's rights

Gemma: Yeah she was still incredibly powerful regardless

Nadia: She didn't change much for women though

Fay: Yeah we've had a female Prime Minister but despite that it's still very much an old boys club here

INTERVIEWER: Ok, and that conversation about Thatcher is quite interesting – do you think she embraced women or femininity –

All: No!

Kimberley: She rejected it

Fay: She rejected it, that's the problem

Priya: But she didn't have a choice

Gemma: Yeah

Kimberley: She didn't use her position to make changes for women

Alice: In fact she probably made it worse

Gemma: But she wasn't there just for women she was there for the country

E.g. 3

Gemma: There was a documentary on inside parliament recently and one of the women was told she doesn't have "hair for parliament"

Nadia: Yeah

Alice: Oh God

Gemma: Yeah and someone told Theresa May that she didn't look Thatcher enough because her hair wasn't like perfect

Priya: Yeah they always comment on what she's wearing, Theresa May

Fiona: But they shouldn't comment on it because it's not relevant

Gemma: One of the Tory prizes actually you know when they do the funding for parties one of the prizes was –

Fiona: Shoe shopping –

Gemma: Shoe shopping, a day with Theresa May!

Fiona: I think you could go with Nicky Morgan as well…

Gemma: Oh, good, great!

INTERVIEWER: So does that sort of thing put you off?

Fay: That's not what puts me off.

INTERVIEWER: What does put you off?

Fay: It's the idea of being surrounded by a majority of –

Numerous: Men

Fay: Men yeah. It's scary

West Midlands Sixth Form 3

E.g. 1

Clara: Well, I personally think male politicians are better anyway. I think they're easier to relate to – well not relate to, but listen to. I find women a bit patronising sometimes

Dominique: I think with the men they seem to have more power over the women in political debates

Grace: I think in those debates recently Nicola Sturgeon was really getting into it and she was –

Clara: I think she was trying too hard

Grace: I think she fired them all down a lot though. And I think you can see they're all scared of her and I think in the past if you thought of a female politician who was strong then you'd think of like Margaret Thatcher but now you'd think of Nicola Sturgeon

INTERVIEWER: Has there been anyone in between?

Dominique: I think you'd have to think about it for a while

Clara: Well I don't think she's a threat anyway

Samara: I know that in America people judge Hillary Clinton on her appearance and stuff like that and I think there was someone who said that her period would influence her too much, even though she's like 70

Dominique: That's so funny

INTERVIEWER: So, her age seems to be a bigger issue than it is for male politicians?

Samara: Yeah

INTERVIEWER: Ok, so why is that? Just going back to what we spoke about a minute ago, that some of you find male politicians easier to deal with. Why? Do you think that politics is more suited to men?

Samara: No, I think –

Grace: But when you think of politics you think of Labour and Conservatives because they're the main parties so you just automatically think of David Cameron and Ed Miliband

Farrah: There's not enough women to kind of relate to in politics

INTERVIEWER: So do you think if there were more women in politics, that would have a positive impact?

Clara: I don't think people really care…

Grace: I think people feel like pity for female politicians as well. Like people are like "oh Lorely Burt, poor her" but if it was a man you'd not say that. It's like because she's got this big role people feel sorry for her. So if people ask if you like your MP, if it was a man you'd be like "oh no he's horrible" but if it's a woman you'd be like "oh no she's lovely, she tries her best". You'd be more sympathetic towards a woman

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