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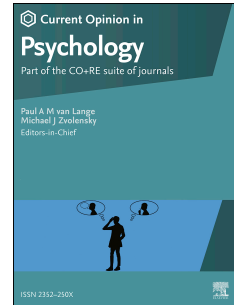
Femininity in the 21st Century

Abstract

This review provides an overview of research that explores femininity through the lens of a postfeminist sensibility. I give an account of two developments that have shaped recent research, in terms of 1) the proliferation of digital, social and self-representational media, which has created a new culture of emotion and feeling, and 2) the visibility and popularity of particular forms of 'popular' digital feminist activism. I show how these developments change the contours of a postfeminist sensibility, where its characteristics are deepened or adapted to fit new contexts. I conclude with suggestions on future directions for research on femininity and a postfeminist sensibility, especially in relation to emerging digital technologies and dramatically different political contexts.

1. Introduction

> "…[C]onstant regulation, constant repositioning. Um, but with no resolution. There's never a kind of, phew I can relax I know what I have to be now. If [sexy femininity is] where you're looking for you validation, you know. But there is none of that. It's just this constant search, isn't it."

The above extract emerged from an interview with Jay, a 35-year-old, white, heterosexual mother of two. The interview took place in 2008, and was part of a larger project on how women made sense of a sexiness entwined with a neoliberal consumer culture, promising freedom and sexual expression, but also about – in Jay's words – a constant regulation of femininity. It was a sexiness that was problematised in the context of a 'sexualisation of culture', which included anxieties around girls and young women, and prompted a number of policy and government reports and social commentaries from experts on the harms that sexualisation engendered. I explored these tensions in *Technologies of Sexiness* [1*], co-authored with Sarah Riley, which unpacked how femininity and subjectivity were shaped by a constant imagining of 'others', including people, places, and consumer items.

A key concept in that book was the notion of a postfeminist sensibility [2**][3**]. In this short piece, I address the changing landscape of postfeminist sensibility as a flexible idea that adapts to new contexts [4*]. Cultural developments since the early-21st Century are multifarious and complex, but include 1) the proliferation of social and digital media, and 2) a growing visibility of feminism. Although postfeminist sensibility has adapted to this changing context, I suggest the ambiguities and ambivalences of femininity identified by Jay still hold relevance – and are possibly even more profound.

2. Postfeminist sensibility

Gill's [2**] influential work on a postfeminist sensibility has shaped an important body of feminist research on contemporary femininity. A postfeminist sensibility was characterised by a number of elements, largely within media and consumer culture. These included: locating freedom, choice, and empowerment in forms of reassuringly feminine consumption; femininity as a bodily property, so that successful femininity is read on the body; a retraditionalisation through a return of biological essentialism; heightened forms of surveillance and discipline, for example where women's magazines zoomed in and highlighted women's body parts for others

to look and judge; a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification; and, a focus on the makeover format.

McRobbie [3**] identified a core element of postfeminism through what she termed a 'doubled articulation' of feminism, where feminism is drawn on and refuted. For example, in an article in Grazia, it is claimed that "42% of women who ask for a pay rise get one", with the follow up "100% of them would probably celebrate with shoes", drawing on feminist discourses of equal pay, but deflecting that through appropriately feminine purchases [3**]. For McRobbie, this meant women were left with no language to make sense of gender inequality and sexism. McRobbie theorised that the anger this created had no viable expression in society, and so was turned in on the self, evident in rising cases of eating disorders, self-harm, and poor mental health [3**, 4*].

For Gill [5*] and others [e.g. 1*, 7, 8], this postfeminist sensibility was a gendered form of neoliberalism, as a political-economic doctrine that promotes market competition and entrepreneurialism, with the ideal psychological person being one who is individual, self-contained, consumer-oriented, and not depended on the state. When the political-economic doctrine of neoliberalism is taken up and applied to the self it has important implications, since it assumes a privileged subject, one who is typically white, middle class, cisgender, and heterosexual. In the UK and elsewhere, neoliberalism intersects with a postfeminist sensibility since the two are historically intertwined, where feminist and legislative gains in equal pay, employment, and sexual and reproductive rights emerging alongside neoliberalism [3**]. Since neoliberalism assumes people are free and choiceful, failure is located in the self, rather than understanding inequalities emerging from social structures. Such individualism is also key to understanding the contexts documented below, in relation to digital culture and a new, popular feminism.

3. Femininity and Digital Culture

Since the early 2010s, a significant body of research documents how femininity interacts with a growing digital culture. This move has seen postfeminist sensibility shift from a sentiment identifiable within media texts, towards research that shows the complex entanglement of identity and self-representation through digital technology. Personal and mobile technology and social media have been at the centre of this shift, as platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and, more recently, TikTok, create unparalleled opportunities to broadcast the self, intersecting with a postfeminist sensibility that makes femininity more visible and public.

Self-taken photography, in particular, has been an object of feminist analysis. For example, the selfie is often understood as a feminine visual and digital practice, since it is concerned with appearance and idealized, often heterosexy, versions of the self [9][10][11]. This means research on young women's self-representaiton on social media has had to manage a visual culture where, on the one hand, there is a pressure to be visible, often structured through heteronormativity and appearance-as-self-worth, while also being mindful of not producing moralizing or 'panic button' analysis that problematize feminine social media practices as narcissistic, self-absorbed, and trivial [12*]. Alongside selfies, which are often shared on public platforms, 'sexting' has also been a key concern, where intimate photographs of the self are shared, often with the intention that these will arouse. Research has identified the emotional components of young people's engagement in sexting practices, with young women in particular having to navigate tensions between agentic, heterosexy self-performances and a double standard where reputation and risk are managed [13*][14][15][16][17]. While a

growing body of research is exploring issues of consent, sexism, violence, and vulnerability in sharing and receiving unsolicited sexual content over digital technologies [18][19].

Alongside self-representation, app-based technologies often deepen forms of self-surveillance, self-monitoring and self-discipline evident in earlier accounts of a postfeminist sensibility. Self-tracking of bodily functions, from fertility [20], pregnancy [21], diet [22], and sex [23], create a context where people compete with themselves and others to reach an optimal health often associated with ideal constructs of femininity [24*, 25*]. In Elias and Gill's [26] discussion of beauty apps, they show how digital technologies are being used to modify selfies through filters and body sculpting to create 'better', more beautiful versions of the self. Their analysis shows how digital technologies also allow people to digitally transform photographs of users' bodies as though they had undergone cosmetic surgery, and be ranked by the app in terms of attractiveness, with links to consumer items that are suggested to overcome 'flaws'.

These findings suggest a deeply psychological and emotional component to the entanglement of postfeminist sensibility and digital technologies [6*, 27]. This has also been noted in research on internet cultures. For example, Kanai [28*] identifies the positive feelings associated with feelings of girlfriendship on blogging sites, permitting a shared feeling of the disappointments of femininity (e.g. putting on weight, seeing the guy they fancy fall for someone else), without challenging femininity. While in analysis of online 'fitspo' (a portmanteau of fitness and inspiration), researchers suggest that these spaces incorporate feminine *imperfection* (e.g. cellulite, weight gain) as an affective solidarity, while remaining oriented towards a new thin ideal in which 'strong is the new skinny' [29][30][31].

4. Femininity and Feminism

Intersecting with a digital culture, a later period of the 2010s was hailed as a new era of digital feminist politics and marked by a shift towards feminist-inspired movements and campaigns [32]. This saw a change in postfeminist sensibility, whereby feminism is no longer refuted to 'count' as feminine. #MeToo is a notable example, given its global uptake [33, 34, 35]. First used in social media by actress Alyssa Milano, who called on women to use the hashtag #MeToo if they had experienced sexual assault and harassment, #MeToo has been celebrated as providing solidarity and support, while also revealing tensions and limitations of contemporary feminist politics, especially in relation to race, class and sexuality [36, 37].

In Banet-Weiser's [38**] important work on 'popular feminism', she suggests this 21st Century feminism is marked by an 'economy of visibility', shaped by postfeminist sensibility [8] that "hides as it reveals" ([38**] p.25). This is demonstrated by the Black feminist grassroots activist-origins of #MeToo, originated in 2006 by Tarana Burke as a movement for victims/survivors of colour, especially from low-income communities. By contrast, #MeToo's visibility is largely connected to celebrity and media industries, representing wealthy and largely white cis-women, while LGBTQ+ people, differently abled people, people of colour, and those living in poverty are less likely to be represented by #MeToo's visual economy of victim/survivor [36]. As Burke claims, "[w]hat history has shown us time and again is that if marginalized voices – those of people of color, queer people, disabled people, poor people – aren't centered in our movements then they tend to become no more than a footnote" (cited in Onwuachi-Willig [39*]).

Another feature of popular feminism has been a focus on body positivity and confidence [40*][41]. A feminist-inspired femininity is created and consumed through sharable and

networked content, from user generated hashtags (e.g. #effyourbeautystandards, #nomakeupselfie) to commercial campaigns selling products with feminist-inspired messaging, which often draw on the recognisable feel good factor of Dove-style advertising [42].

One body positive advertising campaign that has drawn attention from feminist analysts interested in femininity is This Girl Can, a Sports England campaign designed to encourage women to take part in physical exercise using slogans that included "I jiggle, therefore I am", "Sweating like a pig, feeling like a fox" and "Damn right I look hot". The advert appeared to challenge an unrealistic feminine body, speaking back to dieting culture, bikini bodies, and the thin ideal. Depper, Fullagar and Francombe-Webb [43], however, have suggested that This Girl Can represents a responsibilisation of health, ignoring barriers to access, including time and money, that limit many women's ability to engage in sport. Others have also highlight a positive and feminist-inspired element in This Girl Can, while suggesting that such empowerment still belongs to a body that is performing sexiness (e.g. a jiggling, sweaty body) that is linked to forms of looking and surveillance [12*][23*]. While wider research on body positivity and confidence suggests new contradictory feminine bodily expectations are being created, where women work on and transform their bodies while at the same time loving them 'just the way they are' [40*][41].

Meanwhile, as Banet-Weiser [38**] notes, a popular feminism has generated its own form of backlash, a 'networked misogyny'. A visible feminism is the target of anti-feminist post-truth rebuttal and violent invasions of privacy and consent [43][44][46][47][48]. The implications of this reach into the present 21st Century, as, online and offline, feminist researchers respond to what events such as the Depp vs Heard trial, and its associated #MenToo movement, and the context of a 'post-Roe' reproductive rights landscape, among others, mean for contemporary gender relations, and for changing concepts of femininity [49].

5. Future Directions

In this review, I have provided a brief overview postfeminist sensibility, as a defining concept for making sense of femininity in the 21st Century, as well as two areas in the wider cultural landscape where postfeminist sensibility has adapted to emerging changes. These developments maintain what Jay, in my 2008 interview with her, referred to as a "constant regulation, constant repositioning". However, these areas also point towards new directions in research. This includes a deepening of the psychologizing and emotionalizing of a postfeminist sensibility, as well as a complex entanglement of online/offline, digital/non-digital, that shapes bodies and selves. Future research will have to find ways to follow femininity in new technologies, such as the challenges and adaptations brought about by, for instance, the 'metaverse', deepfake photography, and implantable, ingestible tech, among others, as they emerge. Also key to future research will be the wider political context that repositions femininity, and the gendered, racialized, classed and sexualized implications of such politics as we look towards creating more equal, equitable worlds.

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