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Transnational Technologies

of

Gender and Mediated Intimacy

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to women, feminist and not; and in the hope that the latter will come on board.

DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

Against widespread prognostications, the Internet has not entailed the demise of commercial women's magazines. Yet print publications are being supplanted by online versions, which are proliferating. These websites offer similar content free of change and significantly greater opportunities for interaction. This thesis is a feminist qualitative study of contemporary online magazines targeting young women, based in the UK and in Spain. Focusing on twelve publications—six from each country— the research inquires into the different but interrelated dimensions of text, user and production. In particular, it asks questions about changes and challenges brought about by the online environment. Of especial interest are representations of gender, sex, sexuality and intimate relationships. In the context of a resurgence of interest in feminist ideas and engagement, the thesis also examines the ways in which women's magazines relate to—and reconfigure—feminism.

The research adopts a multi-methods approach, and draws on a large body of different data. Comprising the primary data are: a) 270 editorial articles; b) 2,657 peer-to-peer messages posted on the sites' discussion forums; and c) 68 interviews with producers, primarily editors and writers. Additionally informing the study is an assortment of supplementary material, including: magazine public communications, archived print copies, trade press, news reports on the sector, and field notes from events organised by interested parties. Influenced by a social constructionist perspective, the analysis uses thematic, discourse and conjunctural approaches, thereby making connections between the details of text and talk, wider cultural sensibilities, and the socio-historical context at large. It deploys postfeminism as a critical analytical term to capture gendered features of contemporary cultural life, and engages with feminist work aiming to understand the operation of power under neoliberalism.

A number of new concepts are advanced to make sense of the identified landscape of patriarcho-neoliberal power, including 'postfeminist biologism' and 'confidence chic', and to capture shifts taking place in the industry, such as an all-encompassing 'authenticity turn', together with the interpellation of a new subject online: the 'shareaholic'. The research contributes empirical insights and critical theorisations concerning the contemporary young woman's (online) magazine, and digital journalism and Internet cultures more generally. Furthermore, this thesis offers understandings about cultural discourses and contestations around sex, gender and sexuality, and about the relationship between femininity, feminism, commercial and popular media cultures; capturing both Spain/UK national specificities and transnational patterns.

PREFACE

It was the summer of 1995. I was thirteen, and on my way for a day at the beach with my family. We stopped at a newsagent's for reading material. I asked for a young woman's magazine, it must have been *Ragazza* (see Pinto 2012). My parents suggested I get a book instead, and off we went to a tiny nearby bookshop. I got two. Once at the beach I opened the first book, which I had chosen mainly because I liked the title: *The Antichrist*. But it read a bit weird, 'lets try the other one first', I thought. "A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism"… now I was hooked (sorry Nietzsche). I never asked for a woman's magazine again! Of course, this does not mean that I never *encountered* these publications again. Whether at the dentist's waiting room or in friends' bedrooms, women's magazines make their way to the lives of all girls – including the Marx-admiring, skater-punk, daughter-of-feminist girls like I was; girls who thus *know* these media are part of the capitalist patriarchal machinery, yet still struggle to avoid arriving at self-loathing conclusions when engaging with their texts and images. Girls who may be planning a socialist feminist revolution one moment, to then find themselves learning that there are such things like a 'men-ology' (*Glamour*; see Gill 2009a) and a 'beauty bible' (*Cosmopolitan*) with a never-ending stream of information that really matters very much, and thus requires considerable intellectual and emotional investment, time and money.

I have always tried to keep away from women's magazines. They hurt me as a woman and infuriate me as a feminist. If I ever have a daughter, I so hope she does too. I hope she too decides that getting a book instead is a good idea (maybe even one with a female author this time). However, the numbers suggest otherwise, with Hearst Magazines alone claiming to reach one in three UK women. Even today, when there is a multitude of different media freely available online, many women decide to stick to the woman's magazine genre by visiting, in growing numbers, web versions. What do these newer versions look like? What do readers say, now that they have the opportunity to speak back to companies and to communicate amongst themselves? And what about the *producers*, how do they explain and relate to what they do? With a mixture of sincere curiosity and serious concern—as a woman, feminist and sociologist—I set out to address these questions three years ago. This thesis is the result of my fascinating journey into the world of the young woman's online magazine.

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

1.1   Introduction to the project

> When you're sort of fifteen, sixteen, you're thinking, "oh God, I'm becoming a woman". They're like your bible, and you learn things about sex and like… Who are we going to ask about actual sex? It's not going to be your mom and dad, is it?
> —Writer at *Cosmopolitan* magazine, 2015
>
> If you wanted to find out about being a woman, you read a woman's magazine. There was nothing else, there wasn't the Internet.
> —Founders of feminist blog *The Vagenda*, 2015

Part of consumer publishing, the woman's magazine dates as far back as the late 17th century. Nowadays the industry offers a vast array of publications, aiming to cover every stage of women's lives (Litosseliti 2006) – or at least those seen as worthy of commercial interest, with magazines for women over 70 being conspicuous by their absence. For example, there are titles for pre-teen girls (e.g. *Go Girl,* aimed at 7-12 year olds), a "20-something girl" (*The Debrief*) and "women aged 50 and over" (*Yours*). The range of magazines directed at women can also be categorised in terms of subgenres. These can be broadly divided into the weeklies, which span from fashion (e.g. *Look*), celebrity gossip/news (e.g. *In Touch*) to 'real-life'-centered (e.g. *Chat*) publications; and the monthlies, which include the lifestyle (e.g. *Glamour*) and fashion (e.g. *Vogue*) 'glossies', alongside other specific-interest titles like *Good Housekeeping*. There are also hybridised genres, such as the weekly-glossy *Grazia*, further increasing the competition for women's attention. But what happened to these publications once the Internet appeared?

With the take-over of perceptions of cyberspace as a place for commerce and audience commodification in the late 1990s, 'communication' and 'community' emerged as key e-commerce strategies – and women as "the new and promising consumers", a yet unexploited goldmine for marketers that was particularly appealing in light of the increasing numbers of women going online and their independent spending power achieved in recent decades (Sadowska 2002: 90). By stressing communicative and community-building aspects, the market began to

fervently position the Internet as offering women novel opportunities to express their femininity (Gustafson 2002; Royal 2005; Worthington 2005). Most typically, however, the dot.com industries promoted segregated commercial e-spaces for women, then sometimes called 'she sites' (e.g. CNET 2002) or 'pink sites' (e.g. Price 1998). The quintessential model emerging out of this process was the 'affinity portal' or 'community site'. These niche-oriented products offered message boards or discussion forums, shopping possibilities and editorial content resembling women's magazines. It proved to be a hugely successful model.

The rising popularity of the Internet among women and the ready availability of similar free and updated content online threatened the—already fiercely competitive—women's magazine print market. Many magazines soon began to suffer a decline in sales, particularly newsweeklies, no longer considered primary sources for exclusive and breaking news (Duffy 2011). In a survival effort, from the 2000s onward publishers began to embrace the web. At first this entailed posting online content created for the print version, as a 'tester' to entice readers to purchase the magazine. This was an ineffective approach, forcing publications to develop online-specific content and strategies. These were especially based around immediacy and interactivity, and often included the incorporation of 'community' spaces, notably discussion forums. At present, as Brooke Erin Duffy (2011: 50) observes: "interactive websites that once served as mere 'companions' to the print-bound magazine have now become the gold standard for magazine publishers".

Currently, the web extensions of print publications and online-only titles are effectively indistinguishable. This is due to their mutual influence, and to ongoing media mergers and acquisitions. Further blurring boundaries, a number of print editions have folded and shifted to an online-only model (e.g. *Grazia Spain,* in 2014). In addition, as part of their internationalisation strategy, well-established brands are expanding to new markets with online-only local publications, such as *Cosmopolitan Nigeria,* launched in 2015. *Cosmopolitan* can now boast that the brand "exists across 79 countries, more than 30 languages", and reaches "1 in 4 millennials" [1]. Large publishing houses are also developing digital-first brands. One notable example is Bauer Media's 2014 launch *The Debrief*, a British lifestyle magazine which "puts a modern take on traditional content pillars" like fashion and beauty, sex and

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[1] From: http://www.hearst.co.uk/brands/cosmopolitan (Accessed 26/06/2016)

relationships (The Debrief 2014). That is, despite the current ample possibilities for content creation and dissemination, along with the ongoing proliferation of media forms, women's magazines are still an inescapable feature of the cultural landscape of femininity, and an important locus of ideas about intimate relationality, sex and sexuality. Contributing to their success, women's online magazines offer similar free of charge content, and significantly greater opportunities for interaction. This includes 'internal' features in the form of discussion forums and/or comment sections under the editorial, along with, increasingly, the possibility to engage via social network sites (SNSs), for example by 'liking', 'sharing', 'retweeting' or 'pinning' content.

The women's magazine industry is, then, remarkably resilient. It has maintained high levels of popularity across time and space, and in the face of significant challenges. This includes the 2008 global financial crisis and subsequent recession, but most notably digitalisation, and especially the "unprecedented period of disruption" brought about by "the Internet age" (Champion 2015: 24). Moreover, after a difficult period which included many permanent closures (e.g. British *More!,* in 2013), the industry is now at the forefront of the emergent publishing paradigm, marked by an urge to "find a sustainable solution to the digital challenge" (Champion 2015: 35). The latest strategies revolve around their newly constructed identities as 'brands' and a 'cross-platform' or 'transmedia' character (Duffy 2011). Also central is the strategy Hearst[2] calls 'months to moments', which aims to capitalise on digital developments, particularly those around mobile devices and social media, and to boost economies of scale and scope at a rapid pace. The editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan US* enthusiastically explains: "Brands need to be where the audience is and *Cosmo* readers live much of their life with their phone strapped to their hand. We are there with them as they wake up, as they go through their day and as they recharge at night".

Therefore, while print circulation is on the main declining, in line with the publishing industry generally and consumer magazines in particular, an online model is catapulting the reach of brands, especially those targeting younger generations – compare for instance *Cosmopolitan UK*'s combined print and digital monthly

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[2] Hearst is a US-based multinational diversified media and information company. Hearst Magazines is one of the world's largest publishers of monthly magazines, with close to 300 international editions. UK women's monthlies include *Cosmopolitan, Elle, Good Housekeeping, Harper's Bazar,* and *Women's Health.*

circulation of 405,308 to the 6.5 million unique users its website engages (Cosmopolitan 2016). Yet these sites have been largely ignored by media, cultural and gender studies scholars. How are gender, sex, sexuality, and intimate relationships constructed and negotiated in these widely accessed spaces? What are their sexual politics? How do the editorially authored and user-generated content compare? How do producers consider online magazine journalism, along with their newly interactive and networked readers? What is the relationship between feminist politics and the politics of production? What is the dis/connect between women's online magazines and broader rationalities, practices and configurations of power? How do the specificities of the local and global trends operate and relate in these transnational media environments?

These are some of the questions addressed by this thesis, which is a qualitative study of contemporary magazines targeting young women. Following the custom in the industry, 'young' is here used to refer to the 18-35 age bracket (in actual practice, as the opening quote indicates, teenage girls also comprise the readership of these publications). At present, this constitutes the generation of people often referred to as 'millennials' (born between 1980-2000). The research aims to examine representations of gender, sex, sexuality and intimate relations, along with the ways these publications relate to feminism, and respond to the online environment. The focus is therefore upon women's *online* magazines. This includes both the web versions of well-established (print) publications, as well as their new competitors, namely online-only titles. In particular, I examine six women's online magazines hosted in the UK and six in Spain. In such a manner, the study pays attention to nuances and particularities that can be overlooked in the literature (usually from more privileged contexts) with the use of homogenising notions such as 'Western' and 'European'. Despite their country of origin, however, these magazines/sites are predominantly owned by multinational companies, and are accessed by users worldwide – due to the accessibility of online media but also because Spanish and English are amongst the most widely spoken languages in the world. In addition to offering cultural-contrastive insights, the research adopts a transnational perspective, attending to that (e.g. representations, practices, logics) which travels across and exceeds national contexts (see also Section 1.6). This thesis develops a novel research design, integrating qualitative analyses of three types of data: a) editorial magazine content; b) user discussions in the forums; and c)

interviews with producers. A number of supplementary data sources are also drawn upon, principally a wide assortment of texts connected to publications, which includes printed versions of magazines, promotional material like media packs/kits, together with news and trade press.

My research design responds to calls for media scholars to internationalise the scope of analysis, and to integrate different methods, along with the examination of texts, production and audiences – which includes *users* (Litosseliti 2006; Holt and Perren 2009; Carter 2011; Orgad 2012; Zhao 2013). As Carolyn M. Byerly (2011: 12, 13) argues, the age of digital communication "offers new conceptual and empirical ground for research on women media audiences" – of particular interest being: "the female Internet user who doubles as a content producer". However, academic research on the Web 2.0 paradigm has given "disproportional attention to certain genres such as youth media, activist media, and political mashups", which, as Lev Manovich (2009: 321) observes, "are indeed important but do not represent more typical usage" of the Internet. Particularly overshadowed have been the "more mundane dimensions of female participation in the contemporary mediascape" (Ouellette and Wilson 2011: 549). Also, commercial online magazines targeting women constitute a particularly useful case study of changing approaches toward audiences by corporate digital media, epitomising as they do the narratives and strategies—as well as contradiction and ambivalence—that have come to characterise the commercial digital media landscape in general. That is, they hinge on claims to a unique media-audience proximity, even "shared identity" (McRobbie 1996: 179), the mobilisation of notions about 'community' and 'empowerment' (Winship 1987), along with the co-optation of elements from social emancipatory movements (particularly feminism) (Mcdonald 1995). These dynamics are succinctly evoked by this columnists' description of the global brand *Cosmopolitan*:

> For me, it represents a place where feminism is fabulous. It's a supportive community of women who care about social issues AND shoes. If Cosmo were a person, it would be your best friend, squeezing your hand and whispering "you go, lady!" (Devon 2015)

With its focus on online magazine journalists, the study also contributes understandings to a growing area of research on work/ers in the contemporary culture and creative industries, and digital media in particular – offering new insights by exploring a sector dominated by women (at the level of production at least). Furthermore, contrasting the rich text-based body of scholarship on women's

magazines, less attention has been paid to the experiences and perspectives of those who *produce* the content, despite calls for more research that asks questions about, among other things, everyday practice, the various levels of constraint and influence (McRobbie 1996), the advertising-editorial relationship (Farvid and Braun 2006), and the ways these professionals "understand, represent and relate to their product" (Gough-Yates 2003: 6) as well as to feminism (McRobbie 1999, 2009). More generally, this thesis captures the changing and evolving form of the women's online magazine market, which has received scarce scholarly attention. In doing so, I aim to make a contribution to the sociological analysis of developments in the digital media era – its technologies, cultures and politics, in terms of representations, production and use, highlighting the importance of incorporating a feminist perspective. Certainly, this thesis is a feminist research project. I am therefore ultimately concerned with identifying and contesting—enduring, mutating, resurgent, emergent—forms of sexual hierarchy and gender power, dynamics of inequality and injustice against women, along with the connection between patriarchal and other dominant forms of power under contemporary capitalism. Another running thread throughout the whole thesis is the very question of what it means to be a feminist, and to research (other) women and (commercial) women's media, particularly in the current moment of a reinvigorated popular feminism.

The reminder of this introductory chapter continues to locate the present research in terms of key (politico-)theoretical principles, vocabularies and tools, and to highlight contributions made to a variety of fields and literatures. Generally speaking, this thesis is inspired by a series of questions, perspectives and approaches commonly encompassed under the umbrella descriptor 'poststructural'. Especially influential are theorisations around meaning, power and subjectivity from the middle and later writings of Michael Foucault. Most immediately, I draw and build on Foucauldian-inflected feminist scholarship on a range of different (but interconnected) issues spanning from the politics of appearance to those of neoliberalism. The next section offers an overview of these influences. This is followed by a focussed discussion about the notion of postfeminism, which is now central to feminist scholarship, and most especially feminist media and cultural studies – the field where this thesis is broadly located. Particular attention is paid to a body of work—notably the writings of Rosalind Gill and Angela McRobbie—where postfeminism is advanced as an object of critical inquiry, as well as an analytical

category for cultural critique. After, I continue to outline the conceptual skeleton of the thesis with three shorter sections, respectively introducing the notions of and debates around mediated intimacy, media convergence, and the transnational. The final section provides a summary of each of the chapters constituting this novel multidimensional study of a commercial media (e)space uniquely created *for* and largely *by* young women.

1.2   Meaning, power and subjectivity

In engaging with poststructuralism, the aim in this thesis is not to achieve analytical 'purity', least of all when it comes to Foucault's androcentric work. Rather, I use poststructuralist ideas as 'tools to think with' or resources in the service of my research and (thus) ethico-political commitments. Particularly useful in this sense is the stimulus to question the seemingly unquestionable, and to expose as contingent the seemingly inevitable. This begins with troubling dominant conceptions from realist social scientific and humanist approaches. As Nicola Gavey (1989: 463) explains, poststructuralism contests the "liberal humanist view of language as transparent and expressive, merely reflecting and describing (pre-existing) subjectivity and human experience of the world". Contrastingly, language (and other signifying practices) is posited as *constituting* meaning, which "therefore is neither fixed nor essential" (Gavey 1989: 463). Inspired by Foucault, in delineating a feminist poststructuralism Chris Weedon (1997) emphasises that language itself is always located socially and historically in *discourses*. Susanne Gannon and Bronwyn Davies (2012: 73-74) offer a useful definition of the term:

> Discourses are complex interconnected webs of being, thinking, and acting. They are in constant flux and often contradictory. They are always located on temporal and spatial axes; thus, they are historically and culturally specific. We are always already constituted within discourse, and discourses operate on and in us simultaneously through constituting desires and modes of reasoning. […] Discourses do not circulate in abstract realms but reach into the very 'matter' of bodies, shaping desires and intimate modes of being in the world (Butler 1993).

The concept of discourse, then, inserts "language into the material world" (Gannon and Davies 2012: 73), and interrupts universalising, essentialist and individualistic cognitive modes of thought, "decentring the subject" and opening up subjectivity to change (Weedon 1997: 32; Gavey 2005). Contrasting the autonomous, knowing, fixed, coherent, unified, rational liberal-humanist subject, poststructuralism theorises subjectivity as fragmented and inconsistent (Gavey 1989), "precarious, contradictory,

and in process" (Weedon 1997: 32), a "culturally specific amalgam of different subject positions" offered by discourses (McNay 1992: 2). Integral to the (re)production of discourses themselves are relations of power-knowledge, Foucault argued. Here 'knowledge', as Wendy Hollway (1984) clarifies, is understood as a historical product of particular practices. Notable among these are "technologies of the social", namely "the processes of social regulation which are so central to modern social organisation", such as psychiatry and criminology (Hollway 1984: 24).

Foucault's genealogical works (i.e. *Discipline and Punish, History of Sexuality*) mapped transformations in the nature and functioning of power which marked the transition to modernity, arguing that the emergent methods operate not so much through law, sovereignty or punishment, but technique, normalisation and control. Indispensable to the development of capitalism was 'bio-power'. The rise of a new form of power over life from the 17th century entailed the explosion of a multiplicity of techniques to control populations through regulation and interventions, and, hand in hand, to subjugate bodies through normalisation and disciplines. Replacing the law with the norm as the primary instrument of social control, "discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies" (Foucault 1977: 138-9). This model of "subtle coercion", Foucault (1977: 201) argued, functions in a Panopticon-like manner, inducing "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power". That is, individuals come to monitor and regulate themselves, with lines of power enfolding into our very sense of self.

Another site of anatomo-politics (interlinked to a biopolitics of the population) examined by Foucault is *sexuality*. Disrupting dominant understandings, rather than a fundamental, innate and fixed drive, his writings advanced sexuality as a socio-historical construct, as "the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviours, and social relations" (Foucault 1978: 127). Contrary to the 'repressive hypothesis', namely the idea that sexuality was repressed during the Victorian era to become liberated in the 20th century, Foucault (1978: 69) showed that the society that emerged in the 19th century "put into operation an entire machinery for producing true discourses concerning it". These were "carefully tailored to the requirements of power", and inscribed sex "not only in an economy of pleasure but in an ordered system of knowledge", constituting a regime of power-knowledge-pleasure (Foucault 1978: 72, 69). Therefore, a Foucauldian framework connects "an intensification of the interventions of power to a multiplication of discourse", as well as power and

pleasure, "linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement". For Foucault, this link is key to the functioning of power. He proposed a view of the nature of power as "technical and positive", as opposed to only "juridical and negative", as it had tended to be characterised in the West (Foucault 1978: 30, 48). In his view:

> What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression (Foucault 1980: 119).

With the *History of Sexuality,* Foucault (1978: 11, 84) aimed "to locate the forms of power, the channels it takes, and the discourses it permeates […] all this entailing effects that may be those of refusal, blockage, and invalidation, but also incitement and intensification: in short, the "polymorphous techniques of power"", along with its "capillary interventions".

There have been numerous productive feminist engagements with these genealogical works. Of course, feminists had emphasised the body, gender and sexuality as socio-culturally constituted and a focal locus for the exercise of power long before Foucault, and poststructuralist thought more generally. The recurrent emphasis on Foucault as the originator of these ideas speaks powerfully to the tendency to sidestep work by women and feminists (Bordo 1993; Gavey 2005), a still pervasive dynamic I hope to convincingly interrupt in this thesis. The significance of Foucauldian texts for feminist scholars lays in the corpus of certain particular concepts, which then require development—indeed *appropriation* (Bordo 1993)—to redress his disregard of a gender perspective, and to meet feminist insights and concerns. In this sense, the present project is clearly indebted to Teresa De Lauretis' (1987: 38) essay *The Technology of Gender*, a notion which she herself employed as "the critical frame of reference for the exploration of gender-related questions". Her essay takes:

> Its conceptual premise from Foucault's theory of sexuality as a 'technology of sex' and proposes that gender, too, both as representation and as self-representation, is the product of various social technologies such as cinema, as well as institutional discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices; by that I mean not only academic criticism, but more broadly social and cultural practices (De Lauretis 1987: ix).

De Lauretis (1987: 38) also usefully highlights that a conception of gender as (a) representation "is not to say that it does not have concrete or real implications, both social and subjective, for the material life of individuals" (see also Butler 1999). The point is rather to disrupt essentialist thinking, and to begin to interrogate "gender as the product and the process of a number of social technologies", increasingly important among which are the media – but also include feminism and the academy. I thereby take De Lauretis to offer an important reminder about the social and political ramifications of research.

Also fruitfully applied by feminists has been the Foucauldian concept of normalising-disciplinary power. Notably during the 1990s, a powerful line of inquiry developed concerned to examine "how women may be persuaded into apparent complicity in the process of our own subjugation", in a manner that complicated traditional analyses which "often relied on the notion of a simple top-down domination of women by patriarchal power" (Gavey 1992: 327, 348). In one notable intervention, Susan Bordo (1993: 167) argued:

> Particularly in the realm of femininity, where so much depends on the seemingly willing acceptance of various norms and practices, we need an analysis of power 'from below', as Foucault puts it; for example, of the mechanisms that shape and proliferate—rather than repress—desire, generate and focus our energies, construct our conceptions of normalcy and deviance.

Repeatedly highlighted as one central such mechanism in contemporary societies is the media, notably adverts and women's magazines, whose representations of normative femininity "now operate as a form of discipline acting on all classes of women throughout the life cycle" (Gill 2007a: 63). Thus, in this important strand of feminist scholarship, feminine bodily work like dieting, exercise and beauty regimens are theorised as disciplined practice, and, ultimately, a form of patriarchal regulation and control. In her Foucauldian feminist analysis of Western femininity, Sandra Lee Bartky (1990: 80) contended:

> The woman who checks her makeup half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara has run, who worries that the wind or the rain may spoil her hairdo, who looks frequently to see if her stockings have bagged at the ankle or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate of the Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance. This self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy.

Soon after, Gavey (1992: 328) wrote: "many parallels can be drawn between Bartky's incisive analysis of the vigilance of some women over their feminine

appearance and the 'obedience' of women in our sexual relations with men". For Gavey (1992), the normalising social technologies of sex produce women as subjects who self-regulate in ways which comply with androcentric and heterosexist versions of sexuality, as disseminated through popular media, sex manuals, and sexology – that 'truth game' which still today largely operates to naturalise the intertwined regimes of "sexual difference fundamentalism" (Butler 1999: viii) and 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich 1980) (e.g. see Farvid and Braun 2013).

Through his work, Foucault (1988: 18) aimed "to sketch out a history of the different ways in our culture that humans develop knowledge about themselves", and to analyse "these so-called sciences as very specific "truth games" related to specific techniques". He identified four major types of such techniques or technologies:

> (1) Technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things; (2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification; (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject; (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state-of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault 1988: 18)

The development of a concept of the self was in part an attempt by Foucault to overcome the analytical limitations of his own theorising of individuals as 'docile bodies' "in the grip of an inexorable disciplinary power" (McNay 1992: 4) (see for example Deveaux's [1994] critique of Bartky on these grounds). With 'technologies of the self' he connected "wider discourses and regimes of truth, and the creativity and agency of individual subjects" (Gill and Orgad 2015: 326). Foucault (1988: 19) referred to the "contact between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self" as 'governmentality'.

The notion of governmentality together with his lectures on the development of neoliberalism (Foucault 2008) have inspired powerful analyses of "our current predicament in terms of a neoliberal political rationality […] emerging as governmentality—a mode of governance encompassing but not limited to the state, and one that produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behaviour, and a new organization of the social" (Brown 2005: 37). That is, for this body of work neoliberalism is not only a set of economic policies, devised for example to facilitate intensified privatisation, deregulation and free trade, to maximise corporate profits,

eradicate welfarism, and dismantle left critique and social movements (Duggan 2003; Brown 2005; Rottenberg 2014). As a modality of governmentality, Catherine Rottenberg (2014: 420) explains: "neoliberalism is a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject". In particular, individuals are normatively constructed and interpellated as entrepreneurial actors (Rottenberg 2014), as active, rational, calculating subjects "whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for 'self-care'—the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions" (Brown 2005: 42). Moreover, individuals are fully responsibilised for the consequences of their actions, "no matter how severe the constraints" (Brown 2005: 42). Concerns have been voiced about its ever expanding geopolitical reach (Gill and Scharff 2011), circulated in large part by transnational connectivities like international organisations and the media, but also about the ways in which neoliberal rationality extends to all aspects of thought and activity (Brown 2005: 44), regulating in increasingly more intimate ways (Gill 2008). Also highlighted has been the deeply gendered nature of neoliberalism – indeed "women are constructed as its ideal subjects" (Gill and Scharff 2011: 7), with young women in particular—alongside cultural workers— becoming "paradigms of entrepreneurial selfhood" (Ross 2008: 32) (see also McRobbie 2009).

Feminist analyses of femininities in neoliberal times have also productively drawn on Foucault's notion of technologies of the self, perceived to have "opened up a space for theorizing agency (not just domination) as well as for considering 'the psychic life of power' (Butler, 1997)". It is a notion that, as Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad (2015: 326) further explain: "offers a way to think about the relation between culture and subjectivity in a way that is not reductive, deterministic or conspiratorial, but nevertheless insists on holding together work on the self with a wider appreciation of power". Key to this Foucauldian-inflected feminist scholarship has been interrogating processes of gendered subjection [3] (Butler 1997) and re-articulations of sexual politics under neoliberalism. These have been widely theorised with regard to postfeminism, a cultural sensibility explored next.

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[3] Butler (1997: 2) defines subjection as "the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject".

1.3   A postfeminist sensibility

Since the 1990s the concept of postfeminism has become increasingly central to the vocabulary of (primarily Anglo-American) feminist scholars working in a range of disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. However, the term is not only contested, but used in multiple, even opposing, ways. For Gill (2007a), it is possible to identify four broad uses of 'postfeminism': as a theoretical position/epistemological shift in feminist thinking in light of engagements with 'difference' and "other anti-foundationalist movements including post-modernism, post structuralism and post colonialism" (Brooks 1997: 1); as a historical break with a strong generational character from the perspectives and forms of political activism associated with the second wave (often, then, synonymously with third wave feminism, particularly in the US context); to capture the sense of a 'backlash' against feminism; and as a distinctively neoliberal 'gender regime' (McRobbie 2009) or 'sensibility' (Gill 2007a). The latter two, then, advance postfeminism as the *object of critical analysis*, not a political or theoretical stance. These formulations have been hugely influential within feminist media and cultural studies, and are foundational for the present research.

The backlash critique gained great impetus with attempts at making sense of a media-supported political counterassault on the goals and achievements of the Women's Movement during the Thatcher-Reagan era of the UK and US (Faludi 1991; Wolf 1991; Whelehan 2000; Williamson 2003). Elements of the media and popular culture vociferously cast feminist politics as no longer relevant by claiming that gender equality had been achieved ('all the battles have been won') or, contradictorily, that full equality was an impossible ideal ('you can't have it all') (Faludi 1991; Wolf 1991; Gill 2007a: 253). As Susan Faludi (1991) famously documented, feminism was blamed for the personal, social and economic problems experienced by contemporary women through a range of mythical afflictions, such as the 'man shortage' or 'infertility epidemic', as well as feminine figures, including the 'unhappy spinster' and the 'anxiety-ridden-careerist'. Further to such a divide and conquer strategy, backlash theorists pointed to the rise of 'retrosexism', whereby overly sexist scenarios are (nostalgically) located in the past, but nevertheless (constantly and unabashedly) reproduced (Whelehan 2000; Williamson 2003). In combination with the implied 'pastness' of sexism, promoted as kitsch pleasure, the knowing, self-aware tone of 'retrosexism' works to pre-empt a critique that is also

relegated to a previous era (Williamson 2003), as well as disparaged as uncool and unstylish (Faludi 1991). The portrayal of society as dominated by women (e.g. in advertising) has also been viewed as a backlash scheme to fuel sexism (Williamson 2003) and anti-feminist suspicions (Lazar 2006).

Accounts of backlashes against feminism are important, highlighting as they do particular political projects and reactive (as well as reactionary) efforts (Gill and Donaghue 2013). Backlash arguments also have much explanatory power for the great affective force of some anti-feminist and misogynistic sentiments circulating in contemporary culture – epitomised by the sexually explicit vitriol, hate speech and threats of violence directed at women, particularly those who support feminism, through social media (Gill et al. 2016; see Jane 2014 on 'e-bile'). At the same time, the framing concept of backlash can underplay the ways in which feminism has always met "strategies of resistance, negotiation and containment" (Tasker and Negra 2007: 1). Furthermore, the tendency to imply a linear temporal model of battles won and then lost can fail to capture the complexity of ideological struggle and fluidity in social contestation around gender (McRobbie 1994, 2004; Tasker and Negra 2007; Lazar 2009; Gill and Scharff 2011). The emphasis on turning backward, Gill (2007a) argues, may miss what is new and distinctive about current argumentation: not so much a return to a simpler, more patriarchal order, but fighting over present-day and future gender relations. Likewise, for McRobbie (2009: 57) postfeminism is "not so much turning the clock back as turning it forward to secure a postfeminist gender settlement, a new sexual contract". In equating postfeminism with anti-feminism the backlash argument also misses a decisive aspect of postfeminism, indeed the root of much of its cultural force, namely the ways in which feminist and anti-feminist ideas are *entangled* (Gill and Donaghue 2013; Gill et al. 2016).

In an influential intervention, McRobbie (2009) has offered a complexification of the backlash thesis through the notion of 'double entanglement'. Postfeminism is here conceptualised as a sociocultural climate where gender equality is assumed to have been achieved, and in which neo-conservative values coexist with a selectively defined feminism that is incorporated into institutional and political life, and asserted as common sense, as well as, simultaneously, fiercely repudiated and feared (McRobbie 2009). By suggesting that feminism has been 'taken into account', McRobbie (2009) argues, postfeminism presents feminist politics as currently

unnecessary and obsolete, even regressive – at least in the West. For McRobbie (2009) the objective of the new regime of gender power is to prevent the emergence of a renewed women's movement, with its critical impetus, radical imaginaries, collectivities and affiliations. Indeed, key to her theorisation of 'feminism undone' is the notion of 'disarticulation', namely a "force which devalues, or negates and makes unthinkable the very basis of coming-together" (McRobbie 2009: 26). As a substitute for—and to pre-empt—the reinvention of feminist politics, (especially young) women are offered participation in education and the workplace, along with greater access to economic, cultural and sexual freedoms. These "postfeminist substitutes" are promoted via aggressive individualism and consumerist discourses, and cut through with tropes of personal freedom, empowerment and choice (McRobbie 2009: 26). Disarticulation as a dispersal strategy also operates in the typecasting of feminism as driven by anger and male-hatred, presented as unfeminine and repugnant stances (McRobbie 2009). For McRobbie (2009: 26), then, postfeminism consists of a "double movement": "disarticulation and displacement, accompanied by replacement and substitution". While seemingly offering well-informed and even well-intended responses to feminism, elements of contemporary social, political and popular culture actively engage in its undoing, as part of a larger project of biopolitical power (McRobbie 2009).

Building on these ideas, Gill (2007a) has advanced an understanding of postfeminism as a contradictory-but-patterned cultural *sensibility*. This framework usefully fashions postfeminism both as the object of critical inquiry as well as a "critical analytical term that refers to empirical regularities or patterns in contemporary cultural life" (Gill 2016a: 613). Among these constitutive elements or modalities of sexism is a 'pasting' (Tasker and Negra 2007) or 'overing' (Ahmed 2012) of feminism, where gender inequalities are safely located in the past or in other contexts (McRobbie 2009; Gill et al. 2016). Also central to the postfeminist sensibility is the reassertion of sexual difference, based on heteronormative ideas of gender complementarity (Gill 2007a). Another shared theme in writing about postfeminism concerns the "delegation" of a good deal of patriarchal power to the fashion-beauty complex (McRobbie 2009: 61). There is an obsessional preoccupation with the female body, which is figured as the locus of femininity, and advanced as a source of power as well as, simultaneously, always already unruly (Gill 2007a). Yet another prominent element is a thoroughgoing commitment to

ideas of self-transformation, constituting a profoundly gendered—as well as racialised and classed—"makeover paradigm" that increasingly extends beyond the body to require the remodelling of the psyche (Gill 2007a: 262; McRobbie 2009). The postfeminist subject is called upon to self-monitor, discipline and transform in a manner that is ever more intensive, extensive and psychologised, as well as increasingly mediated by digital (self-tracking) technologies (e.g. see Elias and Gill, in press, on beauty apps). All of this is wrapped in discourses about 'pleasing oneself', freedom, self-determination, 'taking control' and empowerment (Gill and Donaghue 2013), obscuring the extent to which this labour is normatively demanded of women. As Gill and Scharff (2011: 7) write: "It is clear that the enterprising, autonomous, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely-choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism". The powerful resonance—even overlap—between neoliberalism and postfeminism is also evident in the muting of a language speaking about power relations and structural inequalities, or indeed "any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves" (Gill and Scharff 2011: 7). Dominant modes of accounting instead revolve around individualistic formulations of agency, empowerment and choice – the maxims of postfeminist femininity (Gill and Donaghue 2013).

According to Gill (2007a), at the heart of the postfeminist cultural sensibility is a shift from the sexual objectification to a sexual *subjectification* of (some) women. Gill (2007a: 258) writes (see also Goldman et al. 1991):

> Where once sexualised representations of women in the media presented them as passive, mute objects of an assumed male gaze, today sexualisation works somewhat differently in many domains. Women are not straightforwardly objectified but are presented as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so.

For Gill (2007a: 258), this constitutes a new, more pernicious and distinctively neoliberal disciplinary regime where power "constructs our very subjectivity". Another Foucauldian-inspired concept with great analytic purchase for the analysis of postfeminism is that of 'technologies of sexiness'. More than two decades ago, Hilary Radner developed the term to speak to the ways in which dominant heterosexual scripts were changing. Radner (1993, 1999: 15) observed a rising cultural pervasiveness—ignited by Gurley Brown's *Cosmopolitan* (see Chapter Two)—of a new, 'modernised' mode of femininity that had replaced virginity,

'goodness', 'innocence' or 'virtue' as women's value in the heterosexual contract with a 'technology of sexiness' organised around sexual expertise and "the disciplined use of make-up, clothing, exercise and cosmetic surgery, linking femininity, consumer culture and heterosexuality" (see also Bartky 1990 on 'new femininity'). Extending this argument, more recently authors have underscored the centrality of psychological transformation to this technology of the self, which now demands a female subject who is compulsorily sexy and sexual, sexually agentic and confident, as well as knowledgeable and skilled in a variety of sexual behaviours and practices – within narrow and tightly policed boundaries (Gill 2007a, 2009a; Evans et al. 2010; Harvey and Gill 2011, 2012; Evans and Riley 2014).

Although there are a number of broadly agreed upon features of postfeminism as a distinctive sensibility, it must be noted that under this conceptual framework the term is not approached as a fixed body of precepts (Gill et al. 2016). Rather, to speak of postfeminism as a sensibility is to speak of a constellation of ideological positions, scripts and practices "that are dynamic, that travel, and that change" (Gill et al. 2016: 3). As Gill, Kelan and Scharff (2016: 2) further explain:

> We are interested in the *dynamics* of power and inequality – for example, in thinking of sexism not as a single, unchanging thing, but as a fluid and malleable set of practices of power: its forms change, mutate, adapt, are reinvented – and it is precisely this combination of dynamism and stability that the concept of postfeminism seeks to address, capturing sexism in its "endless variety and tedious monotony" (Fraser and Nicholson, 2010, p. 234).

Using postfeminism as an analytical concept or category in cultural studies means being attentive to "both continuity and change", in addition to the ways in which "multiple and contradictory ideas can co-exist in the same moment, plane, field" (Gill 2016b: 2). Directly speaking to this dynamism, in the period of time during which the present study was conducted, postfeminism has undergone permutations in light of its encounter with a resurgent interest in feminism that has been particularly visible in the media and among young women (Gill 2016a). Within the academy, some have questioned the continued relevance or value of the concept for our seemingly new feminist moment (Keller and Ryan 2015; Retallack et al. 2015). The present study makes a contribution to these recent debates about the new cultural life of (mediated) post/feminism(s) (see especially Chapter Nine) (Banet-Weiser 2015a; McRobbie 2015; Gill 2016a and b; Gill and Orgad in press). In examining sites accessed by English and Spanish-speaking users across the globe, this thesis also

adds to a body of literature still principally centred on Anglophone contexts, and to a growing conversation about how postfeminism crosses boundaries and travels transnationally (Gill and Scharff 2011). Indeed, Simidele Dosekun (2015: 960) has recently called "for a transnational analytic and methodological approach to the critical study of postfeminism". This thesis advances current understandings in yet another area of increasing concern for feminist scholars of postfeminism and neoliberalism, namely the ways in which these rationalities configure sexual subjectivities and relations, as part of a broader interest in the mediation of contemporary intimate life (O'Neill 2015).

1.4   Mediated intimacy

The ideas of writers like De Lauretis (1987) and Butler (1999)—and poststructuralist thought more generally—proved foundational to the tradition of feminist media studies informing the present research, broadly marked by a shift from realist assumptions to constructionist concerns (Carter 2011). In general terms, as Carla Willig (2008: 7) explains, researchers adopting a social constructionist perspective aim to identify the "ways of constructing social reality that are available in a culture, to explore the conditions of their use and to trace their implications for human experience and social practice". From a constructionist epistemology, Lia Litosseliti (2006: 119-120) expounds, the media are key "sites for the representation, construction, and contestation of knowledge, values, social relations, identities and ideologies" (see also Orgad 2012). Taking a similar stance, Panteá Farvid and Virginia Braun (2006: 297) highlight that: "Magazines necessarily provide a space for, and contribute to, (societal and individual) discourses of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality". As such, Farvid and Braun (2006: 297) argue, "the critical analysis of magazine texts is one important mode of inquiry into their social construction".

This thesis is built on the premise that researching media—as offering not simply reflections but powerful *constructions* of the world—is crucial to feminism and the social sciences, and that this is the case now more so than ever before in light of the ever-growing ubiquity and pervasiveness of media representations, technologies and use. Moreover, at present: "the ways we experience, make sense of and act upon the world (including ourselves) are always already tied up in media" (Deuze 2012: 5). It is in this context that Mark Deuze (2011: 137) proposes a 'media life' perspective—an understanding of contemporary life not lived *with* media, but

rather *in* media—as "the ontological benchmark for a 21st-century media studies". A 'media life' ontology emphasises the ways in which "our lived reality cannot be experienced separate from, or outside of media" (Deuze 2011: 140), and points to the increasingly mediated nature of our social and psychological, indeed our most intimate, lives. Certainly, especially in more affluent societies, intimate relationality is increasingly constructed, negotiated and lived in and through media and information and communication technologies (ICTs). More and more digital platforms are used to build, maintain and discuss intimate relationships, as well as engage in sexual practices. In growing numbers people create and disseminate personal intimate material, notably sexually explicit content, as part of a convergence culture of fluid boundaries between the public and the private, content and connectivity, consumption and production (see next section). Representations of intimacies—particularly concerning sex—dominate the media, which are now the central cultural arena for defining regimes of sexual desire and conduct (McRobbie 2009). Against this backdrop, Imogen Tyler and Rosalind Gill (2013: 80) declare: "the need to develop an understanding of mediated intimacy has never seemed more urgent".

Shifting the sociological focus upon the 'transformation of intimacy' (e.g. Giddens 1992) to the role played by media in reconfiguring intimate life, feminist scholars have began to interrogate a varied range of sites of mediated intimacy, spanning from the multiplying well-established genres such as sex and relationship advice in books (Barker et al. In press) and magazines (Gill 2009a), to newer figures and spaces, such as 'celebsexperts' and 'dating coaches', the TV sex makeover show (Harvey and Gill 2011) and 'pickup' community-industries (O'Neill 2015). But what about user-led sites of mediated intimacy? How does the 'sexpertise' elaborated by members of the public relate to that disseminated in the edited content of experienced advisors like agony aunts? Further, contrasting the attention paid to textual representations in research on mediated intimacy—and women's magazines—the *production* of content about sex and relationships remains a conspicuously under-explored topic (Boynton 2009). This thesis sheds light on these issues, thereby responding to recent calls for scholarly inquiries into mediated intimacies in online environments, and into the changing meanings of the role of the expert in times of media convergence (Winch et al. 2015).

1.5 Media convergence

Both industry and academic commentators have found great use in the notion of convergence [4] to discuss transformations in a broad range of aspects of the contemporary media/ted world, and as an identifier of multiple trends in digital culture in particular, considered to be marked by 'blurred boundaries' or 'collapsed distinctions'. At the centre of these discussions is the gradual coming together of production and consumption ('cultural convergence'). This has given rise to a whole new vocabulary – for example, notions like *produser* (producer/consumer; Bruns 2008) and *Pro-Am* (professional/amateur; Leadbeater and Miller 2004) (in turn inspired by earlier notions like Alvin Toffler's 'prosumer' 1970). Most understandings of the term also point to the interrelated blending of multiple media industries, components and platforms, and thus also the rise of cross-media content ('technological convergence') (Uricchio 2004; Jenkins 2006; Deuze 2007a, 2008; Grant and Wilkinson 2009; Duffy 2013). That is, for media companies convergence entails the "move from medium-specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels" (Jenkins 2006: 243). The traditional publishing industry is likewise embracing multi-platform and trans-media strategies. One illustration from women's magazines is 'Elle 360'. *Elle UK* explains: "We're now working across every platform, all the time" (Candy in May Johnson 2014), namely "print, digital, mobile and social media" [5]. Moreover, publications—newly re-positioned as *brands*—are increasingly seeking to expand *beyond* media platforms (Duffy 2011) – the ultimate stage of so-called 'platform agnosticism'. Women's magazines now go beyond the printed periodical to not only penetrate other traditional media—books, newsstand specials, television—and 'new' media formats and devices, but also *non-media* realms. A point in case is *Cosmopolitan UK*[6], which boasts:

> Our highly successful events – careers masterclasses, fashion catwalks, the Ultimate Women of the Year Awards – take Cosmopolitan off the page or screen and into readers' lives. Wherever the Cosmopolitan woman is, so are we.

Embracing convergence more than any other traditional medium (Duffy 2011), these publications are developing into 'magabrands' that are multiplatform and

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[4] Like other feminist media researchers (e.g. Ouellette and Wilson 2011; Duffy 2013), I differentiate the concept of 'media convergence' from the particular evaluations or viewpoints in the work of scholars like Henry Jenkins, as notably developed in the 2006 book *Convergence Culture*, discussed later in Chapters Three and Six.

[5] From: http://www.hearst.co.uk/brands/elle (Accessed 26/06/2016)

[6] From: http://www.hearst.co.uk/brands/cosmopolitan (Accessed 26/06/2016)

omnipresent: "We are a 24 hour fashion media brand", declares *Elle UK*[7].
Consequently, as Duffy (2013a: 4) argues: "Women's magazines provide a
compelling site to examine […] questions about how 'traditional' media industries
are transforming in a digital era of media".

Media scholars have additionally emphasised processes of convergence with
regard to media content creation and marketing services, individual-level creativity
and mass commercial production (Deuze 2007a, 2008, 2009a), along with the
intersection of grassroots and corporate media (Jenkins 2006). The rising
convergence of ownership, regulation and production has also been emphasised by
critical commentators, who in light of increased acquisitions and mergers have
expressed concerns about an ever more concentrated and hierarchised (cross/trans-
)media industry under the control of a smaller and smaller number of giant
transnational conglomerates ('corporate convergence') (Uricchio 2004; Grant and
Wilkinson 2009). Attention has also been paid to the increasing liquidity between
humans and machines, the public and private domains, and to convergence "between
self and social identities (especially on social networking sites), between work and
play, and due to timespace compression, the convergence of the local and the global"
(Deuze 2009b, 2011; Deuze et al. 2012: 11). Therefore, the concept of convergence
simultaneously refers to technological, industrial and socio-cultural processes, and is
intimately connected to those of globalisation and transnationalism.

1.6   Thinking transnationally

Doing social research today, and clearly Internet research, inevitably entails
engaging with the complex specificities of the local *in relation to* global linkages and
flows of representations, discourses and commodities, people, labour and capital –
indeed, forces, trends and modalities of power that are *transnational* (Szeman 2006).
Following transnational (and postcolonial) feminist scholars, I use the term both to
designate the multiple and uneven "layering of social, political, economic, and
mediated processes" (Hegde 2011: 8), practices and subjectivities which traverse and
exceed—but do *not* negate—conventional boundaries of the nation, and,
simultaneously, "the analytic mode of thinking across them" (Dosekun 2015: 961).
Moreover, for Radha S. Hegde (2011: 8): "The transnational provides an analytical

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[7] From: http://www.hearst.co.uk/brands/elle (Accessed 26/06/2016)

framework to open the terrain of media cultures, gender, and everyday life in dynamic interrelationality". She further highlights how: "The notion of the transnational focuses attention on the contested connections and lines of power that cut across contexts" (Hegde 2014: 95). At the centre of the circuitry for these 'scattered hegemonies' (Kaplan and Grewal 1994) are "media technologies, systems of representation, and information networks" (Hegde 2011: 1). Hegde (2011: 1) asserts: "Hence, transnational media environments serve as a crucial site from which to examine gendered constructions and contradictions that underwrite globalization". In this sense, and supporting the foci of the present research, McRobbie (2009: 59) maintains that: "The sexual contract on the global stage is most clearly marked out in the world editions of young women's fashion magazines".

Thinking transnationally, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003: 503) argues, also involves a commitment to a vision of "noncolonizing feminist solidarity across borders". For Mohanty (2003: 518), fundamental to such a project is cross-cultural research, undertaken in the broader context of a ""comparative feminist studies" or "feminist solidarity" model"[8]. This model assumes as its analytic strategy "both distance and proximity (specific/universal)" (Mohanty 2003: 521). Mohanty (2003: 501) further explains that such a solidarity perspective "must be attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes", as part of a wider critique of capitalist patriarchies. As McRobbie (2009) notes, the term 'patriarchy' has been often used within feminism in universalising and homogenising ways, and this has rightly received extensive critique. At the same time, it is vital politically and analytically for feminist theory and practice, pointing as it does to structures and patterns, and thus to the necessity for collective action and solidarity, the very mode of thinking and acting neoliberalism aims to disarticulate. I thus align myself with McRobbie (2009: 90-91), who writes: "I propose it can be re-employed particularistically by drawing on Mohanty's terminology and her use of the word patriarchies".

The feminist studies model put forward by Mohanty (2003) rejects both colonising *and* cultural relativist accounts. This latter, Mohanty (2003: 520) argues, silences "common criteria for critique and evaluation". In a similar manner, Haraway

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[8] Although Mohanty (2003) is here advancing a curricular strategy, her ideas are equally pertinent and applicable to the research situation.

(1988: 584) calls on feminists to trace a path away from relativism—or a "strong social constructionist perspective"—as well as from (homogenising, essentialist, androcentric) "totalisation". Both, Haraway (1988: 584) argues, "promis[e] vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully". Advancing the notion of "situated knowledges", Haraway (1988: 584) usefully advises the feminist researcher to work with "partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology". Furthermore, as this chapter has discussed, against claims that nihilism, ethical paralysis and apoliticism are inevitable consequences of poststructuralist thought, there is a vast body of feminist poststructuralist-inflected scholarship driven by "passionate attachments to ethical and transformative practice" (Gannon and Davies 2012: 70). It is in this spirit that I offer my partial, situated and critical knowledges developed during three years of immersion into the world of women's online magazines.

1.7   Chapter summaries

In this first chapter I have introduced the central questions, concerns and contexts, concepts, frameworks and contributions of this thesis. To recap, this is a feminist qualitative study of consumer young women's online magazines (both digital-only titles and web extensions by well-established print publications). It aims to offer critical insights with regard to texts, users and production around the online platform, relationships with feminism, and representations of gender, sex, sexuality and intimate relations. In doing so, I hope to expand current understandings of the complex relation between mediated knowledges, gendered and sexual subjecthood, and neoliberalism (e.g. see edited collection by Gill and Scharff 2011). By focusing on sites based in the UK and in Spain but globally accessed and predominantly owned by European or international corporations, this thesis also makes a contribution to a growing body of feminist scholarship interested in the textured contextualisation of sexual politics within transnational media environments (e.g. see edited collection by Hegde 2011). Online environments in particular are important to prioritise not only due to their enormous and ever increasing popularity, but also because, as Mark Deuze (2008: 27) puts it, the "Internet has become the foremost frontier over which symbolic, financial and cultural battles are fought". More

generally, this introductory chapter has established that the present project is animated by social constructionist insights about media as constitutive, and by feminist interests in cultural representations of gender, sex and sexuality. Ultimately, I am concerned to understand dynamics of power, inequality and subordination under contemporary capitalist patriarchy.

The next two chapters continue to situate the thesis and its scholarly contributions by respectively reviewing the literature on women's magazines and on women and the Internet. **Chapter Two** outlines the scholarship on consumer print magazines for young women, particularly as developed within feminist media and cultural studies. The review examines text, audience and production-oriented research. In order to offer further context for my study, I close the chapter with a discussion of sex advice media culture today. Turning to the online environment, **Chapter Three** overviews central feminist debates about the Internet, from the early days to its development into a commercial mass medium. This is followed by a discussion of a fundamental part of this commercialisation process, namely the profusion of online products and services created specifically for women, and in particular the affinity portal or community site, a model firmly rooted in the woman's magazine tradition. The chapter then examines key theorisations of interactivity in digital media contexts. Finally, I pull together a range of literatures concerned with work/ers in the contemporary cultural and creative industries, and the new media sector in particular.

The women's online magazines that form the focus of the thesis are presented in **Chapter Four**. Also discussed here are the practicalities of producing the data corpus, primarily consisting of: a) editorial texts; b) user-generated content; and c) interviews with producers. Next I introduce the approaches that informed the analysis of the data, which are thematic analysis, (critical) discourse analysis, and conjunctural analysis. In addition to offering practical accounts, I reflexively engage with methodological, ethical and political considerations pertaining to the selected methods and my fieldwork experience. Somewhat unconventionally, toward the end of the chapter I draw on empirical data from the interviews so as to address the politics and ethics of engagement with and representation of research participants. Then I develop what I call a 'solidary critique' as an orientation for the analysis of the talk of women who at once (re)produce, suffer and contest sexism.

Chapters Five to Nine constitute the empirical heart of the thesis. Throughout all these I attempt to resist the rigidity—and increasingly inappropriateness (e.g. Deuze 2011)—of the conventional text/production/audience triad in communication and media studies by integrating the analysis of at least two data types, providing richer understandings of the phenomena under inquiry. First, **Chapter Five** deals with the production of content about sex and relationships. It additionally offers an introduction to more general but central aspects of magazine production such as editorial-advertising relations. The analysis maps how notions of intimacy penetrate different dimensions of the magazine, along with networks of influence for the development of editorial content, perceived as marked by a shift from 'experts' to 'real life'. The ways in which producers describe the particularities of online woman's magazine journalism are also explored, as is the issue of representational continuity and change in sex and relationship texts. I show how the talk of women's magazine producers constitutes a heterogeneous discursive landscape, in which passionate attachments to the traditions of the genre and its femininities complexly coexist with critical self-reflexivity, ambivalence and ideological dilemmas. The chapter also highlights the increasing importance of ideas about authenticity in these media, making connections to online cultures, contemporary branding strategies, together with a reinvigorated interest in feminism.

As already noted, contributing to the success of women's online magazines are the opportunities for user interaction – often in the form of discussion forums. However, these interactive spaces are currently disappearing, being replaced by an ever-escalating emphasis upon social network sites (SNSs). The second analysis chapter, **Chapter Six**, critically examines this changing model of reader interaction in women's online magazines, drawing on the interview material with industry insiders, forum user-generated content and a variety of trade material. The analysis demonstrates how the decision to close the forums and embrace SNSs responds to multiple determinants, including a corporate doctrine of control over users' discourse and effort to outsource new modalities of free consumer labour, constituting a new ideal worker-commodity online: 'The shareaholic'. This exercise of power has varying levels of success, and potentialities remain for users to exercise some transformative subversion, for example through what I theorise as 'labour of disruption'. Nonetheless, the chapter argues, the emergent SNS-based magazine model of reader interaction poses a serious challenge to ongoing celebrations both in

the industry and in some scholarly work about an increasingly democratic and user-led digital media ecosystem.

Chapter Seven takes as the starting point a recurrent thread in the discussion forums: Women expressing confusion, concern, disappointment, hurt and/or self-doubt, and asking for advice, on discovering that their male partners consume various pornographies. This commentary about hetero-male-oriented pornographies is utilised as a point of analytical entry into the kinds of gendered and sexual pleasures, bodies, subjectivities and intimate relational possibilities contemporary (new) media and public sex and relationship advice bring into being and render (un)intelligible. Drawing on both peer-to-peer and editorial advice, I show how pseudo-scientific discourses give support to a narrative of male immutability and female adaptation in heterosexual relationships, and examine how these constructions are informed by accounts of sexual difference from Evolutionary Psychology. I contend that the identified iterations of evolutionary/biological gender essentialism constitute a contradictory ideological formation I call 'postfeminist biologism'. The chapter also unpacks the construction across the data of a distinctively postfeminist feminine sexual subjectivity tied to a technology of sexiness organised around pornification, entrepreneurship and confidence.

In our injurious patriarchal cultures, unconfidence is almost inescapable when inhabiting womanhood. However, recently the promotion of self-confidence has surfaced as the site for expanded, heightened and more insidious modes of regulation, often spearheaded by those very institutions invested in women's insecurities. This notably includes consumer women's magazines and their commercial partners. In **Chapter Eight** I explore this gendered turn to confidence by examining editorial texts on the body, sex and relationships that apply a 'love yourself' (LYS) approach, along with my discussions about this 'new way' with magazine producers. The chapter advances 'confidence chic' as an emergent gendered technology of neoliberal governmentality variously related to proliferating feminisms.

Certainly, after a long period of widespread castigation, disavowal and postfeminist stranglehold, during the course of this research feminist ideas and activism have enjoyed a resurgence of interest, with a diversity of voices proliferating across civil society, the political and corporate worlds – as well as celebrity culture and popular media. **Chapter Nine** addresses the complex relationship between women's magazines and feminism today, both as subjects of

feminist discourse and as objects of feminist critique. Paying particular attention to the interviews with producers, the chapter examines feminist (dis)identifications, the constitution and contestation of a purported 'new feminism', the various ways in which critique is countered, along with discussions about the future feminist (im)possibilities for these media.

Finally, in **Chapter Ten** I reflect upon the central methodological and theoretical contributions of the thesis. Considering my research as part of an ongoing feminist conversation or project, I also suggest possible directions for future research.

Chapter Two

THE WOMAN'S MAGAZINE

2.1   Introduction

Media research can be often positioned as 'non-work', ephemeral, trivial. Moreover, scholars may become identified with the supposed banality of their object of study. This ties in with longstanding distinctions between 'popular' or 'mass' culture and 'high' culture or 'the arts' – distinctions that have received extensive critique, particularly by the neo-Marxism informed field of cultural studies. However, even within cultural and media studies there can be hierarchies of scholarly value, with particular genres such as romance novels or reality television sometimes considered as less 'worthy' of research than news media, for example. Feminists have long challenged such value distinctions, foregrounding how they are often classed, racialised and gendered (Hermes 1995; Wood and Skeggs 2011). Notably, from the late 1970s feminist cultural studies scholars began to place what was often (problematically) called 'women's genres' at the centre of critical academic interest (see CCCS Women's Studies Group 1978); making a fundamental contribution to a field previously centred on popular cultural forms that exclude or marginalise women, and challenging the masculinist set of emphases and gender blindness of previous work (Geraghty 1991; Shiach 1998; Gill 2007a). Women's magazines have since then attracted substantial scholarly attention and debate, responding to the feminist research interest in cultural spaces and experiences that concern women. Certainly, these media are primarily created *for* as well as *by* women – although those at higher levels (still) tend to be men. Also motivating this academic attention in women's magazines is their maintained high popularity and resilience (see Chapter One), together with the understanding of these publications as key cultural sites for the (re-)production of gender identities and relations. This is vividly captured by McRobbie's (1996: 172) words concerning "the centrality of the women's magazine as possibly the most concentrated and uninterrupted media-scape for the construction of normative femininity". Yet in Spain women's magazines have received little scholarly attention, partly as a result of the widespread intellectual disdain toward the genre. An additional contributory factor is the lack of a strong tradition of feminist media and cultural studies. Most research has been historical,

rarely reaching beyond the Transition (to democracy) period (e.g. Perinat and Marrades 1980; Jiménez 1992; for a UK-based historical study see Ballaster et al. 1991). Furthermore, as María Isabel Menéndez (2013) notes, those few who have focused on Spanish women's magazines published after the 1980s have almost exclusively conducted quantitative content analyses (e.g. Ciudad 2004; Ganzábal 2004). In light of this shortage of Spain-based relevant literature, the following discussion will focus on Anglo-American scholarship, and especially that within British feminist cultural and media studies – the tradition on which this thesis principally builds.

The Western Women's Liberation Movement or second wave of feminism of the late 1960s and 1970s stimulated both the emergence of 'women's genres' as an important scholarly topic, and the establishment of feminist communication studies as a distinct scholarly field more generally (Mendes and Carter 2008). It also triggered the development of the young woman's lifestyle magazine as we know it today, a development spearheaded by the re-launch of *Cosmopolitan*. Taking this period as its point of departure, this chapter offers an overview of the body of feminist qualitative research on women's magazines, mapping key theoretical and methodological trajectories, and highlighting some of the main changes and mutations but also insistent continuities of the genre. In doing so, the review suggests how, as McRobbie (1996: 173) has observed, this scholarship "tells the story of the complex, repetitive but also changing social construction of femininity, but also of the emergence and development of feminist media and cultural studies itself". McRobbie's (1999) broadly but not strictly chronological stages of feminist critique of magazines serve as a general guide for structuring the first three sections of the chapter: After a brief introduction to early text-based critiques, I discuss the turn to questions of pleasure and audience research, and then explore shifting textual constructions of femininity and sexuality with the rise of a new generation of magazines. In comparison to audiences and especially texts, feminist scholars have paid little attention to women's magazine *production*, and only a small number of studies have inquired into the experiences and perspectives of the writers. Some have explained this discrepancy in terms of the practical complications involved in conducting the research, particularly with regard to recruitment (Gough-Yates 2003; Murphy 2013) (see Chapter Four); while others relate this imbalance in foci to the set of privileged interests in cultural studies, which are partly a reaction to economically

determinist interpretations of commercial (media) culture (Levine 2001). Nonetheless, the existing production-oriented studies and debates offer valuable contributions, as discussed in Section 2.5. The final section of the chapter briefly reviews feminist research on sex advice in popular media today, paying especial attention to the perceived increased 'pornification' of Western societies since the beginning of the millennium, in addition to theorisations of contemporary femininities and sexual politics in terms of neoliberalism and postfeminism.

2.2 Texts and ideology

The Women's Liberation Movement was situated in a context dominated by media, which as such "became a major focus of feminist research, critique and intervention" (Gill 2007a: 9). This initially entailed a concern with the (under/)representation of women in the mass media, with Gaye Tuchman (1978) famously speaking of their 'symbolic annihilation' through a combination of omission, trivialisation and condemnation. From the mid-1970s onward, increased consideration was given to representations *for* women (Brunsdon 1991), or what came to be often called 'women's genres' (Kuhn 1984). A pioneering work was Tania Modleski's *Loving With a Vengeance* (1982), which analysed three cultural forms overwhelmingly consumed by women – romance fiction, gothic novels and television soap opera. With regard to women's magazines, Betty Friedan (1963: 18) offered a renowned early intervention, disparaging the genre for glorifying the figure of the 'happy housewife' and promoting the idea that women need to "work to keep their bodies beautiful and get and keep a man". This early phase of feminist critique of magazines—referred to by McRobbie (1997: 192) as one of "angry repudiation"— was characterised by a focus upon texts, and by an understanding of the genre as exemplifying oppression and objectification. In addition, a binary opposition between 'feminism' and '(conventional) femininity' (often embodied in the figure of the housewife-mother) provided a fundamental framing device (Brunsdon 1991; McRobbie 1996). Magazines were seen to present a coercive ideology of femininity, and were derided as categorically pernicious and alienating. Authors foregrounded the omnipresent consumption imperative and almost sole focus on—along with conservative approach toward—beauty, fashion and romance. The representational regimes of magazines and other commercial 'women's genres' were also critiqued as 'unreal', 'untruthful' or 'distorted', and as working to impose 'false consciousness'

on women for the benefit of patriarchal consumer culture (Friedan 1963; Greer 1970; Tuchman 1978). One clear illustration of this sentiment is Shulamith Firestone's (1971: 139) declaration that: "romanticism is a cultural tool of male power to keep women from knowing their real conditions".

The second, more academic stage of analysis, McRobbie (1996: 173) explains, shifted the question away from searching for more realistic or truthful representations and toward "understanding the range of interconnected meanings constructed around the category of women" (Williamson 1978; Winship 1978; Ferguson 1983; McRobbie 1991). Initially, particularly influential was Louis Althusser's (1971) theory of ideology as permeating the *whole of society* and constituting *all subjectivities* (McRobbie 1997). Exemplifying such a shift in perspective, Janice Winship (1978: 134) supported her early call to feminists to consider these publications seriously by writing: "all of us women 'achieve' our subjectivity in relation to a definition of women which in part is propounded by women's magazines". During the 1980s, the impact of poststructuralism, notably Foucauldian writing (see Chapter One), gave way to a concern with the politics of meaning, and the regulative and normalising role played by magazines, understood as sites of discourse (McRobbie 1999). Marking another development, in her seminal book *Inside Women's Magazines*, Winship (1987: xiii, 14) went beyond the semiotic and ideological analysis of editorial and advertising texts to include, as a "closet reader", reflections on consumption, its situatedness in everyday life and pleasures offered, for instance pointing to relaxation and a combination of "survival skills and daydreams". The question of (female) pleasure was central to the third stage identified by McRobbie (1997: 192) in this field of study, itself leading to the fourth: "the return of the reader".

2.3   Pleasure and the reader

The 1980s marked an important moment of change in media and popular culture studies, characterised by an 'ethnographic turn' or 'new audience research' (Ang 1985). A range of influences—significantly psychoanalytic, poststructuralist and postmodern writing—complicated previous assumptions, and notably those regarding ideology. Always a contested concept, during this period scholars increasingly problematised its assumed function, efficacy or success, along with the associated idea of an underlying 'true' state of being, or the possibility of being

'outside' of ideology – particularly as seen in theory deriving from textual analysis. There was also a displacement of the notions associated with the Frankfurt School concerning mass-culture as monolithic, manipulative, debased and duping passive consumers; and a rejection of the hypodermic model of media effects that dominated early mass communication research (Carter 2011). Helping to launch an 'ethnographic turn' in media research, Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model of communication advanced meaning as polysemic and open to different interpretations (Mendes and Carter 2008). Though not "closed", these mappings are, however, "structured in dominance" (Hall 1980: 134). That is, for Hall (1980: 134) particular historical and socio-cultural contexts imprint on events meanings that are *dominant*, and thus there exist domains of "preferred readings", which "have the whole social order embedded in them". Readings of Antonio Gramsci's (1971) thought, and specially the notion of hegemony (see Chapter Four), also proved profoundly influential for British cultural studies, particularly the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Studies approached popular culture as both a site of domination and resistance, and explored a growing range of moments of negotiation, struggle and contestation.

Feminist scholars attempted to 'rescue' popular cultural forms from their low status as unworthy of attention generally (McRobbie 1999), and "to resist double standards which operate to condemn or dismiss women's genres" in particular (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 2006: 492). Alongside the emergent focus on the politics of meaning in text-based studies (e.g. the Gramscian-informed studies of Hebron 1983 and Winship 1987), there was an increased interest in the terrain of lived experience and everyday media consumption, with scholars raising questions about the textual pleasures—and even possibilities of resistance—that 'women's genres' offered readers. This was framed within a more complex understanding of the process of consumption where multiple uses and readings were seen to be possible. An early example in the field with far-reaching impact was Janice Radway's (1984) interview-based ethnographic study of avid romance novel readers. According to Radway (1984: 8), for a "good cultural analysis of the romance": "The analytic focus must shift from the text itself, taken in isolation, to the complex social event of reading". She theorised the act of romance reading as neither "fundamentally conservative" nor "incipiently oppositional", but rather a "polysemic event" (Radway 1984: 209). For her research participants, Radway (1984) argued, it was both a 'compensatory'

and 'combative' activity. It enabled women to temporarily refuse their prescribed social role within the institution of marriage, which to a large extent revolved around domesticity and self-abnegation. Radway (1984: 212) further maintained that the ideal romance exerts a "counter-valuative" function by presenting the triumph of "female values of love and personal interaction" over "the male values of competition and public achievement". For Radway (1984: 213), romance reading could hence be conceived as "mild protest and longing for reform". She also noted, however, how this activity does nothing to change women's actual social situations. It potentially has the opposite effect in fact, by obviating the need to "demand satisfaction in the real world", "recontaining this protest", and due to its isolating, private nature (Radway 1984: 212).

Women's magazine reading and associated activities also soon became a topic of feminist scholarly inquiry. Studies argued that these publications are important avenues for pleasure and, moreover, that readers not only critically read but actively transform meanings from these commercial texts in creative, transgressive and resistant ways. On the basis of interviews with readers, in *Women's Worlds* Ros Ballaster and colleagues (1991: 35) pointed to "the pleasure of the critic", facilitated by familiarity with generic conventions. Drawing on group discussions, Elizabeth Frazer (1987: 419) claimed that teenage girls adopt a "self-conscious and reflexive approach to texts". McRobbie (1991) found that teenage girls utilised an emphasised femininity inspired by magazines as a form of resistance to oppressive class ideologies at school. Also based on interviews with teenzine readers, Dawn Currie (1999) highlighted the pleasure of (self-)recognition, or what she referred to as "comparison reading" between magazine representation and school culture. For Currie (1999: 277), this "empowers women by reaffirming the normalcy of their experiences" and offering a "sense of 'belonging' to the social". A contradictory experience, in her study teenzine reading also emerged as "a source of marked displeasure", particularly with regard to self-doubt and anxiety (Currie 1999: 277). Currie (1999: 277) further observed: "Even readers who criticized the beauty standard perpetuated by commercial representations of women provided an extensive inventory of physical characteristics that are a source of personal dissatisfaction". Thus, Currie (1999: 20) concluded, "comparison reading" can result "in girls questioning themselves rather than cultural constructions" (for similar findings see Duke and Kreshel 1998).

In her influential text *Reading Women's Magazines* Joke Hermes (1995: 2) critiqued previous text-based work for taking up a "distancing criticism", making inferences about reception, and imposing oppressive interpretations. Hermes (1995: 3) applied what she characterised as a postmodern approach that shifted the emphasis away from "the older feminist position of concern" to one of "respect" toward women and women's genres more generally. "Claiming respect", Hermes (1995: 151) argued, should be "feminism's overriding motivation". Drawing on extensive interviews, Hermes (1995: 37) claimed that magazines become meaningful for readers in offering practical knowledge ('tips'), mostly on domestic but also some cultural issues. Readers additionally value the opportunities for 'emotional learning and connected knowing', namely learning about other people's emotions, problems and experiences, as well as ones' own feelings, anxieties and wishes (e.g. through 'real life' testimonies and problem pages). Hermes (1995) especially emphasised the way in which these texts easily accommodate to everyday duties and activities because they are 'easy to put down' (and pick up gain). Her work hence downplayed the level of readers' investments in the magazine content.

The shift in scholarly focus from texts to readers was often celebrated as having an equalising effect, with feminists no longer occupying a position of knowledge and truth outside of ideology in comparison with 'ordinary' women and girls who enjoy women's magazines (McRobbie 1996). In fact, during this time a number of scholars would openly discuss their own enjoyment of these publications (Hermes 1995), though often noting a "simultaneous attraction and rejection" (Winship 1978: xiii), or even "something of a love-hate relationship" (McRobbie 1999: 49). Their pleasure in reading women's magazines, Ballaster and colleagues (1991: 1) observed, "is by no means pure, unambiguous or unproblematic". Moving beyond the dominant tendency to approach women's magazines exclusively as either vehicles for women-centred pleasure or as purveyors of oppressive ideology, they highlighted how:

> The construction and maintenance of any social order entails the construction and maintenance of certain pleasures that can secure consent and participation in that order. That any cultural form is pleasurable and ideological is, then, neither surprising nor worrying – what else could pleasure be? And how else could ideology work? (Ballaster et al. 1991: 161-162).

In other words, Ballaster et al. (1991) usefully underscored how analyses of ideology and pleasure need to be integrated as they are inevitably interwoven (see also Gill

2007a). Shelley Budgeon and Dawn Currie (1995: 185) were also weary of the "turn to pleasure": "we feel that there is a danger in romanticizing women's agency through reading as resistance". They additionally highlighted that while the pleasurable aspects of reading help to explain the appeal of women's magazines, pleasure must not be taken as a measure of empowerment. Speaking to this concern, Budgeon and Currie (1995: 184, 173) called on feminists to attend to how antifeminist messages were being increasingly promoted "by paradoxically incorporating the values and goals of the women's liberation movement", a tension that was navigated "through the construction of meanings which support the notion of postfeminism".

2.4   New magazines and (post)feminism

In her landmark book *Forever Feminine,* Marjorie Ferguson (1983: 78) argued that "the 1970s were a decade of challenge for women, for women's magazines and for the cult of femininity", where publications "had to respond to the women's movement". In this sense, Ferguson (1983) underscored the reinvention and immediate huge commercial success of *Cosmopolitan*. In 1965, US editor Helen Gurley Brown transformed this long-established but moribund Hearst Corporation publication according to the image of her best selling book *Sex and the Single Girl[9]*. Brown's *Cosmopolitan* was the first consumer magazine to target single "girls with jobs" (Ouellette 1999: 362), and to discuss "unambiguously a range of sexual topics" (Ferguson 1983: 82). For Winship (1987: 111), *Cosmopolitan* contributed to popularising a "feminine version of 'sexual liberation'", helping "to dispel old myths and banish women's feelings of shame/guilt/abnormality about their sexuality", for instance concerning masturbation, sexual fantasies and premarital sex. However, in addition to problematising the continued heteronormativity, Winship (1987: 112) reflected: "Yet this emphasis on sex also made it increasingly like any other area of personal work and in this respect, ironically, *Cosmo* was following the hallowed footsteps of magazine tradition: 'domestic work', 'beauty work' and now 'sex work'". In turn, Gloria Steinem (1990: 176) condemned how *Cosmopolitan* brought

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[9] The first international edition of *Cosmopolitan* was the UK edition. It hit newsstands in 1972, selling all 350,000 copies by lunchtime. The publication first appeared in Spain a year after the death of the dictator Francisco Franco, in 1976, but soon folded. It successfully reappeared again in the very different Spain of 1990.

"'the sexual revolution' to women's magazines – but in an ad-oriented way". Steinem (1990: 176) observed: "Attracting multiple men required even more consumerism, as the Cosmo Girl made clear, than finding one husband".

After the launch of 'new *Cosmo*' there followed a general shift in women's magazines toward representations containing "greater sexual explicitness" and "a wider range of the permissible", including "partnerships alternative to marriage" (Ferguson 1983: 85). Ferguson (1983) also discerned an increased coverage of social policy matters, such as child-care provision and equal pay. The mid-70s saw the advent of the 'Independent Woman', who was urged to achieve her full potential within as well as outside the home (Ferguson 1983; Winship 1987). This marked the beginning of an (elitist and individualised) 'aspirational feminism' in women's magazines (Winship 1987). In her article *The selling of the women's movement*, Elisabeth Cagan (1978 in Winship 1987: 155) criticised the rising promotion in these commercial media of "a feminism of rising expectations, not analysis and critique", where feminist ideals were articulated in personal and "totally depoliticised" terms. According to Ferguson (1983: 100), an associated dominant theme emerging in late 70s and early 80s was that of (the ethic of) self-help, organised around the variants of "Overcoming Misfortune" and "Achieving Perfection". Central to this emergent imperative pursuit of self-determination and self-realisation was a heightened emphasis on women's self-esteem. At the same time, Ferguson (1983: 95) observed, the "be more beautiful" theme remained a case of "maximum constancy and minimum change".

In the 1980s, Winship (1987: 149) argued that as women were increasingly active in the public domain, "the *raison d'être* for traditionally styled women's magazines is gradually being undermined and a space opened up for new sorts of magazine". In her view, with feminism becoming more openly diverse, fragmented and contradictory, and (some) feminist ideas having entered the realm of common sense, "the demarcation between feminist magazines and the more commercial glossies" had become less rigid (Winship 1987: 149). However, she also maintained that this tended to result in "an appropriation of the cultural space feminism opened up minus most of the politics" (Ardhill and O'Sullivan, 1985, in Winship 1987: 150). Sumin Zhao (2013: 146) summarises:

> Lying at the heart of contemporary glossy women's magazines since the 1980s is the ideology of 'new women', which incorporated 'feminist' language of 'freedom',

'independence' and pleasure', but reduced these to matters of lifestyle and consumption.

The centrality of the New Woman[10] figure for the magazines emerging in the 1980s and early 1990s is related to the intensified targeting of young (or youthful) middle-class women. With a new collection of monthly titles, the 'glossies' (e.g. *Elle, New Woman, Marie Claire,* and the transformed *She, Company* and *Cosmopolitan*), this publishing sector "managed to rejuvenate itself in an inhospitable business climate" (Gough-Yates 2003: 20). During this time, Anne Gough-Yates (2003) explains, there was a wider transition from an era of mass-marketed consumer goods to one of flexible specialisation and differentiation. Publishers, marketers and advertisers shifted the emphasis away from demographics (e.g. 'ABC1 housewives with children') and toward segmentation by 'attitude'. This was incited by new forms of market research, such as 'motivational' research and later 'lifestyle' segmentations generated through qualitative techniques (Winship 1987; Gough-Yates 2003). Overall, from the mid-1980s women's magazines "flourished as vehicles for advertising messages", selling women as "active leisurers" and "consumers of objects: objects that symbolise the worth of emancipated women" (Goldman et al. 1991: 340).

From the 1990s, the pages of women's magazines increasingly offered particularly contradictory discourses, largely due to continued attempts at marrying femininity and feminism in the most commercially successful way. Both in advertising and editorial copy, a range of values, debates and discourses from the women's liberation movement were being incorporated – as well as revised. Scholars problematised the ways in which feminism was framed according to the ideologies of possessive individualism and free choice, and redefined through personal consumer and lifestyle choices (McCracken 1993; Macdonald 1995), constituting what Robert Goldman and colleagues (1991) called 'commodity feminism'. Budgeon and Currie (1995: 184-185) spoke in terms of 'postfeminism' about a discourse that emphasises patriarchal market values and simultaneously "endorses a woman-centred individualism and assumes rather than questions equal opportunity for women", undermining the collective nature of feminism and creating the "commonsense that

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[10] It must be noted that much like the 'man in crisis', the figure of the 'new woman' is cyclical, albeit if different in its specificities; see for instance Mendes (2013) for representations of the 'new woman' in the 1890s woman's press.

gender equality has been achieved". Myra Macdonald (1995: 91) similarly claimed that postfeminism was transforming the socially emancipatory collective programme of feminism "into atomised acts of individual consumption". Macdonald (1995: 91) additionally noted that during this period: "Pleasing oneself, freedom and self-sufficiency all moved up the copywriting hierarchy". In turn, Goldman et al. (1991: 349) pointed to the centrality of the body, arguing that:

> [T]he female body has become the mediating element between the constructed domains of femininity and feminism – the domestic sphere and the world of work. Commodity feminism declares that control and ownership over one's body/face/self, accomplished through the right acquisitions, can maximise one's value at both work and home.

As noted in Chapter One, questions around the female body were at the heart of feminist critique during the 1990s. Naomi Wolf (1991) famously spoke about the 'beauty myth', namely the idea that female beauty is an objective, universal or natural category that all women want to achieve and men desire. Materialising in the restrictive and largely unattainable standards of beauty circulated by the media (notably women's magazines and advertising), it was seen to damage women's self-esteem and promote harmful practices, ranging from dieting to cosmetic surgery (e.g. Wolf 1991; Bordo 1993). For Wolf (1991), the beauty myth was a patriarchal political weapon working against women through the diminishment of self-esteem, and part of a wider backlash against feminism and its achievements (see Chapter One). Wolf (1991: 28) declared: "The closer women come to power, the more physical self-consciousness and sacrifice that are asked of them. [...] You are now too rich. Therefore, you cannot be too thin".

For McRobbie (1996, 1999), what became the frame for feminine identity and the most fundamental characteristic of the "new magazines" of the 1990s was an intensified interest in sexuality. This was, McRobbie (1996: 193) argued, a "more nuanced, more knowing and less naive sexuality than that of the liberated *Cosmopolitan* of the 1970s and 1980s". The 'new sexualities' involved the abandonment of romance and the demystification of sexual expertise in favour of women's own pleasure and knowingness (McRobbie 1996). There was a shift from a cold, clinical or moralistic language to a much more frank, explicit and celebratory approach to sex which proposed assertiveness (even brazenness), confidence and fun as new forms of sexual conduct for young women, who were depicted as "crudely lustful" (McRobbie 1996, 1999: 50). *Cosmopolitan*'s new tagline 'Fun Fearless

Female', which endures to this day, can be seen as evidencing this "new politics of femininity" (McRobbie 1999: 50). According to McRobbie (1996: 187), by blurring "the line between good and bad girls", the new sexual discourse declared "the death of naiveity" and broke with "some of the tighter constraints of normative femininity" and its monolithic, predictable and judgemental world: "Slut, tramp, slapper: all undergo ironic reversals. They are, in Butler's terms, made to re-signify". The culture of femininity becomes more fluid, complex, diverse, contradictory and self-reflexive. In her view, the newly knowing, ironic, humorous, parodic, self-mocking tone of these magazines (which she associated with the language of postmodernism) both suggested and invited certain detachment and "a degree of critical reflection on the normative practices of femininity and sexuality endlessly incited, invoked and otherwise presented as imperative" (McRobbie 1996: 178). McRobbie (1996) also identified in the 'new sexualities' of the 1990s an increased attention to sexual health and safety, as well as equality in sexual relationships. This new regime of representation was associated to the more explicit and information-oriented sexual culture produced in the wake of AIDS and HIV, in addition to the impact of feminism – a presence generally felt in the overall message to "be assertive, confident and supportive of each other", or in the encouragement "to insist on being treated as equals by men and boyfriends" (McRobbie 1996; 1999: 55). Publications were also beginning to discuss lesbianism, albeit mainly as a social issue rather than sexual desire. Thus, heterosexuality continued to constitute the framework of sexual normality.

This observation was key to the less optimist accounts of the women's magazines of the 1990s. A number of feminist studies underscored the persistent emphasis upon heterosexuality, beauty and body-work (Jackson 1996; Eggins and Iedema 1997), together with the continued depiction of women as responsible for the well-being of relationships (Wilbraham 1996). Scholars concerned with stubborn textual continuities also critiqued the dominance of 'commodified desire' (McCracken 1993) and 'consumer femininity' (Talbot 1995). Additionally highlighted was the condemnation of transgressions despite the alleged embrace of sexual liberation (Caldas-Coulthard 1996). McRobbie (1999: 55-56) responded: "What I would say in contrast is that feminism exists as a productive tension in these pages", perceiving in the 'new magazines' a simultaneous dependence on and disavowal of feminism – together with a generational desire both to provoke it and

enjoy "the rewards of its success". For McRobbie (1999: 56), the "conventional feminist attack" needed to consider the relationship between feminism and readers, as well as "the female journalists and editors who produce the magazines".

2.5   Magazine production

During the 1990s, there was a strong sense of optimism regarding the potentials of a new generation of female media professionals. Wolf (1990: 278) celebrated: "In transforming the cultural environment, women who work in the mainstream media are a crucial inside vanguard". Reed (1996) offered another sanguine argument in her study of Hearst Magazines International. Pointing to the rise of women during the mid-1990s in senior levels both in the field of publishing as well as corporate management, Reed (1996: 271) claimed: "If readers are distressed with the content of these magazines, let them raise their voices; they will be heard, now perhaps as never before". McRobbie (1996: 189) was also optimistic regarding the impact of feminism and a new generation of women's magazine professionals in the 1990s:

> Popular feminism has permeated every sector of the female population. It has been most staunchly supported and advocated by the female professionals who work in the media and the culture industries which produce magazines and other magazine media.

Many of the young women entering the industry, McRobbie (1999) noted, had been trained in media studies, and had received at least some education on feminism or women's issues. She remarked: "I cannot think of a single women's or girls' magazine whose (full-time or freelance) staff does not include some of my ex-students" (McRobbie 1999: 58). The process of teaching, McRobbie (1996, 1999: 58) highlighted, had been "possibly the only direct channel for the wider dissemination of feminist debates" about these media. In her view this entailed possibilities for transformation, as these young women integrated into their work elements of such critique, as well as their wider awareness of sexual politics. In fact, McRobbie (1996: 177) connected this generation of professionals to the "dramatic changes" of the "new magazines" of the 1990s (see previous section).

In order to ascertain the parameters of change, and as part of a broader interest in recognising young women not simply as consumers but also as producers of culture, McRobbie (1994: 168, 1996, 1999) called for producer-oriented magazine scholarship. Of particular interest, she argued, would be feminist research that approaches writers and editors as cultural intermediaries, and pays attention to their

everyday routines, practices and environments, the various levels of constraint, together with the tensions between the different departments and sections (see also Levine 2001). This new approach would thus involve understanding the magazine as "a site of intersecting but also competing interests and values" (McRobbie 1996: 179). According to McRobbie (1996: 179), questions needed to be asked about the "multiple and uneven practices which together constitute magazine production", the space of everyday experience, the different personnel and the agendas they bring to their work, how they pursue them, and how they relate to feminism. With this thesis I seek to address a number of these issues.

Those adopting a production lens to the study of women's magazines have problematised the exceptionally close editorial-advertising relationship, highlighting how these publications primarily depend on advertising revenue. In one early contribution, Stella Earnshaw (1984) pointed to two critical content-related implications, namely that editorial staff are compelled to create a suitable, conducive and persuasive environment for their advertisers' products, along with content that will appeal specifically to the audiences advertisers aim to reach, which are increasingly segmented (see also McCracken 1993). In addition to the inclusion of vast numbers of advertisements, and other more subtle strategies such as merging the verbal and visual styles of editorial and advertising content (Earnshaw 1984), this intimate relation has also gradually led to "the proliferation of genres such as advice columns, interviews, and 'advertorials' – where products are promoted less explicitly, as part of 'advice' to readers" (Litosseliti 2006: 99; see McCracken 1993 on 'covert advertising'). On the basis of interviews, Earnshaw (1984: 412) established that "magazine staff themselves are aware that they have two categories of consumer to please: readers and advertisers". Concerning the extent to which this gives rise to conflicts between editorial and advertising departments, Earnshaw (1984: 420) observed: "editorial co-operation is not always guaranteed as journalists struggle between attempting to please readers and advertisers and retaining some degree of independence". Through her analysis of advertising, marketing and magazine trade press, Anna Gough-Yates (2003: 24) similarly determined that women's magazines are for producers "objects of discourse and sites of contestation". Gough-Yates (2003: 157) also concluded that production is not "linear, causal or mechanical", and should be studied with respect to the dialectical relationship between culture and the economic.

A decade later, McRobbie (2009) revisited her writing about young women's magazines, offering a much less optimistic account. She argued that in her earlier work: "I was over-enthusiastic about the impact the recruitment of feminist-influenced graduates might have on the editorial policies"; failing to "fully engage with the way in which the battle for circulation figures could see an editor sacked for displeasing a company with a lucrative advertising contract" (McRobbie 2009: 5). McRobbie (2009: 5) also reflected: "Nor did I take into account the need for magazines to be constantly re-inventing themselves, which of course means that a strong feminist voice might well only last for as long as a couple of fashion seasons and then be discarded in favour of a new counter-trend". She continued to assess her former analyses as follows:

> I found myself acknowledging, rather than confronting the generic features of the magazine format, which seemed to be set in stone, the centrality of the fashion-and-beauty complex, for example, the dominant heterosexuality, the hermetically sealed world of feminine escapist pleasures, and in this respect I was perhaps myself complicit, without abandoning a feminist perspective, in accommodating to the genre itself, and reducing the level and intensity of critique, in favour of a kind of compromise position which aimed at having the staple contents co-exist with a strong but nevertheless popular feminist voice (McRobbie 2009: 5).

For McRobbie (2009: 5): "In actuality the idea of feminist content disappeared and was replaced by aggressive individualism, by a hedonistic female phallicism in the field of sexuality, and by obsession with consumer culture" – all of which plays "a vital role in the undoing of feminism". Indeed, McRobbie (2009: 5) suggests that magazines "became unburdened" through their "self-definition as decisively post-feminist". As I began this research, women's magazines were starting to self-identify as *feminist* to an unparalleled unabashed degree. Such a remarkable development became crucial to the research, and resulted in a full analysis chapter, Chapter Nine. Here McRobbie's experience usefully served as a caution against rushing to celebratory positions. More generally, her work emphasises the importance of integrating production-centred understandings in the study of commercial media cultures at large, and women magazines in particular.

2.6   Sex advice today

Since the end of the 20th century, in Western contexts: "The societal message is that you *have* to be sexual, you have to *want* to be sexual, you have to be *good* at being sexual, and you have to be *normally* sexual" (Tiefer 1995: 129). Intensifying this,

'great sex' is now becoming a normative expectation, depicted as both the "'truth' of subjectivity and the cement of relationships" (Harvey and Gill 2012: 491). Vividly illustrating this cultural concern are incitements like the following, which pervade women's magazines: 'Don't just be good in bed, be GREAT!' (*SoFeminine.co.uk*). Here 'great sex' broadly refers to consistent high amounts of sex, the presence of orgasm, skilful performance, and the constant introduction of novelty. In this sense, and despite the current abundance of information, commercial pornography has surfaced as *the* source of knowledge and new techniques across sex advice media (Farvid and Braun 2014). For Pedro Pinto (2012: 45), pornographic corporations together with Big Pharma constitute a "gigantic industrial axis" operating as "the chief informant of *all* mainstream politics of sexual subjecthood" today. These "hegemonic lexicons" in "permanent dialogue" have profoundly influenced the sexological model of (ideal) sexuality (Pinto 2012: 45), as seen in an expanding medicalisation of sexuality and associated "sexuopharmaceutical" industry-culture (Tiefer 2006: 273), or in the growing use of pornography as a form of sex therapy (Tyler 2011).

A related and much debated shift concerns the blurred lines between pornographic and mainstream representations of bodies, sex and sexuality. This has been associated with a wider contemporary Western phenomenon often referred to as the 'pornification' of society, culture, the mainstream or everyday life (Paul 2005; also 'raunch', Levy 2005). This term signals the growing sense of Western societies as saturated by sexual imagery and discourse, as well as products and services (see Gill 2012a on the broader concept of 'sexualisation'). More specifically, 'pornification' is used to designate a historical moment where the sex industry— especially pornography—has become increasingly influential and porous, transforming contemporary culture. Examples of pornification are not difficult to come by. 'Porno' or 'stripper chic' has become a dominant representational practice across the media, and fashion style across the high street. Porn stars and sex workers have emerged as celebrities, bestselling authors, and as icons of empowered female sexuality more generally (e.g. Jenna Jameson). They are also highly present as sex (also beauty) advisors across the mainstream media, including the Spain and UK-based women's magazines here under study, for example: 'How to do a striptease: exclusive guide by Dita von Teese' (*EnFemenino.com*). Practices once associated with commercial sex are being repackaged as regular leisure and corporate

entertainment—largely for men—as well as recreational and fitness pursuits – predominantly for women. In an increasing number of leisure centres we can find burlesque, striptease, 'lap dance', 'pole dance', and 'high heels dance' classes. Thus, at the heart of pornification is the commodification and recreationalisation of sex, along with an obsessive preoccupation with women's bodies, and increasingly too with their sexual practices.

Feminist scholars have taken up divergent positions in relation to pornification. Some echo the second wave anti-pornography perspective, making connections to male domination, misogyny, and racism, and focussing on exposing processes of objectification and exploitation of women (Jeffreys 2009; Dines 2010; Tankard Reist and Bray 2011; Tyler 2011). Third wave so-called sex-positive positions offer more optimistic views, highlighting women as consumers and producers of pornographic material—seen as any other type of media—and mobilising notions of agency and pleasure (Smith 2007; Attwood 2010). Bordering on the promotional, some like Brian McNair (2012) even write books about *How Pornography Changed the World and Made it a Better Place*. A third line of feminist scholarship examines pornification in terms of wider transformations associated with late consumer capitalism, neoliberalism, and postfeminism (Gill 2007a, 2009a; McRobbie 2008; Harvey and Gill 2011, 2012; Donaghue et al. 2011; Pinto 2012; Evans and Riley 2014; De Miguel 2015). These scholars emphasise how the participation of women in a masculinist, limited and limiting terrain of sexuality is embedded within neoliberal values of individualism, consumerism and choice, as well as wrapped in postfeminist discourses of personal sexual liberation, entitlement and empowerment.

There is now a normative expectation for women to engage in "the rationalization, improvement, and mastery of sex" when in intimate relationships (Cacchioni 2007: 299). For Thea Cacchioni (2007: 301), this is connected to the "unending stream of sexual advice contained in women's magazines and 'self-help' manuals, which urge women to 'work on' their sex lives". Modelling Arlie Hochschild's (1983) notion of 'emotion work', Cacchioni (2007: 301) advances that of relationship-based 'sex work' to designate "the unacknowledged effort and the continuing monitoring which women are expected to devote to managing theirs and their partners' sexual desires and activities". More recently, Harvey and Gill (2011) have observed how sex advice media (and popular media culture more generally) call

forth a feminine subject who is compulsorily 'sexy', always 'up for it', 'spiced up' and updating her sexual CV, and who is interpellated via discourses of playfulness and experimentation which coexist with heteronormative, mononormative, gendered and classed ideals that are tightly policed. Building on the Foucaultian-inspired concepts of 'technologies of sexiness' and 'sexual subjectification' discussed in Chapter One, Harvey and Gill (2011: 56) have developed the concept of 'sexual entrepreneurship' to capture this contradictory and distinctively postfeminist 'new femininity', in a manner that "open[s] up a language in which subject–object, power–pleasure, discipline–agency are no longer counterposed as antithetical, binary opposites". The "sexual entrepreneur", Harvey and Gill (2011: 56, 64) further observe, "is interpellated through discourses in which sex is work that requires constant labour and reskilling (as well as a budget capable of stretching to a wardrobe full of sexy outfits and drawers stuffed with sex toys)", and "made intelligible through discourses of sex produced by the mainstream self-help genre".

The postfeminist technology of sexual subjectification, Gill (2007a: 258) observes, endows women with agency "on condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy that is found in pornography" (see also feminine 'hetero-sexiness', Dobson 2011). Furthermore, although calls to women in sex advice media today are articulated via post/feminist tropes of female desire and agency, empowerment and independence, the need to find and please (to keep) a man is never far from view – even if the sexual practice causes her emotional or physical discomfort (Tyler 2008; Boynton 2009; Gill 2009a). Yet under the cultural context of postfeminism this must be represented/understood as self-chosen, as well as undertaken in an active and emotionally engaged manner – ultimately, again, to increase men's enjoyment. 'One thing men don't like is mechanical oral sex, performed without passion' asserts *SoFeminine.co.uk*, a woman's magazine under my analytic gaze. With this thesis, I make a novel contribution to text-based understandings about the sexual politics of these publications by asking questions about the politics of *production*, by exploring the advice given by *members of the public*, and by focusing upon the most widely consumed medium today: the woman's magazine *online*.

Chapter Three
WOMEN AND THE INTERNET

3.1   Introduction

The previous chapter offered a general overview of feminist research and debate on the woman's print magazine, tracing shifts and continuities both across time and within text, audience and production-based studies. This chapter undergoes a similar endeavour with regard to online media. Broader in scope, it covers literatures from a range of disciplines to examine different aspects relating to gender and the Internet, and concerning technologies, products and cultures, audiences/users and work/producers. I begin by mapping central feminist debates about the Internet from the early days to its development into a deeply commercial mass medium. This is followed by a discussion of a fundamental part of this commercialisation process, namely the profusion of online products and services created specifically for women, and in particular the rise of the community site or affinity portal, a term which has now fallen out of use. I discuss their development, culture and politics, the editorial content, the forums, and a range of accounts on these matters. The next section introduces the Web 2.0, and some central critical insights about its shifting cultures. After, I review key theorisations of interactivity in digital media contexts, paying particular attention to the research strand informing my analysis, which some call critical media studies 2.0 (Andrejevic 2009) or critical (also Marxian) Internet studies (Fuchs 2012). The last section brings together various lines of inquiry looking to capture the distinctive features of contemporary new media work/ers, and labouring lives and environments in the cultural and creative industries more generally. By 'new media work/er' I refer to the wide array of practitioners associated with new digital technologies and the web, thus encompassing a great variety of occupations, skills and practices (Gill 2002, 2007). Included among these are web community management, and writing, editing and publishing online content, as undertaken by the producers of women's magazines interviewed for this thesis.

3.2   Early debates

In the early 1990s, press coverage of the Internet predominantly focussed on communication, constructing cyberspace as a wild place of sociality, writing, and the

exchange of information and ideas (Consalvo 2002)[11]. It was considered a world for the 'odd' rather than the everyday citizen. Women and issues of gender were rarely mentioned. The Internet was perceived as an 'ungendered' space, which in fact meant it was a masculine domain, especially enjoyed by those in privileged positions in academia, government and the military (Royal 2008). During the mid-1990s, the Internet enjoyed an explosion of attention, and its business possibilities began to evoke interest. Across the spectrum of print media, an increasing number of features focused both on how women could use the Internet as well as the dangers they faced when doing so (Warnick 1999; Consalvo 2002). While men remained unmarked, women emerged as the marked user in cyberspace, "where they became notable for having a gender and bringing 'gender troubles' to this new space" (Consalvo 2002: 128).

In the 1990s the Internet became for feminists a highly debated and contentious subject, to the extent that early perspectives have been characterised as marked by divisions (Carstensen 2009), even as evidencing a dichotomy between 'utopian' and 'dystopian' thinking (Boyd 2001). For some the medium inevitably involved masculine codes and values. Such critics for instance pointed to the long-lasting close association between technology and masculinity (Wajcman 1991), the Internet's roots in the American military-industrial-academic complex, along with the dominance of men in ICT research, development and use, or the androcentric nature of most online content (van Zoonen 1992). The Internet was emphasised not only as an unfriendly but also as a hazardous environment for women, riddled with the same gender divisions, inequalities and power relations present in 'real world' institutions and conventions (Perry and Greber 1990; Wajcman 1991; Selfe and Selfe 1994; Hocks 1999). Much early feminist research demonstrated that women online often encountered sexism and (mostly sexual) harassment, male domination of discussions and resistance to their participation in newsgroups, forums and chats, along with high levels of trolling, flaming and negative feedback from men, both in 'general' and in feminist spaces (Balka 1993; Ebben and Kramarae 1993; Kramarae and Taylor 1993; Herring 1999; Shade 1994; Sutton 1994; Herring et al. 1995; Winter and Huff 1996; Kennedy 2000).

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[11] Consalvo (2002) is writing about the US, but this is indicative of trends, albeit often slightly later, in many European countries and beyond.

Contrastingly, others emphasised the Internet as offering new radical potentials for feminist politics (Spender 1995; Plant 1996; Harcourt 1999; Floyd et al. 2002; Shade 2002), for example in the form of "consciousness-raising possibilities in new transnational settings" (Youngs 1999: 65). Some even argued that it was uniquely suited for, and even intrinsically close to, women (Turkle 1995; Plant 1997). Most notably perhaps, Sadie Plant (1996) (re)interpreted the development of decentralised and informal information networks as signalling a feminisation process. Moreover, for Plant (1996: 170): "Complex systems and virtual worlds […] undermine both the world-view and the material reality of two thousand years of patriarchal control". Particularly celebrated by these more optimistic feminist accounts of the Internet were text-based and anonymous communications. These were seen to offer individuals liberating potentials to transcend the limitations of patriarchal constructions of gender, and to explore alternate and/or multiple identities uninhibited from the threat of social sanction within their physical environments (Bruckman 1993; Reid 1995; Braidotti 1996; Turkle 1995; Youngs 1999). Inspired by poststructuralism and combining transgender politics and technophilia (van Zoonen 2002), and strongly drawing on Donna Haraway's (1991) cyborg theory, a number of cyberfeminists considered that: "The nets are spaces of transformation, identity factories" (Stone 1995: 181), where women can "float free of biological and sociocultural determinants" (Dery 1994: 3).

In only three years, from 1995 to 1998, the estimated number of US female users rose from 17% to 48% (Consalvo 2002). This shift in the demographic composition of users correlates with a critical transition in perceptions of cyberspace, which shifted from being understood as a place for exploring or creating to a space of commerce and audience commodification – with women emerging as the new, promising consumers (Consalvo 2002; Sadowska 2002). Mia Consalvo (2002: 131) notes how throughout the years 1996-1998 there was across the media an increased emphasis on consumption, the aggregation of audiences into consumer groups, along with wild speculation about the commercial future of the Internet. Articles focusing on dangers began to decline in favour of a celebratory and informative approach to women going online, and their value as users. A few years later, Consalvo (2002: 132) wrote: "Gender in relation to the Internet, then, remains linked with the feminine, but it is being reworked as an asset for Internet use, rather than being the liability it was one or two years earlier".

The increasing ownership of Internet companies by large media conglomerates tempered the radical possibilities that were celebrated in the 1990s (Worthington 2005). Critical scholars expressed concerns, as Ellen Seiter (2003: 689) put it: "that commercialisation of the Web will discourage activism in favour of consumerism and the duplication of familiar forms of popular mass media, such as magazines, newspapers, and television programmes". It was also observed how corporations were looking to market products and services to particular demographics, making web content increasingly segregated and fragmented into niches (Royal 2005). Fundamental to this separatist turn that began in the late 1990s to only continue to intensify, is the profusion of commercial products and services created specifically for female users. The quintessential model emerging out of this process was the affinity portal or community site for women – rooted in the women's magazine genre, and explored in the next section.

From the late 1990s onward many of the optimistic perspectives about the Internet came to be widely contested (e.g. Balka 1999). It was highlighted how early discussions were dominated by a focus upon non-commercial sites and *ad hoc* social aggregations, such as newsgroups (Watson 1997), fan communities (Baym 1995), chat rooms predicated on sexual identities (Correll 1995; Shaw 1997), or Multi-User Dungeon/Domains, games constructed for fantasy role-playing (Turkle 1995). Subsequently, there were calls for research that broadened the scope of investigation to "the more mainstream, everyday practices of Internet use", a task which was perceived to be "especially relevant as the Internet and the World Wide Web become more ubiquitous and more commercialised" (Consalvo and Paasonen 2002: 4; Haythornthwaite and Wellman 2002). An increasing number of studies showed how these shifts brought about different forms of organisation and usage that rapidly departed from visions of 'identity workshop' or 'gender laboratory', pointing for example to the preoccupation with online bodies being 'authentically' sexed and gendered (Consalvo and Paasonen 2002; Sundén 2002). Susanna Paasonen (2002: 89) also observed: "Commercial services for women that reach vast audiences of female net users, are a far cry from academic fantasies of fluid genders". Again speaking to early optimistic feminist claims, Liesbet van Zoonen (2001: 11) argued: "There is enough evidence about (child) pornography, right wing extremism, sexual harassment, among and other unpleasantness to disclaim any utopian vision of the Internet as an unproblematic feminine environment". Van Zoonen (2001, 2002)

further remarked that in failing to complicate the celebration of the Internet as a women's medium, some feminist theorists, albeit unintentionally, were aligning themselves with marketing researchers (and their gender essentialism) who at the time were beginning to also enthusiastically emphasise the technology as particularly close to as well as empowering for women.

Overall, despite early assessments of the enormous transformations the Internet would bring about, it soon became apparent that "the changes have been less dramatic and more embedded in existing practices and power relations of everyday life" (Wilson and Peterson 2002: 449). The rigid divide between 'virtual' and 'real' worlds was soon problematised and complicated, and online engagements came to be increasingly approached as part of—and both shaped by and shaping—the broader terrain of lived experience, a shift supported by the insight that users rarely draw clear distinctions between their online and offline lives/worlds (Markham 1998; Kendall 1999; Hine 2000; Gray 2009; Shaw 2013). Illustrating this important conceptual shift, there was a terminological move from virtual/real to on/offline, and from discussions of 'cyberspace' to talk about 'the Internet' (Hardey 2002). Likewise, by the end of the 1999s the term 'online community' began to be preferred over 'virtual community' (Campbell 2008). Contemporary feminist approaches to the Internet, Judy Wajcman (2010: 143) explains, "focus on the mutual shaping of gender and technology", and avoid "both technological determinism and gender essentialism".

3.3   The affinity portal

> A new online social formation representing the peculiar hybrid of community and commerce constitutes fertile ground for investigation – the affinity portal.
> —John Edward Campbell (2008: vi)

The take-over of a commercial image of cyberspace and significant growth of Internet users seen by companies as potential consumers sparked a multitude of Internet start-ups from the mid-1990s in the US (Campbell 2008), and only slightly

later in Europe[12]. This speculative investment environment that formed around Internet companies between 1995, and specially 1997 and 2000, came to be known as the 'dot-com boom' or 'bubble'. In order to compete with established universal portals such as *Yahoo*, *AOL* or *MSN*, new players coming to the entrepreneurial arena of the Internet felt a need to distinguish their portals, and to obtain a share of emerging online audiences (Campbell 2008). This gave rise to the affinity portal or community site model, which has played a fundamental part in the increased commercialisation and commodification of the Internet – and its users. Much like 'universal portals', affinity portals were developed to "structure a total online experience around the portal", namely, to maintain for as long a possible user attention for advertisers, the "most valuable resource online" (Dahlberg 2005: 164, 163). However, rather than aspiring to be "universal first ports of call", these sites were instead oriented toward specific populations considered by marketers to constitute under-exploited profitable markets (Campbell 2008: vi). These populations—variously described as niche, specialty and minority markets—predominantly included socially marginalised and oppressed groups, particularly due to sex (e.g. *iVillage.com*), sexuality (e.g. *Gay.com*) and ethnicity (e.g. *BlackPlanet.com*), with sites using "inviting images of community to suggest they are more than merely a commercial site" (Campbell 2008: 8). In doing so, much like e-commerce, these portals aimed to cultivate users' loyalty and emotional investment, and to increase site 'stickiness' (Jarrett 2003). Crystallising the 'community' strategy of address was the discussion forum or message board offering, which in the case of women's portals encouraged user communication about a variety of traditionally feminine topics like beauty, fashion and relationships, thereby mirroring the site content.

Indeed, these sites were strongly influenced by the woman's magazine publishing tradition (Paasonen 2002; Sadowska 2002). Therefore, rather than to offer an alternative to traditional media content, these sites principally aimed to attract traffic by applying established strategies (Royal 2005). Reflecting this intention, in 2001 the then editor of *Enfemenino.com*, Mercedes Cubillo, claimed: "Everything

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[12] For example, concerning commercial websites targeting women, the US sites *Women.com* and *Oprah.com* were launched in 1996 and 1997 respectively, and *Oxygen.com* in 1999. The US media company iVillage Inc. was established in 1995 and launched its US website *iVillage.com* in 1998. Its British version was launched in 2000. Also in the UK, the sites *Handbag.com* and *BEME.com* were both introduced in 1999. The French AuFeminin group was founded in 1999, and its Spanish and UK sites respectively started in the years 2000 and 2005.

women are ready to pay for at the newsstand is here" (in Baquia 2001). As Consalvo and Paasonen noted (2002: 7): "'Woman', here, stands for feminine as communicative, sharing, and caring". For example, Cubillo (in Baquia 2001) further celebrated: "We women communicate more. It is even biologically proven that girls start to talk before boys". Thus, like women's magazines, these new sites flaunted essentialist notions about gender, and addressed readers "as a single unified community by virtue of its femaleness" (Litosseliti 2006: 93) – "the world of women" (Ferguson 1983: 6). A case in point is the slogans of two US-based pioneers: 'The Internet for Women' (*iVillage.com*) and 'A Women's View of The World' (*Oxygen.com*).

The new "popular women's sites" or "magazine-like Internet portals" (Sadowska 2002: 94) soon because the object of feminist scrutiny and debate, as part of a broader critical interrogation of the evermore powerful online political economy that was enthusiastically emphasising the feminine—even also feminist—qualities of the net (van Zoonen 2001; Seiter 2003). Feminist scholars condemned how these sites primarily positioned women as consumers, and were "using essentially feminine stereotypes to promote and position their content" (Royal 2005: vi), very much like the oft-critiqued printed women's magazines (see Chapter Two). Also problematised was the way in which discourses from the women's movement about community were incorporated – "but without any political edge" (Paasonen 2002: 95).

Responding to these criticisms, Eble and Breault (2002: 316) maintained that the editorial content was of secondary importance for users, linking instead the success of women's sites to the interactive features. Even if not "overtly feminist or alternative", for Eble and Breault (2002: 326, 317) the forums were a valuable space "where women could produce, consume and exchange information, knowledge or advice about various topics". Eble and Breault (2002: 318) also emphasised that contrasting most online spaces these forums allowed women to communicate in a safe environment and to actively occupy positions of authority in the production of (their own) knowledge, with little or no competition with—or flaming and harassment from—men (see previous section). Evoking the optimism of early cyberfeminists, Eble and Breault (2002: 326) additionally argued that in assisting women's discourse and collaborative processes, the "primetime online community […] has had and will have an important influence on how we define online

communication, knowledge, and power".

Gustafson (2002: 185) conceded that "the ability of these communities to bring groups together cannot be entirely discounted". However, she challenged the rhetoric of egalitarianism and empowerment by scrutinising the site architecture and rules governing usage on the US-based *iVillage.com*, *Oxygen.com* and *Women.com*. Gustafson (2002) problematised how in exchange for technical infrastructures, users waive publication rights to all the content posted – content that adds fundamental value to the websites, and is ultimately what makes them community sites (see Section 3.5 on 'digital labour'). She additionally highlighted how the editorial policy guidelines are not determined by the members nor consensus-driven. Furthermore, the websites reserve the right to, at their sole discretion, delete or modify material and messages for a range of both stated and unstated reasons. This arrangement, Gustafson (2002: 182) contended, gives companies "a great deal of latitude in governing content", where "the editors of the site can exert a fluid and invisible control over users' interaction, while not actually forbidding any topics outright". Gustafson (2002: 185-186) also critiqued how "with the promise of community" and "by using rhetoric of empowerment and self-direction" these "commercially controlled structures" were seeking to "attract women and encourage them to form predefined affinity groups, neatly packaged for marketers".

Certainly, the corporate-engineered communities of affinity portals represent a remarkably different concept envisioned by early cyberculture enthusiasts. As Campbell explains, these are a profitable commodity, "vehicles for the targeted delivery of brand messages" (2011: 493), "the ideal tool for marketers attempting to target ever finer consumer segments" and to construct ever more narrow and emotionally involved audiences (2008: 4). In being rendered 'safe' for marketers, Campbell (2008) further problematises, these communities are negated their political significance. All in all, for Campbell (2008: 17) affinity portals must be understood in terms of the intersection of the shift from mass marketing to niche and tailored marketing, the growth of online advertising and e-commerce, the growing pervasiveness of corporate consumer surveillance and 'dataveillance', processes of media consolidation, along with "the refinement of the marketing practice of emotional branding".

Outside academic circles, early critiques of women's websites manifested a clear sense of disillusionment, in light of the expectations set by some early ventures

such as *Women.com* (previously *Women's Wire*) and *Oxygen.com*, which "promised to provide alternatives to the shallow women's glossies on newsstands" with diverse, intellectual and politicised content (Brown 2000). For example, a *CIO Magazine* piece entitled 'Women's Websites Insult My Intelligence' stated: "Although they promised us a revolution, these sites are a devolution, hosting content that harks back to the worst June Cleaver-ish prefeminist tripe" (Genusa 2001)[13]. One *Salon* article equally wondered: "What happened to the women's Web? They promised a revolution, but all we got was horoscopes, diet tips and parenting advice" (Brown 2000). Pointing to the intimate connection between these new sites and the established woman's magazine genre, together with the increasing company mergers and acquisitions of Internet properties by media giants, this article also declared:

> Other than a certain emphasis on resourcefulness, do-it-yourself-ism and pro-female positivity, there isn't much difference between the front page of *iVillage* and the cover of *Family Circle*, that of *Women.com* and *Cosmopolitan* (whoops, *Cosmopolitan* is now part of *Women.com*) (Brown 2000).

In light of the collapse of the dot-com bubble in the year 2000, critics celebrated that the future of commercial women's sites seemed uncertain. For example, continuing its unapologetic attack, the *CIO Magazine* article read (see also Gustafson 2002):

> The good news is that these sites are dying a slow, agonizing, well-deserved death. It turns out you can go broke underestimating the intelligence of the American public, especially if that public has two X chromosomes (Genusa 2001).

However, the dot-com crash did not entail the end of woman's magazine-like content online; nor did it disrupt the framing of women primarily as community-seeking consumers. Quite the opposite, with the consolidation of the Web 2.0 these practices would only intensify and expand.

3.4   The Web 2.0

Particularly from the mid-2000s, there was a rapid progression from static informative characteristics into an increasingly rich, dynamic and interactive web. Social software proliferated, along with an attendant variety of platforms designed to enhance interconnectedness and communication channels, and to host the explosion of user-generated content. At the centre of this second generation of online technologies, often called Web 2.0, are social media sites and applications. These

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[13] June Cleaver is a fictional character from the US television sitcom *Leave It to Beaver*, who personified the ideal middle-class mother and housewife of the 1950s.

include blogs, microblogging (e.g. *Twitter*, founded in 2006), wikis (e.g. *Wikipedia*, 2001), and social curation (e.g. *Pinterest*, 2009), social networking (e.g. *Facebook*, 2004) and video sharing sites (*YouTube*, 2005). That is, another key part of the combination of innovations the notion of Web 2.0 captures is the growth in multimedia content, with text, audio, image and video featuring in ever more integrated ways. Indeed, technologies are continually evolving and changing – with some now speaking about a Web 3.0 (also 'intelligent' or 'semantic' web), based on the ability of machines to autonomously understand and catalogue data (see Rudman and Bruwer 2016).

Web 2.0 tools have provided unparalleled opportunities to connect and communicate, to access, produce and distribute information and media, for pleasure, creativity and collaboration. Besides, many go online to develop, disseminate and engage with feminist ideas, to communicate, network and organise at both national and global levels, raising awareness and recruiting volunteers, in addition to producing new identities and practices (Shade 2004; Keller 2015). This coexists, however, with high levels of harassment, with a clear gendered character. Facing unwanted contact, sexist and misogynistic commentary, vitriol, bullying, and even threats of rape and death have become a common feature for women who are active in public life and/or openly engage with feminism (e.g. Bates 2013; Jane 2014). Moreover, partly in response to a heightened visibility of popular feminism (see Chapter Nine), this 'networked misogyny' is increasingly directed toward *all*— especially young—women online (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016). Thus, feminist uses of the Internet coexist with anti-female violent expression, and with a highly commercialised web deeply invested in positioning women as objects as well as subjects of consumption.

The mid-2000s witnessed a significant rise in the number of female Internet users. In 2007, an Ofcom report found that British women aged between 25 and 49 were for the first time spending more time on the Internet than men. The *Guardian* newspaper announced these findings under the following headline: 'It's arrived: the feminisation of the net' (Allen 2007). This immediately stirred much excitement about commercial implications, attracting the attention of advertisers, and thus soon after "major media companies and venture capitalists" (Miller 2008). In 2008, *Bloomberg.com* predicted: "the Internet is going to look pink". Titled 'The Social Media Gender Gap', the article reported that (young) "women far outpace the men"

(Hoffman 2008). It advised: "So if you're going to create the next hot Web 2.0 site and you want it to go viral, you'll target women". Certainly, the market's response to women's greater Internet use was to create more gendered content, and more separated spaces for women. This proved successful. In 2008, the *New York Times* announced that: "Sites aimed primarily at women, from 'mommy blogs' to makeup and fashion sites, grew 35 percent last year – faster than every other category on the Web except politics" (Miller 2008). As a result, advertisers increased their interest in these online spaces. The article explained:

> Advertisers are betting that the trust and intimacy that come from talking about sex after motherhood or reading about a blogger's battle with postpartum depression will translate into sales of products discussed on a site or simply advertised alongside the personal stories (Miller 2008).

The *New York Times* further claimed that: "Some companies are also working with women's sites to create sponsored content in a collaboration so close that it would surprise many traditional print editors" (Miller 2008). Concerning the nature of the content that was emerging from such close relationship, it observed: "advertisers are not interested in every kind of content. They gravitate to the tried-and-true topics of women's magazines: fashion, beauty, celebrities and love life" (Miller 2008).

As discussed in Chapter One, from the 2000s well-established print publications such as *Cosmopolitan* began to create web extensions in response to the enveloping media ecosystem – coming to compete with the women's community sites or affinity portals, such as those offered by the AuFeminin group (owner of two websites examined in this study). Together they constitute the media genre that constitutes the object of inquiry in this thesis: the woman's online magazine. In 2010, the *New York Times* observed:

> Increasingly, sites like these are filling the role once played in many women's lives by glossy magazines, whose circulation has stagnated in many developed countries. Web sites like auFeminin add an interactive element, in the form of online discussion forums (Pfanner 2010).

Around the same time, Campbell (2011: 503) also pointed to the interactive community offer, and in particular the discussion forums/boards, as fundamental to the success of commercial women's websites. In this study of *iVillage US,* he found that despite it being a commercial site, many users viewed it as a "vibrant online community worthy of their emotional investment" (Campbell 2011: 503). Campbell (2011: 503) noted how this is far from accidental since "[e]very facet of the portal is

discursively framed within a context of community" – in a profoundly gendered manner. Indeed, the industry's enthusiastic reproduction of discourses of gender difference continues to increase. Notable among these are the long-standing—and widely contested (e.g. Freed 1992; Uchida 1992; Gill 2007a; Talbot 2010)—ideas about sex-based communicative styles/needs[14]. For example, in 2010 the CEO of AuFeminin was quoted by *New York Times* as follows: "the real difference between men and women is that women need to talk, and that is the same everywhere in the world" (Sauty de Chalon in Pfanner 2010). That same year, the then *Cosmopolitan UK* editor-in-chief Louise Court described the future of women's magazines in the following way: "It is exciting. Magazines are about communicating and women love communicating", also noting: "We have a really vibrant community on the website" (Court in Saner 2010).

Therefore, in the Web 2.0 era the construction of communities has turned into a multi-billion dollar industry. Key to this business model is the exposure of personal information by users, which the culture of 'public intimacy' (as embodied by reality television) has helped intensify (Hearn 2010). Alison Hearn (2010) also points to the rise of 'reputation' as a new form of currency in the digital public sphere, built through Web 2.0 activities ranging from tweeting to rating on tripadvisor. For Hearn (2010: 423), the reputation economy online: "Functions through forms of market discipline and affective conditioning, which, much like the practices of branding, work to direct human meaning-making and self-identity in highly motivated and profitable ways". Social media cultures promote the active creation of the self as brand (Hearn 2008, 2010; Marwick 2010), and of the body as commodity – targeting in particular the female body (Banet-Weiser 2012, 2015b).

Particularly from the end of the 2000s, there was a shift from text to image based-interfaces. The increasingly visual nature of the Internet has been associated to growing expectations for users to strictly replicate online their 'real' (i.e. offline) identity, and to offer a range of 'trust cues', notably photographs. Again, this has problematic gendered dimensions. Feminist scholars have shown how fundamental to this desire for 'authenticity', 'realism' or 'the sincere' is established gender-based

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[14] These echo the liberal difference/cultural perspective in gender and language research as popularised by Deborah Tannen, whose bestselling book *You Just Don't Understand!: Women and men in conversation* (1990) has been connected to the emergence of the postfeminist self-help texts which enthusiastically promote the notion of essential sexual difference, such as John Gray's 1992 *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*.

classifications (Doorn et al. 2008; Carstensen 2009; Bromseth and Sundén 2010). Furthermore, this imperative to render oneself visible is especially demanding for girls and women (Banet-Weiser 2013a, 2015b). In fact, the constitution of femininity currently takes place within a gendered "sphere of visual governmentality" (McRobbie 2015: 8), with economies of visibility that simultaneously position women as consumer *and* product (Banet-Weiser 2013a, 2015b). The increasing expectation for users to reproduce established identities online has also been associated to data gathering for commercial purposes, notably targeted advertising. One illustration is the encouragement by Facebook for users to use 'authentic identities', as exemplified by its various attempts at enforcing a 'real name' policy (Haimson and Hoffmann 2016). Web 2.0 surveillance in particular and the capital accumulation models of the Internet in general have been at the centre of on-going debates about what it means to participate or interact within digital media contexts.

3.5   User interactivity

With the rise of the Web 2.0, narratives of community building, consumer participation and empowerment have only intensified. These pervade the media and e-commerce industries, as well as academic writing. One notable example is Jenkins (2006: 9), for whom media convergence has brought about a "participatory culture" constituted by "active" and "socially connected", "noisy and public", "newly empowered" consumers. This culture, Jenkins (2006: 4) argues, leads to "collective intelligence", understood as "an alternative source of media power". In a similar vein, Bruns (2007: 100) maintains that "social software or Web 2.0 environments" indicate a paradigm shift toward a "new user-led information-age", foreseeing a democratic model based on the activities of 'produsers' (see also Tapscott and Williams 2006). Although generally more tentative, such claims echo the narratives about the radical emancipatory and democratic potentials that began to circulate widely as the Internet popularised during the 1990s, such as Pierre Levy's (1997) notion of 'collective intelligence', or Cecilia Pierce's (1997: xvii) 'interactive revolution' and declaration that: "Binary code is the digital Esperanto that is leading concurrently to individual empowerment and worldwide unity" (see also Section 3.2 on some forms of cyberfeminism).

A number of scholars have (again) problematised this position. For Christian Fuchs (2009: 96), it demonstrates a "new techno-deterministic optimism",

resembling the "ideology that accompanied the commercial rise of the Internet in the 1990s", and constituting a 'Web 2.0 ideology'. With reference to *Convergence Culture* (Jenkins 2006) specifically, Catherine Driscoll and Melissa Gregg (2011: 567) declare: "Ideological analysis […] is sorely needed when cultural, media and especially Internet studies appear ready to serve as the prophets for new industries". Noting Jenkins' emphasis on fandom, Driscoll and Gregg (2011: 567) caution Internet researchers against (once more) "allowing the practices of a minority to stand as the optimistic vision of the imminent media landscape". Also complicating the work of Jenkins, Mark Andrejevic (2011a: 613) emphasises that marketers employ narratives about 'community' and 'engagement' as "strategies for managing interactive audiences", where: "The goal is not so much collective bargaining with interest groups as it is covert and pre-emptive opinion tracking on an unprecedented scale". In turn, Deuze (2008: 31) highlights that: "much of this participatory culture is heavily regulated, constrained or embedded within company processes and practices that strive to 'harness' rather than 'unleash' participation"; and notes how: "the corporate appropriation of social media […] opens up new opportunities for companies to enlist the 'free labor' (Terranova 2000) of media users". Indeed, with the rise of social media the 'digital labour' debate has become central to critical media and communication studies (Fuchs 2014; see also Scholz 2013).

Suspicious of the promises of new media and the rhetoric of empowerment, a number of scholars have shifted away from a sole focus on participatory culture to explore in more depth the new online economy, most notably by analysing productivity in digital networks through the theoretical lenses of 'immaterial' (e.g. Hardt and Negri 2004)[15] and 'free' labour, which draw on principles from Italian autonomist Marxism. In this line of work, the Internet is seen to depend on the extraction of value from enormous and continuous amounts of labour, much of which is unpaid or free labour (Terranova 2000). Corporate industry is posited as investing in digital technologies to redefine the relationship between the spheres of production and consumption, exploiting user interactivity and participation in various ways as forms of labour that generate marketable commodities and other types of (commercially-exploitable) value. For instance, focusing on affinity portals Campbell (2011) has drawn on Sut Jhally and Bill Livant's (1986) 'work of watching'

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[15] In line with others (e.g. Hardt and Negri 2000; Jarrett 2014), I take 'immaterial labour' to incorporate cultural and cognitive work, informatisation, communication, and affect.

model to argue that users perform a type of work on behalf of corporations paralleling that which commercial television audiences perform in exchange for television content, namely exposing themselves to advertisements in exchange for access to the cultural resources being offered. However, Campbell (2011: 494) notes, interactive media add a new dimension to this long-standing implicit contract between media producers and consumers, as users in commercial online communities *generate* content, which increases the value of these sites considerably.

Certainly, in her early important intervention Tiziana Terranova (2000: 42) highlighted how the "productive capacities of immaterial labour on the Internet", like "the work of writing/reading/managing and participating in mailing lists/Web sites/chatlines", significantly enhance—or even constitute—the value of online spaces. As Terranova (2000: 49) explains: "Users keep a site alive through their labour, the cumulative hours of accessing the site (thus generating advertising), writing messages, participating in conversations, and sometimes making the jump to collaborators". Thus, the web relies on users as providers of various forms of technical production, as well as "forms of labour we do not immediately recognize as such" which "witness an investment of desire into production of the kind cultural theorists have mainly theorized in relation to consumption" (Terranova 2000: 38, 42). As Gregg (2009: 209) explains, researchers in media and cultural studies have used the notion of 'affective labour' to refer to "meaningful and productive human activity that does not result in a direct financial profit or exchange value, but rather produces a sense of community, esteem, and/or belonging for those who share a common interest" (see Postigo 2009 on the 'passionate labour' of *America Online* volunteers).

Consequently, with the Internet the 'audience commodity' (Smythe 1977) becomes a 'produser commodity' (Fuchs 2009). Also building on Jhally and Livant's (1986) argument, and concerned about the mounting corporate surveillance in the digital economy, Andrejevic (2008: 42) has claimed that interactive media add yet another dimension to these new arrangements. In response to offers of convenience, personalisation and participation, consumers of commercial digital media submit to comprehensive surveillance and, in doing so, produce exploitable data for mass customisation and targeted marketing (Andrejevic 2003). Likewise, online communities are used by marketers as forums for practices of self-disclosure where consumers reveal aspects of themselves in ever more detailed and comprehensive ways (Andrejevic 2008, 2013). Subsequently, for Andrejevic (2003: 197), in

engaging with digital media consumers "are not so much *participating*, in the progressive sense of collective self-determination, as they are *working* by submitting to interactive monitoring". This "work of being watched" facilitates turning the "details of activity that once eluded systematic forms of value extraction" into "information commodities" (Andrejevic 2011b: 90). As the Internet threatens traditional forms of commercial revenues, the future of the digital media economy increasingly relies upon the effectiveness of online advertising, and so "data-driven customization, forecasting and targeting become the default model for financing the commercial media infrastructures of the digital era" (Andrejevic 2011a: 618).

Exploring how interactivity doubles as forms of labour, Andrejevic (2003) points out, does not entail a dismissal of the possibilities of deriving enjoyment, didactic and practical value, engaging in creative activity or building meaningful relationships; nor does it deny that user practices have *potential* for empowerment. As Terranova (2000: 33) maintains, free labour online is "simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited". The point of this critical scholarship is rather to challenge "media ideology 2.0", based upon an "automatic association between interactive participation and democratic empowerment" (Andrejevic 2009: 36). The point is to highlight the ways in which "new media technologies are being deployed in many contexts according to priorities that reproduce the very forms of alienation they promise to overcome" (Andrejevic 2011c: 2), for example concerning power and control over information. Critical Internet research likewise aims to draw attention to "the important line between *access* to the means of online content production and *ownership or control* over these resources" (Andrejevic 2011b: 97) – a line which became forcefully evident when users on women's sites faced the permanent closure of the(ir) forums. In exploring this moment in the history of the woman's online magazine market, and with this thesis as a whole, I respond to calls for critical Internet researchers to address issues of gender and gendered media, and in the context of digital labour by women that is free as well as paid (McRobbie 2010; Driscoll and Gregg 2011; Ouellette and Wilson 2011; Duffy 2013a, 2015; Jarrett 2014; Conor et al. 2015).

3.6 New media work

In recent times contemporary forms of labour in the cultural and creative industries (CCI), including (new) media work, have come to attract considerable attention from

a broad range of social science and humanities disciplines. Speaking about this "turn to cultural work"[16] Mark Banks and colleagues (2013: 1) write:

> After decades of being displaced in media and communication studies by a focus on texts and audiences, and in sociological research on work by the study of industrial and service sector labour, the labouring lives of people working in the cultural and creative industries are now firmly on the research agenda.

This scholarly interest responds both to the rapidly changing patterns of productivity, technologies, economies and markets of cultural production in the digital era (Duffy 2016), as well as to the fact that the nature and conditions of contemporary CCI work, along with the workers' experiences and subjective dispositions, are seen to exemplify wider transformations under "conditions variously described as 'risk society', 'liquid modernity', 'network society', and 'cultural', 'new' or 'late' capitalism" (Castells 1996; Beck 2000; Bauman 2005; Sennett 2006; Banks et al. 2013: 2). These are hence considered to prefigure the (near) future models and modes of conduct in other areas of employment (Leadbeter and Oakley 1999). New media workers are put forward as an iconic representation of a broader shift to a 'Brave New World of Work' (Beck 2000), in which workers have to individually endure an increasing number of employment-related risks and responsibilities, and to become entrepreneurs of the self within an ever more intensified 'political economy of insecurity' (Gill 2002, 2007; McRobbie 2002; Sennett 2006). The nature of new media work has been chartered as fragmented, unpredictable, changeable, discontinuous, temporary and flexible, a trend that Deuze (2007a), paraphrasing Bauman (2000), refers to as 'liquid media work'. This liquidity for instance implicates a disruption with traditional notions of the career (Sennett 1998), with a move toward more informal, flexible and discontinuous or freelance forms of employment (e.g. 'project-based' or 'portfolio' career; Leadbetter 1999), along with high levels of mobility and fluidity between different roles, activities and tasks (Beck 2000; Gough-Yates 2003; Gill 2007b). The liquidity of new media work is also characterised by a continuous porosity between production and consumption, and between work and leisure or life, work and play ('playbour'; Kücklich 2005). This involves the encroachment of work into leisure, even personal and intimate life, and so the increasing disappearance of non-work time altogether (McRobbie 2002, 2004; Nixon and Crewe 2004; Deuze 2007a; Gill 2007b; Duffy 2011; Banks et al. 2013).

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[16] Cultural work can be "broadly defined as symbolic, aesthetic or creative labour in the arts, media and other creative or cultural industries" (Banks et al. 2013: 4).

A somewhat different line of scholarship has shifted the focus from new media workers as exemplars of other phenomena and macro industry-based inquiries to new media workers in their own right, developing an empirically-informed literature "which is at once a critical sociology of work and an attempt to understand new media as a site of creativity and innovation" (Gill 2009b: 163). Scholars have expressed concerns about the increasing precariousness and job insecurity, together with the relative low pay, long hours and intense working patterns (Gill 2007b, 2010; Gill and Pratt 2008; Conor et al. 2015). Furthermore, recurrent features in the lives of new media workers include high rates of anxiety and fears about not finding work and earning enough money, as well as 'missing out' and 'keeping up' with ongoing developments and the associated required skills (Gill 2002, 2007c, 2010; McRobbie 2002, 2004; Deuze and Lewis 2013). Presenting a paradox, these endemic "pathologies of precariousness" (McRobbie 2011: 33) tend to coexist with deep, passionate attachments and affective ties to the work, the identity of CCI labourer, and the field more generally (McRobbie 2002, 2010; Gill 2007b, 2010; Gill and Pratt 2008; Deuze and Lewis 2011). High levels of enthusiasm and excitement are expressed about the ways the work offers flexibility and autonomy, possibilities for self-expression and self-actualisation, and to communicate and innovate (Gill 2007b; Gill and Pratt 2008; Taylor 2010). Other attractions mentioned are the informal work environments and distinct forms of sociality, in addition to being involved in an industry that is 'cool', cutting edge, youthful, dynamic and creative (Gill 2002, 2007c; Mark and Lewis 2011).

These empirical investigations have therefore shown that the lived experiences of new media workers—who according to Gill (2007b) are amongst the most highly educated workers in the West—are complex and contradictory. One key contribution has been to highlight the hidden costs of this type of work, contesting the progressive narratives surrounding CCI work/ers, and problematising some of the most celebrated characteristics of the industries. Some have raised critical questions about the ways in which 'passionate work' operates in the service of power (and as gendered practice) (McRobbie 2002, 2004, 2016). Notably, it generates consent and attachments to practices and conditions that would otherwise be more readily problematised as exploitative, demonstrating how exploitation increasingly works "through dispersed disciplinary modalities and technologies of subjecthood" (Gill

and Pratt 2008: 21) (see also McRobbie 2016 on the 'creativity dispositif', and Tokumitsu 2014 on the 'do what you love' credo). Scholars have also exposed as myths the prevailing notions of CCI as open, diverse and egalitarian, pointing to the dominance of white, youthful, able-bodied people with few caring responsibilities, along with both old and new forms of sexism, which intersect in complex ways with other dynamics of social differentiation and inequality, for example with regard to class (e.g. McRobbie 2002, 2015; Gill 2002, 2007c, 2010; Gill and Pratt 2008; Conor et al. 2015). Some of the difficulties and discrimination endured by women in the CCI have been partly associated precisely to some of its most valued distinguishing features, such as informality. For instance, in their study of advertising departments in London, Sean Nixon and Ben Crewe (2004: 134-135) found that "practices that would have been seen as unprofessional in other occupations were condoned within this area of creative employment", allowing "strident forms of masculinity and homosociability to flourish". That is, in addition to gender-based inequalities in terms of numbers and a persistent sexual division of labour, female media workers continue to regularly confront (Othering and excluding) (hyper)masculine work environments, or the so-called 'boys' club' culture (Byerly and Ross 2006; Proctor-Thomson 2013; Duffy 2016). Bridget Conor, Rosalind Gill and Stephanie Taylor (2015: 10) emphasise: "This principle of informality is not just a feature of working *environments*, but also – crucially – of *hiring practices*"; and this can function as a form of gendered (classed and ethnic minority) exclusion, not least because "'like' tends to recruit 'like'" (Taylor 2010: 367; Proctor-Thomson 2013) (see Chapter Four).

A different body of work from communication studies has explored how convergence-related shifts are reshaping the contours of professional identities and practices (Singer 2004; Klinenberg 2005; Deuze 2007a and b, 2009a and b; Duffy 2011, 2012). Scholars have claimed that the newly required orientation toward digital technologies, revenue generation and marketing partnerships create tensions, change and challenge what it means to be a media worker (Deuze 2007b). Convergence also demands media workers to produce cross-media content, which is commercially viable but also ever more compelling (Klinenberg 2005; Duffy 2012), and within the context of a "fiercely competitive industry" (Deuze 2007b: 251). Moreover, as Mark Deuze and Nicky Lewis (2013: 166) note, this type of work increasingly involves providing platforms for other people to "make, edit and

exchange their own content". Media workers have to deal with a precarious balancing act between offering content and offering connectivity (Deuze and Lewis 2013). Further threatening their creative independence and professional identity is the requirement to engage in dialogue and share the creative spotlight with "the people formerly known as the audience" (Deuze 2007b: 251), who are learning to have increasing control over media content, to interact and co-create with other users, and to swiftly move across platforms. In response, media companies are having to learn to accelerate the flow of content across as many delivery channels as possible so as to expand markets and strengthen consumer loyalty (Jenkins and Deuze 2008).

Duffy's (2011, 2013) research on convergence and the women's magazine industry corroborates these findings. On the basis of interviews, Duffy (2013a: 141) has claimed that the shift from "print to bits" involves for magazine producers a loss of editorial/creative autonomy, as they are increasingly required to produce content that is 'cross-platform' and 'search-friendly', and to play an active role in the creation and execution of marketing campaigns for advertisers (or 'clients'). These changes and challenges are set within a context of fierce competition for audience attention and loyalty. Duffy (2011, 2013a) highlights the increased participation of non-professionals in the media marketplace (e.g. bloggers), as another threat to the unique voice and credibility—and thus professional identities—of magazine journalists. The early 2010s, Duffy (2013a: 143) concludes, constitutes for the women's magazine industry a "moment of profound uncertainty and flux". This thesis makes a contribution to current understandings by capturing recent developments in the women's online magazine sector with regard to the different but interrelated 'moments' of production, use and text.

Chapter Four
RESEARCH METHODS

4.1   Introduction

While there is no specifically feminist research method, there are certain general methodological principles that typically characterise feminist social research. Challenging traditional positivist approaches, feminist social scientists have highlighted that research is messy, situated, partial and thoroughly affected by a "multiplicity of influence", which includes the researcher's own subjectivity, political commitments and "private fascinations" (McRobbie 1982: 54). Practicing reflexivity throughout the research process is hence an integral part of feminist methodology (Hesse-Biber 2007). Reflexive accounts also attend to the embodied and affective, relational and power-infused nature of research (Ryan-Flood and Gill 2010). Another notable feature of feminist research is a disruption of the (Anglo- and) androcentrism infusing academic disciplines. Consequently, there is a tendency to place (the diversity of) women's experiences at the centre of social inquiry – increasingly (also) with respect to global (Hesse-Biber 2012) and online contexts (DeVault and Gross 2012). These are all elements that feature in the present thesis.

In this chapter, I offer a descriptive and reflexive account of the multi-methods research design for this cross-cultural and multi-dimensional doctoral study of women's online magazines. Qualitative methods were selected in accordance with the research aim to examine, among other things, subjective accounts of experience, nuances of meaning, and the details of representational regimes and every day practices (Ramazanoglu with Holland 2002). The chapter is divided into four parts. First, the twelve British and Spanish publications that form the focus of the thesis are introduced. The next section presents the different methods of data generation[17], broadly divided into media/ted texts and interviews. In the third section, I discuss the approaches that informed the analysis of the data corpus, namely thematic analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and conjunctural analysis. I also introduce associated key notions, such as hegemony and articulation. This research project received the approval of the School of Arts & Social Sciences Research Ethics

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[17] This phase is used instead of 'data collection', which is closely aligned with a positivist-empiricist epistemology.

Committee at City, University of London. In Section 4.5, I address a number of issues considered of central importance by most guidelines for ethical Internet and interview-based qualitative social research, and my own practice therein. Inevitably, these ethical guidelines for good research practice fail to capture the uniqueness of each project, the unpredictability of actual encounters, or the complex challenges of managing power, positionality and emotion in fieldwork. In a rather unconventional manner, Section 4.5.2 incorporates empirical material from the interviews. This is done in order to better explain my development of 'solidary critique' as a useful ethico-political tool to guide me through the analysis of the talk of women's magazine producers (and beyond) (Section 4.5.3). Throughout the chapter I expound the rationale for the choices made and challenges encountered. Also highlighted are connections to the feminist and social constructionist positions informing the study, as established, particularly, in Chapter One. The chapter closes with a short summary in preparation for the ensuing analytic chapters.

4.2 Twelve magazines

> 29/01/2014: *iVillage.co.uk* disappears! Permanent closure, no explanation. ☹
> 03/02/2014: Bauer Media launches digital-first brand *The Debrief*.
> 20/08/2014: *Elle Spain* forum gone. Save announcement and user complaints.
> 04/09/2014: 'New Cosmo' is launched. Forum disappears - users complain on twitter - forum reappears.
> 04/09/2014: *Glamour Spain* changes design.
> 01/10/2014: *EnFemenino.com* changes design.
> 17/10/2014: *Cosmopolitan UK* announces the forum will be permanently closing at the end of November! Saved user complaints. Trying to find a way to retrieve the threads.

The entries from my research diary reproduced above vividly exemplify the ways in which "studying sites in cyberspace can feel like trying to paint a portrait of a subject who refuses to stop moving" (Campbell 2008: 29). Websites not only suddenly and drastically alter in structure and content, but actually disappear altogether, often leaving no trace behind. This snapshot nature of e-research must be taken into account when considering the analysis, which by the time it reaches an audience it most probably reads like a story of the 'then' rather than the 'now'. Of course, this does not diminish the value of the work. But it does interestingly force the Internet researcher into a position of humility about the claims to knowledge one can possibly ever make, and evidences the impossibilities of ever satisfying the demands of fast-

paced academia. I also note here the ephemeral nature of the e-field because it informed the decision to establish a relatively large research focus: twelve women's online magazines in total. Initially, I selected for analysis the commercial community sites for women with the highest levels of traffic in the UK and in Spain, namely *iVillage.co.uk* and *EnFemenino.com* respectively. A few months into the research, the former suddenly closed, marking according to commentators: "the end of an era in online publishing" (Moses 2014). Only a few days later, Bauer Media launched a new digital-first brand for young women, *TheDebrief.co.uk*, whose model was heralded as "the cutting edge of publishing" (Cottrell 2014). All this rendered evident that I had to reconsider my strategy. Incorporating a relatively large number of sites would safeguard me from potential future closures, but also, importantly, allow me to better capture general trends in the industry. Furthermore, including in the sample several magazines would hugely facilitate offering research participants anonymity, which is fundamental both in terms of adhering to ethical principles in interview research and of increasing possibilities for participant recruitment.

To recap, the aim of the research project is to examine representations of gender, sex, sexuality and intimate relations in consumer magazines for young women from the two different European contexts of the UK and Spain, along with the ways in which these media relate to feminism, and respond to the digital era. The following criteria were accordingly developed for the selection of sites/online magazines: It is a commercial site hosted in the UK/Spain; it is aimed at young women; and it has higher traffic rates than other comparable websites. Having an editorial section on sex and relationships, and hosting forums were also preferred, though not compulsory criteria for inclusion. For example, *Elle UK* does not meet these two criteria, but the title has been a central player in promoting (and formulating) the so-called 'new feminism', and is hence an important publication to study here. With these considerations in mind, the twelve selected magazines and their publishing houses are: the online-only *FemaleFirst.co.uk* (independent), *SoFeminine.co.uk* (auFeminin-Axel Springer) and *TheDebrief.co.uk* (Bauer) in the UK, *EnFemenino.com* ('in feminine') (auFeminin-Axel Springer), *Grazia.es* (Mondadori) and *Nosotras.com* ('us women') (ITnet Group) in Spain; along with the well-established global brands *Cosmopolitan* (Hearst UK/Gruner+Jahr Spain), *Elle* (Hearst UK/Spain) and *Glamour* (Condé Nast UK/Spain) in both countries. As can be seen, the women's online magazines under study are predominantly owned by

multinational companies. Although specifically developed for British and Spanish women, these sites cross national borders by also respectively reaching users from the US and India, and from various Latin American countries, among other contexts. Subsequently, as discussed in Chapter One, in addition to offering cultural-contrastive insights, the analysis is able to incorporate a transnational perspective. The address (URL), self-description and unique users per month of each site can be found below in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 The twelve women's online magazines

Web address and description	Monthly UU
TWELVE WOMEN'S ONLINE MAGAZINES	
Key: Media Pack 2016 (MP); Personal communication (PC); Publisher's web (PW); Website traffic estimator *W3Snoop.com* (W3S) with search conducted 28/09/2016; Unique users (UU)	
UK	
http://www.cosmopolitan.co.uk/ The women's magazine for fashion, beauty, sex tips and celebrity news.	6.5m (MP) 3,849,044 (W3S)
http://www.elleuk.com/ Click here for the coolest, smartest fashion, beauty and lifestyle content. For stylish, creative women who want to be the first to know, brought to you by ELLE UK.	850,000 (MP) 2,545,008 (W3S)
http://www.femalefirst.co.uk/ Keep up-to-date with the very latest celebrity news and gossip as well as the best in lifestyle, entertainment and fashion news from Female First.	1,516,242 (W3S)
http://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/ Daily gossip, fashion, beauty, celebrities, games, chat, shopping and horoscopes in UK edition of this Condé Nast title.	2,889,711 (MP) 3,760,868 (W3S)
http://www.sofeminine.co.uk/ The women's online magazine: astro, beauty, sex, diet, tests, quizzes, fashion, trends… Expert advice, interactive tools and sofeminine's fabulous forums!	2,669,342 (W3S)
www.thedebrief.co.uk/ Getting Ready. People. Sex. Life. Things To Do. The Debrief. Your Life Online.	842,522 (MP) 758,943 (W3S)
SPAIN	
http://www.cosmohispano.com/ La Web de la chica Cosmo: plena, atrevida, creativa y sexy. Información sobre sexo, pareja, moda, belleza, trabajo, salud y lifestyle.	1,611,615 (PW) 1,479,901 (W3S)
http://www.elle.es/ Versión online de la revista de moda, belleza y celebrities.	1,754,000 (PW) 3,650,109 (W3S)
http://www.enfemenino.com/ La revista femenina en Internet: astro, belleza, sexualidad, adelgazar, tests, moda, tendencias… Consejos de expertos, útiles interactivos… ¡y los famosos foros de enfemenino para charlar!	12m (PC) 15,682,983 (W3S)
http://www.glamour.es/ Tu revista de tendencias, street style, belleza y celebrities.	1,917,969 (MP) 2,285,564 (W3S)
http://www.grazia.es/ Moda, belleza, celebrities, estilo de vida.	1,487,631 (W3S)
http://www.nosotras.com/ La web de la mujer moderna. Moda, Belleza, tendencias y amor, seguido de Actualidad, Fitness, Ocio, Salud, Bebés y mucho más…	1,375,666 (PW) 1,397,021 (W3S)

The selected sites could be generally categorised as young women's lifestyle online magazines. One exception is AuFeminin, whose sites follow the (now older) affinity portal model (see Chapter Three), and thus target a broader audience segment.

Evidencing this is the content on motherhood/parenting, but also cooking and weddings (see 'maternidad', 'cocina' and 'novias' in Figure 4.5). The greatest contrast is found in *The Debrief*, whose more 'cutting-edge' strategy involves creating a highly targeted product, aiming at an urban "ABC1 20 something female" (The Debrief 2015).

Figure 4.1 Homepage, *Cosmopolitan.co.uk*, 2014 (partial screenshot)
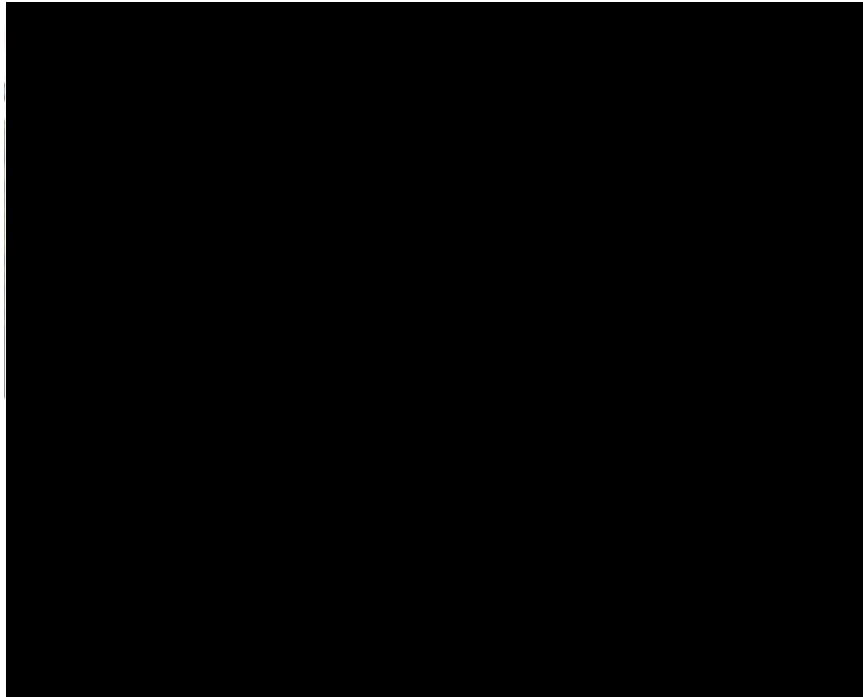
Figure 4.2 Homepage, *Cosmopolitan.co.uk*, 2016 (partial screenshot)
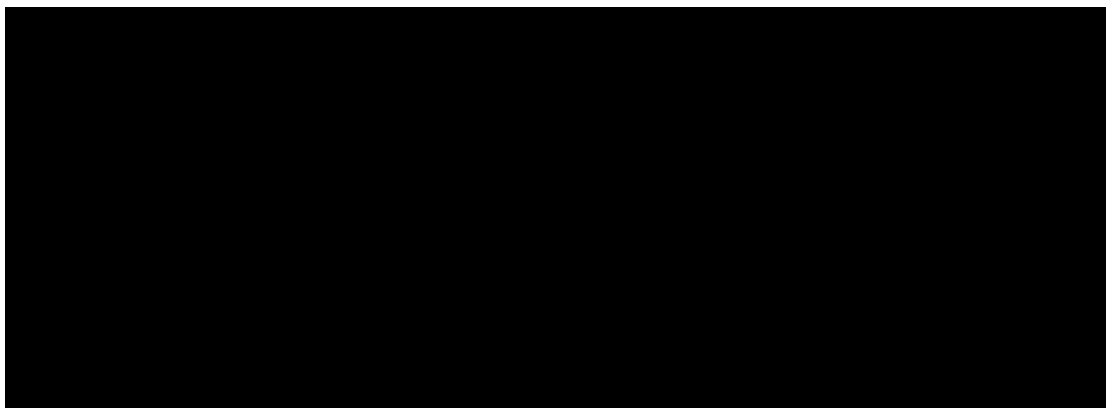
All media companies construct strongly branded products through a carefully crafted and consistent graphic design. During the period of research, the sites have undergone redesigns with social traffic and mobile devices in mind – compare

Figures 4.1 and 4.5 to the more simplified designs in 4.2 and 4.6. In general, the presence of the colour pink is notable, used to signify femininity (see figures 4.1, 4.2, 4.5 and 4.6). Also dominant is the colour black, which for example the more fashion-centred *Elle Spain* utilises prominently to denote elegance (Figure 4.3). Another noteworthy contrast to the dominance of pink can be found in *The Debrief* (Figure 4.4), which aims to offer a more 'modern' approach and hence, in the words of members of staff: "we try to keep our space as ungendered as possible".

Figure 4.3 Homepage, *Elle.es*, 2016 (partial screenshot)
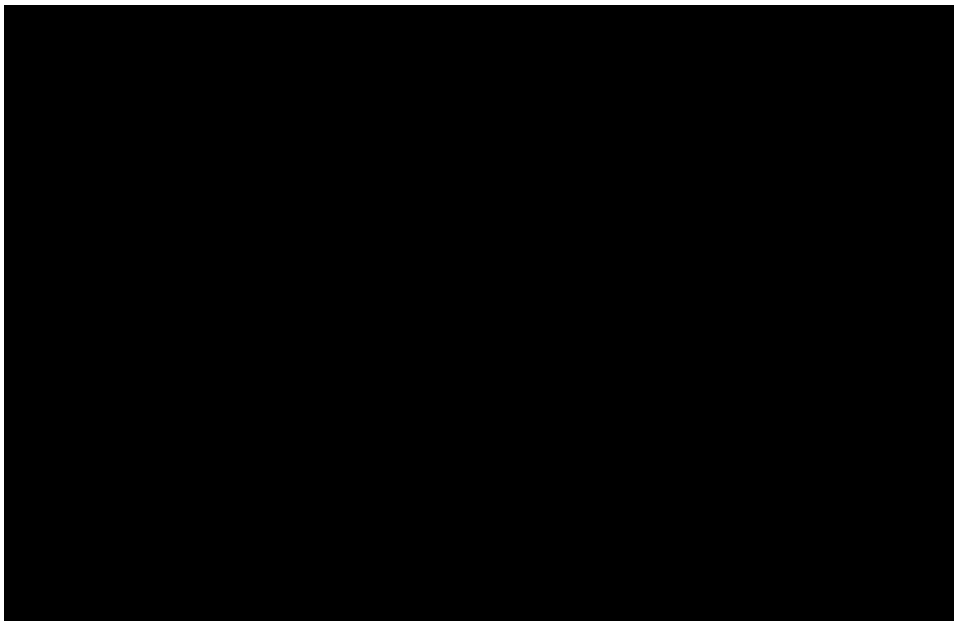
In the sites, a horizontal navigation bar at the top of the page organises the editorial content under distinct headings, with sections typically divided into further sub-sections opening vertically. Resembling the print magazines, areas covered include beauty and fashion, sex and relationships, celebrity, together with the more generic 'lifestyle' and 'entertainment' which include a varied range of secondary topics including food and drink, travel, technology, books, film and TV. It is worth noting that the 'new Cosmo' of 2014 incorporated 'worklife' as a main section (compare Figures 4.1 and 4.2). Again introducing novel elements, *The Debrief* offers a principal section on 'news', and this comprises one subsection called 'politics' (Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4 Homepage, *TheDebrief.co.uk*, 2016 (partial screenshot)

Alongside more conventional text and image formats consisting of news stories, interviews, information and advice articles, these sites often include newer components such as videos and moving images. Most Spanish sites additionally offer a network of blogs (see Figure 4.3), mainly—but not only—by public figures like models, actors and journalists, and often too by the editor-in-chief of the publication. Advertising constitutes another prominent type of content, in the form of a varied range of display adverts (e.g. see breast surgery advert in Figure 4.2), and increasingly as an integrated part of the editorial content (see Chapter Five on 'native advertising'). What is more, some sites have a shopping section ('tienda' in Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.5 Navigation bar, *EnFemenino.com*, 2014
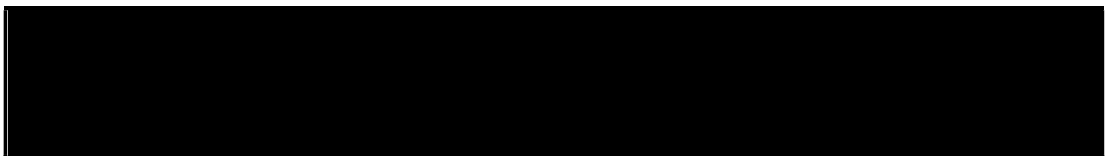
Figure 4.6 Navigation bar, *EnFemenino.com*, 2016
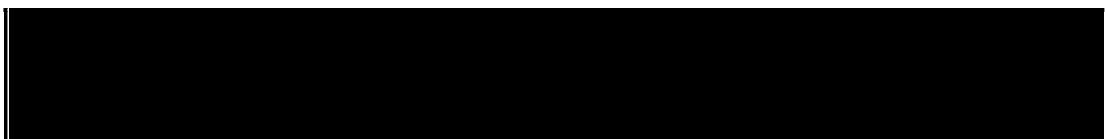
Yet another type of non-editorial content in women's online magazines is that generated by users. This takes two main forms: a) comments under the editorial texts; and b) messages in the forums. Reader comment sections facilitate commentary under specific editorial features, a format ubiquitous for example in news websites. Forums, by contrast, comprise their own space within the site, which is divided into a number of inbuilt topic-specific sections (see Figure 4.7). These magazine-determined topics are mostly in line with the central foci of the publication, such as beauty, fashion, relationships and sex, but also include a varied range of (less popular) other topics spanning from 'animals' (*EnFemenino.com*) to 'jokes & games' (*Cosmopolitan.co.uk*).

Figure 4.7 Forum homepage, *Cosmopolitan.co.uk*, 2014 (partial screenshot)
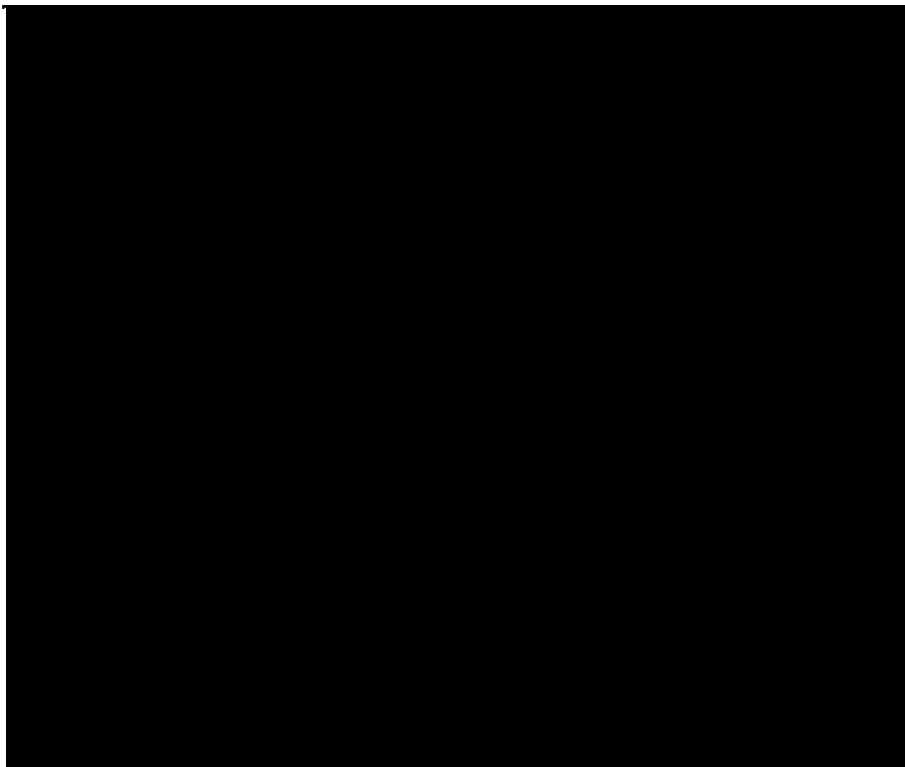
At the time of selection, three out of the six sites in each country hosted forums (six in total). During the early months of the research, the forums enjoyed an important presence in the sites, with visible tabs on the navigation bar (see Figures 4.1 and 4.5), and editorial articles directing readers to forum discussion threads on similar topics. About a year into my project, *Elle Spain* (August 2014) and *Cosmopolitan UK* (November 2014) closed their forums, and the other websites began to demonstrate a

diminishing interest in the platform. Links to threads no longer feature next to editorial content, and the forum button is significantly less prominent or even relatively hard to find. Compare for example the placement of 'foro' in the screen capture taken of *EnFemenino.com* in 2014 (Figure 4.5) to its absence in the 2016 main navigation bar (Figure 4.6). Meanwhile, all sites began to demonstrate an increased interest in SNSs, as evidenced by the prominent buttons in the 2016 homepages, particularly in the new brand *The Debrief* (Figure 4.4). This shifting model of reader interaction motivated an additional level of inquiry, and constitutes the subject matter of Chapter Six.

4.3　Data generation

4.3.1　Media/ted texts

Two main types of textual material were gathered from the twelve selected women's online magazines: a) editorial articles; and b) (when applicable) user-generated messages from the forums. In order to avoid obtrusive repetition, in some sections of the analysis these data sources are identified by the letters E (editorial) and F (forum). The concern with magazine texts responds to the (feminist) social constructionist principle that (gender) *representations matter* (Gill 2007a; Orgad 2012). Of course, this includes the full range of semiotic forms, and women's magazines are very visual media. Nonetheless, this thesis fundamentally focuses on the written word. The decision to leave aside an in-depth image-centred analysis was not taken lightly. It was made primarily for reasons of scope and space, where I favoured instead the inclusion of a study of user-generated content and producer interviews, offering a more original research contribution. Indeed, both in academia and beyond, the visual representation of women in popular media has and continues to receive significant critical attention (see e.g. Sanmiguel 2000). Even the producers themselves critiqued magazine images much more readily than the texts (see Chapter Eight). This called for close scrutiny. Finally, a focus on the written word usefully allowed for comparative work across the different types of data. Still, some chapters include images to provide further context and to support the analysis. Reader comments under the analysed editorial texts were collected when available. Yet the forums were prioritised over reader comment sections as primary data for the user-generated content element of the research since comments to articles are infrequent in these

sites. Moreover, in the forums users themselves are the ones selecting the issues for discussion. An analysis of these spaces thereby constitutes an original contribution to audience-oriented research on the woman's magazine, and offers unique insights about mundane communicative practices of (young) women online. Chapter Seven came into being after I identified a particularly recurrent thread across the examined forums.

The strategy of immersion involved daily visits to the sites, and making detailed notes first about general structure and offering, and later more specific dominant textual patterns and striking features. On the basis of careful observation over several months, I began to identify a number of broad topics deserving further detailed attention. I then proceeded to produce substantial but manageable data samples, in total consisting of 270 magazine articles and 2,657 peer-to-peer messages. When appropriate, details of the research rationale and data corpus are presented at the beginning of the analysis chapter. Both the editorial and user-generated content was publicly accessible. Webpages were saved as PDF files in order to keep the original formatting, accompanying images, and surrounding elements such as advertisements and further readings recommended by the editorial team. With the magazine content, this task was often complicated by the editorial use of photo galleries (with the purpose of gaining clicks), which means that each article consisted of multiple pages. Retrieving forum content was equally time-consuming since threads tended to comprise more than one page. When *Cosmopolitan UK* announced the forum closure, I was able to save the threads using the application SiteSucker.

The study is additionally informed by an assortment of supplementary textual material gathered over nearly three years of research. In order to enhance my understanding of the industry and keep track of changes and developments, I have conducted exhaustive and ongoing reviews of magazine communications in the form of corporate website posts, media kits/packs, press releases, and published interviews with editors. Also reviewed in a continued manner during this time are trade sources like advertising and marketing press, along with other media coverage such as newspaper articles (e.g. about site closures and launches). Finally, I have attempted to remain well aware of the print versions of publications (past and present). The level of familiarity with the women's magazine industry this documentation allowed also facilitated and enriched the interviewing of the producers of this media.

4.3.2 In-depth interviews

The principal data for the production-oriented part of this research project was generated through 68 interviews with magazine professionals. This hugely popular method among social scientists is especially valuable for producing information about the understandings on a given topic by particular populations, and is useful when researching hard to reach individuals like busy professionals (Edley and Litosseliti 2010), such as journalists. Excepting two email interviews, I used in-depth semi-structured interviewing. This format usefully allows for spontaneity, complexities, particularities and new questions to emerge, and simultaneously, for thematic continuity and comparison across a body of interviews, which was particularly important for the cross-cultural aspect of the study. Favoured by feminist researchers, among other things the in-depth interview inquiries into "lived experiences", "subjugated knowledges" and the "'subjective' understanding an individual brings to a given situation or set of circumstances" (Hesse-Biber 2007: 118). In this thesis, the interviews aimed to ascertain how producers of women's online magazines discursively construct and position themselves in relation to: the women's magazine industry; their specific role (e.g. sex and relationship writing); the online product and digital journalism; advertisers; their readers/users and the forums; feminism; editorial representations of gender, sex, sexuality and intimate relations; and (feminist) critiques thereof.

After conducting two in-depth semi-structured pilot interviews with women's magazine producers from Greece and Italy, the generic interview guide was finalised (see Appendix A). The guide continuously evolved as the research proceeded, and I developed more concrete ideas, and unexpected questions emerged in the interviews, in the analysis of editorial and user-generated content as well as in the industry more generally. Also, prior to each interview the guide was tailored to the experience and occupation of the individual participant, in addition to the publication(s) they work(ed) for. During the actual interview, the guide often remained unused and (thus) unseen by the participant. Most interviews began with the question: 'Have you always been interested in working in the women's magazine industry?' This proved to be a hugely successful strategy, as participants seemed to enjoy answering this question and almost invariably offered valuable, rich narratives. At the end of each interview, I asked participants whether they thought there was any other topic/issue I

should look into or consider, and I offered the opportunity to add, clarify or ask anything.

With the exception of those with previous professional experience in the industry (Ferguson 1983; Davies 2009; Keller 2011), scholars have emphasised difficulties in locating and recruiting the producers of women's magazines for research (Jackson et al. 2001; Gough-Yates 2003; Murphy 2013), which partly explains the scarcity of producer-oriented studies, particularly when compared to analyses of readers and especially texts. Locating and recruiting participants for this study was certainly challenging and very time-consuming, not least because contact information is often not available or difficult to source. Potential participants were identified through an exhaustive study of each publication and of the industry at large. The criterion for selection was to be working or to have worked for at least one of the selected publications. Within this, I aimed for all publications and a varied range of occupations to be included in the sample. Of particular interest were those professionals involved in the production of sex and relationship content. I also aimed to interview at least some writers and editors involved in producing the particular magazine articles that I was examining. As the research progressed, new names— and texts, topics, questions—kept emerging. These constitute some of the reasons why I invited a large number of individuals (for a qualitative study) to take part: 239 in total. Another motive concerns my attempt to diminish the impact of a likely self-selection bias toward more critical voices, and to hence include a diverse array of discourses and perspectives within the industry.

Potential participants were first contacted by email, and a private Twitter or LinkedIn message when email addresses were unavailable, with a general informative text adapted to the position/specialisation of each individual. In the cases of no response, I sent two follow-up reminder emails/messages at approximately seven-day intervals. This approach was recommended by a number of participants, who claimed to have failed to reply earlier not due to a lack of interest, but because of busy schedules, and multiple emails and requests for their time. Those who agreed to receive more information were then sent the participant information sheet (Appendix B) and informed consent form (Appendix C). Participants were given ample opportunity to discuss these documents, and to ask for further details at all stages of the process. Once a person had agreed to take part in the research, we arranged a suitable way (e.g. face-to-face or Skype) and moment to talk.

Between December 2014 and February 2015, I conducted 68 interviews with women's magazine professionals (plus the two pilots). The sample is equally divided into the UK and Spain, though in the latter one participant was a writer from the US whose articles were syndicated by Spanish magazines. Our discussion about the US market offered additional useful insights, as did the pilot interviews with journalists from two other EU countries. All twelve publications are represented in the sample, as are a range of different occupations: editor-in-chief, content director, digital director, deputy editor, managing editor, features editor, web/online editor, sub-editor, intern, and, in the largest numbers, staff and freelance writers. Within these categories, there are a variety of subject-specific posts, such as sex writer, news editor and beauty director. One audio-visual producer and a product manager were also interviewed. Many participants fall under more than one of these categories. For instance, an editor may also write, and most professionals have been interns. Besides, some writers additionally undertake the role of community manager.

The magazine producers I interviewed were predominantly female (62), all white and (seemingly) belonging to the national dominant ethnicity, with the exception of a Latin American woman in Spain (who was, perhaps not coincidentally, in a particularly precarious situation and shamefully underpaid). Apart from some very senior professionals, the research participants largely coincided with the target audience in age. This was most certainly the case in the UK, where the majority of the sample lies within the mid-20s to early 30s range. In the Spanish sample there is a slightly older and wider age spread, with the greater numbers falling within the late 20s to early 40s range. This contrast can be partly explained in terms of the longer duration of university education, along with the high unemployment rates among youth specifically and in the overall population (respectively 45,0% and 20,1%, and slightly higher among women)[18]. The younger journalists thus take longer to enter the workplace than their British counterparts, and those in their 30s and 40s find even more obstacles when attempting to find work in other areas of journalism, which I found to be a recurrent aim for them. Almost every single participant had a first degree, many also postgraduate qualifications, and the majority were based in the capital cities of London and Madrid. Two were email interviews, and the rest took place via Skype (32), in cafés (27), on the phone (4), at the participants' office

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[18] From: http://www.datosmacro.com/paro/espana (Accessed 31/05/2016)

(2) and home (1). These 66 in-depth semi-structured interviews lasted just over one hour on average in duration, and were digitally audio-recorded with permission. The recordings were transcribed verbatim by professional services, and later thoroughly revised by me.

As somebody who is personally disinterested in and politically troubled by the fashion and beauty industries, I expected the interview encounter with key players in the area to be riddled with awkwardness, distance and/or a marked sense of difference. These proved to be incorrect preconceptions. Thankfully, these were challenged soon after entering the field, usefully triggering a process of critical self-examination that came to constitute a central part of my research. One element of some concern was bodily presentation, particularly because I had decided to not alter my everyday appearance for the interviews, as I wanted to 'normalise' my encounter with these women and avoid what would have felt like a disrespectful strategy of deception (see also 4.5.2). Thus, I entered the field without the aesthetic markers of desirable femininity in women's magazines: no fashionable clothes, designer labels or notable accessories and jewellery; no high-heels, full makeup or pristine hair. Notwithstanding difference and diversity, the self-presentation of female participants was generally less hyper-feminine and/or 'glamorous' than I had expected. Indeed, with no (at least conscious!) prompting from me, participants often noted this assumption, both in the UK: "People think magazine offices are these very glamorous places with these very glamorous women and actually it's just normal women"; and in Spain: "There is really normal people in the office. People wear jeans, go to work in trainers". This description broadly reflects my own observation of the two offices for Hearst and Condé Nast publications that I was able to visit (one in each country). Still, another aspect to consider is the fact that my sample does not include fashion specialists, or high-end publications like *Vogue*. Regardless, this helped me reflect upon the ways in which I was entering the field loaded with preconceptions, indeed, prejudices. One important moment in this sense was an interview with a fashion journalism graduate. This young writer physically captured the ideal style of femininity of women's magazines—with fashionable and perfectly arranged clothes, immaculate long blond hair, full face make-up, bold red lips—and I am ashamed to admit that upon our encounter I immediately anticipated her talk to also faithfully reproduce the problematic, limited and limiting gendered discourses

pervading this cultural space. On the contrary, this writer voiced many critical views, including:

> Laura: How would you like women's magazines to develop?
> Writer: I still feel like women's magazines are fashion and makeup and pleasing men. That's fun, but I don't think there's enough intelligent content about the world. If there is, it tends to be a little bit tokenistic like, "look at these women who have built a well in Africa". There are interesting women doing interesting things and I'd like to see their stories told a bit more, women who aren't necessarily famous. Giving a more diverse interpretation of what it means to be a woman. […] They need to break out of their box a little bit and not think, "oh, just because we're a women's magazine we need to talk about makeup and only makeup, and we can't get too serious". I think they should be able to get serious, they should be able to get political. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

That a woman can enjoy and embody normative femininity and simultaneously hold critical views thereof is of course not a ground-breaking discovery. The point of my 'uncomfortable reflexivity' (Pillow 2003) is to better trace the research trajectory, and capture something of the ways in which the beginning of the fieldwork forced me to work through my own difficulties with women's investment in normative styles and practices of (hyper-)femininity—rooted both in feminist theorisation and my own experience as a woman affected by patriarchal culture—so that I could move beyond looking and assuming, in order to start to really *listen*. I'm not proud to say that another decisive moment in this regard involved offending a participant. I began to conduct the interviews under an understanding of women's magazines as profoundly ideological, and deeply concerned about the profound penetration of a postfeminist sensibility, particularly in women's magazines and British culture (e.g. Gill 2009a) (there was no feminist writing available in Spain on postfeminism prior to Favaro and De Miguel 2016). This largely explains—but does *not* justify—my phrasing of the following question more than 40 minutes into one early UK interview (underlining indicates speaker emphasis):

> Laura: How would you say we could create a closer dialogue between feminists and people working in the industry?
> Writer: Just to set things straight. People working in the industry <u>are</u> feminists. I don't think they're different. It's a little bit worrying that the way you phrased the question suggests that people who work in magazines aren't feminists. That's <u>really</u> worrying because I consider myself feminist and most people working in women's magazines are <u>utterly 100% feminists</u> and the fact that you put us on different sides of the fence is <u>really</u> like quite upsetting.

Naturally, I thanked her for pointing this out. The reminder of the interview continued to be valuable, but never fully 'recovered' from this moment of conflict.

Fortunately, this is a unique case. The vast majority of interviews—both with women and men—were relaxed and conversational, harmonious and pleasant, with rapport being quickly established and maintained throughout. Skype video calls were conducted from the home, and hence gained a certain level of intimacy, in spite of physical distance. In the cafés, conversations took place over food and drink, which again served to develop a sense of participant-researcher proximity. More profoundly, common ground was repeatedly established. Most directly, I shared with participants a real passion for talking about women's magazines! Often we also had academic background/interests in common, with some having even carried out similar projects whilst at university, for example: "I did my dissertation on sexual messages for women in mainstream magazines, but focused particularly on *Cosmopolitan*". Another particularly remarkable example was when a writer replied to my email agreeing to participate in the research by also noting: "Gender and the Media was one of my go-to's for like every paper I wrote during university!" She continued to explain:

> I studied communications for my undergraduate (and my master's) and love Rosalind Gill's work. I studied under [name of scholar] at [name of university] in [name of city] and did lots of media studies and feminism/media studies and masculinity types of classes. (So, basically, I'm very jealous that you get to work with her!).

A sense of solidarity almost always developed around our shared professional activities ("if you have any problems you can always just get right in touch with me. I spend my life recording interviews. It's so stressing"), with encounters peppered with useful tips, funny anecdotes, and even 'meta-discussions' about the interview (e.g. "I have liked the interview because you have touched upon a number of different issues"). Often amusingly noted was the fact that "you're interviewing people who interview people for a living": "we're not judging", smiled a British editor. A level of camaraderie additionally surfaced from our shared feminist identifications, or at least our shared 'pro-woman' inclination (certainly 'woman-centeredness'). With some women I even shared enriching moments of exchange of information and opinion about feminism.

It seems as important to note that there were also very many moments when participants articulated anti-feminist, sexist, and other discourses I consider problematic. The way I approached this is well captured by Ann Phoenix's (1994: 57) comment that: "Since the whole point of interviews is to evoke respondents' accounts rather than hear one's own discourses reflected back, I would argue that this

is usually interesting data rather than upsetting and that it is manageable within the interview context". Moreover, as she also notes, the talk of participants is "not unitary and there are generally parts of their accounts with which researchers can feel in sympathy" (Phoenix 1994: 57), "though this can mean that dealing with the less sympathetic aspects is more difficult" Donna Luff (1999: 695) adds, speaking to my own experience (see 4.5.2).

Sometimes difference proved useful for building rapport. In particular, the fact that I am Spanish and live in the UK produced curiosity and conversation in both contexts. Also, my location as an interested industry outsider, and specifically a sociologist rather than a business-oriented scholar, seemed to make my questions less 'threatening', and facilitated the solicitation of detailed talk about what participants assumed was 'shared knowledge' (Hesse-Biber 2007). In the same manner, as Rebecca Klatch (1987: 17) observed about her own research: "Being a graduate student granted legitimacy to my position as a 'seeker of knowledge', thus placing me in a non-threatening position". I only really found difference challenging in two interviews with 'older' (50+) very high-level female professionals (one in each country). I struggled with their clear sense of superiority, distant approach, and unbecomingly short or rote-like answers. Fortunately, these moments of participant exercise of power and uncooperation marked the exception. On the contrary, I generally sensed not only enjoyment of the interview—some kindly emailed after confirming this—but also an attempt by participants to actively facilitate it, readily engaging in rapport-building and responding to probes, offering concrete examples and new questions to consider, and often even anticipating domains of inquiry that I wanted to cover.

The various events I attended in London during the course of my research provided additional rich insights. One was run in 2015 by Hearst's brand 'Empowering Women' on the topic of 'confidence', which involved a conversation between TV celebrity Davina McCall and the then *Cosmopolitan UK* editor-in-chief Louise Court, preceded by a drinks reception and followed by questions from the audience. Another was the launch of the 2015 *Hot Feminist* book by Polly Vernon, a British journalist who has written extensively for women's magazines. The 2016 event with the creators of feminist media *The Vagenda*, Holly Baxter and Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett, on 'The Vagenda two years on: what has changed?' was particularly useful as I was able to converse with these journalists informally.

4.4   Data analysis

4.4.1 Thematic analysis

Selecting an appropriate method of data analysis involves a number of considerations, including a general awareness that the approach taken will fundamentally shape the analysis produced. Crucially, the selected method(s) need to relate to the particular theoretical—and here also explicitly political—commitments and research questions/aims of the project. In this thesis, an issue of particular additional importance was the large volume of data (for a qualitative study). Besides, the material analysed was very different. Concerning magazine content, it is now widely recognised that texts are polysemic and multifaceted, and that there is no one fixed and unitary meaning to be discovered by the media analyst, nor one unique way of reading or interpreting a text, not least because of contextually influenced variability. At the same time, most media analysts would agree that certain readings are dominant or preferred (Hall 1980), especially with carefully edited, strongly branded and targeted texts such as those in women's magazines. This contrasts sharply with the content from Internet forums, which is generated anonymously by members of the public separated in time and space to exchange information, advice and support. Postings to online forums are characterised by spontaneous expression, intimate self-disclosure and informality. The language is often unedited, containing elements from speech, contractions, punctuation oddities, spelling and grammatical errors (Seale et al. 2010). Contrasting the so-called naturalistic material from magazines and forums, discourse generated in interviews is profoundly influenced by the researcher's agenda. Moreover, the research interview is a "joint venture" (Gaskell 2000: 45) where meaning is co-constructed between researcher and researched (Hesse-Biber 2007), a very specific social event punctured by performed, affective and embodied dimensions, often in unpredictable ways. Interview data, Edley and Litosseliti (2010) argue, must therefore be treated as *social interaction.*

With these considerations in mind, I decided to conduct a thematic analysis (TA) of the data corpus. Specifically, I draw on the definitions and step-by-step guide developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006), whose six phases of TA can be found in Table 4.2. I selected this qualitative "method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" as it is suitable for a varied range of data types (Braun and Clarke 2006: 79). Furthermore, TA can be applied

across a range of theoretical positions and epistemological paradigms (unlike, for example, other traditions like grounded theory, which are "theoretically bounded") (Braun and Clarke 2006: 80). The flexibility of the method also lies in the possibility for theme 'size' as well as prevalence to be determined in a number of ways. In this thesis, the importance of a theme is notably measured in terms of *occurrence across* articles/threads/interviews. However, influenced by discourse analysis (see next section), I also consider *deviant cases* as well as *absences* (i.e. what is not said). TA can be used to produce: "A rich [thematic] description of the data set, or a detailed account of one particular aspect" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 83). In the former type of analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006: 83) observe, "some depth and complexity is necessarily lost". However, as they also note, this is a "particularly useful method when you are investigating an under-researched area, or you are working with participants whose views on the topic are not known" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 83), as well as when dealing with large amounts of different types of data. In the analysis presented in this thesis I move back and forth from providing more comprehensive and broad-spectrum to more detailed and nuanced accounts of themes (and sub-themes) identified in the data.

The whole data corpus—magazine articles, forum threads, interviews, and supplementary material like trade press—was imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software to aid organisation, note-taking and coding, namely organising and collating data into meaningful groups, and thus a part of the early phases of analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). I used both deductive/theory-driven and inductive/data-driven coding methods (Braun and Clarke 2006). The former involved coding for a quite specific research question, for example: 'How do the producers of women's magazines define feminism?' (see Chapter Nine). The latter entailed several close readings of the whole data corpus for meanings/ideas/representations that captured the patterning of the data and met—but also informed—the research interests (e.g. 'confidence', see Chapter Eight). Both coding methods require a long process of creating, discarding and re-organising codes and sub-codes. Similarly, in the next phase, namely the identification of potential themes, much time was dedicated to collating, reviewing and abandoning, re-defining, re-naming and refining themes and sub-themes.

Table 4.2 Phases of thematic analysis (from Braun and Clarke 2006)

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Braun and Clarke (2006: 84) establish two main 'levels' at which themes can be identified in TA: "At a semantic or explicit level, or at a latent or interpretative level". In this thesis both TA approaches are deployed. The 'solidary critical' orientation that informed my analysis and writing up of the interview data, expounded below in 4.5.3 (see also the discussion on feminist poststructuralism and theoretical impurity), involved developing multi-perspectival understandings, and hence making ongoing efforts to shift the analytical angle. In terms of TA, this entailed at times organising the data to "show patterns in semantic content" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 84) or "reporting a surface reading of the data" (Farvid et al. 2016: 6). Sometimes there is a political motivation for the 'semantic TA' – one clear example being accounts by journalists of precarious working conditions, as presented in Section 4.5.3 (see Gill 2009b for a similar decision in her study of new media workers). A focus upon the 'face value' of the interview material was also deemed important in light of the little previous research on the understandings, opinions and experiences of women's magazine producers. In greater alignment with a constructionist paradigm, more emphasis was placed upon 'latent TA', particularly when analysing the magazine texts, due to a concern about the broader implications of their 'dominant readings' (Hall 1980; see Chapter Two). Braun and Clarke (2006: 84) explain:

> A thematic analysis at the latent level goes beyond the semantic content of the data, and starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations—and ideologies—that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data.

Therefore, as Braun and Clarke (2006) note, the 'latent approach' in TA overlaps with some forms of discourse analysis (see below). The last phase, namely 'producing the report', entailed selecting the final textual illustrations, a process which I found excruciating as all extracts appeared to me as fascinating, compelling

and important as the next – especially those (very many!) from the interviews. It also involved a constant going back and forward across the entire dataset, the coded extracts of data, and the analysis being produced (Braun and Clarke 2006). I likewise underwent a recursive process of (re-)engagement with the research questions and relevant literature – as well as carefully (re-)considered the broader cultural, social, political and economic environment, in order to generate interdiscursive, contextualised and socio-political accounts. This is crucial for the traditions of discourse and conjunctural analysis, both of which have influenced this thesis, and are respectively explored next.

4.4.2 Discourse analysis

'Discourse analysis' (DA) is a broad umbrella term used across disciplines and encompassing a varied range of approaches. Still, there tend to be a number of commonalities, which Gill (in press) usefully organises into five main themes. First, (most) discourse analysts are interested in texts (broadly understood) *in their own right*. This speaks to the second theme, namely "a rejection of the realist notion that language is simply a neutral means of reflecting or describing the world, and a belief in the central importance of language and representations in constructing social life" (Gill in press). That is, DA is underpinned by a social constructionist orientation (see also Chapter One). The third theme pertains to an understanding of discourse as social practice and "occasioned", namely "produced for a particular audience or context" (Gill in press). This involves an analytic concern with its 'action' or 'function orientation'. Forth, there is an emphasis upon the rhetorical nature of texts, which "directs our attention to the ways in which discourse is organized to make itself persuasive" (Gill in press). Gill continues: "Finally, discourse analysis involves identifying patterns in discourse, being able to highlight recurrent themes or ideas or tropes – particularly when looking across a corpus of data". This also includes contradictions, and a sensitivity to silences or absences, which "in turn requires a significant awareness of the social, political and cultural trends and contexts to which our texts refer" (Gill in press).

DA was popularised in Media and Communications Studies from the 1990s onwards, "reflecting a wider 'turn to language' across the humanities and social sciences, along with the influence of poststructuralist ideas" (Gill in press), which

notably includes Foucaultian ideas. Foucault (1972: 49) understands discourses as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak", becoming structures both of possibility and constraint (Talbot 2010). Another important influence from his archaeological works is the primacy given to intertextuality (see below). Later his genealogies highlighted the discursive nature of power, and thus the need to attend to discourse in social research, as well as for DA to attend to both power *in* and *over* discourse (Fairclough 1992). Foucault (1981: 52-53) maintains: "discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle: discourse is the power which is to be seized". Resistant to the Marxist concept of ideology, seen to imply a universal truth, rationality and (unitary) subject, Foucault (1980: 118) aimed to explore "historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false". However, in my view, not all 'truth effects' are ideological. That is, I find the concept of ideology useful analytically (and politically).

Similar to Gill (2009a) in her analysis of women's magazines, I consider that a feminist broadly Foucaultian-influenced approach can be productively integrated with the 'critical' orientation found in the perspective (van Dijk 2015) or research programme (Wodak and Meyer 2009) of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), itself very much influenced by Critical Theory (see Hidalgo Tenorio 2011). Although CDA is not a specific method and there are many types of CDA (see Wodak and Meyer 2009), researchers have developed a range of tools and strategies for detailed linguistic analyses. Due to this attention to the micro level of language, rooted as it is in critical linguistics (e.g. Fowler et al. 1979), CDA is not ideal for analysing a large body of data, as is here the case. Nonetheless, its general perspectives on and insights into discourse and language, along with its theorico-political tenets, can be valuably incorporated into a less fine-grained approach that takes 'theme' (in the Braun and Clarke sense) as the unit of analysis.

Although Foucault is one of its "theoretical 'godfathers'" (Wodak and Meyer 2009: 10), CDA places at the heart of analyses the notion of ideology, albeit understood in different ways. In this thesis, the term ideology is used to designate the ways in which meaning is mobilised to establish and sustain unequal power relations (Thompson 1984; Wodak 2001). CDA also deviates from Foucault with its emphasis upon concrete instances of practice, namely contextualised text and talk. In CDA, a

socio-theoretical view of discourse as "different ways of structuring areas of knowledge and social practice" (that is, in the Foucaultian sense) is combined with the "text-and-interaction" linguistics sense (Fairclough 1992: 3, 4). The starting assumption is that social inequality and injustice are repeatedly re/produced in and legitimised by language (Titscher et al. 2000). That is, language is understood as a principal vehicle for social control and power, and as an integral element of the material social process (Fairclough 2001). CDA examines what it considers to be a complex dialectically causal relationship between semiosis and other elements of social practices, which are hence both, constituted by and constitutive of discourse (Fairclough 2001). Also closely attended to are—both diachronic and synchronic—interrelations between different utterances, texts, genres and discourses (intertextuality, intergenericity, interdiscursivity), along with processes of recontextualisation (Fairclough 1992; Wodak 2006).

CDA scholars take an open and explicitly political stance (van Dijk 2008), and acknowledge how this intersects with research interests (Wodak 2001). This is clearly evidenced in Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA). The aim of FCDA, Michelle Lazar (2007: 145) explains, is "critiquing discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order". FCDA researchers examine how gender/ed power and dominance are discursively re/produced and (counter-)resisted in contextualised instances of texts and talk, making connections to material elements of social practice (Lazar 2007). Interestingly, Lazar (2007: 154) highlights this approach as particularly important when researching "the global neo-liberal discourse of postfeminism", which is "of particular concern to feminist CDA", as it: "reframes women's struggles and accomplishments as a purely personal matter, thus obscuring the social and material constraints faced by different groups of women". For this form of "analytical activism": "the ultimate goal is a radical social transformation based on social justice", which entails a radical subversion of the gender order (Lazar 2007: 153). Lazar (2007: 153) continues to observe: "From this view, liberal reformist positions – even when embraced by some feminists – are inadequate and can be easily co-opted by the dominant structures". Following from its "radical emancipatory agenda" (Lazar 2007: 154), F/CDA: "starts from prevailing social problems, and thereby chooses the perspective of those who suffer most, and critically analyses those in power, those who are responsible, and those who have the means and the opportunity to solve such problems" (van Dijk 1986: 4). However, the

oppressed-oppressor dualism that is so common in CDA, the dichotomy between research in solidarity with 'dominated groups' and the critique of 'powerful groups' (van Dijk 2015)—notably the media—proved inappropriate for my research on the producers of women's magazines. This is explored later in Section 4.5.3.

4.4.3 Conjuntural analysis

Resembling other critical scholars of culture and media, CDA analysts have found a productive framework for conceptualising power and accounting for change and struggle in Gramsci's notion of hegemony. Sally Davison (2011: 2) defines hegemony as follows:

> Rule that is secured through the broad consent of the population, rather than through domination. This is secured partly through making concessions to subordinate groups, but most crucially through seeking to make the ideas of the interests represented by the dominant classes appear to be the obvious 'common sense' of a whole society. ('Common sense' is another key Gramscian term).

As a site of struggle and challenge by alternative or oppositional forces, every hegemonic order must be continually defended, renewed, modified. Hegemony is, then, a partial and temporary, "contradictory and unstable equilibrium" (Fairclough 1992: 93). A "central part of winning consent or achieving hegemony", Gill (2007: 57) points out, is creating new subject positions (in discourse) and (thus) transforming subjectivities. As she argues, these Gramscian ideas offer valuable tools for understanding representations of gender in the media, drawing our attention to: "the dynamic qualities of ideology – its mobility and fluidity; the fragmented nature of subjectivity; and the significance of winning consent for particular identities through struggle" (Gill 2007a: 57).

Fairclough (1992) proposes mapping hegemonic struggle in DA in terms of processes of articulation, disarticulation and rearticulation. In this sense, Hall's (1986) theory of articulation developed within the field of cultural studies is particularly helpful (Chapter One discussed how McRobbie 2009 builds on this work through the idea of disarticulation to explain the 'undoing' of feminism by postfeminism). Hall (1986: 53) understands articulation as: "the form of the connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time". Hall (1986: 53) further explains:

> Thus, a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects.

The term 'conjuncture' refers to the settlement that is formed when "all the complex forces operating in a society during a given period" come together into a particular articulation (Davison 2011: 2). Lawrence Grossberg (2006: 5) adds: "A conjuncture is always a social formation understood as more than a mere context – but as an articulation, accumulation, or condensation of contradictions".

Conjunctural analysis is crucial to cultural studies, as well as left strategy generally (Jessop 2012). Pioneered by Hall, it "looks at cultural, ideological and social forces, as well as at the underlying economic structures, of any given moment" (Davison 2011: 2). It entails complicating classical notions of economic determinism and paying attention to the different levels of expression of the "complex field of power and consent" (Hall and Massey 2012: 63), and "thinking the relations between things" (Gill 2011: 68). As Jonathan Rutherford and Sally Davison (2012: 6) note, in addition to considering the social, political and economic: "A critical part of this kind of analysis is the recognition of the importance of culture". Therefore, Jo Littler (2016: 238) explains, "practicing or trying to produce it necessarily involves being trans/inter/anti disciplinary", inventively borrowing analytic tools and theories as needed to pursue the inquiry at hand.

At the same time, most conjuncturally-oriented analysts tend to draw on certain key tenets and resources in cultural studies. Littler (2016: 238) lists the following: "the importance of thinking through the cultural and the political together"; a "poststructuralist understanding of discourse which can be 'articulated' (Laclau and Mouffe 1995)"; a view of "tendencies as dominant, residual or emergent (Williams 1977)"; and a "Gramscian understanding of cultural hegemony". At its core, doing conjunctural analysis means asking the question: 'What are the particular character and power dynamics of this particular moment?' (Littler 2016) In engaging with this suggestive and important concept, throughout the analysis of the data for this thesis I also considered the ensuing questions, as suggested by Littler (2016: 238-239):

> What is specific about the moment we inhabit? What common-sense understandings, what economic decisions, power dynamics, what vested interests and collaborative terrains work to shape its contours? What does this constellation of forces look like? How are these power configurations different from before?

4.5 Ethical and political considerations

4.5.1 Reproducing e-voices

The ethical considerations of using online user-generated content as data for qualitative research are subject to ongoing debate, particularly when the selected analytic method requires direct quoting. A much-discussed ethical complex arises when attempting to assess what constitutes public material, complicated by divergences between site accessibility and user perception (e.g. Sveningsson Elm 2009; Nissenbaum 2010). Another key debate concerns whether researchers are working with 'texts and authors' or 'human participants' (Snee 2013). The former implicates the need to deal with issues of authorship and copyright. The latter, by contrast, places the focus upon privacy protection, and guaranteeing anonymity and gaining informed consent from participants emerge as important ethical measures to consider. However, obtaining consent for e-research is sometimes unwarranted and often unviable, as in the case of large anonymous forums. Against this backdrop, the Association of Internet Researchers advocates a case-based approach to Internet research ethics (Markham and Buchanan 2012).

In line with other researchers (e.g. Seale et al. 2010), this thesis considers open-access online forums as public spaces. All retrieved messages were publically accessible, although registration was required to post by providing a valid email address and self-selected username. Upon setting up an account, users were also asked to read and agree to the Terms and Conditions, where most companies included reminders such as: "Postings to the Discussion Forums are not private" (*Cosmopolitan.co.uk*), and: "A forum is a public space analysed by search engines" (*EnFemenino.com*). However, as the concept for Internet research ethics of 'perceived privacy' (Sveningsson-Elm 2009) highlights, forum users may still consider their postings private, and these were certainly not published for scholarly scrutiny (see Nissenbaum 2010 on 'contextual integrity'). Furthermore, the content of interest in this thesis is at times of an intimate and sensitive nature. As a result, I decided to privilege adopting anonymising measures over attributing authorial credit. This means that in addition to the open accessibility criteria, I checked that forums allowed anonymous commentary through pseudonymisation. Pseudonyms (and other names) were removed in order to further de-identify contributors, and because they can be an important part of people's online persona and/or reputation. A further

ethical safeguard is that the analysis presented in this thesis draws attention to prevailing presentations, themes, discourses, not the specificities of any individual user (or journalist).

Speaking to the interest with actual language use in discourse analysis, throughout this thesis the extracts from the forums are direct quotations. It must be noted, then, that all capitalisation and errors remain as in the original post. Having said this, I only quote directly from the material gathered from the UK-based sites, as all the presented data extracts from the forums—as well as magazines and producer interviews—that were originally in Spanish have been translated into English. This always entails a process of interpretation. Often I encountered words and phrases, jokes and proverbs that carry specific cultural meanings in Spanish without an exact equivalent in English. Accordingly, although I am fairly confident with my linguistic competence, and knowledge of the historical and cultural contexts of the UK and Spain, my translations inevitably carry some loss of specificity in language use, as well as a level of mediation by my own subjective judgment about the meanings being expressed and the most appropriate manner to articulate them in English. As is the case with the other dilemmas encountered in this cross-cultural social science qualitative study, I dealt with the issue around translation across languages in an ongoing, deliberative and self-reflexive manner, and attentive to the understanding that different judgments or interpretations could often have been equally legitimate and sound.

4.5.2 Interviewing women

Fundamental to codes of ethical practice for qualitative researchers conducting interviews are the questions of informed consent and anonymity. The latter involves careful consideration of how much information to disclose about individual participants and from interview transcripts. In this thesis, identifying information about individuals and brands from transcripts is either withheld or replaced with generic terms (e.g. 'magazine name'). The other fundamental anonymisation technique involves the delimitation of participant details to: a) approximate age (in early/mid/late formulation); b) sex; c) position; and d) country. Moreover, providing this personal information was voluntary (all participants readily agreed to provide it). Besides, the details accompanying interview extracts were agreed upon with each

individual, with many for example opting for more generic post nomenclatures. As an additional measure, I have omitted elements in those moments when I have felt that anonymity might potentially be compromised. Some participants kindly offered to be personally identified so as to support/strengthen my analysis/claims. Since this was left to my own discretion, I have decided to leave names undisclosed as a precautionary measure. When considering the provided information about participants, it must be noted that staff reshuffling and new appointments have taken place since the interviews were conducted.

Another important consideration in interview research concerns what and how much information is revealed to participants about the study before and during the interview, with a view on the one hand to questions of informed consent, and on the other to the possible impact upon the data generated. Although I deemed a certain amount of ambiguity necessary—for example the extent of my critical views about the industry—I wanted to avoid an active strategy of covertness, and most certainly of deception. This means that I never eliminated or adapted any publicly accessible personal online profiles, where my critical research interests and feminist identity is clearly stated, nor did I refrain from revealing information about myself and/or my work when asked (e.g. on forthcoming publications); a decision which most likely contributed to the probable degree of self-selection bias in the sample toward individuals with more critical views about women's magazines. For this same reason, I never altered my everyday aesthetic and sartorial practices (see also 4.3.2). Of course, building trust and gaining acceptance whilst not misrepresenting one's own position is "a delicate balancing act" (Klatch 1987: 18), which I most probably managed in a variously 'successful' manner (Luff 1999). Despite my efforts, I am certain that some participants would/will experience a sense of deception upon encountering my analyses, or at least feel unfavourably portrayed. This is an almost inevitable result from critical deconstruction work. Although I explained that direct quotations from the interviews would be used to illustrate patterns in discourse, I did not expound in detail the process of text-based inquiry in social constructionist research. I hope, however, to have written the analysis chapters in a manner that renders categorically clear that my object of critique is *not* the individual person (or even publication) – and in a way too that is solidary as well as critical. It is to discussing such an orientation that I dedicate the next section. First, the reminder of this section sets the context by bringing in the actual interview material.

As already noted, the producers of women's magazines are notoriously difficult to recruit for research. I asked participants about this, and received a patterned range of responses. One pertained to a desire to "preserve the mystique behind it", namely the glossy, fantasy world of the woman's magazine. More recurrently mentioned was not wanting to "give the trade secrets away". For some this was particularly important at present due to current industry challenges: "People keep the cards close to their chest. They are protective because the industry is increasingly more difficult to actually keep a niche in". Rather than "trade secrets", more critical voices would point to "agendas": "Maybe they don't want people to realise they have such a set agenda, and by engaging in conversation, it will become apparent that they are trying to get people to think a certain way". The refusal to participate in research was also explained by characterising people in the industry as "snobs" and "divas", even "very frivolous and silly" (I must note, however, that much more frequent were descriptions of industry insiders such as: "The people are lovely to work with, and they're not stupid bimbo people, which is often how they're presented"). One participant similarly spoke about magazine producers' "egos" for being "the voices": "Maybe it's an ego thing. We know that we are in demand by people that want us to feature their products. We are the voices. We are used to being a little bit harassed". Somewhat relatedly, almost always mentioned was: "Time. Most journalists don't have time to breathe". Another person similarly reasoned as follows: "I think it's a time thing because I don't understand why we wouldn't want our voices to be heard, because women's media has got so much flak from the media, from the world". That is, for some contributing to the research was an opportunity to contest widespread negative represent>ations of the industry. Corroborating previous research (Gough-Yates 2003; Murphy 2013), this "flak" was commonly advanced as the very reason why magazine producers avoid giving interviews. I was told that "editors in particular [who] class their publications as their babies, don't want the scrutiny". Moreover, they are "fed up" of talking about issues like size zero models, eating disorders and photoshopping. Certainly, my relative recruitment success seems to be partly due to the research interest in sex and relationships rather than fashion and beauty. As I discuss in the next chapter, magazine journalists explained that: "Those of us who write about sex and relationships have much more freedom because there is very little advertising". It appears that my focus upon the web rather than print also helped for this very same reason. One Spanish writer claimed to have

agreed to talk to me:

> Because I work online [where] advertising is not as powerful as in the print magazine. Probably if I was the director in print of the beauty section I would be scared to talk to you because maybe you would ask me lots of uncomfortable things because it is obvious and true that much of the content is produced according to the advertising clients. (Online writer, early 40s, Spain)

Again, in explaining their willingness to participate, freelancers would note: "As I am a freelancer I am not so subjected to the criteria of advertisers". Vividly illustrating the extent of this 'subjection', after our interview one editor who had not said anything particularly revealing about the issue sent me an email with the following request:

████████████████████████████
████████

This crucial reason for challenges in recruiting women's magazine producers for research was usefully summarised by one Spanish writer as follows: "It is principally because of economic questions […] the world of women's magazines is very hermetic because it depends a lot on advertising". Industry insiders fear "getting into trouble", for "pissing off" advertisers – as well as the magazines themselves, which are "very strict" with their "public persona" and "message". I was told that: "If you annoy the wrong people, or if aren't seem to uphold what that magazine stands for and the message they are putting out to their readers […] You'll get penalised". This is particularly the case for staff, who are expected to always represent, indeed, *be* the brand. As a result: "Freelancers will speak to you a lot more easily because they're not tied in to a company in that way." Even freelancers, however, fear being perceived as "shit stirrers" and "betrayers" and being "singled out as badmouthing", since "that's going to affect their ability to contract work in the future". "You just can't bite the hand that feeds you basically", many summed up. While this could be applied to every job/industry, again I want to highlight the woman's magazine as particularly problematic, constituting what a British editor called "the culture of fear". Both in the UK and in Spain, magazine professionals maintained that "it's a precarious industry to work in", and that: "We are hugely under pressure, massively underpaid. You feel like your job could be lost at any given moment. That is the culture of women's magazines". It was often additionally highlighted that: "Trying to get into these companies, trying to get a job with them or an internship or anything,

that's hard". In explaining other industry insiders' reluctance to talk to researchers, a British freelancer similarly said: "They feel like their job is... They fought so hard to get it, and they're scared to talk. I just don't care anymore. I'm not scared of anyone, I've decided". That is, some framed talking to me as an act of defiance, of deciding to "not be scared anymore".

My interviews with women's magazine producers corroborate various findings from previous research on the lives of workers in contemporary (new) media, and the CCI more generally (see Chapter Three). This includes the ways in which great enthusiasm toward and passionate attachments to their professional identity, activity and field coexist with working conditions characterised by long hours, modest earnings, insecurity and precariousness – together with continued broader dynamics of inequality and exclusion. Examples highlighted by British producers of women's magazines include the manner in which "people still hire in their own likeness", along with the fact that internships are largely necessary but "nearly always unpaid"[19] and based in the expensive city that is London. A young writer explained: "When I did my internships I was so lucky because I had parents who lived in the suburbs of London. It was an hour, and they let me live at the house rent-free. That's how I managed to do it". Still, she described her time as an intern as "unbelievably depressing", partly because:

> There was this dreaded feeling when you'd get to the end of two weeks or three weeks or a month, whatever, "I really really want to stay". They'd throw a huge bag of make up on your desk, crap turquoise eye shadows that no one wants, and that would be your payment. They're like, "thanks, you've been great". (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

As discussed in Chapter Three, previous studies have shown how in addition to gender disparities in terms of numbers and a persistent sexual division of labour, female media professionals continue to regularly encounter masculinist and often sexist work cultures (Byerly and Ross 2006; Proctor-Thomson 2013; Duffy 2016). My data corroborate this. For example, explaining how she had ended up working for a woman's magazine, one British journalist recounted:

> After university, I did work experience at a newspaper [name of top-selling 'quality' paper], on the news desk, which is quite male dominated. I didn't really enjoy it very much. [...] It wasn't the job itself. It was definitely the atmosphere. [...] I saw there was sexism in the office. One thing I really remember is there was a woman wearing a pair of quite tight black trousers, and some sleazy old man basically was staring at her

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[19] What is more, according to according to Baxter and Cosslett (2016): "Unpaid internships are so much more common in areas that women work in".

bottom. As a young girl, I didn't really like that. (Former online deputy editor and current freelance editor and writer, mid-30s, UK)

Further to offering additional corroborative examples, my study of women's magazines contributes novel insights to the growing literature exposing gendered patterns of discrimination, inequality and exclusion in the CCI (e.g. see edited collection by Conor et al. 2015). First, there seems to be significant disparity in salaries with respect to other similar sectors. According to a British editor: "Compared to all other areas in the media, including men's glossy magazines like *GQ*, the pay gap is extraordinary". The discussion continued as follows:

> Laura: What is, then, the appeal of the industry?
> Editor: A, it's occupied by a lot of women like me, who got their magazines delivered to their door and had big hopes of becoming editor of *Vogue* at some point in their life when they were a teenager. That's probably why you start getting pushed into the machine. Also, to be honest, that's where the jobs are. It's incredibly difficult to find work as a female journalist elsewhere unless you're going to be a columnist, a Caitlin Moran or an Eva Wiseman or that kind of stuff. (Features editor and freelancer, mid-20s, UK)

What is more, it was asserted that "once you're in the female magazine machine, it's actually quite difficult to leave unless you want to go into commercial work at a publication that does Tesco magazine or whatever like that"[20]. The writers and editors of women's magazines asserted that it is common for other types of publications like newspapers to not regard them as "proper journalists". For a writer: "There is an assumption in the journalism industry at large that like if you have experience writing for women then you probably have no idea how to write for anyone else". Others spoke of being told by newspapers that their "skills don't translate". "There's a real snobbery around women's publications within the industry and we're aware of it as jobbing journalists", one features editor observed. Writing for a general-interest publication, "does give you a little bit more respect to the industry", expounded the US writer I spoke to. In her view: "There is definitely some sexism in there, and I think it is also just a reflection of basically like the societal hierarchy and how women's issues are often devalued". It was moreover emphasised that further to providing work and a "decent commission", in contrast to other media like newspapers, women's magazines "treat you well":

> Female freelancers flock towards women's monthly because it's one of the places where you will get a decent commission. If you look at the stats for newspaper articles, it's still dominated mainly by male writers. Women's magazines will pay you a good

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[20] Tesco is a large British grocery and general merchandise retailer.

fee and treat you well, won't do a *Daily Mail* on you and try and to make you become a hate figure. (Features writer, mid-20s, UK)

As already mentioned, many explained the refusal or hesitance to talk to researchers in light of the amount of critique these publications receive. One writer spoke of "being scared of criticism and just making sure that the study is a positive one. A lot of people are very critical of women's magazines and women's features a lot of the time". Importantly, also mentioned was wanting to avoid further criticism at an individual level: "As a journalist, you're open to criticism anyway from everyone, especially now. Someone can look at your byline and then find you on Twitter. […] If you're opening yourself up to criticism anyway, then you don't really want to potentially risk yourself for more". Gendered dimensions were also noted, for example with reference to being "misinterpreted": "Women's experience in media is you say X, and X, Y, Z gets published".

Therefore, my research rendered palpable the difficult terrain of journalism for (young) women, heightening my sense of obligation to 'protect' participants. It also brought to the fore the potential dangers of fuelling with my critique a culture of denigration of women's media grounded in masculinist values. Furthermore, I stand in solidarity with these women as workers who face limited and limiting opportunities outside (and within) feminised arenas, and who have restricted space to manoeuvre in attempting to effect change within their field. Having worked as a primary school teacher for many years, I often had to subjugate my own views to meet the demands of the schools' philosophy and curricula, much like my participants need to respond to the magazines' strategies and their advertisers' demands. And, again, I did not revolutionise the education system but like many of the interviewed journalists attempted to 'make a difference' even if with subtle acts often possibly imperceptible to others. Intensifying this sense of solidarity even more was my participants' feminist self-identification. At the same time, I believed that many of the discourses these women (and few men) reproduce in their talk and work are problematic, indeed often profoundly ideological and injurious, and needed therefore to be documented, deconstructed and challenged.

4.5.3 A solidary critique

What first drove me to study women's magazines was bewilderment about their popularity as a non-reader, connected to a conviction that this media is profoundly pernicious. I felt complete disidentification with—even animosity toward—women working in the industry. So the fieldwork rendered my research much more complex, affect-laden and dilemmatic that expected. Returning to the literature on feminist methodologies, I found some consolation. A research interview, Marjorie L. DeVault and Glenda Gross (2012: 216) explain, involves "active listening", namely: "allowing that information to affect you, baffle you, haunt you, make you uncomfortable, and take you on unexpected detours". It entails interrogating "deep-seated assumptions about various worlds" and our "arrogant perceptions of others in those worlds" (DeVault and Gross 2012: 218). Complicating my initial position, my research indicates that the producers of women's magazines simultaneously (re)produce, suffer as well as contest sexist media; and play an important cultural role in the production, reproduction and dissemination of anti-feminist but also feminist ideas and identities. The 'solidarity with the oppressed'/'critique of the oppressor' dualism of CDA (partly due to a delimitation of analysis to media texts) and common distinctions made in feminist research (and beyond) between studying/interviewing 'up' versus 'down' (e.g. Ortner 2010) offered little help for negotiating a situation which criss-crosses and complicates these distinctions, or the dilemmatic terrain of researching other women who identify as feminists, and whose feminism may conflict with the researcher's own perspectives. All this, added to my gratitude and sense of obligation to the participants, together with guilt for my early prejudices and the attachments formed through the encounters, led me to experience great timidity, paralysis even, when it came to the moment of interpretation and representation of the data, of deciding what to include and exclude, indeed what my research 'story' was going to be (namely when I was most unequivocally holding power [Phoenix 1994]). Most simply, I felt divided by a sense of responsibility to my participants on the one hand, and, on the other, to not only readers but also all other women as subjects of the landscape of femininity magazines contribute to establish, as well as myself both as a woman injured by the current gender order and as a feminist dedicated to its radical transformation. My experience strongly resonates with Maria do Mar Pereira's experience of researching as an academic other academics. She writes:

> Anne Beaulieu argues that these challenges make these studies 'busy' ethnographies (2010: 463) that demand constant attention and force the ethnographer to 'simultaneously attend to multiple kinds of accountability' and engage in 'a kind of hyper-reflexivity that requires both skill and intensive work' (2010: 460-461). This, as Sheehan notes, can at times cause 'almost paralysing' anxiety (1993b: 75) and place the researcher 'on tenterhooks [especially] during the writing up process' (1993b: 85) (Pereira 2013: 195).

In working through this impasse, I found particularly useful the feminist writing on ethics in empirical social research. This then came to inform the articulation of what I have called a 'solidary critique' as a guiding feature through the processes of data analysis and writing up. First, the feminist 'ethic of care (and relationship)' calls for empathy and respect for, together with receptiveness to, the understandings and experiences of the other, admitting emotion into the ethical process (Edwards and Mauthner 2002; Preissle and Han 2012). However, there are potential problems with the ethic of care in a research context. Echoing my own experience, Rosalind Edwards and Melanie Mauthner (2002: 23) list the following: "sacrifice or loss of self", "failure to recognize autonomy of other" and "over-identification with other"; which are particularly worrisome when researching people involved in social practices deemed problematic. Here the "ethics of intention (and political praxis)" offers a crucial intervention. For Val Gillies and Pam Alldred (2002: 43): "Once research is acknowledged to be a political activity (e.g. Mayall, 1999), questions of ethics cannot be separated from political aims and intentions. Judgements of ethical practice therefore become situation specific, with criteria tied to politically informed intentions". Gillies and Alldred (2002: 43) additionally argue that producing research explicitly tied to a political agenda can help diminish the possibility of our work "being invoked to back analyses we would not support politically", and to "retain some control over the political uses to which the 'knowledge' we produce might be put", which is particularly important when researching spaces/machineries renown for utilising strategies of co-optation, such as women's magazines. In calling for research as an explicitly political tool, Gillies and Alldred (2002: 43) also make the claim that: "Once our faith in objective positivism is shaken, the goals of feminist research tend to be transformed from attempting to better understand or represent women's experiences, to the explicitly political aim of challenging gender oppression and improving women's lives". However, as I see it, the particularities of my research demand that I both challenge gender oppression *and* better understand women's (accounts of their) experiences. Moreover, these distinctions are too

simplistic in the context of my research (and possibly also beyond), which is why I found embarking on a critique of these women's talk so challenging.

Enormously valuable in this regard was the notion of 'critical respect' developed by Gill (2007c) in a somewhat different context, namely as part of a discussion about conceptualisations of female choice and agency in feminist research. Gill (2007c: 77) writes:

> It is absolutely crucial that a feminist account of the popularity of G-strings, glossy magazines, cosmetic surgery or any other practice should listen to and treat respectfully women's accounts of their experiences of such practices. This is axiomatic to feminist research. Yet surely this 'respect' does not mean treating those accounts as if they are the *only* stories that can be told? The role of the feminist intellectual must involve more than listening, and then saying 'I see'. Respectful listening is the beginning, not the end, of the process and our job is surely to contextualize these stories, to situate them, to look at their patterns and variability, to examine their silences and exclusions, and, above all, to locate them in a wider context.

An "orientation of critical respect": "involves attentive, respectful listening, to be sure, but it does not abdicate the right to question or interrogate" (Gill 2007c: 78). Gill (2007c: 77) also emphasises that: "to situate an individual's account is not to disrespect it. Indeed, sometimes not doing this would be irresponsible and disrespectful".

Though intimately related to 'critical respect', the orientation or approach I am proposing as especially useful for this study instead centres *critique*, informed by a feminist ethics of intention and driven by a Foucauldian understanding that: "Radical transformation can only emerge from radical critique" (Gannon and Davies 2012: 70). I found Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2013b) definition of critical practice in communication and media studies particularly useful. Resonating the tradition in CDA and Critical Theory more generally, Banet-Weiser (2013b) writes: "Critical practice means always contending with the question of how power works and how it has worked historically". A critical approach to communication and media also involves "seeing cultural practices as not merely emergent but also always residual", as well as "insist[ing] on culture as too rich and too important to be understood within a binary frame". Ultimately, Banet-Weiser (2013b) argues, critique is an expression of "a particular kind of hope for what we want our work to do". She continues: "It is about having the kind of faith and investment in culture that it demands our critical attention; it is a recuperative project, it is, above all else, about an ethics of care" (Banet-Weiser 2013b).

Rather than the notions of care or respect, I use the adjective 'solidary' to qualify 'critique'. As I see it, solidarity not only incorporates care, respect as well as other important elements for social justice interventions like empathy, but is also a more politicised concept that always already demands contextualisation and entails collectivity. This research highlights collectivity both in the sense that power relations mediate us all – me included; and in terms of my responsibility to others to offer interpretations of the generated data. This includes understanding scholarly critique as providing participants 'tools to think with' in order to collectively push for transformation within the industry, and beyond. In this sense, a useful and sympathetic approach is feminist poststructuralism, suggesting as it does that "we are simultaneously both less and more free than we might think" (Gavey 2011: 185). As Gavey (2011: 185) argues, this approach understands "our obedience to dominant cultural norms and values (in a way that is more nuanced and respectful than the older notion of 'false consciousness')", providing as they do the (sometimes very limited) "conditions of possibility for being and acting in the world", yet also highlights these as contingent and rarely overdetermining. In doing so, Gavey (2011: 185) maintains, "it shines light on possibilities for being and acting otherwise—and for imagining more just and ethical conditions". Therefore, I am developing my critique of the text and talk I have gathered in solidarity with the participants, and in particular with those who expressed a desire for change. Also, and importantly, the work is conducted in solidarity with the readers, and ultimately women in general, present and future, including myself and the women I love, for whom women's magazines form a part of a limiting and limited, pernicious and injurious cultural landscape of normative femininity.

In procedural terms, during the interviews I endeavoured to offer participants opportunities to develop comprehensive explanations, looking at the same issue from different perspectives, suggest areas of inquiry, speak back to critiques, and challenge my thinking. Analytically, a solidary critique incorporates a poststructuralist sensitivity to the heterogeneity of experience, different levels of context, and the capillary and polymorphous nature of power, attending to moments of struggle, and resisting both the romantisation as well as the negation of resistance. It aims to offer multi-causal explanations that transcend binaries, to work in and with complexity and contradictions; and prioritises questions of politics and ethics over theoretical and methodological purity. When I began the process of data analysis, I

felt conflicted by a 'double pull' between the precepts and approaches of discourse analysis on the one hand, and a more realist 'impetus' toward some talk as (albeit mediated) descriptions on the other. I felt a need *politically* to take some accounts at face value, at least to some extent, notably with regard to working conditions (see above). To help me through this predicament, I found much use in Gavey's (2011: 187) argument for "embracing theoretical impurity—in an informed and sensitive way". Gavey (2011: 187) writes:

> Some discourse and conversation analysts find it impossible to step outside a theoretical logic that requires focusing on the performative aspect of any statement, looking for the communicative work being done to construct a particular desired effect (such as an identity or argument). However, if we are bound by this kind of theoretical and methodological purity with regard to how we understand language, then it is difficult to engage with questions to do with politics and ethics—where the material and relational conditions of people's lives matter. If we are interested in this material world, then we have to rely on taking realist accounts of that world at least somewhat at face value in order to be able to discuss a working idea of what these conditions are.

In her own interview-based research with women, Gavey (2011: 187) also found the need "to work simultaneously with two theoretically contradictory understandings of language—as descriptive on one hand and constitutive on the other". She argues: "This kind of bi- or multi-theoretical flexibility is necessary, I would suggest, for supporting feminist scholarship and research that is adequately rich in scope" (Gavey 2011: 187).

Incorporating a praxis element, I will be preparing a document to feed back the research to participants, which they all expressed a desired to receive, encouraging further discussion about the issues raised. Of course, this only increases my fear of disappointing participants, pointing to the ways in which: "Feminist ethics likely generates as many issues as it may help either avoid or address" (Preissle and Han 2012: 598-599). Ultimately, there is no eliminating discomfort, dilemma and ambivalence, nor one definite, indisputably 'right' course of action that will resolve all challenges in research (Edwards and Mauthner 2002). As Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland (2002: 161) maintain: "At best you can be as aware as possible that interpretation is your exercise of power, that your decisions have consequences, and that you are accountable for your conclusions".

4.6   Summary

This chapter has provided an account of the qualitative research methods I employed to generate and analyse empirical data, along with some of the main methodological, ethical and political challenges and dilemmas arising thereof. I started by introducing the twelve women's online magazines, which are UK and Spain-based though globally accessed, and include online-only and web extensions, well-established and new brands. After, I discussed the rationale and practicalities of producing the data corpus, primarily consisting of: a) magazine editorial texts; b) forum user-generated content; and c) semi-structured interviews with producers. I also noted the range of supplementary data, which most significantly includes a wide assortment of texts connected to publications, such as trade press. The next section turned to my data analysis method, consisting of a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) informed by shared understandings, concerns and approaches in (most) discourse analysis traditions, and (feminist) critical discourse analysis in particular. Also briefly discussed were the notions of hegemony and articulation, as was my "political investment in conjunctural analysis", a key feature of cultural studies (Littler 2016: 234). The last section reviewed key ethical considerations pertaining to online and interview-based (cross-language) qualitative research, including issues around privacy, anonymity and consent, translation and representation. Drawing on material from the interviews with magazine producers, especial attention was paid to my struggle to reconcile the political commitment to deconstruct the ideological work their talk accomplishes with insights and emotional attachments—including a politicised inclination to protect—developed through fieldwork. A number of feminist ethico-political concepts were discussed to advance 'solidary critique' as a running thread through the five analysis chapters that follow.

Chapter Five

MEDIATING INTIMACY ONLINE

5.1   Introduction

> Find the karma sutra of *sex* positions, *dating* advice hot *sex* tips
> and even *sex* news at *Cosmopolitan* - the authority on *sex*.
> —*Cosmopolitan.co.uk*

This first analysis chapter addresses the sex and relationship content of women's magazines, particularly from a production perspective, and with an interest in the role of and (re)configurations of 'intimacy'. The analysis is divided into four sections. Drawing on the interviews with producers, I begin by exploring how notions of intimacy penetrate different dimensions of the young woman's magazine, ranging from the content, to the reading experience, to worker identities, and playing a role even in the decision of young women to enter (and to stay in) the industry. The second section maps networks of influence and restriction for the development of sex and relationship content, highlighting the growing move from expert-based to first-person accounts, as part of what is perceived as a turn to 'real life'. I then move on to specifically focus on the online platform, how this affects work practices and the content that is produced, highlighting the increasing centrality of strategies based on ideas about 'authenticity'. The fourth and last data analysis section examines a series of questions around continuity and change in magazine representations, especially in the content about sex and relationships. In the final section I move away from the details of the data to offer some critical notes on the identified 'turn to authenticity'. Beyond the specificities of these findings, this chapter also serves as an introduction to a number of issues that are central to the women's magazine industry generally, including those pertaining to: hiring practices and work environments; online journalism; together with medium-producer, editor-writer and producer-advertiser relationships. In such a manner, this first chapter creates the foundation or frame for building the ensuing chapters.

5.2   Establishing intimacy

Notions of intimacy lie at the very core of the woman's magazine, and transverse its many different dimensions. Notable among these is the nature of the content. In the words of magazine professionals, publications provide copy dedicated to the topics "every woman is interested in", namely fashion and beauty, together with sex, as well as "features that speak to you and your concerns and your relationships". Interestingly, the first major British periodical addressed exclusively to women and claiming female authorship, the *Ladies' Mercury* (1693), took the form of a reader's problem page. Intimacy is equally prominent at the level of language. For example, it can be observed in the direct address 'you', which simulates a two-way friendly interaction; the inclusive pronoun 'we', which establishes common ground; and the informal style mirroring the supposed speech of the target audience, creating a sense of closeness (see 'synthetic sisterhood', Talbot 2010). When it comes to producing copy, a research participant explained that this for instance means:

> Putting lots of exclamation points and like funny little jokes here and there […] always trying to make your writing sound super casual like it was coming straight out of a conversation with your girlfriends, which sometimes makes the text seem a little bit trivial. (Former staff writer, late 20s, UK)

Indeed, a number of the writers were critical of these linguistic conventions. One freelancer distanced herself from the editorial style adopted by those on staff, claiming that: "It's almost like they're talking to a child […] it's very patronising". Another writer had left the sector in part because: "What I experienced at the women's magazines was pink washing everything so it seemed really nice and women-friendly and 'your best gal pal'". Instead, she wished to have had: "More of an opportunity to be a little bit blunt, maybe sometimes even crass and really just like bring in a sarcastic tone" (although magazines are now incorporating this critique, see below). All in all, a prominent feature of the woman's magazine is its self-presentation as a friend to the reader. In the words of a British editor-in-chief: "A good magazine is like a girlfriend. She understands you, she knows you, she makes you laugh, she encourages you. It's an intimate relationship". One Spanish former deputy editor took it as far as to say that: "There will be women's magazines as long as there are women who enjoy being with their friends".

Most of the interviewed writers and editors of women's magazines were or had been—frequently avid—readers of these publications. When I asked them about their initial interest in working within the industry, most responded with almost

identical statements like: "I have always been interested in it because I grew up reading those magazines"; especially in the UK (in Spain "lack of opportunities" in other media sectors was more recurrent). This early readership experience was often described as "a passion", even "an obsession", where they would "devour" magazines and "literally gorge over them for hours". When asked what the appeal of these media was, participants repeatedly mobilised the idea of an intimate magazine-reader relationship. The(ir) reading experience was described as equivalent to "talking to your best friend", and the magazine as something that you can "rely on", that is "loyal" and "honest", "a source you can trust". They spoke of the pleasures of reading something that "you connect with", is "supportive", "reassuring" and "relatable". Repeatedly portrayed as central to the appeal of women's magazines were "identification" and a "sense of belonging". Equally highlighted were notions of "camaraderie" and "a fun community-esque thing". Publications were declared to offer a valuable sense of "being part of a gang" and "part of a community", "clique", "tribe" or "group". A senior features editor followed by stating: "So I've taken that from the magazines and I wanted to give it back as an adult".

When explaining their own early consumption of women's magazines, many producers also depicted the magazines as a "treat", an opportunity for "indulging in a bit of fashion, a bit of beauty, a bit of lifestyle". Additionally mentioned were aspirational pleasures. Publications were for instance declared to provide "an exciting world that you wanted to be a part of". Participants also spoke of feeling "older" and "sophisticated reading them". For a writer, magazines constituted "a perfect formula": "It was a brilliant mix of relatable things, "oh, this magazine's like my friend", but also, "oh, I wish I could be like that". It was such a perfect formula". An informative/didactic value was also highlighted, particularly with respect to sex and relationships. Two examples are: "A lot of things that I learned about sex, that I learned about the world, I learned it through magazines"; and: "I literally got all my information about relationships from these magazines".

In sum, these media were lauded as space that is "all about you" and "life experience as a woman". On this basis, a number of participants located the value of such a space within a politicised understanding of the broader context, for example: "Our contemporary culture can be a little bit harsh on women. It's nice for them to be able to consume a media which is female-friendly and it's a women's safe space".

In a similar manner, another British writer developed the following defence for the ongoing need of this media:

> Women speaking honestly about their experiences can change and save lives. Women talking about their bodies. Women talking about their experiences with abortion. Women talking about how they're treated in the workplace and how much they're paid. Women talking about rape and rape experiences. This is all stuff that women go through a lot, still, on a daily basis. We're still shamed into not talking about it. If you can buy something for three pounds fifty where a woman explains her experience or gives you advice or makes you feel less alone, I think, fundamentally, that's why women's magazines should never go. It's women talking to each other honestly about stuff that we still don't talk about enough publicly. That's why I think they're brilliant. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

This level of passion toward the genre was then incorporated into the work of magazine *producer*: "Every girl says, "Oh, that's my dream job", but it is. You talk about fashion, beauty, your body or your life, and it's all positive and it's all there to help you and to give you advice". It must be noted, however, that a few spoke of "complete disenchantment", mainly those who had decided to leave this sector of journalism. One former sex and relationships writer told me: "When you become involved with it, you start to realise it's actually not as healthy to look up to these magazines as you perhaps thought it was". The vast majority of professionals seemed to tread a middle path between these two positions. Many others offered intense expressions both of regard toward and critique of magazines, one example being (see Chapter Nine on the 'new wave of feminism'):

> I love women's magazines. They've really educated me, and made me, and really helped me. Especially now with this amazing wave of feminism that we're in. It's really enlightened me and certain pieces of women's journalism have informed me. There is a lot of crap in women's magazines. I know that because I've written what I would call good pieces that I feel like have been manipulated into shit. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

Interestingly, after voicing critical views about women's magazines, one writer mobilised the idea of a relationship (between girlfriends) to explain her decision to continue working in the sector. Note how this "love-hate thing" with magazines experienced by producers echoes the experience of many feminist scholars (see Chapter Two).

> I have quite strong views about this [women's magazines], but I still want to be part of it. It's like being part of a group of girlfriends. You wanna be in the group but you still might bitch about one of the girls. It's a love-hate thing. It's just a relationship. (Freelance writer, early 30s, UK)

A deep emotional attachment and long-term connection to magazines were advanced as fundamental to enter the industry and succeed in the profession: "I don't think you could ever write for a publication that you haven't read or loved". High levels of passion were portrayed as necessary in light of long working hours and relative low pay. Furthermore, familiarisation with the genre was highlighted as advantageous in job interviews. The significance of this intimate connection to publications was also related to *reader identification*, with many noting: "I am a reader of the website as well". There was a patterned exception of women who had not been (at least frequent) readers. In these cases, participants told me they had been hired because they "bring in something new", besides noting that they represent the women magazines aim to address. Again depicted as crucial was an equivalence between writers and (ideal) readers, which includes, importantly, generational equivalence. This way, producers argued, magazines can give "women millennials": "What we need and what we want".

Therefore, this research corroborates the smaller study by McRobbie (1996), who found that producers describe themselves as long-term avid magazine consumers, claim to identify with their readers, and to be producing a product they and their friends would like. Mobilisations of what McRobbie (1996) called a 'shared identity' discourse pervade my interview data. Two illustrations are: "In terms of relating to the audience, we are them basically. I <u>am</u> the target audience"; and: "The team is made up of people that are in the bracket, and so we know what we want to read and, therefore, we create it". As suggested by the use of 'we' in these quotes, a sense of intimate community was also often attributed to the *offices* of women's magazines. These were portrayed as "a group of girls" "chatting away" and "a bunch of women being really supportive". "And that warmth hopefully comes across in the pages", noted a senior editor, suggesting the commercial drive behind such a representation. Certainly, the notion of producer-consumer proximity is increasingly central to the marketing strategies of the industry. Discussing the success of *The Debrief*, the publisher Lauren Holleyoake (in Gavin 2015) explains: "tone and relatability is crucial and the fact that The Debrief is written for these girls by these girls (no one older than 26 is in the team!) has cut through". In the interviews, this approach was declared to be taking magazines toward increasingly faithful reflections of 'the real world', as I explore in the following section, which looks at the process of selecting topics for content about sex and relationships.

5.3   Selecting magazine intimacies

When it comes to sourcing ideas for pieces, women's magazine producers depicted as absolutely crucial looking at the competitors, to then find "a different angle" or "put your own slant on it". This practice plays a role in maintaining the repetitive and limited nature of the content across the different publications. Particularly in Spain, producers also mentioned syndication, which means reproducing content from other versions of the title, purchased at a lower price. For example, largely due to limited resources *Cosmopolitan.com.es* syndicates an average of 4 articles a day—mostly about sex—from the other *Cosmopolitan* sites, particularly the US, and to a lesser extent the UK site.

Another recurrent response to my question about sourcing ideas for sex and relationship content was: "It's just looking at the world" or "I think, "What are people doing in the real world?"" For women's magazine producers, one important part "the real world" is "key dates". "St Valentines. 'Things to do on St Valentines' or 'postures for St Valentines he is going to love in bed'", swiftly improvised a Spanish writer to illustrate the point, vividly indicating the formulaic character of the genre. Additionally mentioned were celebrity news (e.g. break-ups) and popular media successes. With regard to the latter, repeatedly named were the ("feminist") HBO television series *Girls* (see McRobbie 2015 for a critique), and, especially, the successful series of erotic romance novels *Fifty Shades of Grey* (and movie adaptation), which have been widely criticised by feminists for romanticising domestic abuse and eroticising male violence against women (e.g. Tankard Reist 2015), as well as for reproducing heteronormative courtship narratives (e.g. Downing 2013).

Also highlighted as fundamental for the development of pieces about sex and relationships was monitoring online media such as news sites, magazines and blogs, especially those produced in the US, which was considered both in the UK and in Spain as a "step ahead" and a central birthplace of "trends or conversations". One writer spoke about getting ideas from:

> US things like *Atlantic*, *Slate*, *The Cut*, bloggers over there, just because I often feel like their dating scene is one step ahead, like an app will launch there, then it will come here. It feels like a lot of sexual, relationship trends or conversations start in New York. (Features writer, mid-20s, UK)

The interviewed journalists likewise mentioned looking at "what people talk about on social media", alongside other interactive online spaces. One staff writer gave the

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following example: "People ask questions on *Yahoo* like, "What should I do if my boyfriend did this"". Others spoke about "trawling" their own forums "either to find ideas or to find case studies for ideas that we'd already come up with" (see next chapter). Journalists explained that this is particularly useful for online viral pieces, discussed in the next section. With SEO (search engine optimisation) content writing, the focus is rather upon keywords typed into search engines (notably *Google*), a process described by a writer as one of being told: "People are *Googling* this. Write about it".

In contrast, academic research was conspicuous by its absence in the discussions about sources of information, influence or inspiration with magazine producers, and only a handful spoke about sometimes interviewing psychologists and sexologists (lack of resources and time partly explains this, see below). Exemplifying the wider commodification of advice giving (Boynton 2009), more journalists mentioned newer types of 'sexpert/ise' such as 'coaches' or 'gurus' and studies by interested companies—ranging from commodity brands like Durex to dating services like eHarmony—looking for opportunities to self-publicise, often via a public relations agency. One staff sex and relationships writer from the UK said: "It's very important to source information from professionals, all the gurus in sex and relationships. I'm always really grateful when they get in touch or their PR gets in touch". However, many repudiated the idea of the expert. Especially in the British context, relying on experts was deemed an out-dated approach to the production of sex and relationship magazine content. For example:

> I'm not a huge believer in these experts or relationship experts […] of like, "listen to these 10 tips of how to change your body language around your partner or around a guy you fancy, and then he's going to want to go out with you". Having said that, that's quite old school anyway. (Digital writer, mid-20s, UK)

In endorsing this repudiation, a British writer pointed to consumer demand: "It's not all about expert views and always advice, people want to relate to it and hear other people's opinions". Magazine producers established a clear dichotomy between drawing on expert knowledge—"really famous psychologists and people who know what they are talking about"—and personal accounts of experience by young women. These were respectively associated with the "serious" and "terribly boring" content and the "smart, funny writing", and with being prescriptive versus "being real". One writer said she wanted to see magazines "playing less into the hands of experts,

saying "you need to be like this"". Instead, for this young woman: "Real life is the way forward". In addition to expert-based pieces, this model of personal/real content was contrasted with one based on: "A much older woman talking down to you, who doesn't understand anything about your life because she is getting lots of free stuff and she has this amazing job".

Most journalists applauded first-person/personal content, both as media consumers and as media producers. From a consumer point of view: "It feels a lot more intimate and I feel like I trust it and connect with it a lot more"; and: "That's a big draw for me knowing that it's a real thing". As journalists, the interviewed women expressed the following: "That's my favourite stuff to write about, something that's personal to me and that's kind of anecdotal and very much about my life and my experiences". While some pointed to a "good mix" of expert advice and first person narratives/anecdotes as ideal, on the whole there was an extraordinary investment on a notion of 'real'. For example: "Everything that I write would be from my experience or my friends' experiences, so that way, in a way, I know it's reality. I know it's happening and it's real". Indeed, "me and my friends" was both in the UK and in Spain the most recurrent response to the interview question about sourcing ideas for sex and relationship features. Suffusing my data are almost identical responses like:

> It really really is to do with just hearing what your friends are talking about and what you're going through as well. It's very personal. (Staff writer, mid-20s, UK)

> Going out to lunch with friends or going out for a drink and then one of them drops something into conversation about something that's going on with her boyfriend or something that's happened. They'd be like, "why don't bla bla bla", and you think, "actually, that was such a good angle for a story". (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

There is, then, a clear practical element to this approach. Through listening/talking to friends, women's magazine writers can source "new angles", "trends" and "stories". "There's only so many awkward dates I've been on", illustrated a freelance writer. New ideas are likewise treasured since "there's a cyclical nature to women's magazines". In this sense, according to a staff writer: "Essentially a lot of magazine sex features are "here are ten sex tips", and it's just how you package that". The approach was additionally endorsed as a form of audience research. One writer said: "A lot of my friends are readers of the publications that I write for, ambitious and really care about their friends and relationships. It's quite good to gauge their opinion on a lot of stuff". Note the use of the adjective 'ambitious', which arguably suggests

an internalisation of the profiling practices of marketers. 'Listening to friends' was furthermore depicted as a particularly convenient method for sourcing ideas for sex pieces since as young women: "We talk about it constantly".

Several journalists spoke about "conversations in the office", notably content meetings. Here I was again struck by the similarity in the descriptions, one representative example being: "In our sex and relationship content meetings, almost all the pitches start with "my mate was saying the other day that she…" or "I got told about a girl who…"" A features editor similarly explained:

> So, someone says, "oh, my friend mentioned this the other day". And if everybody goes, "oh, that happen to me, to me, to me". We know that's going to be a good feature because we've all experienced it and it's really touched a chord. But in order to know that you have got to share. (Features editor, late 30s, UK)

It is interesting how this more senior professional adds a mention about the need to share intimacies. Certainly, I was told that this is fundamental to the job: "We have to talk about our own personal lives a lot in order to come up with feature ideas". This concerns in particular the youngest members of staff, for whom intimate experiences and friendship networks emerge as currency, and every emotion, relation and occasion must be 'put to work'. Such dynamic comes to elide work-play divisions, constituting the permanent role for these young women of trend-tracker, peer-to-peer marketing researcher and 'brand ambassador'. Pointing to this suturing of self and work, for some their writing about sex and relationships: "Feels like an extension of my personality more than anything else". I was told that this approach is "the best way to deliver some authentic content" and "keep it fresh". Then, as explained by a senior editor: "The higher you get, you're more editing and overseeing. It's more managerial". A junior writer summarised the content production process as follows:

> The actual ideas come from the frontlines […] on a bottom level, the features writers and the freelancers. These then go to the editor. She'll be like, "that's not our voice. That doesn't quite work for us". She just knows. (Writer, mid-20s, UK)

This deeply embedded idea of an editor's 'instinct' effectively works to mystify the role they actively exert as 'cultural gatekeepers' (Milkie 2002) and 'influencers'. For example, the editor-in-chief of *Elle UK*, Lorraine Candy asserted in 2016: "We instinctively know what our audience want before they do and we apply our skills to

help them make the best choice"[21]. This "before they do" contradicts the pervasive claims about responding to consumer demand, typically as a strategy to disavow critiques of editorial decisions. This 'instinct' discourse also obscures the ways in which (higher level) editors act as boundary markers for 'the bottom level', and more generally how these companies are structurally profoundly hierarchical. For example, a Spanish former managing editor contended that making changes in her magazine was difficult because: "At the end of the day, these magazines operate according to the editor-in-chief, who calls the shots and give the orders".

Again problematising the notion of content springing from a sisterhood in full expression is the fact that "you're limited about what you can discuss by the other print publications under the publishing house", their commercial partners, and political agendas. For example, at *TheDebrief.co.uk*: "We've got *Heat* and *Zoo* and *Grazia*, and we could never really slag off anything that any of them are doing, and we can't really touch No More Page 3 because of *Zoo*"[22]. Besides, at the publishing houses:

> Those high positions are still occupied by men. Even though [publisher]'s readership is predominantly… I'd say 99% female, it's headed up almost exclusively by male CEOs and not particularly nice male CEOs. It's not a welcoming environment for you to feel like you can push the boundaries.

Also making "pushing the boundaries" complicated is the fact that: "We're underpaid, overworked, under an inordinate amount of pressure". Many producers additionally pointed to "stretched" and "shrinking teams", particularly now "we've had the recession and it's just a bit crap for everyone" (especially in Spain). Further contributing to the widespread sense of "not wanting to rock the boat too much" in women's magazines are the ways in which "you feel like your job could be lost at any given moment". This is particularly fear-inducing due to the difficulties of finding work as a female journalist (see also Chapter Four). For a number of participants all this constitutes what critics of women's magazines often disregard, namely what a young editor called *'the culture of fear'*. It is within such a precarious and competitive work environment that many refrain from "questioning" editors or from "pushing your own writing" (beyond established formulae), and often produce "stuff I don't want to write", especially "when you're a skint journalist". One

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[21]   From: http://www.hearst.co.uk/news/hearst-magazines-uk-refreshes-elle-uk-with-innovative-distribution-strategy-bold-new-look-and-new-editorial-content (Accessed 21/10/2016)
[22] No More Page 3 was a British feminist campaign for daily tabloid newspaper the *Sun* to cease the practice of featuring photographs of young women posing topless.

freelancer told me how at one magazine "they wanted me to write about how I loved catcalling". When she expressed disapproval, it was suggested to her that: "The way you could spin it is, "I'm in charge of my sexuality"". She continued: "They're very persistent. Often offering you more money", and:

> If someone's saying to you, "say something you don't really believe in. It's fine. Be light-hearted about it. Here's a load of money", it's very hard in the climate of journalism we're in not to be like, "maybe I can". (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

Weaving a deeply contradictory discursive terrain, despite the many forces which "limit your journalistic integrity" there was a powerful overarching investment in the idea that "we're all just women talking about real life issues" – particularly by the (younger) writers. Senior professionals would more readily concede that "absolutely crucial in terms of how a magazine is established" is "the relationship with the advertisers". One content director explained this difference in participant response on the basis that "the more senior you get, the closer you become to the advertising demands". She also mentioned the necessity to maintain the following "fiction":

The woman's magazine, this content director further told me: "It kind of presents itself as your best friend, but it's not your best friend […] Because of the variety of pressures that go into forming women's media, some of the most strongly felt being commercial, that being quite disguised in the media itself". She additionally explained the recurrent downplaying of the influence of advertisers by participants as follows: "Even producers want to believe that they [advertisers] are not really that influential". This is increasingly the case, however. For example, one Spanish beauty director said: "What I least like about my job is the increasing lack of journalistic independence and the pressure that advertising companies exert on my work. […] Unfortunately, the line that separates advertising from the editorial content is increasingly faint. The key is finding a balance everyday". In the same manner, a British writer described the relationship with advertisers as "massively about compromise". Thus, in women's magazine production: "There is a great tension between what we might say, and what we might want to say, and what we're

required to say, and what our advertising says". This is always informed by an understanding that: "It's not hard to upset an advertiser, and if you upset an advertiser, that is quite a serious thing".

When I asked about the role of advertisers in the development of sex-related pieces, writers and editors claimed that this content is "much more free" because "there is barely any advertising" or "it's not as advertiser-based" (as fashion and beauty). After I prompted further, most proceeded to say that "it's more about positioning". That is, brands "do not want to be associated with it" or "just want to be far away from it". When requested illustrations, participants spoke about the impossibility of having advertisers like Yves Saint Laurent and Chanel "running next to" or even "in the same issue" as "an article about threesomes", "a feature about kink fetish play" or "an anal dildo sex toy": "It will upset them and annoy them and they will go running". Such advertiser adversity to sex content was especially stressed in Spain, a censorship indeed evident in the generally more conservative approach to the subject (see Section 5.5 below). This dilemmatic terrain was handled by celebrating that "there is more freedom online to talk about sex than in print". And it is to this—the selling of intimacies online—that I now turn.

5.4   Selling intimacies online

According to the producers of women's websites, online content is "more newsy" "more digestible" and "snappier" than print. It was also described as characterised by "humour", "sassiness" and "bluntness". Some attributed this print-online contrast to consumption patterns distinctive to the medium, in the sense that "people want an easy, quick, fun read online". Others emphasised that "online is catered for a slightly younger audience", who wants "no-nonsense stuff", and media that is "realistic", "relevant" and "accessible". According to a young features editor:

> Print media was giving you this kind of unrealistic blue print for living, online media is designed really to make you feel like it's your friend down at the pub talking to you. You're talking about the topics that are relevant to you in a language that's really relevant. It's much more accessible. (Features editor, mid-20s, UK)

In addition to millennials, the web was celebrated as responding particularly well to *women*. Vividly underscoring the producer-as-consumer identity of most participants, a British staff writer described what young women today want as follows: "We want

entertaining stuff, we want real life, we want honest things". Contrasts were again made with (traditional) print media:

> Traditional print media doesn't necessarily tackle those issues that actually women really care about, [or] talk about sex, for instance, in a way that's particularly conducive to the way that women actually speak about sex in their friendships. (Freelance writer, late 20s, UK)

Particularly the younger journalists emphasised that, as a writer put it in an email: "When girls are reading online, they want to hear the no-bullsh** stuff". Examples from magazines might include *TheDebrief.co.uk*'s '7 Pieces Of Non-Bullshit Relationship Advice From Couples That Have Been There, Done That' and 'Calling Bullshit On Things You Shouldn't Say To A New Lover'. Reflecting the sensibility articulated in the interviews, the second article contests well-established 'sexpert' Tracey Cox (who has written for *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan*, among other magazines) with the refreshingly unusual claim that: "you don't need rules to figure out how to go about dating someone".

For a content director, when attempting to understand recent changes in the editorial content: "I don't think you can underestimate the impact that the Internet and blogging, publishing online has had on magazines". Although some beauty and fashion bloggers now produce paid content, it was highlighted how: "You've got people who are actually independent who are talking in a new kind of language, very personal, relatable, direct […] readers respond to that because there is more a relationship of trust there". Magazine journalists applauded the production process of online content on the basis that: "It's very real and it's just being yourself". The property of 'realness' was often ascribed specifically to *viral* content, which adopts styles from personal blogs. Viral content was also defined as "light-hearted", "entertaining", and as a "quick and easy read" that is usually structured as "listicles" (portmanteau of 'list' and 'article'). It thus follows the model pioneered by the Internet media company *BuzzFeed*, which was claimed to have been "a wonderful eye opener for the women's magazine industry". Some spoke of feeling limited by the 'listicle' format, and more generally by the viral and 'trending topic' imperatives for a feature to be commissioned. But many others were celebratory, describing viral content as "honest and real", and as especially important for "our generation" "because we have so much to say". It was contrasted to the "SEO-led pieces, the expert-led pieces", which "are there to guide you and give you advice". According to one writer:

When we write viral content pieces, which are for example like 'The twenty-five things women want', obviously I'm not going to go to an expert for that because the point of that piece is to be honest and real. (Staff writer, mid-20s, UK)

Locating intimacy at the heart of the online media business, journalists explained that in creating such content what websites want is: "For our audience to see pieces that they can relate to and in the most personal way possible […] because that's what they go to their friends for". This 'friend factor' should then trigger a 'must-share' effect. That is, a close text-reader connection is expected to motivate users to *share* the content, ideally via social media, which "is a massive contributor to our traffic" (see next chapter). For a British writer: "Women's magazines are bloody good at it. They picked up this viral technique pretty quickly". At the level of journalistic practice this means that: "All the time, it's finding that magic combination of an engaging article that's got that sharable component to it so you read something and you're like, "oh my God, I want to tell my friends about this"". In this sense, I was told that online "the more genuine the article […] the better it does, automatically". Therefore, 'being real' content is the shareable content required by a business model based on virality. "We have to make our content shareable but really that comes down to making it relatable", explains the publisher of *TheDebrief.co.uk*, the magazine at the forefront of these new strategies (within the selected sample) (Holleyoake in Gavin 2015).

The identified shift in women's magazines is likewise a commercial response to the emphasis upon intimacy and authenticity in Web 2.0 cultures, and to the consumer demand for "something that feels a bit more genuine, a bit more real, a bit less rushed and mass produced" in contemporary capitalist societies more generally (Gearin 2010, in Zhao 2013: 143). Reflecting this is *TheDebrief.co.uk*'s description of their target audience: "Seeking authenticity – demands honesty & transparency from brands" (The Debrief 2014). In the interviews, 'genuine' editorial was depicted as a very real requirement "if you don't want to alienate your younger audience" who are "Internet literate" and "discerning". According to a features editor, this means that if content "doesn't feel legitimate to them any more, they just won't visit you". Moreover, dissatisfied users are potential content-producing competitors – as well as possible PR disasters for brands. A British digital health editor emphasised that "social media has brought this sense of honesty" and "has given people a platform to be able to say "this content doesn't work for me […] so I'm gonna create my own or

I'm going to yell at you about yours"". Another British editor similarly explained that: "The moment you start putting stuff that doesn't feel genuine online you'll be called out on Twitter, and there'll be some sort of PR disaster for you and probably the advertiser as well". Particularly threatening for women's magazines are "prominent feminist, female social media users", who can start a Twitter "war" or "trial".

Certainly, another important catalyst for the identified 'authenticity turn' in magazines is young women's new interest in feminism (see Chapter Nine). Part of this feminist reinvigoration is a proliferation of media, especially online. Consider for example the following interaction with a professional at *TheDebrief.co.uk*:

> Participant: *Grazia*, the *Cosmo*s, the glossies, they're aspirational, so everyone who reads them, the idea is that are reading something like, "I want to be like that". Whereas *The Debrief* is, "I am that, and the people that work there are that".
> Laura: Do you know what pushed this change?
> Participant: Yes, I do. It was publications like *The Vagenda*.

Launched in 2012 as a blog by two young female journalists and later adapted into a book (Baxter and Cosslett 2014), *The Vagenda* self-describes as "a big 'we call bullshit' on the mainstream women's press"[23], together with a platform for women to "tell their stories […] without it being curated by some capitalist entity" (Baxter and Cosslett 2016) (see also Chapters Six and Nine).

Against this backdrop, *TheDebrief.co.uk* conveys in their 2014 media pack to potential clients that: "How we sell to this girl is important – advertising messages must be authentic, entertaining and relevant" (The Debrief 2014). A year later, the media pack vaunted: "native advertising is the best way to engage with our girl […] we've built a branded content model that offers advertisers a bespoke and authentic way of telling their story". Pioneered by *BuzzFeed*, 'native advertising' was described by magazine editors as a "much more subtle" approach where "customers pay the publication to hide the advertising" in content produced by the editorial team. Explaining its embrace by companies, a deputy editor said: "It's just that people are very sophisticated consumers of digital media and they have learned to ignore it. They know what an advertising unit is and they just don't look". I was likewise told that this is the model that works online because "people are too savvy and they get cross […] if you put adverts everywhere" since "they see the Internet as their space".

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[23] From: http://vagendamagazine.com/about/ (Accessed 12/02/2016)

Namely, the branded content model helps corporations maintain the—commercially necessary—illusion of 'the people's network'.

In an attempt to appeal to these 'territorial', savvy and "very sophisticated consumers of digital media" demanding authenticity, *SoFeminine.co.uk* claims to offer: "Relationship advice told straight up". The online magazine additionally promises: "Sex tips from the subtle to the X rated. No topic too taboo […] Keeping it real". Indeed, producers explained that online the approach to sex and relationships is "a lot more tongue-in-cheek, a lot more cheeky", "bolder" and "braver" than in print. I was repeatedly told that the web will more readily include sex and relationship topics considered "a bit more risky or a bit more out there" than the print magazine. Making brands feel more comfortable doing this is the understanding that online publishing entails little cost, and that: "It can be gotten rid of a lot easier if it does end up offending people" – namely "your audience and your advertisers". As with every area of women's magazine production, "our readers" and "our sponsors or commercial partners" are at the core of all considerations. They must be 'pleased', and never 'alienated'. According to a writer: "It's hard for magazines because they've got to keep the readers happy and they've got to keep the advertisers happy".

"Equally, they are more game to write the most salacious thing possible in order to drive traffic", a British writer emphasised speaking about the difference that the online platform makes. One Spanish online editor similarly explained: "We play with polemic headlines seeking the click". 'I'm a feminist, but I like it when he comes on my face' by *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* could be partly interpreted on that basis (see Chapter Nine on struggles over definitions of feminism). A number of journalists were critical of the way in which much sex content online uses "shock value stuff" as "clickbait":

> Shock value stuff annoys me, because it means that a website is chasing traffic. For example, we ran 'the guide to double penetration' and it did so well that in order to boost traffic in the last week of December we did 'the advanced guide to double penetration'. I think this is a bad idea because once you chase traffic, your content isn't as genuine or interesting. That second article wasn't really needed. Thankfully we don't do that often, but if I see another listicle about anal or 'things you only know if you love giving blowjobs' or 'things that go through every woman's mind while having sex' I'll punch something!

Interestingly, then, the industry's aggressive incorporation of virality logics comes full circle to erase the very qualities that made viral content appealing for the younger members of staff in the first place, such as 'genuineness'. More generally,

for many magazine producers the constant traffic-chase leads to content of poorer quality. One *Elle UK* professional said: "You end up with more clichéd, more banal writing on the website". She provided the following illustration:

> We would never, ever, ever in a million years do a page of Kim Kardashian's haircuts in the magazine, but if we put that online, it gets a million clicks. We want those clicks for our advertisers, so we do a lot of, "you'll never guess what Kim Kardashian has done to her hair".

Another staffer at a different magazine also complained about getting "lost in the 'viral' content", thereby "forgoing more intelligent stories", including those on feminism:

> I am mostly in charge of the feminist section of our website, and it frustrates me sometimes that I'm not allowed to write more for it. Sometimes I feel that we get a bit lost in the "viral" content, so we end up forgoing more intelligent stories for stupid stuff, like "dog jumps in a ball pit". (Email, staff writer, mid-20s, UK)

Many journalists pointed to the fast pace of the work for the web for this same reason, emphasising that "online it's like bang it out, get it up". This means that: "You can have content that goes up online which is not very good basically, and that would never happen in the magazine". Likewise, I was repeatedly told that when writing for the web "you don't have much time to think about stuff". One writer claimed: "It's a little bit more difficult to go to a subject like sex and relationships into too much detail and do it cleverly when you've got a time frame of a couple of hours to turn a piece around". These work practices cause some professionals significant anxiety and frustration. One notable example is a former Spanish digital editor, who said she left the industry after finding the following too frustrating to continue:

> There is no time to contrast sources, to conduct interviews, to talk to experts, to do research and consult studies […] There is no rigor and the quality of the content is awful. It's simply more of the same. To fill up space, to upload the article for *Google* to give you points for publishing everyday, to generate more visits… (Former digital editor, mid-30s, Spain)

In her view, sex and relationships are "very important" for people's "psychological and physical health". Subsequently, she felt a great sense of responsibility. This critique was often countered in other interviews with the claim that magazines are *entertainment*. "Obviously I'm not qualified, we're doing things for entertainment purposes", remarked a British writer who replies to reader letters about their sex and relationship concerns.

Further to the entertainment defence, the pervasive discourse of 'what we millennial women want' can also operate to block critique and exonerate magazines

from the accountability that accompanies the dissemination of messages by established (s)experts like psychologists. For instance, one 2015 article by *SoFeminine.co.uk*, which again boasts that it is "written by millennials for millennials", tells women that: "If you go down on him, and you do so often, because you want to – not because he asked, he'll think of you as relationship material. Men love women with a pleasing personality". This article, titled '21 Things Men REALLY Think While You're Giving Head', also states that: "The deeper you can go the longer your relationship will last". It continues:

> Many men have mildly sadistic fantasies when receiving a blowjob. They want to relive all the crazy stuff they see in porn or have experienced before. Like 'throating' or basically (ab)using your mouth. If you're so dedicated to go as deep as possible that your eyes start to water – he'll view those as tears of joy. Just make sure you smile at the end.

The article pre-empts critique with the disclaimer: "Honesty is the best policy". Potential critique was similarly rebutted in the interviews, often in combination with discourses of consumer demand: "There's nothing wrong with being honest. That's what people like, honesty". Equally, pieces such as the article '17 Unexpected Signs You're A Psychob*tch Girlfriend' (again by *SoFeminine.co.uk*) can evade challenge on the basis that: "It's just being honest, and that's why when women read it, they can completely relate to it". Compare this, however, with the approach taken by *TheDebrief.co.uk*, also under the ethos of 'being real': '5 So Called 'Crazy' Ex Girlfriends Share Their Side Of The Story'. Some magazine producers observed that viral content specifically "might be a little bit controversial" and "interpreted negatively" by "some people", arguing this is "because it's personal". And for many: "you could do no better than when you're just being yourself, and when you're just giving it your personal experience". One Spanish editor noted how her magazine gets critiques from users for "disdain against women and machismo". She then said: "I know myself and I know I would never be sexist, so I let myself say some things that I would say to my friends, and that obviously can be misinterpreted if taken out of context".

Not all honesties and personal experiences have the same value for magazines, however. For instance, a freelance writer complained: "I do give honest opinions but then when it's not what they want to hear, they just disregard it and try and twist it". On occasions she has felt pressured to promote "the idea that having an open relationship is a way to spice up your sex life and your relationship". She finds this

problematic because: "There's a lot of responsibility there and I feel that magazines they just don't think about that, they just want something that sounds exciting regardless of what the consequences for people might be". Others problematised some of the practices in 'relatable' content creation. One editor was critical of how online magazines in particular: "They just toy the copy to make you sound like a hysterical woman because apparently that's more relatable for the readers, because they get more clicks". She also noted that, as a result: "I've done this as an editor and a writer as well". Participants negotiated these moments of incongruity with comments like: "Anywhere you go you have to wrestle with your own conscience, don't you?" Most repeatedly, I would be reminded of the fact that: "We are not a charity". One Spanish digital writer and community manager equally responded to criticisms of "clickbaiting the magazine" like this: "At the end of the day, you are only asked for results, page visits. It's not an NGO, right?" This usual comeback to critiques of women's magazines is thus typically associated with discourses of consumer demand. I was repeatedly told that since magazines are "commercial products designed to make money", change can only occur if the reader "not only demands it, but demands it with their buck". One editor concluded: "It's a capitalist system. That's unfortunately the way it is".

5.5   Representational continuity and change

In the interviews, I discussed with magazine producers a series of questions around representational continuity and change. Key among these was that of diversity. Some argued that publications continue to feature a limited range of representations, voices, experiences and intimacies due to the also limited composition of *staff*. These critical accounts problematised how "there is no door open" for most women in a sector where internships are essential but "nearly always unpaid" and London-based (see also Chapter Four). One young freelancer said the following about interns: "They have to have either parents who can fund them or parents who live in London. By proxy that means normally they're posh, middle class, white women". She went on to affirm: "The people who come in at entry level, at internship level, are the people who ultimately will be the opinion makers and they are the ones who decide who is on the cover, or what the cover line is, and that's why it's so whitewashed". Another freelancer responded as follows to my question about what she would like to see change in the industry:

> Participant: People are very "I'm very white, middle class, generally straight that I write about". You get quite a conventional view of the world, and you get quite a pale stale same old people that are in the media. There's not such a plurality of voices. You don't necessarily hear about the personal experiences of a forty-two-year-old Muslim woman in Birmingham. You don't hear about her sex life. You don't hear about how dating is with her, what's out there for her.
>
> Laura: Why do you think not?
>
> Participant: I think to a certain extent people still hire people in their own likeness, and get writers who they relate to and whose lives they relate to. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

Recognitions of representational invisibility in terms of class were rare, however. Even those more critical voices were often unable or unwilling to concede such a problem exists. See for example this conversation:

> Laura: What would you say to those who argue that women's magazines are excluding in terms of race, class and sexuality?
>
> Writer: Yes, I think they can be excluding in terms of race and sexuality. I'm not sure about class. There definitely needs to be more black and ethnic role models out there, which magazines could try harder to find and perpetuate. I think we also need to show more LGBT role models, particularly transgender ones. (Staff writer, mid-20s, UK)

In our conversations about 'race' and ethnicity, I received a patterned variety of different responses by the British participants. One was the more critical acknowledgment of underrepresentation, as seen above. Arguably demonstrating the force of white-as-norm, others responded to my comment about the lack of people of colour like this: "I don't read a magazine and particularly notice". Equally worryingly, another type of retort came in the form of post-race ideology. One *Cosmopolitan UK* professional told me: "Colour is irrelevant, so it's just like if you're an awesome woman doing an awesome thing, "let's get her on the cover"". The last patterned response drew on a consumer-blaming strategy through discourses of (the need for) reader 'representation' and (thus) 'identification'. In our discussion about the possible incorporation of more diverse representations, a British features editor affirmed: "The main barriers we have is that we have to cater for our readership". She explained: "We try and include all cultures or races or genders or sexualities within our magazine in some way, but we do have to ultimately think, "these are the people who are buying the magazine"". In the same manner, one director told me the following about writing more magazine texts about lesbian experience: "There's no point in writing endless speeches about lesbian experience if that represents 10% of the people who might buy the magazine because it's 90% who

think, "this has nothing to do with me. Why am I reading this?"" Quite remarkably, this seems to go *against* what "quite often" readers demand:

> We do quite often get letters from people saying, "you've not covered gay women in this sex article. It's about heterosexual sex, male-female". And obviously the majority of readers are cis-gendered heterosexuals. That is just the main bulk of our readership. We can't please all the people all the time. (Features editor, late 30s, UK)

In Spain, I was similarly told that: "It's strange for you to target a homosexual person because your readership is generally going to be heterosexual"; and: "90% of the population is heterosexual". Again, Spanish journalists mobilised the discourse of identification, as in the quote below. Previously in the interview the writer had conceded that the current state of affairs is not exactly ideal. Note, then, how she attempts to resolve the dilemma with a final remark about their "mission in the world":

> That is the fundamental key, for people to feel identified. So, if you put somebody of colour or some homosexual or something, people don't feel as identified or there is less people that feel identified. […] Our mission in the world is to write well, to inform well, and for the web to do well, and to have lots of readers. (Freelance writer, late 20s, Spain)

Discussing the lack or slowness of change in these publications, a British features writer remarked: "It's hard to do something different. Because it's a risk and it's like, "will people like it?", and yeah and that's probably--that's definitely a failing in women's magazines, they are very risk adverse. Very risk adverse". This characteristic of the sector came strongly to the fore in one discussion about the lack of people of colour in the Spanish magazines. Note how little sense of *actual* audience behaviour there is in comparison to the talk about 'fear' and 'risk'.

> Writer: You are never or almost never going to see somebody of colour on the cover, unfortunately. It's not because we are racists, it's because we keep within what's established.
> Laura: Right, you follow the established model, and why is that so hard to break?
> Writer: Because that's the way our Spanish culture is. […] We continue to be quite traditional. You see publications in other countries and they are much more multicultural. Not here. Why not? Fear, I suppose. Fear that it won't get clicks. So we are in the comfort zone. It's the safe thing. However, if you take a risk and put a photo of somebody of colour or a sentence that… you risk having less visits. And that's the way it is. That's why we don't do it. Not because we are racists. (Freelance writer, late 20s, Spain)

The quote above is also noteworthy for the ways in which the participant denies prejudice within the magazine *twice,* to blame instead "our Spanish culture". Certainly, in the Spanish interviews a pervading set of explanations for the lack of representational diversity and the more conservative approach to sex revolved around

discourses of 'Spain is different' and reader-blaming narratives. Again and again journalists insisted that: "Spanish society is still not ready to talk about sex openly. There is still a lot of conservatism". Many would follow: "I would like to do it but this country isn't ready". Others equally lamented: "We are not free to talk about certain topics that are still taboo in our country". There were also reiterated references to long-lasting effects of the dictatorship, and especially the ongoing "very strong presence of Christianity". Likewise, it was repeatedly contended that the greater emphasis on the "romantic love stuff" rather than actual sex remains because "there are readers from a very Catholic sector", and more generally because "in Spain we are still more prudish" than in the UK, described as more "advanced" and "liberal" with regard to sex.

Different cultural sensibilities and customs make content syndication a "very hard" process for Spanish producers. One web editor told me that: "It's very hard to adapt for Spain some American or English sex content, especially American, because they are a lot more brutal than what people are capable of reading here, a lot more explicit, because in Spain we are more prudish". She immediately followed by conceding: "I suppose here there is also my own point of view and way of being, a bit". Similarly, after invoking the figure of the traditional and close-minded reader to explain the cutback in explicitness when syndicating content about sex, one insider from *EnFemenino.com* went on to say: "Actually, the Spanish public does demand a lot of this type of content, what happens is that the media are maybe not so used to talking openly about it". And, of course, there is the advertisers, who I was told are "very conservative" and don't like content about sex. They do seem to like certain areas though. 'The '50 Shades' fever. Going shopping with Grey' reads the title of an article from *Elle.es*. Also inspired by the trilogy, *Glamour.es* offers: "A simple decalogue for beginners in the art of bondage and sadomaso". In an interview, one writer told me: "I'm currently writing a shopping list of everything that has come out in relation with the film, toys, merchandising, everything […] this topic doesn't interest me but we have to do it because its fashionable" – and great for business.

Spanish writers and lower-level editors often recounted attempts at trying to convince (higher-level) editors and directors to allow more explicit language in content about sex ("the language that is in fact used in the streets"; see below on *Grazia*) together with a broader range of topics. "Why wouldn't we talk about female masturbation?!", expressed a former digital director. Within the tight and strictly

policed limits established by the editors—who in turn blame readers, advertisers and/or publishing house executives—many writers claimed to try to make the content a bit less sexist and a bit less exclusionary. For a *Cosmopolitan Spain* professional: "There is still a large sexist load in those topics. It's always expected that he takes the first step, that you to provide him pleasure [...] that you look pretty for him". Like others, this writer asserted that all she can do is "silly things, little things". She offered me this example: "Imagine the topic is 'learn to do a pleasurable massage for your partner'. What I can and do say is, "well, now that you know how it's done, ask your guy to give you one after"". Another writer spoke of sometimes using the word "partner" instead of "guy" or "boyfriend". Some writers claimed to have tried to include more diverse representations, having had their ideas rejected. One illustration is: "I have sometimes proposed topics for homosexuals and it didn't happen".

Lesbianism, it seems, is not glamorous enough for Spanish women's magazines (beyond the occasional celebrity article). For example, I was told that *Elle* "is still a long way from talking about a topic like this. It's like the reader is not going to like it, like she's going think it's not very glamorous". Thus, again, the blame returns to the reader. To illustrate how her fear of "a negative reaction from readers and advertisers" affects her daily practice, one online editor shared the following anecdote about syndicating content:

> The other day I did a US piece that I found hilarious about sexual postures in costumes for Halloween. It was very funny drawings, a witch with a wizard, a mummy with… And all of the sudden there was one with two women. And I said, "I'm not including this one". See?

She followed by saying: "I think it is more dangerous with lesbians than with gays. I am less scared with gays than with lesbians. I don't think it is fully accepted". Unfortunately this is not an isolated case. On a number of occasions Spanish journalists told me that more so than gay men, they would be hesitant to talk about *lesbians*. One writer critically observed that "to be a lesbian in this country is like a horrific thing". Interestingly, transgenderism provokes much less "fear" or "horror". As somebody from *Glamour Spain* remarked: "Throughout the year 2015 we have spoken time and time again about this topic". One example from the web is the article 'The history of the corset that revealed Caitlyn Jenner as a woman'. The article includes the comment "it costs 200$ (€) and can be bought online". A link to the shopping site is also provided.

Yet another patterned response to my mention about diversity in sexual desire in the Spanish interviews was: "I hadn't thought of it, I'm going to try". This in part reflects the still largely unchallenged hegemony of heteronormativity in the Spanish context. It can also be understood in relation to the repeated claim that "there is a lot of self-censorship". This was connected to the internationalisation of the editorial line, as those on staff particularly are expected to do, and which is a valued skill in the profession. In the words of a British features writer: "I don't write as me, I am just [name of magazine] and sometimes that's boring but that is a skill in itself, being able to write in a house style". Somebody at *Glamour UK* took this further to explain how when working for a magazine, you are expected to "become the *embodiment* of that magazine":

> When you work for a magazine, you <u>are</u> that magazine, you are that brand, you uphold their morals, you uphold their ideas. They have their house style, they have their rules, they have certain ways that they'll explain and look at things and you are that. You become the embodiment of that magazine, the personification if you like.

As a few research participants themselves noted, this makes impositions from "above" very "organic". Staff members are often not given "orders" but rather come to "know" what they can and cannot say or cover, effectively self-regulating. The brand comes to be internalised to the extent of delimiting the parameters of thought. To explain why they refrain from pitching something new or slightly different to the norm, many writers also highlighted wanting to avoid "causing bother", which was depicted as particularly imprudent in a relatively small market such as the Spanish one. For individuals this entails fewer jobs. For magazines it means that: "You cannot risk losing an advertiser for supporting gay marriage, for example".

Still, Spanish journalists would often observe: "But things are changing, especially online". If *The Debrief* exemplifies the changes that especially the younger women's producers claim to want to see in the UK context, *Grazia* is the case in Spain. Launched in print and online in 2013, the print edition folded eighteen months later due to poor sales. Now, standing as an online-only brand, it represents itself as follows in the *Grazia* international website (original in English):

> The EASY CHIC spirit invades every aspect of the website. The fresh and informal language connects with the audience. Grazia.es treats the topics that are discussed on the street by the Grazia kind of women!

Pronounced as it reads in Spanish *Grazia* sounds like 'gracia', which means something funny and with flair. This is used constantly to capture the 'essence' of

this title, whose sex and relationship section published only in July 2016 pieces on female masturbation, the "orgasm gap", together with a critique of "how society has endeavoured to denigrate vaginal smell (while the male crotch is like a garden in bloom)" (see also, in Chapter Nine, its refreshingly political take on feminism).

Particularly in the UK, magazine producers celebrated that "there's a real change in the air". In general terms, for a writer: "The fact that every women's magazine now has a sex and relationships section is important and wonderful". More specifically, British magazine producers were sanguine that: "A lot of them have got more relatable content in them. They've got content that is a bit more real". This "real movement towards a better, more real, discussion about sex" was located within "a new wave of women's journalism that's happening now" connected to millennial sensibilities and digital cultures. It was claimed that for "the younger generation", who have a more "fluid vision of sexuality": "It would be strange to them if we weren't including stories about different types of relationships, or experimentation, or whatever. I think they would be like, "Okay, this isn't real"". Also highlighted was the "growing new wave of feminism", which producers celebrated as "one of the biggest focus of recent times" in (primarily UK) women's magazines (see Chapter Nine). As a result of this influence, "sex and relationship features have become very intelligent" and "we're trying to be more relatable, more real" (see also Chapter Eight on 'confidence'). If the previous breakthrough, headed by *Cosmopolitan*, revolved around the "message that women enjoy sex, and that we should be allowed to discuss sex", "this new step involves talking about sex in a more realistic way".

British magazine producers celebrated that the content is generally "so much more positive and feminist and it acknowledges that women have sex for sex's sake". In their view, "magazines are listening", and in so doing have become "so much pro-women". For example:

> They're talking about sex in a female-oriented way. They've listened to the way people want to hear about it, the problems they have. And not just glorifying it all or pleasing-your-man kind of stuff, and that's really exciting to see. (Ex-relationships columnist and current freelance writer, early 30s, UK)

In the UK, producers were sanguine that the "man-pleasy stuff" has "generally been turned into "how to have the best sex of your life"". Concerning the production side, I was told that: "It's always about "you're doing this for yourself". That is always a

constant discussion. […] Never saying, "this is what you should do for a man"".
Ultimately: "We do want it to be about female empowerment". Others celebrated the
increased coverage of lesbian experience across women's magazines:

> There has been a shift. There really has, the past couple of years especially. One of the
> big things I've noticed is more explanation about having sex with women as a woman.
> That's a really new thing. I'm really enjoying the prominence that that's getting these
> days. (Freelance writer, early 20s, UK)

A *Cosmopolitan UK* professional equally pointed out: "We've been doing a lot of
stuff on LGBTQIA recently". Two November 2015 headlines include 'This is what
it's really like to be gay and disabled' and '10 Heartbreaking confessions about
dating as a transgender person' (note, again, the first person approach). Another
example of a magazine producer highlighting this particular issue is:

> I think we're making a lot of strides, I really do. Talking about lesbian relationships,
> and bisexuality, and trans-teens, and LBGQ - I can't remember the end. LGBQT?
> Yeah. All of that stuff is amazing. I think that's really important. (Freelance writer,
> mid-20s, UK)

One British freelance sex writer expressed: "They are becoming more liberal but
good grief it's taking so long for them to get there"; and another celebrated:
"Obviously so much progress has been made. Things that were once taboo are not
taboo". Examples given include anal sex, "ass motorboating"—"inspired by the
episode of *Girls* with Marnie"—and bondage, inspired by *Fifty Shades*. For a sex
writer: "The 50 Shades of Grey effect has got a lot of to answer for in a really
positive way". She explained: "What it's done is open up people's minds to the idea
that […] this is how sex stays exciting within the confines of a relationship". This
enthusiast of kink-inflected 'sexual entrepreneurship' (Harvey and Gill 2011), who
also writes "commercially for e-commerce clients or manufacturers", welcomed the
ways in which:

> Times have changed dramatically. The types of articles that people want. Now, post-
> *50 Shades of Grey*, it's not articles on the best vibrator. It's articles on how to do
> nipple clamps. It's how do we make things more exciting? How do we make our sex
> life more exuberant? (Freelance writer, early 30s, UK)

Meanwhile, *SoFeminine.co.uk* exhorts: "Ladies, time to get the ropes, whips and
blindfolds out, here are 10 Fifty Shades of Grey inspired ways to kink up your sex
life, stat". Reporting "400% increase in sex toy sales", in 2012 *Cosmopolitan.co.uk*
claimed that the "trilogy has sparked a sexual liberation across the UK". A year later

EnFemenino.com declared that: "'50 shades of Grey' has changed the sexual life of Spanish women".

Less celebratory accounts connected the "more risky" or "more liberal" content to the magazine business model of "what's new, what haven't we tried yet, what can make us cool, what can make us better in bed than our next-door neighbours […] you can be like celebrities, etc." According to another sex writer: "The more extreme stuff does tend to get more air time" because "controversy is king in the era of online content, which is driven by advertising". She continued:

> You've got to think what's going to make people click. They [women's magazines] may suddenly start writing articles about, I don't know, ""how do I use a butt plug?" Here's a product recommendation. Here's an advert for a sex toy retailer". It's a composite thing, and it's geared towards money (Freelance writer, early 30s, UK)

That is, these new discussions about sex become acceptable only once they have undergone the "ordering gaze of the market" (Jarrett 2005: 12), a gaze which is enjoying an expansion online.

Whilst acknowledging that "things are changing" (positively), many simultaneously articulated critiques of sex and relationship content in contemporary publications. For a freelance sex writer: "It's hard to write for them when you're stoic about how […] there is no normal when it comes to sex". In turn, one staff writer expressed: "I don't like the occasional implication that we should all be having orgasms constantly, having great sex and shagging everyone". Another similarly said: "They present this idea that women should always be super super horny and have these amazing like soul crushing orgasms like it will always be great, which is just not true". Many denounced how: "Most women's magazines are still very heteronormative". One news editor alluded to daily "battles" in this sense:

> Obviously with Twitter and certain feminists coming through on Twitter, and the feminist movement kind of coming up through online activity and online activism, it means that intersectionality is so much more important to people. But I'm still finding that a battle, daily. I look at the website and I think, "why does it say, like, 'how to get a boyfriend?'" That's exclusive. (News editor, late 20s, UK)

Yet another critique of representational continuities pertains to the way in which: "Women are still expected to take the responsibility when it comes to the bedroom. They are the gatekeepers. They are the pleasure makers". Another writer disliked:

> The concern with how women appear to men, and the concern about cushioning the male ego and stroking the male ego. It's subtly done. There's still a lot of impetus on women to worry about what men think of them and to try and get them into a relationship and to try and please them once they're in a relationship. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

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She went on to tell me that: "I'd like to see more of a message about women putting their pleasure first and their comfort first, and not worrying about being nice and not worrying about what people think of them so much". "I don't think we can talk the talk about feminism and then be still doing things like that", expressed another British writer.

Of course, many of these young women are the actual individuals producing the exact type of content that they were critiquing. In explaining why she writes the very "pleasing men" articles she is so critical of, the freelancer quoted above spoke of "the tension and the struggle […] between two different sides of me": "The side of me that wants to be liked and wants to be loved and wants to be in a relationship and please a man and feel validated, and the side of me that wants to think, "no, fuck you. I'm going to be out for myself. I'm going to go for my own pleasure. I'm going to try and work on my relationship with myself"". In her view: "A lot of women are still in that space, a lot of women in the media. It's such an internalised thing. When you're giving people advice, you can accidentally tell people that they need to change to please other people".

Most, however, mobilised the idea of 'making a living'. For a British freelancer: "'How to give him amazing head' or 'ten oral sex tips for her' […] Doing those features is just money for old rope". Somewhat differently, in part due to her different employment status, one Spanish staff writer explained: "I understand it is a business. And it is a business not created by me, but by others". This was a recurrent response when I asked journalists about how they negotiate having critical views about and simultaneously working within the sector. One British staff writer said: "I guess I'm realistic about working for a company […] that's the reality of the job… I'm creating someone else's magazine and not my own". In spite of this, many writers claimed to very consciously try to pitch "new and non-typical ideas", which are often faced with a "no, we can't really do that because it doesn't fit with our editorial goals". Quite understandingly, to undergo this process repeatedly is both personally wearing and professionally counterproductive.

Nonetheless, even critical accounts were often accompanied by optimistic elements, not least because "it's a very very interesting time, and exciting". According to a British freelancer: "There is still kind of this whole sort of '10 blow job tips male fantasy', but they are writing more progressive things". Another similarly said: "There are still things that are a bit out-dated in it, but I do think it's

moving in the right direction and that makes me really happy". For yet another British freelancer: "The sexual revolution is tiny steps, little things, and they'll catch on the big magazine brands". In this regard, both in the UK and in Spain, many said that: "I do feel like I can make a bit of a difference". This was driven by a common belief that "the only way you can really change these issues is from the inside". Discussing representational continuity and change in women magazines, one content director told me:

> You have to remember they're not fixed. They're fixed in a loose sense […] but if you look at it [magazine name] over its history, it's gone through many, many permutations, further in one direction, further in another, depending on the prevailing economic conditions, but also the editor […] and not just the editor, but the other people in the team. (Content director, late 30s, UK)

That is, many producers emphasised that the individuals that make up the team *matter* – albeit along with an assembly of other factors, not least the nature of the brand and its USP ('unique selling proposition or point'); and in the context of an understanding that, as a former *Cosmopolitan UK* editor-in-chief put it: "However much you love it, a magazine is a money-making machine".

The magazine professionals who want to break away further from conventions will encounter resistance by those who articulate discourses of consumer demand to explain the sustained presence of the 'older' 'man-pleasy' content – epitomised by 'blow job tips'. For example, a digital writer emphasised: "Continually, some of the most popular pages in our sex and relationships pages online will be the older ones that are like, 'here's how to give a blowjob'. Because women ultimately want to know if they're doing it right". This type of content is still very much present across the examined magazines, albeit if approached in slightly different ways. For example, while *SoFeminine.co.uk* says 'How To Give The Best Blow Jobs', *TheDebrief.co.uk* puts it like this: 'Non-Awful Blow Job Tips From Men's Mags'. Participants maintained that this issue is something that concerns particularly the "traditional *Cosmo* reader". So, what are the 'blow job tips' articles of the (latest) 'New Cosmo' like? Corroborating the broader findings of the chapter, one notable difference is the shift in the advice-giver: Compare the 2008 article '4 essential blow job tips from sex expert Sadie Allison' to the first person approach in the 2016 '16 things I wish I knew before I ever gave a blow job'. Evincing a process of pornification in line with the broader cultural terrain, examined in more detail in Chapter Seven, new prominent voices are also those of 'sex workers' and 'porn stars', who are deemed to

both hold expert knowledge *and* to represent 'reality'. One example from *Cosmopolitan* is: 'Here's some surprising blow job advice from porn stars'. As well as more 'real' voices, for many women's magazines producers, all that was needed was a different framing and attendant change of *language*:

> As much as 'here's how to please your man' was an awful way of raising the question, people still want to know the answer to that question, and if you phrase it in a different way, 'ten ways to have the best blow job experience of your life', so it's phrased in a much more positive and pro-sex way. (Former relationships columnist and current freelance writer, early 30s, UK)

This "much more positive and pro-sex way" to a large extent only entails shifts at the level of phrasing, offering very little contrast in terms of *message*, or at least preferred reading. Compare for example the *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* 2008 'Blow job hell. Learn to love it' to the 2016 '5 blow job sex positions that do it for you too', which reads: "Plenty among us are *not* that into BJs […] For the BJ-averse (or anyone, really), here are some positions that do something for *you* while you're toiling Down Under". That is, performing fellatio maintains its compulsory status. It is arguably no surprise that those with more critical views come to feel "cynical and jaded", and even decide to move on to other areas of employment – one example being a British sex writer who sent me this email after our interview:

> Once I got back home, I thought back on everything we chatted about and it was interesting for me too. I think I'm a lot more cynical and jaded about this industry than I first thought! Maybe I need to be more open minded and accepting of women's lifestyle media and keep hope that the little changes that are currently happening will go a long way. (Post-interview email, occasional freelance magazine writer and copywriter for sex-oriented retail companies, late 20s, UK)

5.6   An authenticity turn

This first data analysis chapter has shown how the talk of women's magazine producers constitutes a heterogeneous discursive landscape, in which passionate attachments to the traditions of the genre and its femininities complexly coexist with critical self-reflexivity, ambivalence and ideological dilemmas. Cutting across accounts are celebratory claims to positive progress, notably around notions of increasing authenticity, which is portrayed as present work-in-progress in the UK and budding/impending model in Spain. This is associated with the impact of young people's critical awareness of commercialism, the digital ecosystem ('call-out culture', blog-style personal narratives, etc.), and the reinvigorated interest in (some) feminist ideas – one notably visible in the media and among young women, and

especially concerned with questions about women's (mis/under-)representation (and injury). Femininity industries (and beyond) have responded with branding strategies revolving around intensified affect-laden notions about relationship building, intimacy and authenticity, thereby profitably incorporating selective elements from an increasingly accepted popular feminism, while also assimilating and capitalising on audience scepticism toward mediated and consumer cultures, a sentiment marked by an "appeal of the real" (Duffy 2013b: 150).

Speaking about this "clamour for authenticity" among "consumer citizens" under contemporary capitalism, Banet-Weiser (2012: 10) writes: "in a culture that is increasingly understood and experienced through the logic and strategies of commercial branding, in a culture characterised by the postmodern styles of irony, parody, and the superficial, the concept of authenticity seems to carry even *more* weight, not less". Against the backdrop of globalisation, digitalisation and "discerning" "hyper-connected" (The Debrief 2015) consumers, brands are told by marketing experts to 'Embrace the Age of Authenticity or risk being left behind' (Cohn & Wolfe 2014), and that "the search for the genuine is particularly emblematic of the millennial generation" (Solomon 2015), as well as central to the new "laws of cool" (Livingston 2010 in Buckingham 2014). Businesses are likewise told: "if Fourth Wave Feminism has taught marketers anything, it is that truth, honesty and authenticity are crucial to establishing meaningful engagements with [female] consumers" (Kemp 2015) – together with the millennial woman *employee* (Kelan 2012).

This is the very generation that is attempting to effect change in women's magazines, often inspired by feminist ideas and driven by a wish to consume *and* produce less narrow, alienating and injurious representations – and whose disaffection is incorporated into capitalism itself (see McGuigan 2009 on 'cool capitalism'). The talk of the writers and editors of women's magazines reflects the ambivalence of contemporary brand cultures, where, as Banet-Weiser (2012: 5, 12) notes, "both economic imperatives and 'authenticity' are expressed and experienced simultaneously", and which often hold at the same time "possibility for individual resistance and corporate hegemony". These women work in complex ways variously with and against the sexist capitalist apparatus that is the mass media. They deserve our solidarity as well as critique.

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Chapter Six

FROM FORUMS TO SNSs

6.1   Introduction

> The women's online magazine: astro, beauty, sex, diet, tests, quizzes, fashion, trends… Expert advice, interactive tools and sofeminine's fabulous forums!
> —*SoFeminine.co.uk*

Stressing notions of a female community, the star feature of the affinity portals that thrived from the late 1990s seeking to capitalise on the increasing female Internet population was the discussion forum or message board. This proved to be a highly successful model, and thus many print magazines (e.g. *Cosmopolitan UK* and *Elle Spain*) decided to also include forums in their online versions. A decade later, commentators both in the media (e.g. Pfanner 2010) and in academic work (e.g. Campbell 2011) were still heralding the forums as key to the success of women's online magazines. Yet a few years on these interactive facilities are vanishing. Why?

This chapter aims to critically interrogate the changing model of reader interaction in consumer women's online magazines. To this end, I draw on a variety of trade material, but, primarily, on the user-generated content and on the producer interviews. First I explore the ways users utilised the forums, taking as a case study *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* as it was hugely popular. Also, *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* announced the closure of the forum in advance, which allowed me both to save the content and to observe the reactions to the closure by users. These are also included in the analysis, which is developed on the basis of months of close observation and a specifically created sample of 421 posts. Turning to the interview data, the next three sections examine how producers explain the increasing closures or abandonment (e.g. by reducing the prominence of the section and deleting links) of the discussion forums in women's online magazines. I begin by looking at critiques of the forum system itself, then move on to discussions about social network sites (SNSs), and end by examining (continued) moments of tension between producers and users in these new platforms. The final section consists of a theoretical and political discussion about the new paradigm identified in the empirical analysis. The chapter demonstrates how the decision to close the forums and embrace SNSs responds to

multiple determinants, problematising the way in which this includes outsourcing new modalities of free consumer labour and a corporate doctrine of control over users' discourse.

6.2   The *Cosmopolitan* forum

> Jump into our buzzing Cosmopolitan forums to discover a world of scandal, hilarity and sisterly support. Chat away to your hearts content.
> —*Cosmopolitan.co.uk*, early 2010's

> The Cosmopolitan.co.uk forums will be closing and moving to 'read-only' at the end of November. We apologise for any inconvenience this may cause. It's not you, it's us. x
> —*Cosmopolitan.co.uk*, 2014

Between the years 2006-2014, *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* offered a platform for audience interaction in the form of a discussion forum. This was divided into a number of inbuilt topic-specific sections, which were mostly in line with the central foci of the publication, such as beauty, fashion and sex, but also included others like 'news and debates' and 'careers and cash'. People—primarily self-identified women—utilised the platform to anonymously discuss a varied range of issues under the section headings, even engaging in meta-debates, for instance: "are there some topics which are too sensitive, taboo or horrible to be debated?" and "Cosmopolitan A 'Safe Space' for Feminist Talk?" More frequently, the forums were used to disclose personal problems and ask for advice and support, with thread titles like 'Please help! i need advice!' and 'Confused and worried' saturating this online space. Some registered on the *Cosmopolitan* forum to discuss a single, specific issue. One example is the thread 'Sexual assault and new partners', where the thread-starter explained: "I made this account for this purpose, because I did not want to risk to be identified, but the struggle I am facing is real". A more typical use of the forums is well-represented by this self-introduction to the community: "I came on here to talk to people about our girl problems, to also have some help myself and to basically just make some friends".

A fundamental 'girl problem' in the *Cosmo* universe concerns appropriately performing the feminine labour of self-beautification and consumption. Threads like the following were pervasive: 'Eyebrow tint- wedding emergency!', 'Blusher colour help!', 'What top do I wear with this skirt?' By requesting and providing advice on

the pains and pleasures, successes and failures with services and products women were therefore doing free market research work for companies. Equally speaking to debates about free consumer labour in digital contexts, one key activity in the forums was what Campbell (2011: 492) calls the 'labour of devotion', namely "where consumers participate in the promotion of corporate brands through interactive media". For Campbell (2011), this mode of consumer work is both distinctive of corporate-engineered online communities *and* clearly gendered, grounded in the market assumption that women, as supposedly innate social beings, actively promote their favourite brands to other women. Indeed, this was a motivating factor for the forum offering in women's websites. For example, a year after the launch of *EnFemenino.com* (AuFeminin) in 2001, the then editor celebrated: "It is proven that women speak three times more than men about their experience with a brand" (Cubillo in Baquia 2001). A decade later, the AuFeminin CEO was still promoting this gendered consumer, putting to work the performative power of discourse: "A great difference is that, while men are difficult to influence (apart from by their wives) yet women are influenced by a number of women" (Sauty de Chalon in Cazard 2011). In *Cosmopolitan.co.uk,* the forumers' labour of (brand) devotion was particularly pervasive in the 'Hair & Beauty' and 'Fashion and Shopping' sections, conveniently matching the industries which provide most of the advertising revenue to the magazine. Two illustrations are: "I find Chanel skin care products a great treat, the make up amazing and the perfumes gorgeous" and "I really LOVE the Maxfactor Masterpiece mascara". As well as its actual and potential commercial partners, this digital labour also benefited *Cosmopolitan* directly: "i never head to the high street until I've checked out the latest issue of Cosmo - keep up the good work!"

It was not all consumer devotion, however. In the forums, women also expressed dislikes and disappointments with brands: "Topshop is terrible quality it is no better than primark", "Riverisland is bad for washing", etc. Again, *Cosmopolitan* itself was also critiqued. One example is: "Cosmopolitan is a money making franchise that exploits women for sales. Rather read something that will expand your mind, instead of poorly written drivel on celebs and bad sex tips". There were even threads dedicated to debating the quality of the publication, such as "does cosmos dumb you down?" and "is cosmos sexist?" In these discussions, some would distance the forum (user-generated content) from the magazine (editorial content): "The forums are different as they really have nothing to do with the magazine" and "The

forum is great; it is real people, talking about real issues. But I view the articles on the website the way I view the Sun; trashy" (note the way in which publications are responding to this critique about the lack of 'real' issues and social actors, as discussed in the previous chapter). Supporting claims in feminist research on audiences of women's magazines (e.g. Frazer 1987; Hermes 1995), self-defined readers also shared critical readings of editorial textual practices. This includes challenging the feminist credentials of publications due to their emphasis on hyper-sexualised women, their limited standards of beauty, along with their profound (ideological) contradictions:

> Although I appreciate what Cosmopolitan is trying to do in terms of making their online space a more feminist space, I just don't see any progress being made. I mean, the models being shown throughout the website are, for the most part, still being portrayed in a very hyper-sexualized manner, as sex icons. The women are representing the 'ideal beauty' of the culture: slim, white, heterosexual, with perfect blonde hair, glazing blue eyes and with perfect smooth skin.

> i love this forum, but some of the [editorial] advice articles are not good. i read one that implied if your OH [other half] had changed or improved a sexual technique it meant he was cheating. this was along side a 'sex help guide' on how to please your man/how to please your woman!

Unlike the magazine, by and large the *Cosmopolitan* forum evaded criticism. On the contrary, forumers repeatedly depicted the platform as an important space of advice and support. For example: "I'd probably have topped myself a long time ago had it not been for cosmos. I know it's only a forum but people don't realise how much it helps others. It's fabulous. X" Repeatedly praised was the possibility to remain anonymous. This was portrayed as facilitating a valued heightened level of openness and frankness in discussion (see Hine 2012 for similar findings). For example: "It's great to be able to ask frank, honest questions without the worry about what people think - love it!" These anonymous communications among women (and some men) on the forum were advanced as a welcome alternative or complement to offline relationships:

> I love the fact that people on here always give good advice and support. It's great to know that if you don't want to share it with real world people, you can come online and share your thoughts and problems with people on here and they're willing to help.

The *Cosmopolitan* forum was filled with messages revealing intimate details and stories of hardship. This was particularly notable in the most popular section, 'relationships', described by *Cosmopolitan* as follows: 'From your man to your mum or your best friend, discuss your latest relationship dreams and dilemmas'. Here

threads featured a diversity of sensitive issues/topics like: 'My Boyfriend hit me with a beer bottle', 'pregnant and feeling so alone…', 'My ex boyfriend has passed away', and 'Is my marriage doomed'. The 'sex' section—'Drop your inhibitions and talk about all subjects sexual. From emotional issues to hot techniques'—similarly included discussions ranging from things such as 'My boyfriend wants us to use a strap on' to the very delicate 'have u been raped i have? :-('. This supports previous observations that in anonymous online spaces people tend to feel comfortable disclosing information and talking about matters considered too intimate or sensitive, inappropriate or even dangerous for face-to-face and other forms of public conversation, making Internet forums especially attractive to socially vulnerable populations (Herring et al. 2002).

This attachment became vividly evident when *Cosmopolitan* announced the permanent closure of the forum (see the second quote opening this section). The community reacted by expressing gratitude to fellow members, for example: "thank you for sharing your thoughts, hopes, fears, dreams, problems etc online", "Thanks to everyone who ever listened to me, read my nonsense or engaged with me", and "Thank you for the years of memories ladies". Furthermore, both forumers and 'lurkers' posted messages stressing the significance of the platform for them and others:

> I was often more of a lurker than an active member, but it was nice to know that if I needed it, there were people on here willing to give advice and support.

> It's a shame. A lot of people came on here looking for advice they couldn't get anywhere else including myself.

> Fuck sake Cosmo threads have really helped me for some really hard times - from debating leaving my first (abusive, animal porn addicted) ex through to general concerns about my job...Really going to miss you all. Goodbye ☹ xxxxxxxxxx

That is, there were vivid expressions of sadness and loss by users when *Cosmopolitan* announced it was closing the forum. Two additional examples are: "Guys I'm going to miss so many of you and find it really sad I'll never speak to some of you again" and "*sigh*. This has made me sad, I've spent a lot (probably too much!) of time on here over the years, and made some really good friends. Will miss this place". There were also a few posts voicing gratitude to the brand for having offered the platform. Noteworthily, the post below indicates diversity in

contributors (something mostly missing in the editorial team) as "one of its great strengths":

> I've read some hilarious and fascinating things, been offered emotional support when I needed it and been able to offer it in return. I've had some fun debates and some nasty debates but all have been entertaining. I've interacted with a wide range of individuals that I would never have met or conversed with if it weren't for Cosmo/Hearst. [The forum] was literally a cosmopolitan melting pot of people and that was one of its great strengths.

In contrast, a larger number of forumers expressed anger at the decision, and raised various critiques against the Hearst brand, not least because: "All the money that cosmo must be making, surely the cost of running this forum is a pittance to them!" Other illustrations of this reaction are:

> It has been a pleasure.
> Cosmopolitan you are fucking arseholes and I will never be buying your piece of shit misogynists dream magazine again. You suck Cosmo.
>
> Cosmopolitan sells lies to vulnerable people. Our forum was a lifeline. And now it is being closed. No explanation, nothing. Hearst is a company run by incompetent, lying, useless fucktards.

There is something perverse about the way companies invoke notions of community to extract free labour and construct ever more narrow and emotionally involved consumer niches, and generate revenue "by selling audiences as markets to advertisers often under the guise of 'serving' their respective minority community" (Campbell 2008: 22). This does not mean, however, that people are users-turned-workers operating under some form of 'false consciousness', deceived or 'duped' by marketers (Campbell 2011). As seen, the *Cosmopolitan* forumers articulated critiques of the editorial content, along with an understanding of the profit imperative and revenue-generating strategies of this media. This includes an awareness of the significant value users added to the site as commercial enterprise, for example in terms of driving traffic and providing ideas for the editorial: "Apparently driving traffic to the website, giving them stuff for the magazine and being a supportive community is not enough when you're wanting cash - eh Hearst?"

In light of the impending closure, the members of the forum community discussed 'migrating' to a different online space. A Facebook private group was created for this purpose, leaving many behind due to a perceived lack of anonymity in this new platform:

> I prefer keeping anonymous so if anyone does have another forum that they know members are going too, let me know. Adios Cosmo, you've been great ☺

> [Response] Will miss you sparkles There's a group on fb, but that's obviously not anonymous. It has been a pleasure.
>
> Oh im so disappointed ☹ I'd prefer to remain anonymous so unfortunately this is probably goodbye to most of you!

Overall, the users lamented the closure of the *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum as an important loss, particularly because of the general consensus that "these boards were a great source of advice and opinion", together with support and belonging. This study thereby corroborates previous claims about the value for users of these interactive spaces in women's commercial community sites (Cooks et al. 2002; Eble and Breault 2002; Campbell 2011).

In addition to disappointment, many contributors (understandably) expressed surprise. All previous communications by *Cosmopolitan* had endorsed the forum community (see the opening quote of this section). For example, on announcing the 2011 site relaunch the acting web editor posted in the forums: "we want to make sure that you – the Cosmo community who are the heart and soul of the site – have the best possible experience on the website". Media coverage similarly highlighted that this re-design included: "A complete makeover of the ever-popular community forums" (InPublishing 2011). As late as January 2014, the webmaster was announcing the winners of the annual Cosmo Community Awards, which comprised ten categories, including 'all-around nicest member' and 'best debater'. So what led *Cosmopolitan* to discard the forums only a few months later in their November 2014 relaunch? *Cosmopolitan* never offered an explanation beyond "it's not you, it's us x", in what was a remarkably silent (or silenced?) operation, which remained ignored by all the attention the new site otherwise received (e.g. InPublishing 2014). In the interviews, the producers of women's online magazines gave a varied range of reasons for the mounting rejection of the forum model of reader interaction. These are examined in the sections that follow.

6.3   Repudiating forums

In response to growing feminist critiques of the corporate community sites for women that were booming from late 1990s-early 2000s, Eble and Breault (2002: 317) argued for an understanding of these spaces as valuable "women's marketplaces—online, primetime agoras" (see also Chapter Three). Interestingly, during our interview a product manager working for a Spanish site with highly

popular forums made the very same comparison: "Before people conversed in the village squares, in Ancient Greece. This is like an agora, you have different stalls and people assemble according to interests". Further accentuating this sense of public gathering and open debate, he added: "We have always understood that the forums aren't ours, they are the users'. So it's a place where we need to let them communicate among themselves". As well as benefiting their corporate image of being a community, user-centred and of serving the needs and interests of women, this level of (relative) discursive freedom in the forum is important for magazines because: "It gives us trends, patterns, really valuable information you wouldn't be able to obtain otherwise".

One important way publications utilise this "really valuable information" from forums is to shape the editorial content. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this was repeatedly confirmed when I asked about sourcing information and ideas for pieces. "I'd read the forums and read what people were talking about, and what readers wanted to know and get general gist", a writer responded. One features editor similarly explained: "When we had our features meetings, I'll always go on there, because they're under the categories of our magazine. See what people are talking about". In the forums, research participants noted, "people are much more willing to talk more openly about issues such as sex". This can provide useful insights and inspiration for features. For some, however, this openness also means that conversations often go "a step too far" to be useful for the elaboration of editorial content. That is, the explicit, detailed and/or non-normative character of much forum user-generated content about sex can block the extraction of value from the forumers' 'work of being watched' (Andrejevic 2002). For example:

> The sex and relationship section of my work website… we get a lot of what I would consider quite inappropriate conversations that I couldn't then translate into an article because it would just take it a step too far. (Staff writer, late 20s, UK)

In a similar manner, a number of journalists claimed to generally dislike the nature of commentary in forums for being "very immediate, anonymous, impulsive". These online spaces were additionally described as too often "weird", and certainly "controversial". "And obviously, we've got a duty to make sure there isn't anything too controversial on the chatroom because we're responsible for that", remarked an editor from the UK. Articulated at times was a discourse of concern for the wellbeing of the reader. For example: "You'd see some people giving some really horrific

advice, medically unsafe advice and emotionally unsafe advice". Others problematised what was perceived as a shift in the type of engagement found in these spaces: "Historically forums were the big platform for chat, debate, everything else. Now a forum is somewhere to be a dickhead". Indeed, women's magazine producers claimed that these online spaces are repeatedly employed to be "bitchy", "nasty" and "aggressive". Some even related the increasing rejection of a forum model of user interaction to growing wider concerns about cyber-bullying. For a British freelance writer: "A lot more websites are very careful about how much they let people interact with each other because what's happened in recent times with online bullying and that kind of thing". Internet forums were also described as a "playground for trolls", as well as "fortune-tellers", unwanted advertising such as "weight loss things", and spam. Moreover, some journalists shared experiences of encounters with scams, and even other illegal activities like child laundering on a couple of occasions. Subsequently, at the centre of explanations about the increasing closures or disinterest in forums was "the issue of moderation and control". A former digital director from Spain told me that: "A forum is free, there isn't any previous moderation. You post a message and it's instantly up. Obviously, that's a bottomless pit. It's impossible to control". Equally, for a Spanish online editor: "Forums are a hotchpotch you have no control over". "You just can't police something's that so massive, that was why that decision was taken", explained a British features editor.

The desire to be in control was not all due to trolls, spammers, and scammers, however. For some producers, this user-led space is an unwelcome competitor for user attention, and (hence) a waste of editorial efforts. "It's sad for people to come to your magazine because of a [forum] comment about anti-contraceptives, it's like, "and all my work for nothing"", expressed a Spanish fashion and lifestyle online editor. Again contrasting the discourse of consumer care discussed above, the producers of women's online magazines repeatedly highlighted forums as detrimental for the "image and reputation" of the brand. Of particular concern was "negative publicity" deriving from "association" with the sex topics discussed by forumers. In Spain especially, there was an additional significant concern about the sex-related *language*. For example, a former Spanish digital editor stated that, in contrast to the writers: "The users speak in an explicit way and that sounds very vulgar for the magazine". Both in Spain and in the UK, this perceived inappropriateness of the user-generated content about sex was a contributory factor

for the decision to close the platform. In explaining the closure of the popular forum run by her magazine, an editor said:

> At one point, if you put 'rimming' into *Google*, [magazine] came up second top search because on the forums people were talking about rimming so much it came up second when you put it in. And that's not really our--obviously, we are a sex and relationship bible but we're not particularly going to be that. (Editor, UK)

Still, the producers of women's magazines contended that: "The censorship is more from a commercial rather than an editorial point of view" (note the use of the strong term "censorship"). Fundamentally, explicit or less conventional sex-related discussions deter advertisers. "There have been issues in the past where particular things on the website [forum] have had to be taken down before they would advertise with us", elucidated a British staff writer. In other words, the user-generated content intensifies what is already a complicated terrain for these publications, namely negotiating changing cultural sensibilities and practices concerning sex/uality with the boundaries of 'taste' and 'respectability' demanded by luxury or otherwise glossy (mainly beauty) brands.

Further diminishing the appeal of the platform for women's online magazines is the fact that advertisers do not consider forums an appropriate space to promote products/services. This is due to an "attitude" a Spanish product manager described as one of: "I control everything that is said about me in all platforms and spaces". As others also put it, "clients don't want to be in the forums" because "everybody has the power to comment". After I asked why her magazine had closed the forum, a director equally explained that:

> A forum isn't economically profitable because there are no brands involved. Well, in our case. I imagine that there are several media that actually do make a profit, but big luxury brands don't want to be in a forum. Why? Because the content is so free that anything can come out. (Digital director, mid-30s, Spain)

One vital thing that can "come out" is consumer dissatisfaction with products/services. Certainly, as seen in the previous section, the users of women's online magazines are not always as docile and devoted to brands as companies expected or hoped. This causes conflict between publications and their advertisers:

> We've had advertisers who advertised in the web and would then receive lots of criticism in the forums because their product wasn't good, according to the users. And the advertisers would then tell us to eliminate those comments. (Audio-visual producer, mid-20s, Spain)

In this sense, a community manager from Spain emphasised that: "There are a lot of problems with aesthetic clinics". By closing the forums magazines "make advertisers and PRs happy" as they (re)gain control of the reviews potential customers encounter in these sites, and more generally obliterate any discourse contesting the 'beauty myth' (Wolf 1991) and 'consumer femininity' (Talbot 1995).

A number of magazine producers explained the closures of forums by making distinctions between forumers on the one hand, and on the other the "consumers that advertisers want to reach". Some others differentiated forumers from readers, asserting that "the people who are on the chatrooms weren't particularly reading any of the articles", but were rather using the web "only as a facility" to communicate among themselves. This was associated with the criticisms the publication was receiving from the forum community, which was another factor contributing to the closures. One writer explained:

███
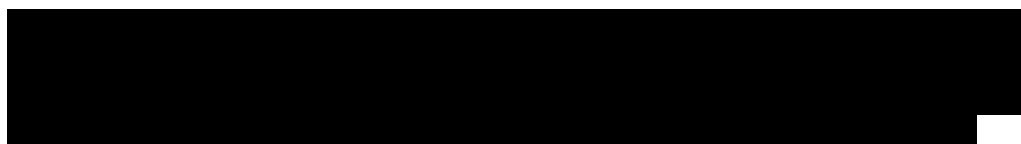
Preferred to forums were the comment sections below editorial articles. Comment sections, which are increasingly connected to SNSs (primarily Facebook), assist magazines in their attempt to maintain reader commentary in line with the editorial content. Note below how "we wanted our readers" is rapidly corrected to "it's about what *they* want":

> The conversations that were happening [in the forum] were not necessarily in line with the kind of things that we wanted our readers--not wanted our readers to be talking about, it's about what they want. But we wanted the conversations to be in line with our content really. So the way to do that is to lead the conversations underneath each piece of content. (Features editor, late 30s, UK)

In addition to topical divergence from the editorial content, there was a general condemnation of the tendency for forum conversations to "go off into oblivion" and "tangents". Here, again, the more restrictive comment sections were favoured. In the words of a British editor: "We'd rather people commented underneath the articles to guide their chat a bit more because people were going off on these different tangents". Again indicating an effort by corporations to order a perceived disorder online (Jarrett 2005), this editor also observed that closing the forum of the website: "It just makes it more neat as well".

On the whole, when discussing the forum facility the producers of women's online magazines stressed that: "It's just more hassle than it's worth". Forums, I was told, are resource demanding, "really, really time-consuming to monitor" and, ultimately, "impossible to control". This involves scammers, spammers and trolls – but also 'unruly' users, namely women disregarding and questioning the topical borders established by the publication and sharing 'unglossy' personal stories— mainly concerning sex—as well as expressing critical views about and problems with brands. The findings therefore support a Spanish freelancer who critically argued that: "When one doesn't open a forum, it's because one doesn't want there to be dialogue". In his view: "There are fantastic Internet tools to filter the disturbing interference of some [e.g. trolls] without impacting upon the freedom of the community, who could enjoy that opening". However, according to this freelancer, women's magazines want to avoid hearing "criticism of brands and editorial lines". "And as a result come the closures and the restrictions", he added. The way magazines are attempting to gain control over user expression while maintaining narratives of "customer connection and interaction" (Elle 2016) is by shifting to a model based on SNSs.

6.4   Endorsing SNSs

When I asked women's magazine producers about the decreasing corporate interest in forums, I received a set of answers problematising the system itself, as examined in the previous section. Another patterned response was that visiting these spaces "it's kind of an older thing", and, more specifically, that "they're very nineties". What is more, for many the Internet forum is "an obsolete system".[24] In terms of searching for answers to problems, journalists pointed to the greater availability of information, and user desire for immediacy. For example: "Online there is so much information that you don't need to go to a forum to ask a question and wait […] we now ask our questions directly on the search engine". Concerning engaging in discussion, it was maintained that: "People don't use them [forums] anymore because everyone has gone over to talking about things on Facebook". Indeed, magazine producers declared that: "The forum is now Facebook and Twitter". This

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[24] Some would observe that forums still work for "specialist things" like fitness, and, most repeatedly, parenting sites like the UK-hosted *Mumsnet*. "It's something that mums look for, it's not something for a general women's lifestyle website", said a British staff writer, suggesting how consumer segments are constituted and put to work in different ways by corporations.

includes those who still had forums in their websites. "I don't think they have much of a future on our site", expressed a research participant from *SoFeminine.co.uk*; also remarking that: "There's buttons of "follow us on Twitter", "follow us on Facebook". We removed the forum button". Overall, the message I received was succinctly put by a Spanish digital writer like this: "Forums have converted into Facebook comments and Twitter publications. The forums are finished". Illustrating this shift from forums to SNSs, *Elle Spain* said "good-bye to the forums" as follows in 2014:

> After more than six years, we say good-bye to the forums […] Thank you to all of you who during these years participated with your conversations and remember that we will stay in contact via our profiles on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Youtube, Vine and Google Plus.

In other words, technological developments and attendant changing patterns of use come into play to systematically push women's online magazines to close down discussion forums and move onto platforms like Twitter and Facebook. In the context of a rapidly developing media(e)scape, forums are increasingly perceived as "relics of web 1.0" (Davies Jones 2015). In contrast, social network sites (SNSs) are the icons of the 'new web' (Tapscott and Williams 2006). After all, glossies are built upon the eternal quest for the new and upcoming, not to mention the most profitable – and SNS referral has surfaced in recent years as the main traffic driver. "In terms of traffic, social media is huge. It's huge"[25], all magazine industry insiders emphasised. This has been boosted by the rise in use of mobile devices, particularly smartphones. As the publisher of *The Debrief* has put it: "That girl is glued to her mobile phone. […] A clear opportunity emerged" (Holleyoake in Gavin 2015). Exemplifying recent shifts, the newly forum-free *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* 2014 redesign was announced to have been "developed to prioritise mobile and social media", because: "Currently 54% of readers primarily access Cosmopolitan.co.uk via mobile devices" (InPublishing 2014). *Cosmopolitan* UK also revealed that: "Our mobile traffic is our social traffic" (Odell in Welton 2015); and that: "73% of our traffic [is] coming from social media"[26]. In addition to increasing traffic, magazine professionals welcomed the move to SNSs in terms of "efforts-reward ratio" with regard to time, resources and cost. For example, one writer said: "If it's all on Facebook, it's minimal effort required to do it, it's going much further, it's resulting

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[25] Research participants used the phrase 'social media' to refer to SNSs specifically.
[26] From: 'The 5 key things you'll benefit from by advertising on Cosmopolitan.co.uk', http://www.cosmopolitan.co.uk/about/a31085/advertise/ (Accessed 26/02/2016)

in more ad revenue". Furthermore, a platform like Facebook, in contrast to forums: "It's free and you don't have to monitor it".

Notwithstanding their importance, these factors do not *necessarily* explain the abandonment of the forum system altogether. Sites like *EnFemenino.com* combine both models, to much success (indeed, it is by far the most widely visited website in the sample, see Chapter Four). Also, these logics alone do not—again, *necessarily*—account for the closure of forums that were popular, such as those hosted by *Cosmopolitan UK*. And the shift from forums to SNSs certainly does not *require* the changing discourse, conspicuously marked by the gradual disappearance of the term 'community'. This is evident in the recent increasing self-designation of the online-only sites as *magazines*. One example is the changing self-description by *FemaleFirst.co.uk* as an "online community" to the 2016 Twitter handle: "women's lifestyle magazine". Equally, in the most recent trade material the word 'community' is increasingly rare. The new discursive landscape has instead been taken over by an enthusiasm about 'connection', 'native advertising', 'real-time data', 'shareable content', and 'social platforms' – but not forums. My data point to a varied range of different factors coming together in the push away from forums and toward SNSs, and for the changing discursive terrain. Building on the previous section, in what follows I wish to highlight one important such factor: corporate efforts to exercise control over user-generated content.

As already discussed with respect to comment sections, one advantage of closing forums and using SNSs industry insiders mentioned in the interviews is the manner in which the latter help companies better restrict and shape discussions. Magazine professionals highlighted that SNSs encourage the delimitation of user participation to commenting on individual editorial features, and thus the topics (carefully) curated by publications as opposed to those brought up by the users themselves. One editor-in-chief appeared to anticipate critique of this corporate move with the observation "we still discuss as many things":

Laura: Why did the forum close down?
EiC: It just worked for us better to have people talking on the social media pages rather than a separate forum that didn't necessarily engage with the content that was up. So it sometimes become like a separate conversation, whereas it makes sense that everyone is having the same conversation about lots of different things, we still discuss as many things. (Editor-in-chief, UK)

Similarly, discussing the recently closed forum of her website, a writer observed that: "What we realised from it was that clearly people have questions that they want answering"; to then continue to say: "But in terms of directing our focus it needed to be on content rather than facilitating people that weren't interested in our content". That is, rather than interrogate the reason why their content failed to engage users with a view to opening a dialogue and modifying editorial lines, publications decide to obliterate this channel of communication altogether – even when its value for users was evident.

Another way SNSs help magazines exercise greater control over users' discourse pertains to the imposing presence of the brand, which the industry translates into benign-sounding narratives of "being part of the conversation". This corporate intention is explicitly articulated in the following endorsement of SNSs (and repudiation of the forum system):

> For all of our readers to be talking to each other is nice but we want to be a part of that conversation. Because I feel like a forum is very much the readers' chats themselves. Yeah… you wanna be in control. (Features writer, mid-20s, UK)

Producers are thus aware of the silencing impact of the brand presence. Besides, it was acknowledged that forum discussions and comments on Facebook and Twitter are "not the same concept" and "not the same type of dialogue", as the former consists of exclusively peer-to-peer communications. Again demonstrating the conscious censoring of users by these companies, a Spanish community manager also affirmed: "You can't talk about everything on social media". Magazine journalists highlighted that contrasting the uninhibited character of forum discussions SNSs involve a general increase in control of self and other due to a decrease in anonymity. Endorsements of this user-silencing process include: "Social media is probably the best forum place. It's safer because there's limits on what you--limits what you can post"; and:

> The majority of us aren't as personal on Facebook as people were in forums. It's kind of anonymous in forums. On Facebook, everyone knows you. If you write something ridiculous, people are going to be like, "what are you talking about? You're crazy". (Staff writer, mid-20s, UK)

In addition to shaping the *nature* of communications, SNSs help magazines exert greater control—and make more profit—by shaping the *manner* in which users communicate with each other. These online publications are transferring the emphasis away from users *producing* their own content and toward users *sharing*

branded/professional content. In terms of editorial work, this involves an increased focus upon viral content: "SEO [search engine optimisation] is really important for online. So, so important in terms of ranking and stuff like that, but right now we really have to focus on viral content, too. […] The most important thing about viral content is it's shareable". The objective of the new digital strategy was expounded as follows by a professional at *SoFeminine.co.uk*:

> Someone will take a viral piece that we have, 'Twenty-Five Things We Wish Men Knew'. We share that on Facebook, but people share that as a way of saying, "read it because I totally agree with it". This is a way of expressing their feelings instead of saying, "you know, I wish guys would do this", like writing their own personal comment.

Forums bring together scattered anonymous discussants around *topics*. In contrast, SNSs emphasise social networks and personal profiles, both of which publications aim to penetrate and monetise via the sharing system. Concerning the former, the corporate reasoning is, in the words of a *Wired.com* article: "When media can spread through social networks, close personal connections *are* the distribution mechanism" (Honan 2014). With regard to profiles, magazine journalists explained that online: "You create this persona of your best self and we feed into that". As is typical in commercial media discourse, content sharing was often articulated via narratives of meeting consumer demand. Consider in the extract below "people want" in comparison to "you've got to shove it in their face" and "it's a massive contributor to our traffic":

> People want to look funny or intelligent in that persona that they create on their social media, because it's a persona for everybody. So, if they come across something funny or intelligent, then they want to share it. So, to make that link as easy as possible, you've got to shove it in their face that, "actually this thing is really a cool thing that you found in the Internet". It's a massive, it's a massive contributor to our traffic. (Digital writer, mid-20s, UK)

Meanwhile, *Cosmopolitan UK* lays the discursive/ideological terrain with claims like: "In today's tech driven society, social status has never been more important and […] all experiences [are] to be shared with our peers". Here *Cosmopolitan* is putting into practice the teachings by experts concerning the "new paradigm for online media", which emphasise that for the professional content provider: "the goal is to provide raw material for people to share […] to build social capital" (Sarvary 2012). The "viral content scene", then, necessitates the digital reputation economy, where consumers' behaviour, relationships, and selves become "both the object and the medium of brand activity" (Moor 2003: 42 in Hearn 2010: 426). Online this is an

activity that is increasingly *doubly branded*, in light of the mounting use of 'native advertising' (see previous chapter).

Networked sociality was also celebrated as an ideal mechanism to boost "brand awareness" and "exposure". In the words of a British freelancer: "So that's the thing about sharing stuff, when something gets shared on Facebook, all of their friends are going to see it. So they may not read it, but they are going to be exposed to it". As well as content broadcasting, SNSs have thus become key spaces for (viral) brand image transmission: "Twitter is the new newsstand", stated a Spanish writer. As such, in the last few years SNS analytics have become a crucial element of the media packs publications prepare to sell advertising opportunities. This also explains the discursive emphasis on *connected* users. For example, *The Debrief* proudly targets the "constantly connected" (The Debrief 2014) or "hyper-connected female millennials" (The Debrief 2015), and promotes the site as follows: "With overt social icons visible throughout the site and on article pages, content is shareable across all social touch points, focusing on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest Youtube & Tumblr"[27]. Indeed, as a writer explained, the new digital strategy means that for the site revamps: "One of the key things is making those share buttons much more prominent".

However, women's online magazines extracted value from the unbranded user-generated content of the forums: the anonymous users "on a tangent" writing "their own personal comment" via "threads that go on for years" were also often a source of ideas for editorial texts. When I pointed this out, a features editor from the UK responded: "I do think you have lost that something on the forum in that readers aren't coming up with new topics. We can only see how they're responding in terms of what we've written rather than coming up with everything". At the editorial level, the shift from a forum to a SNS-based model of reader interaction entails a shift in focus away from: "This is what they're talking about", and toward: "How many people have shared this? How many people have looked at this?"; which could potentially further limit the range of perspectives and topics these publications feature.

Reader monitoring is becoming unprecedentedly central to women's magazine journalism (and beyond). Companies are constantly developing tools to

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[27] From: http://www.bauermedia.co.uk/brands/the-debrief (Accessed 20/10/2016)

monitor users in an even more sophisticated, extensive and intensive manner. One Spanish product manager explained: "We have tools developed by the company to hear the social noise, what people talk about in the forums, what people talk about in other websites, where people are going, etc." In the larger publications like *Cosmopolitan,* monitoring technologies also include "a screen in the office with a list of what people are looking at right now which is on all the time". Companies are embedding this within the daily practice of journalists through motivational activities like competitions: "We have a lot of competitions to see who's going to write the most popular article, have arguments over it, that sort of thing. So, that is a really good motivation tool for us". Indeed, the talk of women's magazine producers is generally characterised by a sheer fascination with the analytics, responsiveness and immediacy of the Internet. A Spanish digital director told me: "I love the medium, for the speed, the data, the analytics, for the immediate audience feedback". Another enthusiastic description of online journalism is:

> The thing with the web is that you can see it as soon as it comes on Twitter. You can see it as soon as they put a comment on the article. You can immediately respond. You can immediately kind of gravitate toward the things they want to see. Just monitoring how your features do. Monitoring shares, monitoring how it does in social. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

On some occasions, concern was expressed about this obsession with analytics. For some producers, it leads to the deterioration of the quality of the content produced (see also previous chapter). "The quality has lowered, ultimately the Tweet matters more than the content", declared an online editor from Spain. One British freelance writer similarly reflected: "Everything is based on the psychology of marketing. It's almost like the content doesn't actually matter anymore".

6.5   Users remain unruly

The increased surveillance of users was repeatedly translated into celebratory notions about a "far closer relationship" or "greater engagement between writer and audience". Magazine producers applauded that with the Internet: "You're able to respond quicker to your audience and have that dialogue with them". Many specifically pointed to SNSs. I was told that "with the invention of Twitter and Facebook, there's more of a dialogue" and "there's definitely more of a channel". However, "dialogue" or "channels" to increase understandings of this notoriously opaque industry are rare – and unlikely to rise any time soon. According to industry

insiders, "a lot of editors don't often do interviews" because "they don't want the scrutiny", and "don't want to talk about the difficult points of women's magazines" or to have to deal with "uncomfortable questions". This importantly concerns the very real influence and power of advertisers.

Once more complicating the narratives of greater dialogue, reader interaction often received criticism by magazine producers as soon as it transcended the mere sharing of editorial content. Many journalists complained that users "feel like they have a right to contact you". For one British freelance writer: "Online readers do have an element of 'I can' because they feel like they have a closer relationship". This is arguably a reasonable consumer response to the longstanding and persistent promotion of women's magazines as a 'best friend', alongside widespread notions of a shared producer-consumer identity. In the same way, I was repeatedly told in the interviews that: "We're there to be their best friends", and that: "Our team is basically the audience". These industry narratives have only intensified online. "I describe the site as our readers' smartest, funniest, most insightful friend", announces a *Cosmopolitan.com* editor (Odell in Welton 2015) (see also previous chapter). Still, users are expected to be media and marketing-aware enough to know how to 'read' branding strategies and to self-regulate and behave accordingly, reflecting the surfaced normativity of (particular articulations of) 'media literacy' under contemporary neoliberalism. The following interestingly makes connections between the "types of people" who contact brands on friendly terms and those who "would take to a forum" and "feel this community":

> We get a lot of comments on Facebook and things. I actually think, "God, I would never sit there and, unless I had a complaint, write on a brand's Facebook, like just commenting as if it was a friend". I just wouldn't do that, but a lot of people do. I suppose those are the similar types of people that would take to a forum, that feel this community and that it was taken away from them. (Digital writer, mid-20s, UK)

Also frequently portrayed as a problem emerging from the increased "channel" online is having to face higher levels of critique. For a British freelancer: "Online people do feel like they have a right to critique you, attack you in some ways, or be a little bit more confrontational with you". One Spanish digital director similarly said that users are "more critical", "less devoted and love you less" than readers. She explained this in terms of the low rate of direct traffic to these sites. In turn, a British news editor highlighted how: "As opposed to buying just one magazine each week, people are looking at 5 different websites a day for their input, and then they're

judging them more critically". Others connected this consumer behaviour to SNS cultures in particular:

> People are more emboldened with Twitter and Facebook to say what they think, and they're not afraid to be critical or rude or very outspoken. Whereas before they would just think that and tell their friend but you as the producer would never hear that, now when someone dislikes something in [magazine] they'll take a picture of it and tweet about it and we'll see that. (Staff writer, mid-20, UK)

These observations were often located within a broader 'pros and cons' accounting about online journalism. For example: "Online people aren't afraid to say they don't like something. People give us praise as well and that's always really nice". Online magazine producers lauded the possibility to get "a better sense of your reader" and receive praise, but struggled because "you face much more criticism as an editor, as a writer". Also problematised was the greater exposure online, since as a producer: "You can hide behind your print edition a little bit more"[28]. Still, SNSs offer companies tools to "hide" and reduce the impact of unwanted moments of "negativity" or "backlash". For example, it was highlighted that: "You can turn off messages on Facebook"; and that: "On Twitter, if you're not responding to anything, it's difficult for other people to see what people are tweeting at you". Brands also take advantage of the "more disposable" nature of SNS content, wherein they can more imperceptibly ignore critical commentary. "In Facebook it gets pushed down because you've got new stuff coming in", one professional explained. Moreover, under the SNS model of audience interaction even negative commentary is potentially beneficial for the magazine, as it can serve to "boost the profile of the web" and encourage "more people to get involved and click on it to see why people are arguing". Here, again, I was reminded of the following: "Efforts-reward ratio. It's that simple".

Despite all these attempts, women's magazines are not in full control of audience discourse online, nor can they fully ignore critique. In fact, Web 2.0 technologies, cultures and uses are having a profound impact on these publications. Industry insiders asserted that women's magazines are "being more a lot more careful" in light of "your younger audience", who is "so Internet literate" and

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[28] Although I am here focusing upon legitimate critiques of the magazine content, I must note that facing misogynistic trolling, hate speech and threats of violence is too common a feature of daily life for female journalists (and, more generally, women who are active in the public sphere and/or publicly engage with feminism). This requires much more attention by feminist scholars, as well as, urgently, by media companies.

"discerning". This means that: "The moment you stop putting content that doesn't feel legitimate to them any more they just won't visit you". Further notable challenges, already discussed in the previous chapter, include user-generated content and a 'call-out culture'. Magazines particularly fear a "PR disaster" deriving from a "Twitter war" or "social media trial", with many professionals pointing out that: "Mainly Twitter, but all social media, is very female focused and it's mostly female users". One editor further elucidated that:

> As a publication, especially an online publication, you're aware that this is a possibility every time you put something out. Even if it's just in the back of your mind, you're going to want to try and appease that huge chunk of Twitter users because they're your clicks. Also they can be the beginning of a PR disaster for you. (Features editor, mid-20s, UK)

Noting how users voice their critical views about the editorial content in SNSs and comment sections, a Spanish editor stated: "There are times when you are writing things and think, "how are they going to feel about this?"" In addition to the collective impact of resistance efforts by individual readers, in the UK interviews also repeatedly mentioned were "prominent feminist female social media users", notably *The Vagenda*. This feminist "labour of love" (Baxter and Cosslett 2016) has influenced publications significantly, becoming even "a voice in the head" for British producers: "It's the voice in your heading going, "This is not a good idea really"" (see also previous chapter, and Chapters Eight and Nine).

On the whole, women's magazine journalists maintained that: "You are a lot more accountable now, for everything you write, because people can really quickly just come back at you". One illustration offered in the interviews is that of '13 Little Things That Can Make a Man Fall Hard for You'. Soon after publication, this 2015 article by *Glamour.com* (US version) was condemned as misogynistic, sexist and regressive across SNSs, and (hence) also shortly after across news outlets (e.g. Moss 2015). Before long, *Glamour.com* deleted the article and issued an apology, remarking: "We hear you, tweeters"[29]. "So we have to listen and we do", one British editor concluded. For producers, this landscape where users are speaking back and magazines are listening is what is leading to "more of an egalitarian approach to producing content". This is then advanced as the reason why "these magazines are starting at least online to approach subjects that their brand would not previously have touched", notably feminism (Chapter Nine) and an approach to sex described as

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[29] From: http://www.glamour.com/story/how-to-make-a-man-fall-in-love (Accessed 20/02/2016)

"more real" (Chapter Five). However, the content production process (still) fails to incorporate readers in any significant manner, maintaining a top-down practice that contradicts the repeated claims to greater dialogue and egalitarianism, and more generally that, as one Spanish editor put it: "What we want to do is to give women a voice". For example, at a time when magazines ostensibly celebrate that 'Feminism is back!' (see Chapter Nine) even professionals concede that:

> There are a lot of vocal women out there who do want to talk about feminism. They do want to take apart magazines and talk to us and get into conversations with us. However, sometimes we can be quite afraid of that interaction. (News editor, late 20s, UK)

Overall, I was told that "we're at this pivotal moment" when the online publishing industry "is beginning to turn into this slightly less lawless thing, and there's lots of money in it". The empirical study presented here indicates that part of eradicating this perceived lawlessness is a shift in emphasis from user-generated to user-*circulated* content, a shift additionally driven by other factors like changing engagements with technologies and, vitally, capital accumulation. It is this paradigmatic development that I next map in relation to various scholarly and industry literatures.

6.6   From produsers to shareaholics

> She is the new delivery mechanism
> —*Wired.com* (Honan 2014)

This chapter is not an expression of blind nostalgia for the good old democratic days of forums in women's sites. Internet forums run by corporations have played an important role in "the naturalisation of online community as marketing maneuver", and employ a decidedly *un*democratic architecture, developed to "ensure that interaction is channelled in commercially appropriate ways" (Gustafson 2002: 184, 172), and to generate "information commodities" (Andrejevic 2011b), among other things (see Campbell 2008). Nor am I advancing a dystopian argument about Big Brother 2.0. Certainly, SNSs are prototype neoliberal technologies (Hearn 2010), and a major part of "the *aether* of communicative capitalism's transnational historical bloc" (Kreps 2011: 697), involving a capital accumulation model "based on Internet prosumer commodification, the unpaid labour of Internet users, targeted advertising and economic surveillance" (Fuchs 2014: 255). At the same time, SNSs are used

every day for activities that are enjoyable, enriching and, indeed, empowering for individuals as well as disruptive for dominant forms of power. In this respect, Jarrett (2014: 26) usefully observes: "as Autonomous Marxist approaches remind us, the social cooperation of users and the regimes of affect involved in digital media are always in excess of commodification and the capitalist labour process. This excess is potentially disruptive".

In this chapter, I have shown how encouraging users to "chat away to your hearts content" (*Cosmopolitan.co.uk*) proved disruptive for women's online magazines and their commercial partners. In claiming this I am not engaging in the 'romance of resistance' (Abu-Lughod 1990): forumers performed various types of free labour, including that of 'social reproduction' (Jarrett 2014), particularly with regard to normative gendered subjectivities, bodies and relations – as I show in the next chapter. However, as seen in Section 6.2, these (self-identified) young women also performed what we might call a 'labour of disruption', which ranged from expressions of consumer dissatisfaction with brands to the more politicised critiques of editorial lines. Against the backdrop of a reinvigorated interest in feminist ideas and activism that has been particularly notable among young women, it appears that some are becoming too—to use industry buzzwords—'discerning', 'savvy' and 'actively engaged' for commercial media, PRs and advertisers. In response, these industries are working hard to (re)gain centre stage in framing and setting the tone of the debate. This corporate effort is discernible in the recent proliferation of 'femvertising' (see Gill and Elias 2014), and in the ways magazines have self-proclaimed as the spearheads of the 'new feminism' – as examined in Chapter Nine. In such a manner, these large commercial entities operate 'from within' to de-radicalise imaginaries and (re)assert patriarcho-neoliberal orders of intelligibility. As will be seen in Chapter Eight, this importantly involves substituting political critique and collective struggle to change *society* with psychologies of positivity and entrepreneurial ventures to transform the *self*.

Interestingly, as this chapter has shown, publications perceived as especially disruptive the take up by young women of the invitation to "Drop your inhibitions and talk about all subjects sexual" (*Cosmopolitan.co.uk*), demonstrating the top-down, commercially-dictated nature of the 'sexualisation of culture' (see Gill 2012a), and problematising celebratory claims about a democratisation of sex and desire in contemporary mass media (McNair 2002). "Really nothing is taboo here" assures us

the editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan UK* (Storr in Koman 2016). The chapter has demonstrated, however, that "nothing is taboo" only as long as issues/topics adhere to the tightly policed boundaries of publications and their advertisers' interests, and once (re)articulated according to their logics of de-politisation, glossification and commodification.

The move away from anonymous user-led and topic-centred discussions in forums and toward brand-led and profile-centred (SNS) platforms is partly an effort by corporations to control the 'unruly' discourse of young women – who are in the process besides 'put to work' for (more intense forms of) capital accumulation. This importantly involves the 'labour of being watched': SNSs enable an unprecedented level of commercial monitoring and "one that only accelerates with the uptake of portable mobile devices" (Andrejevic 2011c: 10), which are fundamental to the current digital strategy of women's magazines. Central too is outsourcing free '24/7' targeted content circulation work, namely users sharing content across their networks of contacts. This new labouring practice entails a new audience commodification strategy. Instead of a "powerful online community" (Cosmopolitan in Superbrands 2010), magazines today are selling advertisers "hyper-connected female millennials", who "are plugged-in 24 hours a day, 7 days a week" (The Debrief 2014). Information packs additionally promise a reader who is an "active social sharer", indeed: "sharing her life online is part of her daily ritual" (The Debrief 2016). Moreover, she is now "sharing like never before" (Elle 2016), publications celebrate. This ideal commodity networker, then, more than a 'produser' is a *'shareaholic'*.

The figure of the shareaholic pervades industry literatures. Neuromarketing research on "why people share online" sends a clear message: our insatiable hunger for a "dopamine 'hit'" (RadiumOne and Steidl 2015: 4). This drug-like "'feel good' transmitter" "driving addictive and pleasure-seeking behaviour" (RadiumOne and Steidl 2015: 4) is allegedly also the "key differentiating factor between male and female sharing behaviour" (Steidl 2015). To be sure, central to the industry obsession with "the psychology of sharing" (The New York Times Customer Insight Group 2011) is delineating gendered profiles, a practice that goes back to the very beginning of commercial Internet (e.g. see Shade 2004; and Chapter Three). These profiling practices (continue to) draw on highly predictable, profoundly ideological narratives, not least the postfeminist 'Mars and Venus' metaphor of sexual difference, evident in claims like 'Men are from LinkedIn, women are from

Pinterest'. These demonstrate the powerful industry (and cultural) investments in 'sexed brains' and (gendered) neurotechnologies (of power), and are more generally part of a resurged biologism explored in the following chapter. All in all, marketing experts are rejoicing that: "Developments in the area of tech-enabled neuromarketing are only going to accelerate, as brands take the initiative to unlock the value of sharing" (RadiumOne and Steidl 2015: 17). In particular, brands are recommended to "appreciate the value in gathering and activating social sharing data from the perspective of both marketing return on investment and consumer insights" (RadiumOne and Steidl 2015: 11). Strategists also enthusiastically assure brands that 'social sharing': "increases receptivity to advertising" (Morgan 2015).

No doubt the interest in SNSs by women's online magazines is also due to the "imminent invasion of social commerce" (Bertram 2015). As the global financial services corporation Morgan Stanley (2015) puts it: "Social media platforms and retailers are learning how to convert 'likes' and 'followers' into 'add to my cart' and buyers". In the women's magazine industry this interest is already materialising in new partnerships such as that established in 2015 between *Cosmopolitan* and *Snapchat* (Bernardo 2015). To be sure, young women are a central target of 'social commerce'. This is apparent in discussions of the 'Instagram effect', namely "millennial females' anxieties about appearing too many times in the same outfit in their Internet photographs" (Felsted and Kuchler 2015) in "the age of the selfie" (Green 2015) – a good age for glossies and their partners. One case in point is the manner in which the editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan UK* delineates her (ideal) reader: "I call the Cosmopolitan readers the 'selfie-made generation' […] They really like Kim Kardashian because, again, she's self-made. She's all about the brand, she's very entrepreneurial" (Storr in Koman 2016). Like entrepreneurial Kim, the shareaholic is a selfie-made girl.

That is, the ideal 'sharing subject' of SNSs is neoliberal *and feminine*. This gendering is also evident in appeals to the ethics of care. 'Sharing is caring', reiterates commercial Internet – also as part of an attempt to eradicate the negative connotations associated to viruses. As Payne (2013: 540) notes: "the current discourse of media virality has paradoxically expelled its own progenitor, the virus" by rebranding viral circulation or transmission as 'sharing', and with alternative notions like 'spreadable media', developed by Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013). Shifting the focus away from the interface and toward the user, this notion rejects the

term 'viral' for purportedly obscuring the active agency of audiences and failing to capture the ways in which the "shift towards a circulation-based model for media access" involves people making "conscious" and "savvy decisions" (Jenkins in Fernandez 2014). In addition to the discourse of viral media, spreadable media is intended to contrast with "older models of 'stickiness'" (Jenkins in Fernandez 2014). In the latter, Jenkins et al. (2013: 5) explain, online publications measure the popularity of content on the basis of "which articles are viewed the most and which hold people's attention the longest". Advertisements are placed alongside the site content, and "advertising rates are based on the number of impressions a page generates or the number of clicks an ad receives" (Jenkins et al. 2013: 4). This is the world of the affinity portal, 'destination' and 'community' sites. In contrast, with the spreadability (business) model: "brands enter into the spaces where people already live and interact" (Green and Jenkins 2011: 117). Benefiting from the gift-economy logic, under the new model "grassroots intermediaries become advocates for brands" as they "circulate the content within their own communities" (Green and Jenkins 2011: 117). According to Jenkins and colleagues, this "next phase of evolution in the media ecology" (Jenkins 2009) involves a more participatory culture, and for broadcasters a crisis in the power to set the media agenda (Jenkins in Fernandez 2014). Jenkins (2009) observes: "unruly behaviour by consumers becomes a source of great anxiety within the media industry". Powerfully indicating the industry/application (and ideological) orientation of this work, *Spreadable Media* recommends companies to respond by outsourcing free digital labour via content sharing:

> While many content creators are struggling with the growing prominence of such grassroots audience practices, an array of online communication tools have arisen to facilitate informal and instantaneous sharing. These platforms offer new capacities for people to pass along media artefacts—and, in the process, to seek models to generate revenue through the activities of their users (Jenkins et al. 2013: 2)

Ultimately, Jenkins et al. (2013: 1) declare, "Our message is simple and direct: if it doesn't spread, it's dead". On the basis of this logic, media industries are promoting an understanding of content sharing as the content experience itself (Potter 2015), a development which conjures Dean's (2009: 26) observation that under 'communicative capitalism': "The exchange value of messages overtakes their use value. […] The only thing that is relevant is circulation". Marketers imbue this circulation machinery with meaning for unpaid digital labourers by describing the

'sharing economy' as that "where consumer interests and passions are shared across all online platforms" (RadiumOne and Steidl 2015: 2). Jenkins and colleagues likewise stress that media "travel through the web because they are meaningful to the people who spread them" (Jenkins 2009). Again mirroring the narratives and rationales of the market, Jenkins et al. (2013: 128) respond to scholarly critiques by arguing that the digital labour approach fails to acknowledge how: "audience members benefit from willing participation in such arrangements". The approaches of political economists are similarly opposed by Jenkins (2006: 248) as based on a "politics of victimization", whereas his own "is founded on a notion of empowerment".

These discursive moves of repudiation are familiar to critical thinkers, as are the tropes of individual responsibility, freedom, autonomy, agency, choice and empowerment. Feminists have exposed them as endeavours to delegitimise and undo radical political articulations according to—and in the service of—neoliberalism (e.g. Gill 2007a; McRobbie 2009). Concerning e-narratives specifically, a Foucauldian framework would highlight how the fundamental question is not ascertaining the truth or falsity of consumer empowerment, but rather interrogating the conditions or environment that demand and sustain it as a (desirable) discourse. Here, as Jarrett (2003: 344) argues, "the affective, and consequently productive, consumer" emerges as a "necessary corollary" of neoliberal economics. Under neoliberalism, Jarrett (2003: 343) further notes, the consumer "is necessarily recognised as active and productive rather than passive and manipulated". Inspired by queer scholarship, Payne (2014: 91) points out how the celebratory rhetoric evident in *Spreadable Media* (Jenkins et al. 2013) additionally overlooks the "important elements of recognition and legibility as pillars of the subjective construction of the laboring social media user", who needs to operate within a field of norms not of her own making "at the expense of other practices and pleasures", and, moreover, in order to stay legible as subject. Besides, under the current structures: "The social network user who ceases to share ceases to be" (Payne 2014: 89). The upbeat and industry-friendly narratives of Jenkins and others additionally serve as 'feel good' distractions from crucial political-economic questions about "who owns, controls and materially benefits from corporate social media", and ignore Marxism-influenced insights about the "dialectics at work and the [complexity of the] relations of dominance we find on web 2.0" (Fuchs 2014: 61). In

this respect, Jarrett (2014: 24) draws on Marxist feminist theorisations of social reproductive labour (see e.g. Fortunati 1995) to highlight how: "The agency of users is not in simple opposition to the exploitative relations of capitalism but is deeply implicated in their maintenance". At the same time, as Fuchs (2008: 6) observes: "Web 2.0 both affirms capitalism and produces potentials that can undercut profitability".

Certainly, to the concern of women's magazines, increasing numbers of people use SNSs to share critical readings and denounce injurious representational regimes, potentially dissuading present and potential consumers. These grassroots efforts are forcing corporations to respond both to oppositional mobilisations against specific editorial decisions, and more generally, to alternative discourse. The 'labour of disruption' of young women embodies an ongoing source of critical pressure for the editorial teams: 'a voice in the (producers') head'. Of course, publications benefit from this free digital labour in various ways, for example simply by gaining brand visibility, and by co-opting subversive elements. Complicating straightforward co-optation theorisations, however, some of the young women craving less limited, limiting and toxic magazine content are also the *producers* of this very content, caught between ideological dilemmas, competing interests, and very real material necessities[30] (as discussed in the previous chapter). In fact, during my research I have at times encountered more critical positions within the industry itself than in some academic literature. This again suggests that contesting the 'ideological convergence' of industry and academia[31], along with the 'spreadable neoliberalism' driving it, is a pressing task for critical scholars – a task that is necessarily collective and interdisciplinary.

In sum, this chapter has shown how multiple determinants come into play in shaping a systematic repudiation of forums and push to SNSs in women's online magazines. This includes anxieties about image and brand reputation, along with a desire to capitalise on developments in technology and use thereof. In tracing this shift, I have raised a number of critical concerns – not least because, as the case study of *Cosmopolitan UK* has demonstrated, users strongly opposed the magazine's

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[30] For example, women's magazine journalists anonymously wrote for *The Vagenda*.
[31] Epitomizing this 'convergence', the research for *Spreadable Media* was, as explained by Jenkins (2009): "funded by the members of the Convergence Culture Consortium, including GSDM Advertising, MTV Networks, and Turner Broadcasting".

decision to close the(ir) forum. Fundamentally, I have highlighted how the new paradigm entails enlisting more unpaid consumer labour, and partly constitutes a corporate effort to (re)gain control over discourse and audiences. This exercise of power has varying levels of success, and I have suggested that the 'labour of disruption' involves certain potentialities for transformative subversion. But on the whole, the shifting models of reader interaction in women's online magazines pose a serious challenge to ongoing celebrations both in the industry and in some scholarly work about an increasingly democratic and user-led media landscape. Therefore, although my empirical work on changes in the woman's online magazine market speak to what Jenkins et al. (2013) call a 'spreadable media paradigm' within 'networked culture', it simultaneously complicates and challenges some of the central premises, approaches and assessments of this scholarship. I have instead argued for multi-causal and multi-dimensional explanations of the media(e)space— replete as it is with tensions and contradictions—as part of a broader sociological project inspired by a diversity of critical frameworks and concerns, including feminist ones.

Chapter Seven

PORN TROUBLE

7.1   Introduction

This chapter examines responses to a remarkably recurrent thread in the forums of both UK and Spain-based women's online magazines: (self-identified) women expressing feelings such as hurt, disappointment, confusion and self-doubt—and asking for advice—upon discovering that their male partners consume various pornographies. The latter encompass 'soft' and primarily 'hard-core' mainstream material targeting heterosexual men, but also sometimes online live chats and shows. Typical thread titles include: 'Men and porn', 'Porn trouble' and 'My boyfriend keeps watching porn it is hurting my feelings'. The following are illustrative of such thread-initiating messages. Both are responding to dominant discourses on the subject circulating these sites (e.g. "not because I'm jealous", "I know […] it's entirely normal for him to watch porn"), as explored in the pages that follow.

> Subject: Boyfriends and Porn!
> Ok, so this thread has kinda come from a lot of comments on other threads concerning boyfriends or husbands watching porn.
> I commented on one saying I didn't think my OH [other half] watches porn. I was wrong. […]
> Now - first point first, I have NO problem with my OH masturbating and that is not the point of this thread; I do it too.
> Second of all - I KNOW from previous threads that it's entirely normal for him to watch porn and that it is genuinely something we girls have to accept. And that it does not mean they like the girl in the porn more than us.
> However - although I know I shouldn't, I do feel a tiny bit bothered by it (*Cosmopolitan.co.uk,* 2014)
>
> Subject: Your boyfriend watching porn
> Hello, is it normal for your partner (in this case a guy) to watch porn and to comment with his friends photos that they send each other of women showing their boobs etc…
> […] he says it's for fun, but I tell him that it bothers me (not because I'm jealous) but because I don't like him commenting "what a pair of tits, she is so hot"... and he says there is nothing wrong with it (*EnFemenino.com*, 2013)

Echoing my own position, one UK forumer wrote: "I find this topic interesting as it seems to be something that comes up time and time again". It is prevalent across sites, cultural contexts, and time. For example, already in 2008 *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* announced that in the forums: 'Everybody's talking about... men watching porn'.

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Years later the discussion continued to be so frequent that some women even apologised for starting yet another thread on the issue: "OH & Porn - AGAIN! Sorry! Right, I know this topic has been talked about to death!, but […]". These apologies seem unsurprising in light of the sense of fatigue with this particular topic that was often expressed: "another porn thread?? seriously". Moreover, whilst the (relative) anonymity of the Internet facilitates the release of inhibitions and this often means that online discussions are highly affectively charged (Jensen and Ringrose 2014), this specific topic provoked a particularly intense response, contrasting sharply with all those other moments of sisterly solidarity and support discussed in the previous chapter. This was even noted by people posting, who for instance spoke about "the porn watching topics" as "explosive threads". For others this "same old debate" was the "oldest cause of argumens" (F-UK) in the forums – as well as in relationships. All this suggested the need for a close inquiry. To this end, I gathered a substantial but manageable sample comprising 102 threads about "the porn & men issue" (F-UK), which resulted in 2,096 peer-to-peer posts. In order to ascertain interdiscusive dis/connections between the advice given by users and magazines, I created a second dataset of 32 editorial features, including 'agony aunt' texts, discussing the same scenario, or the topic of pornography more generally.

There are certain UK-Spain contrasts in the data. Especially in the Spanish forums, the pathologising discourse of (male) (cyber)porn/sex addiction was occasionally mobilised[32]. More significantly shaping the contours of the debate across the Spain-based sites, also in the editorial content, was a critique of women as upholding conservative and archaic views, at times associated with the influence of religion. Pornography was championed as exemplifying sexual liberation, modernity, and freedom from old taboos and religious indoctrination. In the UK data, this seemed to stand as commonsensical understanding unwarranting explicit verbalisation. Here there was instead a striking preoccupation with the notion of men's privacy having been invaded. Women were figured as psychologically disturbed and shamefully untrustworthy individuals for looking through their partner's belongings (principally computers and phones), and as somehow deserving their distress for "asking for trouble" (F-UK). Overall, these narratives exemplify the

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[32] For an academic discussion of the figure of the cyberporn addict, see Attwood (2010).

overarching tendency to turn the critical gaze away from men's pornography consumption and toward the women starting the thread.

In what follows, I unpack the most dominant discursive patterns permeating all datasets, which together constitute a sexual regime based upon male immutability and female adaptation. The analysis is accordingly organised around two broad themes. The first pertains to the naturalisation of men's consumption of pornography through gender essentialist accounts. I show how evolutionary psychology (EP) narratives and research influence these popular cultural advice texts about gender and pornography. In the second theme, women are urged to undergo numerous personal transformations in response to the 'ways of men'. The identified discursive landscape is theorised in relation to the (trans)cultural penetration of postfeminist and neoliberal rationalities, technologies of governmentality and modalities of sexism. I conclude by arguing that the data analysis suggests an invigorated and distinctively postfeminist mode of biologism [33], heavily informed by—and informing—EP. In order to better contextualise my argument, before commencing the analysis I briefly bring together the literature on postfeminism as a cultural sensibility with EP scholarship on sexual difference.

7.2   Postfeminism and EP

As briefly noted in Chapter One, central to the postfeminist sensibility is the resurgence—and revalorisation—of ideas about 'natural' sexual difference grounded in a heteronormative framing of gender complementarity, together with a reanimated sense of the 'battle of the sexes' (Gill 2007a). Closely informing these notions is the popular self-help literature on gender relations and heterosex that soared from the 1990s, a phenomenon spearheaded by John Gray's Mars-Venus texts, which have become central to postfeminist media culture and have strongly influenced other popular genres, notably women's magazines (Gill 2007a). This literature represents women and men as "internally undifferentiated categories" (Cameron 2007: 55) that are complementary though "fundamentally and *properly* different" (Potts 1998: 154). It promotes the idea that such difference needs to be acknowledged and accepted rather than denied or problematised, as well as advancing a 'different but equal' (Cameron 2007) 'no-blame' approach to conflict (Gill 2007a). This reanimation of

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[33] My use of the term 'biologism' here refers to the practice of mobilising reductive and essentialist biology-centred accounts to explain human ways of being and acting in the world.

discourses of sexual difference and aggressive 'gender profiling' (Ruti 2015) in postfeminist culture is commonly connected to developments in the life sciences, including genetics and neuroscience. Especially influential has been the rapidly expanding field of evolutionary psychology (EP).

EP grew exponentially during the 1990s, in the context of a reactionary backlash against recent feminist gains (Kelly 2014) and a related budding neoliberal postfeminist sensibility (Gill 2007a). As Fisher and Salmon (2012: 105) explain, "the focus of EP is on how evolution, via natural and sexual selection, has shaped human bodies, minds, and behavior, and how culture has emerged out of our evolved nature". A foundational tenet is that the human mind "comes factory-equipped" (Buss 2005: xxiv) and "is sexually dimorphic" (Ellis and Symons 1990: 532). EP's gender meta-theory emphasises the contrasting opportunities/benefits and constraints/costs encountered by ancestral females and males around (maximising) reproductive success/genetic proliferation (Ellis and Symons 1990). A dramatic asymmetry in the minimum possible parental investment required to produce viable offspring is argued to have led to profound differences in their evolved sexual strategies (Trivers 1972), and particularly "their underlying algorithms" to short-term mating (Malamuth 1996: 14). Current conflicts between women and men are seen as inevitably resulting from interfering 'sex-specific strategies' – a concept which connotes "the goal-directed and problem-solving nature of human mating behavior and carries no implication that the strategies are consciously planned or articulated" (Buss and Schmitt 1993: 205). Encapsulating the postfeminist Mars-Venus model of gender difference, Malamuth (1996: 15) underlines that: "One cannot consider either gender's mechanisms superior or inferior to the other", as together they form a "co-evolved strategy" whose elements "either complement or compete".

Scholars across disciplines have challenged EP for leaving assumptions unexamined, anthropomorphising animal behaviour, offering 'just-so' stories and engaging in circular reasoning. They have also highlighted flaws in research design, misinterpreted findings, considerable contrary evidence, and the implausibility of some central claims (e.g. McKinnon 2005; Cameron 2007; Ruti 2015; see also edited collections by Rose and Rose 2000; Grossi et al. 2014). Nonetheless, the paradigm continues to acquire mainstream legitimacy and penetrate new arenas. Enjoying especial appeal are EP accounts of gender and sexuality. These saturate popular culture, having had a particularly profound impact on sex and relationship advice

media, notably in Anglo-American contexts. This chapter shows how the logics and narratives of EP are crossing conventional boundaries of language and cultural context, as well as permeating the newer sites of mediated intimacy where the 'sexperts' are members of the public.

7.3   'A Fact of Life': Male Immutability

The user-generated content of women's online magazines is *littered* with what discourse analysts call 'extreme case formulations' (Pomerantz 1986) such as: "All blokes watch porn, it's a fact of life" (F-UK). In the editorial content, an intimate link between pornography and men is equally established: "If he's a man, he watches porn. There's no two ways about it" (E-UK). As already noted, often forumers expressed a sense of frustration and/or exhaustion regarding this discussion. Another example is: "It is Normal, how much longer is it going to take until women understand that all men watch porn on a daily basis" (F-Spain). These claims to 'porn debate fatigue' operate to silence women, as evoked by: "Men look at porn period" (F-UK). They likewise work to police what are legitimate topics for the forums, and arguably too public conversation about sex and sexuality more generally. Rather than collective consideration, for those experiencing porn debate fatigue all that is required to solve the "porn problem" (F-UK) is women assuming the 'truth' of sexual difference, and of pornography consumption as *inherent* to male sexuality.

The 'porn trouble' thread-starting comments are repeatedly interpreted as rooted in ignorance about the 'fact' that "men are programmed differently to women" (F-Spain), and most significantly: "their minds work in different ways" (F-UK). In a distinctively postfeminist manner, some texts accompany these claims with a 'different-but-equal' note: "men and women are different (*equally valuable and important, but not the same*)" (F-UK, my emphasis). The quintessential symbolisation of difference in postfeminist (media) culture is also used: "they are men and are driven by entirely different forces than us girls. […] its a mars venus thing" (F-UK). Others conjure it in crude comments like: "Men are to porn what women are to bags and shoes. It's their thing" (F-UK). In light of this perceived ignorance, respondents exhort women to search information about men's 'nature' and 'innate' sexual differences. Some advice the woman posting her concerns to: "Read men are from mars, women are from venus" (F-UK). Most posts highlight, however, the 'scientific' basis of sexual difference: "women and men are different,

science says so" (F-Spain). Whether implicitly or explicitly, this tends to involve EP, with comments like: "read up on the differences between men & women … there's many! […] it's just basic psychology stuff" (F-UK) and "There is actually a pretty good proposed evolutionary psychology rationale of how this all came about" (F-UK). Suggesting the growing presence of EP in educational curricula, others similarly declare: "We did this in evolutionary psychology, it's universal" (F-UK). Below I examine the two main rationales elaborated across the user-generated and editorial content in women's online magazines for a universal, intimate connection between men and pornography. These, to borrow the words of a woman posting, pertain to the ideas that "men are more visually stimulated than we are and have higher needs" (F-UK).

7.3.1 Visual creatures

Women writing their concerns are told that "men need porn" because "men are visual creatures" (F-UK/Spain). More specifically, for contributors: "Men are biologically programmed to find an attractive mate using a visual reference" (F-UK). Contrasts in female/male sexuality are also elaborated to elucidate "why the conflict and lack of understanding can occur" (F-UK). This notably concerns gendering the psychosexual along the dichotomous lines of: "Men are visual, women are imaginative" (F-UK) or "Men are turned on by the visual, Women by the emotional" (F-UK). The *FemaleFirst.co.uk* agony aunt responds to a 2014 reader letter titled 'He was watching porn!' in a similar way:

> Men are very visual creatures and so porn is a great way for them to get themselves off—whereas women need more of an emotional connection. This is not his fault, simply a part of his biology. It may be difficult for him to understand how you feel, given that we are programmed differently to each other. Men use porn from a young age to gratify themselves whereas women usually just need the help of their imaginations and fantasies.

Therefore, in this editorial text women are expected to undertake the *non-reciprocal* emotional labour of understanding men. Discursive closure on the subject is orchestrated through appeals to biologically determined—and thus unaccountable—male sexuality. One post in a Spanish forum similarly reads: "It's not his fault it's the testosterone". Other people posting provide greater detail about binary sexual desire:

> Women are still generally attracted to a man with power, strength, financially secure as they should provide a better chance for their off-spring to survive. Men are still

attracted to primitive visual references of a healthy mate such as hip to waste ratio, long healthy hair, pert boobs, rosey cheeks and lips. (F-UK)

Following a similarly problematic statement regarding biologically driven "choices of mates", another commentator proclaims: "whilst it may be considered shallow, it's a fact of nature" (F-UK).

It is remarkable how closely the cited data extracts reproduce academic EP thinking. EPs argue that "fitness-favouring" actions are not consciously chosen. The focus is rather on the "activation" of mind mechanisms (and "evolved hormonal mechanisms") (Saad 2013: 65), understood as "computational adaptations" or "programs" (Tooby and Cosmides 2005; Malamuth 2008). It is further held by EPs that given their greater bearing and raising 'costs', in addition to "constraints on the maximum reproductive output", selection has favoured females who are discriminating ("choosy") and slow at arousing sexually to facilitate careful assessment of mate quality before consenting to sex (Ellis and Symons 1990; Pound 2002: 444). This apparently comprises "indicators of genetic quality", but also, importantly, high status, physically protective males willing to invest time and resources (Hald 2006; Salmon 2012: 154). In the case of ancestral males, it is argued that a key adaptive problem involved gaining access to—and so identifying—as many fertile partners as possible. Men have therefore been designed by selection to experience sexual arousal on the basis of observable cues to reproductive value. Purportedly non-arbitrary universal components of female attractiveness include clear, smooth and firm skin; full lips; long, lustrous hair; large, symmetrical, firm and high sitting breasts; long legs; and a "waist-to-hip ratio of roughly .70" (Malamuth 1996; Buss and Schmitt 2011; Salmon 2012; Saad 2013: 69). These evolutionary currencies allegedly explain men's perception of women as "mere collections of female body parts" (Vandermassen 2010: 74).

Like the journalists and users of women's websites, EP scholars assure us that: "These asymmetries between male and female psychosexuality are a fact of life" (Vandermassen 2010: 72). In particular, according to many EPs "male sexual fantasies tend to be more ubiquitous, frequent, visual, specifically sexual, promiscuous, and active"; in contrast: "Female sexual fantasies tend to be more contextual, emotive, intimate, and passive" (Ellis and Symons 1990: 529). In the materials analysed, these dichotomous psychosexualities are straightforwardly correlated with media consumption as follows: "Watching porn is for men like

watching rom coms is for women" (F-UK). EP has played an important role in reinforcing and elevating to the status of 'scientific fact' such longstanding analogy between "pornotopia" and "romantopia" (Salmon 2004). Indeed, EPs argue that "evolutionarily recent phenomena (such as romance novels) can be just as informative as phenomena that existed in the Pleistocene, or more so" (Ellis and Symons 1990: 531). Part of a growing body of work investigating popular culture via an evolutionary lens, a number of studies proclaim that contemporary pornography and tales of romance are the products of biologically based universal "gender dimorphism in sexuality mechanisms" (Malamuth 1996, 2008; Pound 2002; Salmon 2004, 2012; Hald 2006; Salmon and Diamond 2012). Their framework sidesteps "issues of politics and morality" (Salmon 2012: 158) to focus instead on how cultural products trigger ancestral mating adaptations, and purportedly thereby "arrive at a far more satisfying and comprehensive understanding" (Fisher and Salmon 2012: 105) than that offered by "antiscience approaches" or "pseudointellectual fads" such as social constructivism, Marxism or feminism (Saad 2012: 114). These, Gad Saad argues (2012: 114), are "typically" "wallowing in the victimology ethos", and "are incongruent with scientific analysis of popular culture". The conclusions of EP parallel those in women's magazines. According to Catherine Salmon and colleagues, "modern pornography is exactly what should be expected" (Salmon 2004: 226), since it taps into "the deeply visual nature of male sexuality" and offers an "optimal" "short-term mating strategy fantasy realm" (Salmon and Diamond 2012: 195). This second theme is explored next.

7.3.2 Insatiable creatures

From an evolutionary short-term mating perspective, pornography "is exactly what males are looking for" (Hald 2006: 583) because their psychological mechanisms are designed to desire "low cost, impersonal sex" (Salmon 2012: 154) with 'high-value females' (Pound 2002). Other specifically male ancestral adaptations to maximise reproductive success that EPs maintain pornography triggers are readiness for sex, along with a desire for 'novel females' and 'sexual variety' – the so-called Coolidge effect. To demonstrate such an effect in his analysis of "collective wisdoms" as manifestations of biological "global realities", Saad (2012: 112) quotes in an article

published in the *Review of General Psychology* an "unknown author": "Every time you see a beautiful woman, just remember, somebody got tired of her".

The material analysed is replete with references to these kinds of "universal truths" (Saad 2012) about men's sexuality to explain their consumption of pornography. Examples from the forums both by self-identified women and men include: "men love sex all the time" (F-Spain); and: "men are wired to be sexually attracted to more than one woman and we are programmed with the urge to seek gratification for this" (F-UK). In addition to 'tech' analogies, which also pervade EP texts (e.g. in references to 'computational programs'), these claims are supported via invocations of biology. This includes reference to the endocrine system, where pornographies are put forward as "expressions of the never-ending and insatiable hormonal urges men have towards women" (F-UK). The desire-need for pornographic media is also linked to male polygamy as a biological imperative to ensure genetic legacy. Illustrations include: "Men are biologically programmed to want to impregnate as many women as possible—that's a scientific fact" (F-UK); and: "Males in nature are progarmmed to spread their seed, their genes. […] men are polygamous" (F-UK). Also common are more generic comments like: "That's the way life is. Men are polygamous by nature and need to contain all that sexual charge somehow" (F-Spain). Again, the resonances with scholarly EP literature are readily evidenced, with EPs arguing that pornography caters to "what's at the root of male psychology", namely "to have mating access to endless women" (Saad 2013: 68), and that in their (unconscious) striving to promote fitness men might even seek "totally uninvited sex" (Malamuth 2008). Ongoing discussions in this field about rape as resulting from the distinctive evolution of male sexuality clearly inform this post:

> Men are also programmed to hedge their bets to ensure his DNA is spread as much as possible and jump on any other suitable female at any opportunity, forced or consensual […] We may be in the 21st century with equality, but human relationships are still based on billion year old evolution. (F-UK)

As is common in postfeminist discourse, the commentator simultaneously highlights gender equality as achieved *and* as having natural, insuperable limits.

Grounded in the idea of men as innately incapable of monogamy, in the examined Spain and UK-hosted sites pornography is advanced as a technology of male infidelity prevention. One illustration is this response by *FemaleFirst.co.uk* to a reader's letter titled 'My boyfriend would rather watch porn than have sex with me!':

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"Like it or not they are programmed to want to have sex with lots of women for procreation, but this method means that he is having an element of that, however still remaining monogamous". This widespread naturalisation of male promiscuity can produce feelings of insecurity and construct men's (potential) cheating as a normative concern for all heterosexual women. It additionally functions to position women in competition against each other for men's attention and (lasting) affection, and to legitimise the demand for women to relentlessly work on their sexual appeal and practice, as examined next. According to many EPs, this is an evolutionary inevitability: "Women must compete to attract and retain" the "valuable asset" that is a "high-quality man", and their "currency" in the "sexual marketplace" is physical attractiveness, EP Anne Campbell declares (2013: 178). It is deeply troubling that a key aspect of the "cultural scaffolding of rape" (Gavey 2005), namely the construction of male sexuality as voracious and emotionally detached, is still pervasive and reproduced so boldly across these popular sites, as well as in contemporary academic (EP) scholarship.

7.4 'Work on Yourself': Female Adaptation

The previous section has shown how in women's online magazines pornography is represented as a fundamental need for men. Women are therefore advised not to disclose their discomfort to their partners – even if "it's the lying about it that hurts you" (F-UK). Besides, according to forumers it is women's "emotional drama" that is to blame for men's lying. One male contributor elucidates: "It's basic womanagement; if something's liable to cause an argument, lie". Ultimately, what women must *never* do is ask men to modify their consumption practices. The consequences are serious. Another self-identified man explains: "any guy that stops, is doing so at the behest of a woman, and in the end will: end up resenting her for it, sneak it, and probably end up cheating one her" (F-UK). Moreover, for some commentators, that "is like asking him not to breathe" (F-UK). Thus, the remarkable sense of urgency for women to "get over it!!!" (F-UK) is partly connected to the perception of men's very nature being attacked by unaccepting women: "Men are biologically different and you simply refuse to accept that" (F-UK). Women are accordingly prompted: "we need to stop being so judgemental of men and accept that they are different" (F-UK). This speaks to a broader cultural understanding of male heterosexuality as increasingly under assault, vilified and pathologised in

contemporary society, informed by an idea of 'the (gender) tables having been turned'
(García-Favaro and Gill 2016). This postfeminist modality of male victimisation
operates not only to exorcise any form of accountability from men, but also to
position any discussion about masculinity—let alone calls for change—as
intrinsically coercive.

In stark contrast to the stress on male fixity, the overriding advice for women
on their 'porn trouble' is: "work on yourself" (F-Spain). Repeatedly positioned as
'the problem', women are expected to subjugate their own views, needs or desires,
and dutifully adapt in response to men's through an absolute transformation of the
self. In what follows I first examine the psycho-emotional makeover women are
exhorted to undergo. I then look at the ways in which the 'sexperts' in these online
spaces construct a female subject whose sexual appeal and practice is failing or
lacking, and needs (ongoing) scrutiny, discipline and work.

7.4.1 Psychic makeover

Repeatedly, women's hesitant or negative feelings toward their partners'
pornography use are depicted as rooted in their own *individual psycho-affective
faults*. What is a (collective) socio-political issue is translated into narratives of
(personal) psychological maladaptation, pathology or failing. Epitomising the widely
unempathetic and at times vicious peer-to-peer responses on this particular issue, a
self-identified woman wrote: "Girl, you're not well, men's nature is different to ours
[…] please, what planet are you from?" (F-Spain)*;* and a self-identified man said:
"You are an idiot or inexpert. ALL MEN [WE] WATCH PORN" (F-Spain). Women
posting their concerns are also depicted as demonstrating immaturity: "you need to
look for the solution: IN YOURSELF. And in your maturity (F-Spain)". Another
perceived female deficiency is irrationality: "it's your problem. you need to get over
it. Deal with why it bothers you. […] your feelings are irrational" (F-UK). Also
pervading this peer-to-peer commentary is an unempathetic notion of the self-
deluding woman. This figure of feminine pathology is variously exhorted to "assume
reality" (F-Spain) and to stop living in her "porn-free fantasy land" (F-UK).

Regardless of her personal views and feelings, the woman starting the thread
is expected to accept the biological inevitability of male sexuality, as urged in: "All
men do this, learn to resign yourself" (F-Spain). Unsympathetic exhortations to 'get

over it' were remarkably recurrent: "Men just like looking at different fanjitas. Get over it" (F-UK). Somewhat more empathetically, a number of women shared personal experiences, for example: "used to be proper obsessed about my man watching porn, but as I've gotten older and more mature, i deal with it. […] EVERY man will watch it […] It's something you just have to grin and bare!" (F-UK). A set of responses drew on a 'cruel but true' credos, which signals to a sense of unfairness or inequality, but renders these asocial and so non-ideological and forever fixed: "Men watch porn, it's what we do accept it because it's never going to change. Harsh, but it's the reality" (F-UK). Others explained that: "We aren't always as free from nature as we like to think we are" (F-UK). Part of this collective attempt to teach women the "inconvenient truths about evolution" (F-UK) includes highlighting the apparent futility of (feminist) wishing for a different state of affairs:

> The truth is human beings are not some fairytale art-house creation, we are a finely tuned system over 100,000 years of evolution. You can't change 100,000 years of biological hard wiring with 10 years of feminist discovery (F-UK).

This online commentary closely resonates with the 'inconvenient truth' accounting in EP scholarship, and related critiques of "ideologies of nurture" (Andrews and Andrews 2012: 60). Mirroring the posts above, EPs advise (particularly feminist) critics: "if self-deception ceases to be feasible, the alternative adaptive strategy may be to learn to live with the realities", namely the "dark side of human nature", the harsh Darwinian truths (Silverman and Fisher 2001: 215).

One less recurrent 'adaptive strategy' proposed by forumers and partners is for women to change their sexual inclination altogether as respectively expressed in: "If, however, you cannot accept this then you may have to become a nun, a lesbian or buy several cats" (UK-F); and: "he told me to become a lesbian if I want a man that doesn't look at other women" (F-Spain).

As briefly discussed above, resting upon the assumption that men are sexually insatiable creatures and pornography a technology of male infidelity prevention, women are even encouraged to perceive their partners' consumption in a positive light. Endorsing this activity is advanced as the rational, informed and strategic choice for women who want monogamous relationships. "Be glad he's satisfying himself that way rather than cheating", exhorts one forumer. *FemaleFirst.co.uk* responds to a reader query in the same manner: "surely it is better that he is seeing to his needs this way rather than with another woman?" A reader

concurs in the comments section: "I found my partner watching it- it hurts but i am glad he is doing this rather then going behind my back cheating on me!" Most directly suggesting the powerful influence of this media, one forumer posted: "i cant stand the idea of porn! never could. […] but i read an issue of cosmo which said lads who have a healthy porn habit are less likely to cheat!!" (F-UK). Once more capturing the antipathy toward women who question male use of pornography, there are quite hard-hitting comments like: "Better than him closing his eyes and imagining what itd be like with your sister" and "id rather a bloke got hard over porn than over sum other girl sittin on his dick" (F-UK). Somewhat differently but similarly calling for a 'rational' cost-benefit approach, others exhort women to welcome such activity "If you want a man that is any good in the sack" (F-UK). This relates to the current status of pornography as the best source of sexual knowledge, alongside the continued association of masculine sexual subjectivity with physical performance, technique, efficiency, prowess, control/leadership and stamina. The following *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* editorial combines both narratives:

> Far from getting bothered by it, you should try to realise that your fella watching porn is actually a good thing (bear with me here). One: it could stop him cheating. By alleviating his sexual curiosity and satisfying his erotic appetite, porn will make him less likely to play away. Two: by watching porn, your man will be able to learn all kinds of new positions and techniques that he'd never even know existed otherwise. Think of it as a how-to guide, but with moving images. And three: male porn-stars have incredible stamina. He'll see this and want to emulate them, so will work on becoming a more tireless lover.

Due to the perceived gravity of ignoring, denying, resisting or feeling affected by such alleged 'simple fact of life', namely natural sexual difference and an intrinsic connection between pornography and male sexuality, women are often (re)directed to the expert tutelage of psychology. For example, a UK forumer wrote: "get over it. men watch porn. if you're going to be hurt by a simple fact of life, you probably have some bigger issues going on that need some looking into. i suggest counselling". Women posting their concerns received a similar response in the Spain-based sites: "So the problem is you, look for psychological help to be guided regarding the reality of life". These posts reflect the omnipresence of psychological (highly selected) knowledges, techniques and practitioners across popular sex and relationship advice media; including women's magazines, albeit in decreasing amounts, as examined in Chapter Five. More generally, they speak to the significance of 'psy' under neoliberalism (Rose 1998), and the centrality of practices

of subjectification through technologies of self-regulation to the constitution of femininity.

Neoliberalism is structured by an ethos of autonomous individualism and self-determination that replaces—renders unthinkable even—any notion of social/external pressures, constraints or influences. Individuals are interpellated as self-reliant and self-regulating, freely choosing, perpetually transformative, adaptive and entrepreneurial actors who are accountable for their life biographies, and whose value is largely measured by their capacity to self-improve and self-care (Gill 2007a; Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008). In the forums of women's online magazines, some women speak of feeling inadequate about their own bodies—"It makes me feel ugly, inadequate and just not good enough"—in light of the material their partners enjoy, usually "websites with naked ladies with huge boobs" and "perfect bodies". Again reproducing neoliberal logics, respondents depict these women as responsible for their feelings of vulnerability: "You yourself, position yourself as a victim" (F-Spain). Another remarkably unempathetic and disciplining example is:

> I'M SORRY, BUT THAT "OOOHH IT UNDERMINES MY SELF-ESTEEM"… […] YOU CHOOSE HOW TO TAKE THE SITUATION, WHAT AFFECTS YOU AND WHAT DOESN'T… ONE HAS TO BE RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT ONE FEELS/DOES WITH RESPECT TO A SITUATION, NOT SEE ONESELF AS A VICTIM OF SITUATIONS… (F-Spain)

Informing these claims is the neoliberal (re)configuration and elevation of 'freedom', 'choice' and 'agency' as indisputably and straightforwardly defining contemporary existence, and the related association of notions of vulnerability or victimhood with "self-pity, insufficient personal drive and a lack of personal responsibility for one's own life" (Baker 2010: 190). In the data, experiencing a sense of fragile self-esteem, helplessness or victimisation is coded in strictly individualised terms as a personal attitude or behaviour, rather than a relational—let alone structural—situation. It is reprehended as something the individual woman actively *chooses*, with the concurrent implication that she can also simply choose to feel better or even good about herself or her situation. Ultimately, it is rendered the exclusive responsibility of the individual woman.

Likewise, to fail to be immune and emotionally detached from media representations is put forward as symptomatic of a personal psychological disturbance requiring individualised self-work: "i would say that the problem lies with the person who is jealous of a picture, rather than the person looking at a picture"

(F-UK). Another illustration is: "Girls who feel insecure and freak out on their boyfriends because they compare themselves to airbrushed women in magazines need their head checked. I mean seriously, get a grip - those women are entertainment only" (F-UK). This recurrent response suggests a surfaced normativity of 'media literacy', and how this can operate in the service of the neoliberal programme, rendering each individual consumer responsible for their own engagements with texts, and silencing all those important, complex questions about subjectivity and representation (Gill 2012b). Rather that engaging in debate about representational practices and calling for change, the dominant message to young women today is: "you need to learn to love yourself and overlook things in the media" (F-UK).

Besides practising 'reality acceptance', then, a form of psychic labour women are repeatedly called to undergo is that of confidence and self-esteem. Here, again, while men's interests are privileged, women are blamed and expected to change. As I discuss in more detail in the next chapter, calls to women to confidence are typically underpinned by an ideological discourse of 'toxic insecurity'[34]. One way this operates is by positioning female unconfidence as so repugnant as to have driven men to pornography: "Maybe you're boyfriend likes the confidence that the girls in the films have as you don't sound to have much confidence in yourself?" (F-UK) Moreover, women are not only blamed for feeling unconfident, but also for putting the relationships at risk, and unjustly affecting their male partners. For one female-identified forumer: "Girls need to work on their confidence instead of whining to their innocent boyfriends" (F-UK). Rather than to accomplish greater personal well-being and happiness, women's labour of self-confidence is thus presented as crucial 'relationship preservation' work. Two examples are: "If you don't resolve your insecurity problems your relationship is going to end BADLY" (F-Spain) and "Insecurities are recipes for disaster and it is NEVER OK to inflict them on others" (F-UK). This post combines the ideological discourses of female 'toxic ignorance' and 'toxic insecurity': "I don't know how your relationships survive if you don't understand men are different and you are so insecure" (F-UK). Certainly, for some forumers women's insecurities are toxic to the extent of incompatibility with a heterosexual relationship: "If such a little thing has "knocked your confidence" then

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[34] I am grateful to Ros Gill for suggesting this phrase to me.

you shouldn't be in a relationship, you need to work on your insecurities instead of offloading them on your poor boyfriend" (F-UK). One such "poor boyfriend" posting in the forum sent women a clear message: "So I should sacrifice my own happiness for their insecurities? Buggar that". Another self-identified young man similarly wrote: "This is exactly what I get day in and day out of my relationship and Im growing extremely tired of it". His advice read as follows: "If you feel insecure, then ADDRESS THE PROBLEM […] Get some confidence and start living in the real world".

Interestingly, even when women do *not* mention the question of self-esteem or actively deny this as the problem, they are still told that the reason they do not appreciate their partners' consumption of pornography is because they are insecure or, moreover, as one commenter puts it: "something is wrong with your self-esteem" (F-Spain). One illustrative post from a Spain-based forum is: "The emotions you perceive are only the result of your insecurities, otherwise you would not care about that". One UK forumer similarly responded to the woman posting: "If this bothers you, you need to improve your own self esteem, thats the issue here […] So improve your self confidence and porn wont seem like an issue anymore". The diagnosis of 'lacking self-esteem' here surfaces as a responsive effect of power to depoliticise and individualise women's resistance to the political and the systemic. In a distinctive postfeminist manner, it operates to render irrelevant and disenfranchise any critique of pornography, and with that associated feminist vocabularies and imaginaries.

Calls to women to confidence as solution to their 'porn trouble' reflect how in the current climate the regulatory work that women are required to undergo includes the disciplining of subjectivity through a 'madeover' ethical relationship to the self (Gill 2009a), with self-esteem and self-confidence becoming an increasingly crucial part of this intensified incursion of the operation of power into the psychic (Gill and Elias 2014). This has notably materialised in the commercial 'love your body' (LYB) discourses that have been increasingly targeting women over the last decade with seemingly affirmative messages about bodies (Gill and Elias 2014). Women's magazines are at the centre of this market for female self-esteem (Banet-Weiser, 2013a), whose preoccupations are a guiding feature of the 'sexpertise' under my analytic gaze – and constitute the topic of the next chapter. What I will be calling 'confidence chic' (re-)presents women's insecurities as an individual—or at times intrinsically female—malady, instead of a socio-political issue deserving collective

anger at both old and new realms of injury and injustice, including a media culture obsessively preoccupied with re-commodified and re-sexualised women's bodies (Gill 2007a). Indeed, the practice of female governmentality through confidence also accomplishes the important ideological work of obfuscating the continued hostile surveillance and judgment of women's bodies, and, increasingly, their sexual practice. It is to this last overarching theme that I now turn.

7.4.2 Pornified upgrade

Coexisting alongside calls to confidence is a female subject whose corporeal aesthetic-erotic standards are failing or lacking, and need (ongoing) scrutiny and work: "do you maintain your sex appeal for your husband?" (F-Spain). Supported by the 'visual creature' figuration of men, the advice offered in these online spaces is chillingly detached, normative and disciplinary. One example is this response to the UK thread, 'Help, he's a porn maniac!': "You will have to make every effort to appeal to him more visually. This will mean keeping in shape, wearing nice clothes/high heels around him, wearing makeup in the house, buying attractive underwear etc …" Drawing on a typical postfeminist move to evade critique—seen in much EP literature—this contributor notes: "I know this advice may sound harsh or even a little sexist"; to then locate it as the rational response to the 'fact' that "men are not the same as women (shock horror)". This ridiculing comment reflects a recurrent delegitimisation strategy within EP wherein opponents are accused of 'biophobia' (e.g. Campbell 2013).

Male consumption of pornography is portrayed as resulting not only from women's undesirable bodies, but also from their unsatisfactory sexual upkeep: "maybe you are falling short in bed" (F-Spain) and "it is very probable that he is sexually unsatisfied" (F-Spain). This involves providing men good enough sex both in terms of *quantity*: "in a healthy relationship you should be having enough sex that he doesnt need to watch t every day" (F-UK); and *quality*: "are you sure you satisfy him correctly?" (F-Spain). On the basis of the premise that men watch pornography because they are sexually unsatisfied, women are exhorted to engage with a narrow repertoire of commodified sexual practices to regain men's interest and ensure their satisfaction. Elements of the compulsory sexual labour for women in relationships include being a "'head' mistress", "mastering the art of sexy stripping" (both

SoFeminine.co.uk), and producing "topless selfies" (F-UK). Another way to "expand your sexual repertoire" is to "try something new in the bedroom like some more kinkiness" (F-UK). The advice in these sites thereby props up the feminine 'sexual entrepreneur' (Harvey and Gill 2011), including her newer—post (E.L. James's) *Fifty Shades Of Grey*—kinky chic or bondage babe component. As a neoliberal subject, this inhabitant of a strictly policed and delimited sexual matrix is incited to relentlessly self-improve and renovate through entrepreneurialism and "consuming the self into being" (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008: 227). A link between sexuality and commodity culture suffuses both the editorial *and* user-generated content. In response to the reader letter 'He's having live chat sex with other women!', *FemaleFirst.co.uk* writes: "You could suggest dressing up for him or introducing some sex toys into your sexual play to make things more exciting". Unsurprisingly, this online magazine has a lingerie shopping section. It is also littered with advertorials and direct links to retail websites for sex toys and costumes. It is nonetheless remarkable how the commercial imperative can override in such a violent manner the needs, concerns or sensibilities of readers. Rendering this categorically evident is the choice of image to accompany the reader letter: a pornified, normatively beautiful young woman webcamming – as seen in Figure 7.1.

Figure 7.1 'He's having live chat sex with other women!', *FemaleFirst.co.uk*, 2014
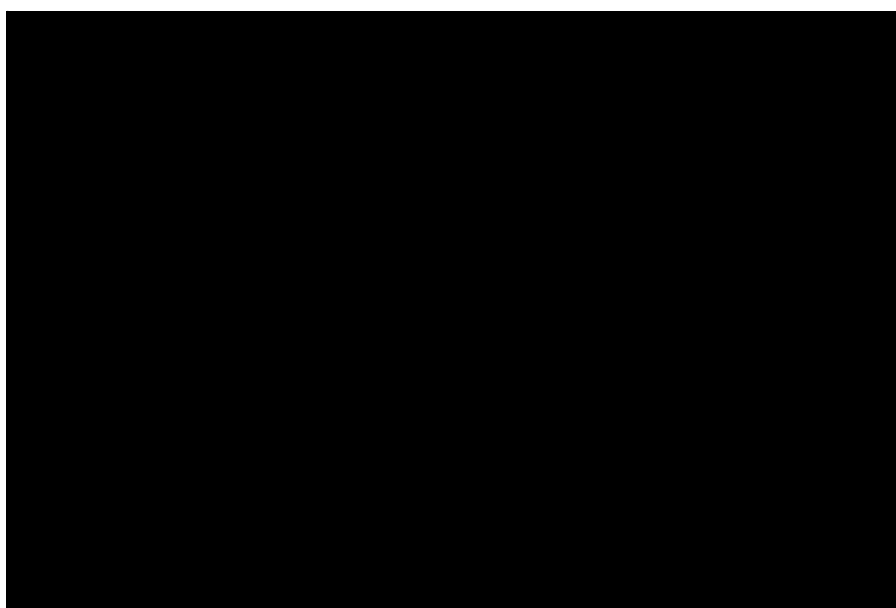
Equally, the women posting their concerns about their partners' pornography use on the forums are told: "you could try and spice your sex life up a bit, next time your in town casually take him into Ann Summers" (F-UK), and "Get some sexy lingerie like a baby doll and stockings" (F-UK). Concerning the widespread reproduction of such consumerist discourses by members of the public, this adds as yet another form of free immaterial labour performed by digital media users benefiting corporations (Campbell 2011). Ultimately it points to the commercial conquest of the sphere of sexuality.

In these transnational spaces-apparatuses of mediated intimacy, being sexually compliant to men's sexual desires, regardless of personal views or wants, is normalised as what women in love *do*. Furthermore, a number of forum contributors advance this as a *requirement to prevent men from leaving*. In addition to such a threat, the post below also invokes the casual normalisation of women's incorporation of commercial sex aesthetics and activities to satisfy men while in— and for the good of—committed heterosexual relationships:

> You will lose him being like this. I am not telling you to like what he likes […] if he likes porn so much, lose your inhibitions, stimulate his visual sexuality by buying a really sexy lingerie set and doing for him a phenomenal striptease as if you were a true porn actress. (F-Spain)

No other feminine subject weaves together more perniciously aesthetic (see Elias et al. 2017), sexual and psychic labour than the 'sexual entrepreneur' (Harvey and Gill 2011). In the data, her technology of sexiness also entails being 'confident" and 'cool' with (men's) pornography. Two illustrations from the *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum are: "a woman who is confident with regards to porn is sexy" and "women who are cool about these kind of things are considered very sexy by a lot of men, whereas 'needy' behaviour like freaking over things like this just pushes them further away".

It is remarkable how unequally distributed care and empathy are. While any sign of female emotional fragility or dependency is resolutely not tolerated, cast as pathological, indisputably repulsive and toxic for relationships, women are expected to be permanently attentive and responsive to—even anticipatory of!—men's needs, desires and insecurities. What is more, women's wishes or anxieties are suppressed through an emphasis on those *potentially* experienced by men – as projected by respondents. Examples from different datasets are: "Perhaps he is craving for something new from you in the bedroom but too shy to ask?" (E-UK), "ask him if he would want to treat you like a porn star, maybe he's just imagining That which he is

too afraid to ask" (F-UK), and "Maybe he wants to realise a fantasy and is shy to tell you, watch porn with him" (F-Spain).

And indeed, there is an overwhelming consensus both in the editorial and user-generated content in the Spain and UK-based websites that *the* solution to women's dilemma is to watch pornography with their partner. This is variously depicted as normatively demanded instrumental behaviour to satisfy men and for the benefit of the relationship, and, to a lesser extent, as an empowering and pleasurable activity. In this sense, some self-defined women forumers point to their own use and enjoyment of pornography: "I love watching porn!" (F-UK/Spain). Others draw on a hedonistic discourse of shared playfulness and pleasure, for example: "see how much fun you can have with each other" (F-UK) and "its such a turn on we always end up having great sex" (F-UK). These messages thus make a strong gesture to *Cosmopolitan*'s Fun, Fearless Female, to the playful, feisty, pleasure-seeking and sexually desiring version of femininity of much postfeminist media and advertising.

More recurrently, however, "watching porn with your OH" (F-UK) is depicted in instrumental terms as sex life enhancing. Instances of this pervasive piece of advice include: "Instead of losing sleep over it, why not join him? Watching porn together can be a great way to expand your sexual repertoire" (F-UK), "you could end up watching something together to spice things up" (F-UK) and "Why don't you watch porn with him. […] Watching it together and commenting on it (dirty talk) can enhance your sex life" (F-UK). Women are also encouraged to—enthusiastically and actively—engage in this activity simply because, as an article in *Elle Spain* explains: "to watch a porn film with a girl is the fantasy of many men" (note the use of 'girl' versus 'men'). Namely, as an act of love: "He will love you for it" (F-UK), and "If you care about your boyfriend, you can show interest in a pleasant way in his virtual pastimes" (F-Spain).

In addition to embracing pornography consumption as a pleasure producing device or, more recurrently, in instrumental ways to 'spice up' sex and to please (in order to keep) men, women are advised to fashion *themselves* according to the aesthetics from their partners' pornographies. For example, in response to the reader letter 'My boyfriend would rather watch porn than have sex with me!', *FemaleFirst.co.uk* suggests: "maybe have a sneaky look at the girls in the porn films to see what they are wearing and try and match it". Figure 7.2 shows the image accompanying this text, which, again, I consider utterly disrespectful toward the

readers' anguish, prioritising instead the pornified male gaze and commercial interests (i.e. creating an environment conducive to lingerie consumption).

Figure 7.2 'My boyfriend would rather watch porn than have sex with me!', *FemaleFirst.co.uk*, 2013
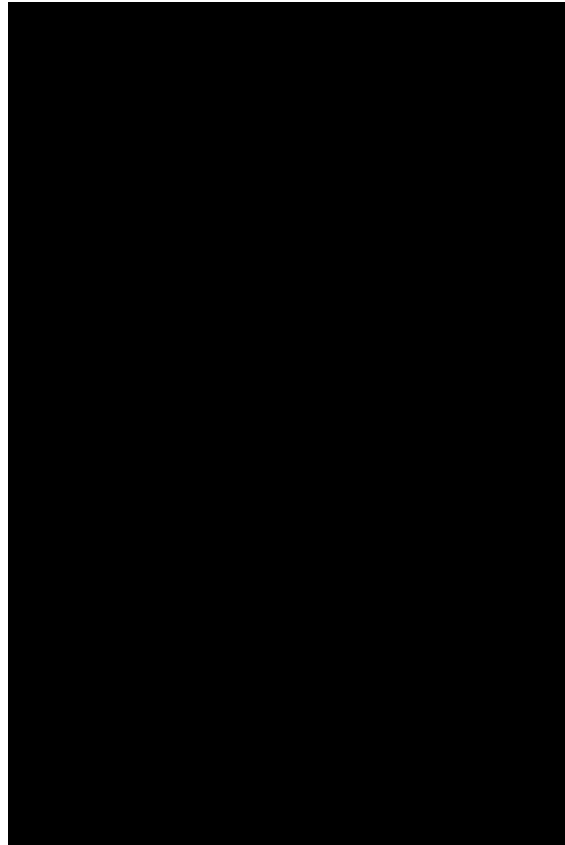
Women are also expected to engage in the sexual acts depicted in the material consumed by their boyfriends/husbands. Illustrations from the editorial and user-generated content include: "Why not try to get more involved with it- watch it together or play out one the fantasies in the recording? (E-UK), and "Does he look at any particular genre? If so, pay attention to those, and try to work them into your bedroom activities" (F-UK). Ultimately, in response to their "porn trouble" women are exhorted to do whatever men want: "ask him what turns him on and do that" (F-UK). According to Meagan Tyler (2011: 3): "the sexuality promoted by sexology and pornography closely resembles the sex of prostitution". My analysis suggests that this is a model that is also now informing the 'sexpertise' circulating online in women's journalism as well as peer networks across and beyond national contexts. One last illustration comes from a *Cosmohispano.com* article, adapted/syndicated

from *Cosmopolitan.com* (US version). For this 2015 piece, the number one rule for women in relationships is to: "Have sex. Even if at first you don't feel like it. Sex generates more sex". Rule number two: "To satisfy your guy's wishes".

7.5   Challenging pornification

The previous sections have shown how the mediated intimacies of women's online magazines are far from placing compassion, consensus and consent at the centre of relationships. I also hope to have captured something of the consequences women face if they fail or refuse to undergo the adjustments demanded by postfeminist sex/ual/ised culture, and if they cease to provide the sense of female enthusiastic participation that is so fundamental to its maintenance. Indeed, rejoinders by thread-initiators suggest the potential injurious effects of the discursive terrain analysed in this chapter. For example, one woman wrote: "You all make me feel terrible and that there's something wrong with me because I don't feel comfortable with porn" (F-UK). Others pointed out that: "I came on here and created that thread for advice and help not for people to laugh at me" (F-UK). More defiantly, another retort in a UK forum developed a counter-narrative to the advice received:

> The majority of people will say "it's just what guys do" "it's not a big deal" but the way I see it is if that's just the way guys are, well the way I am means that porn use would hurt me very badly. Why should you automatically have to be the one to adapt?

A number of forumers also contested the general tone of commentary: "Why do people feel it's appropriate to be rude and judgemental when the problem is 'just porn'?" (F-UK). Although in the minority, others also resisted dominant discourses. One post read: "Why is it always seen as insecurity… some people just don't like it" (F-UK). Another forumer expressed: "I don't understand when porn became this thing that everyone is expected to be cool with. I don't think it's fair for people to just have to accept it because it's 'what happens'" (F-UK). There were a handful of more clearly defiant and politicised comments, such as:

> I am sick to death of the media telling us all how skinny we should be, how we should all get implants and let our boyfriends treat us like %&*$# for fear of being seen as a nag. […] Men don't have to put up with their girlfriends looking at pictures of hot guys naked with massive dicks on the net all the time. I doubt many of them would handle it as well as a lot of women do. […] I understand how you feel, and it is ok to feel that way. It's not ok for people to tell you it's pathetic, because it's far from it, it's a symptom of the pressure we are under these days. (F-UK)

The critical comment by another forumer, this time from Spain, succinctly captured postfeminist dynamics of gender power:

> This is what happens when you live in a machistic and manipulated society which makes women believe that behaviours like this (and many others) happen because of nature or trends, and that we have to accept it… moreover, that we have to accept it with a big smile, with absolute delight, normalising the situation, that is why we are liberal women from the XXI century. (F-Spain)

Pointing to the potentials of education, another forum message read: "I wouldn't like it at all. I did part of my dissertation on pornography & its social impact, and a lot of the stuff I read was really shocking/made me think" (F-UK). She followed: "I don't want to start on some big Occupy-esque rant, but I think there's a lot of social change needs to happen & to me, the porn industry is a symptom of that". Finally, one post *did* explicitly embrace political activism. This female-identified contributor spoke about "a growing movement in the UK of women challenging this pornified culture", offering the link to the UK feminist organisation Object. Note how once again this message highlights the pressure felt by young women to accept pornification to please men.

> I am surprised at some of the comments on here from other women. I too experienced this from friends for years, as I continued to challenge porn, my friends continued to make me feel like I was the only one with the problem. In fact, I have come to realise that it is not you that has the problem, it is all those that leave this insepid sexism to go unchallenged, and even pretend to like it to impress their boyfriends. You are not alone. For more info check out www.object.org.uk where thousands of women are rising up against sexism today. (F-UK)

It is heartening to find these moments of discursive dissent, systemic analysis and politicised solidarity among young women – the very activities postfeminism works so very hard to stifle (McRobbie 2009). However, the shortage of this type of commentary is deeply troubling. In addition to the afore-discussed, and particularly in the UK forums, the critique of pornography was rebutted with discourses of choice and of the sex industry as a great business for the women involved: "are you aware of the amount of money some women who CHOSE to do porn are making? I cant see how you'd find it degrading". Therefore, on the main what prevails across editorial features and user discussions about men's pornography use in women's online magazines accessed by Spanish and English speakers worldwide are gendered neoliberal logics, together with an ideological formation suturing elements from postfeminism and EP.

7.6   Postfeminist Biologism

Drawing on peer-to-peer and editorial discussions about men's consumption of pornography in women's online magazines, this chapter has argued that the heterosexual contract promoted in these spaces is largely based on a profoundly unequal distribution of labour, lack of mutuality and consensus-building, disciplining women into deeply injurious and unjust psycho-social arrangements. Male consumption of pornography is established as something which is strictly not open for debate, and men are deemed as entitled to more understanding. In contrast, the female user is expected to adopt a position of compliance, and to resign herself to the idea of male sexuality as inevitably predatory and linked to pornography use. Lack of such an endorsement is associated with a personal psychological deficiency or inadequacy, such as immaturity, irrationality, profound ignorance or reality denial. Further, she is expected to subjugate her feelings, views and needs—which are stringently policed, pathologised, ridiculed and cast as toxic—and instead adapt and respond to her partners'. Moreover, positioned as failed subject-objects of desire-consumption, working on constructing an upgraded—pornified—selfhood is advanced as women's required response. The analysis has highlighted how these narratives of male immutability and female adaptation in heterosexual relationships are given ideological support by pseudo-scientific discourses heavily informed by EP. By way of concluding, I want to reflect on how this represents not simply the continuing cultural force of EP, but also critically the manner in which contemporary iterations of evolutionary/biological gender essentialism are distinctively shaped by postfeminism (and neoliberalism) to constitute a contradictory ideological formation I call 'postfeminist biologism'.

EP has long worked with and reinforced ideas of sexual difference, but these are nourished by a political moment in which a postfeminist sensibility has powerfully taken hold across diverse cultural sites and contexts. Like EP, postfeminism as a cultural sensibility is deeply invested in reductive, dichotomous understandings of gender. Like postfeminism, EP as an academic discipline needs to take feminism into account – if only to then 'undo' it (McRobbie 2009). And like postfeminist media and EP literature, those posting on the sites I examined portray feminism as confounded by insuperable restrictions fixed by ahistorical, asocial and apolitical forces, principal among which are the forces of evolutionary sexual

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selection. This then facilitates the unabashed promotion of a sexual regime that systematically privileges (though also patronises and limits) men.

But the fixity of biological determinism conflicts with a deeply gendered neoliberal program. Certainly, in contrast to the notion of immutability that surrounds maleness, in the spirit of neoliberalism women are constituted as adaptive actors fully responsible for their self-care and enhancing their own well-being through strategic cost-benefit calculation. In the 'porn trouble' scenario this means promptly abandoning negative feelings about pornography—and a partner's lying—through recognising the 'scientific fact' that men are 'biologically programmed' to consume such material (or cheat), and reconstructing herself as a wiser, better-adapted, heterosexual feminine subject: a gender unquestioning, porn-accepting, lust-provoking, 'great sex' provider.

Making this sexual regime palatable is a postfeminist moment where gender polarity has not only been re-naturalised but also re-*eroticised*, and where pornography has not only been mainstreamed but also rebranded as liberating, chic, 'cool' for women (Gill 2007a). What is more, pornographic and other sex industry aesthetics and practices are advanced as models for the constitution of a contradictory postfeminist normative ideal: the 'sexual entrepreneur', a feminine subject who is always 'up for it' and 'spiced up', although, as this chapter has shown, within narrowly defined and distinctly masculinist parameters that are tightly policed (Harvey and Gill 2011). Further to such 'compulsory sexual agency', the cultural climate of postfeminism also effectively masks the normalisation of sexual compliance through the "related assumption that women no longer make decisions outside of free choice in (assumedly) egalitarian relations" (Burkett and Hamilton 2012: 825). These are heterosexual relations that postfeminist culture additionally depicts as structured by antagonistic polarity and the forces of the "sexual marketplace", not least "seller-buyer dynamics in relation to sex drive" as EP advocate Campbell declares (2013: 330). Certainly, EP zealously propagates these ideas, which in turn respond to deeply embedded neoliberal rationalities. All this suggests that current EP discourses are influenced by neoliberalism (see McKinnon 2005) *and* postfeminism.

The ideological formation of postfeminist biologism predominates in contemporary EP literature, suturing notions of women's equal *social* rights and opportunities with deep investments in Western normative gender arrangements and

a totalitarian 'real science' of androcentric 'common-sense', fallacious 'neutrality' and vindictive 'universal truths'. In EP, the possibility of political critique and radical imaginaries are delegitimised by what we might call a 'Pleistocene mystique'. In line with the gender regime of postfeminism, the main preoccupation here is not so much upon returning to past arrangements, but rather upon preventing further change *and* dismantling feminism as a political force. The increasing eagerness to 'reconcile' EP and feminism (see Kelly 2014) is evidence of this, as a strategy of fragmentation and containment 'from within'. And a similar argument might be made about the recent interest among EPs in undertaking media and cultural research, which, to their chagrin, is generally marked by the politics of questioning, change and social justice.

Learning about these growing academic interventions was a particularly disturbing aspect of my encounter with EP – one that many feminist scholars understandably avoid: Why engage with a literature that is inexcusably malign *and* utterly wrong? But I found the dominance of the logics and narratives—moreover, the exact same language—of scholarly EP in my research data alarming, travelling across the user-generated and editorial content from globally accessed sites in Spanish and in English. Alarming too is its important role in lending legitimacy to a pernicious ideological formation. My primary concern is the manner in which postfeminist biologism not only suppresses romantic and erotic creativity, but functions to secure an unjust and injurious sexual regime through disciplining women while privileging men. Ultimately, it establishes a brutally alienating framework for intimate relationality, and, indeed, human sociality. The travels of postfeminist biologism make a reinvigorated collective "politics of discursive intervention" (Gavey 2005: 227) all the more urgent.

Chapter Eight
LOVE YOURSELF

8.1   Introduction

> Few topics are as recurrent today as that of self-esteem
> —*Nosotras.com*, 2014

From the mid-2000s, and particularly the turn of the decade, the so-called poor body image of girls and (principally young) women has become subject to intensified concern. This has involved an explosion of variously corporate, non-profit, state-funded, national and global initiatives, along with experts and discourses – epitomised by the now omnipresent call to 'love your body' (LYB). This can stem from sites as different as The National Organization for Women Foundation and multinational consumer goods company Unilever, owner of brands like Dove, Slimfast and Axe/Lynx, which is notorious for its misogynistic adverts. With Dove's Campaign For Real Beauty, launched in 2004 in England to soon spread worldwide, Unilever created "one of modern marketing's most talked-about success stories" (Bahadur 2014). A number of beauty brands followed suit, and began to promote positive, affirmative, seemingly feminist-inflected messages about female bodies, offering women a sharp contrast to the familiar messages of inadequacy and lack[35]. LYB advertising is often partnered with interested well-respected individuals and non-commercial entities. For instance, among calls for body confidence and media literacy education, in 2014 the Dove Movement for Self-Esteem—whose advisory board is chaired by feminist psychotherapist Susie Orbach—and Girlguiding UK collaboratively started a "body confidence revolution", exhorting girls and young women to take a pledge to #BeBodyConfident, and offering the "first body-confidence badge". Declared by the then UK Minister for Women and Equalities "a watershed year in which body image truly entered the zeitgeist", 2014 also saw the launch of the British national campaign Be Real, "the reinstatement of the Body Confidence Awards, and an explosion of body image activism on social media" (Swinson in Government Equalities Office and Swinson 2015: 3). Certainly, a blaze

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[35] For feminist critiques of LYB advertising, see Murray (2013) and Gill and Elias (2014).

of images, mantras and initiatives promoting female self-esteem, self-belief and positive self-regard permeates social media, as exemplified by a multiplicity of hashtags like #loveyourself, #confidentwomen and #CelebrateMySize.

More recently, great concern is also surfacing about a 'shortage of female confidence' in general. This is claimed to hinder women in everything from achieving happy intimate relationships to ascending the professional ladder, thus maintaining the 'glass ceiling' (Kay and Shipman 2014). Exhortations to women of all ages to self-confidence accordingly infuse an ever-increasing range of established domains and institutions (Gill and Orgad 2015). Furthermore, new ones thrive especially for this purpose, ranging from entities such as the Confidence Coalition aiming to promote an international 'confidence movement' (Banet-Weiser 2015c) to confidence training programmes and self-esteem workshops. Indeed, such 'movement' is also a very lucrative *market*. This notably includes a plethora of (self-help) media, which spans from a growing array of smartphone and tablet applications for 'building' and 'boosting' confidence to bestselling books by high-powered self-identified feminists encouraging women to 'internalise the revolution', to 'lean in' to their individual careers and close the '(leadership) ambition gap' (Sandberg 2013), and to 'stand tall' and defy the 'confidence gap' (Kay and Shipman 2014).

One important meeting space for all these confidence actors, enterprises, commodities and discourses are women's magazines. Publications have incorporated a 'body positivity' approach that extends from advertisements and advertorial, editorial features and even dedicated sections (e.g. 'My body's amazing because…' and 'Bye-bye body hang-ups' in *Cosmopolitan UK*) to initiatives and campaigns, frequently in partnership with health associations (e.g. *Cosmopolitan UK* and eating disorder charity Beat) and certainly beauty brands (e.g. Lancôme's The Power of Confidence campaign with British *Elle* and *Red*). More recent publications are also marked by an intensified preoccupation with female *self*-love, and with instructing women on how to "go from crisis to confidence" and replace Negative Nancy with Confident Chick (*Cosmopolitan.co.uk*) in *every area* of life. Again, this effort includes a varied range of collaborations (e.g. Sheryl Sandberg as guest careers editor for *Cosmopolitan US*), and a editorial approach that ranges from a shower of articles like 'The 10 confidence tips you need to know' and '8 Ways to Love Yourself' to special sections and even issues. In January 2015 *Elle UK* published a Confidence Issue, billed as: 'A smart woman's guide to self-belief' (see Figure 8.1).

The following month *Cosmopolitan UK* began featuring a 'confidence revolution' monthly column by founder of the Self-Esteem Team Natasha Devon (see www.selfesteemteam.org). As seen in Figure 8.1, its June 2015 Love Issue powerfully suggests the apparent re-organisation of editorial foci: 'Love yourself. Love your body. Love your man'.

Figure 8.1 Confidence Issue, *Elle UK*, 2015; Love Issue, *Cosmopolitan UK*, 2015
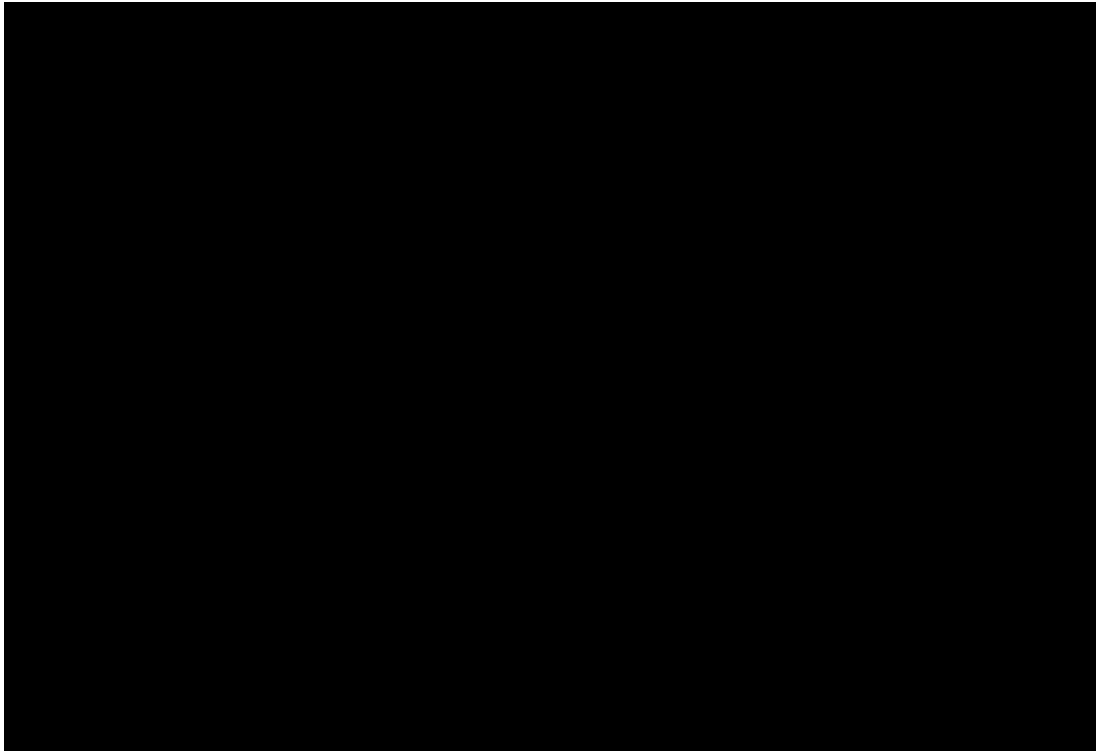
The topic of body positivity, confidence and self-esteem also pervades women's magazines in the form of celebrity, fashion and trend-oriented coverage. 'REAL beauties are trending topic on the Internet', *Glamour.es* reports (note the ideological metonym women/beauties). In another article, and taking singer Jennifer Lopez as exemplar, the publication declares: 'The Body Revolution has triumphed: curves are the standard again'. Further emphasising this sense of 'revolution', the title of a feature reporting on the 'NYC Girls Project' (see Banet-Weiser 2015c) reads: 'Celebrity alert: All against the tyranny of beauty'. In yet another piece, this time on 'Beautiful Big Bloggers', *Glamour.es* describes the current context as follows: "As advertising takes new benchmarks of beauty, campaigns for the self-esteem of women proliferate or feminism becomes cool, size diversity moves onto the blogosphere".

Indeed, the 'body positivity movement' is connected to a new luminosity of (certain forms of) feminism that is particularly notable in the media and among young women, and which constitutes the topic of the next chapter. First, this chapter critically interrogates what I have labelled 'confidence chic' – a phrase which points to the gendered, classed and commercial nature of the phenomenon under study, as well as its entrenchment within economies of visibility, notably those associated with digital media cultures (see Banet-Weiser 2013a). To this end, I purposely built a corpus of 126 editorial features applying a 'love yourself' (LYS) approach to the realms of the body and intimate relationships. The analysis additionally draws on the producer interviews, and, to a lesser extent, user-generated content from the forums, having created a sample of 140 posts discussing female confidence. After a general introduction to the LYB/S magazine approach, the first analysis section unpacks the new and old levels of (self-)work demanded of women. The following section highlights how confidence is thoroughly informed by notions of female toxicity. I then look at various re-allocations of blame and claims to injury, marked by an injunction to women to understand themselves as freely choosing, entirely self-responsible and atomised actors. Focusing exclusively on the interview material, the last analysis section explores the various and even opposing ways in which magazine professionals explained and evaluated LYB/S. Zooming out from the details of the data, I close the chapter with some critical notes on confidence chic.

8.2   The labour of confidence

In women's magazines, 'lack of self-confidence' is normalised as a universal peculiarly female malady. However, this malady has solutions – individualised ones, which are to be undertaken via the application of knowledges and procedures specified by experts: 'Feel Like the Queen of Confidence with these Expert Tips'. LYB/S texts thus mark a notable exception to the otherwise general increasing rejection of expert or professional voices, as discussed in Chapter Five. Particularly predominant are the 'psy' professions (Rose 1998) and the newer authorities associated with the 'self-esteem industry' (Banet-Weiser 2013a). Certainly, the power/knowledge apparatus of confidence chic seams gendered psychotherapies with commodity logic. This is vividly illustrated by hybrid positions we could call 'psycommercial' such as: 'dating guru and [shampoo brand] Head & Shoulders Date

Night Confidence Coach'. The following from *Cosmopolitan US* epitomises the extent of the hybridity of the confidence movement-market: "Social Psychologist Amy Cuddy speaks on stage during Cosmopolitan Fun Fearless Life 2015 presented by Maybelline New York in partnership with #ActuallySheCan". In LYB/S magazine content, readers are told that becoming confident: "It's all in the power of thought". Influenced by positive psychology, texts urge women to engage in the subjectivity labour of confidence individually and at all times through the conscious direct manipulation of thought, taking "mental shifts" toward a "#PMA" (positive mental attitude). The ultimate exhortation to women is to "Zap your negative thinking" and "Think yourself confident!" "Whether you're in the bedroom or boardroom". Below I centre on the realms of the body and intimate relationships.

In apparent opposition to the obsession with (highly sexualised) female bodies in contemporary hyper-visual culture, suffusing women's magazines is the claim: "confidence is sexy". Indeed, according to Bobbi Brown Cosmetics: "Confidence is the new sexy". In women's magazines, beauty magnates equally tell readers that "beauty is all about confidence" (Liz Earle in *FemaleFirst.co.uk*). Sex and relationship texts also equate sexiness with confidence: "Real sexiness is true confidence!" Women are accordingly assured that "to attract love": "what really works is looking at the *inner* you and doing the *inner* work necessary". As an agony aunt further explains in response to 'My weight is making me nervous to register for online dating': "The important thing is to feel confident, be confident as confidence is attractive regardless of your size". Note in these two quotes the resort to 'overwording' (Fairclough 1992), even italicisation for additional emphasis. This suggests ideological struggle, intense preoccupation with winning consent for a particular representation or (new) meaning – in this case complicated/challenged by adjacent weight loss content, and more broadly the centrality for these media of the beauty sections, which are then further divided into dedicated subsections on skin, hair, make-up, nails, and even cosmetic surgery in *SoFeminine.co.uk*. In the same manner, one of the images accompanying the assertion "Sex appeal is all about self-confidence", reproduced in Figure 8.2, suggests that in actual fact 'sex appeal' derives from reproducing a (pornified) model of physical appearance unattainable for

most women[36]. Discursively mystifying this is the 'inside' dictate: "love yourself on the inside", "confidence is an inner issue", "seductiveness comes from within", and so on. Such discursive drilling is also fundamental for normalising the new realms of psychic labour required of women.

Figure 8.2 "Sex appeal is all about self-confidence", *SoFeminine.co.uk*, 2014
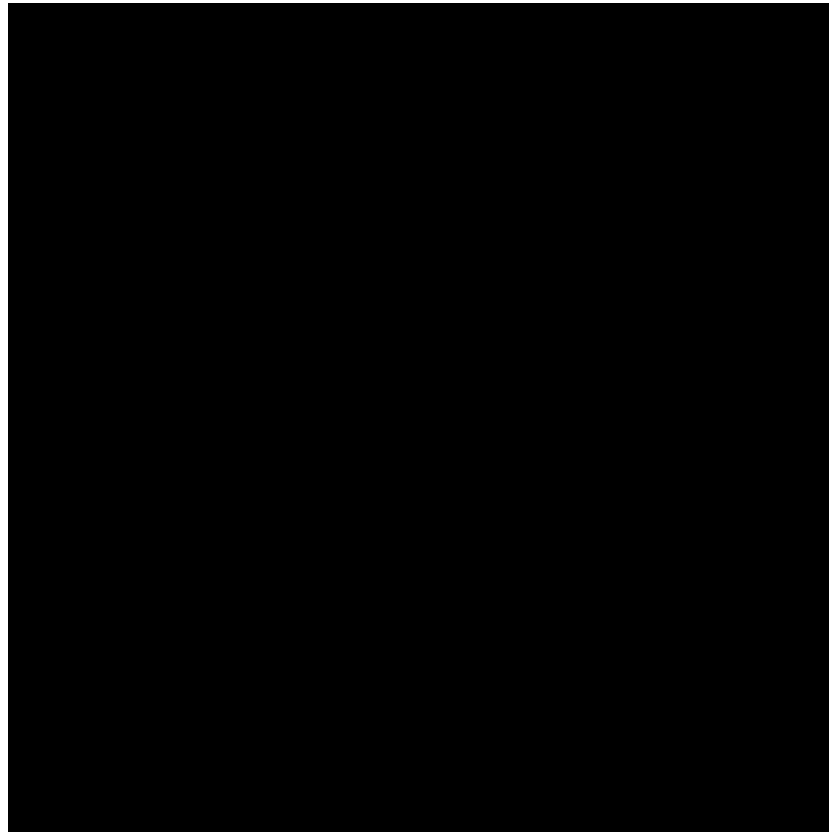
The confidence chic regime exhorts women to undergo intense, constant self-scrutiny and self-work. Since self-confidence is allegedly not innate in women, "working on your confidence is a life-long task", magazines assure us. It requires much "perseverance and practice", and "turn[ing] to a coach if necessary", adds *Elle.es*. This legitimises an editorial bombardment of advice features ranging from how to "become confident", "boost your confidence" to "maximise your potential". In particular, to be a 'confident chick' (*Cosmopolitan*) is to govern oneself taking an entrepreneurial approach informed by positive psychology. This involves the incessant calculation and "appreciation" of distinctive personal strengths ("assets"),

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[36] Note also how the photograph has been cut to leave out the upper part of the model's face. Feminists have long critiqued this fragmentation of women into body parts, which is a dehumanising practice that is particularly prevalent in pornography and advertising (Sanmiguel 2000).

along with advanced skills of self-management such as identifying and rationalising "bad body triggers". Women are equally expected to employ micro-techniques for the cultivation, enhancement and maintenance of positive outlooks and self-regard, through exercises like gratitude reflections and repeating affirmative mantras in front of a mirror. Magazines also offer "confidence commandments" for every minutia of women's lives – from the meeting at work to the "bikini body" to fellatio.

Confidence chic does not replace but rather *adds yet more levels of labour* to the project of normative femininity. It weaves the remodelling of the psyche with aesthetic and sexual labour, much of which is grounded in the heteronormative, pornified, body-fixated consumerist culture of postfeminism – the very culture seemingly being contested. Speaking to this ideological amalgam is the magazine advice to women to:

> Walk like you have three men walking behind you. Heels can do a lot for a lady's confidence. […] And, what's better, it gives you an excuse to shop for pretty shoes just because they make you feel good about yourself.

It is remarkable how easily 'feel good, look good' is reversed. An article '10 Hacks For Instant Body Confidence' reads: "Make the effort to look good, doing this will make you feel good internally, thus boosting self-esteem and confidence. Wear your favourite top, put on some lipstick, go the extra mile and paint your nails, shave your legs..." Although becoming a "queen of confidence" is allegedly "all in the mind ladies", it is inseparable from "keep[ing] up the self-maintenance" (e.g. "make sure you've waxed"), dressing for (hetero)"sex-cess" (e.g. in "killer heels"), wearing a "full face of make-up", buying a "push-up Super Egoboost bra", and performing a boudoir striptease for "your man" Dita Von Teese-style – "exuding confidence", of course. The same logic applies to fellatio, as the following 2015 article by *SoFeminine.co.uk* explains (see previous chapter on the figuration of men as 'visual creatures' and the normalisation of pornography consumption):

> Men are visual. If you're shy and hiding, that won't make a blowjob better. On the contrary, you risk him thinking about that other chick or some porn star instead of seeing you. Confidence is key. Fake it if you must.

Pervading the data is the 'tip' to "trick yourself confident" by "faking it", under the hope that if you "fake it enough and you will actually start to believe it". "You know the old adage, 'Fake it till you make it'", magazines remind us. However, as the quote above also indicates, in the realm of heterosexuality the most immediate priority is *men*. The technology of confidence responds to an attempt to ensure that

women will engage in the practices desired by their partners and achieve the standards of performance demanded of them when in heterosexual relationships. *EnFemenino.com* exhorts women to: "Be confident in yourself. Men love it! You cannot imagine how much it turns a guy on seeing that you manage confidently in bed… Even if it's not true!" The peer-to-peer advice in the forums is strikingly similar. In advising women to engage in sexual practices they are hesitant about, forumers stress: "Confidence is the sexiest thing you can do for him". The pervasive recommendation is: "just take a deep breath and go 4 it, men love it!" When it comes to the seemingly obligatory lap dance, forumers counsel the following:

> Low lighting, a moderate amount of alcohol, heavy eye makeup, pouty lips, the music nice and loud – you'll rock his world. Exude confidence even if you are embarrassed, there's nothing sexier than confidence. (F-UK)

The call to women to 'fake confidence' in the absence of the 'real' thing is also related to the fact that, as Gill and Orgad (2015) observe, in the climate of 'confidence is the new sexy' insecurity surfaces as the new ugly.

8.3 Female toxicity

If, as women's magazines insist, "Loving the way you look will make you irresistible to your partner", being insecure about your appearance makes you a total male-repellent. In the very same manner, according to these publications, a woman performing the obligatory 'sex work' (Cacchioni 2007) unconfidently is the ultimate 'turn off' for men. One case in point is the assurance to readers by *FemaleFirst.co.uk* that: "The biggest turn-off for a guy is when a woman doesn't sound confident when she talks dirty" (which she is expected to do, ultimately to please him). The forumers agree: "unconfidence is not sexy". It is so repulsive that the editorial staff and forumers of women's magazines repeatedly tell women to *never* disclose their insecurities to men. One post from the *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* forum reads: "Okay, no matter how insecure you are NEVER, EVER talk about it! There is nothing more unattractive than a self conscious shag". *SoFeminine.co.uk* further explains that: "He's not your best friend. He's not your therapist. He's not there to reassure you about yourself". Meanwhile women are exhorted to be *permanently* attentive and responsive to men's insecurities (see, especially, Chapter Seven). Even more worryingly, a piece titled '30 Things MEN Wish Women Knew' builds on the premise "Insecurity isn't sexy!" as follows: "A bit of self-dignity and self-confidence

in who you are and what you want is HOT. If you can't respect yourself, he won't respect you".

The seemingly radically woman-friendly new precept "love your body and he'll love it too" is readily put to work against women and for the benefit of men. Such state of affairs is discernible in this agony aunt response to 'My husband ogles at other women!', including "the maid":

> Men are drawn to confidence and if you are feeling a little low about yourself atm [at the moment] then this may be why he is looking at the maid that is more forward and comfortable in her own skin. Remind him why he married you and bring out your best side again!

However, in bringing out their "inner sex goddess", women can (read: will) also get it very wrong. *EnFemenino.com* explains that men: "can feel paralysed before a sexual expert […] Do not forget that his manhood is at stake". Its British sister site *SoFeminine.co.uk* additionally elucidates that: "He wants you to be that innocent princess", not the "uni chick that slept with the entire footie team". Thus, in applying "your miraculous blowjob skills": "He'll hope you're just a blowjob natural – and that's exactly what he should think". This injurious field of contradictions where women are always toxic or failing is perfectly captured by one "quick guide" for preventing men from "running away" in *Grazia.es*. The publication tells women to never: "talk about your flaws". This is *directly* followed by the commandment to also never: "Emphasise your virtues too much".

Notions of female toxicity are additionally present in the recurrent depiction of autocritique and negativity as a natural tendency in women, which is portrayed as profoundly toxic both for themselves and others. The familiar language of 'flaws' and 'battles' departs the corporeal as its (main or more obvious) target to enter the arena of the psyche: "Stop looking in the mirror and bashing your body … Battle the negative self talk". Thus, as Gill and Elias (2014: 185) argue, in LYB messages: "women's difficult relationships to their own embodied selves are both dislocated from their structural determinants in patriarchal capitalism and shorn of their psychosocial complexity". Confidence surfaces as a depoliticised, straightforward self-governing venture of rational choice and active appropriation. In Chapter Seven I showed how the ideological discourse of 'toxic insecurity' not only blames women for feeling unconfident, but also for putting their relationships at risk by bringing silly personal problems, and unjustly affecting their male partners who have no responsibility whatsoever for their well-being (see also above). Increasingly,

magazines and advertisements also accuse mothers for 'passing' body insecurities onto their daughters, and stress peer judgement. One example is hair removal company Braun and its 'ambassador' actor Jessica Alba, who call on women to "express positivity towards each other and stop judgment". Also presented as avid promoters of female confidence are men, as evidenced by recurrent statements like "you say flawed, he says sexy". These dynamics of culpability operate to turn the critical gaze away from patriarchal capitalist culture—not least sexual politics and the violence of the beauty industry—and to constitute women as *pathological*, and so legitimate subject-objects of *intervention*.

Confidence chic is a sinister regime. Despite the apparent promotion of positivity, self-acceptance, and the insistence on insecurities as individual self-sabotage with no external basis (excepting possibly other toxic women), at the heart of LYS/B is a female body that is always already unruly, flawed, and difficult to love. The following extract from *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* exemplifies this contradictory discursive landscape: "Body confidence = great sex. It just takes a mental makeover […] The day of your big date is not the time you realise your legs resemble the Amazon jungle". In addition to humour, the notion of producer-as-consumer that is key to women's magazines (see Chapter Five) also facilitates a level of body shaming that would otherwise more readily risk criticism. By speaking from the position of 'us girls' and 'sisterly honesty', body hate—the prerequisite for the body love business—can be safely maintained. For example, one *Female.First.co.uk* piece consistently written in the first-person plural lists among 'A women's top 20 confidence boosters!' the following (my italics):

> Looking good in a photograph – There is always an apprehension that you will be able to see *that awful spot*, or *your double chin* will appear, or *your arm will look fat* from the side – when one turns out well we are generally surprised!

Magazines continue to endorse—indeed benefit from—the very body hate discourses purportedly under challenge. But in an ideological sleight of hand, it is women/readers who are figured as their toxic (re)producers. This is so pernicious a move that it seems important to examine how the content producers make sense of it. One type of explanation highlights the idea that magazines reflect "life experience as a woman", which includes body hatred, and must generate reader identification. Note below the use of the first person, and how smoothly the subject position of reader flows to that of producer, speaking to the dynamics discussed in Chapter Five:

> When you read, yes you are looking for advice and tips but you're also looking to recognise yourself in what you're reading and find a sense of belonging, and I think that that's a very important part of women's magazines, to write about the real women, not someone who is perfect and who is always confident and happy. (Freelance writer, late 20s, UK)

Taking a more distant approach, a senior professional equally connected talk about "insecurities and foibles" to the attempt by magazines to "create that sense of inclusivity", as well as to deliver humour and light-heartedness. Observe her concluding reflection:

> Magazines are always trying to create that sense of inclusivity of an understanding between the reader and the brand, that, "we understand what you're going through. We are like you". It's insecurities and foibles and the areas where we think we're not matching up, those are very quick and easy ways into people's lives, that kind of thing of, "you're on a date, but your shoe just broke". Also, because it's funny and it's light-hearted and it accesses those points where we all roll our eyes and go, "yeah, me too". If that is the continual message, is that an undermining factor ultimately? (Content director, late 30s, UK)

In fact, for this content director: "Those little throwaway remarks […] become really reinforcing if they're repeated all the time". She thus expressed: "I don't think you can just bat it all away by saying, "but we were reflecting real women's lives"". Moreover, she connected what we might call 'relatable body hate' pieces to "habit", and, importantly, to the commercial imperative of women's magazines:

> Participant: Obviously, it would be <u>totally</u> dishonest to say there aren't commercial pressures that are pushing you to focus your reader's minds on areas of their body that might need improving. But I <u>also</u> think a lot of it is just habit.
> Laura: Yeah, the convention, just following—
> Participant: And also how else do you write about it? If you're writing a feature about cellulite, what are you going to say, "don't worry about it"?
> Laura: "Embrace it".
> Participant: That doesn't sell any pots of cellulite cream.

It is in this (commercial) context that we can locate comments by writers about their texts being changed by editors to sound "more insecure", "more self-doubting" and "concerned about my appearance". One freelancer offered the following example, which is a vivid illustration of the manufacturing of the heterofemininity that is so profitable for LYS/B market. In a personal experience piece about "meeting up with an ex":

> The editor put in that I was really worried about my outfit and that I put on this pair of skinny jeans so that I looked really sexy for him, because I knew he liked a rocker chick, so I put on this pair of black skinny jeans so I looked really sexy and I was really hoping he'd like them. I hadn't written that at all. (Freelancer, mid-20s, UK)

8.4   Injury and blame (re)allocated

Speaking to the general idea that 'women do it to themselves', pervading LYS texts is the claim that: *"The greatest enemy of true self-confidence is comparing yourself"*. Readers are exhorted to instead "just focus on being uniquely YOU!" Notwithstanding the actual intentions of some magazine producers (see next section), this pervasive 'confidence commandment' on the main performs ideological work. It largely functions to support the values of authenticity and singularity of contemporary self-branding culture, and to induce into being feminine entrepreneurs of the self, with for example 'creative fashionistas' and 'trend setters' serving as ideal models. The otherwise intensely promoted culture of comparison (certainly, it is a pillar of the industry) here hampers the competitive drive and work toward maximising unique personal qualities and developing differentiation (for example, in your 'fashion mojo'), hence potentially hampering also the course of consumption. It may encumber too yet another crucial activity publications are resolute women must never discontinue: heterosex. *EnFemenino.com* warns: "Lots of insecurities emerge when we compare ourselves to others, and even though this will affect any area of our life, the most affected one will be the sexual one".

The "no comparison!" confidence commandment also fits within the program of sociocultural desensitisation that confidence chic entails. As exemplary neoliberal technology, it is structured by a violent ethos of self-determination that repudiates notions of social/external constraints, pressures or influences, and contributes to the undoing of social empathy. In the previous chapter, I showed how in the forums female-identified contributors repudiated—even ridiculed—the idea that women may feel jealous of and judge themselves against the women in pornographic material, advising them to rather look to themselves as the problem, even to get "their head checked". This very same idea pervades discussions about women's self-esteem and the media in general: "The media doesn't affect my confidence" and "It's time for girls to stop looking to the media for role models and look to themselves", proclaim *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* forumers. In these threads, young women express a remarkable sense of atomic selfhood. Two examples from the thread 'Body confidence - does the media affect our confidence' are: "My confidence is affected by myself" and "my body confidence is affected by me and me only". As ideal subjects of neoliberalism, and *Cosmo*land, forumers advance self-transformation as the response to body insecurity: "Not much affects me tbh [to be honest]. […] If I didn't like my body, I

would change it".

As Chapter Seven demonstrated with respect to women's 'porn trouble', in the magazine editorial and user-generated content women's—never men's—low self-esteem and feelings of vulnerability are translated into notions of insufficient personal drive, effort and responsibility for her own life. Another illustration is one article titled 'Love yourself more', where *Nosotras.com* exhorts readers to: "Understand that it is we ourselves who construct our destiny and that satisfactions and joys depend upon our own work". In these texts, an enterprising 'madeover' positive subjectivity is promoted as panacea for all ills: "Remember love your self and everything else will follow suit" (*SoFeminine.co.uk*). Against a backdrop of an economic crisis that has especially affected the young and women, *Glamour.es* even declares self-esteem as "the best anti-crisis technique". Following neoliberal logics, under confidence chic the injunction is to deny *external* injury, and to repudiate negative affect. As Samuel Binkley (2011: 382) writes concerning the related 'happiness turn': "the docility of social dependency, and the negative thoughts that lull us into states of torpor, must be actively uprooted and transformed through an infusion of affirming optimism"; thereby activating the "enterprising spirit that is the wellspring of neoliberal subjectivity". According to *SoFeminine.co.uk*: "Only you can help you. Want the truth? You have to stop blaming others for your low self-esteem and accept some responsibility […] Positive mental attitude!" *Cosmohispano.com* has similar advice for Spanish women: "everybody has problems […] but don't then go and self-victimise. Confront problems in an energetic and positive manner". Demonstrating the heteropatriarchal nature of this neoliberal disciplining, comments like the following are never far from view: "If there is something that men hate is the typical woman that complains about everything, that plays the victim", states *Elle.es*. The forumers at *cosmopolitan.co.uk* agree: "There is nothing more unattractive than a nagging whining girlfriend". The 'offense'? Disliking 'lads' mags' (see Gill 2007a).

Arguably due to the current difficulty (see next section) of completely ignoring the cultural injuries inflicted upon women, some are at times acknowledged – but only to be disavowed a few lines later to again blame and responsibilise women, and to incite the labour of positive subjectivity. For example: "Fatphobia is everywhere in the media […] Negative thinking will damage you more than fashion mags". Other editorial features interpellate the by now normative media literate

consumer, with calls to "be critical of these kinds of images", essentially exculpating the media industry. Yet another strategy is to pass on the blame to celebrities, and, particularly, to social media, especially the image-based Instagram. Essentially, this again means blaming women. For example, *Glamour.es* asks "Why don't we end with the tyranny of beauty?", in order to follow by condemning: "some [female] celebrities appear to be determined to make the world think they are absolutely perfect". Of course, the article then embraces the opportunity to 'demonstrate' that this is not the case: "they also have cellulitis, stretch marks or flaccidity" – and to offer readers 'see also' articles like 'The key to losing weight in your 20s, 30s, and 40s'. In an equally hypocritical manner, plastic surgery-promoting *SoFeminine.co.uk* says: "Being body confident is easier said than done […] Especially when we have to contend with celebrities and deal with stunning women all over our social media feeds but we are here to help". During our interview, one British editor-in-chief similarly claimed that "the whole advent of social media has put pressure because everybody on this is projecting their best selves". Against this: "I would like all girls to feel that they're great, that wherever they are, "yeah, that's great". That your best is good enough, and everything about you is normal, and fantastic, and to feel confident". She added: "That's what magazines <u>do</u>. I think it's a very easy path to go with your "magazines are really bad for women". Well, why do women buy them?"

In contrast to the tyranny of silence directed at women regarding claims to external/social injury, magazines readily capitalise on the logics of victimisation or oppression. Especially in the UK interview data[37], there are multiple statements like: "Women's magazines particularly come under a lot of scrutiny, huge amount", "a lot of people are very critical of women's magazines" and "it's sad that women's magazines get a lot of flak". The sector was portrayed as subjected to high levels of "focussed", "aggressive" criticism that is also *unjust*: "Women's magazine bashing is a thing, which is unfair". It was even claimed that: "People want to hate on women's magazines because we're an easy target". Others complained how: "We are really held to account". Furthermore, conjuring an idea of irrational attack, some argued that criticism ensues "no matter what we do". One Spanish editor complained that the magazine gets critiques by readers for "using thin bodies. But then you put a fat girl and get [phone] calls because she is fat and ugly". Less misogynistically, it was

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[37] As discussed in Chapter Two, in the Spanish context women's magazines have received relatively little attention by feminists, both inside and outside of academia.

also noted that: "Women's magazines always have a hard time whenever they try to stand up for women […] because critics will always immediately respond with, "but how can you say that because you are an instrument in making women feel bad about their bodies?"" Typically producers quickly challenged this view, claiming that on the contrary: "Our publication encourages young women to feel good about themselves, that they're great as they are". Somewhat contradictorily, also mobilised to counter claims that women's magazines are detrimental as misguided and unfair was an ideology of 'best'. According to features editor: "It's aimed at making you look and feel and do the best you can". Discussing the perceived magazine 'bashing', one writer protested: "Me and my friends that write for magazines spend a lot of time actually trying to help people with their weak spots". She further explained:

> *Cosmopolitan* has this strapline, 'be the best you can be' or 'helping you be the best you can be', and that's definitely something that I have written about a lot. So it's helping people to identify where they have an area of weakness, whether it's in their confidence, or their CV or in their relationship, and then giving them the knowledge they need to boost that, which is why it's quite annoying when people criticise women's magazines and say they're bad for women. (Freelance writer, mid-30s, UK)

That is, many women's magazine producers fail—or refuse—to recognise the role they play in *constructing* such 'weak spots'. Others spoke of a distinctively *contemporary backlash* against these publications (see also next chapter). For instance:

> There's been a cultural backlash against women's magazines because we are perceived—I would argue incorrectly—as being out of touch, telling women that they're not right, they need to be thinner, healthier, lalala. That we're not funny, that we're not intelligent, and that we're out of touch with this growing new wave of feminism, etcetera. (Features writer, mid-20s, UK)

Against this, magazine producers repeatedly asserted: "We have changed since the 90's and the noughties". More specifically, I was told that: "When we're talking about the shift in women's magazines, at the core of everything we do is […] always trying to enforce positive messages". In particular, for a staff writer: "Women's magazines try to make women more empowered and more confident in themselves and what they do".

8.5 (De)Constructing LYS/B

In general terms, the writers and editors of women's magazines described LYS/B as a shift in focus from 'looking' to 'feeling' good, from 'looks' to 'health' and

'wellbeing'. One staff writer additionally explained: "It's kind of positive reinforcement and "here's how to feel great about what you've got" rather than what you should be having". Currently informing the content production process is the principle that: "We can't give out negative messages". Another account of editorial transformations is:

> The key now with editorial, it's never about losing weight, it's always about being healthy, being happy, being all of those sorts of things. Those are your key words, 'fit'. That's your key word, never 'thin'. I think that that is an awareness, because there was an emphasis on that in the past. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

The turn to LYS was explained as an industry-wide attempt to change under an understanding that "we've made mistakes in the past". One features writer expressed: "I know in the past is like "there's models that are too thin" and "features that aren't very encouraging", but we're trying to address that, and we're trying to change". This conscious "general shift" in the industry was portrayed as a response to claims about the negative effects of magazines upon women's wellbeing and self-regard. Some also stressed a *personal* motivation to effect change rooted in concern about such claims:

> I remember reading a stat when I was first starting out about "women read magazines and afterwards they feel worse about themselves" and I found that really sad and I've always had that at the back of my mind that I wanna go against that. That's what my passion is. (Digital health editor, late 20s, UK)

The development of LYS/B was likewise portrayed as a response to "a lot of backlash the women's magazines in general have received". Cited as a key catalyst in this sense in the UK was feminist media *The Vagenda*:

> [Women's magazines] were basically making women feel bad about themselves, and perpetuating this thing that women should be ashamed, women should try and be better. "You're fat, that's not good enough. You need to be thin, and pretty and perfect in every single way, and be able to afford everything". *The Vagenda* said, "hang on. This is not okay". Then, suddenly, all the women's magazines, because they're in decline anyway, because print is in decline, it was the perfect opportunity to come out and be like, "hey, here's the new way". (Staff writer, mid-20s, UK)

Also highlighted as influential in prompting this "commercial reaction" were popular young feminists challenging self-hatred, comparison with others, silence and isolation as inevitable features of the female experience:

> It's a commercial reaction to a new voice that's coming through women like Caitlin [Moran] and Lena Dunham that says, "there is an alternative life available here. It doesn't have to be a life of self-hatred and comparison to other women and silence in times of distress or marginalisation". (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

Magazine producers additionally spoke about an "awakening" or "backlash" by women in general against beauty standards that were unachievable and thus "alienating them". The culture of "nothing tastes as good as skinny feels" and the "size zero thing […] it just became ripe for a backlash". It was additionally pointed out that: "When the Internet became very mainstream, beauty standards had just become really unattainable". Certainly, the Internet was positioned as crucial for the emergence of LYB/S. This includes the rise of user-generated content, such as independent blogs, which offer women alternative representational regimes. Most repeatedly highlighted both as a key trigger and ongoing watchdog for the "new way" was call-out culture. For instance, one staff writer expressed: "I remember last year a celeb mag did a '10 of the grossest bikini bodies of 2014' and it got such a backlash on Twitter. It was really heartening".

When discussing the development of LYB/S, many magazine producers stressed: "We're all just women feeling the same things everybody else is feeling". For example, one staffer said the following about women's magazines: "A lot of the time they make you feel shit about yourself, especially when you just see loads of really skinny women everywhere and they are all really amazing looking". Indeed, writers often expressed discontent with the images used by publications. One told me that:

> If there is one thing that makes me feel bad about working in women's magazines is the images, specifically the fashion and beauty shoots because no one actually looks like that not even the models. […] Personally, I wanna see something different, I don't want to see lots of skinny models who look nothing like me or any of friends and don't even look like themselves. (Features writer, mid-20s, UK)

Some associated the rise of LYB precisely to this growing understanding: "People have become even in the last 5 years much more sophisticated/cynical about […] glossy media in particular. I think that's due to online as well. Everyone understands how constructed those images are". A media ecosystem saturated with images of women "photoshopped to every inch of her life", the "flat stomach decades", the proliferation of user-generated content, a reinvigorated popular feminism… "all those things created and continue to create an appetite for more realism and more truth telling from media". That is, LYB/S was intimately linked to the turn to authenticity examined in Chapter Five – as evidenced by the pervasive talk about images of 'real women', a strategy epitomised by the Dove campaigns (for a feminist critique, see Murphy and Jackson 2011). Others also connected LYB/S to "a new

wave of healthy eating and wellbeing" and the "general lifestyle of mindfulness". Overall, this "trend that is happening everywhere" was explained as "an amalgamation of everything", "a shift in mentality, a shift in historical context, a shift in so many things that is informing us […] working together" to change media messages, as well as assumptions about audiences:

> It's all these different things, body confidence, feminism, the Internet… all these things have fed into a way that journalists, and all media, have had to think about what they're saying and writing, and what assumptions they're making about their readers. (Content director, late 30s, UK)

Although the producers of women's magazines I spoke to were generally sanguine about this so-called 'new way', there were also a number of critical perspectives. With regard to LYB images, it was noted: "Obviously, as you probably know, real women in magazines are not real". More often highlighted was the trend dimension of LYB/S. For a writer: "It feels quite thinly done and it's just done because it is so current and it's a trend at the moment". In contrast, others claimed: "I don't really care whether it comes from a place of amended morals and compassion, which I think it does, but I don't mind. I mind that they're doing it". Most typically, critical accounts problematised that: "We are a walking contradiction". This particularly involved establishing a clear distinction between images and text. One former writer from Spain condemned: "*Cosmopolitan* has for example the Body Love section […] but then it continues to feature skeletal models in the fashion sections". Another example is:

> Now we're at a weird point where, for example, you've got articles being all 'love yer body!' next to ads of super skinny airbrushed models. Even at [magazine], the stock images we create for articles tend to be of really skinny girls, because the industry is of the opinion that this looks more high brow and fashion-y. Models on the catwalk are pretty much dying of anorexia to sell the clothes that women's mags tell you to buy while also saying you don't need to diet. (Email, staff writer, mid-20s, UK)

Equally, many sex writers expressed disagreement with the images of women ("with big tits and a tan and a flat stomach") that are selected to accompany their words, claiming that "it's feeding mixed messages", such as: "Be confident in your sexuality, but you don't look like any of the women in our magazine". When I asked how this situation is negotiated, one staff writer responded as follows: "I guess that's where I'm just like, "this is my job and I can't"--I don't actually control what pictures are used and even if I voiced some sort of dissent it wouldn't really make any difference". She also stressed that, on the other hand: "I would 100% defend every

word that is written in [magazine] because I think everything we write is inclusive, celebrates women". This was not a unique case where, in contrast to images, words were deemed as no longer problematic. Another staffer at a different publication told me that image modification is one of the "fundamental things that we can't do anything about" and that: "That's something that's never going to change" (see below). She continued: "But in terms of content, I mean in the office, I've had conversation about, "God, do you remember when this was published like years ago?"" Although in the minority, some producers did articulate critiques of LBY/S texts. One freelancer made the following valuable point:

> This whole 'I love my bum' thing, it's great, but it is still an obsession with ones' body. The love of the body issue, it's better than the hate the body issue but it is still wasting a lot of time talking about bodies, dissecting and obsessing. 'Fit not skinny' is still a lot of time and energy and money poured into the upkeep and vanity and look of oneself, whether it is positive or not. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

Another claimed that LYS should be: "Less about ways in which they can cash in on women's insecurities and more about how they can get rid of those insecurities". For some magazine producers this is highly unlikely to occur since: "All the content that is produced in the magazine is assessed through the filter of "what will our advertisers think about this"". Advertisers veto the critique of some issues, for example, plastic surgery and photoshopping, and more generally demand a (mainly beauty and fashion) commodity/service-friendly environment. In this sense, in our discussion about LYB/S a content director highlighted how even if you "dress it up in the nicest possible way": "The basic point of an advert is to make you feel like you need something and feel like you want something. It's very difficult to do that without making people feel like there's something lacking in their lives". She continued:

> I would still defend women's magazines in doing this stuff because it's better that you do something than nothing, but you're not... They're not perfect vehicle for it because there are all those contradictions, and there're all these questions. (Content director, late 30s, UK)

In addition to the constraints posed by advertisers, another fundamental question— product of much contradiction—that emerged in discussions about the possible future of LYB/S pertains to consumer demand. As discussed above, some appealed to consumer demand to explain the rise of LYS: "We are setting the agenda but we are also just reporting on the agenda, we are giving people what they want", a digital health editor stated. However, this discourse was as readily used to justify

photoshopped images and 'look good' and content. When discussing the possibilities of seeing "less perfection, less airbrushing, more varied skin colours and body sizes" in women's magazines one features editor declared: "Unfortunately, you're still fighting against the current a little bit in terms of consumers". Other mobilisations of a discourse of consumer demand to justify an unlikely expansion of LYB/S texts include: "Women still want to know how to be thin. They always will"; and: "The bottom line is women like reading about diets". In this regard, I was repeatedly "reminded" of the following: "We have an editorial and journalistic responsibility to make sure that what we are giving people is going to be ethical and good and positive, but also we are business not charities, we have to sell". As discussed in Chapter Five concerning 'man-pleasy' content, for some professionals the answer to this situation is maintaining the content but changing the *language*. For example: "I don't see why you can't have a diet feature that's called 'feel fucking fabulous in ten days' rather than 'look fabulous in ten days', and it's such a subtle difference but it's huge". Offering a counter-discourse, one staff writer claimed that her magazine is not going to stop photoshopping and shooting with women who are young, thin, beautiful and "probably white": "because the argument would be that we need to create beautiful images and that's what people want to look at. But advertisers want beautiful images and we tell ourselves that's what people wanna look at".

Another aspect that would determine the possible growth of LYB/S in women's magazines, and which is subject to much disagreement among professionals, concerns the relatability-aspiration pendulum. Not all producers consider 'being real' and 'relatable' as 'the way forward' (see Chapter Five). An alternative position contends that although women's magazines "are being more accessible and representative" "there's only so much they can accommodate" due to the very nature of the genre itself. It was argued that "we will never really get to point where it's proper all inclusive" because the woman's magazine "it's about fantasy that you can't achieve". In our discussions about the future and/or possible expansion of the LYB/S approach, many writers and editors highlighted: "At the end of the day, women's magazines are aspirational". This was validated via notions of indulgent escapism, notably the pleasures of "looking at nice things", and especially at "someone beautiful on the cover". As is the case with much of the interview material, these validations of the aspirational travelled fluidly and often ambiguously from the subject position of reader and producer. One example is: "For me I just like

looking at nice things […] if you take away nice images or aspirational features, then you've just got reality. People don't read a magazine for that". Again contrasting those pushing for more representational 'authenticity', one freelancer also claimed: "There is reality everywhere. If I want to see an overweight, sad person with bad hair, I just have to go to my neighbour, or walk down the street, or indeed, sometimes look in the mirror". For many women's magazine producers, another important appeal of this "aspirational world" is the inspiring "blueprint for how you ought to be living". Aspirational features were likewise endorsed as offering valuable guides for how "to obtain the best version of yourself". Speaking about beauty content in particular, one Spanish editor-in-chief declared: "A lot of people would overcome lots of personal problems if they knew how to make the most of themselves". Producers often transmitted these ideas through narratives about to their own experience as readers. This functions as a strategy to strengthen the sense of 'validity' for the claims being made, and to complicate the articulation of critique. One illustration is:

> I don't remember ever thinking, "oh, those women are too skinny and gorgeous and I'm never going to be like that". I aspired to be like that, but then, actually, I wanted to be a *Cosmo* girl and now I <u>am</u> a *Cosmo* girl […] I could achieve it because they told me how to achieve it.

Similarly, one Spanish beauty director said in an email: "For me, beauty journalism doesn't make feel bad, but has precisely served me for the opposite: To love myself more, because I have learned to get the best out of myself". Here, as in the editorial content, there is an inversion of the 'feel good, look good' principle. Moreover, this professional repudiated the LYB approach. She wrote: "I believe it's a hypocrite even counterproductive philosophy: so that fat women (or "curvy", to use the politically correct term) feel good, we now make the thin ones (and many women are so genetically) feel bad". For her: "We women should be intelligent enough to know that we can't get frustrated if we don't have that [body]". To be sure, those magazine producers who defended the aspiration model or element tended to evoke the figure of the responsible, rational, freely choosing and media-savvy consumer. It was repeatedly highlighted that women can "make their own choices" and "informed decisions on their own", that they "aren't dumb" or "stupid" and "have an awareness of what the point of advertising is". Challenging the idea that women's self-regard may be affected by magazine representations, one editor declared: "We're not robots and people are very aware of the marketing that goes into these products and

everyone's really savvy". I was likewise told that: "We all know, it's universally known, that a lot of the people that are on magazines don't really look like that"; and that: "You look at those things and you see that's not real life". Echoing the magazine content, others rebutted critique and avoided responsibility with claims such as: "Women have a natural tendency to feel insecure and to compare themselves with each other".

Most cynically, LYS/B was sometimes described as the result of wanting to promote aspirational elements such as "being skinny", "but in a way that is less dangerous and means we won't get into trouble". In the UK in particular, it was repeatedly claimed that: "There's a danger in women's magazines. You have to be so careful with what you write". Participants even spoke of women's magazine producers "checking themselves in fear of being scrutinised or told off". Interestingly, this never involved, say, higher-level journalists or media watchdogs. It was instead attributed to social media call-outs for "realism" and "honesty" by "literate" and "discerning" readers – and to feminists: "People do self-censor and check themselves because they're so over-analysed by feminists, popular mainstream feminists who have a massive following, the bloody *Vagenda*". As I examine in the next chapter, for some magazine professionals these feminist writers "have got a point" and "have been a force for good" (see also above). However, *The Vagenda* was often derided as judgemental, "ranty", "mean", and "totally and utterly anti-women". This was contrasted to the publications' own approach: "We're just there to celebrate women and be real and make them strong and empower them". Much like the notion of 'empowerment', calls to confidence have been (re)formulated to constitute what one Spanish writer critically called "the amiable face of feminism". Amiable too are the 'Fashion Feminist', 'Career Feminist', 'Cute Feminist', 'Stripping Feminist'… as will be seen in the next chapter women's magazines offer quite a selection to pick from, as long as its not 'Angry Feminist', whose anger—much like her supposedly hairy armpits and hatred of men—is deemed utterly obscene. The glossy happy feminism of individualistic go-getters intensifies the abject state of the "feminist killjoy", alongside other "affect aliens" (Ahmed 2010: 158), and misogynistic figures like the 'nagging girlfriend'. The only legitimised form of female defiance is that against the seemingly toxic self. Negative affect is rapidly silenced, and with that goes the transformative force of collective anger at structural realms of injury and injustice. Under confidence chic anger only flows inward.

8.6   Confidence chic

Confidence chic is an assemblage of diverse—often contradictory—lines of thought and will, acts and counter-acts, interventions and developments ranging from marketing strategies in the fashion-beauty-complex to a call-out culture in the digital mediascape. This transnationally travelling technology of governmentality has roots in the 'state of esteem', a form of citizenship and self-government linking power and subjectivity in modern democracies (Cruikshank 1993). It is also part of the more recent neoliberal turn to happiness, connected to the impact of positive psychology, and, relatedly, the popularity of therapeutic cultures and feel-good self-help industries (Davies 2015). And it is deeply aligned with the postfeminist sensibility (Gill 2007a), evident for instance in the emphasis upon individual empowerment and choice, (hetero)sexiness as power, and a reasserted gender essentialism. But LYS/B in women's magazines is also partly a response to longstanding critiques, for example, for promoting unrealistic beauty standards, being stubbornly 'man-pleasy', judgemental, and, ultimately, harming women. It is often pushed by young female professionals who sympathise with these critiques, claim to feel "passionate and strongly about women's confidence and their self-image", and identify as feminists.

Certainly, unlike the 'psy complex' (Rose 1998), the 'state of esteem' (Cruikshank 1993) or the 'happiness industry' (Davies 2015), confidence chic is explicitly advanced as a *feminist intervention,* and is indeed related to some forms of proliferating feminisms (see also Gill and Orgad in press). Some contest dominant forms of power. Others are embedded within them. In this regard, confidence chic is informed by and implicated in articulating what Rottenberg (2014) calls 'neoliberal feminism', as disseminated by texts such as *Lean In* (Sandberg 2013). This is palpable in the compliancy to corporate values, the interlacing of positive affect and intensified individuation, alongside the concern with (some) gender inequalities and simultaneous avoidance of confrontation and emphasis upon 'internal obstacles'. In the spirit of neoliberalism, confidence chic constructs an active subject wholly responsible for her self-care, enhancing her own well-being, rationally calculating her 'assets', 'maximising her potential' and 'achieving success' – a hyper-

autonomous, freely choosing deeply individuated woman who can thereby more effectively and resiliently meet the demands emanating from contemporary patriarchal capitalism. Such mode of subjectification involves a versatile equilibrium between self-scrutiny and self-appreciation, self-capitalisation and self-realisation, it links disciplining and enthusing the self (Bröckling 2005). These micro-practices of self-government interconnect with the biopolitical management of women via apparatuses of power/knowledge increasingly centred on inserting positive affect within infrastructures of surveillance, measurement, discipline and exploitation (Davies 2015).

When for many the injuries of postfeminist (and gendered 'austerity') culture were becoming insufferable and thus no longer silenceable, power relations are revitalised by translating feminist sentiments into a seductive ethos of individual capacity, realisation, worth, and wellbeing – re-conducting the desire for change toward the self, replacing social emancipatory politics for personal entrepreneurial ventures and "interiorised affective spaces" (Rottenberg 2014: 424); rendering normative *whilst obscuring* new forms of labour and new forms of violence. The inner-directed quasi-feminism of confidence chic not only reconfigures feminism along neoliberal lines but also works 'from within' to countervail the more radical energies in this moment of reinvigorated feminisms – some of which would underscore the necessity for collectivist projects and politicised female solidarity, whilst destabilising gender essentialism. Others might offer intersectional insights into structural domination and privilege. And others still kill joy with their anger at the socio-political forces responsible for women's discontents and insecurities. Sara Ahmed (2010: 216, 61) would usefully encourage us to consider whether this duty to confidence could be about leaving collective "feelings of structure" safely unexplored, and the "narrowing of horizons, about giving up an interest in what lies beyond the familiar". Maybe the way to "give ourselves that well needed boost" (*FemaleFirst.co.uk*) is to *refuse* the imperative to be confident.

Chapter Nine
(POST)FEMINIST SENSIBILITIES

9.1   Introduction

> You've read the papers, you've seen the news; Feminism is back!
> —*FemaleFirst.co.uk*, 2015

After a long period of widespread castigation, repudiation and postfeminist stranglehold, albeit with different levels of visibility and engagement, many countries in the West and beyond have in the last few years witnessed a resurgence of interest in feminism (McRobbie 2015). This involves a diverse and often opposing array of modalities of thought and action, with interventions ranging from bestselling pseudo manifestos by "stadium feminists" (Gill et al. 2016: 17) from the corporate world (e.g. Sandberg 2013) to grassroots campaigning against welfare cuts by young women using creative forms of political intervention (e.g. Sisters Uncut in the UK). One notable constant in this otherwise heterogeneous terrain of voices and purposes is the use of new media technologies and Web 2.0 spaces. Moreover, the Internet is considered as a defining element of what for some evidences a fourth wave of feminism (Cochrane 2013). As Ealasaid Munro (2013: 24) observes, it "works both as a forum for discussion and as a route for activism" at national and international levels (e.g. see Everyday Sexism Project). The Internet, Munro (2013: 23) also emphasises, has been used to create a call-out culture, "in which sexism or misogyny can be 'called out' and challenged […] insofar as they appear in everyday rhetoric, advertising, film, television and literature, the media, and so on". Certainly, the newly invigorated feminism of the 2010s has been notable for focussing in particular on issues to do with the representation or treatment of women in the media and public space (e.g. Banyard 2010; Walter 2010; Bates 2014; and British campaigns No More Page 3 and Lose the Lads' Mags). The Internet additionally offers a valued platform for alternative media *production*, as evidenced by a booming feminist blogosphere, one among many examples being *Feministing: Young Feminists Blogging, Organizing, Kicking Ass* (see Keller 2015). Also key in making the "return of the F-word" (*Glamour.com*) take a transnational (and youthful) dimension has been popular media and celebrity culture. An important moment in this sense was the

performance at the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards by singer Beyoncé to extracts of author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TEDx speech 'We should all be feminists' against an enormous neon sign reading: 'FEMINIST'. That same year, young actress Emma Watson took the UN as a platform to tell men that 'gender equality is your issue too', launching the HeForShe global campaign. At the time of writing, the question 'are you a feminist?' has become a familiar part of media interviews to female—and increasingly male—'A-list stars', with negative answers almost guaranteed a critical headline. On the whole, disrupting the notions of 'pastness' and redundancy, the othering, repudiation and at times hostility of postfeminist media culture (Gill 2007a), feminism has arisen as 'trending topic', a 'cool', youthful, stylish, fashionable and decidedly desirable, even compulsory, self-identification: 'The New Do: Calling Yourself a Feminist', announced *Glamour US* in an emblematic iteration of this in September 2013; only some weeks before I began my doctoral research.

In response to this notable shift I began to monitor the magazine content on feminism and integrated the topic as a vital part of the interviews with producers. These discussions usually began with my question: 'What would you say is the relationship between women's magazines and feminism (today)? It is such a relationship that constitutes the focus of this initially unplanned chapter. Broadly speaking, the magazine-feminism relation takes two main forms. First, women's magazines are an important *object of feminist critique*, as epitomised in the British context by *The Vagenda*. Second, the women's magazines here under study are *sites of feminist discourse*, particularly in the UK. A turning point in this sense was *Cosmopolitan*'s 2012 F Word Campaign, which was allegedly "designed to remind us all about the positive and powerful force of Feminism"[38]. Garnering much more attention was the 2013 Rebranding Feminism project by *Elle*, another Hearst publication, where: "We invited three feminist groups to work with three award-winning advertising agencies to re-brand a term that many feel has become burdened with complications and negativity"[39]. Illustrating the complexity of the field, included among these groups was *The Vagenda*. Baxter and Cosslett explained their decision to collaborate as follows: "We were initially a bit skeptical, mainly because

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[38] From: http://www.cosmopolitan.co.uk/entertainment/interviews/a15250/cosmo-meets-annie-lennox/ (Accessed 11/08/2016)
[39] From: http://www.elleuk.com/fashion/celebrity-style/articles/a2322/elle-rebrands-feminism/ (Accessed 11/08/2016)

of the use of the word 'brand'. But then we considered how bringing gender equality to larger audience [sic] is really what we've always been about"[40]. The result of their collaboration with *Wieden + Kennedy London* is reproduced below in Figure 9.1.

Figure 9.1 *Wieden + Kennedy* and *Vagenda* for *Elle UK,* 2013
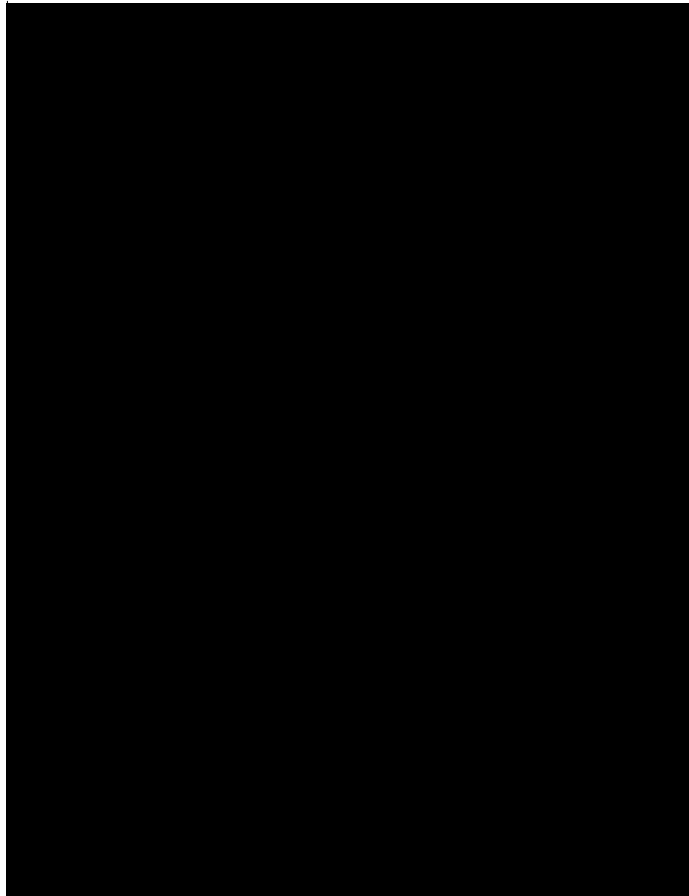
Since the events and publications around the Rebranding Feminism project, *Elle UK* has published two annual special issues explicitly labelled as a Feminism Issue (see Figure 9.2). The first was published in December 2014, and came with a free sample of 'They're Real Push-Up Liner' by cosmetics brand Benefit. It featured Emma Watson on the cover, described as 'the fresh face of feminism'. Among a sea of advertisements (already taking up alone the *first 73 pages of the magazine*) and advertorials, between the pages 193-234 the reader of the first Feminism Issue could find the results of surveys conducted by *Elle*, an interview with (and full-page fashion shoots of) Watson, and a report of men wearing 'This is what a feminist looks like' t-shirt, a venture in collaboration with the Fawcett Society. The remaining

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[40] From: http://vagendamagazine.com/2013/09/so-we-rebranded-feminism/ (Accessed 10/08/2016)

pages are dedicated to the '*Elle* inspire list', made up of women from a diversity of domains, although featuring most prominently are fashion, celebrity, media, the arts and the corporate world. The cover of the November 2015 Feminism Issue is graced by actress Carey Mulligan under the heading 'The new radical', due to her *playing* a suffragette in a Hollywood movie. On page 186, editor-in-chief Lorraine Candy explains that while the former issue focussed on the HeForShe campaign and "urged men to join the equality conversation. This year, we've decided to celebrate the power of women as a collective". This call to "female solidarity" by *Elle*, along with its #MoreWomen (at the top) campaign, is a commendable intervention, which however loses much of its force by being reduced to twelve image-dominated pages within a 330-page publication. Nonetheless, *Elle UK* has self-proclaimed as a "game changer with regard to bringing the new feminism to young women"[41]. Such a commitment even encompasses a corporation-wide dimension. Soon after her appointment as chief executive of Hearst Magazines UK in 2014, Anna Jones launched Hearst Empowering Women, an online and events initiative that "embraces everyday feminism and celebrates the lives, aspirations and achievements of British women" (*Empowering.hearst.co.uk*).

Figure 9.2 Feminism Issue December 2014 and Feminism Issue November 2015, *Elle UK*

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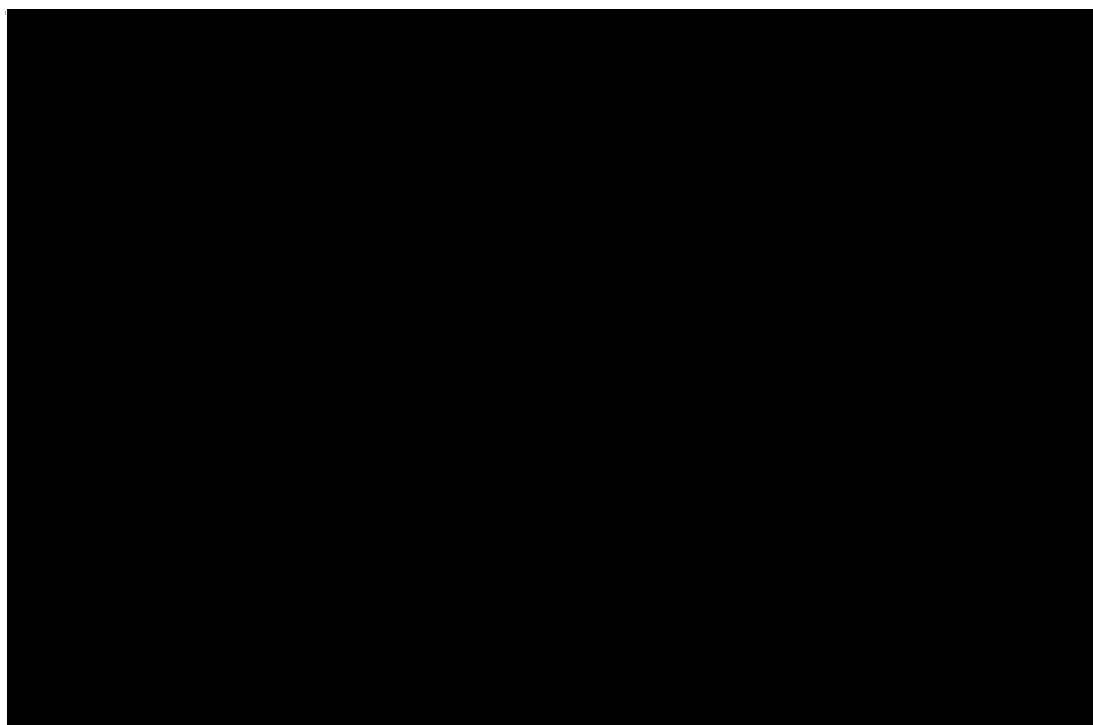
[41] From: http://empowering.hearst.co.uk/be-inspired/inspiring-interviews/editors-interview-lorraine-candy-elle/ (Accessed 10/08/2016)

While these initiatives are particularly noteworthy, all the other publications in my sample, including the Spanish ones albeit to a lesser extent, organise events, launch campaigns and most certainly pepper its pages with talk about feminism. This ranges from a blaze of celebrity news-oriented coverage—e.g. 'Beyoncé talks about marriage, fame and feminism' (*Glamour.es*)—to the much more rare 'Top 10 Feminist Books You HAVE To Read' (*SoFeminine.co.uk*). I collected 67 such magazine articles for in-depth analysis, in addition to *Elle UK*'s print Feminism Issues, and an assortment of supplementary material including Hearst Empowering Women webpages, media interviews with the editors-in-chief, and the material by *The Vagenda*. Still, in this chapter I principally attend to the interviews with producers, in light of the valuable and unique insights these offer to current understandings about the complex intersections of young/youthful femininities, mediated feminism, and consumer and popular media cultures. As this research progressed, a number of feminist scholars have published inquiries into the "mediated feminist landscape" (Banet-Weiser 2015a) and "the new cultural life of feminism" (Gill 2016b) or its "new luminosity in popular culture" (Gill and Orgad in press). This chapter makes a novel contribution to this growing debate not only by examining in detail one notably involved cultural space—the young woman's magazine—but by bringing to the conversation the voices of those very individuals doing the mediating, providing such a luminosity. I begin by exploring the range of ways participants dis/identified themselves and the(ir) publication with feminism, dividing the discussion into UK and Spain-specific subsections due to significant cultural contrasts. The second section then turns to the terrain of 'the new'. It first examines claims about a "new wave of women's journalism", connected to a "cultural shift"; and then looks at how the 'new feminism' was defined, endorsed, as well as critiqued. Next, I address the diverse but patterned manners in which producers rebutted feminist critiques of the magazine content, with a strong focus on *The Vagenda* and thus the UK context. The last analysis section traces the (im)possibilities of a continued and even increased integration of feminism within women's magazines. By way of conclusion, I offer a critical commentary of dominant (re-)configurations of (post)feminism currently present within, and, more concerningly, *beyond* the confines of the woman's magazine.

9.2 Feminist (dis)identifications

9.2.1 (Dis)Identifying with feminism: UK

Dramatically reversing a well-documented feature of postfeminism—namely the repudiation of a feminist identity (Scharff 2012)—in the UK most research participants defined themselves, the *glossierati* and women's magazines as "utterly 100% feminists". There was a general tendency to portray female journalists or media professionals as particularly inclined to upholding such an identity. For instance:

> All of us would call ourselves feminist, especially women in magazines. We all work in the media, we're all very current, modern, informed, intelligent people so for us feminism is like a given. (Digital health editor, late 20s, UK)

This open self-identification with feminism by journalists was often framed as a distinctively contemporary phenomenon. Due to the 'return of the F-word', "everyone would readily identify themselves as feminists now", said a writer. Some spoke of learning about feminism through their recent work: "As a journalist, especially in the past year […] working in women's magazines really opens up your eyes to all aspects of feminism". More recurrent, however, were accounts about the previous impossibility of claiming this identity and covering feminist issues. For example:

> Do you know what most of the journalists you're working with, female journalists, are? Not only feminists, but really strong feminists. They get frustrated about some of the content that they have to produce […] and want to push feminist issues and have always wanted to, but it was seen as quite unfashionable until recently. (Features editor, mid-20s, UK)

Further to the more predictable expressions of admiration for public figures like Emma Watson, there were a number of endorsements of specific feminist authors. Two examples are: "I've read *Full Frontal Feminism* by Jessica Valenti, and I really, really like her" and "I agree with everything Naomi Wolf said about the beauty in *The Beauty Myth*". Also mentioned in these discussions about feminism was Germaine Greer, with the participant observing: "I have an academic understanding, plus a longstanding personal interest in it". One news editor even spoke of entering the industry *because of her feminism*, on the basis of a conviction that: "The best way to change women's magazines is to work within them". She recalled:

> I had a media studies teacher in 6th form who gave us a lot of critical theory and told us how to apply theory […] from that I learned the very, very basic feminist theory, like Laura Mulvey […] and from that I thought, "okay, the only way to change it is to

work within". (News editor, late 20s, UK)

As I noted in Chapter Four, several British participants were familiar with the feminist literature on gender and the media, and a number had even conducted projects on women's magazines during their undergraduate studies. Another example is (see Section 9.4.2 on the discourse of change):

> I used to hate *Cosmo*, because despite their kind of aspirational tone, it always felt that their message was more "you can be better by being thinner" or "you can be better by learning how to please your man". I did a lot of studying on this at university for my dissertation. (Staff writer, mid-20s, UK)

Therefore, most were very aware of how my seemingly straightforward question was, in fact, "loaded":

> Laura: What would you say is the current relationship between women's magazines and feminism?
> Writer: That's such a loaded question. What is that documentary? It's your required viewing for your first day of women's studies, or any sort of media and women course. It's called, *Miss Representation*? I've seen that so many times. (Freelancer writer, mid-20s, UK)

By far the most recurrent response to my question was, as one staff writer expressed it in an email: "We're all in the same boat – we're all feminists". Permeating the UK interview material are high modality claims like: *"*There is, obviously, a sense of feminism in all women's lifestyle magazines, of course"; and: "There is a huge sense of feminism in every women's lifestyle magazine". Quite often these declarations were not followed by any specification about the nature or content of such feminism. When asked to specify how feminism is understood within publications, participants explicated that magazines work to "inspire" and "champion other women". Another prevalent claim was: "We're celebrating women". "They view it as empowering for women, helping women to become stronger", a staff writer also clarified. The postfeminist sensibility that informs these answers is particularly palpable in the following distancing move: "Even if you're not there with your unshaven armpits, but our tone is just feminist because it's supportive". Indeed, this was another common designation: "They're feminist in terms of they're supporting women". Indicating the 'emptying' of the concept even more, one features writer responded: "The idea is that feminism is not be derogatory to women". Speaking to the 'turn to authenticity', the magazines' feminism was additionally defined in terms of: "We're there to be real". Again, as discussed in Chapter Five, this can potentially mean very little in terms of *politics*.

Repeatedly singled out in these discussions about the intrinsic link between feminism and women's magazines was *Cosmopolitan*. "We're a feminist magazine", *Cosmopolitan* staff established. Even those working for other publications explained how: "That is part of their brand DNA from Helen Gurley Brown and *Sex and the Single Girl* onwards. They were part of that history, particularly in America, of empowerment and emancipation" (see Chapter Two). Gurley Brown was described as a "feminist icon" and "very pioneering, especially when it came to sex and relationships". At *Cosmopolitan* it was highlighted that: "We've always campaigned for women's rights and always campaigned to make women feel that they should put themselves first and that a man is never more important than they are". Rather, an "it's always about doing it for yourself" rationality was presented as key to the "undercurrent of female empowerment" in these publications. In terms of campaigning, one *Cosmopolitan* professional emphasised:

> We have campaigned for the rights of rape victims. We've campaigned for equal pay. We've done lots of work with domestic violence, charities. We have got a day of remembrance for victims of honour killings. We have done lots of work to try and battle the whole issues of eating disorders. There are so many campaigns that this magazine has done for the last 43 years. (*Cosmopolitan* professional, UK)

On the basis of this understanding, there were several protestations like: "*Cosmo* has always been a feminist magazine and a lot of people really underestimate it as a feminist magazine". Moreover, for one *Glamour UK* professional: "It's frustrating when people always hold us up as prime examples of people who are failing feminism. It's upsetting, because it's like actually the work we do, how we work is feminist" and "actually those voices are within our magazines". She expounded:

> We have a lot of feminist voices who write in women's magazines, so someone like Zoe Williams in the *Guardian* writes a lot of features for *Glamour*. We have contributions from people like Caitlin Moran and Laurie Penny… someone like Victoria Coren has a column in *Elle*. So actually those voices are within our magazines. We tackle a lot of feminist issues. *Grazia* have their 'pay gap' campaign. We've got the 'sexism in sport' campaign. We write about sexual assault, attitudes in universities. And, also, a women's magazine office is one of the most feminist places you could possibly work. I'm surrounded by women, I have creative control or financial control or business control. It is really empowering! I sometimes think, "oh, I don't know if I could work with lots of men again". A women's magazine is a really empowering place to work. (*Glamour* professional, UK)

In sum, there was a broad consensus among British producers that women's magazines are feminist spaces. While there were critical accounts of the 'new feminism' (see 9.3), and magazines more generally, in the UK this did not translate into outright contestations of the feminist nature of magazines. Only in one occasion

a British participant categorically rejected an understanding of publications as feminist, due to their commercial nature:

> I wouldn't say that any women's magazine is a feminist publication because you can't be a feminist publication if you have higher priorities than feminism, and every magazine does. Their priorities are selling copies and getting money from advertisers. (Content director, late 30s, UK)

Women's magazines were not defined as feminist spaces in two other interviews. Described instead as "just pro-women", publications were validated as technologies for the production of 'best' selves, and interestingly according to the very same features that most industry insiders associated with feminism, such as 'championing women' ("or trying to"). It is noteworthy how both cases include a defensive move ("only a good thing"; "why would anyone buy…?") in response to my question: 'What would you say is the current relationship between women's magazines and feminism?'.

> Women's magazines are always trying to get the best out of women. They're trying to enable women to get the best of their relationships, the best of their jobs, and the best out of themselves, and I think that that's only a good thing. (Staff writer, late 20s, UK)

> Most of them are championing women or trying to, anyway, trying to celebrate their achievements and then, at the same time, help them live the life they wanna live. If it was negative, I don't think anyone would buy it. Why would anyone buy a magazine if it were making people feel bad? So, in terms of feminism, I'd say it's just pro-women, basically. (Freelance writer mid-30s, UK)

This type of distancing of women's magazines from feminism—whether underpinned by postfeminist repudiation or, on the contrary, feminist critique—is what I had expected to encounter in the interviews with producers, and indeed found to characterise the talk of the Spanish journalists.

9.2.2 (Dis)Identifying with feminism: Spain

As discussed above, the interviews with British producers are notable for establishing a general consensus regarding the magazine-feminism relation, summarised by a staff writer as follows: "How we work, what write about, who we get to write for us… We are all feminists". Contrastingly, the data from Spain constitutes a divided discursive landscape. Here participants tended to either articulate more forthright postfeminist logics or more politicised understandings of feminism than in the UK. In a textbook postfeminist manner, many Spanish

journalists declared: "Feminism had its *raison d'être,* but it no longer has it". The discourse of 'pastness' was often intertwined what Elisabeth Kelan (2009) calls 'gender fatigue'. As critics of postfeminism have shown, these discourses serve not only to 'undo' feminism (McRobbie 2009) but also to render gender inequalities unspeakable (Gill 2011). The following evinces such ideological work. In a context where women have been most affected by the economic crisis and recession and earn 24% less than men[42], for a number of women's magazine producers: "It feels like antiquated to talk now about the equality of women at work. It feels silly to even have to talk about it". According to another writer: "There is no need to be defending constantly the value of women. Yes, of course we are worthy, the same as men". A number of participants asserted that feminism not only "sounds old", but is also "a total drag" and "a topic that bores me to death". Although less recurrent, another repudiatory move in the Spanish interviews, and which is absent in the UK data, concerns the depiction of feminism as equivalent to machismo. One writer manifested:

> I don't believe in feminist or machist. It's in the very word. I've often talked about this with friends, colleagues. If you are machist it has a negative connotation. Meanwhile 'feminist' appears to even have a positive one. Why? It's the same thing. (Freelance writer, late 20s, Spain)

Whether rooted in 'genuine' ignorance or anti-feminist strategising, it is worrying how these ideas are expressed without any hesitance or even the need for any sort of disclaimer. This indicates the existence of a broader socio-cultural context that sanctions such ideas/narratives, as implied by her mention of discussions with "friends, colleagues". My interviews with producers, however, show that not all her colleagues agree. Even *Cosmohispano.com*, which is among the most problematic titles in my sample, states in an article triggered by the film *Suffragette*: "While many of us know what feminism is, others continue to mix the sheep and the goats thinking that feminism is the opposite of machismo".

Epitomising the level of disparity in Spanish interview data, one writer even spoke of resigning her job at a magazine *upon encountering feminism* in a class on gender and the media during her journalism undergraduate degree. This interview made a fascinating and heartening case for the potentials of feminist education. The talk of this inspiring young woman is worth quoting at some length. She said:

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[42] From: http://www.elmundo.es/economia/2016/02/19/56c7021a46163f7f788b45d7.html (Accessed 20/08/2016)

I had always defended the equality between men and women. Like in general terms, equal pay. But I had believed the tale that everything has been achieved. For me, to join that class means… what they say about putting on the violet glasses. To begin to see, and say, "my God, I was so deluded, I can't believe it". […] It's very easy to defend equality. It's very easy to establish, "look, in this business a man earns more than a woman", and to say "this is wrong". It is much more complicated to ascertain structural violence, the 'micromachismos', those small gestures, those small actions disseminated precisely by women's magazines and which contribute to the persistence of this whole system. The moment I join this class I begin to see all these things, and I begin to additionally see that the place where I work is a reproducer of all this, is a machine of this system. (Ex-staff writer, early 20s, Spain)

Whilst unique in her eloquent account, and speedy decision to quit her job, which is particularly admirable in the challenging Spanish context, this writer was not alone in her problematisation of women's magazines (nor in her decision to thereby leave the sector). In Spain, many producers maintained that there exists a "huge gap between feminism and women's magazines" – to the extent that some were left "speechless" by my question:

> Laura: What would you say is the relationship between women's magazines and feminism?
> Ex-editor: You leave me speechless. All women's magazines should be feminist. That's not actually the case. We are very far from feminism. (Ex-web editor, late 30s, Spain)

Another experienced former industry insider (currently executive editor at a men's magazine) went as far as to claim that feminism and women's magazines are "antagonic, even enemies". She explained:

> They are antagonic, even enemies. There is a bad relationship that should be revised, related to those formulas that have worked for years based on distancing models of femininity from reality. The use of Photoshop, the frivolisation of women as frenzied consumer or as objects of consumption… (Ex-deputy editor, mid-40s, UK)

My question also met indications of the difference between feminism and femininity: "What is the relationship...? I could say that, well, small steps are taken. But feminine is not the same as feminist, not at all". I was also asked back several times: "What do you understand by 'feminism'?" Some participants observed that their publications were not seeking a feminist identity. One writer explained: "There may be more feminist information, there may indeed be clearly feminist people in the team, but on the whole there is no attempt to identify the magazine with feminism". Others did note a feminist self-identification on behalf of their publication, to then distance themselves from it. For example: "I consider myself a feminist and I think that my magazine identifies as feminist, though I don't know if from my own feminism I can consider it as such". In this spirit, many were critical of the

engagements with feminism on behalf of the brands they work for, which were perceived as hypocritical or empty of any real commitment. Two examples are:

> On International Women's Day we all raise our fists, do actions, and give away a wristband, but in actual practice patterns continue to be repeated that aren't feminist whatsoever. (Fashion and lifestyle editor, mid-20s, Spain)

> The day of domestic violence you become the most feminist of all, you write lots of articles, throw around thousands of statistics, you wear your pink ribbon, but then in the day to day you don't try to <u>liberate women</u>, not at all. (Online editor, late 20s, Spain)

When I told Spanish journalists that those working for the very same brands in the UK *did* define the(ir) magazines as feminist, they were often surprised. Once more, I was asked back: "What do they see as 'feminism'?" A few proceeded to make comments along the lines of: "If feminism is simply advocating for women, then us too". Others followed with a more critical note, such as: "You may think that it's a bit feminist to talk openly about sex. For me dealing with these issues would entail, yeah, sexual liberation, but also the liberation of women in society and work". Here, then, 'liberation' is used again in the Spanish data, conjuring the more politicised or radical forms of feminism, and a term that in the UK material is either absent or associated to feminist positions that are rejected or positioned as obsolete (see next section). Some Spanish producers contested the approach to feminism in British publications:

> I don't know what magazines you have analysed in the UK, but *Grazia* or *Glamour UK* advocate for feminism quite a lot… they also advocate for the false feminism. Like showing Cara Delevingne and Rihanna, all super feminist. Beyoncé also, raised fist. I don't think they really are, actually. (Fashion and lifestyle editor, mid-20s, Spain)

In direct contrast, others expressed admiration toward the relationship with feminism of magazines in other countries, being particularly aware of publications in the US, UK and, to a lesser extent, France. Speaking about the UK context, one editor-in-chief related: "The hashtag was ElleFeminism, with Lorraine Candy who is the editor-in-chief. They even made a t-shirt by Whistles which was 'This is what a feminist looks like'. That, in Spain, *forget about it*" [English in original]. This impossibility was explained in terms of: "We are a different society, with different customs". More specifically, several journalists declared that: "To express an opinion, to be for or against something, doesn't happen in Spain". Many others similarly told me that in comparison to the UK, in Spain: "There is certainly less intention to

commit oneself. Of maintaining the status quo"; and: "Editorial departments are much more conservative in the sense that they do not want to get their hands dirty". Also highlighted was "self-censorship", both in terms of wanting to avoid "getting into trouble" with the editors/directors, and also more generally in terms of "let's not get into a mess". This was often granted as "very contradictory" since producers themselves are interested in the very issues they are deciding not to cover. One such issue mentioned a few times was the abortion law proposed by the conservative government:

> When the issue about the abortion law came out there were many people who were truly indignant. I'm talking about directors, editors. And in the end nothing was done, because of that self-censorship, like an attempt not to commit oneself too much, politically. (Online beauty writer, mid-20s, Spain)

Another recurrent 'Spain is different' discourse revolves around the ideas that: "There is still such a retrograde mentality"; and that: "We are still a very machist country". Many followed by specifying: "Women themselves are the sexist ones". Some referred to consumers, while the more critical voices pointed also to the sexism of many women within the sector. The discourse of sexist women is also discernable in the editorial content, which again demonstrates different orientations. In applying the familiar magazine formula of resposibilising women, this time for sexism, some magazine content carries misogynistic undertones. *Grazia.es* offers an alternative approach: One 2016 article deals with "internalised misogyny"—"the oppressed exercising their own oppression among themselves"—and critically examines competition between women, and the idea that "this is part of our nature", with respect to a "patriarchal society like ours" and a "brutal emotional neoliberalism".

Regardless of personal stances on feminism, two broadly agreed upon understandings in the Spanish data are that: "Many women don't like the label 'feminist'"; and that: "Feminism has turned almost into a scourge to avoid". In the interviews, I was repeatedly assured that publications are "scared" or "won't dare" to identify—at least "so openly"—with feminism due to "the historic burden that the term has in Spain". The material is saturated with almost identical statement like: "The label 'feminist' has a very bad name in Spain"; and: "The term 'feminist' in Spain has a very bad reputation". It was equally claimed that feminism "has many negative connotations in our country", "gets a bad press", "is pejorative" and "much reviled". For some magazine producers, feminism is "wrongly understood" because: "The image that women have about a feminist woman is that of a feminazi, like the

one from Podemos that said, "I'm an anarchist, dike, lesbian and feminazi""[43]. Many others similarly expressed disapproval with the ways in which in Spain "it seems that to be feminist you have to burn your bra, and go against men" and "not shave". For these reasons, magazine producers argued, to "self proclaim as a feminist is still hard", and it "could cause more rejection than interest". According to one very experienced writer who self-identified as feminist: "The previous feminism was a feminism of attack, of "I am a feminist and so I attack men", and a bit like a tomboy, of a woman that imposes herself and is aggressive". Thus, even when a supposedly pro-feminist position was being articulated, the negative connotations of not adhering to normative femininity and of upholding more radical political positions were not only left uncontested, but actually reinforced (see also next section).

When appeals to consumer demand/disinterest are made to justify editorial decisions, these are also often a result of the inclinations or views of producers themselves. That is, there are industry insiders who reject feminism and its integration within women's magazines (for the case of the UK, see 9.5). Note in the first quote below the reduction of feminism to a "cliché", and the unashamed declaration "I can't be bothered" (with it) in the second:

> I would get rid of all those clichés and simply value women and that's that. Be proud of women, love women, love everything that surrounds the feminine, and work toward that. I think that's more than enough. (Freelance writer, late 20s, Spain)

> For me, feminism as such, I can't be bothered. If you talk to me about neofeminism maybe it attracts me a bit more but not even. I think we should find another more interesting term because to me that one sounds out-dated (Ex-managing director and current communications consultant, late 30s, Spain)

Further to the rejection of feminism by many members of staff, venturing into something like *Elle UK*'s Rebranding Fºeminism project is deemed too risky commercially due to the characteristics of the Spanish market. For example, one editor-in-chief who admired the initiatives by *Elle UK* highlighted that British publications work within "a more powerful market where they could afford losing an advertiser" (see Chapter Five for the same justification for the lack of representations of lesbian desire). However, she proceeded to observe how: "Everybody has jumped on the bandwagon a bit because ultimately it is a current topic that everybody is interested in". Others similarly pointed to shifting cultural perceptions: "There has been a period during which feminism has been reviled, and we are seeing a series of

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[43] Podemos is a Spanish left-wing political party founded in the aftermath of the 15-M Movement.

renown women talking about it, and it is beginning to be perceived a little bit more positively". Nonetheless, an editor-in-chief explained, most Spanish publications are still "careful about the term 'feminist', being closer to the label of 'female empowerment'". One director similarly noted that many "adorn" the term: "'Chic feminism' or they talk about women's empowerment, or a new wave of feminism… turn it around a bit because it was a pejorative term". For example, it was pointed out how: "At *Elle* we usually talk about 'new feminism'".

9.3 (De)Constructing the 'new feminism'

9.3.1 A cultural shift

The previous section has shown how many British participants established a longstanding—even intrinsic, as in the case of *Cosmopolitan*—connection between women's magazines and feminism. This section examines how it was also connected to a "new wave of women's journalism", associated with a "cultural shift" where feminism "is not a dirty word anymore". On the contrary: "Feminism is obviously finally coming to full force". As such, one British writer added: "That's a massive consideration for everyone". Both in the UK and in Spain, repeatedly highlighted as key to "bringing feminism into the mainstream" were popular culture figures, events and products from the US. Notable among these were Beyoncé and her MTV awards performance, Emma Watson and her UN talk, and Lena Dunham and her TV show *Girls*. British journalists also made references to national feminist activism, for example: "All these groups like No More Page 3 and Everyday Sexism". Identified as absolutely central to stimulating the 'cultural shift' in this context was the publication of the 2011 book *How To Be a Woman* by British journalist Caitlin Moran. According to a writer in her mid-twenties, Moran was able to: "Bring what used to be a very scary, I think for a lot of them [young women] it's still a very scary, inaccessible conversation into the mainstream and made it fun and silly and caring and welcoming, which is feminism". It was also explained how:

> She had a massive Twitter following and then she launched that book, which is a sort of feminist manifesto/account of a life lived with feminism, and became a huge hit partly because she had such a massive online following already. There were other books and other people in that group and in the wake of that, but it felt like it was a cultural shift going on. (Content director, late 30s, UK)

The level of success of Moran's book meant that: "You couldn't ignore that as a publication catering to young women". Many also noted: "Even if only for commercial reasons".

> It's dragged public voices and publications into engaging with it [feminism], if only for commercial reasons. If only because they're like, "oh, here's this feminist who everyone's talking about and who everyone loves. She's selling loads of books. We need to channel that as well". (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

In this sense, I was often reminded that, as an *Elle UK* insider put it: "Every decision has got something commercially minded behind it". Magazine producers likewise pointed to "what the media is about", namely: "It's always trying to do the new thing and be the first one to do it"; and: "The media by nature want to cover things that are current and up to date and the things that people are talking about". A content director similarly explained:

> Obviously, magazines very actively and consciously filter the wider world. They're trying to distil what's going on and what your readers might be thinking about into the most prescient and relevant features every month. It's certainly not a thing that magazines have just gone, "hey, you guys should know about feminism". I would say it was more the other way. (Content director, late 30s, UK)

Thus, for many producers magazines have recently turned to feminism because: "Feminism and love your body and all that sort of stuff has become quite popular and trendy and of the moment". Two more examples are:

> Everybody's talking about feminism at the moment. It's on everybody's lips. It's the first question that celebrities get asked these days and it's just very of-the-moment. That's probably why I would consider it to be so hugely covered, because it's such a huge topic. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

> In order for the big players to be covering it, it's got to have already built up a lot of momentum for them to even register on their radar to cover it. They cover it because it's news, because it's popular. (Former writer, late 20s, UK)

The two participants quoted above were condemning of the magazines' treatment of feminism as a trend. Some, by contrast, evidenced this approach, which pervades the editorial content, in their talk: "Now there's a massive trend for it, to be really empowering for the reader".

Producers explained that women's magazines also felt the need to deal with feminism "because of the pressure, because of the competition". One British writer told me: "When it's about women and it's for women and it concerns women it would be crazy for a women's print magazine not to pick that up, especially if they're hoping to keep up with their competitors and with online". With regard to the

latter, it was highlighted that feminism "is online everywhere" and especially in "all the social media". Participants also emphasised how with "social media and the Internet […] things can gain ground a lot more quickly". This means that the editorial inclusion of feminism additionally emerges as a necessity or obligation so as to avoid the "PR disaster" that can follow from getting 'called out' on social media:

> Twitter... mainly Twitter, but all social media, is very female focused and it's mostly female users. If you piss off a huge chunk of Twitter users, they will let you know. That's a PR disaster. That influences a lot of what people are producing. (Features editor, mid-20s, UK)

A number of women's magazine producers, including staffers, explicitly welcomed these practices by female users. For example, one British staff writer in her twenties celebrated: "They [women's magazines] are pretty much all outwardly feminist, or dealing with conversations about feminism, which I think is really cool. Because if they're not, then they get called out on it thanks to social media". In addition to magazines themselves, their commercial partners are also very keen to avoid a PR disaster – as well as to appear to be 'with the times', and to commercially benefit from shifting cultural sensibilities. One director explained: "Advertisers, they're in the same milieu as everyone else. They can see which way the wind is blowing. They know that it's important for them to be on this bandwagon". At present, a features editor explained, "buzzwords" like "female empowerment […] are fashionable, and the advertisers find [them] a turn on rather than a turn off". This then "legitimises" the content that "we always wanted to write". She emphasised: "It's not that there was suddenly more female writers wanting to write feminist stuff. They've always wanted to write feminist stuff and there's always been feminist writers working in mainstream media". In a similar manner, after noting all the pressures and commercial interests aforementioned, several others keenly added comments like: "Also, the content producers, they're young women as well or mid-30s/late 30s. These are the things that we're interested in as well". For a content director:

> I think it would be too cynical to suggest that you've got glinty-eyed robots sitting in a room going, "oh, feminism, that's a thing. We're going to put that in magazines", without caring about it at all. Once you start drilling down into it, you get actually to a group of individuals and personalities in a room who are making these decisions. (Content director, late 30s, UK)

In the same vein, the idea for the *Elle UK* rebranding feminism project was explained as follows:

It wasn't like, "now we're going to do feminism". It was 4 or 5 people from the team sitting in the room talking about, "what could we do?" That was the idea that came up and the one that people responded to the most, but if that had happened on a different day, with different people in the room. Who knows?

On the whole, in explaining the 'turn to feminism', (principally British) producers painted a multi-causal picture, speaking of "a complete package" where everything is "going on at the same time. It's all bouncing off each other". But what does this 'new' or 'rebranded' feminism consist of or look like?

9.3.2 (Post)feminism (re)branded

> We're on a mission to reclaim the word.
> —*Elle UK*, 2014

Especially or at least more explicitly in the UK, women's magazines are on a "mission" to "reclaim the word" away from "complications and negativity" through a "re-brand" (*Elle UK*). As implied by the term 're-brand', and corroborating the concern of critical commentators (e.g. Kord 2013), much magazine content establishes feminism as a commodity – to the extent of becoming something to 'spice up' ones' week, as in the *SoFeminine.co.uk* article 'Monday To Friday Feminism: How To F Up Your Week':

> In case you haven't noticed, the whole feminist movement is making a big comeback and that means it is time to clarify what being a feminist actually means, and how you can incorporate it into your daily routine… spice up your week with some feminism.

Feminism "actually means", women's magazines tell readers, wanting the "equal treatment of men and women" (see below). There is great consensus on this designation, with the editorial data presenting a uniform discursive landscape. Also evident in the quotes that follow is the adamant emphasis upon the 'simplicity' or 'straightforwardness' of adopting a feminist identity:

> If you believe in equality, man, woman, boy or girl – and it really is this simple – you are a feminist. (*Elleuk.com*)

> Feminism is having a RISE, and it's crucial every woman knows what it is. Do you want equal treatment of men and women? Yes? Then you are a feminist, welcome along. (*Cosmopolitan.co.uk*)

> Ultimately, feminism is about equality of the sexes, a cause we think everybody needs to get behind. (*SoFeminine.co.uk*)

In the very same way, I was told in the interviews that (the 'new') feminism: "It's

about you deserve everything a man deserves and that's that. It's simple". This could be seen as a welcome attempt to de-stigmatise feminism and to create a popular majority supportive of the "cause", albeit if understood in very narrow liberal terms. Furthermore, as Banet-Weiser (2015a) writes: "The marketing, or commodifying, of feminism does allow feminism to circulate in culture in some ways, to be then taken up in different ways, with different goals". If nothing else, the mediated popular feminism of women's magazines encourages "an opening of space and mind" (Banet-Weiser 2015a) for young female readers and journalists. Yet, as Banet-Weiser (2015a) also observes, "commodifying feminism is clearly a neutralization tactic". Besides, in much of the work and talk of women's magazine producers the endorsement of feminism goes hand in hand with a project of disavowal and boundary marking. One example is when *SoFeminine.co.uk* explains to readers how with the "New Wave Feminist": "Their focus is less on female liberation, and more on gender equality". Also evident in the data is an effort to reconfigure feminism according to postfeminist sensibilities. One British editor explained her magazine's effort as follows: "It's very much about re-branding the idea that feminism means equal rights for women. That's what it means. It doesn't mean I don't shave, it doesn't mean I hate men". Contrariwise, keeping with postfeminism, the 'new feminism' of women's magazines revolves around an unabashed celebration of normative femininity and *loving* men. In outlining their 'rebranded feminism', magazine producers highlighted the allegedly new principle that "you can be feminist and love fashion with a passion and love beauty", "waxing and high heels", want to know "how to have good sex" and "to put on make up right". One *Cosmopolitan UK* professional likewise explained: "We're trying to say, "look, you can be a bloody feminist and like wear shoes and care about makeup and want a boyfriend"". As in the editorial content, in the interview material the sentence 'you can do x and be a feminist' comes to constitute a sort of mantra and a catchall truism. It is used below to avoid coming to uncomfortable conclusions, stirred in this case by a sound academic knowledge of feminist media studies:

> I fully appreciate that by writing about waxing and high heels you are perpetuating an image of what is feminine, and what is an ideal version of femininity, and what women should aspire to, and what men should want. I get it. But, that being said, there's more to it than that. I don't think that those things are mutually exclusive. You can wear high heels and be a feminist. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

This obsessive preoccupation to marry feminism with normative femininity is in part

an attempt by women's magazines to make the former palatable to all those readers *and producers* deeply invested the latter. One Spanish writer defensively expressed: "I can wear red lipstick and stilettos and be as feminist as everybody else". This dynamic also pervades the editorial data. One first person account in *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* reads: "Yeah, I like makeup and fashion - but don't you dare tell me I'm not a feminist". Also, crucially, by suturing a feminist identity with normative femininity the editorial team is able to meet the demands of their advertisers. See for example the following conversation with an *Elle UK* professional:

> Interviewer: How do advertisers feel about this turn to feminism or the embrace of feminism by women's magazines?
> Participant: I don't think it's caused any problems, is the quick answer, partly because of the way... We would never do it in a way that would cause... Obviously, it's very... If you asked the question, "is it okay to be a feminist and wear makeup?", we're going to say, "yes, of course it is and here's some that you can buy".

This *Elle UK* insider expressed a concern that through the processes of mainstreaming and commercialisation feminism "is becoming a broader and broader church":

> As people and brands want to be able to identify with feminism because it's a cool thing, they're having to marry that with views or standpoints which aren't particularly feminist. It's becoming a broader and broader church of "you can be feminist and like make-up and go on diets".

Against this critical stance, and particularly in the UK interviews, there was a strong investment on the premise that: "You can want to look a certain way, and that's your prerogative. In it being your prerogative, that is feminist". *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* equally exhorts its readers to: "reclaim what true feminism stands for – equal rights and freedom of choice". Likewise, one *Sofeminine.co.uk* and *Enfemenino.com* article on 'Modern feminism: Busting feminism myths' explains: "You can be sexy, as long as you are choosing to do it" [English version]. In this transnational text, readers are thus assured: "If you want to be a burlesque dancer, that's fine!" In an article titled 'Can fashion and feminism ever be friends?', *Sofeminine.co.uk* argues in the affirmative as follows: "freedom of expression, freedom of choice and celebrating femaleness is what feminism is all about".

To legitimise these claims, women's magazines draw on public figures and their popular texts. Often mentioned in Spain was Sheryl Sandberg. For example, I was told that in contrast to the "feminism of attack […] the new feminism of *Elle* is

more Sheryl Sandberg in *Lean In*". More prominent in the UK data is Polly Vernon, a British journalist who writes for women's magazines and published a book in 2015 titled *Hot Feminist* – whose tenets indeed pervade the media under my analytic gaze. This includes battling the "feminist fatigue" that many women are supposedly suffering through rebranding feminism (Vernon 2015a: 23). Vernon (2015a: 13) continues: "What kind of feminist does that make me? The shavey-leggy, fashion-fixated, wrinkle averse, weight-conscious kind of feminist. The kind who likes hot pink and boys; oh, I like boys! I like boys so much". Again paralleling women's magazines, of central importance to Vernon (2015b) is identifying "how to be fancied", "actively pursuing sexiness", and uniting fashion and feminism. Her book also discusses women's apparent FFOGIW—"feminist fear of getting it wrong"—in the face of "Snarkers and Trashers" (Vernon 2015a: 206). Some participants agreed, finding FFOGIW "annoying":

> Polly Vernon talks in *Hot Feminism* about the fear of getting it wrong and how it means people don't say stuff anymore because they're so… they don't voice opinions because they're so worried about getting it wrong. They just go mute. I do agree with that and that is annoying. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

In contrast, *Hot Feminist* offers, as the subtitle puts it: 'Modern Feminism With Style, Without Judgment'. Like Vernon, psychotherapist and campaigner Leyla Hussein writes for *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* about her 'struggles' with "women judging other women": "I'm sick and tired of being judged and not taken seriously based on my choice of outfits, lipstick and on what I do in my private time" […] I'm only practising my feminist values of having a choice". 'Choice', then, becomes a value in and of itself and always already feminist when exercised by women.

For British magazine journalists, rather than "splitting apart and having your own camps", feminism should be "about everyone coming together and accepting and living and let live". Moreover, one editor from the UK told me: "If we're going to get more people on board then what we do is we have accept that feminism doesn't mean one--well feminism means one thing, but it doesn't exclude everything else. It's a very simple, basic idea". She elaborated: "Feminism should be about equality for the here and now, and the atmosphere we live in is that we like things and we like shopping and we like clothes. That's a product of our consumerist society but really that's a different issue". Another issue that is supposedly unrelated to feminism is the beauty industry:

> I understand the idea that what the beauty industry does, as in beauty brands, they kind

of create problems and then create products to fix these problems. This is how businesses work. And it's a sad state of affairs but it's different to feminism. Feminism is about the equality of men and women and that's that. (Digital health editor, late 20s, UK)

One British writer equally critiqued "the people that really are like, 'I'm a feminist'" because they allegedly "use feminism as an umbrella term to rant about other things that they believe are issues. I believe feminism is a basic thing of equality, and it's a basic thing of support". Taking this process of depolitisation even further, for some producers the new feminism: "It's a basic concept of just being nice and being accepting". The 'feminist' subject interpellated by magazines is thus one who supports and accepts all women regardless of their thoughts and actions, consents to—indeed embraces—the status quo, and refrains from "ranting about other issues" like consumerist society/capitalism and the beauty industry; because feminism is about equality 'in the here and now', '*and that's that*'. As well as unrelated to feminism, to be critical of consumer culture was considered as actually *unfeminist*. No only does it allegedly demonstrate lack of acceptance and respect, but it is seen as *disrespectful* toward and even "excluding" of those who "enjoy it". And for the producers of women's magazines: "Feminism shouldn't exclude anything or anybody". It should be non-excluding to the extent of becoming whatever each individual wants – a feMEnism. To this point, *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* claims that feminism "should mean something different to every individual". In another piece, the publication reiterates this idea by quoting Caitlin Moran: "you can make it whatever you want. There are going to be 3.3 billion different kinds of feminist because there's 3.3 billion kinds of women". Note how it is simply inconceivable to hear such claims about any other social movement (anti-racist movement, labour movement – one definition per worker?). By becoming a floating signifier, feminism is fragmented, individualised and emptied of shared meaning to the point of *unspeakability*: "It's just so hard to talk about it because everyone sees it in different ways", voiced a staff writer. Sexism too becomes something different to every individual – *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* calls it 'subjective sexism'. In one piece called 'Why is EVERYTHING sexist?' and subtitled 'It's time to calm down a bit'— speaking to the 'fatigue' that is so distinctive of the postfeminist sensibility—the magazine expounds: "Wolf whistling is a perfect example of this [...] for every woman who blusters with red hot rage when she is wolf whistled there is another who positively basks in it". Pointing to the apolitical character of the confidence

market-movement, this *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* piece was written by the founder of the Self-Esteem Team, "which delivers lessons on mental health and body image in schools and colleges throughout the UK". More generally, these examples show how as feminist ideas receive more visibility and backing, social critique is again silenced – but, most perversely, this time in the name of feminism.

Contradicting the pervading idea of 'one feminism per head', magazines often offer typologies of feminists. Especially valued are types named by *Sofeminine.co.uk* as "The Fashion Feminist", "The Cute Feminist" and "The Stripping Feminist". Another notable obsession both in the Spanish and British publications pertains to "The Male Feminist" (again, because we feminists *love* men). Also particularly favoured by women's magazines is what *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* calls "The Sneaky Feminists", who "go about their daily business, quietly thinking women should be treated the same as men and […] like wearing make-up and think men are brilliant, and weep at rom-coms". Although the "Second Wave Feminist" is now allegedly obsolete, *Sofeminine.co.uk* nonetheless tell readers that: "we have a lot to thank these ladies for". All in all, there is really one vilified 'type' – "The Angry Feminist", who according to *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* is "A bit like a misogynist":

> These feminists want men and women to be equal. But confusingly, they want all women to be equal, too – i.e. exactly like them. If you buy the wrong kind of magazine, or love giving blow jobs, or feel fleetingly guilty when you eat some cake, then you are a Bad Feminist. Angry Feminists believe that unless you express your feminism in the same way that they do, then you're not a proper one and should shut up. A bit like a misogynist, in fact.

Pervading the data, then, is a hostility toward any feminist position which involves a critique of the status quo. In addition to its critique of consumer capitalism, heteronormativity and normative (youthful) femininity, "the more radical feminism" (see below) is additionally rejected on the basis of questioning the innate nature of the gender system. This was particularly evident in Spain, where one very experienced writer told me that:

> There are two points of view with regard to feminism. One, which is the one I uphold and [magazine] also shares, which is about a feminism that you can live with in your epoch. Then the more radical feminism thinks that we are the same as men in everything. (Freelance writer, mid-40s, Spain)

In her view, women and men: "Deserve the same rights and the same opportunities. But we are not the same, we have our differences, and what is still missing nowadays is for those differences to be valued". Indeed, this writer explained that what her

magazine tries to do is: "Value and enhance femininity in women, because it is often restricted and inhibited". Women questioning the necessity of the gender system and embodying normative (hyper-)femininity is a real threat to business. For example, and contrary to the pervasive notion of reflecting consumer demand, one insider explained the following about *The Debrief:* "it's definitely a website for women but we are not as gendered as most, and that was a conscious decision because we realised that our audience, 18-21, quite young, isn't as interested in making differentiations. I mean, you do it for commercial reasons".

As is the case with most topics/issues investigated in this thesis, in the interviews critical perspectives and counter-discourses were articulated concerning the 'new feminism'. A number of references were made to "commercial bandwagon-hopping", "tokenism" and "just lip service" to feminism. For example:

> From knowing what it's like working in the industry, part of me very much thinks how much of this is just lip service, unfortunately, from the big magazines. I'm still not convinced enough that they believe what they are saying, or that they are true to the cause. (Former writer, late 20s, UK)

One *Elle UK* professional was frustrated at how engaging with feminism has not entailed more of a broader "underlying current" in the magazine, and spoke about "a trend to make money", which will thus soon be replaced by a newer one (see Section 9.5):

> The fact that they had to make a big deal out of it one month of the year, it's like, why can't you just have an underlying current? I think they do, for the most part, but why can't you have more of a... of every issue being, have we got X amount of women of colour? Have we got X amount of LGBT? Have you got X amount of plus size or just different? That sort of thing. No, I think because it's a trend to make money, I think that it's like, "okay, we've done that. Now, what's next?"

This was corroborated by one Spanish online editor, who critically expressed: "Right now the relationship is one of use. For us feminism right now is a hashtag, a trending topic, nothing else. It's not a fight, it's not a right, it's nothing". Against the pervasive attempt to marry feminism and beauty content, particularly notable in the UK, the editor of another web agreed on the following basis:

> We obviously did an article about the talk Emma Watson gave in the UN. And it came out and people liked it, and went, "oh, [magazine] is so liberal, how feminist". And the next day I go, "put on lipstick", you know? It's not a medium that's gonna fight for that. (Online editor, late 20s, Spain)

Especially in Spain, journalists critically referred to a "feminism lite" or even a "false feminism" (see 9.2.2 above), and, moreover, the "prostitution that feminism

has been submitted to". One male freelancer expressed: "I always see a sediment of the old and pestilent machismo in that 'new feminism'". An ex-writer who said she would never write for these magazines again "unless I needed it to feed myself", spoke of a "make-up operation":

> I don't think these magazines are increasingly more feminist. What I think is that there is an increasing make-up operation everywhere with respect to feminism, including the media. It's PC, it's cool, it's super, to say that you are a feminist, but in practice they're not. Because the very same magazine that tells you, "you have to be very feminist and love yourself lots", instructs you on the best weight-loss diets or treatments to be perfect for a man. That is <u>not</u> feminism. That is make-up. (Ex-writer, early 30s, Spain)

At the same time, many of these Spanish participants argued that while "all of this has a very important commercial aspect […] it is also positive to clean a bit the image" of feminism. It was additionally expounded how "even though I condemn that double morality in women's magazines [...] I do think it is an important step forward", as some years ago "it was almost impossible to have this type of content, and particularly in a magazine that has so many followers and readers". One former writer concluded: "So, it's good to be critical, but not to condemn all the small advancements. Because step by step is how it's done". A number of her British counterparts agreed:

> It's brilliant that feminism is actually being talked about in these publications. It's not a dirty word anymore. It's a bit of a sort of a 'feminism 101'. It's for people that have grown up thinking that feminists are all hairy lesbians, so it's kind of easing people in a sort of way that might be less scary than being really full-on political. I did have a problem with that for a while, but I'm growing to understand that that's the way you have to do it. (Freelance writer, early 30s, UK)

In this sense, there were claims about being able to "make a bit of a difference" (see below), an idea also mobilised to more generally navigate the complicated terrain of holding critical views about whilst working for these publications (see also Chapter Five). Below I quote at length the account given by a British senior professional as it offers one valuable insight into the dilemmas faced by feminist women in the sector, together with some sense of the quotidian within the offices of women's magazines:

It is because of the everyday efforts of women such as this that more politicised or profound discussions and concerns are increasingly entering the pages of women's magazines. One *FemaleFirst.co.uk* piece celebrates how "feminist opinion and feminist activism is visible and vibrant throughout the country once again", and is accompanied by the cover of Finn Mackay's 2015 book *Radical Feminism: Feminist Activism in Movement*. Among other more predictable books like those of Sandberg and Moran, *SoFeminine.co.uk* recommends readers *The Beauty Myth* and *The Second Sex*. In 2016 *Glamour.es* dedicates a piece to serve as a "reminder of why it is indeed important to vindicate feminism". Reasons given include "denominations like 'feminazi'", "the rise of ultramachist movements" and: "Because the patriarchal system still prevails". Meanwhile *Grazia.es* is critiquing fat-shaming, neoliberalism and heteronormativity, and skilfully debunking sexist discursive strategies including that of 'I'm not machist but…' and 'I'm not a misogynist - I love women". Regarding the latter, *Grazia.es* states: "what the gentleman tends to mean is that he loves to consume them". In the UK, the *TheDebrief.co.uk* publishes a long sanctioning report on direct action group for domestic and sexual violence services Sisters Uncut, concluding: "Activism is alive and well in 2016, more than this it's just as necessary as it ever was. We aren't there yet". In another piece the magazine ponders: "As feminism becomes a commodity, who benefits from it? And who loses out?"

9.4 V/Agenda wars

This section examines the different ways in which producers contest, rebut or delegitimise feminist critiques of the editorial content in women's magazines. There

are a number of patterned discursive strategies across both the UK and Spanish interview data to counter *all forms* of critique. A clear case, and one with a particularly silencing force, is that of: "If you don't like it, don't buy it". Also typical are claims about meeting consumer demand. Particularly when journalists seemed to agree or sympathise with the critique under discussion, this was then often connected to ideas about needing to 'make a living'. One Spanish writer combined these as follows: "We all work to earn a salary, and we cover necessities that exist in the market, because there are people who are interested in this type of publication". Two more recurrent responses to any of type criticism consist of declarations about the impossibility of "pleasing everybody", along with the inevitability of receiving critique, not least because allegedly: "People love to critique". The latter was highlighted as especially inevitable in the "Internet era" where "people are more empowered to be critical". This is often a source of aggravation for media companies, as evoked in comments like: "It's that Twitter backlash thing again" (see Chapter Six).

In this section, I wish to explore those responses that are targeted specifically at feminist critiques, whilst attempting to explicitly uphold a feminist identity. The discussion principally centres on the UK data, where the topic was engaged with more extensively and intensively. Discussing and dealing with critiques from feminists had become part of the quotidian for the British participants at the time of my fieldwork, largely due to the conflicts arising from their explicit identifications and engagements with feminism. For example, *Elle UK* professionals observed how: "There's been a lot of backlash to the Feminism Issue". As I have already discussed, also in the UK interviews there were claims about a "cultural backlash against women's magazines" more generally. This perceived backlash, spearheaded by *The Vagenda*, was considered powerful to the extent of becoming "something that comes into play when someone wants to analyse your magazine through a study". That is, it was proposed as a key reason why journalists would decline or be hesitant to participate in my research. Paradoxically, the alleged "women's magazine bashing"—and its perceived unfairness—simultaneously *facilitated* the discussion of feminist critique in the UK. Namely, it served as a crucial point of entry for detailed explorations of what was otherwise often perceived, unlike in Spain, as intrinsically inconsistent. "It's very strange to pick on women's magazines and say you're a feminist because it doesn't add up, it doesn't make sense", expressed a British staff

writer. At times it seemed incoherent to the point of becoming unspeakable. In the following interaction I was quite literally silenced:

> Laura: There is a long history of feminist critique of women's magazines and--
> Editor: Which is hilarious because women's magazines are full of feminists. (Digital health editor, mid-20s, UK)

As the quote above suggests, discussing feminist critiques of women's magazines with the British participants was also difficult because many were quite defensive about their feminist identity. One writer voiced: "Why on earth would a female journalist ever want to write about women solely every single day if she wasn't a feminist?" (see also Chapter Four). By contrast, participants often brought up the topic of "the backlash" themselves. In this regard, many specifically asked: "Have you looked at *The Vagenda*? The backlash on women's magazines, they pick apart magazines". In *The Vagenda*'s own words, the purpose of the blog (and later book) was to "rip the piss out of the mainstream female press"[44] and to "expose the silly, manipulative and sometimes damaging ulterior motives of women's magazines" (Baxter and Cosslett 2014: 1). For these young feminists: "It is high time that we subject the media and the way it 'speaks' to women to all the ridicule it deserves"[45]. Using an informal, direct and satirical approach, *The Vagenda* contributors (and their users in the comment sections) skilfully unpacked gender stereotypes, the "tirade of mixed messages", "obsessive body monitoring" and shaming, and the "increasingly sinister content" of women's magazines (Baxter and Cosslett 2014: 3, 6). Through this, magazine producers explained, they "basically pissed off every editor", not least because "every single one of those women did internships at glossy magazines". As such, for an editor: "It's the most bizarre backlash that's happened in women's magazines". Most repeatedly, in the interviews with producers *The Vagenda* was constructed as anti-women and as misguided. It is these overarching themes that the next two subsections respectively consider.

9.4.1 The Vagenda as anti-women

Cosmopolitan.co.uk explains the existence of that what it calls "The 'I'm not a feminist!' Feminists" as follows: "This is partly thanks to the Angry Feminists making it all look like wearyingly hard work, and also because if you picture

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[44] From: http://vagendamagazine.com/about/ (Accessed 10/08/2016)
[45] From: http://vagendamagazine.com/about/ (Accessed 10/08/2016)

feminism as a person, she's wearing clothes made of hemp and frowning". In the interviews participants evoked similar familiar ideological associations, describing *The Vagenda* as "quite bitter", "almost scorned women", and more generally as "just doing negative". Paralleling the editorial content, this feminist media was declared a negative force to the extent of "alienating the idea of feminism for people who would otherwise just accept it", hence "doing the movement a disservice". Namely, the producers of women's magazines blamed "people like *The Vagenda*" for young women's disidentification with feminism:

> If we do surveys and they say, "do you think women should be paid the same as men? Do you think women should be treated the same as men? Do you think that men should be allowed to rape women and get away with it?" "Yes, yes, no, no, no". "Are you a feminist?" "No". None identifies as feminists anymore. That's because of people like *The Vagenda*. (Features editor, late 30s, UK)

In a context where "people like *The Vagenda*" or unstylish and angry feminists are pushing young women away from feminism, publications like *Cosmopolitan UK* are hard at work trying to show their readers that:

> You don't have to be like somebody who works for *The Vagenda* to be a feminist. You don't have to be ranting against all women, slacking off all other women. You can like women and be nice to women and be a feminist. And I just think it's really important that we're there to do that.

In other words, for some producers women's magazines are saving feminism from feminists themselves, and fostering the seemingly new idea that liking women is compatible with feminism. Participants argued that further to "equality between the genders", "feminism is made up of support for your sisters" and "bringing other women up". It was contended that on the contrary *The Vagenda* was creating an "idea of feminism that is about bringing other women down". Again, a feminist critique of women's magazines was deemed as not only nonsensical or contradictory, but also as *unhelpful* for feminism: "I don't think that's helpful to the feminist cause, when you're belittling other women". That is, critiquing the content of women's magazines was translated into notions of belittling and even attacking the women who produce and consume that content. On this basis, *The Vagenda* was considered: "Totally and utterly anti-women".

The producers of women's magazines repeatedly described *The Vagenda* as a "violent attack", "quite scathing", "awful" and "cruel". Indeed for one editor: "Their whole structure is based on being mean". Many condemned the ways in which writers at *The Vagenda* selected magazines to "take them apart bit by bit". Producers

would point out specific articles, and declare: "They basically have just torn it apart and ripped it to shreds". Some went as far as to speak of a 'massacre' by *The Vagenda*: "All it did was massacre female journalists by name and massacre their work". Across the board, participants were critical of the fact that when "*More!* magazine closed down, they actually celebrated", highlighting that "it was 20 intelligent women losing their jobs", and that these were "jobbing, skilled women basically just trying to do their best"[46]. One features editor further declared: "Just because they weren't necessarily pushing a feminist agenda doesn't necessarily mean they're the bad guys either". Many personalised the defence of *More!* staff by noting: "Loads of my friends worked for *More!* magazine, and I have in the past". The feminist identities of these journalists were (therefore) also highlighted: "I know them all. They're all feminists".

In addition to their 'massacre' of female journalists, *The Vagenda* was proclaimed as 'anti-women' through claims that by critiquing the magazine content they were *insulting the readers*. In the words of an editor: "They are insulting them by insulting what we do and who we are. And that's the opposite of feminism, it's not a sisterhood. It's about support". This was compared to the magazines' own approach, for example that of *Cosmopolitan*:

> They're basically saying 1.5 million women are stupid. Well, I don't see how that is fabulous feminist at all. I can't imagine any article where we've called anybody stupid. Because our mantra is 'Be the best that you can be', which is in any sphere. So, be the best. We support all women in whatever they want to do.

In antithesis to the sisterhood provided by magazines, it was declared that *The Vagenda* "are alienating people, calling them out for things that they might feel passionate about". Producers equated critiquing magazine content with telling readers: "You're frivolous and you're stupid. So you're silencing them". I was equally told that: "People like *Vagenda* or academics, they're silencing all the readers who do enjoy it". This 'silencing' feminist force has supposedly "made people scared to say they want some advice". For example, with regard to *More!* magazine it was declared that:

> *The Vagenda* completely bypassed the point, what completely went over the heads in their huge ranty raging was that women and girls used to read *More!* magazine because they wanted to get sex tips. They wanted to know how to have good sex.

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[46] *More!* was a weekly by Bauer Media with a focus on celebrity news, high street fashion and sex advice. After 25 years, it suspended publishing in 2013 due to "continuing challenging economic conditions" (Keenan in Halliday 2013).

> They <u>wanted</u> to know how to give great manicures. They wanted to know how to put on their make-up right. And now there's almost this backlash thing. You <u>can't say</u> that you want to know that in case you're being unfeminist and that's sad. (Ex-relationships columnist and current freelance writer, early 30s, UK)

Similarly, one editor-in-chief responded to feminist critiques of her magazine as follows: "The whole thing of feminism is not about judging other women saying, "you're not feminist enough"". Against such 'judgy feminism', supposedly seen in *The Vagenda* and much academic work, magazine producers favoured Catlin Moran's feminism, which was described as one of: "Do whatever the fuck you wanna do, be whoever the fuck you wanna be. It's not about fitting some mould" (see also previous section). In a remarkable ideological move, in the interviews (typically unspecified) other or older feminisms were denounced for offering women restricted and restricting 'moulds'. This was contrasted with the allegedly balanced approach of publications, which were argued to "care about all the issues" and "reflect all aspects of women's personalities", and to subsequently provide a comprehensive and balanced model of femininity:

> It's really important that there are magazines that care about all the issues, not just feminism, not just shoes and celebrities. We care about all the issues and we show that balance. By having that balance, the magazine shows it's possible to be a woman who is interested in all of those things. (Features editor, late 30s, UK)

> [Women's magazines] reflect all aspects of women's personalities and part of that is very much about fun, enjoyment and frivolity, rather than having to carry this big burden that we have to change the world. It's great to change the world as well and have issues but that's not our sole *raison d'être*. (Editor-in-chief, UK)

This understanding, namely that "changing the word" is not the "sole *raison d'être*" of women's magazines, was mobilised by many producers to portray *The Vagenda* as "misguided". It is this theme that I take up next.

9.4.2 *The Vagenda as misguided*

In contesting the critiques by *The Vagenda*, one editor-in-chief emphasised "the difference between newspapers and magazines": "Magazines are <u>entertainment</u>, they're <u>fun</u>. They're not just about causes and issues because people buy them if they have had a hard day at work, for relaxation, for entertainment". Also discussing *The Vagenda*, a freelancer similarly stated that the world of the woman's magazine: "It's whimsical and fun. That's why they've really misjudged how they've attacked them". Equally, one features editor said the following about the articles *The Vagenda*

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critiqued: "They were intended to be light-hearted. That's their purpose, for entertainment". Feminist critics in general were also exhorted to: "Be aware that women's magazines, part of their thing is to entertain, it's meant to be a pleasure to read". These claims were often followed by appeals to the value of the genre. One features writer stated: "We're not trying to say we're the *Economist* or even the *Guardian*. I still think writing about fashion and beauty is totally valid". In direct contradiction to the afore-discussed discourse of magazines as offering *balance*, these validations of specialisation were often accompanied by protestations that: "Women's magazines often are meant to be all things to all people"; and that: "Women's magazines are unfairly held up and we have to do everything, we have to be doing politics and everything, everything, it's like, "we only got so many pages"". Vindications of the value of escapist and frivolous pleasures were particularly prevalent in the Spanish interviews, where there are manifold claims like: "We entertain, and this is as worthy as any other journalism". One online director similarly stated: "My task is to entertain, to evade, to create wellbeing temporarily. I make people happy with what I do. Not everything has to be on a profound level". Like their British counterparts, many also highlighted the difference between magazines and newspapers, with one editor even affirming: "Whoever wants to be educated doesn't buy these magazines".

Standing against—although coexisting with—discourses of magazines as trustworthy and educational (see Chapter Five; and below) is the insistence that their purpose is light-hearted entertainment and, moreover, that the reader must "take everything with a grain of salt". In both cultural contexts, producers countered feminist critiques of women's magazines by appealing to the knowing, freely choosing media literate consumer. One Spanish freelancer rebutted critiques by pronouncing: "The reader has a critical sense and knows what she is reading". A number of British research participants criticised *The Vagenda* for, as one freelancer put it: "Underestimating the intelligence of magazine readers". In her view: "They don't trust women to be smart enough to understand what a magazine means and what it's for". One writer repudiated the *The Vagenda*'s concern for readers as follows: "They think they're defending them or acting on their behalf where actually they're smart women who can read between the lines and make their own choices and see what's a joke and see what isn't". Another ridiculed *The Vagenda* on the basis that: "They think readers are stupid girls who just absorb anything they're

told"; then noting: "Which we know isn't true". Common both in the UK and in Spain were claims such as: "We have lots of readers and levels of reading"; and: "There are many forms of reading and many types of readers". I was likewise assured by producers in both contexts that: "It's all about how people are going to consume it and interpret it for themselves"; and that: "It's all about what you're getting out of it. It's that personal relationship with the content". For example when reading "a feature about something as simple as pleasing your boyfriend or making him love you more", magazine producers explained, the reading possibilities range from "that's a ridiculous idea" to "this is something that can empower me on a date, or empower me in the bedroom [...] Then it's all about how you consume it". Hence, individual strategic choice is at the heart of the expected process of media consumption: "You take it and interpret it for yourself, and make your own choices about what you want to take out of it and what you don't". The producers of women's magazines also highlighted that readings are context-dependent, and thus unpredictable and changing. Subsequently, it is not possible "to make sweeping statements about it [a media text] being feminist or anti-feminist, people are going to take different things away from it at any given time". "Another thing that's misconstrued is they're not telling you what to do", added a writer. These discourses are combined in the following, where one freelancer contested scholarly literature for claiming that magazines negatively affect women's self-esteem:

> You see it a lot in scholarship, when people say writing about something is making women feel bad about themselves. That's not what we're doing. We're just kind of providing maybe--There are instances where there is no denying it, saying something like, "you should get Botox at age 35". I think that's never said, "this is what you have to do". It's just presented as, "this is a thing that happens. Here's our information about it". If you want to read that and say, "I will never do that", great. If you read it and say, "that's defining what it means to be a woman in a really narrow sense", great. If you want to read it and say, "that's making me better about myself, so I find this empowering", great. It runs the gamut. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

In Spain, I was likewise told that: "Women's magazines only offer an array of possibilities [...] you then have to undertake your own interpretation". Against this backdrop of brutal relativity and individualism, media critique surfaces not only as useless, but as an act of disrespect toward the individual media consumer: "Who the hell are we to say what someone's going to get out of it?", heatedly expressed a British writer. Echoing the postfeminist sensibility, in the data we find a repudiation of notions of women as "passive victims" and "cultural dupes" (Gill and Donaghue

2013: 250), in favour of configurations of consumers as active, media-savvy, individualised entrepreneurs, and of consumption as "an act of self-empowerment" (Banet-Weiser 2012: 56). In the spirit of neoliberalism, the producers of women's magazines rejected ideas about cultural influence in favour of a media consumer fully responsible for her own engagements with representations, who constantly thinks critically and deconstructs, and who rationally chooses from among different possible readings to further her own goals. Supported by the neoliberal fetishisation of individuality and choice, together with its abjection of victimhood, the figure of the entrepreneurial media consumer serves to exonerate the media industries from responsibility, and to delegitimise calls for change in the name of respecting individuals. Indeed, for one British editor-in-chief to conduct a feminist critique of magazine texts is "being patronising towards women". These narratives evoke a branch of media and cultural studies that developed from the 1980s and into the 1990s to counter the 'texts and ideology' approaches (see Chapter Two). Echoing what my participants told me, in her book *Reading Women's Magazines: An Analysis of Everyday Media Use* Hermes (1995: 1) critiqued "the majority of feminist work that has been done on women's magazines". In such work, Hermes (1995: 1) contends: "The feminist media critic is prophet and exorcist"; and attempts to "speak on behalf of others who are, implicitly, thought to be unable to see for themselves how bad such media texts as women's magazines are. They need to be enlightened". Like my participants, Hermes (1995: 2-3, 5) places great emphasis upon "claiming respect", "the polysemic character of popular media texts" and "readers as producers of meaning" to contest those who raise concerns about representational practices in women's magazines. Another area of work that has been taken up by the industry to then totally depoliticise to service its own interests is that of media literacy. This is palpable in the advancing of critical and reflexive consumption as a tool that will somehow 'inoculate' or protect women against the otherwise damaging effects of magazines (Gill 2012b). Using a "20-page beauty section" as an illustration, a British director argued: "The basic assumptions are possibly damaging to women […] if you are consuming that media in an unthinking or passive way". As discussed in other chapters of this thesis, the way in which the talk and work of women's magazine producers interpellates media literate subjects works to avoid accountability for the content produced, and more generally supports the shift in power and governance toward greater individual self-governmentality and self-responsibilisation under

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neoliberalism (Gill 2012b). Again, this is palpable in the following statement by one Spanish freelancer, which also suggests the centrality of confidence within the neoliberal gendered regime, as examined in Chapter Eight: "Sometimes the one with the problem is not the magazines but the audience. In the end each person has to know their circumstances, to know oneself, accept these things, love oneself, and to then choose the options" to best further her goals. As Gill (2012b: 740) argues, the "freely choosing female subject" of much media literacy discourse rests upon an understanding of subjectivity as unified, coherent and rational, "with the assumption that affect follows knowledge in rather a neat and obedient manner"; a model of the subject that remains complicit with the ideology of individualism, and more generally postfeminism and neoliberalism. It is perhaps for this reason that it has gained such cultural traction. The attendant erosion of complexity serves the commercial arena particularly well, as evinced by recurring critique-countering declarations that, as one British editor-in-chief expressed it: "Why would women keep on magazines then if they made them feel rubbish? Why would they?!"

Contradicting claims that magazines exert little influence in women's lives, feminist critiques were also contested with statements like: "It's very easy sometimes for people to have a really patronising attitude towards magazines, the work that they do, and the role they play in women's lives". Discussing feminist critiques, one British editor-in-chief declared: "It's very easy to sit and talk in theory but we actually have a dialogue, and go out there, and fight and campaign to help women". In contrast to those "who talk in theory" like academics: "We get letters in from people who go, "thank you. You made me feel brave enough to go for that job, to leave that man, to see that doctor". And I think ultimately that's what you are judged by". This was a very common narrative, also used to rebut *The Vagenda* as misguided: "I don't see how *The Vagenda* consider themselves to be more feminist than us. We get hundreds of letters from women saying, "thank you for helping me with my eating disorder. Thank you for helping me with this"". These anecdotes about how "a lot of magazines do a lot of good" speak to a prevalent discourse of critique as rooted in ignorance. Examples include: "A lot of it is so unfair because a lot of the criticism we get is from people who haven't even read the magazine"; and: "There's a lot of negativity thrown around by uninformed people". Taking the conversation back to the notion of balance, now in the opposite direction to that discussed above, both Spanish and British professionals countered critiques of the

frivolous elements by positioning them as part of a broader offering, where, in the words of a Spanish writer: "You also find good in-depth reports". Another example from Spain is:

> Often the critique is due to ignorance as people don't really know what the magazine is. They haven't bought it. They haven't read it. They think it is a magazine only full of brands that is exclusively dedicated to beauty and fashion and that everything it says is very silly. But in reality that's not the case. There are very in-depth and well-elaborated articles. (Freelance writer, mid-40s, Spain)

A discourse of unfair selectivity was used to confront *The Vagenda*: "What I felt *The Vagenda* would do is they would pick out a couple of our more light-hearted articles and extrapolate from there to say that we're nonsense […] so you're being selective, your argument is based not on the whole picture". Many accordingly called on critics to "get the last issues, sit down and actually look at them in the context of the whole magazine".

Closely linked to that of ignorance was the discourse of change. One freelance writer who said she is commissioned to write because of her "young feminist views" used it to negotiate her sense of contradiction. She expressed: "When I read *The Vagenda*, I was like, "ahh, what I'm I doing?!" Because [magazine] used to be so, so, just objectifying and quite derogatory to women and it was just dumbing stuff down, and they're changing that now". Similarly, one *Glamour UK* professional complained: "There's a big perception, prejudice, culturally against women's magazines that we're a big frothy and frivolous and irrelevant. […] We have changed […] we write lots of articles about feminism and we have a lot of feminist writers writing for us. We never have diet features, have affordable fashion, etc., etc." Insiders from *Cosmopolitan UK* agreed: "People who haven't looked at *Cosmo* for 15 years are tweeting at us about things and it's like, "well, open the magazine"". Repeatedly, producers protested that: "People don't look at the magazine. They just knee-jerk, "oh, women's magazines are fluff", and they just take their assumptions from that". Subsequently, many maintained: "Battling assumptions, that is the biggest hurdle we have to face across the board". One features editor more specifically complained about: "That view that we're fighting all the time, that we're stupid airheaded man-pleasers, but we're not". She also protested that:

> There's this weird perception that we can't possibly be proper journalists, we can't possibly be writing about these serious issues because we write about shoes as well. And if you write about dresses or handbags and honour killings, you can't do that,

because you're a bad feminist or can't know about serious things and like shoes at the same time. (Features editor, late 30s, UK)

According to producers, magazines exert an important educational role of 'translation' of feminist issues, "bringing these things in a palatable way to people who won't necessarily read about them". Using FGM as an example, one *Cosmopolitan UK* professional said: "I don't want to preach inverted basically […] So, what I like about *Cosmo* is I can try and get things to this group of 1.5 million women that wouldn't necessarily read it anywhere else. And we can put it in a way that makes them read it". When I asked an editor-in-chief what she would say to feminist academics who are critical of women's magazines she similarly stated: "A magazine like [magazine] has campaigned and often reaches women that academics don't reach". On the basis of this understanding, there were a number of complaints about the treatment and reactions received by the industry and the producers, and a defence of the importance of their efforts. A few British journalists offered anecdotes of being disparaged by members of the public whilst doing research on the basis of the publication they work for. One example is:

Another anecdote referred back to 2012: "We came under a lot of fire for the breast cancer campaign where we got a picture of Mel B. having her boobs felt by her husband. And everyone's, "oh, you're trivialising breast cancer" […] If I write an article about breast cancer for a mainstream newspaper or left-wing feminist publication, they already know about it". Overall, in the interviews there were repeated appeals to critics to "give us a break" as "we're actually trying to do something good here", even if "within the editorial context" of publications:

> If you're just nit picking somebody who is actually genuinely trying... *The Vagenda* attacked a campaign that [magazine] did about FGM. Why are you attacking these women trying their best to push this issue forward? Yes, they're doing it within the editorial context of [magazine], but that means that maybe a reader who might not have considered FGM before is reading about the topic. That's a great thing. (Features editor, mid-20s, UK)

Interestingly, *The Vagenda* founders made similar claims about their experience of collaborating with *Elle*, noting how: "We got so much shit for that, we got so much shit for doing that rebranding feminism thing" (Baxter and Cosslett 2016). Cosslett

went on to explain: "When I decided to do it I wasn't thinking about what the *Guardian* or the *Times* would say about it. I was thinking, "how could we talk to girls like the ones I was at school with, to me at sixteen, in a way that gets them interested in feminism?""

Despite the multiple critiques presented in this section, most British journalists agreed that "*The Vagenda* has got certain things right". Some even went as far as to claim: "A lot of the content that they criticise <u>is</u> rubbish and should be criticised". These sympathetic voices followed by pointing to restrictions in the production process. According to one features editor: "Even features editors and other editors, you're not at liberty to produce the kind of work that you'd love to produce". A director who asserted that *The Vagenda* "have got a point" followed by noting: "It's just so lacking nuance, lacking sympathy or empathy for the pressures that people who work on mainstream women's magazines are under". One deputy editor who again was sympathetic with *The Vagenda* similarly declared: "They don't understand the bigger machines behind huge media companies. It's not that easy to change. If you start changing things your circulation or your traffic will drop instantly". It was accordingly expounded that:

> [*The Vagenda*] pisses people off because: "It is easy for you to say. You don't have any of the constraints that we have, and lucky for you that you've managed to create a lucrative and high profile career out of basically saying what you want to say". Most people are not in that position. (Content director, late 30s, UK)

Others disavowed *The Vagenda*'s critiques with claims that: "It's very easy to point something out that's wrong". This often came with objections that: "They criticise without providing a solution". One features editor said to *The Vagenda*: "Okay, right, great. Mostly I agree with you, the cases where articles haven't been produced correctly. So tell me, how are you going to produce them correctly?" She even 'promised' that: "When you provide a solution to this problem, absolutely, we'll be on board". This was a recurrent call to all feminist critics of women's magazines: "Say what you <u>would</u> want to see. It's so much easier when people say, "oh, why don't you write about xyz", rather than just, "you shouldn't write about this"". Is it that straightforward? What are the potentials, then, for the relationship between women's magazines and feminism to develop further? It is to exploring these questions that I dedicate the last analysis section of the chapter, which again highlights the complexity and diversity of the talk of women's magazine producers.

9.5   The (im)possibilities of feminist futures

Notwithstanding the range of counter-arguments and critiques examined in the previous section, there was a general agreement among women's magazine producers that the existence of *The Vagenda* is ultimately "a positive thing". One professional at *Elle UK* said: "I'm glad it exists because the worst excesses in women's media definitely should be criticised". As already mentioned in Chapter Six, I was also told that, as a content director put it: "Overall they've been a force for good because if you're in a features meeting and you're talking about a rubbish idea, there is a voice in your head going, "well, what are *The Vagenda* going to say about this?"" One freelancer similarly spoke about a development of 'self-awareness' in women's magazine producers: "People didn't have an awareness, self-awareness before whereas they do now. It's really good to censor yourself. Thing you write. Words are dangerous and ideas can be dangerous". In a similar manner, many Spanish participants expressed appreciation of the "interference" of "hard-core feminists": "I understand that element where the female body is frivolised a bit, where there is too much talk about beauty, about aesthetics […] an effort is being made and in this sense I do thank the interference of hard-core feminists". Moreover, for the great majority of participants, "criticism is always going to be beneficial" and "criticism is important". Some even contended that "it needs to be there". Against the 'no impact' counter-critique discourses examined in the previous section, here, again (see above "words are dangerous"), we find the endorsement of critique being supported by a notion of media influence, and thus responsibility:

> They [feminist critiques] are extremely valuable. It needs to be there. From what I've seen of women's magazines it's just women like me running them and writing for them. It's like the blind leading the blind. I'm not qualified in this. We're all human. It's really important that there are checks and balances and that we're held to account and that there's people calling us up on the fact that we're not just talking about ourselves and we're not just screaming into the ether. There are people reading this, and they're internalising the way that we're talking and internalising the messages that we're giving. I think it's hugely important. I generally agree with most of it. (Freelance sex and relationships writer, mid-20s, UK)

As I have discussed at various moments of the thesis, in addition to becoming a 'voice in the head' generally producers put forward *The Vagenda* as a key catapult for recent changes in women's magazines that they welcomed, such as the 'authenticity turn' (Chapter Five), LYB/S (Chapter Eight) as well as the more 'pro-woman' and 'feminist-friendly' approach generally. However, even when the influential role of *The Vagenda* for the "new way" was sympathetically

acknowledged, it was often simultaneously positioned as having exhausted its possible influence due to its strident approach and anger – with magazines supposedly taking over with their positive tenor and celebratory style. In the words of one *The Debrief* professional:

> *The Vagenda* were trying to do that ["bring about the new way"], but they couldn't do it because they became a little bit too strident and too... What's the word? I mean I think we're all feminists, but they took it a little bit too far. There were just one too many angry ranting articles on there, that were attacking. [Talks about the closure of *More!*] So then, *The Debrief*, it's a feminist website where we celebrate women. *Cosmo* are now doing the same sort of thing.

For some British producers women's magazines have now reached the maximum point of possible accommodation of demands or ideas from feminism, now that the content "is always positive". Those who still want to see further change are relegated to the category of "hard-core feminists" and are attributed the affective texture of 'negativity'. See for instance this conversation with a *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* professional. Note that I simply asked about the possibilities for a more productive *dialogue*.

> Laura: How can we create a more productive dialogue between women who are working in the industry and other women who are critical of some aspects of the industry?
> Writer: I don't know what we could do anymore than make our content positive to welcome these--I'm just gonna call them hard-core feminists in.

What is more, according to a—albeit small—number of participants, magazines "have gone almost too far in one direction", and feminism is now "it's a little too much everywhere and it's too full on" – and hence "needs to be kept in check". For some, this is the case because "magazines might be alienating some of their readers". Others were (explicitly) speaking from their personal inclinations, for example: "It's quite intimidating if you don't agree with it or you don't have those feelings or you wouldn't say you're a feminist". Namely, there are non-feminist women in the industry who do not want to see more coverage of feminism, and certainly refuse the integration of more political content within women's magazines.

That is not the end of the story, however. As I have been discussing throughout the chapter, in my—most probably biased—sample there were very many self-identified feminists, albeit, as someone at *Elle UK* described her own team, "with different levels of engagement and understanding". Many want to further explore feminist issues in their work. For example, one British staff writer communicated in an email: "I effing LOVE writing feminism pieces. That's what I

feel most comfortable doing. I want to do more of them". Will she be able to? The reminder of the section will discuss how, as one participant put it: "It's a tricky one". She said the following about feminism and/in women's magazines:

> It's got to be good overall for them to be talking about these topics because it's getting more people involved. For it to be sustainable and for them to really care... It's a tricky one! (Former sub-editor and community manager, late 20s, UK)

When producing a woman's magazine, participants highlighted, "there are so many things like to take into consideration"; and all these entail "a level of not rocking the boat too much". It was explained that: "There isn't a whole lot of wiggle room to think outside the box because you have all of these boxes to tick. Once you've ticked all those boxes, there's only so much you can do". This is, however, less relevant for the web. Here, crucially, doing "something that's different" and "that perhaps is a bit more radical" is difficult because it is a *commercial* risk, as their 'dual customership' (Murphy 2013), namely readers and advertisers, might drop. Concerning the former, one important aspect to consider is the fact that: "A reader up North is often quite different to someone in London"; and so it was argued that: "If you're approaching feminist issues, you have to make sure it's accessible for all". This speaks to the broader understanding that, as a deputy editor explained: "It's a numbers problem, the bigger your brand is, the harder it is to really stand for something"; not least because "18-35 is a very, very broad spectrum", as many producers highlighted (indeed, the fact that *TheDebrief.co.uk* and *Grazia.es* are smaller brands and have a narrower target, urban women in their early/mid 20s, was advanced as part of the reason why they can publish more politicised and otherwise 'risky' content). Also, producers argued that prior to the introduction of new feminist topics: "You have to be so certain about what your audience are into and what they'll pick up on […] because if you start backing that and a lot of your readers don't like it, they'll switch off from you". As for the advertisers, a writer said: "It's very hard for them [women's magazines] to find that balance between being feminist and pleasing advertisers". Moreover, one *Elle UK* insider affirmed that "the moment" feminism ceases to be profitable and enthuse advertisers, magazines "will follow the money" – and then: "you'll just see a drifting away of interest and coverage". Equally complicating the 'feminist futures' of women's magazines is the very nature of the genre, which is based upon the constant pursuit for "the new and the next". Subsequently, feminism "will go away":

However, on a less certain note, later in the interview this content director said: "As much as I've talked about the advertising and all that kind of stuff, at the end of the day, it is still a creative process. Those ideas come out of people's brains. The people who are in the room who are talking, that is very important". The "people in the room" can, of course, be non-feminist and/or resistant to change. They can also be in the majority, and might "not be going anywhere". This is the experience of one participant, who spoke of her struggles to push for "more feminism" and "women of colour":

> If you've got a team of 40 and only two people are saying, "oh, we need more feminism or we need more women of colour", then it's not going to change because that's such a big group to fight against and there are enough people at least at [magazine] that have been there for a long time and not going anywhere. (Former sub-editor and community manager, late 20s, UK)

Many Spanish journalists similarly told me that "what large publishing houses want is results", but then how the content is developed "depends on the people leading the team". For one young online editor from Spain, in order to see more feminist content in women's magazines: "What is needed is an internal renovation, a renovation of management, of editorial lines, everything, at a structural level".

Yet another call for change in these discussions about the possible future of feminism in women's magazines pertains to the working conditions. With the current stretched teams: "There's no time to be creative and there's no time to think of new ideas. It's just about getting your work done and not exhausting yourself". A former *Elle UK* professional explained:

> That's probably one of the reasons why I don't think it'll change, because I don't think there are enough people who have enough time to breathe and actually be... Creative isn't the right word but think about what's next, apart from just following the trend. There's probably just enough space to go, "oh, this is the next trend. Let's do that", but I don't think there's enough to say, "okay, what's actually right for women?"

Others were more uncertain, and contemplated the possibility that "maybe it will stay quite current for longer than might have been anticipated", especially in those cases where feminism "has become so embedded". One example in the following excerpt from an interview with someone at Hearst:

Hearst Empowering Women is an example of how this whole feminism, confidence, empow- It is just blooming to take in everything. It's not just, "let's do a feature about this". It's, "let's have a company strategy around this", which makes me think that hopefully this will be a trend, for want of a better word, that will be harder to move away from than a fashion trend or whatever because it has become so embedded. As much as women's media were in picking up the feminism thing, were maybe responding to stuff that was going on around them, they are now a part of the dialogue and the culture. So as long as there is an interest, even if it's a self-interest in the sense of, "we've made such a fuss about this in the past. We can't now just dump it", as long as that is still fuelling this coverage and articles and stories and the way of presenting stuff, maybe it will stay quite current for longer than might have been anticipated. I don't know.

Interestingly, in their event 'The Vagenda two years on: what has changed?' Baxter and Cosslett gave more celebratory accounts than some of the producers of women's magazines. These two journalists—who now write and edit for newspapers including the *Guardian*, *Independent* and *New Statesman*—were sanguine about the changes that have taken place in the past few years. They argued that the "intellectual quality of the debate has moved forward a lot", highlighting how when they started the blog in 2012 *Cosmopolitan* was debating at the Women of the World Festival the topic of: 'Can you be a feminist and vajazzle?' It does indeed seem less likely that *Cosmopolitan* or any of the other magazines in the sample would currently focus on this topic, especially in such a type of event. Baxter and Cosslett (2016) also pointed to an increased "accountability to the audience", which they connected to Internet platforms and cultures. They celebrated that via spaces like Twitter women's magazines "are being challenged and are having to defend themselves in a public domain. They are not these unanswerable entities that they were before". Again stressing the importance of the Internet, Baxter and Cosslett (2016) were optimistic about the fact that: "You can't ignore feminism because the Internet is there, and there is always going to be a certain proportion of really pissed off women […] whereas before it was very trend-led" (Baxter and Cosslett 2016).

There are also optimistic accounts about the future relationship between women's magazines and feminism in the interview data. According to a Spanish writer: "It will come. It's like with everything else, Spain is not usually the pioneer in these things, but it will come". In the UK, many expressed enthusiasm about the present, and an attendant optimism about "where it's heading":

Now magazines aren't necessarily all about stuff like sex and relationships, entertainment. The wider issues are being discussed and coming to the forefront. It is massively exciting. As a journalist, it gives you so much more option about what you

can write about, which is really great. […] I think that's definitely where it's heading. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

Also highlighted as key to ensuring a more 'feminist future' for women's magazines was the impact of the current feminist movement upon how young women "understand and consume media":

> It does feel like this is a real, very far-reaching movement. It's not as political as the 70s feminism movement, but I think it has had quite an impact on the way that people understand and consume media in particular. […] It does seem like the population, or population of young Internet literate women that I have a window on, have developed quite a sure sense of when they are seeing sexism, which maybe is quite new. (Content director, late 30s, UK)

In addition, and mirroring *The Vagenda*, the producers of women's magazines underscored the important role played by the Internet: "We'll never go backwards. The Internet's changed things completely", pronounced a features editor from the UK. References were made to the call-out culture online, which, as already discussed, exerts a form of 'watchdogery'. Those who wanted to write about more political or 'serious' topics also celebrated that user engagement is quantifiable online, which can help when proposing pieces to commissioning editors. One features editor and freelance writer expounded:

> Whereas before I might have said, "right, let's do an article on FGM". They went, "oh, it's miserable, no one cares. Let's do something else". Now I can go, "look, no, it's obvious that this is what readers want. You can see it. Look, this is how many clicks we're getting. This is how many social media interactions we're getting". It's quantifiable, which I think is actually the turning point for that. (Features editor, mid-20s, UK)

However, she went on to note: "But it is certainly true that if you put Jennifer Aniston on the cover of a magazine, it will sell more copies than if you put a story about FGM". Indeed, this was a recurrent complaint by those who did not—and did not want to—write about celebrities, beauty or fashion: "That's the problem, you'll see an article has been shared like 20,000 times and it's an article about Kim Kardashian's outfit or her naked picture, and then something that me or one of the girls that does the more serious pieces write will get shared maximum like 300 times". One British features editor similarly told me: "It's the sad truth, but if we put a story about Kate Middleton on our website, it will do better than an anecdote about feminism. You need both in my opinion".

Indeed, this idea of incorporating very different types of content as the best model for the future was a prevalent one in the UK. Here most participants were very

keen for the monthlies to follow the footsteps of weekly-glossy *Grazia*, where "they'll have an important news piece on one page and then on the next page it will be the latest Prada sandals". This British writer proceeded as follows: "More women's magazines need to be less afraid of doing that and less afraid of breaking down boundaries […] they should be able to get serious. They should be able to get political. They've got to take a real interest in that, and a broader view in what it means to be a woman, and what women are interested in reading". Yet some observed how: "A feminist probably doesn't want to see a circle around someone's cellulite on a page next to an article about FGM". This understanding was particularly dominant in Spain, where women's magazine producers themselves also rejected the *Grazia* model. In this context, a number of professionals in positions of responsibility argued that: "It is often contradictory to talk about the fashion industry and women's rights". I was likewise assured that: "The effect is very schizophrenic, to talk about a *Valentino* catwalk with €200,000 dresses, and in the next page the civil war in Ukraine, with deaths everyday. In another society it's possible, but it's very difficult to understand here". In addition to broader cultural sensibilities, as I have been arguing throughout the analysis, these editorial decisions respond to the personal views of some producers, as well as to the pressures from advertisers. Evincing this is the following declaration by a former digital director: "I buy this type of magazine to escape from the world, from my problems, from the problems in the world. If I want to see bad news I go to an information web […] and then there's the advertisers". She explained that in contrast to "the type of advertiser that goes to a general information web […] our advertisers don't want to see miseries". Overall, in Spain: "It has been the endless debate, to what extent we should be a web of entertainment and information/awareness-raising, or only an entertainment web". Particularly among the younger generations, and especially in the UK, there appears to prevail a preference for the former model; and the newer titles in my sample, namely *TheDebrief.co.uk* and *Grazia.es*, both launched in 2013, are indeed taking that route. No doubt much (more) feminist writing will emerge critiquing how radically diverse elements increasingly coexist within women's magazines; interestingly the product of considerable effort by feminist journalists wanting these media to offer "a broader view in what it means to be a woman" (see above), in addition to an established media space to write about things that interests them. Accordingly, I hope that this thesis makes a convincing case for the value of

integrating voices from and insights about production in research on women's magazines, and media more generally. Another important such an insight offered by my interview data pertains to the ways in which some female journalists are sacrificing the security of a staff/permanent position due to their feminist politics. One example is the following account:

> I'm semi freelance now. For <u>years</u> and years and years, I struggled with maintaining my feminist identity and credentials and producing copy that I would be proud to put my name on and finding it very difficult. What a lot of women do is become freelance and take that decision away from the editor and away from the publication. (Features editor and freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

In addition to wanting to take a "more critical stance on things", another young British professional also spoke of leaving her permanent post because of the fashion and beauty content that she was required to cover:

> I've chosen to go freelance because you can pitch ideas that you actually are interested in. You can take a more critical stance on things. […] I ultimately left [magazine] for that reason and for fashion and beauty […] It was a lot of fun for a while. You'd get a lot of freebies, you'd get to go to events, I went to London Fashion Week, and all this stuff. Eventually, it's just kind of a bit shallow, really. It doesn't really matter in the grand scheme of things and there are more important things to write about. It's why I left. (Former staff writer, current freelancer, mid-20s, UK)

She also recalled: "I can remember feeling a bit sort of uneasy about the fact that you can write about feminism in one capacity and then be talking about stuff that's not so feminist on the other pages". The costs of this decision should not be underestimated, as suggested by comments like the following by a British writer interested in "radical social justice": "I've made a decision to go freelance, and I am struggling financially quite a bit […] I'm actually living at my parent's at the moment". After a similar comment, one freelance writer from Spain further declared: "I have missed out on a lot of jobs because of the feminism issue". For this writer, publishing articles about feminism/from a feminist perspective involves another very real cost: *constant* personal attacks and even rape threats through social media, predominantly by men. Still, this feminist writer (and activist) remains undeterred by misogynists, as well as by an anti-feminist journalism industry, and committed to her feminism, described as follows:

> As I see it, the last thing I should do is follow the line of Emma Watson, Beyoncé… that feminism, nice and white, bourgeois. If it doesn't bother anybody it's not working, feminism. If it doesn't annoy anyone it's not doing it's duty, which is to show mainly what is wrong. So this feminism of 'I put on heels and red lips and go out for a drink', well, that's what patriarchy wants you to do, girl! And for you to not <u>fight</u>! […] Is feminism only about us cis white women being able to wear Jimmy Choo shoes? <u>No</u>, I

prefer for the Latin women in this country to have access to jobs that are not domestic service, for single mums to have better welfare and support, for the victims of gender violence to be assisted by the State once and for all. (Freelance writer, early 30s, Spain)

As I told her in the interview, I sincerely hope she continues to write for women's magazines for many years to come – ideally more than three times a month and for more than €60 an article. Whether this will happen or not, "it's tricky".

9.6   Postfeminism reconfigured

> If it doesn't annoy anyone, it's not doing it's duty.
> —Freelance writer on feminism

> The history of feminism is thus a history of making trouble.
> —Sara Ahmed (2010: 59-60)

Just as I began my research, women's magazines were shifting from a "self-definition as decisively post-feminist" (McRobbie 2009: 5) to one of "game changer with regard to bringing the new feminism to young women" (*Elle UK*). Responding to such a notable shift, this chapter has sought to explore how contemporary young women's magazines relate to feminism. Primarily drawing on the interview data, I have aimed to examine the magazine-feminism relation from a varied range of angles, including: the different ways in which producers identified or disidentified themselves and their publications with feminism; explanations for the embrace of a so-called new feminism, and how this was defined, defended, as well as critiqued; rebuttals of feminist critiques of the content and its impact on women; and the challenges for the maintenance and even further incorporation of feminism within publications. I have also attempted to shape the analysis in a manner that captured something of the great diversity and contradictoriness characterising the talk of women's magazine producers, along with the multifaceted, multi-causal and often ambiguous nature of the different phenomena under study, including the (re-)turn to feminism by publications, and the specific form(s) that this takes. One thing that was rarely discussed by the participants is how publications take up feminism in a *cyclical* manner. Looking through the archive of post-1965 *Cosmopolitan* magazine, in addition to periods of absolute silence one can observe a shifting of the pendulum from contesting to endorsing feminism – as well as the publication itself being

variously contested and endorsed by feminists in the broader cultural landscape of the time. For example, the otherwise fierce critic Betty Friedan is quoted as saying in the mid-seventies: "If the Cosmo girl is for the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment], then I'm for the Cosmo girl" (Friedan in Scanlon 2009a: 195). As examined in Chapter Two, the period that began with the relaunch of *Cosmopolitan* by Brown rendered the relationship between women's magazines and feminism much more complex, ambiguous and contradictory. Full of contradictions too is the actual magazine content, where we not only find anti-feminist and even misogynistic messages coexisting with feminists ones, but also a range of feminist voices – with their differing ideas, commitments, goals; albeit predominately, but not only, those reflecting broader dominant sensibilities. Returning to the *Cosmopolitan* archive, we can find texts spanning from a lengthy excerpt from Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* in the 1970s (published in the US version; albeit after a sit-in protest!) to a piece from the 1980s by the author of *The Business Amazons* (1986) titled 'Cheers for the Capitalist Feminists' (*Cosmopolitan UK*). We could see this "new species of feminists" who "reach the top, earn big money, dress to kill" as the older sisters of the current 'leaner in' promoted by Sandberg – who *also* writes for *Cosmopolitan* (US). In *Cosmopolitan.com*, her advice on "tapping into your financial power" sits alongside articles by Jill Filipovic on how "As long as words mean things, "feminism" is still a political movement with political aims, not a feel-good self-help catchphrase", in turn coexisting with the very different approach by Naomi Wolf: "I Dyed My Hair Blonde and It Completely Changed My Life"[47]. Thus, and as the producers themselves highlighted in the interviews, many of the feminist ideas of women's magazines *are the ideas of some feminists*. I would like to close the chapter by offering some critical notes on this simple but in my opinion crucial point in relation to feminist trajectories, postfeminism and neoliberalism.

Much of the 'new feminism' of women's magazines has close affinities with a set of perspectives that were prominent—largely due to the general-audience literature and media attention generated—in the 1990s, which also self-declared as 'new feminist' and aimed to reclaim feminism in line with their times (Siegel 1997), as well as to repackage it for younger women, who, to varying degrees, supposedly felt oppressed (Abraham 1997) and certainly alienated by the 'Old Feminist Order'

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[47] An adapted version was published in the 'Glow' section of the February 2016 issue of *Cosmopolitan UK* under the title 'Why I Went Blond'.

(Denfeld 1995). The second wave was portrayed as too political and radical, negative and angry, trapped within a victim paradigm, besides too preoccupied with collectivist projects and sexual politics. It was further repudiated as exclusionary, overly proscriptive and, as Wolf (1993: 68) put it: "judgmental of other women's pleasures and private arrangements". As a substitute for what she referred to as 'victim feminism', Wolf (1993: 149) promoted a 'power feminism', which was individual-oriented and capitalist-friendly, indeed it "knows that poverty is not glamorous". For Rene Denfeld (1995: 237), the feminist movement had degenerated into "a profoundly antisex, antifreedom, and ultimately anti-women's rights perspective". Describing the second wave as the 'new Victorianism', Denfeld (1995: 276) defined herself as an "equality feminist". Similarly, and closely mirroring my data, Natasha Walter (1998: 41) proclaimed: "Feminism is about equality for women, nothing more nor less". Furthermore, Walter (1998: 4) argued that "the new feminism must unpick the tight link that feminism in the seventies made between our personal and political lives". "The personal, in other words, is no longer political", happily announced Karen Lehrman (1997: 5). Again paralleling the talk and work of the journalists I interviewed, these third wavers[48] declared that "feminism isn't about what choice you make but the freedom to make that choice" (Baumgardner and Richards 2003: 450); and exhorted second wavers to: "Learn to respect women's choices" (Lehrman 1997: 13). These ideas were further depoliticised by postfeminism, which as Lazar (2009) has highlighted actively incorporates third wave perspectives, preoccupations and voices. In so doing, postfeminist media capitalises on the tensions and divergences among feminists, and "presents itself as well-informed by and aligned with current feminist impulses" (Lazar 2009: 374). One example is the integration by beauty adverts of the pleasure-seeking impulse (Drake 2002) and embrace of self-aesthetification of the third wavers, who declared their 'new feminism' as: "no longer on the defensive, with a fun, playful aesthetic that acknowledges the erotic and narcissistic pleasure women receive from beautifying themselves, a pleasure not to be denied" (Senna 1995: 16). These ideas are, of course, also central to brands like *Cosmopolitan*. Indeed, for Jennifer Scanlon (2009b: 128): "Helen Gurley is one of the most, if not the most, striking of the third

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[48] I am here only briefly discussing one relatively cohesive line of thought, but it must be noted that the term 'third wave feminism' is variously defined as well as contested. For a thorough critical discussion, see Budgeon (2011).

wave's second wave antecedents"; a remark which points to the ongoing dialectical relation between these publications and popular feminism.

Although not necessarily under the banner of 'third wave' (but see e.g. Snyder-Hall 2010), many of the ideas of the 'new feminists' of the 1990s have been more recently further developed by an increasingly visible type of feminism, notably online, involving a shift away from references to ideology, oppression or power structures, in favour of personal desires, goals and, most importantly, *choice*. What some have critically labelled 'choice feminism' (Hirshman 2006) and theorised as an *orientation* to feminist politics posits "freedom as the capacity to make individual choices" (Ferguson 2010: 248). Understood as guarantor of freedom, 'choice' should thus be upheld as the primary criterion for evaluating women's lives (Budgeon 2015). Individual accounts of experience should mark the end of feminist inquiry, and the role of feminism lies in withholding judgement on the choices women make, *regardless of their nature*. For 'choice feminism', Shelley Budgeon (2015: 309) critically highlights, the "differences between women are so immense that feminism can only remain relevant […] by validating not the *content* but the *act* of choice itself, thereby diverting attention away from normative demands of gender". Most perniciously, and in a remarkable manoeuvre to silence critique, the gradual suturing of 'choice' with 'empowerment' in the terrain of femininity (Budgeon 2015) has reached a point in which to hold women's choices up for critical scrutiny or ideological analysis is equated to *disempowering* the individual women in question. As critics have emphasised, 'choice feminism' is driven by a 'hyper' (Hirshman 2010) or "possessive individualism" (Kirkpatrick, 2010: 245) that is incompatible with a political project. Furthermore, this type of exhortation to women to leave one another alone is essentially an exhortation to leave the status quo alone (Hirshman 2006). We might, then, think of 'choice feminism' as postfeminism re-configured for the present moment; a moment when even the more optimistic, 'lite' or popular versions of feminism were beginning to express great concern about the force of old and new modalities of sexism, particularly with respect to the co-optation of feminist signifiers by commercial cultures, a reinvigorated gender essentialism, and the increasing power of the sex industry to define the terms of normative femininity, sexuality and sex (e.g. Walter 2010: 8; who wrote in *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* that her previous assessment was "entirely wrong").

This chapter has shown how much of the 'rebranded' or 'new' feminism of women's magazines is effectively a continuation of what has been widely theorised as postfeminist. This includes the primacy given to consumerism, the influence of a 'makeover paradigm', and the emphasis upon normative femininity as a site of pleasure and empowerment. Another obvious parallelism is the pervasiveness of "individualism, choice, and agency as dominant modes of accounting" (Gill 2016: 613) for women's lives. Generally missing from the data, however, are two among the most well-documented features of postfeminism, namely the rejection of a feminist identity/label, and the suggestion that gender equality has been achieved. What is more, the analysis has identified a remarkable effort to *recruit* young women to the 'new feminism'. Why such preoccupation? In its new iteration, postfeminism "numbs resistance and deflects critique" (Lazar 2009: 396) not so much by claiming that feminism is no longer needed but, most perniciously, by *setting the agenda,* the terms and conditions. In the terrain of mediated feminism under analysis here, there is a link between a multiplication of discourse and an intensification of the interventions of power. To continue to borrow Foucault's (1978: 72) language, an entire machinery has been put into operation to produce 'true discourses' about feminism, and these are "carefully tailored to the requirements of power". As Gill and Orgad (in press) observe, the aim is: "Nothing less that to transform feminism's very defining claims and goals" according to the logics and requirements of patriarchal neoliberal capitalism, re-circumscribing in the process the parameters of 'feminist' thought and action. Calls to collective critical analysis and struggle for social change are substituted by exhortations to turn the gaze inward and work on, improve and maximise the self; and feminism becomes a personally defined mantra to guide individuated self-care, or a general attitude to stimulate entrepreneurial ambitions. Neoliberalisation operates, then, 'from within' to undo feminism as a movement of revolutionary politics, radical imaginations and solidarity, as well as to obscure the exercise of power. One clear example is the ways in which claiming free choice and autonomous self-determination is actually enacting normative femininity under neoliberalism. Scholars have shown how postfeminism is implicated in the emergence of 'new femininities' (Gill and Scharff 2011), and indeed in the data there is an effort to constitute a new feminist subject: a feMenist. At the centre of what some call 'neoliberal feminism', is a highly individuated female subject designated as feminist for acknowledging that (some) inequalities between women and men

exist, but whose response to that knowledge is to "accept full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care" (Rottenberg 2014: 418; Budgeon 2015). As Linda Gordon (2016) writes: "The neoliberal feminist is supposed to take individual control of her life, become more ambitious, and set better priorities. She is supposed to move up through personal assertiveness, hard work, and discipline" – as well as by upholding the right attitude: a thoroughly 'PMA' (positive mental attitude).

Particularly in Chapter Eight I discussed how neoliberalism has a distinctive affective character, marked by the repudiation of 'negativity', which technologies like positive psychology, 'confidence chic' and the happiness industry function to eradicate or supress, and to substitute with a number of qualities like self-confidence, optimism and zest, ultimately to ensure the resilience, tenacity and 'bouncebackability' required to (barely) endure a brutal social world (see De Benedictis and Gill 2016 on 'austerity neoliberalism'), a sinister world where "interpretations which emphasise self-determination are required in even the most testing situations" (Baker 2008: 60). I have also highlighted how in addition to calls to confidence one important element of the affective life of neoliberalism, which is gendered, is the abjection of a sense of victimhood, of expressions of complaint, resentment or bitterness, and, most notably, *anger*. This also speaks powerfully to the observation by Ahmed (2010: 66) that: "To be oppressed requires that you show signs of happiness, as signs of being or having been adjusted". 'Happiness scripts', Ahmed (2010) argues, are gendered scripts, and troubling these is a deeply political act, and thus for that reason a condemned one – as captured by the figure of the 'feminist killjoy'. For Ahmed (2010: 62), once we see happiness as a gendered technology and an instrument of power: "We might explore how imagination is what allows women to be liberated from happiness and the narrowness of its horizons. We might want the girls to read the books that enable them to be overwhelmed with grief" – and with anger, the 'Good Anger', the one directed not at ourselves but at the forces and structures that cause us pain. On the contrary, as an interest in feminism becomes revitalised the figure of the angry feminist comes in to demarcate the new boundaries of desirability and deviance, and, ultimately, to prevent 'trouble' (see Ahmed's quote opening this section). "My feminism doesn't come from a point of anger", emphatically rehearses the author of *Hot Feminist* for a room filled by young women keen to learn about feminism (Vernon 2015b). Like Vernon, women's magazines repudiate the 'angry feminist' in a tediously familiar manner: as extreme

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and difficult, misguided, old-fashioned, anti-fun and anti-pleasure, anti-men and (hetero)unattractive... One newer, quite remarkable, dynamic is their negation of the status of feminist. This operates via a new regime of compulsory positivity and non-judgmentalness, where "celebration is the modus operandi" (Edwards 2015), and feminist questioning or expressions of anger (at cultural practices) are re-interpreted as attacks upon individual women. Hey presto, no more critical thinking.

In 2010 Barbara Tomlinson examined the reinvigorated trope of the angry feminist in terms of an effort in the (US) political and academic discourse to delegitimise social criticism generally and feminist arguments in particular. This trope, Tomlinson (2010: 102) wrote: "is a convention, a plot trick, a setup, a narrative structure, a character type". It is designed so that: "One never encounters the feminist's argument for the first time because it comes already discredited"; and in order "to foreclose feminist futures by making feminism seem repulsive to young women" (Tomlinson 2010). Somewhat differently, under the current iteration of postfeminism the 'angry feminist' operates partly as that familiar backlash strategy of 'divide and conquer', and, ultimately, as a prevention measure against radicalisation. I take the analysis to suggest that considered especially threatening is the possibility of young women revisiting socialist and radical feminist perspectives. Other recent observations also point in this direction. In her discussion of the contemporary cultural landscape, McRobbie (2015: 4) highlights how: "there is a battle to ensure that the new popular feminism which emerges or which holds sway is one which discards the older, welfarist and collectivist feminism of the past, in favour of individualistic striving". She also notes how in this new popular feminism: "What is conspicuously absent is any angry and outright critique of male domination" (McRobbie 2015: 17). It is in this context that Nancy Fraser (2013: 10, 1) calls for an integration of "the best insights of the cultural turn with the nearly forgotten but still indispensable insights of socialist-feminism", including "its structural critique of capitalism's androcentrism, its systemic analysis of male domination". While socialist feminism is 'nearly forgotten', radical feminism inhabits the space of the abject. It serves, as Finn Mackay (2015a: 334) has recently observed, "as the vessel or totem which signifies a feminism gone too far, an extreme example of feminism and a destination at which no sane person would presumably wish to arrive". It is also one that no heterosexual woman would presumably dare to *embody* (to the comfort of the beauty-fashion complex, and thanks in part to the

efforts of women's magazines). With regard to the realm of academia, as McRobbie (2015: 17) notes: "for many feminists and gender theorists alike there is likewise a reluctance to resurrect and reinstate 'old' categories such as masculine dominance, patriarchy or male power. They are too crude, possibly essentialist, and theoretically unviable 'after' queer theory". Yet radical feminism "might provide the tools for women to imagine an alternative world to that which is now available to them" (McRobbie 2009: 49). In feminist thinking, when we are pressed to obsess with the new and the next, we might like to pause for a moment and consider the supposedly *passé* – particularly if detested by capitalist patriarchy as the "standard bearer for lines crossed" (Mackay 2015b: 334). A conversation with radical feminism might at the very least offer an urgently needed disruption in a context where postfeminism or the gendered regime and sensibilities of neoliberalism are penetrating not only more predictable arenas like mainstream media, but also feminist activism and scholarship, particularly around topics to do with women's participation in the sex industry and with the cultures of 'sexualisation' and 'beautification' (Budgeon 2015). Maybe it's time for more of us[49] to 'call-out' postfeminism in these terrains too.

The new feminist visibility in women's magazines is deeply but not only ideological, necessarily but not simply commercially-driven, useful for de-stigmatising as well as depoliticising feminism. It might open *and* close the horizons of readers. I feel at once heartened to see feminism celebrated in women's magazines and petrified to see it eviscerated of any trace of radicalism. Ultimately, it is distressing to see it put to work in the service of power. But somewhat unconventionally perhaps, I want to end the chapter by noting how even more so than the terrain of commercial popular media per se I am alarmed by its consistency with some feminist activism and scholarship, where radical feminism is also repudiated and other revolutionary accounts like Marxist and socialist ones are rendered invisible, while liberal perspectives and neoliberal logics colonise frameworks of intelligibility and political imaginaries. At a point when some feminist scholars question the continued relevance of the critical concept of postfeminism in this seemingly new feminist moment, it seems important to remind ourselves that, as one participant put it: "That's what patriarchy wants you to do, girl! And for you to not *fight*!"

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[49] See for example the critique by Gill and Donaghue (2013) of 'the turn to agency' in feminist cultural studies scholarship concerned with 'sexualisation'.

Chapter Ten
CONCLUSION

I began this thesis with a personal note about my point of departure for the research: a profound sense of aversion toward women's magazines. I located myself as a very deliberate non-reader, and indicated my longstanding consideration of these media as tools of capitalist patriarchy, important cultural sites for the re/production of gender regimes and sexual politics that are deeply injurious for women – including myself: the utter fixation with appearance which adds insult to injury with unattainable beauty standards, the imperatives to please and seduce men, to constantly consume, to turn the critical gaze inward in times of discontent, and so on. I accordingly expressed a serious concern, and genuine puzzlement, about their sustained popularity and even growth online in a moment of great abundance of different media. Hence began my 3-year journey into the world of the young woman's online magazine.

I shall begin this short concluding chapter by sharing my latest research experience. It is one that exemplifies like no other the rich, complex and unpredictable character of my research journey – an experience where against all my possible predictions I suddenly found myself as nothing less than an enthusiastic actor within my very field of critical study. Only some weeks before finalising this thesis, one research participant from Spain contacted me. Her message read as follows:

> Hello Laura! I'm sorry to bother you but as far as I can remember we spoke about the topic of emotional neoliberalism in the interview and you commented that you were interested in the topic. Well, this weekend I'm going to write about this issue for [magazine], in case you would like to collaborate or to give me a statement, I personally prefer to cite you and your work over any other sociologist.

I was of course familiar with her work and during the interview we had established a significant level of commonality with regard to our feminist positions. I offered to help develop the piece without claiming authorship as a gesture of political camaraderie, and of appreciation for taking part in my study. Also, in order to protect their anonymity it felt important to not establish too strong a public link with participants, at least so close in time to the research. On a Sunday night, within the space of two hours, we emailed back and forth ideas, links to websites, comments,

edits, revisions. Just in time to meet the 12am deadline, she sent her new article to the web editor. I found this pace of work extremely challenging. For me, it was a new experience to devise, write and submit a piece for publication within such a short amount of time; for her, inevitable daily practice. I am glad I included a solidarity lens in my analysis, which in part meant taking elements of the interview talk at face value, particularly those with regard to working conditions. As the research participants pointed out, two hours allow for very little time to think, let alone for conducting research in any profound manner. I also found that one can indeed easily fall into self-censorship, moderating your (political) words and (angry) tone so as to not 'put off' the reader – or the editor. Once more in agreement with my participants, I believe that publishing this article is 'better than nothing'. I do think it is significant that some readers of the web will encounter an accessible critique of the entry of market values into the realm of intimate relations, or an open denunciation of "treating others as if they were commodities", as well as how "success for women under Patriarchy is very clear: to gain male approval". The article also critiques the 'myth of meritocracy', "which has ruined more working class lives than heroin" (her [great] words), together with the machinations of 'emotional neoliberalism' (her phrase). It condemns how under neoliberalism women "have to become a 'sexual entrepreneur' with the only life project of being desirable and dedicating the necessary daily effort to keep up with the novelties of the market. A full budget for sexy clothes and drawers filled with sex toys (hyperlink to Harvey and Gill 2011 [in book by Gill and Scharff])". It expresses anger at the constant exhortation to: "chase an unachievable perfection. The Photoshop body. The rejuvenated vagina, it must not show your age. To be the perfect female, always available and always smiling as sold in porn (hyperlink to García-Favaro and De Miguel 2016)". And it critically unpacks the constitution of a so-called sexual market, where as a woman:

> The fewer problems you entail and the more needs you satisfy, the higher you will score. What does that mean? That you will have access to more and better 'high value men'. And of course the 'luck' of competing with other women for them. To compete is to live for women, or that's what they want to convince us of. […] In that manner, neoliberalism is able to get what it seeks, to separate and confront us. And to keep us busy consuming. […] We don't want competition, we want sisters.

Of course, surrounding the article are very many elements that contradict our words: '10 Expert tips for a perfect skin', 'Tricks to rejuvenate your gaze', 'Things men hate in bed'… the list is interminable. Among what at the time of writing has been

fundamentally positive reader commentary on SNSs, one person posted this evaluation of the article on Twitter: "Everything very good apart from this magazine selling that very image of womanhood". I agree with her, and now I know that so do many of those producing women's magazines. I also now better understand how crucial the money coming from beauty (and fashion) is; and that to change the type of content offered is a very real commercial hazard – in terms of losing advertisers *and* readers. Because of this research I know that the publication of our article has been facilitated by the online platform, where publishing costs are low and the focus is on gaining clicks and shares per page; by the fact that the magazine is relatively small, and so, to borrow my participants' words, it can "take more risks" or be "slightly edgier" (despite belonging to a conventional multinational company); as well as by the personal concerns of the editor – these *do* matter[50]. And I have learned that the *Grazia* model (where there is a greater heterogeneity of subject matter, as discussed in Chapter Nine)—prone as it is to receiving much critique due to dramatic contradictions—is what many feminists in the industry are advocating in order to be able to produce content that they consider important and interesting, whilst keeping publications commercially afloat. Thus, I see my research as offering strong support for the value of incorporating production-based insights in media research, and of thinking together the discursive and the material in sociological inquiries.

This doctoral study of young women's online magazines was an ambitious project. I wanted to examine representations of gender, sex, sexuality and intimate relations. I also aimed to ascertain the difference the online environment makes, including an interactive readership. As soon as I started the research I additionally recognised the importance of examining in detail the ways in which these media relate to feminism. I set out to explore all these things by asking questions about the different dimensions or 'moments' of text, user and production, as well as issues to do with transnational flows together with the significance of cultural context. I established as my focus two countries (and languages) and twelve publications. My final primary data for close analysis consisted of 68 producer interviews, 270 editorial articles and 2,657 forum posts. These sat alongside continued visits to the sites, and myriad of secondary research material gathered over three years, spanning from media packs to trade press to print magazine copies to my own field notes from

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[50] The web editor invited the research participant with whom I collaborated to contribute to the magazine after encountering her work in a feminist blog.

attending events. This is an enormous amount of data for a qualitative research project with strict word limitations. There are, therefore, a variety of issues that I was unable to consider here. But there is also much that I *was* able to attend to in the form of five analytic chapters, together with a methods chapter incorporating empirical elements. I would like to conclude the thesis by pulling together some of the central themes and arguments developed through the analysis, as well as by suggesting a number of potential areas for future research.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

With this thesis I set out to make an empirically-based contribution to feminist media and cultural studies both in theoretical and methodological terms. A central, almost implicit, concern was putting women's magazines back on the scholarly map at a moment of concerted fascination with newer media forms and—particularly 'resistant'—uses of digital technologies. My intention was not, however, a simple return to past research efforts but to revisit them, build on the lessons learned, and take this area of inquiry forward onto the digital age. One important point observed in the literature review was the disproportional attention given to ideological analysis of texts and producer-based inquiries, along with what I considered to be a problematic preoccupation with notions of the 'knowing', 'active', 'agentic' and 'resistant' audiencehood from the 1990s onward, which can be located as part of a broader 'turn to agency (choice, and empowerment)' within the field of media and cultural studies, and much feminism more generally, informed by neoliberal and postfeminist logics (see Gill and Donaghue 2013) – the very logics I sought to critically scrutinise. Against this, my research was informed by the critical tenet that cultural representations matter (Gill 2007a; Orgad 2012), and in particular that women's magazines are an important locus of ideas about gender, sex, sexuality and intimate relationality that affect (albeit in a complex diversity of ways) not only readers but all of us as members of the cultural environment in which these ideas circulate (McRobbie 1996; Farvid and Braun 2006).

The five analytic chapters have endeavoured to make connections between the details of the data, my growing understanding of the women's magazine industry and online publishing, and broader practices, sensibilities or forces. An attempt has also been made to attend to changes and mutations in addition to continuities and the

residual. Furthermore, I have been guided by a commitment to working with complexity and contradiction, not least due to the empirically-supported understanding of my research participants as simultaneously (re-)producing, suffering and contesting sexist media. The findings indicate that there is a multiplicity of opinions within the offices of women's magazines, and that this includes critical voices, many of whom actively work to effect change, having to negotiate opposition from other members of staff, particularly those in more senior positions. More significantly perhaps, all magazine producers face an important number of restrictions that complicate incorporating new representational practices or approaches, ranging from the very real and serious threat of upsetting advertisers, the publishing house or readers, to the past pace of the work online. Overall, the talk of women's magazine producers constitutes a heterogeneous discursive landscape in which longstanding passionate attachments to the genre and deep investments in its femininities tend to coexist with critical self-reflexivity, ambivalence and ideological dilemmas – often due to an awareness of, even agreement with, feminist perspectives about gender and sexual politics.

Chapter Five (*Mediating Intimacy Online*) additionally explored in detail a growing editorial focus on content that was perceived as more 'relatable', 'honest' and 'real'. This is the result of the longing by many producers to generate writing that breaks with past practices and that is close to their life experiences as young women today – as well as a (responding) carefully designed marketing scheme, in a move distinctive of 'cool capitalism', which is based on the incorporation of dissent and disaffection, translated into acceptance and compliance, thereby legitimising the system and debilitating opposition (McGuigan 2009). In addition to user-generated e-cultures (e.g. 'call-out culture') and practices (e.g. personal blogging), I highlighted the reinvigorated interest in feminism as a key catalyst for what I called an 'authenticity turn' in magazines, among other industries, particularly those targeting the millennial generation and female consumers and workers. In turn, both the "clamour for authenticity" (Banet-Weiser 2012: 10) and feminism are related to the explosion of 'love your body' and more recently 'love yourself' texts by companies offering women (particularly beauty-related) products and services, which purport to offer a drastic alternative to the more familiar messages of inadequacy and lack.

Yet in Chapter Eight (*Love Yourself*) I showed how, notwithstanding the noble intentions of some of the actors involved, these texts and the current social concern about a perceived shortage of female confidence more generally largely operate in the service of a gendered technology of neoliberal governmentality. What I termed 'confidence chic' is related to the 'state of esteem' (Cruikshank 1993) and the neoliberal turn to happiness (Davies 2015), as well as, again, the workings of 'cool capitalism' (McGuigan 2009), incorporating as it does dissatisfaction with longstanding unrealistic beauty standards and the 'other-centeredness' of traditional femininity (Lazar 2002). Confidence chic re-conducts women's yearning for change toward the self, turning the focus away from social justice engagements and onto individuated ventures of self-transformation as solutions. Moreover, it at once renders normative and obscures new forms—indeed an intensification and extensification—of labour demanded of women, as well as new forms of misogynistic violence, not least for being figured as always already failing or toxic both for themselves and others – now not only in terms of their bodies but also their psychic lives and sexual practices. I have argued that in addition to the market the technology of confidence tends to ultimately benefit men, for example by in part functioning to ensure that women will engage in pursuing the standards of sexual aesthetics and performance newly demanded of them when in heterosexual relationships. All in all, under confidence chic women's insecurities are (re-)presented as an individual malady rather than a result of power relations deserving collective anger, most directly at a culture obsessively preoccupied with hyper-commodified and hyper-sexualised female bodies – one that my analysis corroborates can be usefully understood in terms of processes of 'pornification'.

Chapter Seven (*Porn Trouble*) traced such a type of process in terms of the adjustments demanded of women by postfeminist sex/ual/ised culture, together with offering an insight into the consequences women might confront if they fail or refuse to participate and accept its logics and narratives. The chapter showed how the heterosexual contract promoted in the data rests upon a profoundly unequal distribution of labour, lack of mutuality and consensus-building. Examining both editorial and forum content about men's consumption of pornography, I unpacked the constitution of a sexual regime based upon male immutability and female adaptation. Here a close connection between men and pornography was naturalised through gender essentialist accounts, notably by figuring men as sexually visual and

insatiable creatures. I also highlighted how distinctly Evolutionary Psychology (EP)-informed pseudo-technoscientific discourses and figurations of body-subjects were intertwined with postfeminist discursive formations and genres of argumentation, including: the heteronormative Mars-Venus framework; a 'cruel but true' credos, which acknowledges some forms of gender-based inequities, but renders these asocial and so non-ideological; and an 'overing' (Ahmed 2012) or relegation to irrelevancy of feminist critique. I considered the concrete articulation of such elements as giving rise to a highly pernicious ideological formation: 'postfeminist biologism'; a notion which I hope will contribute to future feminist interrogations of EP's ongoing popularity in the face of sound, longstanding and widespread criticism of it as scientifically flawed and culturally pernicious. In the chapter I additionally indicated as worrisome the growing entry of EP into media and cultural studies, as is the increasing number of scholars who advocate the union of EP and "difference feminists" (Buss and Schmitt 2011: 770) – indeed there now exists a Feminist Evolutionary Psychology Society (see Sokol-Chang et al. 2013). These recent developments in the academia beg critical attention.

However, the immutability associated with biological determinism conflicts with a deeply gendered neoliberal program, and ultimately the old sexist dynamics of blaming and expecting women to change (for others). In contrast to the ideas about fixity and unaccountability that surround masculinity, women are positioned as freely choosing and fully responsible for their situation and feelings. Repeatedly established as 'the problem', women were urged to undertake the non-reciprocal emotional labour of understanding men, as well as to undergo numerous personal transformations – not just in order to please (so as to keep) men but most simply to enter the realm of acceptable feminine subjects. This notably involved silencing their concerns about pornography and practicing 'reality acceptance'—namely agreeing to rancid gender doctrines, the 'Pleistocene mystique' of EP—together with consuming and imitating the pornographic material consumed by their partners, besides the incorporation of other sex industry aesthetic and practices, in a total 'porn(nified) upgrade' of the self.

In examining the formations of confidence chic and postfeminist biologism or processes of pornification I have expressed a concern about their presence across data sets, pervading both the user-generated and editorial content, and the UK and Spanish material. Indeed, the analysis has tended to focus on such striking

similarities, raising questions about the transnational travels of ideology under the current conditions of globalisation and supporting an understanding of postfeminism as a sensibility that crosses borders and histories, which is then nonetheless variously localised (Dosekun 2015) and whose forms may change, mutate or adapt (Gill et al. 2016). For instance, I have pointed to the strong presence in Spain of the prototypical postfeminist claims that feminism has now achieved its goals and is thus no longer needed. Contrastingly, and more perniciously perhaps, more recurrent in the UK was a newer dynamic based on the promotion of motifs extensively discussed as postfeminist *in the name of feminism* (see Chapter Nine, and below). That is, at some points of the analysis cross-national differences emerged. Another example is the tendency by Spanish magazines to demonstrate a more conservative approach to sex than their British counterparts (Chapter Five). A repeated pattern of accounting for this was articulated via 'Spain is different' discourses, with participants notably pointing to Catholicism. I complicated such a narrative, however, by remarking the powerful presence of BDSM-themed *50 Shades Of Grey* or of discussions about transgenderism (albeit in a celebrity-focused manner); arguing that these decisions are powerfully informed by commercial questions, together with an opportunity to re-affirm Mars-Venus discourses. I also pointed to the assumptions and/or own viewpoints of staff, in addition to their greater sense of risk than UK professionals due to the smaller Spanish market.

Most clearly in the UK, then, seemingly progressive changes are slowly taking place, with the increase for example of editorial content on LGBQT. However, I consider this content to largely demonstrate postfeminist and what we might call postqueer sensibilities, as suggested by the figure of the lesbian bride: '10 Stunning Photos of Two Beautiful Brides and Their Desert Wedding', writes *Cosmopolitan.com*. Moreover, it remains to be seen whether this editorial effort to break with genre conventions is sustained in any (politically) significant manner. The 'worklife' section from *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* that I mentioned in Chapter Four as a positive novelty had by October 2016 disappeared from the main menu, and as I write this conclusion there is a discernable lack of new articles about feminism… But then again the editor-in chief of another Hearst Publication, *Elle UK*, writes in her November 2016 'editor's letter': "As the contrary, confusing, surprising, occasionally uplifting but more often upsetting 2016 draws to a close, I believe there is one thing I absolutely must ask you to do in 2017 and that is to become an active

feminist". One month later *Elleuk.com* publishes a piece declaring: 'The End Of 2016 Means Nothing: Real Change In 2017 Will Happen Only If We Make It. We have to be pro-active about social change'. In yet another article titled 'What Will Life Be Like For Women With Trump In Power?', the publication observes: "it seems as though this election might just mobilize, maybe even radicalize, women who were previously inclined (read: privileged enough to be able) to sit on the sidelines". Therefore, the 'feminist future' of women's magazines seems even more unpredictable in the context of the "Brexit and Trump's victories" (*Elleuk.com*), both of which have been critiqued (albeit with different levels of explicitness and commitment) by the British publications in my sample, speaking from the position of women as well as millennials. Disappointingly, with the exception of *Grazia.es* the Spanish magazines persist in their avoidance of taking a stand on political issues, with articles around the matter being celebrity, fashion or beauty-oriented, such as: 'This is how celebrities have reacted to the triumph by Donald Trump' (*Elle.es*) and 'Melania Trump, the sexiest first lady' (*EnFemenino.com*). Should British women's magazines decide to adopt this approach or to "follow the money" by turning away from feminism as something else becomes the next big thing, as many industry insiders including those at *Elle UK* predicted, I look forward to learning whether users will (continue to) challenge publications.

User interaction in/with women's online magazines was closely examined in Chapter Six (*From Forums to SNSs*). First I showed how forums were highly valued by users for offering a space for anonymous support and advice, often about highly intimate issues. I followed with an inquiry into the varied range of reasons given by producers for the mounting rejection by magazines of the forum platform in favour of SNSs, problematising the way in which this includes outsourcing new modalities of free consumer labour. For example, SNSs intensify the 'work of being watched' (Andrejevic 2002), and the sharing system entails free targeted content circulation work, in addition to increasing receptivity to advertising. I argued that the online publishing industry—with the complicity of some media scholars (e.g. Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013)—is constituting a (gendered) new ideal commodity net/worker, which I called 'shareaholic'. In tracing the growing closures of the forum facility I also highlighted a corporate doctrine of control over young women's discourse, particularly concerning sex (pointing to the 'top-down', commercially-controlled nature of the 'sexualisation of culture'), together with a desire to silence the critique

of editorial lines and the commodities/services of present and potential commercial partners.

In spite of all their attempts, publications are not in full control of reader discourse online, nor can they escape facing critique or the greater level of corporate accountability facilitated by Web 2.0 technologies, cultures and uses. This thesis has shown that women's magazines are being effectively forced to modify some of their editorial practices due to both the collective and individual efforts of young women, which in developing the notion of 'labour of disruption' I have aimed to emphasise as (unpaid) labour in at least three ways. Firstly, companies utilise critique to shape new strategies. Secondly, and once more as highlighted by women's magazine producers themselves, in the online context publications can more readily benefit from negative publicity by gaining clicks. It is under this understanding, namely to avoid giving companies clicks, that SNS users aiming to raise critical awareness about problematic media representations are increasingly sharing screen captures of the web content under discussion rather than hyperlinks. It remains to be seen whether, and if so how, companies react to new ingenious user tactics such as this. Finally, in a more 'traditional' sense of the term labour, these resistance efforts, albeit to different extents depending on the activity (e.g. compare a tweet with running a blog), take skill, and certainly time and energy. One clear example that has figured prominently throughout the thesis is *The Vagenda*. This feminist media paused production after three years in 2015 because of exhaustion and lack of time and funds, as the blog was "never monetised in any way" (Baxter and Cosslett 2016). In their last post titled 'We Need A Lie Down', Baxter and Cosslett[51] explain how: "We have never accepted offers of advertising because we felt it would compromise our message […] like so much feminist labour, you're in it for love, not for money". This laudable resolution meant, however, that: "the amount of time this blog needs is not time that either of the two of us can afford […] It's a full time job".

Many others have taken on a route different to *The Vagenda*, and future research might consider editorial-advertising relationships in self-identified feminist or otherwise progressive websites, which primarily target millennials. Many of these, for instance the US-based *Jezebel.com* and x*oJane.com*, increasingly resemble young women's magazines (see Wright 2016), and particularly their newer online versions

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[51] From: http://vagendamagazine.com/2015/07/we-need-a-lie-down-2/ (Accessed 11/10/2016)

as examined in this thesis. As Meghan Murphy (2016a) highlights, by and large, very much like brands such as *Cosmopolitan*, these sites "refuse to take a stand against prostitution and pornography", and, moreover, "many of them are partnering directly with the sex industry"[52]. Murphy (2016b) further observes how in many feminist websites 'feminism': "vaguely means "equality" (for whom and with what?), "empowerment" (on what basis?), and/or "choice" (in what context?)" – thereby again mirroring the women's magazines studied in this thesis. Indeed, among other things the last analytic chapter, *(Post)Feminist Sensibilities,* has argued that much of the 'new feminism' of women's magazines is postfeminism with a feminist name. I have condemned how publications establish feminism as a commodity, and endeavour to disassociate the movement from defiance to capitalism, gender essentialism, sexual politics, normative femininity or the patriarchal gaze. Figured as a pro-woman attitude or a simple orientation of validation of (claims to) the exercise of individual choice, where no exclusions or judgements whatsoever are to be made, feminism is totally evacuated of political meaning or purpose. Under the neoliberal re-formulation of feminism, political critique and collective struggle to change *society* are replaced by psychologies of positivity and an entrepreneurial spirit to transform the *self*.

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Speaking to Mohanty's (2003) transnational solidarity model discussed in Chapter One, I hope that this cross-cultural study will serve to encourage journalists to build more networks and organise politically to demand change in their working conditions at women's magazines in particular and in the media industry in general, where much remains to be done to tackle discrimination against women – from the gendered distribution of labour to the machismo of workplace cultures. Also of vital need is a wide and concerted campaign against the online misogyny hard at work to silence female voices in the public realm. According to Baxter and Cosslett (2016), in the current world of journalism: "There is this idea that it's part and parcel of the job, and that you just need to grow a thick skin and put up with it". In their characteristic humorous way, they followed by making the very serious comment:

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[52] For example, *Mic.com* has: "teamed up with everyone's favorite porn destination, Pornhub"; and pornography actor and director James Deen had a sex advice column at *TheFrisky.com*, until being accused of multiple counts of rape and sexual assault in 2015 (*www.thefrisky.com*).

"But if somebody is threatening to murder and rape you, I think that goes above what you can consider legitimate criticism as a female journalist". The level of abuse received: "It does make you go, 'I wonder how much energy I have for this'. It is a problem" (Baxter and Cosslett 2016). Baxter, who is "an editor on a comment desk", lamented "the amount of female writers that I get who start off so enthusiastic" to then quit after publishing a few articles "because there is so much abuse that comes from it online". In turn, Cosslett declared: "I have lost count of the amount of women, young women, who have come up after talks and said, "I really really want to be a journalist but I'm scared because I see the crap that you and other women journalists get"". This is reaching such levels of occurrence that even the new *Cosmopolitan UK* editor-in-chief, ahead of International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, dedicated her 'letter from the editor' in the November 2016 issue to sharing her experience of being attacked online after publishing work.

Throughout the thesis I have pointed to the presence of a violent ethos of self-determination that repudiates notions of social/external constraints, pressures or influences, and ultimately fosters the undoing of social empathy. One related issue discussed at different moments but that I believe merits further critical scrutiny is the rendering normative of certain forms of media consumer labour. My analysis has indicated that media consumers are now expected to strategically choose the exact media texts, and then textual readings, that will service their needs, ambitions or desires; as well as to always engage critically, rationally deconstruct, and to remain unaffected by representations. More work remains to be done concerning such expectations not only on behalf of media companies but actually also consumers themselves (as seen in the posts of forums users), along with the ways in which 'media literacy' is understood by the range of interested parties – from companies to government to schools; making connections to dynamics of power under neoliberalism. For example, we might want to place less emphasis on the reading practices of consumers and more on demands for change in the media. There is an urgent need to push back against neoliberal logics responsibilising individuals for all aspects of their wellbeing: although we now have more complex understandings than those in the direct transmission model, it seems both intellectually unbecoming and politically detrimental to deny that media representations very much matter and that therefore those producing them must be held to account.

Again speaking to my concern with corporate responsibility, the realist assumptions that pervade the arena of journalism warrants in-depth attention. In the interviews, notwithstanding some exceptions, participants again and again talked about publications as more or less 'reflecting' 'reality', with little—or, at least to my mind, insufficient—sense of their role in *constructing* particular versions of the world. This is something that I have also observed during my teaching for a Magazine Journalism and Publishing degree (in yet another unexpected outcome of this doctoral research). Large numbers of the future magazine professionals I have taught appeared to encounter for the first time social constructionist perspectives concerning representation – as well as gender, continuously conflated with 'sex'. This points to a pressing need for feminist scrutiny and intervention.

For those interested in implementing new practices within the sector, it would be useful to conduct a production study that better charts the dynamics of influence and restriction by incorporating interviews with the editorial team alongside those to whom the blame for the problematic aspects of magazines is attributed (in addition to consumers), namely the advertisers, PRs and those from the fashion industry. Ethnographic and even collaborative magazine production research would also be particularly valuable. It is likely, however, that gaining access would be enormously complicated. At the same time, it does not seem entirely impossible, especially in the current moment, for some magazines to come to an agreement with a researcher taking a feminist liberal and reformist position, in an Orbach-Dove type of venture. Yet this sort of endeavour where feminism is adapted and ultimately put to work for these commercial entities—often creating more pernicious and difficult to contest ideological machinations (e.g. Love Your Body discourses)—is one that many feminists would reject, including myself. I don't want slightly more sufferable technologies of gender – I want a world *without* gender.

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To conclude, on the whole the examined editorial and user-generated content of women's online magazines based in the UK and in Spain operates to discipline women in their entirety—their bodies, sexual practices, their emotions and thought—into injurious and unjust arrangements. The transnational technologies of gender and mediated intimacy studied in this thesis primarily advance depoliticised,

individualised and by and large androcentric interpretations of women's life experiences and discontents, built according to, and obscured by, neoliberalism and postfeminism. In this context, crucial matters such as intimate relations, self-esteem or pornography are being rendered increasingly unintelligible as political or feminist issues. Such a manoeuvre works to disarticulate the potential for solidarity among women as well as collective resistance, energies which are rechanneled into technologies of self-governance through self-scrutiny, self-work, and, of course, consumption. In fact feminism itself is increasingly unrecognisable as a radical political movement – and I have emphasised that this is the case in women's magazines, and popular media more generally, but also in some activism and scholarly work.

I want a feminism that is about radically transforming societies as we know them, about finding new ways of being, acting, feeling, relating to ourselves and others; a feminism that is about an ethics of (social) *justice* – not the search for a (personal, momentary) 'feel good' kick; about a politics of (angry) *rupture* – not (willing) compliance; an exercise of the *imagination* – not adaptation. I want a feminism that ultimately aims to *dismantle* patriarchal and capitalist systems – not multiply and diversify their reach under more seemingly benign or transgressive guises. According to McRobbie (1999: 46), the feminist scholarship on the woman's magazine also tells the history of feminist cultural studies, indeed: "it can be read in its own right as part of the history and development of feminism in the academy". I would like to think that this thesis has served as a reminder of how our writing and teaching matters, how our vocabularies, claims, explanations can make a very real impact in the world; they have social and political ramifications. Ultimately, I hope that my work contributes to a collective effort to re-radicalise feminist thought and action in the academy and beyond, a collective resistance against—the articulation of dissent that is "genuinely disconcerting" (McGuigan 2009: xi), that constitutes real trouble for—commodity logic, gender essentialism, individualism and 'choice feminism'… against all those old and newer tools of capitalist patriarchy that the analysis here presented has endeavoured to demystify – because they isolate, limit and hurt us all.

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Generic interview guide

1. Background and professional experience
1.1. Have you always been interested in working in the women's magazine industry? What about online magazines in particular?
1.2. Do/did you read women's magazines? What pleasures do they offer?
1.3. How did you get into this field?
1.4. What is the appeal of the industry?
2. The publication/s and their readers
2.1. How would you describe the publication/s you work for? How does it compare and contrast with other similar publications or sites?
2.2. What kind of audience is the publication you work for aimed at? Does this differ from the print version?
2.3. How much do you know about your readers, and how do you find out about them?
3. Content production (general)
3.1. Could you describe what your role entails?
3.2. What do you like most and least about your job?
3.3. Are the ways in which content is selected and created different for the online and print platforms? How does this affect the final product?
3.4. Could you describe your relationship with advertisers? Are there any differences between the editorial-advertising relationship in online and print magazines?
4. Sex and relationships
4.1. What are the most popular types of sex and relationship features or topics, and why do you think that is?
4.2. Are there particular ideas or themes that you like/don't like writing about?
4.3. How do you source ideas for your pieces?
4.4. In your opinion, what use does the reader make of the sex and relationship content in the magazine?
4.5. Who do you address with your work?
4.6. Can you tell me what you like and dislike, if anything, about the messages

about sex and relationships in women's magazines?

5. *Women's magazines and society*
5.1. Why would you say women's magazines exist or are needed?
5.2. Would you say women's magazines play a particular role with respect to readers? What about society at large?
5.3. What do you think about the critiques that representations of femininity and gender relations in women's magazines have received?
5.4. What would you say is the relationship between women's magazines and feminism? Ask about past, present, future.

6. *The forums*
6.1. How important are the forums for the magazine?
6.2. Who uses the forums?
6.3. Do you read the forums? If so, does what you read in the forums impact your work in any way?
6.4. How do advertisers feel about the forums?
6.5. A number of online women's magazines have recently closed the forums. Why would you say this could be?

7. *Conclusion*
7.1. How would you like women's magazines to develop in the future?
7.2. Many academics have said that people working for women's magazines are difficult to recruit for research, why would you say this is?
7.3. Is there any other topic/issue that you think I should look into or consider?
7.4. Is there anything you would like to add or clarify?
7.5. Would you like to ask me anything?

Appendix B. Participant information sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Sex and Relationships in Women's Online Magazines:
The Case of Spain and the UK

What is the purpose of the study?
This is a PhD research project funded by the Department of Culture and Creative Industries, School of Arts and Social Sciences, City University London. The project investigates women's online magazines produced in the UK and Spain, with a particular focus on sex and relationships. As part of this, the interview study seeks to inquire into the insights, views and experiences of professionals working in this field. The research findings will inform debates both within the industry and the academia about sex and relationships advice and education, as well as the future of women's magazine media more generally (in light of the digital revolution, media convergence, and participatory culture).

Who has reviewed the study?
This study has been approved by the Department of Culture and Creative Industries Research Ethics Committee, City University London.

Why have I been invited?
You have been invited to take part in this research due to your professional experience in the women's magazine industry (online), most likely as a sex and relationships writer and/or editor (freelance or on staff; past or present).

Do I have to take part?
Participation in the project is voluntary. If you agree to take part, you reserve the right to withdraw from the study without an explanation up to three months after the interview.

What will happen if I take part?
You are being asked to take part in one interview, which is expected to last approximately 1 hour. It will take place at a convenient place and time, as agreed by you and the researcher.

In the interview, you will be asked questions relating to women's magazines generally, and the online platform and sex and relationships content in particular. There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in your views and experiences. You can refuse to answer questions without having to give a reason.

The interview will be audio-recorded to ensure the researcher has an accurate record of what you say, and later transcribed.

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If you decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form confirming that you understand and agree to participate in the study.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Everything you say in the interview will be treated with complete confidentiality, and you will remain anonymous.

Your name and the magazine title(s) you work(ed) for will not be audio-recorded, and will only be known by the researcher. In the interview, we will talk about 'your magazine' or 'the title you work for', and never mention your name.

In reports resulting from this research, any potentially identifying information will be withheld or replaced with generic terms, e.g.: 'participant A', 'magazine 1', 'competing magazine', 'magazine initiative'. Only your gender, approximate age (e.g. 'late twenties') and whether you are freelance or on staff will be indicated.

Data will be stored in a secure location, and used only for the purposes of research. The data will not be kept for longer than necessary, and will be disposed of confidentially. This research will abide by the Data Protection Act of 1998.

What will happen to results of the research study?

Fully anonymised short quotes from the interview will appear in my doctoral dissertation, and potentially academic journal publications and/or conference presentations. You are welcome to request a report/summary of the results.

Further information and contact details

If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, please contact a member of the research team at any time[1]:

Researcher: Laura García Favaro, PhD Student. E: ████████████████████

Research Supervisor: Rosalind Gill, Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis.
E: ████████████████

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet

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1. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through the University complaints procedure, by contacting the Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee, Anna Ramberg. E: ████████████████

Appendix C: Informed consent form

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INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Sex and Relationships in Women's Online Magazines:

The Case of Spain and the UK

Please initial box

1.	I agree to take part in the above City University London research project. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the participant information sheet, which I may keep for my records. I understand this will involve: • Being interviewed by the researcher • Allowing the interview to be audiotaped	
2.	This information will be held and processed for the following purpose: The interviews will be transcribed and records will be examined in order to obtain an insight into the views and experiences of professionals producing content for women's online magazines. I understand that any information I provide is confidential, and that no information that could lead to the identification of any individual will be disclosed in any reports on the project, or to any other party. No identifiable personal data will be published. The identifiable data will not be shared with any other organisation. I understand that I have given approval for my gender, approximate age and my status as a staffer or freelancer to be used in reports arising from this research.	
3.	I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw at any stage up to three months after the interview.	
4.	I agree to the researcher (Laura García Favaro) recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose set out in this statement and my consent is conditional on the researcher complying with the duties and obligations under the Data Protection Act 1998.	

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5.	Additional agreement:	
6.	I agree to take part in the above study.	

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   Signature   Date

_____   _____   _____
Name of Researcher   Signature   Date

*** When completed: 1 copy for participant, 1 copy for researcher ***

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