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## **Girls' Gendered Identities and the Media: Feminist Dis/Identifications**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is based on some of the findings of my Masters dissertation: a feminist analysis of middle-class teenage British girls' construction of gendered identity in relation to media consumption. I will discuss girls' interpretation of commodified third wave feminism and seek to establish what kind of feminisms, if any, they create through this process. I will use the ideology of romance to explore how girls occupy a particular discursive position that discourages them from feminist identification. I argue that a process of dialogue with younger women is needed in order to create a feminism that is both relevant to their experiences and politically motivated. The paper will close by considering how, given the value of popular culture and the media in young women's lives, we can utilize these resources creatively to help us imagine new feminisms.

**Key words:** post/feminism, consumption, popular culture, girl power, ideology of romance, dialogue



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## Introducing the research

This research is based on in depth focus groups involving eight fifteen year-old middle class British girls. Re-negotiating and exploring the meanings of feminisms with young women involves setting-up real dialogues that firstly involves them in the construction of the meanings of feminisms and also provides the opportunity to see feminisms as a tool to understand problems and make changes in their lives. In order to achieve this I framed my research within popular culture consequently highlighting its significance for the construction of gender identities. Therefore choosing popular culture as a methodological route to discuss feminism enabled me to reach the young women's voices from a different perspective, one which was non-threatening and had relevant meaning for their personal and group identity. It was a fruitful route to interrogate the meanings of feminism because I used the version they most often have contact with through the media and consumption. The aim of my research was to explore how young women's understanding of feminism was shaped by the cultural resources available to them but also how they negotiated these texts to create their own gendered cultural and social identities. Moreover, as well as researching these issues the dominant discourses which act as frameworks to the girls' engagement with feminisms were investigated.

## Using Media Stimuli

Not surprisingly the analysis revealed that the respondents were active producers of culture who are not easily manipulated by the media but take up or reject images and texts depending on their individual tastes, and relevance to their personal lives.

During the focus groups the discussion around the media, romance and feminism was facilitated by the use of 'stimulus material', actual media texts around which a discussion was based. They included an article entitled 'Real Footballers' Wives' from the magazine *More* and a song by Natasha Bedingfield entitled 'Single'.

The use of the material proved very successful as the girls were often already familiar with the material and also because it provided specific examples of different kinds of femininity currently available in the media. These two texts represented two extremely different versions of femininity and lifestyle and provided contrasting resources to elaborate on. Moreover the first

text (the magazine article) allowed me to discuss the girls' opinion on financial autonomy whereas the second (the song) was a good way to start a discussion about a kind of alternative to heterosexual romance. Using these stimuli was also valuable because the participants' interpretation of these texts was particularly sophisticated, showing awareness of the media industry's marketing and targeting audience strategies.

### **Key Concept**

I used three key concepts in this research: Consumption, Class and the Ideology of Romance. In this paper I will focus on the latter: My approach to 'the ideology of romance' should be seen in relation to the construction of girls' gender identities and their investment in compulsory heterosexuality in the context of a world where although girls are not dependent on boys, the promise of true love continues to shape girls' fantasies of the future. Whilst my conceptualization of romance does not aim to restore its status by re-claiming its value as a feminine pleasure as some feminists have (Radway, 1991). I would suggest that studying the processes through which romance constructs gender and sexual identity is more profitable than discrediting it as synonymous with domination and misogyny. As Thompson argues feminism should reconsider its relationship to romance and aim to re-think the issue in positive new ways that acknowledge its power: 'Effective feminist work with teenagers must speak to the magnetism and concerns of sex and romance not dismiss them.' (Thompson, 1983: 377)

### **Ideology of Romance in the Media**

As the ideology of romance appeared to be the overarching framework in the construction of my participants' femininities, I chose to focus on how this is deployed in their interpretation of the Natasha Bedingfield song and the magazine article on footballers' wives. What follows is my close analysis of these interpretations.

### **Juxtaposed readings of 'Single':**

The first group showed sophisticated reading skills and awareness of the 'hypocrisy' of marketed media products and their search for a target audience. Their comments stressed that

they knew what the song's message was but weren't 'taken in' by it and were critical of its endorsement of singledom:

'I think she's just doing it for the publicity stunt.' (Charlie)

'She obviously doesn't want to be Single she's just doing it to target the single people to make them think oh that's good I can identify with that' (Daisy)

'I don't think anyone who listens to it thinks oh that's good at least I've got someone on my side'. (Emily)

'She's really making a bit of a fuss about being single if it really didn't matter that she was single then she wouldn't be singing about it would she?' (Daisy)

It also doesn't give any advantages of being single it just says 'I'm single and that's great that's ok that's how I want it to be' (Claire)

This short conversation about the lyrics of the song highlighted that the respondents were dubious about its naïve attempt at making singledom acceptable and appealing. Although they recognized that the song was a change from the usual love/breaking up song themes, they saw the singer's insistence in proclaiming her independence as suspicious in itself. Their refusal to see singledom as a counter-discourse to heterosexuality clearly illustrates that the ideology of romance is a current discourse that continues to shape how girls read texts and by implication occupy discursive positions. Their rejection of this song as a potentially empowering lifestyle also reveals that contemplating alternatives lifestyles to heterosexual romance is not considered as within the realm of their possibilities.

The second group had quite different interpretations about why the singer might be expressing happiness about being single: they seemed to associate specific events in the singer's life with the creation of this song. They saw the song as a strategy to cope with pain and loss:

'At this stage everyone's like 'I really want a boyfriend' but she's older and at that age when she's been messed around by a few guys and got fed up of that.' (Ann)

'She's had more experience, she might have just split up from her boyfriend and it was really nasty or something' (Marie)

Yeah she's just split up and might be in her 'I hate men' phase'. (Ann)

‘Maybe she’s had bad experiences like he cheated on her.’ (Lisa)

‘I think she’s not really happy about it she’s just saying it because actually she’s really upset. I think she’s just split up from her boyfriend and she’s all like ‘I don’t care’ and I’m gonna make a song but actually she’s crying about it every night.’ (laughs) (Ann)

Firstly these comments highlight the girls’ pessimistic expectations about heterosexual relationships as they anticipate that they often result in feeling hurt and being badly treated. Moreover their interpretation of the song is clearly maintaining the myth of true love as the respondents only consider singledom a possibility if the singer faces rejection from her boyfriend. The fact that the girls read alongside the ideology of romance shows how extensively it continues to permeate in all areas of social life. Besides the last comment shows an interpretation of breaking-up that puts pressure on women to conceal their emotions and appear strong and successful. Walkerdine argues that middle class girls see emotionality as something that needs to be suppressed and disciplined in order to distance themselves from the passionate and sentimental working-class thereby asserting their respectability (2001). This suggests that for the respondent performing emotionality should be avoided because it is inappropriate for her class.

I would argue that the girls’ varied interpretations of this song are all set in the context of romantic love and therefore reveals their personal opinions about singledom. It is clear that they see the singer’s ‘declaration of independence’ and supposed happiness at being single within the bounds of heterosexual romance, so important is this framing discourse that it even affects a text which is trying to challenge the supremacy of heterosexual romance. The girls, maybe in an attempt to by-pass the expected dominant reading of the song, clearly refuse to see it as an empowering depiction of singledom and legitimizing an ‘alternative’ lifestyle.

### **Responses to Footballers Wives’ Article**

Romance and ‘quest for wealth’ seemed inter-linked in the girls’ minds, especially in their imagined future lifestyles. This was clear when I asked them if the footballers wives lifestyle appealed to them:

‘I think it would be nice to have that lifestyle because you wouldn’t have to work you’d have more time and more opportunities to do things that you wanted and you’d have the money to do that as well.’(Lisa)

‘Yes I like the whole idea of being a princess in a nice mansion.’(Ann)

‘You could go to spas’ (Ann)

‘I really wouldn’t mind some man spending lots of money on me’ (Lisa)

These comments were generally a topic of heated debate as other girls didn’t agree and highlighted instead the importance of financial autonomy and having rewarding experiences that aren’t linked to consumption, especially friendship. The type of lifestyle which some of the girls imagined if they were rich (or had a rich partner) were clearly framed firstly within the ideology of romance as financial protection was seen as part of true love. This clearly shows how the discourses of romantic love and consumption intersect to shape girls’ fantasies of the future. Moreover their hypothetical consumption\_practices showed that they would use their advantageous financial position to invest in beauty therefore conforming to ideas of conventional femininity. However consumption especially through shopping had an important place in the girls’ lives and they stressed the level of control they had over it: the rewards it brought them both as a bonding activity and as a means of temporary empowerment or ‘confidence boost’ were valuable to them.

### Feminist Dis/Identifications

Introducing the cultural trend of girl power (the version they most often have contact with through the media) and juxtaposing it with feminism lead to some particularly insightful comments from participants, which revealed how they were positioning themselves within these discourses.

#### **‘Seeing through’ commodified feminism**

Some of the characteristics of post-feminism mentioned in the literature ‘feminist rhetoric is being packaged and sold by the media’ and the new kind of feminism ‘advocates taking charge

and earning power through your sexuality and looks' were issues raised in the focus group and incited very perceptive comments (Whelehan, 2000:136). When discussing 'girl power' in the focus groups I found that the girls' understanding of this cultural trend was sophisticated as they analyzed commodified feminism as a marketed discourse with a concealed patriarchal agenda. This was especially clear when I asked them about the difference between feminism and girl power:

'When you think of girl power you think of very girly, glittery and pinky stuff which I think is very anti-feminist because it's like about looking good and getting the boys cos it's for young people. So I think girl power is kind of anti feminist' (Emily)

'It was made up by corporations so that it appeals to girls cos everyone is saying 'girl power'. I think it's preying on how they think that girls feel inferior to boys maybe and they shouldn't so they're all like 'don't' 'have girl power' instead.'(Charlie)

It may be useful to juxtapose this comment with Riordan's criticism of this new kind of sexy feminism as one that can be bought and sold on the market and associates empowerment with body image and beauty (2001). It seems clear that at least some of the girls are unwilling 'to buy' this version of feminism and are very capable of distinguishing between a feminist project originating from political change and feminist rhetoric being packaged and sold by media industries.

### **Reading Girl power through Style**

The marketability and emphasis on looks that feminists have criticized post-feminism for were the most important subject my participants raised when we discussed girl power and the reason why they disliked it. However the way the respondents compared each other's version of 'girl power' was through a discussion of what girl power clothing might be like. Some saw it as 'little girls dressed in pink', or 'sophisticated suits with high heels for older women' while others said 'girls in army suits controlling the world'. These style definitions clearly reflect their varied interpretations of feminism, but more importantly it is the medium through which they define them that is most significant. The use of material goods in girls' discussion of theoretical concepts clearly indicates the importance of consumption in the girls' lives. Therefore we should

stress that although they are critical of the marketability of girl power and its emphasis on beauty, their own discussions of it revolve around the consumption of fashion.

### **Girl power vs Feminism**

The girls' responses about the difference between feminism and girl power showed their awareness of a 'generation gap' and the difference of age and experiences as creating fragmentation in Feminism (Budgeon, 2001). Participants seem to associate 'girl power' and feminism with two different generations:

'It kind of sounds like girl power is for young girls and feminism is for women.' (Daisy)

Moreover one girl's definition of feminism highlighted the fact that the girls saw it as a discourse remote from them and their everyday experiences:

'It sounds like something from about 1960 when they're all burning their bras and fighting for equality. It doesn't feel like that now cos we kind of have equality or we're supposed to have...'(Charlie)

This clearly shows that the generation gap discussed in the literature is a reality that distances girls and young women from the relevancy of feminism, as they see it as an obsolete discourse defined by stereotypes. The last part of the comment suggests that there may be a place for feminism as doubt is expressed over the current state of equality.

As the respondents had very different takes on what the difference and similarities might be between feminism and girl power it became clear that they generally preferred feminism to girl power for different reasons. This particular comment shows a very specific conceptualization of both feminism and girl power discourses:

'I think that like girl power is like 'girls are best' but feminism I don't think is about that I think it's about that we're equal, like girl power its all about girls and they rock but feminism it's just trying to say that women are just as important as men, no more and no less important.' (Claire)

This comment clearly frames the two discourses within existing feminist theories, whilst girl power is rejected because of its 'extreme radicalism' as it defines the female sex as superior, she sees feminism as a liberal discourse where 'equality' (achieved through changes in legislation)

is the key argument. This association of radical feminism with girl power and feminism with liberal feminism was also apparent in other girls' comments:

(on girl power) 'I just think of women having men's jobs and being strong without men' (Charlie)

(on feminism) 'If men have rights then women should make a stand. Because of the olden days when women were weak.' (Ann)

Here the contrast appears even clearer as girl power rhetoric identifies men as the problem and seeks to struggle with them, whereas feminism is seen as a movement which brings about change through 'rights' legislative reforms.

Their evaluation of the two different discourses suggests awareness of their validity and how they might use them in the future. Their perceptive comments about commodified feminism suggest that they are able to construct their own discourse, one that both accommodates their needs and provides a different version of empowerment. Moreover it also highlights the need to re-negotiate what feminism means for young people and the importance of 'creating meaningful dialogue between younger and older women' (Frith, 2001) in order to construct feminism as a valuable tool.

### Mediating New Feminisms?

Determining what kind of feminisms the girls produced through their consumption of commodified feminism was difficult as they did not associate with the girl-power trend and rejected commodified feminism because of its commercial and over-simplistic messages about how women should lead their lives. I would argue they didn't produce their own coherent feminism but instead took up some parts of several different discourses and operated using a 'pick and choose' model in order to create a group identity and ideology that benefited their discursive position and therefore suited their needs. They valued and used the notion of 'friendship' and 'girl solidarity' that commodified feminism encouraged but did not take up the trend in its entirety as they disagreed with some of its components. They also used some parts of a second-wave liberal feminist heritage such as women's rights and the importance of financial

autonomy. However they generally did not see feminism itself as very relevant to their lives and did not want to be labeled as such probably because of social costs involved.

### **Conclusion**

This research has sought to address what Morgan identifies as a lack of communication between feminist academics and young women ‘being at the margins of feminist theory is inevitable when young women are excluded from the process of analyzing practice and creating theoretical frameworks.’(Morgan, 1995: 131) Thus I have shown the benefits of creating meaningful dialogues with young women as a valuable tool not only to understand how they respond to already existing feminisms but also as a way of establishing how we might, together produce a feminism that takes their experience seriously but also refuses to be dictated by the pressures of consumption and capitalism. As we have seen the value and importance popular culture and the media takes in girls’ lives, we should try to utilize these resources constructively to imagine ways in which they can help create new feminisms.

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