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# *Entitled to consume: postfeminist femininity and a culture of post-critique*



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**ABSTRACT** The article provides a critical analysis of a postfeminist identity that is emergent in a set of beauty advertisements, called 'entitled femininity'. Three major discursive themes are identified, which are constitutive of this postfeminist feminine identity: 1) 'It's about me!' focuses on pampering and pleasuring the self; 2) 'Celebrating femininity' reclaims and rejoices in feminine stereotypes; and 3) 'Girling women' encourages a youthful disposition in women of all ages. The article shows that entitled femininity occupies an ambivalent discursive space, which celebrates as well as repudiates feminism, and re-installs normative gendered stereotypes. The ambivalence, it is argued, contributes to fostering a culture of post-critique, which numbs resistance and deflects criticism. For all its appearances to be pro-women, feminine entitlement based squarely on an entitlement to consume offers a rather limited and problematic vision of femininity and gender equality.

**KEY WORDS:** *beauty advertisements, consumerism, entitled femininity, pleasure, post-critique, postfeminist discourse*

## **1. Introduction**

Whereas traditionally media representations of women were repudiated for featuring women in narrow, stereotypical ways as passive and as sexual objects, emphasizing their domestic roles, according little visibility to women in the public sphere, and for trivializing women's culture, the contemporary media represent women as assertive, in control and autonomous, having a strong public presence, while confidently embracing feminine practices. Although in Singapore the former type of representations has not disappeared, the latter, indexing a global neo-liberal discourse of postfeminism, has become increasingly common. A postfeminist discourse assumes that feminist struggles have ended, viz., that women today enjoy full equality and can 'have it all' if they put

their minds to it; in fact, that it is becoming a women's world, with a celebration of all things feminine.

This article is part of a larger project that investigates the articulation of the postfeminist discourse and its subject effects in the advertising media. The data for the study are 'beauty ads' for women that deal with cosmetics, fragrances, skincare, hair and body treatments. Collected randomly and continuously since 2001, the growing data set comprise mostly print ads from Singapore's main English daily and its weekend supplements, and local women's magazines and beauty catalogues inserted in these magazines. Although the ads are all located in Singapore, the majority are for international beauty brands situated in Europe, Japan and the USA.

Based on the data, I have previously analysed the formation of postfeminist feminine identities in relation to broadly emerging themes such as 'emancipation' and 'empowerment' (Lazar, 2004, 2006). In this article, the focus is on the theme of 'entitlement', and an 'entitled femininity' as a subject-effect of the discourse. The attitude of entitlement is exemplified in Wolf's proclamation that 'We deserve lipstick if we want it, *and* free speech; we deserve to be sexual *and* serious – or whatever we please; we are entitled to wear cowboy boots to our own revolution' (1992: 2, original emphasis). The construction of an entitled femininity in the ads, as will be shown in the article, is a postfeminist subject who is entitled to be pampered and pleased, and to unapologetically embrace feminine practices and stereotypes, and invited to become 'girls' once more.

Informed by a feminist critical discourse analytic perspective (see Lazar, 2005), I am interested to examine contemporary texts and practices where a 'handle' on questions of power and ideology are becoming ever more complex and elusive, even as their operation gets more insidious. Specifically, I am concerned to investigate 'a culture of post-critique' that is being fostered by postfeminism as a 'dominating discursive system' (Tasker and Negra, 2007) globally and across media forms, as feminism is made to seem irrelevant. As Greer (1999) puts it bluntly, 'The future is female, we are told. Feminism has served its purpose and should eff off.'

In order to appreciate better the discourse of postfeminism and the culture of post-critique it entails, in the next section, I shall outline key positions adopted by feminist scholars in relation to the mainstreaming of feminism in media and popular culture. Also in the next section, the rationale for choosing beauty ads as the site for analysing postfeminist feminine construction is provided. In the section following that, the analysis of postfeminist entitled femininity is presented, and the article concludes by outlining why critical feminist analysis of discourse continues to be a necessary and urgent undertaking.

## 2. *Postfeminism and the media*

Although aspects of postfeminism had originated in the popular media in the UK and USA in the early 1980s, it was during the 1990s that the term became concretized as a discursive phenomenon (Tasker and Negra, 2007), and started

to permeate the popular media more globally. Early on, some feminists theorized postfeminist culture as a media-supported antifeminist attack against the achievements made by the women's movement in the West. The antifeminism constituted a massive backlash that presented women as miserable and frustrated because of feminism, and thereby pointedly blaming feminism as a failure (Faludi, 1992). Although reactionary attacks against the women's movement cannot be overlooked, some scholars, however, consider the backlash thesis to be an overstatement, which is unable to account for more complex relationships between feminism and the media.

Whereas for Faludi postfeminism was unequivocally antifeminist, other theorists were keen to examine how postfeminism was involved in the popularization of feminist ideas. Among these, some viewed 'popular feminism' quite favourably. *Oprah* is cited as a good example of media that attempts to empower women by making feminist ideas accessible to a wider popular audience (Squire, 1997).

More commonly, however, popular feminism has been viewed sceptically as co-optative, that is, harnessing feminism to other discourses which neutralize its radical potential, while making it appear as if change has been effected (Brundson, 1986; Hollows, 2000). Co-optation not only takes the 'bite' out of feminism, it characteristically leaves traditional femininity remarkably intact. The co-optative view is adopted especially by critics of consumer culture. Goldman (1992), for instance, describes co-optation in advertising as a process of distilling feminist values and priorities to produce a signifier emptied of its political content.

Another influential 'take' on the entry of feminism into the popular is offered by McRobbie (2007: 27), for whom contemporary postfeminist culture positively 'invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account' in order to emphasize that it is no longer needed. Unlike the backlash, which overtly rejects feminist politics, in McRobbie's account it is by virtue of feminism's success that it gets relegated to the past as 'a spent force'. Unlike the co-optative model, in which normative femininity is undisturbed, the postfeminist culture, according to McRobbie, produces 'new femininities' that are neither 'feminist' nor are they 'traditional' forms of femininity, which goes towards breaking down the dichotomy between 'feminist' and 'feminine' identities. Aligned with McRobbie's position, Tasker and Negra (2007) further note that feminism not only gets assimilated into the popular (as in the case of the co-optative model), feminism is simultaneously 'othered' as extreme, difficult and unpleasurable.

There is much value in McRobbie's stance as well as the co-optative model, both of which inform my current position. I take the view that postfeminism is an immensely complex and contradictory discursive space that assimilates feminist signifiers as well as feminists' repudiations of normative patriarchal practices. At the same time, it is alert to debates and shifts within the feminist academy between 'second' and 'third' wave feminisms,<sup>1</sup> including critique of second wave positions by feminists identified with the third wave, and preoccupations that are distinctively third wave. The 'pastness' of feminism is a significant current of postfeminist discourse, traces of which can be found and sometimes even valued in the present (Tasker and Negra, 2007). However, I would suggest that postfeminist discourse is not only about rendering feminism as 'past' as envisaged

by McRobbie, for whom 'feminism' implies *second* wave feminist currents. If we accept that postfeminist discourse also actively incorporates 'third wave' thinking in the feminist academy, as well as the voices of self-professed feminists whose positions appear friendly to the postfeminist ethos, then a postfeminist discourse also presents itself as well-informed by and aligned with current feminist impulses. A postfeminist discourse deploys a variety of positions with respect to feminisms, so that at times it is celebratory and at other times it distances itself from a past politics now felt misconceived (Projansky, 2001). At the same time, in terms of subjectivities, it is useful to see postfeminist discourse productively as engendering new forms of femininity; rather than assume this as a *fait accompli*, it is worth maintaining the interrogative in 'New femininities?' as Gill and Arthurs (2006: 444) have done in titling their special issue on the subject. As they note, whether the femininities are indeed 'new' is an open question and needs to be interrogated in terms of what is novel about contemporary articulations of gender, and what continuities remain.

In the final part of this section, I shall explain why I consider beauty advertising a productive epistemological site for the analysis of postfeminist discourse and subjectivity. Beauty practices represented in ads constitute a key site for the construction of feminine identity, and in the contemporary period this has become a contested site of meanings. Beauty practices and their marketing through ads have long been criticized by some second wave feminists as oppressive upon female consumers for their promulgation of impossible and potentially harmful beauty standards. Many feminists have also repudiated these practices as objectifying and exploitative of women's insecurities. Some feminists, more recently, have reclaimed beauty practices as a source of pleasure women derive in terms of decoration and transformation of the body (Walter, 1998; Wolf, 1992). In Wolf's words, 'We need to embrace pleasure, choice in adornment, our own real beauty and sexuality *and* call ourselves feminists' (1992: 1). Constructing the 'politics of pleasure', in fact, has been identified as one of the salient features of third wave feminism in the 1990s and 2000s (Zeisler, 2008). Situated thus, postfeminism re-energizes the beauty culture by offering new rationale for guilt-free consumerism disassociated from the 'burdens' of reproachful (second wave) feminism (Tasker and Negra, 2007). Ads that deal with self-beautification have become a productive space for the appropriation of feminist signifiers, interwoven with patriarchal codes of femininity, without apparent contradiction.

### *3. The construction of 'entitled femininity'*

This section focuses on the analysis of 'entitled femininity', a subject effect of the discourse of postfeminism, which claims leisure and pleasure as women's entitlement, along with the celebration of all things feminine and 'girly'. There is a certain 'knowingness' that underlies this entitlement, which allows for the construction of a narcissistic, confident and fun female subjectivity. The discourse analytic approach used in the study operationalizes Foucault's concept of discourse formations (1972) (understood as systematic, socio-historically

contingent signification practices) for text analysis. This involves analysing, intertextually, configurations of meanings constitutive of a particular discourse in the set of texts of a given period, and their inter-semiotic multimodal expression through language, visual images, gaze and posture, colour and graphics. Entitlement is one of the emergent macro-discursive themes that constitute the postfeminist discourse I have studied. Entitlement, and its subject effects, are further analysable in terms of three major themes, which I have named 'It's about me!', 'Celebrating femininity', and 'Girling women'. Each of these further comprises a number of minor discursive themes.

### 3.1 IT'S ABOUT ME!

Unlike feminine 'other-centeredness', a normative feminine identity, based upon social and cultural expectations that women acutely prioritize the needs and interests of husbands and children, and live vicariously through the fulfilment of their loved ones (Friedan, 1963; Lazar, 2002), 'It's about me!' focuses on women's prerogatives for a change. 'It's about me!' is an identity supported by a consumer culture, which satisfies women's needs and desires through commodity consumption. It is an entitlement to live a self-absorbed, hedonistic and narcissistic lifestyle based upon consumerist values. In this section, we see how this identity gets discursively represented in terms of self-indulgence and pampering, as well as through related notions of pleasuring the self and enjoying an exclusive space of consumption.

#### 3.1.1 *Self-indulgence and pampering*

'Indulge' and 'pamper' are terms used frequently and synonymously in the beauty ads.

- (1) *Indulge* in a moment of *absolute luxury* with new Hydramax + Active through a 60-minute skincare discovery. (Chanel Precision 6/6/08)
- (2) To *sumptuously* soften skin, go ahead and *overindulge* in this lightly scented body cream. It's worth its weight in *pleasure*. (Benefit 2008)
- (3) Lie back, relax and leave your worries behind as we *pamper* you from head to toe with *heavenly* body treatments . . . (Haach 9/10/03)
- (4) *Lavish yourself* with HELENA RUBENSTEIN products worth \$150, and *be pampered* by this exclusive 8-piece gift set . . . (Helena Rubenstein 30/7/04)
- (5) *Luxurious Pampering* . . . just for you. (Clarins 11/3/05)
- (6) This Valentine's Day, *indulge in all things pampering and divine* at the Ralph Lauren Romance rendezvous. *Indulgent delights* await at your one-on-one fragrance workshop. [. . .] You'll also be treated to a *pampering* hand massage and a hot cup of floral tea, any time of the day. (Ralph Lauren 20/1/06)

Examples (1) to (6) document the lexical variants of 'pamper' and 'indulge' as they appear in the ads, and their collocation with luxury (1, 5); sumptuousness (2) and lavishness (4); pleasure (2) and delight (6); and heavenliness (3) and divineness (6) – which altogether constitute a positively appraised semantic

field of hedonism. Example (6) is an instance of which both terms 'indulge' and 'pamper' co-occur in the same copy for reinforced semantic effect.

Pampering, in part, is represented as merited as 'me-time' by the emancipated modern 'working' woman because of her lifestyle, as seen in examples (7) to (12) below:

(7) Caught up with a *hectic lifestyle* with no time to pamper yourself? With Expressions, looking fresh and fabulous as you breeze through your *busy schedule* has never been so easy. Now you can stay healthy and look great through the year with our holistic packages tailored to your needs. (Expressions 13/3/06)

(8) Liping's life journey is one that many are familiar with. A *celebrity, mother, wife, friend and colleague, Liping has a busy schedule* that keeps her from taking care of her looks and health. [. . .] Now at Expressions [she has found] a sanctuary where she can pamper her mind and body. (Expressions 2/7/07)

(9) *Working for hours in air-conditioning* dries out your skin and leaves it rough and lifeless. [. . .] Indulge in a foundation that truly cares for your skin and flaunt a flawless complexion. (Shiseido 7/1/05)

(10) *Feeling tired, toasted, emotionally roasted?* Discover Origins Peace of Mind™. *Life in the fast lane* – that's life for many of us these days – may be fun and thrilling. But it comes at a price: *Stress*. We love it and we hate it! To get our equilibrium back and rebalance body and soul, we could all do with a little help. [. . .]. Peace of Mind comes in a little bottle but it's a hugely blissful experience! (Origins 13/6/04)

(11) TREAT YOURSELF. YOU NEED IT. At Haach, we understand how *your hectic lifestyle can take a toll on you*. That's why we're introducing three completely new programmes to refresh, revive and rejuvenate you. Come experience these pampering treats and feel *the fatigue* slip away, replaced by a renewed sense of well-being. After all, you need it! (Haach 29/7/04)

(12) Life was *an endless series of meetings and phone calls* UNTIL I DISCOVERED HAACH. Discover a refreshing haven inspired by nature. A peaceful sanctuary away from *the daily grind of life*. Where *stress* dissipates, senses reawaken and *fatigue* slips away. (Haach 7/10/04) [Other headlines in the same campaign: *The 9-to-5 routine seemed too much to bear* UNTIL . . . (Haach 26/8/04); *March was to be another exhausting month* UNTIL . . . (Haach 16/9/04)]

Feminism is acknowledged and taken into account in the description above of the modern working woman as leading a 'hectic lifestyle' (7, 11), as maintaining a 'busy schedule' (7, 8), and as living 'life in the fast lane' (10). Example (8) is one of few ads that explicitly represents women also as juggling their public ('celebrity', 'colleague') and private ('mother, wife, friend') roles and responsibilities. For the professional and executive woman, work is depicted as relentless, consuming and exhausting. Spending long hours on office work, in fact, is one of the defining characteristics of a postfeminist lifestyle (Hymowitz, 2007). Note the verb phrases 'caught up' (7) and 'keeps [her] from' (8), and the adjectives used in the Haach series headlines (12) 'endless series of meetings and phone calls', 'too much to bear', and 'another exhausting month'. In the Haach headlines, the use of the temporal adjunct 'until' underscores the relentlessness



of the experience, where respite is possible only through the brand. As several of the ads show, the inexorable hectic lifestyle has detrimental consequences on women. This is expressed in the declarative statements 'Working for hours in air-conditioning dries out your skin and leaves it rough and lifeless' (9); 'we understand how your hectic lifestyle can take a toll on you' (11); as well as in a rhetorical question (where the answer is found in the ensuing copy) – 'Feeling tired, toasted, emotionally roasted?' (10).

Based upon a problem–solution schema, where the public sphere of work presents challenges to modern women in a postfeminist era, the solution resides not in re-structuring work–life balance, but in temporary pampering relief. Note the semantic field of renewal and relaxation: 'refresh, revive and rejuvenate' (11); restores 'equilibrium' and 're-balance[s] body and soul' (10); 'stress dissipates', 'senses reawaken' and 'fatigue slips away' (12). Visually, close-ups of women's contented faces (eyes closed and smiling) in relaxing settings such as resting in a tub of flowers or against a cushioned seat or beneath a flowing water fountain are chosen. Alternatively, images of nature (calm blue sea and sky, a stretch of soft desert sands, or a close-up of a green leaf) are chosen which signify, metaphorically, a calm and relaxed state of mind, achieved through spa and beauty treatments.

The entitlement to pamper oneself is construed as a necessary luxury. The construction of necessity is expressed in various degrees of explicitness. Example (11) is most explicit in the direct advice offered to professional women – 'You *need* it.' Less explicitly, presupposed in the question in (7) – 'Caught up with a hectic lifestyle with no time to pamper yourself?' – is the assumption that pampering is a normal and expected part of one's life, but is prevented by the 'hectic lifestyle'. Yet another way necessity is constructed is through invocation of health and general well-being, which suggests that pampering is not merely something frivolous and optional; note the lexical choices 'health(y)' (7, 8); 'mind and body' (8); 'body and soul' (10); and 'well-being' (11). Where explicit reference is made to women's physical appearance, this is linked at the same time to health (via a coordinating conjunction), so that one's appearance and health exist in a relationship of equivalence: 'Now you can *stay healthy and look great*' (7), and 'keeps her from taking care of her *looks and health*' (8).

Self-indulgent pampering, however, is not an entitlement only of women categorized explicitly as busy professionals. These women are represented as having 'earned' the right to be pampered. Some ads, however, operate on the assumption that women of today simply are entitled, implicitly referencing feminism's success. The reason for entitlement need not be made explicit; indeed, no explanation is necessary, as it is assumed to be apparent to the target female addressee. L'Oréal's famous tagline 'Because you're worth it<sup>TM</sup>' is an excellent case in point. The dependent clause functions independently as a simple statement of fact. Even when presented in the body of an ad – 'A pampering sensory experience awaits – because you are worth it' (L'Oréal 13/7/06) – there is still no explanation in the copy as to why women are worthy; the reason 'because you're worth it' is reason enough. In this particular ad, the headline invites women to 'Be pampered like a star!' with a close-up image of actress Eva Longoria-Parker



provided as reference. Famous for her role, in the popular postfeminist US television dramedy *Desperate Housewives*, as Gabrielle Solis who is emblematic of a materialistic femininity, the choice of Longoria-Parker presents self-pampering as a woman's postfeminist prerogative.

A similar postfeminist entitlement is found in other ads also:

(13) *Lady, you deserve a break!* Pick from these two indulgences in celebration of International Women's Day. *Every woman is worth the luxury.* (Slimming Sanctuary 24/3/08)

(14) Rediscover *the pleasures of a sensual pampering.* Feel gorgeous – *because you know you deserve it.* (Unisense 11/10/03)

(15) *It's our turn to have our ego massaged.* (Banyan Tree 22/2/04)

Examples (13) and (14) represent categorically women as deserving and worthy; in the case of (13) reference to 'International Women's Day' suggests that women's entitlement accrues from recognition of women's progress internationally. Instead of being addressed in the second person, in example (15) the statement is made from the female first person point of view. In headline position, the statement rendered in a 'feminine' cursive script, confidently claims for women an implied prerogative of men, who would, culturally, expect women to massage their egos.

The consumerist ideology underlying beauty advertising ties pampering exclusively to consumption practices. For instance, it is through the consumption of goods that one gets to be pampered. Frequently, commodities are presented as pampering 'treats' or 'gifts', for example 'Slimming *Treats*. Radio Frequency Body Slim or Bamboo Slimming Massage' (Beyond Beauty 6/8/08), where 'treats' function as another term for beauty 'treatments' (or 'therapies' and 'programmes'). This is especially clear in ads such as (16) and (17). Through conflation of meanings, the pampering experience that results from the use of a product and the product itself become one and the same.

(16) Clarins Beauty *Treat*. [. . .] Clarins Beauty Eye Express *Treatment*: This relaxing *treatment* . . . (Clarins 15/9/06)

(17) 6 sessions of medically proven skin or body *therapies* or therapeutic spa *therapies*: Face *Treats*; Body *Treats*; Spa *Treats*. (FIL 11/10/07)

Pampering not only is experienced via consumption, it is conditional upon consumption. Example (18) makes clear that gifts are bestowed on women who already are consumers of the brand:

(18) Experience true luxury in indulgent proportions. Purchase \$100 and above of Lancôme products in a single receipt and you'll receive a lavish 8 piece *gift set*. (Lancôme 8/10/04)

### 3.1.2 *Pleasuring the self*

Related to self-indulgent pampering is the notion of giving pleasure to oneself. From this perspective, the use of cosmetics is not about looking attractive to gain the approval of others, particularly men – which is something feminists have

critiqued (see Coward, 1984). Rather, it is about the pleasure women themselves derive from wearing cosmetics.

(19) The lipstick blends on with a *melting sensation* the moment it touches the lips. Luxuriously rich moisture and *succulent glow*. [. . .] These [sic] new lipstick line inspired by the hues of coral reminds you of *the pleasure of applying colors*. (Lunasol 18/4/08)

(20) *Feel the pleasure of the melting creamy texture*. (Chanel 2/4/04)

(21) [. . .] *delight your senses with Estée Lauder pleasures* Eau de Parfum Spray 4ml. [. . .] New. Estée Lauder *pleasures delight*. (Estée Lauder 27/9/07)

(22) *Experience the stunning sensation* of Dior's new lipstick with a revolutionary formula, pampering your lips with the *vibrant colors* and nourishing benefits. (Dior 29/9/06)

In (19) to (22), the feminizing ritual of applying lipstick or a fragrance becomes a gloriously sensual experience. Note the injunctions to the consumer: 'Feel the pleasure', 'delight your senses' and 'Experience the stunning sensation' as well as the adjectives 'succulent', 'melting' and 'creamy', which evoke the senses of taste and touch (and sight – 'vibrant colors'). As (20) and (21) reveal, the evocation of the senses is primarily related to pleasure. In (20) 'pleasure' occupies the central position as head noun – the concept of which is then elaborated in the postmodifier as a 'melting, creamy' sensorial experience; and (21) 'pleasures' is the (name of the) fragrance, which delights the senses.

The concupiscent pleasure derived from cosmetics is also metaphorized as an act of seduction.

(23) Join us in a celebration of beauty as *international fragrance brands seduce you* with their scents. (Tangs Beauty Hall 9/5/08)

(24) Feel the power with color so potent, so creamy, *it seduces every curve of your lips*. (Estée Lauder 7/5/04)

(25) *Be seduced by this bewitching and mesmerizing creation*. Fall for the all-powerful charms of this charismatic fragrance, a unique association of the purest, noblest Lily and the deepest, densest Oak Wood. Discover an unparalleled elegance that is at once angelic and hypnotic. *Surrender to the magnetism of Ange ou Démon* . . . (Givenchy 12/10/07)

Brands or products in these examples, imbued with sexual agency, 'seduce' the female consumer (or in one instance, just her lips). In the case of (25), the product-as-seducer, in fact, assumes a larger-than-life force. The language of compelling attraction typically found in popular romantic fiction – the invited actions of the consumer to 'be seduced', 'fall for' and 'surrender', and the subjecthood of the fragrance in 'bewitching and mesmerizing creation', 'the all-powerful charms of this charismatic fragrance', and its 'magnetism' – involves an ambivalent spiritual force 'Ange ou Démon'. Here, the sexual blends into the spiritual, and pleasure resides in the paradox of partaking in the heavenly yet the forbidden. References to 'creation', 'fall', and 'démon' arguably allude to the biblical story of the 'Fall of Man', with the consumer playing the part of the new

'Eve'. The spiritual overtones of (25) aside, all three examples suggest women as sexually autonomous of men, with the product substituting in the role of sexual agent. Men, in these scenarios, unlike in women's romance fiction, are distinctly absent, even dispensable.

### 3.1.3 Women-only spaces

Finally, a variation of the theme 'It's about me!' is 'It's all about us, women!', which is noteworthy for the provision of women-only spaces.

(26) Enjoy the pampering comfort of our luxurious ambience and spa suites. *Exclusivity, prestige and total privacy, just for ladies.* (Slim Fit 24/1/05)

(27) Feel gorgeous inside and out. Shape up in *our private environment, exclusive to women.* (Philip Wain 5/6/06)

(28) *The Only Fitness and Beauty Club Reserved for Ladies.* [. . .] This is where you can indulge in a pampering spa and facial, lie back for a luxurious slimming treatment and enjoy a great workout at a fully-equipped gym – conveniently in *one exclusive ladies-only club.* (Philip Wain 13/3/07)

(29) **WOMEN ONLY.** *Where everything is about you.* U 2 Women is now open at Wisma Atria. (U 2 Women 5/10/02)

The emancipated woman today not only has access to the public sphere, evidently she also has female-only spaces reserved for her use in the public, as seen in the lexical and phrasal expressions in the ads: 'exclusive/exclusivity', 'private', 'ladies/women only', 'reserved for ladies' and 'just for ladies'. Such representations index social change. In the 1980s, radical feminists had advocated female-only spaces on the Internet as a platform for women's voices and discussions to flourish, unimpeded by harassment and control of some male internet users (Hall, 1996). Exclusivity of use of public spaces in the form of professional and social clubs also traditionally belonged to (rich and middle-class) men. Therefore, in offering women a space for consumption and relaxation of their own, the ads seem to be extending a similar privilege to (middle-class) women also (note, the brand name 'U 2 Women' read 'you, too, women'). The right to gender-based exclusivity appears to be a marker of postfeminist equality, as suggested by the prominence of the words 'WOMEN ONLY' (29) in upper case, in caption position, and stamped boldly in red. Visually, the portrayed female images vary: in (29) the model's unsmiling direct gaze and frontal posture with arms akimbo exude a defiant confidence, whereas in (27), the model is smiling at the readers and her body positioned sideways with arms stretched behind her as if in flight. These images, in different ways, signify women coming into their own, in a space that is discreet ('private'), of distinction and class ('prestige'), and focused on them ('where everything is about you').

In sum, 'It's about me!' presents itself as pro-feminist and woman-centric. Women are encouraged to take care and pamper themselves, enjoy autonomous sensual pleasure, and have access to an exclusive public space, which is safe and private and, at the same time, marks social progress (gender equality) and distinction. The key to unlocking these entitlements is through consumption. The

postfeminist entitlement related to pampering, pleasure and exclusivity is an entitlement to consume. As a consumption driven identity, 'It's about me!' turns the focus from the social to the personal and individual.

### 3.2 CELEBRATING FEMININITY

Another aspect of postfeminist entitlement is an unabashed celebration of all things feminine. In order to appreciate the decided celebration of normative femininity in this era, it is necessary to place it in the contending context of second and third wave feminist views about femininity. Some second wave feminists adopted a critical view of femininity, considering it – with its associations of passivity, subservience and dependence – to be an obstacle to achieving gender equality. Rowbotham (1973) and Millet (1977) (cited in Hollows, 2000) saw women's feminine values and behaviours as colonized by patriarchal structures and which, therefore, implicated women in their own oppression. Friedan (1963) also famously critiqued femininity as a highly valued achievement for women, which led to feelings of failure, of nothingness and a sense of 'is this all there is?' in the women she studied (Hollows, 2000). In rejecting conventional feminine values and behaviours, the tendency by some second wave feminists, however, was to favour masculine values and behaviours instead, and to consider a 'feminist' identity as totally antithetical to a 'feminine' one. In contrast to the view of femininity as oppressive upon women, some third wave feminists more recently have argued for recognition of differences between women and men, and to re-validate conventional feminine qualities (O'Shaughnessy, 1999).

In the postfeminist discourse emergent from the data, the celebration of femininity can be read as a reclamation and re-signification of stereotypical feminine values and practices in the present time. Femininity is construed as pleasurable and signalling confidence in women's gender identity, and sometimes even as potentially subversive. In contrast to a second wave feminist position, a postfeminist celebration of femininity in the ads is based upon double-distancing, viz., from masculine values and traits as well as from a supposedly humourless and outmoded feminism. Instead of the dualistic split between 'feminist' and 'feminine', the postfeminist ethos dissolves the distinction between the two. The discursive theme 'celebrating femininity' is discussed below in terms of reclaiming feminine stereotypes, dealing with paradoxes that underlie the construction of postfeminist feminine identities, and the presentation of the desiring feminine subject.

#### 3.2.1 *Reclaiming feminine stereotypes*

In a postfeminist social order, women proudly and enthusiastically embrace conventional codes indexical of 'femininity',<sup>2</sup> with an element of fun and self-conscious play. One of the codes of femininity taken up and re-signified in the ads to fit within a postfeminist ethos is the colour pink. Associated stereotypically with normative femininity (especially, but not only, in the West), pink has become popularized as a marker also of postfeminist femininity in popular culture. Postfeminist pink marks such qualities as fun, independence and confidence,

while at the same time reaffirming unambiguously women's gendered identity (Koller, 2008; Sparke, 1995).

In my data, postfeminist pink is commonly characterized by an outright flaunting of the colour. Estée Lauder's ad for the fragrance 'pleasures delight' is a case in point (19/10/07). The visual image depicts a carefree Gwyneth Paltrow clad in pink (light pink shirt, a matching belt, and darker pink shorts), standing over a bicycle laden with a tiered pink cake and baskets of flowers and fruits in various saturations of pink. The background is lush greenery with splashes of pink bougainvillea, and in the right foreground of the image is an oversized fragrance bottle in pale pink, with the brand and fragrance names printed in dark pink cursive letters. In terms of semiological analysis (Williamson, 1978), the pink product packaging reflects the (ideational) meaning of the overly pink scene, constitutive of a type of femininity that is fun, carefree and recognizably successful (in the choice of the celebrity actor).

Not only is pink represented in the ideational content of the visual image, the rest of the ad, too, is suffused with the same hue. The ad copy, below the image of Paltrow, is printed against a dual saturated pink background, and the headings and sub-heads in the text are also in pink letters. The overdetermination of pink in a variety of shades and functional semiotic contexts (in the image content, as page background and the colour of the typescript) can be referred to as a process of 'oversemioticization' (which I extend from Halliday's [1978] term 'overlexicalization' that refers to words only).

Oversemioticization involves also the cooperation of various semiotic modalities, including language. In a cosmetics brochure for the US brand Benefit, the flaunting of pink occurs across its pages, as background and typescript colour, banners, product packaging, functional labels, as well as through colour terminology. The following are some of the colour terms used, several of which are invented terms not likely to be found in a conventional colour chart: 'poppy-pink', 'silky pink', 'pulse-racing pink', 'pop o'pink', 'ballerina pink', 'linen pink', 'pearlized pink', 'nude pink', 'tutu pink', 'pink blossom', 'nude rose', 'heathered plum', 'bubble gum pink', and 'passion fruit pink'. The ubiquity of terminology to distinguish between shades of the hue rehearses stereotypes of feminine language style (Lakoff, 1975), and is used unreservedly throughout the brochure; sometimes, also appearing unapologetically alongside product names with counter-cultural references (e.g. 'You Rebel' and 'BADgal').

Postfeminist pink is also overtly represented as pink-with-an-attitude. In an ad for the fragrance 'Incredible Me' by Escada,<sup>3</sup> we see a young woman dressed in dark pink, walking purposefully into a room, reaching for and plucking a rounded heart-shaped bottle containing a pink liquid, held up by a thread of crystals. The action sequence is explicated linguistically by the clauses 'I want it. I get it.' printed beneath the bottle in the closing shot. The brief, structurally parallel statements, from the first-person female point of view, represent a self-indulgent, egotistical femininity. Like example (25), the representation here, arguably, invokes a modern new 'Eve', who resolutely plucks the tantalizing bottled fragrance with full knowledge that the perfume is for 'incredible' women like her, who know what they want and get it at any cost.

Lancôme's 2009 spring colour collection intriguingly named 'Pink Irreverence' also exemplifies pink-with-an-attitude. Like the others, the ad relies on pink excess. In the bottom right section of the ad headlined 'GET PINK'D WITH PINK IRREVERENCE', oversemioticization is evident through lexis, typescript, the boxed frame, and an image of single stalk of pink rose. In the top left segment of the copy, pinks of various saturation, purity and modulation (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2002) conspire to produce an avant-garde background with the imprint of a woman's face, against which a female model, bathed in pale pink light, leans with arms raised, and her body immersed in darker shades of pink.

In this ad, it is not pink alone that signifies 'attitude', but the mixing of pink with black – implicitly bearing distinct values – which produces a postmodern feminine identity that is ostensibly non-conformist. As clarified in the copy below (30), an attitude of 'irreverence' is created from the fusion of difference; note the lexical repetition of 'contrast', and the adversative conjunction 'yet' that juxtaposes supposedly dissimilar qualities. The typescript used in the name 'Pink Irreverence', interestingly, also evinces hybridity: whereas the lettering of 'Irre' is in pink, the rest ('verence') is in black, and the word 'Pink' is in black. The blending of pink and black produces types of 'look' – 'extreme sophistication' or 'bold spontaneity' – that creates the effect of code-breaking anti-conformism. Yet, given that only the word 'pink' is chosen for inclusion in the product name, the emphasis is on the re-signification of the value of pink as transgressive.

(30) Feminine yet bold. Ever so elegant yet ultra-modern. For its latest Spring 2009 color collection, Lancôme creates a dynamic contrast where chic modernism meets an anti-conformist flair for visionary stunning results.

#### THE LOOK, THE COLOURS

[. . .] Exemplifying the characteristic French spirit of irreverence, Pink Irreverence is the collection that stylishly breaks the classic codes of beauty for looks of pure individuality. The smoky eye is given a new twist with a contrast of pink and black for a 'pink smoky eye' look. Lip volume is reinvented with lacquered pink lips. Eyes and lips are simultaneously emphasized. Without compromise. Extreme sophistication or a bold spontaneity, anything is possible. (Lancôme 20/2/09)

Besides the colour pink, femininity is also conventionally associated with flowers – although in the ads, a broader category of flora is deployed, which includes fruits (and plants) as well. In some cases, the association between women and flora is clearly metaphorical. The conceptual metaphor WOMEN ARE FLORA is evident in (31) and (32) below. In these examples, the cosmetic brands not only draw colour inspiration for their products from flowers and fruits ('poppy-pink', 'juicy berries and ripe tropical fruits'), but also construe the female consumer as a 'bloom' and 'juicy-fruity gorgeous' when she uses these cosmetic items.

(31) Posietint. A cheerful pop of *poppy-pink* to lift your spirits [. . .]. You'll be the *prettiest bloom in the bunch*. (Benefit 2008: 2)

(32) fresh 'n' fruity. Inspired by the vibrance of *juicy berries and ripe tropical fruits*, ettusais presents a fresh new palette of *dazzling fruity colors* this season! It's time to *bloom* and get *juicy-fruity gorgeous* with ettusais! (ettusais 25/3/05)



In others ads, women are not metaphorized as flora, although there remains a close association between floral elements of nature and their supposedly special relationship to femininity. Fragrance ads for women, particularly, draw on floral essences as constituent ingredients that would supposedly appeal to female consumers. A postfeminist ethos is evident in ads where a floral theme combines rather unexpectedly with elements of self-conscious play, hybridity, and/or sexual confidence. The Estée Lauder ad campaign (33) to market the fragrance 'pleasures', as earlier mentioned, exemplifies a celebratory play of femininity:

(33) Life is sweet. Introducing a deliciously playful new side of pleasures that's simply irresistible. Treat yourself to a floral confection, blending notes of juicy Pomegranate, whipped Strawberry Meringue and tempting Caramel with a sprinkling of Sugared Rose Petals, dewy Freesia, White Peony and Fresh Greens. How can you resist? (Estée Lauder 27/9/07)

The fragrance, described as a sweet blend of named flora and pastries, constitutes a 'deliciously playful new side of pleasures'. The playfulness, perhaps, could refer to the unexpected crossing of senses, whereby scent and smell get construed in terms of taste; note the semantic field of taste – 'sweet', 'delicious', 'juicy' and 'sugared', and the named food items 'strawberry meringue' and 'caramel'. Yet at the same time, the ultra-feminization in terms of floral and other elements of sweetness, coupled with the liberal use of pink earlier described in a related Estée Lauder ad, may be read as 'playful' and 'new', to which women are invited to 'treat' themselves. If this interpretation is to be accepted, then the 'floral confection' is not simply a banal indexicality of femininity, but represents an unabashed embracing of the codes of femininity.

The floral motif is also emblematic of a postmodern hybrid identity that embraces contradiction and ambiguity with ease. In examples (34) and (35), the floral-based perfume and rose-tinted lip stain signify the complex nature of a postmodern femininity that is able to reconcile semantic opposites: confidence and modesty, and innocence and provocativeness, respectively.

(34) a warm, sensual and sophisticated floral-oriental eau de parfum, the scent is a harmonious blend of *confidence and modesty* [ . . . ] (Hilfiger 15/10/2004)

(35) *Innocent yet provocative*, our rose-tinted lips and cheek stain is kiss-proof color that endures it all. (Benefit 2008: 4–5)

Finally, combinations of floral ingredients can result in exhilarating scents that encourage sexual confidence in women. Consider the two examples from Benefit below:

(36) b spot. Every gal's got one (a few actually) . . . b spots, that is. Awaken your most seductive pulse points with this new fragrance from Benefit. It's a sexy combo of lush mango; faster, faster freesia; provocative peony & steamy sandalwood . . . and don't forget to shake, shake, shake your amber, baby! (Benefit 2008: 14)

(37) maybe baby. Like a playful wink across the room, a lingering gaze or a shy smile, this flirtatious fragrance is a divine fusion of white ginger, apricot & a tumble of white blossoms. [Printed on the bottle are a series of partly visible questions:] is this seat taken? [unclear] do you want to know a secret? should we? do you dare? would



you like to? want some company? promise [unclear] dinner tonight? remember me?  
Maybe Baby. (Benefit 2008: 27)

Both fragrances comprise a mix of various floral elements that signify sexiness (36) and flirtatiousness (37), respectively. In (36) the fragrance-induced sexualization is overtly performed in terms of the advice given to women to 'awaken your most seductive pulse points', and the cheeky naming of the product, which because of the flourishes in the cursive script used, one might easily mistake reading 'b' spot as 'g' spot. Also, the rhetorical style of the writing, including the adjectives ('lush', 'provocative' and 'steamy') and repetitive wording ('faster, faster'; 'shake, shake'), resembles the excited momentum of sexual activity. Unlike (36), the copy for the Maybe Baby fragrance is subtler, in-keeping with skilled flirtation. The series of printed questions encircling the bottle are presumably the kind that could be attributed to a would-be admirer, whereas 'Maybe Baby' is the singular noncommittal response by the wearer of the perfume. The ambivalence of the modality marker is interesting, especially when considered in the light of second wave feminist public campaigns to disambiguate for men women's responses to male sexual advances, viz., whereas 'yes' signals consent, 'no means no'. In view of this, feminism gets 'undone' through the signification of the fragrance, which encourages teasing to be reclaimed as a feminine skill and prerogative, as women having the upper-hand in dating rituals.

### 3.2.2 *Paradoxical constructions of femininity*

So far, we have seen how pink and floral matter get re-produced, albeit in a re-signified postfeminist celebration of femininity, as a woman's gender entitlement. Underlying a postfeminist feminine identity is a fundamental tension of two sorts, which is the focus of this section. One involves a tension between supposedly essential feminine qualities and an acknowledged performance of femininity. The second deals with the tension arising from the mixing of normative and non-normative elements of femininity, which is textually resolved through the production of hybrid feminine identities that are at once normative *and* non-normative.

On the first point regarding essential-versus-performed femininity, the cosmetics industry is known to habitually blur the distinction between the made-up face as revealing a woman's inner self and the made-up face constituting that self (Peiss, 1996). Consider the examples below on naturalness and radiance as supposedly characteristic feminine attributes.

(38) Includes a split pan compact featuring Bronzer for *a natural glow* [. . .] (Bobbi Brown 14/10/08)

(39) This pulse-racing powder gives you the *natural flush you get* when your heart races. (Benefit 2008: 4–5)

(40) In delicate shades of blue and pink, eyes shimmer like dewdrops. It's *a chic look, brimming with radiant energy*. (Shiseido 6/3/08)

(41) This season, it's all about *being feminine, natural and glowing*. (Shiseido 24/2/06)

(42) the scent [. . .] expresses the illumination of a star, and *the inner radiance of a woman*. (Hilfiger 15/10/04)

(43) [. . .] discover *a radiant and beautiful you!* (Expressions 29/3/06)

In examples (38) to (41), naturalness and radiance are represented as traits to be achieved through the application of makeup. The ‘naturalness’ of the skin’s glow or flush is a created effect, where a product is used to actually improve upon what is naturally endowed (Williamson, 1978). Similarly, ‘radiant energy’ in (40) is the effect of a styled feminine ‘look’ (among a range of other looks) made possible through makeup. Example (41) captures the performance aspect of femininity best by calling attention to itself as a trendy beauty statement. The thematized temporal adjunct ‘This season’ and the overt statement ‘it’s all about being feminine, natural and glowing’ signal that femininity and its associated qualities are not immanent in women, but can be consciously put on (and, therefore, also taken off) from time to time. In all these instances, women are educated in consumer competences and skills, which go to show that femininity, rather than simply being natural, has to be performed (Hollows, 2000). However, that does not mean that advertisers do not also work to naturalize femininity. As Hollows (2000: 155) writes in regard to media representations of fashion, ‘Just as some second wave feminists believed in the possibility of a “natural” form of femaleness “outside” of fashion, so many narratives of transformation also privilege the idea of revealing a “natural” feminine self.’ Examples (42) and (43) above support this, in that radiance is presupposed as an inherent feminine quality. Whereas in (42) the scent expresses the pre-existing radiance in women, in (43) the word ‘discover’ suggests that radiance (and beauty) are latent feminine qualities waiting to surface as a result of undergoing slimming treatments.

Turning now to the second aspect of tension that belies a postfeminist feminine identity is the ‘double entanglement’ (McRobbie, 2007) of normative and newer imaginings of femininity. The ensuing hybridity that allows for new ways of being may involve a mix of supposedly different elements, or an inseparable fusion of various elements. Examples of the former type include the following:

(44) *Feminine yet bold*. Ever so elegant yet ultra-modern. For its latest Spring 2009 color collection, Lancôme creates a dynamic contrast [. . .]. (Lancôme 20/2/09)

(45) Celebrate *independence and womanhood* at Expressions today [. . .]. (Expressions 29/3/06)

(46) Celebrate your *femininity & sensuality* with our professional team of Make-up Artists [. . .]. (Bobbi Brown n.d.)

In the above, hybridization is structurally expressed through either adversative or additive conjunctions. In (44), the use of adversative ‘yet’ sets up and draws together two sets of made-to-seem contradictory elements – feminine/bold and elegance/ultra-modern – lexically underscored by the advertiser’s admission of wanting to create a ‘dynamic contrast’. Unlike (44), the relationship set up by the conjunction in (45) and (46) between ‘independence and womanhood’ and ‘femininity & sensuality’ is not contrastive. Yet the use of the conjunctive

to conjoin the two elements implies that femininity and womanhood are quite distinct, though not incompatible with independence and sensuality. In sum, in all three examples, we find that the term 'feminine' is understood in a very particular (traditional) sense, and is not conventionally attributed with boldness, independence and sensuality. As the ads show, however, new hybrid femininity is possible only through consumption of beauty products and practices.

Inseparable fusion of elements is illustrated in the following examples from Benefit's advertising campaign.

(47) justine case. mini beautifier kit . . . 'just in case'. 'I'm always prepared for the unexpected . . . just in case. Justine case is my indispensable instant makeover just in case of a beauty emergency. I keep one in every fabulous handbag I own, just in case. And just in case my best friend steals my handbag, I keep several of these crafty kits on hand in my car, in my gym and at home . . . just in case' (2008: 22)

(48) rush hour. 'Whew! I'm a go, go, goin'! Betcha didn't know I could multi-task – I can chew gum & gossip at the same time. One better is rush hour, my all over face color. It's Beverly Hill bliss in a stick! A few quick strokes and I'm ready for lunch at The Ivy' (2008: 23)

(49) high brow. 'I'm not an ageist, but seriously, sisters, droopy brows are a bummer. I always keep my brows perky & so should you. High brow makes it a snap. Just draw the linen-pink cream-in-a-stick evenly under your brow and blend. You'll look 10 years younger. Promise.' (2008: 23)

Here, hybridity is not signalled structurally through cohesive devices; rather, by stylistically blending elements of knowingness, self-humour and irony in the construction of femininity. Produced from the first-person point of view, the utterances index a discourse of 'sisterhood' – a world of intimate female friendships found in the pages of women's lifestyle magazines and 'chick lit' (McRobbie, 1997; Talbot, 1995). It is presupposed that women have 'best friends' ('my best friend'), although best friends, quite expectedly, may steal from them (47). In (49), the term 'sisters' is actually used, which carries resonances of a feminist 'sisterhood', conveying solidarity and identification with other women (Fox Genovese, 1991; Mitchell and Oakley, 1976). Intimacy is also discursively constructed using informal and colloquial language – contracted forms ('I'm', 'didn't', 'betcha', 'goin'); slang ('bummer'); and exclamations (exclamation points and expressions, e.g. 'Whew!'). Plus there is honest, expert sisterly advice-giving ('seriously, sisters, droopy brows are a bummer'; 'Just draw the linen-pink cream-in-a-stick evenly under your brow and blend.') and personal assurance ('Promise').

Embedded in the discourse of manufactured sisterhood are representations of a femininity that is threaded through a certain knowingness and/or self-humour. In (49), the disclaimer 'I'm not an ageist, but . . .' represents a knowing female voice, that is, someone who is informed of socially progressive discourses and does not want to appear politically incorrect. Yet disclaimers are a known discourse strategy that enables speakers, nevertheless, to perpetuate the status quo from a 'safe' distance (Van Dijk, 1998). In fact, following the disclaimer is advice on how to achieve 'perky' brows and a promise of looking a decade

younger. Feminist and other socially progressive voices on ageism, therefore, get subverted from a position of knowing about ageism, yet upholding the ideology of perpetual youthfulness.

Hybridity is also produced from a facetious uptake of feminine practices. In (48), multi-tasking which is conventionally regarded as a feminine attribute is given a facile re-interpretation ('I can chew gum & gossip at the same time'), and instead of describing the peak-hour workday, the product name 'rush hour' ironically refers to women who would be headed to a West End celebrity haunt (The Ivy) for lunch. The reference to busy women juggling many social responsibilities, therefore, are re-signified as women with the luxury of time on their hands and disposable income to spend. The glamorous yet superficial lifestyle of the postfeminist woman is rehearsed in (47) as well – someone who is acquisitive ('every fabulous handbag I own'), and neurotically obsessed with her appearance. The commendable virtue of foresight and planning for 'the unexpected' and 'emergency' are confined to the activity of beautification only. Also, the reiteration (five times) of the phrase 'just in case' and keeping the beauty kit everywhere ('in every fabulous handbag', 'in my car, in my gym and at home') signals an inordinate preoccupation with one's physical appearance. Facetious as this represented lifestyle is, it is celebrated everywhere in popular culture, in such shows as *Sex and the City*, as an entitlement of modern day femininity, which is available to middle-class women with a disposal income but who are not represented as actually working a job (see 48).

### 3.2.3 *Desiring feminine subject*

Finally, in closing the discussion in this section, it is worth noting that the post-feminist celebration of femininity is powerfully expressed through the perspective of the desiring feminine subject – a position which is informed by feminism. See examples (50) and (51) below. In (50), a medium close-up image of a directly gazing, smiling woman is presented, whose face, shoulders and hands raised up to her shoulders are revealed. Superimposed on the image of the woman are several close-up Polaroid-like snapshots of parts of her face and body, with handwritten captions such as:

(50) I want to be eye-catching [photo of one of the woman's well made-up eye]

I want luscious lips [photo of her lips]

I want to be pampered [photo of painted, manicured fingers resting on a shoulder]

I want the sweet smell of success [photo of the other hand holding a bottle of fragrance]

[Copy of the ad as follows:] To all ladies, it's time you got the recognition you deserve at Northpoint! In celebration of International Women's Day, we have lined up exclusive privileges and rewards just for you . . .

I WANT TO DOLL UP!

Get dolled up with the latest red earth cosmetics [. . .]

I WANT TO INDULGE!

Every \$50 you spend entitles you to a stamp [ . . . ]

I WANT TO CELEBRATE LADIES' DAY!

Enjoy pampering treats and rewards on this special day [ . . . ]  
(Northpoint 8/3/07)

(51) On every smart woman's wish list:  
"I wish for healthy, more luminous skin."  
Daily Essentials (Normal/Drier Skins) [ . . . ]  
"All I want for Christmas is less shine!"  
Daily Essentials (Oilier Skins) [ . . . ]  
"I want firm & younger looking skin."  
Super Line Preventors [ . . . ]  
"Erase my lines & wrinkles fast."  
Holiday Magic [ . . . ] (Prescriptives 5/12/04)

In the above examples, we see that normative beauty practices and ideals – achieving healthy, luminous, firm, younger-looking and less shiny skin; 'cosmeticized' eyes and lips; manicured, painted nails; and smelling a certain way – are represented not as externally imposed and coercive, but internalized as desired by feminine subjects themselves. The 'I wish/I want clauses', from the first-person point of view, represent subjects as taking ownership of their wants and desires. Double quotes around the clauses as well as the use of cursive type-script in (51), and mimicking handwritten notes on Polaroids in (50) represent the clauses as authentically uttered by feminine subjects themselves. Further, the use of exclamation points in this case (along with the use of upper case in 50) suggests an emphatic, even demanding tone of voice. In these clauses, the 'it's about me' and 'what I want' stances are foregrounded, while the product descriptions occupy a secondary position after the statements, acting in response to each of the demands. The products, thus, are in the service of meeting women's self-generated desires. The desiring woman, who embraces feminine pursuits (e.g. 'I want to doll up!'), moreover, is not a bimbotic female, but someone of substance. Framing the affective mental clauses in (51) is the description 'On every smart woman's wishlist' – the implication being that smart women are beautiful women. In (50), women's beauty wants are celebrated in the context of International Women's Day, a day designated by the UN to recognize globally women's many contributions and achievements in their societies. In recognition of women's social successes, they are entitled to indulge in all things feminine – a sign that they have 'arrived' and are secure in their own gender identity.

In sum, at the heart of a celebratory femininity is the production of a 'new' postfeminist feminine consciousness. In embracing all things decidedly feminine, the new femininity is distanced from masculinity, and combines 'feminist' and 'feminine' identities. On the one hand, it reclaims normative feminine stereotypes consciously, through agency and posing as potentially transgressive, yet on the other hand, it continues to recycle gendered stereotypes and maintains a gender dichotomy. The product is a hybrid identity that is frivolous, yet indexing a feminist consciousness at the same time. Further, while in the formation of the new postfeminist identity, the performance of gender is recognized, an appeal to

'essential' feminine qualities remains remarkably intact. In celebrating femininity, women are positioned as desiring subjects, who wholeheartedly embrace the beauty myth and the consumer culture that supports it.

### 3.3 GIRLING WOMEN

Closely related to the celebration of femininity is the discursive theme of 'girling' women, which invites grown women to return to the time of their girlhood. Like other aspects of feminine entitlement, the celebration of girlhood is about instant self-gratification and pleasure, but also specifically emphasizes youthfulness as a time of fun. A youthful 'fun-seeking' female subjectivity is not unlike that which is found in magazines that actually target young girls (McRobbie, 1997). As one of the ads invitingly puts it, 'Come over to our swanky new counter for some seriously girly fun!' (Robinson's Beauty Hall 3/7/08). The appeal of girling women rests on a feel-good factor which, like celebratory femininity, is premised on being distanced doubly from popular (mis)conceptions of feminists as dour and mannish. The construction of a youthful feminine identity, by contrast, achieves an unmistakable distinctiveness from (hetero-)masculinity, and at the same time, reclaims femininity as 'fun'. Shown to be embraced by actual female consumers, an advertising feature for the range of beauty products by the 'girly' brand Miso Pretty quotes a 21-year-old woman as saying 'At the end of the day, it just makes me happy'. To which the feature writer concludes, 'That alone is reason to indulge' (ST Urban 10/7/08). The discussion of 'Girling women' is divided into three sub-sections: 'girl talk', 'girly-girl cuteness', and the notion of play.

#### 3.3.1 *Girl-talk*

By 'girl-talk', I refer to the advertiser's use of juvenile reference terms for women, as well as representation of the language style associated with girls. In girling women, one of the things that is immediately striking is the use of the lexical item 'girl' to refer to or address women consumers. Examples from the ads include a compact powder case designed for the 'girl-next-door' (ettusais 26/11/04); encouraging women to sign on to a skincare treatment named 'School Girl Complexion' (Haach n.d.); and asking women rhetorically 'what more could a girl want?' when offered a unique brand of concealer (Benefit 2008: 2). Even in the absence of a lexical referent, visually, girlish images of women may be chosen. For instance, Chanel's promotion of its fragrance 'Chance' features a waif-like model, whose very slender and youthful physical appearance resembles a 'girl-woman'.

Feminists have long criticized the usage of juvenile reference terms and images for women (e.g. Kilbourne, 1999; Lakoff, 1975) as patronizing, for adult women are presented as immature, powerless, and not needing to be taken seriously. In the last 20 years, the usage of 'girl' for women, however, has come to occupy an ambivalent semantic space. There has been a valorization of girls as powerful in popular culture ('girl power'), with television series such as *The Power Puff Girls* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. At the same time, 'girls' has been reclaimed positively by feminist-conscious women as well. The feminist punk movement



'Riot Grrrl' with the re-spelling of 'grrrl' to sound like a growl, indicative of resistive power, and African American women's expressions like 'You go, girl!' to signify in-group solidarity and pride among women, are cases in point. Making an intertextual reference to the latter expression, a shampoo ad creatively headlines its advertising feature to read 'You glow, girl!' Arguably, an ad for Fasio cosmetics, captioned in big, black, bold letters 'STAND UP! GIRLS', followed by 'Get Active' in smaller print, also vaguely invokes a retro-feminist tenor of mobilizing women for social action, while girling women.

Apart from the use of linguistic and visual signifiers of 'girl', girl-ness is represented also through language style that indexes a youthful female identity. It is a language style that is constructed largely through expressive values of punctuation and lexis (Talbot, 1995) in the ads. Exclamation points are common, projecting on to the reader a youthful state of excitement (e.g. 'receive this limited edition, delectable candy-colored handbag!' (ettusais 26/11/04); 'Photo ops with Kitty Mild and Kitty Wild!' (ST Urban 13/3/04)), and conviction (e.g. 'Flash those lashes. Fake is fab!' (Tangs Beauty Hall 6/3/03)). Lexical choices derive from the world girls supposedly inhabit, such as slumber parties. Note, though, that in the following example, the sleep-over is not for girls at a girlfriend's home, but for grown women in a paid-for hotel suite: 'With your purchase of \$60 or more [. . .] stand to walk away with a *slumber party for you and 6 friends at the Gallery Hotel Executive Studio Suite*'.<sup>4</sup> Informal adjectives are used (e.g. 'solve pesky beauty dilemmas'; 'choose from 6 wonderfully *yummy* colors'); along with contracted 'cool' forms (e.g. 'Fake is *fab!*'); and a whole range of playful, clever coinages (e.g. 'tan-i-tude', 'bad-itude', 'swoonderful', 'suify' [after the brand name Anna Sui], 'nailover' [an extension from makeover], and 'her glossiness' [the name of a lip gloss]).

Extending beyond the expressive values of punctuation and lexis associated with girl-talk, I suggest considering expressive values also at the level of discourse. Example (52) from Benefit is a personal narrative of disclosure presented from the point of view of a young girl:

(52) 'I used to be a little envious of gabbi (she's so popular) so I made her my new best friend! Now, I take her everywhere I go & we're both seen in all the right places. Love ya, gabbi!' [Accompanying the copy is an image of a cosmetics bag with gabbi's face on it and the caption: 'Gabbi Glickman gets grabbed by Glitzy n' Shine . . . Go Gabbi. Go!']

Some context is needed to make sense of the above narrative. Gabbi is a doll-like character, which exemplifies a certain beauty 'look', and has a cosmetic bag named after her. The discourse evidently is presented from the point of view of a child for whom, in her make-believe fantasy world, Gabbi (the bag and the doll) is personalized. Gabbi is referred to as 'she', is attributed admirable qualities ('so popular'), is capable of a relationship ('my new best friend') and can evoke envy, and has a surname (Gabbi Glickman). The represented narrator is a savvy yet insecure girl, who craves popularity (is envious of Gabbi's popularity and later relishes being 'seen in all the right places' with Gabbi) in order to affirm her formative sense of self. In addressing women via the discourse of immature girls, a sense of nostalgia is evoked, entitling them to acquire trendy goods.



### 3.3.2 *Girly-girl cuteness*

Cutesy is a subject position for women that encompasses, under a broad umbrella, sweet and innocent as well as sexy and sophisticated. In examples (53) and (54), we find a construction of girly sweetness:

(53) butterflies, berries and bunnies on a sweet pink background for the girl-next-door. (ettusais 26/11/04)

(54) open the très petite compact and discover an adorable soft puff that's both pretty and convenient. (ettusais 25/3/05)

(55) Girl2Go Pocket Beauty [. . .] What's the big deal. That everything's so tiny, of course. (ST Urban 19/6/08)

Above, girly adjectives are used to describe the beauty products – 'sweet pink', 'adorable and soft' and 'pretty'. The appeal of a very small size product ('très petite'; 'so tiny') is from the perspective of a subject who would be positively predisposed to dainty little toy-like objects – the presupposition of which is signalled in 'of course' (55). The juvenile term 'bunnies' as well as the alliterative listing of entities of nature in (53) produce a carefree and idyllic childlike appeal.

Girly cuteness is also presented in terms of whimsical and frivolous fun. This may be reflected in the brand names and designs of select Japanese beauty lines like 'Miso Pretty' (sounds Miss-so-Pretty when vocalized), described as 'the romanticism of the Orient combined with tongue-in-cheek Western humor'; 'Cute as Hell' whose packaging is inspired by a 'gothic-Lolita cutesy' (Pretty Baby, ST Urban 10/7/08); and 'Majolica Majorca', whose playful name sounds like a magic incantation such as 'abracadabra' (Girl Power, ST Urban 2/1/09). These examples manifest some form of semiotic play – cuteness through phonological play (Miso Pretty and Majolica Majorca), and irreverence through semantic incongruity (the analogy of 'cuteness' with 'hell'). Another example of semiotic play, also by a Japanese brand (Fasio), which indexes girly cuteness, comes in the form of whimsical typeface. In an earlier example '*STAND UP! GIRLS*', which had traces of pro-feminist tenor, cute girly touches are added to an otherwise staidly typescript of black, block letters in upper case. To those letters I have marked in italic above, spidery black lines are added to the top to resemble eyelashes. This lends a tongue-in-cheek effect to the directive, which suggests that women stand out by batting their eyelashes.

Japanese brands, in particular, seem to favour representations of girly-girl femininity in promoting beauty products to women, as seen in the examples above. In an ad for 'Hello Kitty Kouture', a similar construction of girly cuteness is found, but combined with adult sophistication and exclusivity.

(56) The ultra-luxe way to be pampered and playful! Announcing our limited-edition, glittering Swarovski crystal compacts, the collection privé of Kitty Kouture world. The ultimate in exclusivity, a sophisticated client's social status is all but assured!

Kitty Showcase at Tangs Orchard.

- Photo ops with Kitty Mild and Kitty Wild!
- Choose a look for your purr-fect makeover!

- Fall in love with our hot bods in kitty getups!
- Purr over our kitty tattoos and balloons!

Although not conventionally associated with the beauty industry, the iconic frivolous feline cartoon character, Hello Kitty,<sup>5</sup> is used as a recognizable decorative design on cosmetic cases, and has a nostalgic appeal of girliness for Asian women. Apart from the design feature on the compact case, the ad invites women to participate in the commercial world of Hello Kitty as well, in which exist 'Kitty Mild and Kitty Wild', 'kitty getups', 'kitty tattoos and balloons' – all of which are in bright pink typeface. In keeping with the lightness of tone associated with girlish frivolity, semiotic play again is present. Here, the word 'couture' is deliberately misspelt 'kouture' to achieve graphological similarity with 'kitty'. Also, the word 'purr-fect' is misspelt in order to approximate the sound a cat would make. Yet, clearly, the target of the ad is not girls but women, who can afford to indulge in a Swarovski crystal-studded Hello Kitty compact case. A girlish pleasure in Hello Kitty collectibles is here re-signified in terms of sophistication and social distinction. Women with disposable incomes are little girls at heart, who are entitled to indulge in frivolous pleasures at a level of luxury.

In some ads, the cutesy girl-woman effect is achieved through the sexualization of girls as 'sexy', 'loose', lusty and foxy:

(57) *Sexy Girl products are unabashedly kawaii*. Star product: Hair cologne spray [. . .] [in] *innocent floral*.<sup>6</sup> (ST Urban 19/6/08)

(58) *they've got a reputation. they're loose . . . powders, that is !!! lust duster collection*. Shimmering loose powders for your eyes & face. [. . .] Go ahead, girl: *Dust on lust!* [names and descriptions of some of the powders:]  
snow bunny – 'hop it up, honey'  
goldilocks – 'you're such a fox!'  
boom boom – 'va va voom!' (Benefit 2008: 12–13)

(59) *BADgal lash*. Millions of gals around the globe demand 'Lay it on me, baby . . . nice and thick!' Fans of *BADgal lash* know this mascara is *sexy, sultry* and pure unadulterated black [. . .]. Good gals: wear at your own risk. (Benefit 2008: 6–7)

Although in these ads, the terms 'girl'/'gal' are used of *women*, the textual combination of girlish innocence with sexual appeal is disturbing from the point of view of feminist objections to the sexualization of girls in the media (Kilbourne, 1999) as well as in child pornography and in the sex trade. Yet feminist repudiations appear to be dismissed through a postfeminist knowingness. In (57), the appeal of 'Sexy Girl' products is said to be 'unabashedly kawaii'. 'Kawaii', which is Japanese for 'cute', exemplifies the vulnerability and innocence of young girls – a quality that is seemingly embraced by Japanese girls and women of all ages. It is represented thus in the name given to one of the brand's popular scents 'innocent floral'. Insinuated into 'kawaii' at the same time, however, by the brand name is a certain coy sexiness. The qualification 'unabashedly' acts matter-of-factly as an unapologetic meta-discursive statement of the kind of meaning espoused by the product (sexy cute), and which from the context, we know is desirable to women themselves. In (58), 'girls' are invited to 'Dust on lust!' and

the powders carry frivolous girly names and captions, which on the one hand sound rather juvenile (the names), and on the other, reference physical and sexual appeal (the captions). The ad, however, is framed in a tongue-in-cheek manner – ‘they’ve got a reputation, they’re loose . . . powders, that is!!!’ – which toys with the notion of a sexual reputation, but diverts that to the powders instead.

Whereas the *kawaii* girl in (57) is coy, the ‘gal’ in (59) is someone who shows ‘attitude’. In the visual representation, a ‘BADgal’ kohl eye pencil is personified, with the face of a young woman, along with a pair of boots, drawn on to the pencil. The ‘girl’ nonchalantly holds a cigarette in one hand, and a snarling dog on leash in the other. The illustration of the eyes, the face and posture of the girl suggest a look of cool defiance. This is a sketch representation of a ‘grrrl’, whose dog is captioned growling (‘grrr’) in proxy. Textually, we are informed that the tough, menacing ‘attitude’ is performed through the wearing of sexy makeup. By explicitly referring to ‘good gals’, and challenging them to ‘wear [the makeup] at your own risk’, the age-old dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ girls as debated by feminists is evoked, and the ‘sweet innocent’ girl stereotype is disrupted in favour of a grrrl who is sexually in charge. In fact, grrrls are represented as coming into their own with a global push by ‘millions’ of young women, who know what they want and are not afraid to go for it.

### 3.3.3 *Child’s play, identity play*

Besides youthful language and cuteness, girliness is constructed also through elements of play and playfulness, which involves marketing beauty products by inviting women to actively participate in a play world of fun and games (note the agency accorded by the verbs such as ‘Say’, ‘Try it’, and ‘let’s you apply as little or as much as you like’). This may involve an alliterative word play such as ‘Say super, shiny, sheer, sexy lips five times fast!’ (Benefit 2008: 18). An ad for lip gloss, the multi-adjective product description is presented in the form of a light-hearted tongue-twisting word game. Repeating the list several times consecutively achieves a dual purpose of making it a fun exercise while aiding memorability for the product’s qualities.

In some cases, the subject position offered to women is that of a child within a play situation.

(60) play sticks. Perfecting your complexion is child’s play with this all-in-one concealer, foundation & powder. The crayon style lets you apply as little or as much as you like for just the right amount of coverage. [The variety of shades is: ‘spin the bottle’, ‘tea party’, ‘jump rope’, and ‘paper dolls’.] (Benefit 2008: 10)

In the example above, the cosmetic item itself is named ‘play sticks’ to reflect how easy and fun it is to use an all-in-one concealer, foundation and powder. The expression ‘child’s play’ functions both metaphorically to mean ‘simple’, and literally in designing the product to resemble crayons. The various shades of play sticks, moreover, are given names of games and activities in which a little girl is likely to participate: tea parties, and playing spin the bottle, jump rope, and with paper dolls.

Doll images, in fact, appear in several Benefit cosmetic ads. In one, three plastic-looking images of women named Lana, Gabbi and Betty are featured, each associated with a neutral shade in light, medium and dark, respectively (2008: 17). Specified row by row for each doll are lipstick and shadow/liner cream shades suited to its 'skin tone'. The presentation of the ad could be taken to resemble that of playing dress-up with dolls, except here it is not about putting clothes and accessories on them, but trying on different sets of makeup.

In other examples, dolls are personified as thinking and talking individuals, attributed with a (first-person) point of view. In one such ad, an image of a life-size doll is attributed a volitional thought process, through representation of a thought bubble: 'Pierre! Shopping is my first love, you're a close second.' In another ad, involving a close-up shot of a doll's face, the doll not only can think ('Hi. I'm Hollie Wood . . . Benefit's resident celebutant!'), but is presented with a speaking voice also, and acts as the product's spokesperson. In the absence of a thought bubble, double quotation marks alone are used to attribute the words to her, who is 'speaking' directly to the consumer:

(61) "I'm already a perfect 10 but I'm adding 10, so this makes me a 20! You do the math. I bronze and highlight in one sexy sweep with this powder duo for my goddess-like glow. Try it. If you're lucky, you'll look almost as good as I do!" (Benefit 2008: 22).

Interestingly, personifying dolls that can talk directly to the reader involves engaging the reader in the world the latter inhabits. Ironically, however, in urging women to try Hollie's beauty regimen with the conditional possibility of achieving her doll perfection entails de-personifying the female consumer, in that she is invited to aspire for doll-like characteristics.

The notion of play is also invoked to specifically represent trying on make-up as a fun and enjoyable feminine activity.

(62) Bring home the pop mode lookbook for *makeup DIY fun* and a polaroid of *your new look*. (Tangs Beauty Hall 6/3/03)

(63) *dress up your eyes with vibrant colors and faux lashes and reveal a different side of you!* (Dior 24/5/07)

(64) It inspires customers to *play with the colors to create their own looks* instead of sticking to what the brand prescribes. (Girl Power, ST Urban 2/1/09)

(65) Unleash your creativity, *experiment and create your own irreverent look at the color play area!* (Lancôme 20/2/09)

(66) ARTY COLOR turns makeup time into *playtime*: now you can be truly audacious in your choice of colors and textures. *Be daring, be demure – be whoever you want to be.* (Givenchy n.d.)

Note the semantic field above that involves 'play' (and 'play time'; 'play area'), 'experiment', 'dress up' and 'DIY fun'. The emphasis on play – indeed, in (66), the activity of beautification is overtly re-classified as play – seems to achieve a number of effects. First, the actual feminine labour involved in beauty practices gets re-framed as non-work, as a pleasurable feminine activity. Second, women are

nostalgically drawn back into a time when, as little girls, playfully experimenting with makeup (and dressing up in grownup clothes) was a fun activity. Finally, playing with makeup is integrally tied to the 'play' with identity. As the examples show, playing with makeup entails an unconstrained, creative presentation of the self as new, unique and different, and entirely of one's choosing. Consumer culture has been imperative in offering plentiful opportunities to 'play' with identity through the use of commodities, so that our sense of who we are increasingly comes from what and how we consume (Hollows, 2000), and identity becomes the performance of a particular 'look' or style.

In the section on 'girling women', we have seen that women are entitled to frivolous girly fun, where women are addressed as juvenile, gain some kind of leverage by performing 'cute', and nostalgically participate in girlish play activities. Knowingly embracing these activities and behaviour as 'a girl thing', arguably, is a marker of women's self-confidence in their gender identity, especially as 'girlness' is a heterogeneous subject position that can be sweet and innocent, sophisticated and sexual, or defiant. Yet, in girling, perpetual youthfulness in women is required – not only in terms of physical appearance (which is the stuff of beauty advertising traditionally), but also especially in adopting a youthful disposition.

#### 4. Conclusion

Entitled femininity is a global postfeminist identity which, as shown in the present study, is produced at the confluence of, broadly, Western (American, European) and Asian (Japanese) media representations. Feminine entitlement is characterized by a focus on pampering and pleasuring the self; being confident in one's gender identity; and embracing youthfulness as an attitude. The discourse is feminist and non-feminist; transgressive and reclamatory yet superficial and normative; and seemingly progressive and regressive at the same time. The contradictory and ambivalent discursive spaces produced, on the one hand, can be thought of as potentially liberating as they do signify shifts in regimes of representation. Besides, as some have noted, the co-optation even of selective elements of feminist discourse might be construed positively as a nod in that direction (Gamman and Marshment, 1988; Macdonald, 1995).

On the other hand, the postfeminist discourse, with its generally pro-women stance, it can be argued, numbs resistance and deflects critique, as feminist struggles over the social transformation of the gender order are seen as already achieved. While it is important to acknowledge the achievements by a growing number of women in many industrialized societies today, progress has not been universal, nor can it be assumed as a *fait accompli*, but an ongoing struggle even to maintain rights earlier won by women. In a culture of post-critique, the political force of feminism gets silenced, under the guise of postfeminism's well-informed and even well-intended position. Adopting an apolitical stance is the marker of the modern feminine subject who has 'arrived'. Those who press on with feminist activism, therefore, are likely to be viewed as fanatical, misguided and totally old-fashioned.

For all its claims to be pro-women, entitled femininity is premised upon a rather limited vision of gender equality. For one thing, its inward-looking focus and contentment only in the achievement of personal freedoms and pleasures, as if that were an end in itself, renders it an 'I-feminism' (the first-person singular pronoun clearly in capital letter). That detracts from a collective 'we-feminism' needed for continuing dialogue and social change. Detached from the social and the systemic, this individualism, in fact, is in danger of blocking change and links between the individual and the collective (Skeggs, 1997, cited in Hollows, 2000).

Postfeminist entitlement also rests on a very particular conception of femininity. Feminine entitlement, as shown in the foregoing analysis, is really an entitlement to consume, and to do so unreservedly. The assumption is that a lifestyle (and identity) based on commodity consumption is universally shared and freely accessible to all, when in fact it is a luxury that many cannot afford. Rather, it is the prerogative of privileged middle-class women, who have the means to access retail pleasures and the luxury to focus self-absorbedly on themselves.

Apart from class, the production of an entitled feminine subject is limited also in terms of sexual and age preferences. The analysis of the ads suggests that heteronormativity is undisturbed. In fact, a 'hyperculture' of commercial heterosexuality (McRobbie, 2007) thrives, in which an intensified interest in all things (hetero)sexual has become a defining criterion of women's emancipation and progress. With a premium placed on youthful femininity, postfeminist representations are also acutely age-conscious. Although beauty advertising is known to promote the ideal of youthful appearance, in a postfeminist era, women are required to adopt a youthful disposition as well, no matter what their age. At the same time, a renewed licence is issued to publicly describe and treat women of all ages as girls, without fear of reproach.

The increasing ubiquity and political ambivalence inherent in the discourse of postfeminism requires more, rather than less, critical scrutiny. The kind of feminist discourse analysis best suited to this task is one that is able to self-reflexively and nimbly negotiate texts and practices that are disarmingly seductive and innocuous. As a first step, it is important, as media critics have done, to reconcile politics and pleasure, rather than treat them as unrelated or oppositional. In the final analysis, we need to be reminded that there is much more at stake in the feminist politics of social justice and transformation than a celebration of pleasure and consumption, however transgressive that makes us feel.

## NOTES

1. The terminology 'second' and 'third' wave feminism marks developments within feminist thought in the West. Even though the development of feminism in Singapore is historically different from the West, the currents represented by the terminology 'second'/'third' wave are recognizable to an informed Singaporean audience.
2. In the interest of space, I shall discuss only two 'codes' associated with femininity in this article, namely, pink and flora. Two other codes found in the ads, not discussed here, are shopping and moods.




3. This is a TV commercial (not a print ad), aired on the local English channel.
4. It is not clear from the ad whether the mention of '6 friends' must all be women, or of mixed company.
5. 'Hello Kitty' is a juvenile and frivolous feline cartoon character that has belonged to a general cutesy trend in Japanese culture since the 1980s, and has gained a popular fan-base among girls and young women across Asia over the years.
6. Launched in Japan in 2005, this hair and body care range made its debut in Singapore in 2008.

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