Competing Femininities: the Construction of Teen Femininities in Magazine Adverts

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses semiotic analysis to identify the ways in which teen femininities are constructed and represented in adverts targeted at teenage girls. It proposes that the relationship between youth and femininity is one that is highly complex, uncovering the differing and often conflicting femininities within advertising aimed at young females. It highlights the ways in which adverts (re)construct teen femininity as a shifting and contradictory identity, one that is distinct from more traditional femininities. It also reflects upon the ways in which postfeminist discourses inform these constructions of femininity in the cultural context of girlhood. By using semiotic analysis, it illuminates the subtleties in the representations of teen femininities within advertisements by Tampax, Charlie Perfume, and Nintendo, encouraging further use of semiotics within contemporary academic study as a means of interrogating nuanced systems of meaning within cultural girlhoods.

KEYWORDS

femininity, semiotics, girlhood, teen magazines, youth, adverts

Introduction

Femininity is a complex and contradictory social and cultural identity and one that is a site of academic interrogation across a wide range of disciplines. Positioning this project epistemologically within constructivism, I understand femininity to be a concept that emerges from contemporary social discourse, playing a particularly important role as a self-making tool for those that identify as female. When we consider Edensor's claim that youth provides a period of time when the shared norms of a particular social identity comes to be learnt (2002: 90), we can come to see the pertinence of interrogating the representations that come to form part of this normalisation, and the inherent power structures that they maintain. This is because if contemporary social identities are discursively constructed, there is an ongoing need to question the ways in which they are reproduced, not least due to the continued gender inequality within society (Ridgeway, 1997). This has resulted in considerable academic attention being given to the construction of gender within media studies (Mulvey, 1975; Tuchman, 1978; Ang, 1985), and advertising more specifically (Goffman, 1976; Hicks Ferguson et al., 1990). Earlier research into the broader field of media studies suggested that the media have portrayed women in stereotypical patriarchal gender roles (Rossi and Rossi, 1985; Ford et al., 1998; Browne, 1998),

while more recent work that has focused specifically on *teen* femininity has suggested that the portrayal of femininity in this context are more progressive (McRobbie, 1991; Gauntlett, 2002). This leads us to question *how* teen femininity might be constructed differently in relation to more traditional constructions of femininity. This is particularly the case in relation to the postfeminist context, whereby the complexity of femininity is heightened by the perception of choice and independence, offered to females through the pursuit of consumption (Tasker and Negra, 2007; McRobbie, 2008). Thus, through the application of semiotic analysis, this work analyses not only *what* teen femininity might look like, but also and more pertinently, *how* teen femininity is constructed through the system of signs found within adverts aimed at this audience. This research finds that teen femininity is not only different from the more traditional forms of femininity identified in research on the broad topic of gender and the media, but also that this identity is far more fluid, and negotiated in relation to alternative and competing femininities constructed for the teenage audience. So while the teen female is offered some challenging and at times progressive gender constructions, this is only achieved through the negotiation of itself in relation to more traditional forms of femininity. As a result, while there may be elements of resistance to dominant ideologies, the greater textual narratives of adverts mean that this resistance is largely de-politicised; not least through the connotation advertising has to capitalist consumer culture.

Therefore, this paper acts not only to bridge the gap between existing work regarding gender construction and advertising, but also to consider gender construction and teen identities within a shifting postfeminist context.

Background

As Boyd-Barrett and Newbold note, the key issue within media studies is rooted in the study of the politics of representation (1995: 388). This is largely because the media offer social actors a common-sense way of making sense of the world, performing 'a key role in maintaining hegemonic consensus' (Meyers, 1999: 7). Thus, mass media not only offers us a way of viewing the world, but through this can be seen to promote and conserve dominant ideologies. The influence the media has on the everyday, therefore makes it a compelling area of study, particularly for feminists who find that images of the media:

> work, cumulatively and unconsciously, to create and reinforce a particular world view or ideology that shapes our perspectives and beliefs about the world, our neighbourhoods, and ourselves (Meyers, 1999:3).

Feminist academics have argued that the media have achieved this in a range of different ways; Winship (1981) and Choi (2000) for example, note how women are dismembered through the media in order to be 'reduced to manageable sexual parts for the masculine gaze' (Choi, 2000: 36), emphasising lips, legs, hair and breasts (Winship, 1981: 738). This emphasis on the "sexual woman" within the media highlights the ways in which females can be disempowered through focus upon the body. This focus the media places upon women's bodies is highlighted by Tuchman's (1978) concept of 'symbolic annihilation', suggesting that there is a long history of the under-representation of women in the media with men dominating the forms of mediation. This is problematic because it indicates that female bodies have less symbolic value than male bodies, and when they *are* represented, their bodies must 'compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves' (Wolf, 1990: 12). Additionally, while the fracturing representations of women within contemporary culture mean that women may be often offered more 'contradictory images' that sometimes challenge the patriarchal view of the world (Meyers, 1999: 7), these images exist within a postfeminist context whereby 'aesthetic pluralism' is associated with the control of beauty enacted through consumerism (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 7).

However, the *spaces* these bodies occupy are also ideologically loaded. Tuchman's (1978) seminal work on the representation of women in the 1970s also places focus upon the stereotypical and idealised versions of women that were represented and the spaces they were represented in. The focus on domesticity as an acceptable space for the representation of female bodies is one that has remained at the forefront of feminist investigations into the representation of women within the media, raising important questions of what the impact of this might be for young women.

> What can the pre-school girl, the school girl, the adolescent female and the woman learn about a woman's role […] The answer is simple. Women are not important in American society, except *perhaps* within the home (Tuchman in Boyd-Barrett and Newbold, 1995: 410)

While Tuchman was writing during the second-wave of the feminist movement in relation to American media, her concerns that '[i]f the stereotyped portrayal of sex roles is out-of-date, the media may be preparing youngsters - girls, in particular – for a world that no longer exists' (Ibid.: 406), are nonetheless relevant today. This is because, while this connection between femininity and domesticity is one that has been challenged by feminists from the early stages of the second wave, there has been little progression found within representation. Friedan, for example, highlighted the way in which femininity was overwhelmingly related to domesticity through many media forms, but particularly within magazines in the 1950s and '60s (Friedan, 1963: 38-39). However, this is something that has been found in differing guises within contemporary media, whereby women's magazines have been found to promote not only successful domesticity as feminine, but also the absence of a career as inherently feminine (Hollows and Moseley, 2006: 108). Importantly, these findings, that span forty-years and two

waves of the feminist movement, indicate little progression in the representation of women, particularly when it comes to the representation of women *outside* the private sphere. However, some theorists that have focused on media produced for younger women have found the representations of femininity to be considerably more nuanced and complex. For example, Gauntlett has noted that although magazines of the past 'reinforce[d] the feminine and housewifely stereotypes' (Gauntlett, 2002: 56), newer publications such as *Cosmopolitan* magazine offer the female reader a more 'assertive and sexually frank approach'(Ibid.) suggesting that 'identity is today seen as more transformable than ever before' (Ibid.: 247). However, it is important to note that this postfeminist focus on sexual assertion is one that is widely communicated as entirely heterosexual (Hodkinson, 2011: 234).

Despite analysis of magazines as central to much feminist media analysis, the study of the ways in which femininity and feminine gender roles are constructed in teen girl magazines, is a largely underexplored field within academic research. As a result of this, and in order to gain greater understanding of the academic debates in this field, I have drawn upon a range of ideas from a variety of academic areas such as sociology, television studies and marketing studies, in order to root my study within an interdisciplinary academic framework.

Girlhood and media consumption

When we consider the emergence of the teenager as a marketing category, we are able to contextualise youth in relation to the media that is marketed to them. Magazines marketed to girls, for example, have long since been popular within girl cultures as a result of this marketing relationship. This is exemplified by the first edition of teen girl magazine *Seventeen,* launched in 1944, selling out within just two days of its release (Osgerby, 2004: 73). While Osgerby has noted that the youth market waned from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s, the children of the baby boom have since led to a resurgence in teen spending. For example, he observed that between '1996 and 2002 teen spending had climbed from $122 billion to $172 billion a year' (Ibid.: 83). Although this spending rise relates to the American market, statistics of the British market, which provides the context for this study, have followed a similar trend, with young people spending an average of £30 billion a year (Lewis, 2001). This highlights the potential offered by young people as a lucrative market within the West, and the investment that advertisers have made within these youth cultures.

McRobbie (1991) has noted the shifting attitudes toward the teenage girl as a consumer in her analysis of teen girl magazines. In critiquing her earlier work on the same subject, McRobbie notes the shift from the use of romance to 'offer a point of entry for understanding important aspects of the female psyche' (1991: 135) toward 'the logic of consumerism' (Ibid.: 144), finding that 'consumption becomes a naturalised feature of the reader's experience' (Ibid.: 145). This

'logic of consumerism' that has been naturalised through the 'reader's experience', means that 'consumers consume in ways that connect to social relationships' (Bowe et al., 1994: 44), with great emphasis on the *symbolic* meaning attached to the object consumed (Ibid.). This relationship between the feminine self and consumption is one that is also central within postfeminist discourse, whereby the emphasis on agency and production of the self is placed upon consumption (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 1-2; McRobbie, 2004: 259; Gill, 2007). Therefore, this highlights the significance of adverts as a means of communicating particular ideologies of the self as well as normalising consumption within girl culture.

> It is the function of the images and texts of advertising […] to strengthen this fragile feminine identity and in doing so introduce girls to the seduction of buying (McRobbie, 1991: 176).

Here, McRobbie highlights the way in which the beauty market anchors femininity within wider normative social structures. This emphasis that teen magazines place on beauty through consumption is not offered as a means to attract boys, but rather for the girl to develop personal choice, self-confidence and the 'creation of a "beautiful" individual identity' (Ibid.: 175) demonstrating further parallels to the rhetoric of postfeminism as discussed above. Osgerby has also noted the importance of the ways in which 'teen femininity [is] characterised by a kind of consumerist hedonism' (2004: 82), illustrating the lucrative market offered by girlhood, and young people more broadly.

Writing about the formation of young femininity as a distinct social category, Driscoll notes the way in which girls magazines 'emerges alongside feminine adolescence and have maintained its importance across that history' (Driscoll, 2002: 74), highlighting the role that teen magazines play in reflecting and shaping the 'changing interests and expectations of girls' (Ibid.). This is important point because it suggests that magazines reflect the interests of girls, but also that it *shapes* them, indicating the role that magazines play in the construction of female teen identities. A study by Currie has indicated that girls themselves valorise these patriarchal meanings of womanhood, as well as naturalising the 'associations between femininity and the commodities through which this femininity is expressed as the everyday doing of gender' (1997: 453). This further highlights the important position of these cultural forms as a site of academic interrogation.

Driscoll also makes the important suggestion, that the 'idea of the girl market is employed to sell participation in girlhood' (2002: 268). This highlights the importance of consumerism in maintaining the category of "girl" and its associated temporal period known as "girlhood". Analysis of these texts or objects are therefore able to tell us much about the (re)production of this social category. However, emphasis placed upon consumption and capitalism within girlhood raises concerns not only in relation to discourses of postfeminism, but also in relation to

the potential homogenisation of girl culture through its "cultural industry" position. In addition to this, Currie (1999: 56) has suggested that this reproduces the 'gendered social order', whereby the logic of capitalism is further maintained. It is important to emphasise that I do not believe young women are the passive consumers of traditional femininity, and rather I do believe that young women can, and often do, subvert or play with the meanings that they are offered to them (as highlighted by Aapola et al. [2005]). However, it is the limited representations that have been found to be available to girls that are of primary concern in this analysis of advertisements to girls.

Gender and Advertising

When considering advertising and gender identities, work that investigates these relationships have found a number of trends and overarching discourses. Rossi and Rossi (1985) found that women in magazine advertising 'tend to be portrayed either in a degrading or demeaning fashion' (1985: 1033). These findings are supported by Ford et al. (1998) and Browne (1998), who found that women were largely represented as product users/demonstrators. When we look more specifically at adverts aimed at young people we find minimal visibility awarded to girls in children's television commercials (Browne, 1998: 87). This indicates that females are subject to "symbolic annihilation" not only in adult media, but also youth media, whereby producers of youth media follow the truism that girls will engage with media produced for both girls and boys, while boys will only engage in media produced only for boys (Lemish, 2010: 107; Hendershot, 1996: 96). Browne (1998) therefore highlights the importance of interrogating the representation of gender in children's adverts, and questions the potential impact advertising could have on 'gender socialisation and, subsequently children's views of themselves and other people' (1998: 93.). If we consider Goldberg's findings that 'children who are more heavily exposed to advertising at a young age appear to be more likely to develop stereotypes' (1999: 288), and that that '14-year-olds were no less influenced […] than younger children' (Ibid.: 286), we must continue to investigate the important relationship between young people and advertising.

Goffman's (1976) seminal work on advertising illustrates the ways in which gender stereotypes have been reproduced within print advertising. Importantly, however, Goffman notes that advertisers do not *create* the stereotypic expressions found within advertisements, but rather 'draw upon the same corpus of displays' (Goffman, 1976: 84) as the society in which it is displayed, he argues, in order to make the 'glimpsed action readable' (Ibid.). While this may place society at the forefront of gender construction (and thus the construction of femininity), it continues to place importance upon the relationship between stereotypes within broader society and their reflection in advertisements. Goffman's contribution to the academic debate

surrounding gender and advertisements remain central as he outlines the key ways in which the artifice of masculinity and femininity (or indeed any other gender identity) can be signalled through advertising (1976: 28-83). Crucially, Goffman demonstrates the ways in which meaning is constructed within static images, through the deconstruction of common-sense ideologies. For example, he argues that the use of fingers can (re)produce femininity (Ibid.: 29) as they represent the delicate nature of a feminine woman, and by not using fingers to aggressively or manipulatively hold an object the representation does not threaten the stereotype of the weak lady. He also notes that this delicateness of femininity can be found through images of women touching themselves in a sensual yet not erotic way (Ibid.: 31). This sexualises the female insofar as we are aware that she is a sexual being, but as she is not using this (heteronormative) power to manipulate a male, she does not threaten the patriarchal order. A further way in which Goffman highlights the presence of femininity in advertising is through 'function ranking' (Ibid.: 32-7). He argues that if and when a male and female are shown in the same shot 'the man [..] is likely to perform the executive role' (Ibid.:32), even at the level of the family where the mother serves the father.

These are trends that have also been acknowledged in Williamson's (1978) work on a similar matter. She extends Goffman's analysis of advertising to also looking at adverts where females are absent as a means of understanding the many and complex ways in which femininity can be (re)constructed. She develops the argument that adverts attempt to translate meaning to the viewer through a system of signs with which they are already familiar (1978: 25). Williamson notes not only the importance of images such as those identified by Goffman above, where femininity is more explicitly represented, but also the importance of more subtle elements of an advertisement such as the use of colours and the positioning between the object, model and text. By decoding the many elements of an advertisement, Williamson is able to identify the nuances of femininity within advertising. If we recall Gauntlett's suggestion that 'identity is today seen as more transformable than ever before' (Gauntlett, 2002: 247) and Choi's belief that 'there may be many more positions that a woman can adopt and that the positions are not fixed' (2000: 43), this is something that is reflected within the rise of 'multiple-identity type ads' (Williamson, 1978: 57). Nonetheless, the common trend amongst scholars that have investigated this field suggests that while adverts over the past forty-years may be more inclusive in their representation of femininity, the femininities represented ultimately do little to subvert the patriarchal norms of traditional femininity.

The existing literature in this area has shown that there is little contemporary academic work that seeks to discover the ways in which femininity can be constructed and represented in magazines aimed at teen females. While we have seen a growing body of girl studies over the past twenty-years, as noted above, few studies in recent years have focused on the ways in which girlhood is constructed in print advertisements aimed at girls as consumers. The normative representation of

femininity that is highlighted in previous media analyses gives continued motivation to its analysis in the present. Young people occupy an important position within contemporary society, a site where 'prevailing ideas about identity and status are questioned, suspended or reversed' (Hesmondhalgh, 2005: 37). If this is the case then we must ask ourselves, why has the literature continued to find adverts that reproduce normative and reductive accounts of femininity? If we reflect upon Hesmondhalgh's idea further, perhaps it is in media aimed at youth that we may find representations of femininity that are different or conflicting. It is in the lack of studies that achieve this interrogation that leads to the motivation for this study. It is due to the depth of analysis that is offered by semiotics that we can deconstruct the system of meanings that can be found within teen media in ways that have yet to be uncovered within academic analysis.

Methodology

As indicated above, this research will seek to identify the ways in which femininity and feminine gender roles are constructed within teen magazine advertisements through a semiotic analysis of the adverts themselves.

One of the most appealing aspects of semiotics is its depth of analysis, Slater notes, 'semiotics […] seeks to draw out the *full complexity* of textual meaning' (cited in Searle, 1998: 234, emphasis added). As I do not endeavour to uncover trends or themes within advertising, but rather to analyse the way in which codes of teen femininity are constructed and represented in magazine advertisements, the culturally rooted analysis offered by semiotics, which seeks to demystify the underlying messages of texts, is central to my research.

It is the ways in which signs construct a common-sense understanding of femininity, primarily by drawing upon the codes of femininity, which is the site of interrogation within this paper. What I aim to achieve is a nuanced deconstruction of the range of the 'higher-level ideological meanings' (Slater, in Searle ed., 1998: 240-1) that are connoted within the images. It is the ways in which femininity can be constructed as a normative category to a youth audience that this paper aims to develop an understanding of. This will be achieved by deconstructing how the interplay of signs presented within an image renders femininity "normal". By considering the sign within its cultural context, each sign that is presented will be continually questioned, asking what purpose it serves for the meaning of the image as a whole. The sign in the case of my research will be any component of the image, and once the signs have been identified the ideologies that they signify will be explored. Much of this understanding will be achieved through analysis of the interplay between signs, or the 'chains of meaning' (Budgeon and Currie 1995: 176), within the image as a whole. This will also require critical reflection of the cultural myths that these symbols draw upon and the ideological interests that they serve (Bignell, 2002: 24).

Given the polysemic nature of texts, the intention of this research is not to offer the "true" meaning of a text, but rather to offer an *interpretation* of the myths these texts draw upon. Through this we can make better sense of the nuances in the ways in which femininity is (re)produced for teen females within popular culture, and question the extent to which these texts draw on traditional codes, or create new ones.

The adverts studied represent adverts found in British teen girl magazines in 2007, which means that the girls that these adverts were aimed at are firmly 'children of the gender revolution' (Gerson, 2010). The audience is therefore one that will have grown up with the postfeminist discourses of "girl power" as advocated by cultural icons such as the Spice Girls, as highly present within their cultural childhood. This provides a distinct postfeminist context through which to consider analysis as it is a context where we have started to see the 'blurring of boundaries between the feminine and the feminist' (Nayak and Kehily, 2008: 59) in their early stages.

The magazines that form part of the original sample are *Bliss, Mizz, Shout* and *Sugar*. These were the top four selling magazines aimed at the younger teenage (12-16) female market during the year of study (Magforum, 2012), and as such represent some of the most popular and high circulation girl media available at the time. To narrow the focus further, one of each magazine, published in the same month (December, 2007) was selected. From this I categorised the 49 adverts that featured within the four magazines, into the following sections, entertainment, fragrances/beauty, sanitary towels/tampons, fashion and 'other' (as a small number were anomalous to these categories). This led to the following findings:

Advert Type:	Occurrences
Entertainment	19
Fragrances/ Beauty	16
Sanitary Towels/Tampons	6
Fashion	5
Other	3

Table 1.

The two best selling magazines in my sample group, *Bliss* and *Sugar*, had a much greater proportion of adverts, with 38 of the 49 in total appearing in these magazines, indicating the

prevalence of marketing and consumerism within popular girls media. The intention was to analyse adverts that were representative of all magazines within the sample, which fell into the following categories: entertainment, fragrances/beauty and sanitary related adverts. Following this, one advert from each category was then selected using stratified random sampling to provide a sample of three adverts, with the aim of representing the most common forms of advertising within magazines aimed at girls in 2007.

Analysis and Findings:

Analysis of advert one.
Category - Sanitary Towels/Tampons.

Figure 1: Tampax Compak

This advert, which falls into the category of sanitary towels/tampons, is for the product Tampax Compak. This product, which was relatively new to the market at the time, was designed to be "discreet" as the connotations to the word 'compact' in its name Compak suggests. In addition to the product reflecting discourses of femininity in relation to menstruation, we can also see that the way in which the product is advertised engages with particular discourses of femininity. This is not least because it presents the object within a girl's bedroom, a space long since connected with girls and teen femininity (McRobbie, 1991; Steele and Brown, 1995), and one which further reproduces the myth of the domestic as a feminine space.

Within this I analysis I will focus on three signs within the image; the use of colour, the toys that are represented, and the tampon itself, as means of understanding the ways in which the myth of femininity is constructed. However, before this I would first like to reflect upon the digital nature of this image.

I believe that the digital construction of the image has two important implications for our understanding of the meaning it produces. In the first instance, its digital construction reflects the growing popularity of digital animation within youth culture (Sefton-Green, 1998). In addition to this, its digital construction allows us to pay particular attention to the arrangement of signs that it presents; the centrality of the tampon, the use of toys, and the girl's bedroom more broadly, is one that is artificial. This is not to say that I believe other advertisements are any more "real", but rather that the designer of this image had complete freedom of expression and was thus not constrained by the limitations of any "real world" objects. What is of interest then, is how the artist/s was/were constrained by the *cultural expectations* of the advert.

Colour has been found to play an important role within advertising as a means of connecting a product, or an object, to a particular world (Williamson, 1978: 22) In the case of Tampax Compak the whole image is tinted with pink, and although pink has a strong connotation to femininity (McKinnon, 2008), I suggest that the darker and often hotter shades of shades of the pink used in the image, indicate a different sort of femininity to lighter pinks that are 'seemed to represent immature asexual femininity' (Gleeson and Frith, 2004: 141). I argue that this darker shade of pink has connotations to the more playful "Emo" subculture that remains highly visible within British teen culture today. This is because the use of pink and black is a popular colour combination within Emo culture, whereby the conventions of gender are played with and at times subverted by these contradictory colours. This signals the ways in which the advert offers variations to more traditional forms of femininity, particularly through its connection to a musical (sub)culture. In addition to this, Tampax Compak is also connected to music through the representation of CDs in the left hand side of the image[i].

However, the representation of a less-conventional femininity is one that is further exemplified by the choice of toys represented within the advert. As noted earlier, every aspect of the image

has been chosen and constructed, placing great importance on the toys used to represent the brand's construction. What is noteworthy from the outset is the absence of dolls, a popular signifier of traditional femininity (Wagner-Ott, 2002: 248). Dolls are related to play-time, and in particular role play (DeLucia, 1963: 108), it is therefore an important observation that play appears not to be a main function of the majority of toys signified within the image. This detachment from play based toys to ornamental toys indicates the increasing maturity of the teen girl, which parallels the physical effects of puberty and menarche (Griffin, 1993: 20) that the product being advertised seeks to address.

Of the advert 14 toys are illustrated only half appear soft, fluffy, or plush. This connotation between "fluffy" and feminine is suggested as having its roots in more traditional concepts of femininity (Holland, 2004: 39), and is a femininity that, as we saw reflected in the choice of colour, is one that is downplayed within the image. Instead, the toys make further reference to the commercial nature of youth culture. For example, we can see the representation of at least three toys that were available to purchase in Britain at the time; Cactus Friends, Rubba Duck and the retro robot. The three alien style toys were called The Cactus Friends, and while this name connects to the feminine notion of friendship, I believe it has far greater connotations to the sophisticated teen advert reader who use brands they recognise in order to judge the product that is being advertised (Bachmann Achenreiner and Roedder-John, 2003). This brand awareness is also evident through the representation of a Rubba Duck and pink retro robot toy. This intertextual use of culturally recognisable brand objects helps to create a "cool" world full of sophisticated signs to a brand savvy audience, reflecting the wider importance of "being cool" within youth culture (Pedrozo, 2011).

However, while these representations signify a move away from more traditional forms of femininity to a more alternative, or edgy femininities, the representation of the tampon itself complicates the femininity on offer. The text which reads 'There is a new star in cute-ville', coupled with the pink tampon which is small in stature, appears to represent a more timid, traditional form of femininity. I suggest that this may be due to the way in which menstruation is considered to threaten 'culturally sanitized views of the feminine' (Roberts, et al., 2002: 131). The text that accompanies the image furthers the distance between menstruation and the wider cultural concept of femininity, stating that their product is 'too cute to bother you'. Menstruation, for girls, is therefore constructed as something that is potentially bothersome. This may be because the inability to control menstruation can leave females feeling embarrassed (Lee, 2002: 25, Lee, 1994: 347) or alienated (Lee, 1994: 349-50), but also because the tampon itself may be a product that girls consider bothersome. The discreetness of the product then becomes noteworthy when we consider the discourses of that fear that surround menstruation, whereby 'she can prevent embarrassment by using products that will reduce the risk of exposing her menstruating state' (Simes and Berg, 2001: 460). While the advert does not ignore menstruation, as its very

existence *signifies* menstruation, by reiterating the myth of periods as bothersome, the cultural norms of 'secrecy and shame regarding menstruation, and a notion of it being a state of spoiled of soiled femininity' (Raftos et al., 1998: 176) are (re)produced. As Simes and Berg (2001) have argued, this has an important impact on the lives of women, as discourses of menstruation continue to be defined negatively within society.

However, the "cute" aspect of the tampon is one that seeks to consolidate the contradiction of menstruation and the norms of femininity. The idea that the tampon is "cute" is made sense of through its signification as another toy. This uses the signification of toys as cute, and that their cuteness within the world of the advert is otherwise unrivalled. The tampon is signalled as cute not only through the text but also through the wider interplay of signs, whereby the arrival of the tampon has disrupted the world of the toys, evident through their facial expressions. We understand these expressions as anger, disgust or contempt, through the angle of the eyebrows and slant of the mouth (see Fox et al., 2000); this is then reiterated in the way in which the existing toys appear to be closing in on the "personal" space of the tampon. The suggestion that the tampon is so "cute" that the toys are threatened, therefore offers the young female consumer a possibility to participate in a femininity where the threat of menstruation to femininity is minimised. This is achieved by connoting the object, the tampon, to cuteness, "a childlike innocence" rather than the realities and responsibilities of adulthood as signified by the act of menstruation. What we see then, is that the femininities that are (re)presented here are ones that are complex and contradictory, with tensions heightened due to the cultural norms of the product being advertised.

Analysis of advert two.
Category - Fragrance/Beauty.

Figure 2: Charlie pinkhappiness perfume

This advert for a Charlie fragrance named 'pinkhappiness' uses both photography and computer generated imaging to construct a system of signs through which the object, perfume, is signified to the viewer. It shows a white, young woman with brunette hair, as a visual representation of the fragrance, while the bottle of perfume stands in foreground.

In terms of colour, this image uses a different shade of pink to that in *Fig.1*. The pink in this instance is just as prominent but much lighter with strong connotations to 'immature asexual femininity' (Gleeson and Frith, 2004: 141). These pinks are also intertwined with shades of green. It is important to observe that this green is also used for the word 'new' using the colour green to connote freshness as is often the case within food advertising (Peterson and Dangel Cullen, 2000: 9), but also connecting to wider social discourses whereby green represents the coming of spring. This idea of "freshness" is also reflected in the spirals of colour exuding from the fragrance bottle, particularly through the representation of flowers growing from the origin of the scent. This imagery translates the freshness of the fragrance through the use of colour, and also through the breeze that bursts through the image, pushing the hair from the model's face. Freshness becomes an important aspect of the image as it has strong connotations to youth, and as Charlie is a brand that markets many of their fragrances, and this one in particular, to the younger teenage market, we can see that the idea of freshness is one that is central to their campaign.

As suggested above the redolence of the fragrance is illustrated through the spirals and swirls symbolically emanating from the perfume bottle at the base of the image. Emerging from these swirls lie some important signifiers of teen femininity. For example, the imagery of headphones flying on wings connotes not only the myth of lightness and delicateness connected with traditional forms of femininity, but also the importance of music and teen identity (Huntemann and Morgan, 2002: 312). While a musical note could have signified this, it is important to see that headphones have been chosen instead. I believe this to be important because it not only signifies music, but *portable* music. Music is not stationary in teen culture but mobile, and this is something that is referenced in the advert. The mobility of objects in teen culture is also represented through the image of the mobile phone, floating detached but still in the area of the imagined fragrance. The phone and the curved lines situated around it symbolise it is in action, vibrating and/or ringing. This suggests to us that the owner of the phone is popular, which signifies the relationship between the fragrance and popularity, and thus whoever wears the fragrance. Further examples of intermediary items mediated through the advert include a pink glitter ball to the right of the perfume bottle, signifying the relationship between the fragrance and fun-loving independent dancing femininities. This connection between girlhood and dancing is one that has been considered highly important (McRobbie, 1993). However, while the presence of the glitter ball brings with it connotations of independence through dancing, I argue that this type of independence is more playful than political. This because glitter balls connote to disco much more than to the rave or urban dance cultures which Aapola et al. note as being far more aggressive (2005: 164) and thus a greater threat to traditional forms of femininity. This playful independence is also signified through the advertisement of their accompanying website which is entitled 'doyourthing.co.uk'. It is here that we can see a much stronger reference to the

postfeminist context, whereby choice and independence is assumed to be available, yet is intrinsically tied to practices of consumption (Roberts, 2007: 229) through its context within an advert.

Elsewhere, to the left of the perfume bottle, we also see a silver ring with large pink gem. This combination of two signifiers of femininity, pink and jewellery, connotes a much more traditional form of femininity (Rutter, 1996). The codes of femininity that this advert draws upon are therefore less challenging to dominant norms of femininity than the more edgy femininities represented within the Tampax Compak advert, and this is continued within the representation of the model itself.

The white, female model, appearing almost as if a genie from a bottle, signifies more than just 'girl' to us because she also she acts for the '*assumption* that they [the fragrance and her] have the same meaning' (Williamson, 1978: 25). The skin tone of the model then takes on significance as her whiteness reflects the dominant visibility of white female faces within postfeminist culture (Negra, 2009: 10). The model also offers the viewer a smile, signalling the happiness contained in the name of the fragrance, pinkhappiness. The appearance of teeth also minimises the sexuality associated with lips, suggesting instead a state of an innocent or playful femininity. Further to this, the makeup that the model wears is subtle, emphasising a "natural"' beauty rather than an artificial one, again connecting the product to freshness. I also suggest that this emphasises "natural" beauty, whereby the fragrance is connected to "naturalness". This natural happiness is therefore constructed as a property of the fragrance, due to not only the name of the fragrance, but the direct eye-contact offered by the model to the viewer. Williamson notes that when the model's eye-line matches yours, 'she stares back at you like your own reflection' (1978: 68), allowing a process of identification with the product.

The codes of femininity that pinkhappiness use in this image are considerably more traditional than those in Tampax Compak, with nature, freshness and happiness used to construct teen femininity.

Analysis of advert three.
Category - Entertainment.

Figure 3: Horse Life *game for the Nintendo DS*

In *Fig. 3* the Nintendo DS game *Horse Life* video-game is advertised to the viewer. It is digitally animated and shows a white young female with blonde hair, in the centre of the image riding a sorrel coloured horse in a dynamic pose. Around the outside of this central image are images that represent aspects of the game, such as images from gameplay and the game's associated affiliations such as John Whittaker. As with the previous two adverts analysed, we can see the prevalence of the colour pink within the image, with the other colours forming the horse, girl, and countryside background image which will be discussed below.

Two shades of pink are used within this image with the most predominant pink a pastel shade, which is soft and more traditionally feminine. This shade is used within the image on the top the

girl wears, but as well as where gameplay information is presented to the viewer and at the bottom of the image. In addition to this, we can see the use of hot pink worn by the horse in the form of its brushing boots. What is interesting about this colour's position on the muscular, and thus masculine (by traditional standards of masculinity) horse, is that it anchors this symbol of strength to the femininity of the female rider. The dynamic pose of the horse, coupled with the young female that controls it, sets a striking image of a young, powerful and independent female. While the image of a girl in control connotes independence, it does so within the context of horse-riding, a space that is heavily feminised within youth culture (Klomsten et al., 2005). However, an important disjuncture from the feminised space of horse-riding can be found within the game itself. The female viewer is invited into a space that is far more heavily masculinised, the video game (Bryce and Rutter, 2003). However, the complexity of this representation deepens when we consider that the creation and marketing of this game to females is also indicative of a shift within gaming corporations toward "pink games", that focus on 'interactive […] gameplay within a girl-friendly, story-driven context' (Krotoski 2005: 2). Therefore, the presence of girls in this masculinised space is problematised by the feminisation of the videogames themselves signifying the complex construction of femininity within the image.

Additionally, the girl that forms the focus of the image, and the connotations she has to an "independent" girlhood addresses a very specific and limited form of power within femininity. Horse-riding is heavily associated with the wealthier classes within British culture, largely due to the financial costs involved with keeping a horse, as well as its connection to the British countryside and hunting. I suggest that through the use of typography as well as the imagery of the countryside in the background, the upper-class cultural context that the advert connotes is one that is not accessible to many young females. The font that denotes the name of the video-game is written in an elegant cursive font, which can be related to education and particularly private-education. In addition to this, high cultural capital is also connoted through the use of this font. One can also see the ways in which the "old fashioned" style, reminiscent of quill handwriting, also connotes the past and traditionality. Therefore, while the connotations to traditional Britishness may indicate that this game is authentic in its representation of horse-riding, in doing so it (re)creates the myth that horse-riding is a pursuit that is for the rural upper-classes. This considerably reduces the power that the teen female may access.

Horse-riding, as a long standing British tradition, connects to an imagined 'rural Britishness' (Wallwork and Dixon, 2004) connoted within the wider advertisement. For example, within the advert, Britishness is connoted not only through the Union Jack flag on the riding hat, but also through the imagery presented in the background. The representation of the countryside through the image of rolling green hills also connotes the rurality of horse riding. This presentation of the rural landscape may be one that constructs the nation through the use of familiar landscapes (Edensor, 2006), thus speaking to the viewer as a member of a specific nation-state. However, by

connecting the game with the countryside, the femininity it constructs remains tied to nature, with 'women representing the innocence of the natural world that "active masculinity must support, protect and oversee"' (Little and Austin, 1996: 103). The myth that presents females as needing to be supported by 'active masculinity' is one that is further represented by the presence of the male "expert" *John Whitaker*.

This (re)production of traditional femininity within the advert is also signified through the emphasis given to traditional, nurturing femininities. While it has been argued that masculine adolescence is defined by its relationship to independence and growing autonomy from the family (Aapola et al., 2005: 109), in contrast feminine adolescence has been defined 'first and foremost via the ability to create close and lasting personal relationships' (Ibid.). The three boxes that signify game play also demonstrate the development of these "feminine" skills. For example, the three images on the lower part of the advert indicate that interactive skills are needed to succeed at the story-driven game, by building friendship through love and cherishment. These skills therefore relate strongly to the skills that girls are rewarded for in society. It is therefore important to note that while the other adverts promote and translate a *kind* of femininity, it is only in this advert that we can see that the promotion of feminine *actions*.

Conclusion and recommendations

Through analyses of the three adverts, we can see that there is a range of ways in which femininity has been constructed in adverts aimed at teenage girls. What was prevalent in the adverts analysed was the use of the colour pink in its varying shades. While I do not wish to state that teen femininity is something that is solely represented by the colour pink, it was an important element that featured predominately in all images. The use of the blackish pink in Tampax Compak connotes alternative teen (sub)cultures, while the use of hot pink in *Horse Life* connotes sensationalism and independence. These connect to McRobbie's findings in a previous study that suggest teen femininity is about developing personal choice and self-confidence (1991: 175), thus differentiating teen femininity from more traditional and restrictive forms of femininity. However the use of the colour pink in pinkhappiness and the pastel pink of *Horse Life* contradicts this and connotes much more traditional forms of femininity, particularly through its connotations to naivety and innocent immaturity. In the instance of colour, we can therefore see that although one colour prevails, the shade it is and the way in which it is used is significant in understanding the relationship it has to femininity.

Another prevalent sign was websites, which featured prominently in Tampax as '*beinggirl*' and Charlie as '*doyourthing*'. This reflected the increasing number of young people that were gaining access to the internet at the time (Huffaker and Calvert, 2005). The appearance of these indicators within the adverts not only symbolised the advertiser's brand awareness of teen

culture, but also through their URLs connect to wider discourses of postfeminism. This, particularly is particularly so in Charlie's 'doyourthing', which foregrounds independent choice, while also connecting to the consumption of their commercial product.

The myth of music as an important signifier of teen femininities is also evident in two of the three (Tampax Compak and pinkhappiness) adverts studied. Through the visibility of CD's in Tampax Compak and the appearance of headphones in pinkhappiness, reference is made to music within girl culture. Music may be seen to be important to girlhood because it is a space in which girls can differentiate themselves from adult culture, demonstrating the important role personal choice and independence plays in conceptions of teen femininity. Independence is also alluded to within *Horse Life*, through the connotation of power through horse-riding. However, it was also noted that this representation of independence was problematised by the wider context offered within the advert, whereby ruralness connected females to nature, and the feminine actions of care and cherishment were foregrounded. A further way in which playful femininities could be seen to problematised through their proximity to more traditional, less powerful, femininities can be seen in pinkhappiness, in the representation of glitter ball, hearts, and pink jewellery.

In terms of identity politics and girlhood, the adverts revealed an overwhelming whiteness within the images analysed. While this may have much to say about the racist notion of the "ideal" slim white woman in British advertising today (Redmond, 2003), we cannot ignore the implications of this in the conceptualisation of teen femininity. This reiterates what Aapola et al. Have seen as 'social ideals of beauty which are based on white European features' (2005:1).

A further finding that is evident from the study of signs in these adverts is that the construction of teen femininity is one fraught with contradictions. We could look solely at pinkhappiness to see the ways in which both traditional and contemporary teen femininities can be constructed simultaneously within one text. One could argue that by not offering one fixed femininity, it could offer teenagers with greater flexibility in the negotiation of their sense of self. Further work into this field would be enlightening to see what effect these contradicting femininities have on identity formation for teenage girls, especially because, as Driscoll notes, magazines have a great importance in shaping girls' interests (2002: 74).

Much of the existing literature in this field finds that females are portrayed in a stereotypical or demeaning way (Rossi and Rossi, 1985; Browne, 1998; Ford et al., 1998). While *Horse Life implies* the demonstration of feminine actions, it is important to note that none of the adverts signify females as sexual objects, nor as product demonstrators, nor in domestic settings. However, Tampax Compak constructs a female space that is domestically located, the bedroom. So while the image of the female is not represented in the private sphere, the girl is nonetheless represented *in reference to* the world of her room. *Horse Life* also problematises these

representations of females and feminine spaces. This is because while the female in the image is presented outside, within the public sphere, the location that that she is represented in, is one that is rural, connecting her to nature.

While I do not think that these adverts are indicative of the 'symbolic annihilation' of females, as femininity is clearly indicated in these adverts, albeit in competing manner. Thus, through the use of semiotics, this article has highlighted the fractured and competing femininities that are at play within adverts aimed at British teenage girls born of the gender revolution. These findings illustrate the importance of teen identity as a site through which to study the complex relationship between gender and the media, raising important questions for the study of femininities in the future.

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[i] It is important to note that CDs may be less likely to feature within contemporary girl culture due to the prominence of MP3 formats.