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**“You can just want something, and have it because you want it.” Discursive  
Constructions of Choice in Relation to Feminine Beauty Practices**

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### **Abstract**

There exists the idea that Western societies are now post-feminist, implying that remaining differences between men and women should be understood as a result of the free exercise of individual choice. Yet this postfeminist promise of liberation is overwhelmingly packaged within the crushingly cruel beauty images that Western women are judged against and incited to emulate. Theorising female agency in light of choice and liberation discourses has been the topic of much recent feminist literature, to which this paper seeks to contribute. We utilised a feminist post-structuralist framework to examine how young Australian women position themselves as freely choosing and able to throw off oppression. We discuss these findings in relation to the conception of the neoliberal feminine subject; described as someone who playfully expresses herself by freely choosing her level of participation in socially promoted beauty practices; in turn resulting in a resistance to being seen as inflexible, or critical of wider social influences

Key words: choice, beauty, neoliberal subject, postfeminism, empowerment, femininity

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## **“You can just want something, and have it because you want it.” Discursive**

### **Constructions of Choice in Relation to Feminine Beauty Practices**

There exists the idea that Western societies are now postfeminist, implying that systematic and structural factors disadvantaging women have largely been addressed and that remaining differences between women and men should be understood as a result of the free exercise of individual choice (Jeffreys, 2005; McRobbie, 2009). As many writers have noted, ‘choice’ has become the bottom-line value of postfeminism; in this view, so long as a woman’s actions or circumstances are considered a result of her own choices, no further analysis or problematisation of them is welcome or warranted (e.g., Braun, 2009, Gavey, 1989; Gill, 2007a, 2008; McRobbie, 2009). Beauty practices are a common focus of these arguments; despite their status as a well-known target of second-wave feminist critique, practices such as wearing lipstick or shaving one’s legs no longer present ideological dilemmas for many feminists. According to some third-wave feminist scholars, our ability to *choose* to engage in these practices is one of the gifts of feminism (e.g., Baumgardner & Richards, 2000).

Yet despite gaining greater access to a wider range of ‘choices’, and entry into social domains from which they were previously excluded, women’s bodies continue to be subject to high levels of surveillance and discipline (Jeffreys, 2005). The opportunities for women to ‘add’ achievements and experiences that were previously unavailable has not been matched by a corresponding freedom to ‘shed’ oppressive requirements to maintain the practices of femininity. Indeed some scholars have argued that the move away from traditionally feminine sex roles in the workplace has been met with an increasing focus on women’s bodies. For example, Gill (2007b) argues that femininity in the contemporary west has continued on a trajectory identified more than 20 years ago by feminist scholars such as Bartky (1990), Bordo (1993) and Wolf (1990) in which the social practices constituting femininity now focus less on the performance of traditional sex roles and more on practices that strongly emphasise the disciplining and beautification of women’s bodies. The postfeminist promise of liberation through empowered choice is overwhelmingly packaged within the crushingly cruel beauty images that Western women are judged against and incited to emulate (Gill, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Jeffreys, 2005; Wolf, 1990). For all its ‘choices’, contemporary western culture places intense scrutiny on women’s bodies.

Theorising female agency in this postfeminist context is a central focus of recent feminist work (Evans, Riley & Shankar, 2010; Gill, 2007a), and this paper seeks to contribute to such work by examining how young Australian women negotiate positions for themselves in relation to the social influences on their engagement in feminine beauty practices.

### *Feminine Beauty Practices*

Beauty practices were a clear target of second-wave feminism, with many critical analyses directed towards the ways in which these practices contributed to the reification of differences between women and men, the objectification of women and the alienation of women from their bodies (e.g., Bartky, 1990; Dworkin, 1974). Towards the end of the 1980s, when the women's movement had made its greatest achievements towards liberation for women, the backlash against second wave feminism created a new set of restrictions on women's freedom (Greer, 1999; Jeffreys, 2005). A contingent message has come to be promoted in which women can embrace their liberated social status, as long as it is not at the 'expense' of their femininity. This message is apparent in women's magazines where editorial declarations of free choice and liberation are situated harmoniously alongside articles describing and instructing women in the execution of a vast array of beauty practices (Gill, 2006; Wolf, 1990). The absence of conflict between messages about women's freedom and femininity works to normalise a small set of preferred 'choices' for women that continue to tie women to narrow standards of feminine beauty. Agency as an empowered or liberated woman is predicated on being beautiful first, and then being free.

Engagement in beauty practices is socially consequential. The so-called 'beauty premium' (Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994) describes the well-documented finding that women who comply with current cultural standards for beauty receive higher incomes than those who do not (see Hosoda, Stone-Romero & Coats (2003) for a review). Psychological research finds an interpersonal benefit of beauty; all other things being equal, 'beautiful' people are considered more intelligent, more trustworthy, more likeable and more desirable than less conventionally beautiful people (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Langlois, Kalakanis, Rubenstein, Larson, Hallam, & Smoot, 2000). The cultural privilege attached to beauty creates a compelling reason for women to engage in beauty practices, which thus should not be understood as unthinking conformity to externally imposed ideals; whatever else these practices may be, they are a means by which women can enhance their status within the dominant social order (Bordo,

1993; Mills, 1997). To give just two examples of the role of beauty in very different contexts, Ghodsee (2007) found in post-socialist urban Bulgaria that being feminine and aspiring to beauty ideals was seen as necessary for women wanting to be successful in a capitalist economy, and Carey, Donaghue & Broderick (in press) found that attractiveness was understood by teenage girls as being a key factor in the relations between and within friendship groups in their all girls' high school. However, it is important not to lose sight of the ways in which engagement in beauty practices has consequences beyond the personal benefits experienced by the woman and girls engaging in them, in terms of reinforcing the patriarchal ideology that naturalises and normalises these practices for all women.

Beauty practices are also not necessarily performed by women solely and specifically to conform to externally imposed beauty standards; they may also provide considerable personal pleasure and gratification. This is evidenced by the 'girlie culture' of some versions of third wave feminism, in which women paint their nails and wear dresses as a means of reclaiming and reinterpreting what have traditionally been considered to be signs of female frailty and frivolity (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). While arguments for personal gratification and simple pleasure are often used to make beauty practices seem an inappropriate site for feminist analyses, acknowledging the pleasures that may be obtained does not preclude critical analysis of these practices. Many scholars have critiqued the 'pleasure' discourse for making effort invisible and as hiding the extent to which (non)compliance with beauty standards has serious social consequences for women (e.g., Bartky, 1990; Gill, 2007a, 2008; Wolf, 1990).

#### *Choice and the Neoliberal Self*

Analyses of beauty practices in a postfeminist context must necessarily be considered alongside changes in the conceptualisation of the feminine subject. In some quarters, Western culture since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century has been characterised by a loss of attachment to romantic notions of a deep, authentic self (e.g., Gergen, 1991). Instead, the post-modern self is said to be characterised by multiplicity, performativity and pastiche, in which different versions of one's self are created and deployed according to the shifting agendas and changing opportunities one encounters (Gergen, 1991). Yet, for all of the attention given to its variable surfaces, contemporary western culture has increasingly shifted its moral locus to the development and expression of the 'true' individual self (Rose, 1996, 1999). The merging of

these two traditions has given rise to a hybrid - the “neoliberal subject” - which has incorporated the flexibility of the post-modern subject into the individualised liberal subject.

A central characteristic of the neoliberal subject is an emphasis on autonomy and self-responsibility that holds ‘individuals’ accountable for their own fates and eschews any acknowledgment of meaningful social or structural constraint on the self. The neoliberal subject is required to actively reject any suggestion that his or her actions are compelled by wider social influences and institutions such as media or government (Davies et al., 2006; McRobbie, 2007; Baker, 2010). Taylor (2010) argues that in this ideological context, women are invited to pursue self-making identity projects, which focus on the confidence and autonomy to be gained through the exercise of (often illusory) choices, while at the same time obscuring the requirements to retain aspects of normative femininity that continue to situate women as relatively disadvantaged (see also Baker, 2010; Gill, 2008, McRobbie, 2007). The notion of free choice among plentiful options is a key feature of the neoliberal conception of subjects; according to this view, women in postfeminist societies are understood as playfully expressing themselves by freely choosing their level of participation in socially promoted beauty practices.

The neoliberal panacea that all choices are good so long as they are freely made ignores the cultural conditions in which choices are offered and taken and the contingencies that are attached to these choices (Gill, 2007a, 2008). However, as demonstrated by Braun (2009), choice functions as such a powerful bottom-line argument that attempts to analyse constraints on women’s choices are often interpreted as erasing women’s agency and freedom (e.g., Duits & van Zoonen, 2006; Mills, 1997; Rubin, Nemeroff & Russo, 2004). The difficulties in simultaneously allowing for the possibility of some ‘individual’ choice while at the same time fully attending to the ways in which choices are constrained poses a dilemma for feminist theory, thus Gill (2007a) and Evans et al. (2010) call for feminist scholars to “complicate” our understandings of choice and agency. A key challenge is to explore the “complex relation between culture and subjectivity in such a way as to render women neither passive, docile subjects, nor the fictitious autonomous, freely choosing persons of liberal humanism” (Gill, 2008, pp40). Our intention in this paper is to examine the extent to which the neoliberal discourse of the autonomous, freely-choosing self is reflected in the ways in which women talk about their engagement in and feelings

about feminine beauty practices, and in how they respond to suggestions that their choices in these matters may not be entirely free.

### *Aims of this Study*

In this paper we examine how women discursively adopt positions for themselves within a system that regulates acceptable boundaries for the neo-liberal feminine subject. The feminine subject is constituted within dominant discourses that surround both establishing and enacting an individual “self” while remaining responsive to patriarchal ideologies that promote specific forms of femininity. Analysing discourse can help to illuminate how women understand and take up these social structures. Gavey (1989) argues that speaking “from experience” has been given too much authority, with the result that the constitutive process of discourse has been diminished. Notions of empowerment and free choice need to be examined in relation to the often hidden influence of ideology which serves to regulate the availability of subject positions by emphasising preferred ‘choices’ and limiting the availability of others in which social consequences motivate against non-conformance and reward compliance, resulting in a system that disciplines and limits ‘choice’.

Much of the recent literature on agency and ‘choice’ discourse, as presented earlier, is focussed on the ‘sexualisation’ of culture and femininity (e.g. Gill, 2008; Levy, 2005; Evans et al. 2010; Malson, Halliwell, Tischner & Rudolfsdottir, 2011). In this paper we focus on beauty practices, however the core issues remain very closely related, in the need to analyse complex subversions of ‘choice’ discourses. We examine how ‘choice’ is used by women to position themselves as unaffected by social regulation, and the ways in which they throw off notions of constraint, coercion or oppression. In order to do this we attempted to engage participants with feminist critiques of the use of empowerment and choice discourse in the promotion of beauty practices in media and advertising, and examined the ways in which women talked about their own engagement in and feelings about these practices. Our focus was not only on highlighting ideological assumptions present in the discourse about these practices, but also examining the ways in which these women negotiate positions for themselves as autonomous, self-responsible subjects, rather than as compliant victims of oppressive ideologies. That is, we were interested in how these women would respond to feminist critique that unsettled their understandings of feminine beauty practices as a straightforward matter of personal choice.



We take a feminist post-structuralist approach as outlined by Gavey (1989). Post-structuralism is a basis for analysing subject positions in relation to language, cultural practices and the material conditions of our lives, primarily to understand power relations and identify areas for change. Post-structuralism does not attempt to make knowledge claims about universal reality or about the psychological states or intentions of the people producing the discourse. Rather post-structuralism involves examining how knowledge is associated with power and how to disrupt and displace dominant (oppressive) knowledges (Gavey, 1989).

## Method

### *Participants*

Fifteen women were recruited to participate in a series of focus groups. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 42 years old ( $M=22.21$ ). One participant did not specify her age. All participants were undergraduate psychology students recruited from an Australian university in a state capital, and received credit hours for their participation. Recruitment through a subject pool website advertised the project as “I am interested in talking to women about the different ways of defining and expressing ‘femininity’ in contemporary Australian society, and whether there are social pressures on women to adopt certain forms of femininity”.

### *Materials*

An information letter and informed consent form were signed by each participant, disclosing that sessions were audio recorded and real names kept confidential. Some material was presented to participants to read and discuss at various points across the sessions. Relating to beauty practices an extract from Wolf (1999, pp9-10) was used, which argues that despite the freedoms gained, women feel worse about themselves physically than in previous generations. A blog post from the radical feminist blog *I Blame the Patriarchy* called “Manure” which critiqued L’Oreal’s “because you’re worth it”™ slogan, and the idea of equating beauty practices with ‘worth’ was included (<http://blog.iblamethepatriarchy.com/2008/04/09/manure/>). Also used was a blog post presenting airbrushed images ([http://shakespearessister.blogspot.com/2008/04/impossibly-beautiful\\_21.html](http://shakespearessister.blogspot.com/2008/04/impossibly-beautiful_21.html)),

displaying the way women can be ‘filled out’ in some places in order to disguise the hollow appearance of their bodies, creating unattainable standards even for thin women.

### *Procedure*

The focus groups ran in four series. Each series consisted of three sessions of 1 hour over a three week period, except one series which consisted of two sessions of 90 minutes (for scheduling reasons). Topics of discussion in the first session included societal ideas of a ‘perfect woman’, what it means to be feminine and what the notion of women’s liberation or empowerment is about. The discussion in the second session centred on representations of women in media, in relation to confidence, sexuality and beauty. In the third session participants discussed ideas of free choice and social regulation, whether there was any perceived cause for concern about current media portrayals of women. Throughout the focus groups materials were presented to participants in order to prompt discussion (as listed in Materials section).

The focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed using a simplified Jeffersonian notation. Pseudonyms were used to preserve anonymity. Transcripts were labelled with a number to signify which series, and a letter to signify which session within that series. For example “2B” is series two, session two.

### *Method of Analysis*

The data were analysed following Willig’s (2008) six steps for Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, a method for identifying the available discourses within a culture, that in turn make available certain ‘ways of seeing’ and ‘ways of being’ in the world. Data analysis took place by becoming immersed in the data; reading and re-reading while writing summaries of each transcript, initially being inclusive of all talk raised by participants. We then generated topical headings from the summaries that covered the various different issues and framings that arose and from these we selected for analysis those that appeared to be the most central and prominent. While initially the research aim was to focus on women’s engagement with a range of practices associated with ‘femininity’, the participants’ frequent returns to issues specifically concerning beauty practices led us to focus our analysis on the ways in which these practices were constructed.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

Feminine beauty practices encompass forms of bodily maintenance that women engage in, including skin care, makeup, clothing, and hair care/removal. As to why women engage in beauty practices, several discourses were used. The analysis is organised around the most common ways beauty practices were discussed across the sessions: as a form of competition with other women, as pleasurable, and as confidence enhancing. We then focus on some nuances in the ways in which ‘choice’ was constructed, in particular on a distinction reflected in participants’ talk between passive and active choices.

*Women compete (only) with other women*

Although feminist scholars identify beauty practices as a key site of the construction of femininity (e.g., Gill, 2007b), participants did not emphasise femininity as a primary reason for their engagement in beauty practices. Rather they were constructed primarily in terms of seeking acceptance amongst other women. Women were described as being catty, judgemental, back-stabbing and insecure, and conforming to beauty standards was identified as a method of avoiding negative judgement and achieving status. The following extracts illustrate some of this discourse.

Extract 1

Jess: I think women tend to dress more for other women than they do for men. Like as a competition kind of thing so I think it kind of um () varies between both, like they dress sexy to get men’s attention but to prove or just look at other women () to say “I’m better than you” (h)  
3B, lns 232-234.

Extract 2

Steph: I think part of it is the female competition- and like what women expect of other women [and] that sort of () feeling that you need to () impress the girls you’re around more than the () [boys] ‘cause I mean I know that girls can be catty (h)  
2A, lns 32-35.

As shown in the above extracts, women are said to dress for other woman in competition with each other, to prove themselves as better (Extract 1, 2). If women were not in keeping with particular beauty standards then they would be judged, because “girls can be catty” (Extract 2). Women who judge other women were depicted as being insecure and competitive for reasons unspecified. The participants in this study identified as heterosexual, and were quite clear to dismiss the notion that they are in competition for men. Men were often constructed as unconcerned whether women looked like models and celebrities, saying they preferred more “natural” and “real” women; as the following extract demonstrates.

## Extract 3

Jasmine: I think most men know, that women aren't like that. I think- obviously some fourteen year old boys are going to have a different () [opinion] say to like say a twenty-five year old guy

Facilitator: [(h) yep]

Facilitator: mm

Jasmine: I think most men know () what a woman looks like ()

Facilitator: yeah

Jasmine: a real () woman you know. Not everyone looks like (Pascal) or whoever (h)

1C, lns 517-523.

Men are represented as seeing through media portrayals of women, “I think most men know, that women aren't like that” (Extract 3). Therefore the ‘competition’ discourse implies that there is no need to be concerned about beauty practices because they are chosen by, and affecting, only women who are merely competing for status with other women. In the extract below, Claire frames attracting a partner as a bonus that merely supplements the benefits women gain from beauty practices.

## Extract 4

Claire: just a portrayal thing. I want people to think I'm pretty () or that I'm () up to date with the fashion I'm not a () (hermit) reject or something. And then that goes further on to, “ooh if I do that I'll attract a nice guy” and it's easier to go out () there's sort of three things, you want to look pretty for yourself because it makes you feel good but it's making you feel good 'cause you know you're not gonna be isolated from your friends ()

Facilitator: yeah

Claire: and then you may also () pick up or () whatever with um a () guy or a girl, whichever way

4A, lns 550-556.

Claire gives three reasons for beauty practices; the acceptance of her friends, making herself feel good and attraction (Extract 4). Attraction was framed as “and then you may also pick up...” i.e. an extra bonus to the advantages already received, serving to minimise the importance overall. Across these extracts, beauty practices were primarily constructed as part of normal social group dynamics, of little consequence for outsiders, but needed for retaining group belonging and status. Men are explicitly let ‘off the hook’; not only are they presented as not pressuring women into the performance of beauty practices, they are seen as not caring about (and therefore as not benefiting from) women's compliance with beauty ideals. This serves to pre-emptively deflect arguments that beauty practices are an act of subordination to men (or to patriarchy) (e.g., as Jeffreys, 2005 argues). To the extent that women's ‘free choice’ in relation to beauty practices is seen as limited, it is portrayed as being limited by other women; each woman has the choice either to forgo such practices and risk judgement and exclusion, or to conform to expectations and retain the status quo. Either way the choice is up to each individual woman, and she is responsible for her decision.

*Beauty practices for pleasure*

As has been identified in other feminist work (e.g., Bartky, 1990; Gill, 2008; McRobbie, 2009), beauty practices were constructed as being for pleasure, something that you do “because you want to”, not because you have to. The following extracts show some examples.

Extract 5

Facilitator: um () do you think there is that equation between () beautifying yourself and () self esteem?

Vicky: [yeah]

Steph: [I] got a haircut and that felt great, it was good. ((laughs)) I got it professionally done and it was all like “yay” you know. and ()

Amber: get your makeup done, get your hair done, you like () feel go:od

Facilitator: yeah

Amber: you haven’t done anything for a while () well at least I () feel like a bit “ehh” feel like ()

2B, lns 646-652.

Extract 6

Emma: yeah. You do that ((facials)) to () as you were saying, because you want it not () you shouldn’t have to get something because [you] () you’re worth being a whole being and dependent on-

Ebony: [yeah]

Ebony: [this one facial or something yeah]

Emma: [you can just want something] and have it because you () [want it]

Ebony: [yep]

Facilitator: But why do you want it? (h)

Emma: it’s something that’s nice (h)

4B, lns 426-433.

In Extract 5 and 6 having a haircut, a facial, or wearing makeup are depicted as intrinsically rewarding, providing comfort and enjoyment. There is no sense of compulsoriness, even if it does make you feel good it is not something you have to do to feel good, “you can just want something and have it because you want it” (Extract 6), and “I got a haircut and that felt great, it was good” (Extract 5). Such constructions convey lightness and lack of concern, the unseriousness of beauty practices. However, as has been argued, an uncritical celebration of pleasure enhancing activities leaves unchallenged the powerful influence of social institutions in creating constricting gender standards, and the effort that women expend is hidden (Gill, 2007a; Bartky, 1990).

Further, it is interesting to note in Extract 6, where Emma is responding to the *L’Oreal* slogan critique, she defended women’s ability to freely enjoy these practices, in that “you shouldn’t have to get something...” based on your worth as “a whole being”. In this case the defence was that women should not feel obligated to utilise beauty practices, yet they should be allowed to have something because it’s “nice”, reflecting the way in which the neoliberal subject disregards compulsion (Baker, 2010). Yet later a

similar type of defence arose when these practices were seen as less optional, and offence was taken to the notion that women are being trivial or self-indulgent, as the following extracts demonstrate.

Extract 7

Amber: well that's the thing like you're () expected to look at certain way and () som- () you know some things are what they are and if you wanna feel nice and you wanna feel that little bit more confident when you're (giving out a speech) then y'know put a little makeup on in the morning

Facilitator: yep

Amber: but () men don't really () we're expected to look one way but () we're not meant to feel good about () buying these products because they're not a necessity

Facilitator: mm

Amber: when we're- so we're forced to buy them but we're made to feel guilty for buying such lavish purchases when-

Steph: but we shouldn't stop (h)

Facilitator: yeah

Amber: yeah exactly when () exactly guys go out and () yeah they may not buy makeup and stuff but they spend thousands of dollars doing up their cars or buying games and things like that

2B, lns 774-784.

Extract 8

Natalie: but at the same time if a woman wants to spend hundreds of dollars () on makeup, make yourself look good she should have the choice to. If she shouldn't have to () be guilted by articles like this [referencing "Manure" article] by saying () you know you shouldn't buy them because () it's evil and you're being permissive to an oppressor  
3C, lns 51-54.

The argument made here is that women shouldn't be made to feel guilty for spending money on beauty practices (Extract 7, 8), and feminist articles were seen as provoking guilt in women. Amber says "things are what they are and if you wanna feel nice...put a little makeup on in the morning" (Extract 7). A "little" makeup emphasises the smallness of going along with what is considered normal, and the resulting positive effects. Bordo (1993) cautions that pointing to women as reproducers of sexist culture often becomes interpreted as calling women our own worst enemies, and saying that women "ask for it". The defence of beauty practices as represented above is an indication of a negative reaction to the perceived message of feminist critique. Such arguments cause women to feel that they are involuntarily placed in a system which holds expectations for women, and then criticises them for pandering to those expectations, "so we're forced to buy them but we're made to feel guilty for buying such lavish purchases"... "but we shouldn't stop" (Extract 7). Strikingly, these participants did not object to beauty practices, nor that women are "expected to look one way", but rather the criticism that women receive when they do spend money on beauty products.

*Confidence*

As seen in Extract 7, gaining ‘confidence’ was constructed as a legitimate and justifiable reason for using beauty practices. The following extract demonstrates the legitimacy of confidence boosting further, based on a desire to ‘fit in’ that extends beyond ‘simple’ beauty concerns.

## Extract 9

Ebony: and but then I () one of my really good friends had um a breast enlargement and it wasn't because () of () beauty but she actually had really uneven breasts  
 ...  
 Grace: but is that a beauty thing too?  
 Ebony: I guess it was but () she also like had to fill out her bra (h) you know  
 [() like you know what I mean] she had to actually yeah() pad her bra it was that yeah() so um()  
 Grace: [oh yeah that's different <indiscernible>]  
 Facilitator: mm  
 Ebony: but yeah I guess it does come down to like self-confidence and stuff like that  
 Grace: mm  
 Ebony: and () looking like everybody else  
 4B, lns 797-812.

Having a breast enlargement due to uneven breasts was not simply a “beauty thing” (Extract 9), which would open her up to criticism for being trivial. Rather it was because she didn't “look like everybody else”, as Ebony concedes, “it does come down to self-confidence”. This echoes Davis' (1995) observation that emphasising everyone's need to fit in can provide a frame for cosmetic surgery that works to remove ‘blame’ from the woman by according it a ‘remedial’ rather than ‘enhancing’ function. Yet, as shown next, there were instances in which the legitimacy of the confidence (and pleasure) discourses became inadequate, as these women talked about their feeling that they could no longer leave the house without makeup.

## Extract 10

Alison: um () I mean my mum doesn't really wear makeup unless it's a like really special occasion. and then I wear makeup and stuff, so () yeah. And I mean I did look at the magazines and stuff, but I never really like () I didn't think, “oh you know I have to do this or like that”. I mean I feel () I guess I still do look at celebrities and think “oh I wish I was like beautiful like that” and flawless and () and at the same time I wish that I didn't wear makeup but like I feel like () I *have* to almost now. 'cause like everyone always sees me with makeup like ()  
 Facilitator: yep  
 Alison: you know? And like the only reason why I wear makeup is to try cover my flaws, like my complexion or () tired eyes or something. And () you know, there goes the judgement again (h)  
 1A, lns 651-659.

## Extract 11

Claire: I think it's changed now though. Like I don't put makeup on so much that I want somebody else to think I look nice, it's just () I'm not leaving the house unless I've got it on.  
 [I know I look bad without it]  
 Facilitator: [yeah (h)]  
 4A, lns 596-599.

In these extracts makeup is constituted as a means of remediating an ‘undesirable’ appearance, because “I know I look bad without it” (Extract 11). These two women indicated feeling compelled, “I have to almost now, cause like everyone always sees me with makeup” (Extract 10), and “I’m not leaving the house unless I’ve got it on” (Extract 11). Noticeably, the pressure they feel is presented as being of their own making. Alison (Extract 10) demonstrates the circularity of her position, unable to identify the cause of her ‘inability’ to stop wearing makeup, in which she did “look at magazines” but never felt like she “had to do this”. Therefore these women expressed a conflict between implying a sense of ‘knowing’ that they are supposed to be above concerns regarding their appearances, but are unable to escape them completely.

*“The media” and self-esteem*

In some instances blame was assigned to “the media” or celebrities for pressuring women, particularly young girls, to “take on” media images. Media was constructed as being everywhere and inescapable; and therefore indicated as having the potential to make an individual’s choices difficult or limited. However, the limitations were constructed as only applying to those who are vulnerable to pressure. The following extracts convey the construction of media and celebrities.

Extract 12

Alison: I think a lot of, like, the celebrities seem to set () that all up. Like you see most of them with painted nails or whatever, and () yeah and then everyone’s like “oh I need to paint my nails too ‘cause she’s painting her nails” or something.

Facilitator: yep

Alison: An’ you know obviously it’s still like everyone’s choice, but then you get most people, who just () like a lot of the younger girls who just follow that

1A, lns 431-436.

Extract 13

Jasmine: everyone’s just conforming, and like especially like our celebrity- mm celebrity <indiscernible>, it’s so big, it’s everywhere. You can’t, you go everywhere and you will see something or you will hear something.

1A, lns 568-569.

“Most people” are “just” conforming, because “it’s everywhere” (Extract 12, 13). These statements have broad sweeping effects, constituting the media as ubiquitous, in which little or nothing can be done to stop its spreading influence. However when talking of their own personal experiences, media was not seen as particularly powerful, as they invoked the notion of self-esteem as the key protecting factor, as shown in the following extracts.

Extract 14

Amy: and I () well perhaps it’s <indiscernible> but when I go clothes shopping um I find



that I can find () clothes that suit waist and suit () legs, perhaps it's just the stores that I go to but, I mean again there is this m-massive media stereotype. It is your choice if you choose to follow it

Natalie: mm

Amy: and your upbringing will dictate if you will follow it or not

3A, lns 968-972.

Extract 15

Melanie: But-but it's still- it's still if they've got enough self-esteem in the home, before they walk out of the door.

Jasmine: yeah

Melanie: Then their friends, the pressure from friends, and the pressure from the media wouldn't have the same effects on them.

1A, lns 598-602.

Conforming to media portrayals is seen as women's choice (Extract 14), but dictated by her upbringing, which teaches her to have the self-esteem that then allows her to be freely choosing (Extract 14, 15). The self-esteem discourse becomes contradictory, at first pointing blame towards the media, then turning back to individual responsibility whereby media no longer holds any power over women if they possess adequate self-esteem. Thus, despite statements of alarm and concern over the extent of influence media has, there was no expression of desire or ability to do anything about it, other than to teach children "self-esteem".

It is worth noting here that the constitution of self-confidence, as presented earlier, departs from the constitution of self-esteem. Self-esteem is constructed as something women shouldn't 'lack', it is necessary for all women to possess as a bolster and protective factor. However, as seen earlier (Extract 7), confidence was not seen as a problem as such, but rather constructed as something legitimate for women to want (and therefore not legitimate to criticise) so long as it was packaged within a discourse of choice, or pleasure.

*Active vs. Passive Choices*

Across these focus groups, often conforming to beauty standards was not explicitly framed as a choice, while non-conformance was constructed as an active choice. These active choices were said to be up to individual women, however they were sometimes acknowledged as carrying a price, as the following demonstrates.

Extract 16

Vicky: I went () uh food shopping and there was a girl with a beard, a really long beard and I was j-just watching everyone's like reactions () and they were like ((whispers)) "look at her beard" and they were like, they were really quite grossed out by it. And I remember myself thinking "why is she making such a statement?" () but really she prob'ly just () being [herself. But I was thinking "why] why, what is the statement she's trying to make?" you know

2C, lns 455-459.

A woman with a beard was seen as making a controversial statement and the price for “being herself” was that she would attract constant attention (Extract 16). The woman was questioned for failing to remove her beard, i.e. her choices were questioned. This example indicates how non-conformity can be constructed as an active choice or statement, whereas conformance is often unnoticed and unquestioned. Extract 16 also reveals the complexity involved in choice; while decisions are constructed as ultimately residing with each person (e.g. you choose to keep or remove facial hair), the consequences may serve to effectively remove that choice as a genuine option. The strength of the social consequences attached to women’s body hair (non)management is shown by Fahs (in press), who set an assignment for women in her college classes to abstain from all hair removal. Many of the students found themselves faced with social derogation and pressure to resume ‘normal’ grooming practices, as well as personal feelings of shame and embarrassment. As Fahs argues, this exercise confronted women with the limitations of “choice” rhetoric, and the power of social norms.

However, as mentioned, the key factor legitimising any choice is its ability to provide (or at least not threaten) self-esteem, or “feeling comfortable” as the extract below shows.

Extract 17

Amy: I mean looking good- looking a certain way you-you () you dress however you dress, you look however you look because you feel comfortable () whatever you’re doing. And () while you can- and I mean there’s choices to have () leg hair or armpit hair () an-and a lot of people may not like it but if you feel comfortable in yourself doing that () then () then you really are nobody else’s problem but your own so

Facilitator: mm

Amy: it really shouldn’t matter.

3A, lns 510-516.

In Extract 17 Amy says that people have choices to dress and groom themselves at whatever level they feel comfortable with, and if they feel comfortable then they can choose not to conform. As Amy says, “it really shouldn’t matter”, indicating the defence that women should not be made to feel that it does matter, as indicated previously. Therefore the individual is implicated in whatever consequences are experienced for her choice, rather than recognising the social preferences for, for example, the removal of leg and armpit hair. Strikingly, the passive decision to decline to remove one’s body hair is framed as an explicit choice, while actively removing hair is presented as the default position (Extract 17). The notion of “being comfortable in yourself” provides a reason for the practice at one level, but is not

required to address the larger, silent question about why it is that the majority of women in Western society feel the need to remove their body hair in order to feel ‘comfortable in themselves’.

The following extracts expand on implicit conformance, and the perception of choice versus actual choice.

Extract 18

Emma: I think it's more that we're told we have a choice but whether or not () it would be acceptable [to take] some of those options or those choices wouldn't be () [you know] a good thing in society. It wouldn't work

Facilitator: [yep] [yeah]

Facilitator: yeah

Ebony: and I think that although we do have choices () there's some aspect of us that always seems to conform to ()

Facilitator: mm

Ebony: social norms and stuff like that

4A, lns 87-95.

Extract 19

Facilitator: I think the () the point that I wanted to make was just that () we tend to talk about such things as if they're trivial () but underlying () that sometimes women actually are deeply concerned about it

Grace: yeah I think that's true. Like I think women don't wanna be and they don't () don't feel like we should have to be but () still don't wanna () go out the house looking () horrible. You know that people would-would pick up on it you know (h)

Facilitator: mm

Emma: mm I think comes back to advertising 'cause () there's so much () in magazines and that that sort of () um makes it all seems frivolous but yet there's so much attention caught up in it that somehow it is very () real () there is some () [importance] to it

Ebony: [like they ()] pull like the piss out of stars who walk out the house with no makeup on and stuff like that. Like it's like a front page thing "Oh my God Britney has no makeup on!"

4B, lns 464-475.

“Women don't wanna be and...don't feel like we should have to be but...don't wanna look horrible” (Extract 19). Grace identifies a conflict between wanting to feel unconcerned about beauty practices, and yet wanting to be beautiful. In opposition to the personal enjoyment discourse that diverted blame away from women, this discourse implies a lack in women that causes them to fail to be freely choosing, with an underlying and unnamed force that prevents one from throwing off beauty ideals. As Alison in Extract 14 said, “I still do look at celebrities and think “oh I wish I was like beautiful like that”...” and flawless and () and at the same time I wish that I didn't wear makeup”.

Extract 18 demonstrates the notion of being “told” that you have a choice, yet “some of those choices wouldn't work”, and so “some aspect of us” (unnamed) conforms. In Extract 19 the source of pressure is identified as advertising, through the amount of attention paid to beauty practices it “somehow” becomes important and real. These are examples of an implicit identification of the

requirements on women to comply with beauty standards, however the “aspect of self” that conforms is unnamed or uncertain, and is therefore explicitly missing from discourses of choice. These constructions of choice can be understood in relation to the concept of the neoliberal self, which makes little allowance for women to explicitly acknowledge restrictions or social pressures that impinge upon their ‘free choice’; the neoliberal self must be seen as self-responsible, flexible and autonomous (Davies et al, 2006). The lack of explicit reference to choices *to* conform indicates that conformance to feminine beauty standards are not constructed as requiring as much effort or risk as does non-conformance, serving to render beauty practices unremarkable.

### *Compromise*

The most common way these women identified their ability to both participate in pleasurable and rewarding beauty practices, while not being entirely subject to social regulation, was to adopt a position of compromise that allowed them to retain some evidence of their resistance to external pressures and still be socially acceptable, as shown below.

#### Extract 20

Facilitator: is it () a little bit depressing sort of, to [think about it?]

Steph: [<indiscernible>] yeah a () ah () a bit. I personally don't feel I suffer too much from the () like anything I do, I do choose to do because I like to () fit in that little bit I don't feel it's strange, yeah so I () shave my legs and I () wear clothes that- I don't wear shoes but you know I chose that (h). You know I-I I've made a compromise. And () um so for me personally it doesn't ()  
2C, lns 967-970.

#### Extract 21

Claire: I think they have to like, you can't entirely go one way or the other. There has to be some sort of um () middle ground where you go “I know that these things are bad, but the modern world...” ()

Facilitator: yep

Claire: “I can like () look nice” and on the one hand yes it is because I'm conforming () 'cause obviously I've () been wooed by the advertising but on the other hand, I do know () that it's bad and if there is a way to do it () to strike up and rise against that I will () but ()

Grace: you don't wanna do it and get () gossiped about or? ()

Claire: not so much gossiped about but there just isn't a () an () an easy way to do it  
4B, lns 1029-1036.

Claire (Extract 21) speaks of conforming yet remaining aware that she is doing so. She says there is no easy way to create change, and so strikes a compromise, which allows her to retain the ability to “look nice”. Steph (Extract 20) says she doesn't feel it is strange to “fit in that little bit”. Extract 20 is again indicative of the subtle difference between actively choosing (not wearing shoes) and passively choosing (shaving her legs). The former is ‘free choice’, the latter is a default position that is missing an

explicit name. These extracts indicate an acknowledgment of the expectations that do exist, and the willingness to carry the consequences so long as a sense of compromise is retained. The subject positions that these women take are not of active and complete rebellion but rather of acceptance of social norms, while subtly flexing the rules that are marginally kept in view (i.e. reflective of the neoliberal self). This position allows women to avoid a confronting sense of personal restriction that would be at odds with the cherished autonomy of the neoliberal self, and therefore not feel compelled to address the causes of pressures to conform that are placed on women.

## Conclusion

This study was intended to contribute to research in an important area of contemporary western women's experience; engagement with feminine beauty practices. While topical concerns in feminism now often focus on the sexualisation of culture, we argue that the analysis of beauty practices also remains important, not only because of the parallels in terms of conceptualising agency and choice, but also through the apparently unremarkable and benign role that beauty practices seem to have taken in postfeminist culture. We noted in the introduction that our aim in this paper was to add to current attempts to 'complicate' understandings of agency. We did this by making several novel demonstrations of the uses of neoliberal discourse, and the ways this discourse is used to locate beauty practices as an unproblematic expression of the autonomous, self-regulating and self-choosing feminine subject (as shown in similar feminist work, Gill, 2007a, 2008; Baker, 2010; McRobbie, 2007).

In particular, there was a conspicuous lack of attention to any claim that women are required to engage in these practices, and men were exempt from any role with frequent assertions that men don't pay attention to or care about women's beauty practices. In pre-emptively undermining an assumed feminist critique in which 'patriarchy' requires from women active efforts to comply with narrow beauty standards, and replacing it with an account in which it is a simple desire to fit in with and be liked by other women, the stakes are lowered; compliance becomes less threatening to the autonomy and 'freedom' of the neoliberal self. In saying this, we do not mean to imply that women are somehow mistaken about their experiences; we do not wish to deny that the pleasures of beauty practices can be 'real', nor is it our intent to criticize women for wishing to fit in with their friends. Rather, we argue that it is the focus on these elements of 'experience' to the exclusion of other forms of analysis that displaces

any engagement with a critique of the darker side of beauty ideals, such as the reinforcement of narrow and oppressive notions of feminine beautification, the material and emotional toll exacted in their pursuit, the insecurity of their achievement, and the invisibility of the disciplining of the body required to achieve them (see Gavey, 1989 and Gill, 2007a for an extended discussion of these issues).

The construction of conformity with beauty ideals as easy and normal, contrasted against difficult and strange non-conformity, highlights the extent to which the current state of affairs -- in which many women go to great lengths to achieve normative female beauty -- is constructed as relatively unproblematic and effortless. The lack of acknowledgement of effort involved in the beauty practices of women, however, was undermined by a lack of equivalent alternatives. There were instances in which these women were unable to articulate why it can be difficult to opt out of their 'self-chosen' engagement in beauty practices (such as the acknowledgement that leaving the house without wearing makeup can cease to be optional), other than a desire/need for 'a little bit of confidence'. One way of resolving the potentially contradictory discourses, and their apparent compliance with patriarchal beauty practices, was to create a 'compromise' between maintaining individuality and 'fitting in'. Small acts of resistance (such as 'not wearing shoes') were offered as evidence of self-determination and freedom from external pressure, which then allowed women the possibility to 'choose' to conform in other ways. As McRobbie (2007) and Baker (2010) argue, neoliberal discourse enables women to attribute their actions to their own desires and capacity to make choices, and disregard compulsion. The compromise position allows women to maintain a view of themselves as autonomous and self-determining, and not as passive victims of oppressive ideologies, which removes any need to critique or otherwise 'take on' the expectations placed on them.

The aim of this research was to contribute to current feminist efforts to 'complicate' our understandings of contemporary western women's experiences of agency and choice in relation to practices that confer privilege in patriarchal, postfeminist societies and which could therefore be understood to be compelled. As such, we argue that the subjectivity of the neoliberal self is a complete 'way of being' in the world in which the pressures placed on women *are* detectable, but not readily nameable. When challenged, these women did identify the existence of appearance pressures but were often somewhat surprised or perplexed by the depth of impact it had on their ability to make choices, or

the ways in which ‘choices’ may only be available to some women, some of the time (Gill, 2008). Ultimately, we argue, that with its emphasis on autonomous personal choice and ultimate self-responsibility, neoliberalism has removed the vocabulary needed to name the social reality of appearances pressures; that not only does she ‘feel better about herself’, but, crucially, under the logic of the patriarchal beauty myth, *is worth more* when complying with beauty ideals. Though these women rejected the notion of beauty defining their worth, (and that they “shouldn’t” be made to feel that way), they did acknowledge that beauty practices allowed them to obtain status by competing with other women and feeling more confident.

In closing, research such as this offers opportunities for insight into the socially shared processes of women’s engagement with feminine beauty ideologies from the viewpoint of a post-structuralist critique, in which the purpose is to make visible that which has long been hidden; the constitution of subjects through discourse and ideology. Feminists wishing to address concerns about the ways in which beauty practices are promoted to and required of women need to take into consideration the discourse of the neoliberal self and its implications in continuing work. The continuing invisibility of the role of discourse in constituting subjects, particularly the subversion of empowerment and choice discourses in popular culture (as argued by Evans et al, 2010), conceals the impossibility of women positioning themselves outside of them. We hope to have demonstrated in this paper a detailed examination of how women do use and take up choice discourses, and the points at which the discourses of the neoliberal self become insufficient, yet not in a way that allows them to be named, or the nature of the oppression to be identified and resisted.

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