

Supersexualize Me!¹ **Advertising and ‘the midriffs’**

Rosalind Gill

Dr Rosalind Gill
Gender Institute
London School of Economic & Political Science
Houghton St
London WC2A 2AE
UK

+44 207 955 6024
r.c.gill@lse.ac.uk

Chapter prepared for Attwood, F., Brunt, R & Cere, R (Eds) (2007)
Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Culture. I.B. Taurus

¹ This title owes a debt to Morgan Spurlock's powerful critique of the fast food industry, *Supersize Me*.

Introduction

It might be Venice Beach in California, or any other similar boardwalk, with white sand, blue sky and the ocean in the background. A tall, slim, blonde young woman is pictured turning away from the viewer (figure 1). She is bending over to tie the laces on her rollerblades, and the tops of her tiny red shorts rise up to reveal the cheeks of her buttocks. The pose is familiar to anyone who has ever glanced at heterosexual pornography, and is known to scholars of animal behaviour as 'presenting'. The only thing stopping us from seeing the young woman's genitalia is a contrasting blue g-string, worn over the shorts. Either side of the image, runs the following text:

'Q: Why do you run?

A: One word. Thong'.

And then comes the brand: Puma running.com

'Fancy a smack?' says another advert. It shows a tall, slim, PVC-clad, blonde dominatrix holding a man tethered on all fours, with a collar and leash around his neck, and his trousers pulled part way down. The woman holds a hard paddle/slipper in her right hand and her arm is raised: she is poised to beat his naked, exposed buttocks. A small box in the right-hand corner reveals that the image is advertising Gym Box, an exercise centre in central London.

'Home slave' reads a third advert - this time for an apartment block in Manchester. Here yet another tall, blonde young woman is shown, tightly tied up from head to toe, while an attractive, chisel-jawed businessman regards her coolly from behind his state-of-the-art laptop computer.

Pornographic poses, sadomasochism, bondage. These have all become regular parts of the iconography of advertising in the early 21st century. Arched backs, exposed breasts and simulated orgasms are so routine as to rarely provoke comment. 'Porno chic' (McNair 2002) is today a taken for granted mode of representation within advertising in many western countries in a context in which advertisers believe they have to produce ever more arresting and stimulating images in order to get consumers' attention in the crowded, sign-saturated mediascape. Hyper sexualized imagery is one way of achieving this, as is the use of graphic representations of violence. Both have increased dramatically in the last decade (Carter and Weaver 2003).

In this chapter I want to consider advertising and sexualization through careful examination of a related shift: the emergence of the figure of the 'midriff' who has become an iconic part of advertising targeted at young people. I will suggest that in the period since 1994 there has been a marked shift in the manner that women's bodies are depicted sexually, in ways that emphasise pleasure, playfulness and empowerment rather than passivity or victimisation. This chapter will both document and interrogate the shift from a feminist perspective.

I review some of the traditional concerns about the representation of women's bodies in advertising, and highlight some significant changes. I look specifically at the rise of midriff advertising, using examples to discuss its key features. Finally, I evaluate the significance of this shift in political terms and offer a critical assessment of midriffing.

The chapter's aim is not straightforwardly to weigh into the debates either for or against explicitly sexual representations (the so-called 'sex wars' of feminism) but to explore the *nature* of contemporary sexualization in advertising, to reflect upon the ways in which women's bodies are depicted sexually, and to critically examine current constructions of feminine subjectivities and desires.

Advertising and feminism

Advertising is inescapable and ubiquitous in northern/western societies, and increasingly elsewhere too. It is estimated that the average US citizen sees or hears 3000 adverts each day (Kilbourne 1999). When you translate that into the notional time spent 'interacting' with adverts, and work it out as a fraction of a lifetime, the results are sobering; Kilbourne puts the figure at approximately three years in the average lifetime of a North American and citizens of other developed countries are not far behind. It is clear that adverts are at the heart of social existence in the West. Indeed, the magnitude of advertising's influence has been compared to that of education and organised religion (Lazier-Smith 1989). It constitutes a 'vast superstructure' (Williamson 1978) and is, according to Leiss, Kline and Jhally (1986) perhaps the most important body of material in the mass media.

It is not surprising, then, that in the wave of feminist scholarship and activism that swept through western countries in the 1960s and 1970s, advertising was a key target for analysis and critique. The short, condensed nature of adverts predisposed their creators to rely heavily on crude, easily-recognisable stereotypes, and research highlighted the narrow range of degrading and trivialising images of women: the dumb blonde, the unintelligent housewife, the passive sex object, and so on. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, content analytic studies documented the same consistent pattern of gender stereotyping in adverts: women were predominantly shown in the home (indeed, in the kitchen and bathroom); depicted as housewives and mothers; they were frequently shown in dependent or subservient roles; their appearance – looking beautiful and sexy - was more important than anything else; and they rarely provided an argument in favour of the advertised products - voice-overs were generally done by men, indexing their greater authority. In contrast, men were portrayed in a range of settings and occupational roles; as independent and autonomous; and were presented as objective and knowledgeable about the products they used. (Dyer 1982; Livingstone 1986; Lovdal 1989; Furnham and Bitar 1993; Gunter 1994).

A landmark study by the sociologist Erving Goffman (Goffman 1979) provided another way of coding gender representation in advertisements, concentrating on the way in which *non-verbal signals* communicated important differences in male and female power. Examining magazine and billboard advertising, Goffman concluded that adverts depicted ritualised versions of the parent-child relationship, in which women were largely accorded child-like status. Women were typically shown lower or smaller than men and using gestures which 'ritualised their subordination' (1979:43), for example, lying down, using bashful knee bends, canting postures or deferential smiles. Women were also depicted in 'licensed withdrawal' (1979:29): slightly distanced from a scene, gazing into the distance, not quite there. The predilection of advertisers for showing women looking into mirrors, with only the reflection captured, was another way of achieving this, which additionally conveyed the message that women are narcissistic.

Goffman's work was developed by many other writers to examine the body's presentation in advertising. Perhaps the major insight of subsequent feminist work has been the analysis of how 'cropping' is used in adverts. Many studies have highlighted the way in which women's bodies are fragmented in adverts, visually dissected so that the viewer sees only the lips, or the eyes, or the breasts, or whatever (Dyer 1982; Coward 1984). This frequently mirrors the text in which women's bodies are presented simply as a composite of problems, each requiring a product-solution. The effect is to deny women's humanity, to present them not as whole people but as fetishised, dismembered 'bits', as objects.

For the last four decades the notion of objectification has been a key term in feminist critique of advertising. Its centrality to the feminist 'critical' lexicon lay in its ability to speak to the ways in which media representations help to justify and sustain relations of domination and inequality between men and women. In particular, processes of objectification were held to be the key to understanding male violence against women:

'Adverts don't directly cause violence... but the violent images contribute to the state of terror. Turning a human being into a thing, an object, is almost always the first step towards justifying violence against that person... This step is already taken with women. The violence, the abuse, is partly the chilling but logical result of the objectification' (Kilbourne, 1999: 278)

It is difficult to over-estimate the importance of this argument for feminism (and also for understandings of racism and other relations of brutality); it has been central to feminist activism around advertising and media representations more generally. However, I want to suggest that a number of significant changes have taken place in the regime of representation in advertising and elsewhere that mean that the notion of objectification no longer has the analytic purchase to understand a lot of contemporary constructions of femininity. Increasingly, young women are presented not as passive sex objects, but as active, desiring sexual subjects, who seem to participate enthusiastically in practices and forms of self-presentation that earlier generations regarded as connected to subordination. Perhaps the advert that most vividly captures this shift and marks its inception, is Trevor Beattie's famous 1994 poster for Playtex Wonderbra in which model Eva Herzigova is shown, regarding her own Wonderbra-uplifted breasts under the slogan 'Hello Boys'. The humorous and direct address to male viewers marked a profound change; Herzigova was positioned not only as object of the male gaze, but also as an active subject, who was knowingly playing with her sexual power.

This shift was emblematic of a wider transformation happening in advertising in the early 1990s. Robert Goldman (1992) has argued that advertisers were forced to respond to three challenges at this time. First, there was the growing experience of 'sign fatigue' on the part of many media audiences, fed up with the relentless bombardment by brands, logos and consumer images. Like its millennial sibling compassion fatigue, sign fatigue showed itself in what we might call a weariness of affect, an ennui, and disinclination to respond. Secondly, advertisers had to address increasing 'viewer scepticism' particularly from younger, media-savvy consumers who had grown up with fast-paced music television, and were the first generation to adopt personal computers and mobile phones as integral features of everyday life. To get through to this generation who regarded themselves as sceptical and knowing in

relation to commercial messages, advertisers had to adapt - and increasingly came to produce commercials that mocked the grammar and vocabulary of advertising and effaced their own status as advertisements. Thirdly, advertisers needed to address feminist critiques of advertising, and to fashion new commercial messages that took on board women's anger at constantly being addressed through representations of idealized beauty.

Goldman argued that advertisers' response was to develop 'commodity feminism'ⁱ - an attempt to incorporate the cultural power and energy of feminism whilst simultaneously domesticating its critique of advertising and the media. Commodity feminism takes many different forms. It consists of adverts that aim to appease women's anger and to suggest that advertisers share their disgruntlement with images of thin women, airbrushed to perfection. It is found in adverts that attempt to articulate a rapprochement between traditional femininity and what are coded as feminist goals: independence, career success, financial autonomy. It may be identified in gender reversal adverts or in revenge adverts which mock or turn the tables on men. Elsewhere I have considered a number of shifts in the representation of gender in advertising in some detail (Gill 2006)ⁱⁱ. In the remainder of this chapter, however, I will turn my attention to perhaps the major contemporary shift in the sexual representation of women: the construction of a young, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is for ever 'up for it': the midriff.

Sexualization and the midriffs

The midriff is a part of the body between the top of the pubis bone and the bottom of the rib cage. This part of the female body has been the site of erotic interest in many non-Western cultures for a long time. In the West, the recent upsurge of interest in the midriff can be traced back to the visual presentation of Madonna in the late 1980s in which her pierced belly button and toned abdomen became features for erotic display in dance routines. For almost a decade, between the mid-1990s and the mid 2000s, revealing the midriff was central to Western young women's fashion, with low hung hipster jeans, short cropped top or belly top, exposing a pierced navel at the front and the familiar 'whale back' (visible g-string) from behind. Increasingly, the lower back has also become a site for elaborate tattoos.

This style was so widespread for such a long time that the term 'midriffs' has become a shorthand employed by advertisers and marketing consultants (Rushkoff, no date; Quart 2003). In one sense it signals a generation - primarily women in their 20s and 30s, but sometimes also girls in their teens and women in their early 40s -- defined by their fashion tastes. More tellingly, however, the midriffs could be understood less in age terms than in relation to a particular *sensibility*: a sensibility characterised by a specific constellation of attitudes towards the body, sexual expression and gender relations.

Advertising aimed at the midriffs is notable for its apparently 'sexualized' style but is quite different from the sexual objectification to which second wave feminist activists objected. In today's midriff advertising women are much less likely to be shown as passive sexual objects than as empowered, heterosexually desiring sexual subjects,

operating playfully in a sexual marketplace that is presented as egalitarian or actually favourable to women.

Midriff advertising has four central themes: an emphasis upon the body, a shift from objectification to sexual subjectification, a pronounced discourse of choice and autonomy, and an emphasis upon empowerment.

Perhaps the most striking feature of midriff advertising is the centrality of the body. If, in the 1950s, it was the home that was the ideal focus for women's labour and attention and from which their 'worth' was judged, in the new millennium it is the body. A sleek, controlled figure is today essential for portraying success, and each part of the body must be suitably toned, conditioned, waxed, moisturised, scented and attired. In advertising, more and more parts of the body come under intense scrutiny: this summer's must-have accessory is beautiful armpits, Dove's summer 2006 campaign alerts us, lest we forget, to all the products necessary to render this part of the body acceptable.

Today, the body is portrayed in advertising and in many other parts of the media as the primary source of women's capital. This may seem obvious and taken-for-granted, but it is, in fact, relatively new. Surveillance of women's bodies constitutes perhaps the largest type of media content across all genres and media forms. Women's bodies are evaluated, scrutinised and dissected by women as well as men and are always at risk of 'failing'. This is most clear in the cultural obsession with celebrity which plays out almost exclusively over women's bodies. Magazines like *Heat* and *Closer* did not even exist a decade ago, but today offer page after page of colour photographs of female celebrities' bodies, with scathing comments about anything from armpit hair to visible panty lines, but focusing in particular upon the crimes of being 'fat' and, more recently, 'too thin' (McRobbie 2004; Gill 2007). In the very recent past, women's cooking or domestic cleanliness or interior design skills were the focus of advertisers' attention to a much greater extent than the surface of the body. But currently there seems to have been a profound shift in the very definition of femininity such that it is defined as a bodily property rather than a social structural or psychological one. Instead of caring or nurturing or motherhood, it is now possession of a 'sexy body' that is presented as women's key source of identity. This is captured vividly in an advert for Wonderbra, which shows a young woman wearing only a black, cleavage-enhancing bra. Situated in between the breasts is the following slogan: 'I can't cook. Who cares?' - making the point that her voluptuous body is far more important than any other feminine skills or attributes she may or may not have.

There has also been a shift in the way that women's bodies are presented erotically. Where once sexualized representations of women in the media presented them as passive, mute objects of an assumed male gaze, today women are presented as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so. A 1994 advert for Wonderbra pictured model Eva Herzigova's cleavage, and hailed us with a quotation from Mae West: 'Or are you just pleased to see me?'. The first part of the quotation - 'is that a gun in your pocket?' with its implication that the male viewer had an erection - was left out, for us as viewers to fill in. This was no passive, objectified sex object, but a woman who was knowingly playing with her sexual power. Similarly, the confident, assertive tone of a Triumph advert from the same period is quite different from earlier

representations: 'New hair, new look, new bra. And if he doesn't like it, new boyfriend'.

This advert, like others in the series, has a feminist veneer, a cool and assertive tone. What this represents is the idea that women can gain control through the commodification of their appearance - that by acquiring a particular look they can obtain power (Goldman, 1992). The notion of objectification does not seem to capture this; a better understanding would come from the Foucauldian idea of (sexual) subjectification, which speaks to the way that power operates through the construction of particular subjectivities -- a point that I return to later.

A crucial aspect of both the obsessional preoccupation with the body and the shift from objectification to sexual subjectification is that this is framed in advertising through a discourse of playfulness, freedom, and, above all, *choice*. Women are presented as not seeking men's approval but as *pleasing themselves*, and, in so doing, they just happen to win men's admiration. A South African advert for She-bear lingerie in 1999, for example, featured an attractive young white woman wearing only her lingerie and a nun's habit and rosary. The slogan, 'Wear it for yourself', ties the brand identity to women who dress for themselves rather than for men - even if they are not nuns. 'If he's late you can always start without him', declares another lingerie advert in which the mise en scene constructs a picture of seduction, complete with carelessly abandoned underwear, but in which a sexual partner is absent. This seems not to be genuinely celebrating the pleasures of masturbation for women but is designed to show how arousing the product is, and how sexy it will make you feel. Of course, this raises all kinds of difficult questions, such as what is the difference between self-pleasure and feeling sexy? How is it that women's arousal has come to be tied so closely to pleasing men? And how precisely is this connection signified in the adverts - that is, is the link made in the text or in the reading of it by normatively-interpellated heterosexual feminine subjects, in which case other, resistant readings might be possible?

Dee Amy Chinn (Amy-Chinn 2006) eloquently captures this double-edged postfeminist emphasis on women pleasing themselves, in the title of her article about lingerie advertising: 'This is just for Me(n)'. Such advertising is at once hailing active heterosexually-desiring (young) women, but does so using a photographic grammar directly lifted from heterosexual pornography aimed at men. The success - and what is novel about this - is in connecting 'me' and 'men' and suggesting there is no contradiction - indeed *no difference* - between what 'I' want and what men might want of 'me'. This is clearly complicated, and I would not want to be understood as saying that there is some kind of essential or necessary contradiction or difference between what women and men want to sexually or in any other way, but equally, though I do not think it can be assumed that these desires are identical. What interests me most is the sophisticated 'higher' development of ideology and power relations such that the ideological is literally being made real, in the form of constructions of femininity that come straight out of the most predictable templates of male sexual fantasy, yet which must also be understood as authentically owned by the women who produce them. Part of their force lies precisely in the fact that they are not understood as ideological (or indeed understood as not ideological). Janice Turner has referred to as the idea that straight porn has 'come true':

'Once porn and real human sexuality were distinguishable. Not even porn's biggest advocates would suggest a porn flick depicted reality, that women were gagging for sex 24/7 and would drop their clothes and submit to rough, anonymous sex at the slightest invitation. But as porn has seeped into mainstream culture, the line has blurred. To speak to men's magazine editors, it is clear they believe that somehow in recent years, porn has come true. The sexually liberated modern woman turns out to resemble - what do you know! - the pneumatic take-me-now-big-boy fuck-puppet of male fantasy after all' (Turner 2005).

In a 1995 advert for a Gossard bra a young woman is depicted lying dreamily in some straw or grass, wearing only a black translucent bra and pants. The text reads: 'who said you can't get pleasure from something soft'. This emphasises women's pleasure, and directs us to the redundancy of men in achieving it, but uses a form of representation which is familiar from pornography: the woman is pictured from above, almost naked and pleasuring herself (or at least being pleased by her underwear). In 'pleasing herself' she is also of course pleasing the many heterosexual men who may have consumed very similar images in porn.

This apparent dual address (to 'new' women and to 'old' - ie unreconstructed - men) is captured brilliantly in Jacky Fleming's (1996) satirical cartoon about the advert. In the first frame a heterosexual couple is shown standing in front of two large images of young attractive women in their underwear. The woman says: 'I don't know why you're staring like that, Adrian, these adverts aren't FOR men. They are meant to be for WOMEN and they make us feel cheekily confident about being sexy in a raunchy but fun loving postfeminist sort of way... And there's a lot of humour involved too.' In the second frame, the same man is shown again in front of the posters but this time with a male friend. We assume he has just reported his partner's explanation. 'Tell you what mate', says his friend, 'if this is feminism we've been backing the wrong horse!'

Almost as central to midriff advertising as the notions of choice and 'pleasing one's self', is a discourse of feminine *empowerment*. Contemporary advertising targeted at the midriffs suggests, above all, that buying the product will empower you. 'I pull the strings' asserts a beautiful woman in a black Wonderbra; 'Empower your eyes, says an advert for Shiseido mascara; 'Discover the power of femininity. Defy conventions and take the lead' reads an advert for Elizabeth Arden beauty products. What is on offer in all these adverts is a specific kind of power - the sexual power to bring men to their knees. Empowerment is tied to possession of a slim and alluring young body, whose power is the ability to attract male attention and sometimes female envy. Wonderbra's 2006 campaign 'Experience WonderYou' signals this particularly vividly, in a shot of an escalator designed to allow the viewer to situate herself imaginatively (in a Wonderbra) as the object of universal male admiration and female mistrust, competitiveness and envy. A US advert for lingerie dares to make explicit that which is usually just implied: showing a curvaceous woman's body from the neck down, clad in a black basque and stockings, the advert's text reads, 'while you don't necessarily dress for men, it doesn't hurt, on occasion, to see one drool like the pathetic dog he is'ⁱⁱⁱ. This is 'power femininity': a 'subject-effect' of 'a global discourse of popular postfeminism which incorporates feminist signifiers of emancipation and empowerment as well as circulating popular postfeminist assumptions that feminist struggles have ended, that full equality for all women has been achieved, and that women of today can "have it all"' (Lazar 2006).

Supersexualize me: midriff advertising and postfeminism

What, then, are we to make of the shift in the way that women are presented sexually? In offering up representations of women who are active, desiring sexual subjects, who are presented as powerful and playful, rather than passive or victimized, has advertising pointed to more hopeful, open or egalitarian possibilities for gender relations? I do not think so: on the contrary, I want to argue that midriff advertising re-sexualizes women's bodies, with the alibi of a feisty, empowered postfeminist discourse that makes it very difficult to critique.

Let us examine first some of the exclusions of midriff advertising. Most obviously this includes anyone living outside the heterosexual norm. Contemporary midriff advertising seems to operate within a resolutely heteronormative economy, in which power, pleasure and subjectivity are all presented in relation to heterosexual relationships. Indeed the parallel growth of a kind of 'queer chic' (Gill, 2008) seems to locate homosexuality in terms of style and aesthetics, rather than sexuality. A cynic might suggest that the greater visibility of hyper-feminine/hyper-sexualized lesbians in advertising may be a way for advertisers to evade charges of sexism whilst continuing to present women in a highly objectified manner.

Others excluded from the empowering, pleasurable address of midriff advertising are older women, disabled women, fat women and any woman who is unable to live up to the increasingly narrow standards of female beauty and sex appeal that are normatively required. These women are never accorded sexual subjecthood. The figure of the 'unattractive' woman who seeks a sexual partner remains one of the most vilified in popular culture. Indeed, returning to the first image discussed in this chapter it is worth noting that a parallel advert featured in the same magazine highlighted the alter *ego* of the micro-shortened leggy blonde: her mother. 'Why do you run?' asks the advert again. But this time the answer: 'I love my mother. But I don't love her thighs.' An unflattering shot shows the behind of an older woman, her wrinkled hands placed on her hips, her upper thighs dotted with cellulite. Here in the figure of the older woman is the repressed of midriff advertising: she who you do not want to become. Unlike the midriff, she has no voice, is accorded no sexual autonomy or playfulness and is put on display as an object (not a subject), a warning.^{iv} Sexual subjectification, then, is a highly specific and exclusionary practice, and sexual *pleasure* is actually irrelevant here; it is the power of sexual *attractiveness* that is important. Indeed, the two are frequently and deliberately confused in midriff advertising.

The practice is also problematic for what it renders invisible, which Robert Goldman (1992) has called the 'diverse forms of terror experienced by women who objectify themselves'. He explains:

'There is the mundane psychic terror associated with not receiving "looks" of admiration - i.e. not having others validate one's appearance. A similar sense of terror involves the fear of "losing one's looks" - the quite reasonable fear that ageing will deplete one's value and social power. A related source of anxiety involves fear about "losing control" over body weight and appearance... and there is a very real physical terror which may accompany presentation of self as an object of desire -- the fear of rape and violence by misogynist males' (Goldman, 1992:123)

Midriff advertising is notable not only for its success in selling brands, but also - much more significantly - for its effective rebranding or reconstruction of the anxieties and the labour involved in making the body beautiful, through a discourse of fun, pleasure and power. In this sense, the work associated with disciplining the feminine body to approximate to standards that are normatively required is made knowable in new ways that *systematically erase* pain, anxiety, expense and low self esteem. See for example the way that the application of boiling wax to the genital region and then its use to pull out hairs by their roots can be discursively (re)constructed as 'pampering'. (Sisters, I don't think so!)

Goldman is correct, too, to point to the erasure of violence in such advertising. It seems literally to have been conjured away. In one ad an attractive young woman is depicted wearing just a bra, her arm stretched high in the internationally recognised gesture for hailing a taxi. 'I bet I can get a cab on New Years Eve 1999' she declares, laughing. Here, again, the exposed breasts are a source of male-attention-grabbing power, a way to defeat the notorious concerns about taxi queues on the Millennium Eve. But the representation is entirely shorn of any suggestion of the violence that might threaten any woman so scantily attired, late at night, in the midst of large numbers of men who are drinking heavily.

More generally, the depiction of heterosexual relations as playful, and women as having as much - if not more - power as men in negotiating them is at odds with the picture presented in most research, as well as in statistics which depict extraordinarily sobering picture of the levels of violence by men against women.^v

Midriff advertising is notable for articulating notions of women's self-determination and agency, yet it is precisely the construction of the subject as autonomous that constitutes another set of tensions. First, it is notable that women's agentic capacities are confined to the 'aestheticisation of their physical appearances' (Lazar 2006) and, moreover, their power as agents is directly tied to consumerism -- points that suggest there is rather less to celebrate about this shift than some (e.g. Scott, 2005; Taylor, 2006); might have us believe. More fundamentally, however, the notions of choice and autonomy as they are articulated within advertising are systematically eradicating any space within which we might think about ourselves as *social* beings. In short, any notion of cultural or political influence is disavowed.

Midriff advertising articulates a thoroughgoing individualism in which women are presented as entirely autonomous agents, no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances. The pendulum swing from a view of power as something both obvious and overbearing which acted upon entirely docile subjects, towards a notion of women as completely free agents who just 'please themselves' does not serve feminist or cultural understandings well. It cannot account for why the look that young women seek to achieve is so similar: if it were the outcome of everyone's individual, idiosyncratic preferences, surely there would be greater diversity, rather than growing homogeneity organised around a slim, toned, hairless body. Moreover, the emphasis upon choice simply sidesteps and avoids all the important but difficult questions about how socially constructed ideals of beauty are internalized and made our own.

The notion of choice has become a postfeminist mantra; the idea that women are 'pleasing themselves' is heard everywhere: 'women *choose* to model for men's magazines', 'women *choose* to have cosmetic surgery to enhance the size of their breasts', 'women *choose* to leave their children in Eastern Europe or in the global South and come and make a better life in the rich countries'. Of course, at one level, such claims have some truth: some women do make 'choices' like this. However, they do not do so in conditions of their own making, and to account for such decisions using only a discourse of free choice is to oversimplify both in terms of analysis and political response. We need urgently to complicate our understandings of choice and agency in this context (Gill 2007).

Finally, I would argue that midriff advertising involves a shift in the way that power operates: it entails a move from an external male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze. In this sense it represents a more 'advanced' or pernicious form of exploitation than the earlier generation of objectifying images to which second wave feminists objected - because the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime. Using the rather crude and clunky language of oppression, we might suggest that midriff advertising adds a further layer of oppression. Not only are women objectified as they were before, *but through sexual subjectification in midriff advertising they must also now understand their own objectification as pleasurable and self chosen.* If, in earlier regimes of advertising, women were presented as sexual objects, then this was understood as something being done to women (from the outside) by a sexist advertising industry -- something that many people began to realize and critique through the impact of feminist activism. In contemporary midriff advertising, however, (some) women are endowed with the status of active subjecthood so that they can 'choose' to become sex objects because this suits their liberated interests. One of the implications of this shift is that it renders critique much more difficult.

Conclusion

In his powerful PBS documentary, *The Merchants of Cool*, the cultural theorist Douglas Rushkoff (no date) argues that the term 'midriff' should be used as a *verb* to refer to the actions of advertising executives. *To midriff*, according to Rushkoff, is to wrap old sexual stereotypes in a new feisty language of female empowerment. It is an entirely cynical exercise dreamed up by the advertising industry in order to continue to use women's bodies as sexual objects, while evading legitimate charges of sexism.

Rushkoff has a point. Whilst I don't subscribe to the more conspiratorial aspects of his critique, preferring instead to see advertising as a networked, mediated practice, whose images are the outcome of multiple, often contradictory, determinants, his emphasis upon the way that midriff advertising creates an alibi for sexism is important, and resonates with Robert Goldman's analysis of commodity feminism discussed earlier in this chapter. Both stress the ongoing encounter or struggle between advertising and feminism, and both suggest that, so far, it has largely been resolved in favour of the advertising industry, with feminist ideas ransacked, cannibalised, incorporated and 'domesticated'.

To contest this, there are three fronts on which feminists must engage: first, to articulate a language and cultural politics of resistance to midriff advertising, preferably one that is funny, feisty, sex-positive and inclusive; second, to rethink agency and

choice in more sophisticated terms that reject the existing dualism; and finally to push for - or create - more diverse representations of gender and sexuality.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Meg Barker and Merryn Smith for their very helpful and insightful comments, and hope to develop their important suggestions in subsequent work on this topic.

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ⁱ Commodity feminism is, of course, a homage to Marx & Engels's notion of commodity fetishism

ⁱⁱ see also (Gill 2008) for specific discussion of sexualization that looks at the rise of 'queer chic' in advertising, the erotic depiction of men's bodies, and the increasing use of the grammars of heterosexual pornography in advertising.

ⁱⁱⁱ Elsewhere (Gill, 2006) I have considered the offensive depiction of male sexuality in such adverts.

^{iv} I am grateful to Angela McRobbie and Valerie Hey for pointing out to me the significance of this woman being represented as the mother. Unfortunately, there is not space here to explore the psychoanalytic implications which follow from this.

^v It is estimated that there were 190,000 incidents of serious sexual assault and 47,000 female victims of rape in 2001 in England and Wales (British Crime survey, 2002, quoted in Walby & Allen, 2004). Research by Amnesty International in the UK (published in November 2005) found that a blame culture exists against women who have been raped, with up to one third of people questioned seeing a woman as responsible if she was wearing revealing clothing, had been drinking, or had had a number of sexual partners.