

Bodies-as-image? The body made visible in magazine *love your body* content

REWA MURPHY and SUE JACKSON

Abstract

Love your body discourse is a relatively new feature of contemporary young women's magazines. This content stakes itself both within and against a history of at least 30-40 years of criticism of the industry for the way in which the fashionably slender and ideal bodies consistently portrayed convey problematic and narrow understandings of both women and their bodies. Taken together, the apparent contradiction of new body love discourse housed within an image-invested media context presents complex questions about the kinds of subjectivities made available to young women, and the social implications of the embodied identities they produce. Informed by a feminist post-structuralist framework, this paper applies these interests to the analysis of one consistent feature of the new *love your body* magazine and media campaigns: repetitive images of semi- and un-dressed women's bodies. We note how a magazine context which reduces bodies to the visual intensifies the possible meanings which are readable of such images, and discuss how particular characteristics of these repeated images can contribute to cultural understandings of what it is that is loved (/loveable) about women's bodies.

Keywords

Popular culture, feminist research, embodiment, post-structuralist discourse, young women

Love your body discourse is a relatively new feature of contemporary young women's magazines. These new body messages follow a history of at least 30-40 years of significant criticism about the ways in which magazines imaged and imagined ideal bodies within a (literally and figuratively) narrow frame. As such, positive *body love* messages represent an apparent shift in the way young women's magazines express the body. However, with little change in the beauty-invested commercial structure which underlies the operation of these publications, we could ask what (if anything) has really changed about the problematic ways in which these publications encourage women to conceptualise their bodies? Such questions hold particular relevance for the feminist interests that frame our research. Not only have feminist voices been influential in the abovementioned criticism of media representations of bodies, but also, feminism has for much of its history been active in promoting positive messages of women's embodiment. In light of this history then, might the rise of *love your body* discourses in contemporary women's magazines be a trend for feminists to celebrate? Or could their location in a media context (which is commercially reliant on beauty and self improvement product sales) complicate and constrain the possibilities of a positive outcome for women? With all these tensions in mind, our interest was drawn to researching how new magazine *body love* messages describe / construct women, their bodies, and the 'relationship' between the two.

More specifically in this paper, we explore how within the new magazine *love your body* messages, women's bodies have been *made* visible. First, we preface our analysis with a discussion of how the body is 'made visible' by its textual construction as a visual surface within dualistic discourses which underpin (written text) magazine *love your body* messages; in drawing out a distinction between the woman and her body, the body is often consigned the role of being 'just an image'. But this is not the only way women's bodies have been made visible

within these messages, and so in this paper we have gone on to explore how a specific set of images associated with *body love* texts which *literally* do make bodies visible, compulsively presenting the reader with strikingly similar photographs of unclothed, un-retouched, 'real' bodies. Arguably, this particular visual availability of women's bodies within *body love* magazine content and the presentation of these images in a magazine context makes way for a range of meanings to be made around what exactly it is that is loved in *love your body* discourse, who loves it and how.

Before turning to our explanation and analysis of these meanings however, it is important to discuss some of the theories which inform our own conceptualisations of the body applied within this article. These are set out below within three key areas: the first about dualistic discourses is particularly relevant to the idea about the body made conceptually visible in the written text of *body love* messages. The second two sections, about 'docile bodies' and their surveillance, and 'captured' bodies and their production, are closely related to our analysis of unclothed bodies made visually available in images which accompany *body love* content.

Dualistic discourse, or embodied subjectivities?

The conceptualisation of the body-as-image under scrutiny in this paper is built alongside a counterpart magazine construction of 'woman' to which this body (/image) is 'other'. As we will discuss later in the paper (and elsewhere), the use of a dualistic woman / image discourse to underwrite the 'body love' message is an overwhelmingly consistent feature of this kind of magazine (written) text, and is of particular relevance in this paper because if the body is (just) its image, the meanings which can be read of the visual body images presented within the magazine are arguably intensified.

Cartesian dualisms like this which separate 'self' and 'body' form the foundation of much of Western thinking about the 'individual', and are by no means unique to magazine discourse (Bordo, 1993; Grosz, 1994). These kinds of dualistic discourses are inevitably hierarchical, not just distinguishing a separate mind and body, but in many cases privileging the former. They are also strongly referential to other kinds of dualisms, and draw their specific meanings and power from the way they invoke and relate to whole complex systems of cultural ideas – for example, mind / body dualism can appeal to other dualisms of being rational / reactive, or male / female, promoting a discursive notion of the male, rational mind as superior to the female, seen as tied to her body and made volatile by her emotionality. Arguably, the construction of the 'body-as-image', as part of a specific woman / image dualistic pair, works both with but interestingly also against some of these well documented 'classic' dualistic associations of Western culture¹.

The effects of such a dualism in the following magazine analysis are measured against the counter possibility of an integrated 'embodied subjectivity' (Henriques et al., 1998; also see Braun, 2000). Feminist, critical and many other academics interested in embodiment have aimed through their work to disrupt and dismantle the Cartesian binary of mind and body, arguing instead for a conceptualisation of lived experience in an inhabited body, of the body not as shallow or secondary but an integrated part of human lives, (e.g. Grosz, 1994). An interest in embodiment calls for a recognition of bodies as available for understanding via a much wider range of perspectives. It also has led to the disruption of 'nature versus nurture' disputes, arguing instead that it is not the origin of behaviour as divided between biology or society that is so important, but how subjects, objects and practices are interpreted / designated as meaningful within a cultural, historical context. However, perhaps dualistic ideas are theoretically intrinsic to even just the simple idea of 'loving the body'. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory,

if 'love' must always be for the 'other' (Toye, 2010), then in order to love the body, the body must be thought of as separate to the self. Even simply the phrase '*love your body*' implies a separation between the body, and 'you' who relates to it. Yet, this need for "proximate distance" alone cannot explain why within the drawing out of this division between body and self, the *female* body is confined to the image, or why her unclothed image (as will be discussed in the analysis section) is then obsessively reproduced. Therefore, it is important to understand some of the ways in which the gendered body becomes (just) visual, and some of the meanings which can be made around the way bodies are imaged in *love your body* media content.

Docile bodies, gender and 'the gaze'

Bodies that are visual of course are bodies which can be seen; this is compellingly so of bodies which are stripped of clothing and then presented as images in mass-circulated media. According to Foucault, in the ways bodies are visible they are also knowable, and consequently docile to the social meanings available around those ways in which those bodies can be known (1979). In turn, the ways in which the body is visually communicated in culture is linked to the provision of a discursive community with ways of surveying, knowing and evaluating the world around them which endorse the interests of specific social institutions. The more detailed this visibility / surveillance is, the more detailed and complex the associated knowledge of its object becomes, and vice versa. Within this theoretical frame, knowledge is understood not as a neutral set of facts, but a powerful and political *act of producing* bodies (and people) as *knowable* in particular ways. People also learn to apply this evaluative discursive surveillance to their own selves, and imagine how they as individuals and as visible bodies might be intelligible within this system. One way of viewing magazines then, is as a site which communicates particular popular cultural ways of seeing / knowing the body, while at the same time limiting the possibility that bodies might be interpreted in other, (e.g. less commodified) ways.

Beyond Foucault, (and also drawing upon other histories of e.g. psychoanalytic thought), feminist researchers have additionally pointed out that in as far as looking / knowing can be thought of as powerful and political acts, they can be thought of too as gendered practices (see e.g. Mulvey, 1975, or from a different perspective, Bartky, 1990). This gendered frame of looking, endorsed by deep set cultural discourses and understandings, encompasses both the significations which are available to a viewer in realising specific meanings of particular kinds of bodies, as well as the position from which the act of looking is accomplished. For example, and in terms of self-surveillance, women are encouraged to not only think of themselves and others from their own gendered point of view, but also to imagine how these bodies could be seen and known by a 'male' viewer. This 'male gaze' is not necessarily literal, but instead is more often conceptualised as a gender framed way of women looking at themselves as 'other'; a recognition that their identity as women is produced through being the 'object' (and men the seeing 'subjects') of a proliferatively visual culture (Berger, 1972).

In terms of magazines, the bodies produced in these publications are noticeably gendered, and gender itself in this context is narrowly defined. For young women's magazines in particular, signifying the self as feminine and gendered happens via a complex multiplicity of sexual, commodified and embodied practices in which the neo-liberal, post feminist woman 'elects' to participate (McRobbie, 2009). Above all else however, these femininities are visual practices, in keeping with the visual mediums for communication of identity available to a print magazine source. Images then, are central to the messages magazines communicate about women's bodies and subjectivities, and so contribute to cultural knowledge about what it means to inhabit an identifiably gendered body.

Captured (imaginary) bodies

Another way of thinking about images of bodies, is in terms of ‘capture’ and ‘representation’ (Coleman, 2009). Capture and representation imply as concepts a kind of selectivity, a suggestion that while there will be some kind of resemblance of what is ‘real’, somehow something is left out of the frame. Of course, the media openly admit to the use of a wide variety of *technologies* in imaging bodies – at least in the past, (and admitting to the fact of their use does not say anything about the extent or whether this use is justifiable). Putting the extent of creativity in imaging aside, arguably there are many ‘media-savvy’ young women who when confronted with it, do recognise that magazine images are specific kinds of almost artistic representations. But from an analytical / theoretical point of view – what is captured, and what is not – what is made visible, and what is purposely or otherwise invisible in representations of the body are all messages which can be interpreted, via discourse, as absolutely full of meaning (Brown, 2005; McRobbie, 2007, 2009).

The way in which images, particularly those of bodies, are produced has a number of other theoretical resonances within the theories which guide our research. For example, in psychoanalytic theory, images can be conceptualised as bridging between what is ‘real’/ material and what is discursive / signified about the body; images are produced as part of a complex ‘mirrored’ relationship of understanding, in which simultaneous identification and distancing helps the individual develop an idea of being a distinct ‘self’ (Grosz, 1990). Alternatively, from a discursive perspective, the ways in which images are produced informs the reading of those images as ‘texts’ in which cultural messages (discourses) can be identified (see Locke 2004). In other words, like written text, images are produced within (or against) a cultural regulatory system of ideologies and institutions, and so the images which are produced by / for / in magazines can be understood within a range of possible discourses which may be drawn upon in the reading of magazine text. The images which accompany magazine body love messages specifically then – the way they depict gender and bodies, what they show and what they do not – are therefore critical to understanding the overall discursive meaning of ‘loving the body’, and the implications within the subjectivities this message offers to young women media consumers.

Methodology

Our research as a whole employs a feminist, post-structuralist framework that inflects the critical analysis of magazine discourse (see for example, Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987), it also draws upon psychoanalytic theories of investment, image and signification (Grosz, 1990, Holway, 1989). Using this orientation, magazines can be conceptualised as a cultural site where body love discourse offers specific ways of thinking about women and their bodies, simultaneously endorsing the potential uptake of these body ‘truths’ by readers for understanding themselves, in particular, and also the social world they inhabit. From this perspective, women’s magazines stake themselves out in the interesting position of both calling upon readers to identify themselves within the pages of content (cf. Althusser 1971), while at the same time, describing (/creating) that figure which is to be identified with. Working within a highly visual genre where appearance is a consumable commodity, it makes sense that the emphasis in terms of reader identification in women’s magazines will first be in relation to the image. That the image associated with the *love your body* message has been so uniform, arguably says something definitive about the discursive strategies magazines offer to women via which they might identify and represent their bodies as loved or loveable.

Method

This paper is based in a larger text analysis study conducted by the first author as part of her doctoral research, which examines the constructions of women and bodies within magazine love your body content, and the positions these offer to readers within discourse. The data set for the text study consisted of 40 articles selected from issues of *Cosmopolitan Magazine* (Australia) and *Cleo Magazine* (New Zealand), dating between October 2008 – July 2009. These articles were selected as representative of a larger data corpus of 301 articles identified in the same period which either (a) encouraged love / acceptance / harmony / care for the body or (b) discouraged major body modification / unacceptance of the body. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed as a starting point to identify themes within the data set. One key theme noted in this process was that of the ‘visible body’. Subsequent discourse analysis (drawing on Locke, 2004; Macleod, 2002; Parker, 1992) facilitated further investigation of this theme, identifying that, within such body love content, bodies are consistently described as (just) a visual surface.

Given the prominence of the construction of the body as a visual surface in the thematic analysis, and out of a recognition of the centrality of images to the magazine format / the influence of (media imaged) bodies as textual representations (Freedman, 2009), all of the images which accompanied each of the articles in the data set were collected together. It became immediately apparent that the dataset images had frequent similarities, but even more striking were a group of these images which were virtually identical in their composition both to each other, and also to various well known images which have appeared across the media in the last five years which were aimed at promoting positive body messages (these repeated images of unclothed, ‘unretouched’ women are described in more detail in the analysis section). Further internet image searches using terms such as *body love* revealed additional repetition of these similar images, and more such images were identified within media items available over the course of the research. The final dataset of repeated ‘body love images’ (as we will refer to them hereafter) which take the focus of the analysis in this paper come from diverse sources, largely within magazines and advertising, all being available in some way or another in New Zealand media over a period of three years between 2008 and 2010.

A critical analysis was then undertaken using these ‘body love images’, in keeping with the kinds of post-structuralist discursive analyses (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987) worked through with the magazine text. This analysis paid particular attention to the similarities and key repeated features of the images; three of these key features and what they communicate given the media context are discussed in the analysis below.

Analysis and discussion

Constructing the body as an image

As a background to the following analysis, this paper draws its understanding of the body-as-image from the abovementioned text study, which examined the discursive constructions of women and bodies within magazine *love your body* content, and the positions these offer to readers within discourse. One central theme of the text study has been that within *body love* content, bodies are consistently described as (just) a visual surface. This body-as-an-image construction is based within a persistent woman / body (image) dualism which empties out the body of substance, subjectivity and functionality – the body is ‘just’ what is in the mirror, or ‘just’ a vessel for personality. Consequentially the discursive building of a concept of the body-as-image simultaneously produces defined positions for the counterpart woman who ‘in-

habits' that body. For example:

Staying active and reminding yourself every morning what you like most about your looks will help you make friends with your body. "I tell my clients to stop thinking of themselves in terms of their appearance", says Durrant. "Our identity isn't wrapped up in our body; it's just a vessel for our personality". (*Cleo New Zealand*, June 2009: 49).

Or:

Negative thought #3: "I don't like my mirror image"

As women, we've probably all had days when we've looked in the mirror and not loved what we saw. [...] To rid that negative voice, we should think about ourselves as more than just a physical entity. "Remind yourself of what strengths, qualities, and beautiful characteristics lie within – even if they're not visible in the mirror". (*Cleo New Zealand*, April 2009: 46).

Conceptualising the body as 'just' a visible surface has a number of implications and resonates in an interesting way against particular theories of gender and bodies (Braun, 2000). As mentioned earlier in this paper, being 'woman' is often associated with being a body, and body in that instance is often conceptualised in a very material, functional kind of way. Usually, theory finds that dualistic discourses bind the woman to her body, and see her as different from the male mind who is able to rationally understand the world he lives in. However, in these examples, the reader is called upon to logically survey her image and think of herself beyond her body. But also, if women's bodies are just their image, what then, are they not? For example, the functionality of a body is difficult to describe if bodies are only images, and perhaps the implication of this is that the functionality of the body is unsuitable for cultural knowledge and discussion, women's bodies should only be knowable / visible as skin and appearance (see Ussher, 2006).

Additionally, endorsing the idea of the body as its image is arguably a beneficial exercise for magazines. This is because magazines are only able to illustrate bodies as two dimensional images; using a print medium, the physicality, movement, dimensionality and personality of the body is only available for communication via (single frame) visual signification². If the body were indeed only what is visible about it, this would make it much easier for readers to identify their own bodies as like those depicted in the magazine. Given the heavy image-branding and the substantial financial investment of beauty and image industries in magazines (Tebbel, 2000; Wolf, 1991), theoretically, bodies being images becomes a highly desirable commercial strategy for these publications. The concept of a body that is not self nor flesh but only what is seen, in many ways also legitimates a range of practices upon the body to produce a desirable image – the dualism of woman / body allows for (and perhaps requires) a woman to practice on or even against her body as an object alien to herself. The further exorcism, (beyond a 'classic' Cartesian mind / body dualism) of not just self but virtually all substance from the 'body' also devalues what may otherwise have been, for example, physically at stake in modifying the body for the sake of appearance, or politically at stake in signifying a culturally identifiable self via the body.

But of course, textual constructions of the body as an image are not the only way in which bodies are *seen* in magazine *body love* messages. The repetition of stripped down images of naked women's bodies which frequently accompany *body love* texts and are the focus of analysis in this paper also literally make bodies visible, communicating something specific about what it means to *love your body*. What these unclothed bodies convey about what exactly is loved and how *body love* can be expressed is intensified by the above conceptualisation of the body as an image. In other words: if the body is just the visual, then the making visible of the body and what this act of visibility might symbolise is so much more significant a proc-

ess. In this way, magazines create an interesting position for themselves as a cultural-textual site which communicates both understandings of the woman's body as an image, alongside (re)presentations in images of women's bodies.

Recurring 'body love images'

To recap, the series of 'body love images' we refer to have appeared throughout magazines and media over the last five years, in a strikingly repetitive fashion. As detailed above, it soon became apparent that exercises of the body stripped down and *made* visible clearly had some textual relevance to the *body love* media message, to the degree that images of (semi) naked women have become almost iconic of, or even representative in their own right, of a positive body media statement.

To summarise the images in the dataset, a series of women appear either in matching underwear or entirely naked, as part of a body-focussed media / magazine campaign (one well known example is reproduced in Gill, 2006, p.89 and in numerous web locations, including: <http://www.dove.co.uk/campaign-for-real-beauty.html>). The women in the images clearly reference and represent a wider diversity in shapes, sizes and skin tones than might be expected of mainstream media images. However, arguably this diversity is limited: most of the women are white and relatively slender; older women or women with 'disabled' bodies for example, were rarely included. The women stand lined up to show off their bodies, perhaps posing in ways which deliberately do this or, if naked, posing in ways which cover their breasts or genitals. Somehow, it is communicated to the viewer that these images have not been digitally altered. Variations within this formula seem to be rare, although an occasional exception is that a celebrity woman might appear alone, unclothed to promote positive 'body image', or that the group of women might for example, appear on individually separate pages across a magazine article. The following are a small number of examples that have been published over the last few years:

- *Cosmopolitan* Australia's "Body Love" section: in "Beautiful Women Bare All" in December 2009 (p. 198-204); in "The Bare Truth About Boobs, Bums and Love Handles" in May 2009 (p. 192-197), in "The Photoshop Test" in October 2008 (p. 246-247), in "The Reader Stripped Bare" in May 2008, and as the cover of the "Body Love" section in October 2008 (p.233) and May 2008 (there were many other examples in this time period).
- *Cleo* New Zealand magazine, for example in October 2009 as part of a promotional article with the "Eating Difficulties Education Network" for "Love Your Body Day" in New Zealand, and similarly for the magazine's "Body Honesty" campaign in September 2008 (p. 152).
- Celebrity feature pieces on the cover of *Madison* Magazine Australia November 2010, in *Glamour* Magazine America September 2009, and as the cover of *Marie Claire* Australia February 2010.
- Multiple international reproductions of the award winning "Dove" brand "Real Beauty" advertisement by Ogilvy and Mather, from 2006 onwards.

While the "Dove" image is perhaps the most circulated example of these 'body love images', it is difficult to argue that all of the many variations have been deliberate replications of that image³. Instead, it seems that there is something about the way media messages ask young women to love their bodies which drives the compulsive production of these unclothed images to signify *body love*. The following paragraphs discuss three key features of the repeated 'body love images': the use of unclothed, 'unretouched' bodies; the appeal to discourses about the 'real' and 'natural'; and the representation of a sexualised, gendered body. In each case, we describe examples of each feature, and then discuss how each feature encourages readers to

conceptualise the body.

Unclothed and unretouched bodies

As mentioned earlier, the ‘body love images’ are on the whole, not photo-retouched. In magazines, this information is often communicated to the reader alongside some kind of statement by each imaged person about how difficult it has been to come to terms with their body. For example, in February 2010 Miss Universe of 2004 Jennifer Hawkins appeared on the cover of *Marie Claire* Magazine Australia, undressed and unretouched to promote positive body image on behalf of the Butterfly Foundation Australia (with the title “The Naked Truth: Jennifer Bares All for Charity”). In the accompanying magazine article, Jennifer discussed some of the body difficulties she has had throughout her time modelling, and the writer acknowledges the potential ‘nightmare’ an unretouched image could be. The cover received news media attention internationally, including discussion of the unedited ‘flaws’ visible in the image, such as dimpling and uneven skin tone.

In common with this *Marie Claire* example, the double emphasis on the body being both unclothed and unretouched in the ‘body love images’ is often aligned with statements about ‘baring’ the ‘truth’ about the body. We suggest that this association communicates that if being naked is associated with the ‘truth’, then the act of appearing naked or without digital alteration is like a confession – and second, that ‘loving the body’ requires some extensive knowledge about what the body ‘really’ is (cf. Foucault, 1978). But also, the “Naked Truth” simultaneously conveys the idea that a particular kind of image of the body can tell the entire truth of that body, or that reality is wholly available via the image. Of course, this kind of ‘unaltered reality’ leaves out the long list of things which can be done to modify an image other than digital alteration (for example with lighting, specific posturing, make-up), and also that an image is just one captured moment of angle, time and space for a body – with much left out of the frame (Coleman, 2009).

The idea of what is visible and observable being associated with knowledge and truth is not a new idea. Mainstream behavioural theorists, for example, have required visual and/or observable evidence as their standard of truth at least since the work of B. F. Skinner, and Foucault’s (1979) writing about the Panopticon documents and interrogates the association of visibility with knowledge in Western culture. However, where the ‘body love images’ differ from behavioural evidence and the Panopticon metaphor of social control, is in that the latter two speak about the observation of behaviour and things which are done via the body – bodies made docile by the visual policing of those things which they *did*. By contrast, the bodies in the ‘body love images’ are (instead of physical, and as discussed earlier) *just* images. If practice were implied at all, it would be via evidence in the image, of those things which are done to the body *for the purpose of producing the visible image*. This connection between the Panopticon and the policing of the image has been made by a number of feminists who use Foucauldian theory (e.g. Bartky, 1990), but it is important to recognise the ways in which policing of the image as a production is different to policing of the productive body.

Foucault was also interested in how ‘confessions’, as a technology of culture, make available to the discursive system of surveillance / visibility / power otherwise unobservable thoughts and emotions. A confession also provided an acknowledgement by the speaker of the ownership of both thought and action, requiring them to stake out their position in discourse as a defined and knowable individual – in a way, electing to make the detail of their subjectivities available to knowledge (Foucault, 1984). In a similar way, Jennifer’s confession in ‘revealing’ her unaltered image conveys an idea of naked flesh being able to communicate the honest ‘truth’ about the body; telling the viewer the story of her body without pretence or deviance

(other examples of this included in the list above were the *Cosmopolitan* pieces on “The Bare Truth About...” and “How I Really Feel About My Body”, and *Cleo*’s “Body Honesty” campaign; in May 2008, *Cosmopolitan* announced, alongside one of the ‘body love images’, the publication of their “Most Revealing Body Special Ever!”). This act of ‘confession’ by which the ‘body love images’ expose the unclothed body conveniently conflates / aligns itself with feminist discourses of liberation by alluding to historical ideas of religious redemption, which Foucault noted were closely associated with the act of confession, and in particular confessions of the body (1984, also cf. Walkerdine 2004).

To a public so used to seeing retouched images in media, being provided with an unaltered image in which they are invited to survey the flaws is something of a novelty. In the case of being given a model body like Jennifer’s (in the earlier *Marie Claire* example) to practise this problem-finding surveillance upon, it is necessary to look in extreme depth and detail, (or to perhaps even use an active imagination) in order to find such small flaws. The problem becomes then, when this level of extreme depth, detail and imagination is turned upon the bodies of others or upon the reader’s own body; under this kind of intense gaze, any non-model body must necessarily be fundamentally flawed. Overall, the entanglement of unclothed, un-retouched images which tell the ‘truth’ about the bodies which have been bravely bared, does not provide much challenge to the idea that women’s bodies are imperfect and difficult to love. Nor does it do anything to move contemporary culture beyond a place where women are consistently images, and subject to close visual scrutiny.

Furthermore, that Jennifer Hawkins chose to make her statement about positive embodiment by the act of posing naked in a very public visual space, over and above just lending her celebrity to The Butterfly Foundation’s cause via a public announcement illustrates the strength with which being photographed unclothed, without digital alteration has come to signify a message of positive embodiment in the media context. That women’s unclothed bodies hold these kinds of significations in the media does not appear to be new. For example, in Amy-Chinn’s (2006) analysis of lingerie advertising, women being partially clothed in expensive underwear were seen to signify similar kinds of meanings of liberation, confidence and self-investment (also see Gill, 2008). Importantly, the strong subscription to these kinds of neo-liberal discourses of commodified self investment and apolitical empowerment is where the *body love* messages of media and magazines see their major departure from political feminist messages about body acceptance (McRobbie, 2009).

‘Real’ and ‘natural’ bodies

A second related feature of the ‘body love images’ is that they are loaded with discourse about the ‘natural’ and the ‘real’. In part, this is communicated via the images in both the refusal to use digital alteration, and in the cases where these images are of ‘non-model’ bodies (often magazine readers). It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss, but the word “real” in a magazine context has almost taken on the new meaning of describing an average weight body, or a body which has ‘curves’ or ‘flaws’ (see Brown, 2005). The message about the ‘body love images’ showing ‘real’ bodies is often emphasized in the text caption, for example, in the well known “Dove Campaign for Real Beauty”. “Real” seems to be of such importance, that in their October 2008 ‘*Body Love*’ section *Cosmopolitan* Australia asked a group of readers who had been photographed in their underwear to identify their “real bodies” out of a line up of digitally altered alternatives (“The Photoshop Test”, p. 246-247). In the same issue, male writer Ben McKelvey tells readers why “Men Crave Real (Not Perfect) Bodies”, and calls upon his audience too, to love their bodies for what they ‘naturally’ are (p. 238). *Cleo* magazine, in the launch of their “Body Honesty Campaign”, even accompanied one of the ‘body love images’

with a large heading telling their readers to “Get Real!” (September 2008, p.152).

Celebrating these images of stripped down, photographed bodies as “real”, “natural” women, coheres with the earlier discussion about the benefits for magazines when women learn to identify their own bodies with the images that they see. It also highlights the use of digital alteration by magazines as one of the key issues in the problematic of how the media portray the body. While the frequency and degree of digital alteration by media has certainly been a concern of magazine critics, in some ways this emphasis acts to obscure the wide range of other issues about the way media portray and convey women’s bodies. For example, making ‘real’ or otherwise an issue of digital alteration directs an understanding of the bodies which appear in unaltered photographs as ‘real’, ‘natural’, not worked upon, and this is problematic for a discursive framework which understands the body as always made out of a variety of body ‘technologies’ of production⁴ (see Butler, 1990). The lack of photo alteration in the ‘body love images’ also appears to be at this time, largely a token gesture amongst a continuing tradition of the majority of media images being digitally ‘improved’ – however, it still represents what could be seen as a start to positive change in an industry which does not respond well to drastic measures (this issue is referred to by Freedman (2009) as a preference in magazines for ‘evolution’ versus ‘revolution’).

The promotion of ‘real’ and ‘natural’ bodies also must be understood in the context of other magazine messages about what actually is meant by ‘real’ and ‘natural’. For example, pieces about fashionable ‘nude’ or ‘natural’ looks in make-up, or articles about eating ‘real’ food are commonplace in young women’s magazines and, as such, ‘real’ and ‘natural’ can take on a constructed meaning of *real-looking* and *natural-looking*. The back cover of the above October 2008 edition of *Cosmopolitan* Australia even features an advertisement for a foundation which promises “healthy looking” skin – of course, if the body is indeed just the image, then its health too, becomes a visual concern. Similarly, Gill (2006) has noted that the use of ‘real’ women as models when such images appear in advertising allows for the idea that these products *actually* work to fix *real* body issues which *all* women will experience – discursively building these products up as effective, needed and used by ‘real’ women (or perhaps in other words, used by women who are ‘real’ / normal, or even to be ‘real’ / normal).

Sexualised and gendered bodies

In addition to visibility as a body ‘truth’, that is ‘natural’ and ‘real’, stripped down ‘body love images’ evoke gender and imply heterosexuality in an almost deliberate way. This can be seen both comparatively via the differences in visual coding in rare instances where men do appear in the images (N.B. Pollock, 1977), and via specific signifiers of femininity which make the womanhood of imaged bodies salient.

In the vast majority of cases, the ‘body love images’ are of women. Where they do contain men, the images still emphasise that the *love your body* message is directed at women, and is about female bodies. For example, in a publicity image produced for the television show “How To Look Good Naked” (according to the program’s website a show dedicated to “making the people of Britain feel positive about their bodies”), male presenter Gok Wan stands alongside four women posing in front of an escalator at a mall. He is wearing a full black suit; the four women are wearing nude coloured underwear. As if the show itself did not make the point clearly enough: here it is women’s bodies that are for looking at, and men are the ones who do the looking (Berger, 1972). The Dove campaign image was also produced in one instance with only German men. Whereas in the equivalent women’s image the caption explains that these women are beautiful, the male image tells us where the men work. The posturing is also different – the women pose almost flirtatiously, inviting us to look at them, their hands touch

their own (or each other's) thighs; the men stand staunchly with their hands on their hips and each other's shoulders. The single male image is the anomaly in the series, seeming somehow tokenistic, it clearly does not belong.

The very fact of the bodies being semi/undressed emphasizes the gendered body (particularly, if the body is conceptualised as only an image, it could be said then that undressing the body shows all that is gendered about it). Like above with ideas of the 'real' and 'natural' body, often the captions will reinforce the gendered message – for example “Embrace Your Woman Body” (*Cosmopolitan Australia*, p. 199 February 2009), or “The Sex Appeal of Women with Real Bodies” (*Cosmopolitan Australia*, October 2008, p. 233). Also underlined in the magazine context is an immediate heterosexuality assumed of the undressed female body – supported by pieces such as “The Naked Quiz” (*Cosmopolitan Australia*, January 2009, p. 136-140), in which the highest confidence score goes to a woman who would choose to ‘strip’ on her boyfriend’s request without hesitation. Another example appears in the above-mentioned “Sex Appeal of Women” article, where women are told men do not care about cellulite and stretch marks, so “TURN THE LIGHTS ON NOW!”. These kinds of images and articles serve as a strong reminder that looking not only cannot be a neutral practice from the point of view of cultural / discursive power, but also, that looking cannot be a *genderless* practice.

Returning to talk about just the ‘body love images’, the cumulative message is that the woman who loves her body is proud and willing to show off this body – she is attractive and loveable because she is confident. However, when these images appear within the strongly heterosexual content of magazines or advertising, the message additionally implies that a woman who loves her body is willing to show off this body to *men*, and she is confident in *the bedroom*. Of course, reducing body problems to a case of ‘turning the lights on’ because most men ‘do not care’, diminishes how complex and debilitating women’s ‘difficult relationships’ with their bodies can be. It also implies a heterosexual context for the practice of *body love* which leaves a lot of women out the ‘picture’, so to speak (Rich, 1980).

On an even more fundamental level, what the ‘body love images’ being of women communicates is that *love your body* is a message directed at women. In other words, that there is something in particular about being women, or having a woman’s body, which means that it is women who need to hear this message. One possible reading of this could be that women’s body difficulties are women’s problem, as opposed to, for example a wider issue of society as a whole continuing to think about women’s bodies (and images) in a problematic way.

Concluding comments

This paper has discussed some of the meanings readable in the ways women’s bodies are made visible within the new body love messages of contemporary magazines. In the written text, bodies are conceptualised in a way which separates them from the self and substance of the woman, and in this division the body is relegated to being ‘just’ an exterior or ‘just’ what is seen in the mirror. This construction of body-as-image has particular relevance when considering the striking consistency of how particular images of (semi) naked women have come to almost iconically represent the media’s body love message. These images are replete with discourse about the ‘real’ and the ‘natural’ and contain heavily gendered ideas which in their context imply an assumed heterosexuality, but perhaps most problematically, do little to disrupt cultural ideas about difficult female embodiment. Together the multiple meanings which can be made of these ‘visible’ bodies send a powerful message to young women readers about what their bodies signify, and how they might relate to them.

Importantly, it is essential to consider which of these meanings are made or intensified by

virtue of the *body love* message and images being presented in a media context, and to consider how (or if) the obstacle of media hegemony might be overcome in order to successfully promote messages of positive embodiment in this context. For example, separate to the upsurge in media *love your body* messages, there have been a number of projects outside of mainstream media which have aimed to show the public the possibility of diversities in the female body, occasionally via unclothed images⁵. On one hand, Pollock (1977) argues that even when presented with good intentions, images of unclothed women may be so ‘colonised’ with inescapably difficult meanings that they will always be problematic and may not ever be able to be viewed in a positive, emancipatory way. Yet on the other hand, (and not necessarily divergent with Pollock’s argument), this could be taken to mean that much of the ‘problem’ with unclothed ‘body love images’ may not be the unclothed bodies per se, but rather, as noted above and amongst other things: the *claims* that these images represent diversity; the media *context* in which women’s bodies are visual products of consumerism, commodification and ideal beauty; and the association of a *practice of body love* with making the body visible (for heterosexual consumption).

Yet, even taking a cynical approach to the ‘new’ *body love* messages and images in the media as purely a problematic ‘lip-service’ to feminist concerns, what is undeniable is that there seems to have been an attempt to address these concerns. At the very least an appropriation of feminist critique can be acknowledged in the magazine versions of ‘body love images’. Realistically, the bottom line might be that without a viable alternative which successfully considers not only practical constraints of format but the pragmatics of magazine business, it is difficult to criticise an overall improvement that on a surface level sees magazines now promoting ‘new’ positive messages about bodies (albeit still embedded within ‘old’ problematic discourses) and on a relative scale they do now show more diverse images of bodies. Either way, we see an integral and ongoing role for feminism here, which creatively engages with the significant challenges of communicating positive embodiment in a media setting, and considering how (or still ‘if at all’) a commercial uptake of positive body messages could / should potentially work.

Notes

1. For example, drawing the dualistic divide between the woman and her body, such that the body is just the image, is different from the dualism described by Bordo (1993) and a similar dualism noted by Malson (1997) where the body is associated with its flesh or its fat, is biological and illogical, requiring containment and management. I (the first author) discuss the details of the magazine woman/image dualism in more depth in my forthcoming doctoral thesis.
2. E.g. from this point of view, an athletic body would be judged one which looks muscled and lean, perhaps wearing athletic clothing, rather than judged as one by watching an athletic performance / measuring heart rate / being one that actually does athletics.
3. In fact, when the first author once pointed out the similarities between the Dove image, and a similar ‘body love image’ to someone who was involved in producing that image, they were surprised, said they never intended to replicate the Dove image, and had not considered the similarities before this time. Additionally, it is difficult to argue that all instances are replications of the Dove image when there are examples of similar images pre-dating this campaign (see Freedman, 2009).
4. We acknowledge the anonymous reviewer who suggested this example.
5. Examples of this include the websites such as www.shapeofamother.blogspot.com, which aims to show what bodies ‘really’ look like after birth, and www.mybodygallery.com, which includes bodies of a range of shapes and sizes.

REWA MURPHY is working towards her PhD at the School of Psychology, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Her general research interests are in the area of embodiment,

gender, and media culture, which frame her current PhD study looking at constructions of gendered bodies and subjectivities within media “love your body” messages. Rewa’s email address is rewa.murphy@vuw.ac.nz.

SUE JACKSON is a senior lecturer in the School of Psychology, Victoria University of Wellington. Her major areas of research and publication are gender, sexuality and popular culture in relation to girls. She is currently the recipient of a Royal Society of New Zealand Marsden Fund research grant, for a three year research project examining ways that pre-teen girls use and engage with ‘tween’ popular culture. The project is contextualised in current debates about the sexualisation of girls through popular culture. Sue’s email address is sue.jackson@vuw.ac.nz.

References

- Althusser, L. (1971). Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays* (pp. 121-176). Ed. Louis Althusser. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Amy-Chinn, D. (2006). This is just for me(n): How the regulation of post-feminist lingerie advertising perpetuates woman as object. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 6, 155-175.
- Bartky, S. L. (1990). *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. New York: Routledge.
- Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC and Penguin Books.
- Bordo, S. (1993). *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Braun, V. (2000). Conceptualising the body. *Feminism & Psychology*, 10, 511–518.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- Brown, S. (2005). An obscure middle ground: Size acceptance narratives and photographs of “real women”. *Feminist Media Studies*, 5, 246-249.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Coleman, R. (2009). *The Becoming of Bodies: Girls, images, experience*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (Alan Sheridan, trans.). London: Allen Lane, Penguin. (Original work published 1975 as *Surveiller et Punir*, Gallimard, Paris).
- Foucault, M. (1984). *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1. (R. Hurley, trans.). Harmondsworth: Penguin. (Original work published 1978 as *Histoire de la Sexualite*, New York: Pantheon).
- Freedman, M. (2009). *Mama Mia: A Memoir of Mistakes, Magazines and Motherhood*. Sydney: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Gavey, N. (1989). Feminist Post-structuralism and Discourse Analysis. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 13(4), 459-475.
- Gill, R. (2006). *Gender and the Media*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gill, R. (2008). Empowerment/sexism: Figuring female sexual agency in contemporary advertising. *Feminism & Psychology*, 18, 35-60.
- Grosz, E. (1990). *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Grosz, E. (1994). *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Henriques, J., Hollway, W., Urwin, C., Venn C. & Walkerdine, V. (1998). Forward to the second edition of *Changing the Subject*. London: Routledge.
- Hollway, W. (1989). *Subjectivity and Method in Psychology: Gender, Meaning and Science*. London: Sage.
- Locke, T. (2004). *Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Macleod, C. (2002). Deconstructive discourse analysis: Extending the methodological Conversation. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 32(1), 17-25.
- Malson, H. (1997). *The Thin Woman: Feminism, Post-Structuralism, and the Social Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa*. London: Routledge.
- McRobbie, A. (2009). *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, culture and social change*. London: Sage Publications.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6-18. Retrieved in reproduction from <http://imlportfolio.usc.edu/ctcs505/mulveyVisualPleasureNarrativeCinema.pdf>

- Parker, I. (1992). *Discourse Dynamics: Critical analysis for social and individual psychology*. London: Routledge.
- Pollock, G. (1977). What's wrong with images of women? *Screen Education*, 24, 25-34.
- Rich, A. (1980). Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence. *Signs*, 5(4), 631-660.
- Tebbel, C. (2000). *The Body Snatchers: How the Media Shape Women*. Sydney: Finch Publishing.
- Toye, M. (2010). Towards a poethics of love: Poststructuralist feminist ethics and literary creation. *Feminist Theory*, 11(1), 39-55.
- Unilever (2007). *The Dove Self-Esteem Fund*. Retrieved 19 October, 2008 from <http://www.campaignforreal-beauty.com/dsef07/t5.aspx?id=7315>
- Ussher, J. (2006). *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body*. London: Routledge.
- Walkerdine, V. (2004). 'Neoliberalism, Femininity and Choice'. ESRC Research Seminar Series: New Femininities. Retrieved 10 February, 2010 from <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/newFemininities/walkerdine.pdf>
- Weedon, C. (1987). *Feminist Practice and Post-Structuralist Theory*. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell.
- Wolf, N. (1991). *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*. New York: Vintage.