

## Critical Respect: The Difficulties and Dilemmas of Agency and 'Choice' for Feminism

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# Critical Respect: The Difficulties and Dilemmas of Agency and 'Choice' for Feminism

A Reply to Duits and van Zoonen

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'Headscarves and Porno-Chic' (Duits and van Zoonen, 2006) is an important and provocative article that deserves to be widely read. It highlights the ways in which young women's bodies have become the locus of contemporary dilemmas about both feminism and multiculturalism – using two very different examples: the headscarf worn by women as part of traditional Islamic dress, and the G-string, as a symbol of the 'hyper sexualized' attire of teenage girls and young women. Juxtaposing the two, Duits and van Zoonen argue that the moral panics in Dutch society (and other European countries) occasioned by both these articles of clothing, situate women's bodies as objects of concern and regulation in a manner that denies girls and young women 'their agency and autonomy' (Duits and van Zoonen, 2006: 104). While boys' clothing choices are framed within a discourse of free speech, girls' sartorial decisions are subject to scrutiny from a variety of ideological positions that situate them as – in various ways – problematic or inauthentic and as requiring intervention. Duits and van Zoonen seek to wrest girls' decisions to wear either (or both) garments out of this moralizing discourse and to relocate them in the domain of autonomous choices. This recognizes girls as 'capable and responsible agents, who produce "speech acts" with their choice of clothing' (p. 115). Moreover, they argue that such a position reinstates a long tradition of feminist analysis,

concerned with 'giving girls a voice' (p. 115) and with respecting their choices.

Duits and van Zoonen's argument is a thoughtful and valuable one that seeks to intervene in the complicated and difficult terrain of multicultural politics, (post)feminism and consumerism. One of the strengths of the article is the way it draws attention to the complex location of girls and young women's bodies in European societies. While young men are the object of numerous and recurrent moral panics, with predictable classed and racialized subtexts, these primarily relate to crime and violence (and, more recently, to vulnerability and crisis). The anxieties projected onto girls' bodies, by contrast, are overwhelmingly sexual – whether they relate to teenage motherhood or binge drinking. Furthermore, as Anne Phillips (2007) has argued, in western multicultural societies women's bodies have become the key site of anxieties and contestation about multiculturalism as a political project. This is played out in debates about genital cutting, forced and arranged marriage and veiling that take place in courtrooms, the media and the academy. Duits and van Zoonen are surely right, then, to highlight girls' bodies as the 'metonymic location for many a contemporary social dilemma' (p. 104).

Another valuable contribution made by the article concerns the identification of the stark contrast between the ways in which boys' and girls' 'deviant' [*sic*] clothing choices are apprehended. Boys' sartorial behaviour is understood within a discourse of freedom of expression, while girls' dress is framed within 'a whole array of specific discussions that are held together by a shared concern about women's sexuality' (p. 105). Duits and van Zoonen do well to highlight this double standard, and I share their concern at the ways in which young women's clothing choices are invariably situated within a moral rather than a political discourse, such that girls are rarely recognized as 'doing politics' in the ways that they dress, despite the many and varied ways in which wearing the headscarf or the G-string can be a powerful communicative act – whether it is a locution targeted at parents, teachers, religious leaders, or a racist and Islamophobic society.

Their deliberate juxtaposition of the G-string and the headscarf is a risky and provocative move, but one which, I think (just about) comes off. However, the dangers of treating the two as analytically similar phenomena are manifold and Duits and van Zoonen tread a difficult path here. The first risk is that this might seem to buy into a long tradition of culturally insensitive western feminism in which the figure of the 'Third World Woman' (Mohanty, 1988) (here symbolically represented by the woman in the Islamic headscarf) becomes subject to the racializing, imperializing gaze of western feminism with its alternate dynamics of condemnation/salvation, waiting to 'save' her from the supposed tyranny and barbarism of her 'culture'.

The wearing of the headscarf, and veiling more generally as a practice, has become overloaded with competing meanings. Like the figure of 'the anorexic', the 'veiled woman' is quite literally weighed down, culturally overburdened, by multiple meanings: invoked by feminists, Islamists and, most cynically of all, pressed into service by George W. Bush to justify the bombing of Afghanistan in October 2001. In this context, Duits and van Zoonen's emphasis on exploring what the headscarf means to women who wear it is an important riposte to analyses that treat its meanings as self-evident.

A further risk in juxtaposing the headscarf and G-string, however, is that it might overlook the specificity of the cultural representation of the veiled woman in a post-9/11 context marked by virulent racism and Islamophobia. In this context, wearing a headscarf marks one as a Muslim, and this makes one a potential target for racist/Islamophobic attack. As verbal and physical abuse of Muslims living in Western European countries reaches unprecedented levels, might it not trivialize this experience to compare the wearing of the Islamic headscarf, with a fashion item that has become virtually hegemonic? In the 10-year period between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s, low slung hipster jeans, exposing the familiar 'whaleback' (visible G-string) and a pierced belly button became almost mandatory-wear for many groups of young women. So widespread and uncontested was this fashion that advertisers coined the term 'the midriff' to refer to this generation/sensibility (see Gill, 2007). The fashion might have attracted mild opprobrium in certain domains, and negative comments about 'muffin tops' (the bulge of flesh above the jeans) when worn by women deemed not slim enough to carry off the look, but in no way can such comments be compared to the hostility and even violence that frequently greets Muslim girls wearing the headscarf.

Notwithstanding, Duits and van Zoonen's aim is clearly to make a different point – to highlight the way in which girls and young women's choices are not respected as choices but are repeatedly understood in terms of external influence (from religion, from consumer culture) rather than as authentic, autonomous acts. In light of this, we might understand Duits and van Zoonen as attempting something wickedly subversive: not trying to demonstrate equivalence, but rather bringing 'porno-chic' fashion into an intellectual arena largely dominated by concerns about 'different' or 'Other' (non-western) cultural practices. Let's not just talk about the Islamic headscarf, they seem to be saying, let's also talk about 'mainstream' clothing as well. As such their juxtaposition may share some similarities with those feminists from the global South who seek to use the machinery of international organizations like the UN to have western/northern pursuits such as extreme dieting or cosmetic surgery recognized as 'harmful cultural practices'. This rhetorical/political move is made in the context of southern feminists' intense anger about what is

perceived as the North's obsessive and imperialist preoccupation with certain selected practices such as genital cutting or polygamy in ways that both ignore the voices of women engaged in such practices, and render invisible the role of the North in sustaining a global economic system marked by catastrophic injustice. The move deliberately refutes this imperial gaze, turning it back on the North as Other. It is a powerful expression of rage, and an attempt to reject objectification and to interrogate the presumed liberal superiority of the North.

In a smaller and less explicitly articulated way, are Duits and van Zoonen doing something similar – reframing 'headscarf debates' within a broader context in which all girls' clothing decisions are treated as problematic?

Duits and van Zoonen's call for empirical research that listens to young women's – all young women's – own accounts is clearly important. But in the remainder of this article I want to problematize the terms 'agency', 'autonomy' and 'choice' that are mobilized so frequently in their argument, and to ask how well such terms serve contemporary feminism. To what extent do these terms offer *analytical* purchase on the complex lived experience of girls and young women's lives in postfeminist, neoliberal societies? Moreover, what kind of feminist *politics* follows from a position in which all behaviour (even following fashion) is understood within a discourse of free choice and autonomy? I suggest that, seductive as the call to 'respect' girls' 'choices' is, it remains trapped in precisely the individualizing, neoliberal paradigm that requires our trenchant critique. I am going to use the example of the G-string fashion to exemplify my critique of Duits and van Zoonen's argument, and to suggest that we urgently need to complicate our understandings of choice and agency if we are to develop a meaningful feminist critique of neoliberal, postfeminist consumer culture.

Girls and young women make choices, as Duits and van Zoonen point out, but they do not do so in conditions of their own making (to paraphrase Marx and Engels). The 'choice' to wear a G-string (or any other item of clothing deemed by them to be 'porno-chic') is made in a context in which a particular kind of sexualized (but not too sexualized) self-presentation has become a normative requirement for many young women in the West. The reasons for this are many and varied relating to the ongoing 'modernization' of young femininity in more explicitly sexual terms since the 1960s (Radner, 1999), the shifts in feminism and postfeminism in generational terms (McRobbie, 1999), and the ongoing 'pornographication' of popular culture as part of a broader 'striptease culture' (McNair, 2002).

For young women today in postfeminist cultures, the display of a certain kind of sexual knowledge, sexual practice and sexual agency has become normative – indeed, a 'technology of sexiness' has replaced 'innocence' or 'virtue' as the commodity that young women are required to offer in the heterosexual marketplace. 'Porn star' is no longer just a slogan on a T-shirt – it is a vital component of many young women's CVs, at a moment in which pole dancing classes are the biggest 'fitness' craze sweeping the UK

and young women's magazines instruct on 'how to make love like a porn star' (see also the best-selling self-help book of the same name). Of course, all this has to be managed with great skill and care by young women, as these newer discourses are overlaid onto tenacious existing notions of 'good girls' and 'bad girls'. Sexual reputation is still policed punitively and at great cost to some girls whose behaviour is reframed within more negative discourses of female sexuality.

The point here is not to explore this cultural context exhaustively but merely to assert that there *is* a cultural context in which girls and young women's choices to wear (or not) G-strings are exercised. Yet there is no sense of this in Duits and van Zoonen's argument; girls appear as autonomous, freely choosing individuals – they seem strangely socially and culturally dislocated. In the desire to respect girls' choices, any notion of cultural influence seems to have been evacuated entirely. Yet how can we account for the dominance of a fashion item without any reference to culture? Why the emphasis on young women pleasing themselves when the look that they achieve – or seek to achieve – is so similar? If it were the outcome of girls' individual idiosyncratic preferences, surely there would be greater diversity?

I am interested in why any compelling understanding of the influence of culture is omitted in this account, and why the 'choices' to be 'respected' are deemed to be arrived at autonomously. I know for myself that many of my choices (particularly those that relate to bodily appearance) are arrived at anything but autonomously: I see a new style – the cut of a trouser, the shape of a shoe – and I vow to myself I will never wear it. Sometimes I even ask friends incredulously if they can understand why, for example, low-waisted dresses or smocked tops could have become fashionable. Then, slowly, imperceptibly, my feelings change and before long I am buying that item, wearing it and indeed cherishing it as the most beautiful thing in my wardrobe – until the reverse process occurs (usually more slowly) and I eventually end up wondering how I could ever have believed it looked good. None of this is governed by my unique individual preferences but has everything to do with my daily exposure to a cultural habitat of images that relentlessly shapes my tastes, desires and what I find beautiful.

Why is acknowledging cultural influence deemed shameful? Conversely, why are autonomous choices so fetishized? As Tania Modleski has written in a broader context:

It seemed important at one historical moment to emphasise the way 'the people' resist mass culture's manipulation. Today, we are in danger of forgetting the crucial fact that like the rest of the world even the cultural analyst may sometimes be a 'cultural dupe' – which is, after all, only an ugly way of saying that we exist inside ideology, that we are all victims, down to the very depths of our psyches, of political and cultural domination. (Modleski, 1991: 45)

One of the problems with this focus on autonomous choices is that it remains complicit with, rather than critical of, postfeminist and neoliberal discourses that see individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating. The neoliberal subject is required to bear full responsibility for their life biography no matter how severe the constraints upon their action (Walkerdine et al., 2001). Just as neoliberalism requires individuals to narrate their life story as if it were the outcome of deliberative choices, so too are Duits and van Zoonen's young women constructed as unconstrained and freely choosing.

Is there a subtext to this? A postfeminist subtext that no longer views women as oppressed, but rather as able to make free choices in a marketplace of consumer identities or styles – with porno chic among them? Such a view seems very common today – not just in Duits and van Zoonen's article but in a plethora of other scholarly work concerned with the beauty industry: dieting, cosmetics, cosmetic surgery. Emerging from much contemporary writing is the figure of the postfeminist consumer citizen: active, empowered, above influence and beholden to no one, able to choose to 'use beauty' to make herself feel good, feel confident. In this literature, practices that would once have attracted criticism from feminists are presented as playful, resistant or at least as the outcome of active, knowledgeable deliberation (Scott, 2005; Taylor, 2006; see also Gill, 2003, 2006).

But an interesting paradox becomes clear when we look at beauty practices in relation to 'race'. In this new, choice-inflected feminist literature breast enlargement surgery for white women is framed within a discourse of postfeminist consumer choice, but eyelid reshaping surgery for Korean women, leg lengthening surgery for Chinese women, or skin whitening for women of African origin are all understood as racialized practices, related to white western norms of physical beauty. This is significant. If black women's/women of colour's beauty practices can be understood as conditioned by racism and sexism, why are white women's practices not understood in terms of sexism? Why, in short, is the repudiation of cultural influence limited to gender, while theorists remain content to talk about racism as exercising material impacts on black women's sense of self? It is almost as if such writing believes that postfeminism has 'come true', that white women are no longer subject to any kind of domination or disciplinary power.

But this is far from the case. In fact, a strong case could be made that – at least in relation to appearance – young women are under greater pressure than ever before. They are expected to live up to ever narrower judgements of female attractiveness and to meet standards of physical perfection that, as Jean Kilbourne (1999) has argued, only a mannequin could achieve. More and more areas of the female body must be monitored, surveyed and disciplined – in summer 2006 as I write this, women in Britain are being bombarded by advertising poster campaigns to make sure their armpits

look 'beautiful', as a happily neglected zone previously requiring 'only' depilation and scenting suddenly comes under the disciplinary gaze, to be culturally rendered as a site of erotic interest (see Gill, 2006).

Not only do the beauty regimes for women today involve a level of intensity quite unknown by recent generations – waxing, bleaching, electrolysis, collagen and Botox injections, etc. – but, to add insult to injury, a discourse that recognizes this as culturally demanded has been exorcized from most sites. Thus, in the British media in summer time I see a daily barrage of hostile cartoons, newspaper articles and 'jokes' about women who have 'failed' to depilate properly and have allowed one or two pubic hairs to show while wearing a bikini, alongside the ongoing normalization of female genitalia in their hairless, prepubescent form . . . yet women are still required to account for their decisions to have a Brazilian or Hollywood wax in terms that suggest free choice, pampering or even self-indulgence! This seems to me to be doubly pernicious, to add a further layer to the operation of power, and it is why I am exercised by a similar evacuation of notions of cultural influence in writing within women's studies.

It should be clear that the understanding of power I am working with is not a model that sees top-down domination by a conspiratorial group of advertisers, magazine editors and fashion and cosmetics companies. Analytically, I do not think it makes sense to posit a global capitalist and patriarchal machine working deliberately to oppress or undermine women – and it is clear that the fashion industry, cosmetics companies, private health companies that carry out cosmetic surgery, advertising, fashion and the magazine industry are relatively distinct and autonomous rather than a single monolithic entity. Nevertheless, it seems to me naive to ignore the powerful interests at work in promoting particular products and practices.

While researching an article about the figure of 'the midriff' – marketing shorthand for a generation of young women wearing the low slung jeans and belly tops that Duits and van Zoonen described – I came across something that should offer pause for thought to those celebrating girls' 'choices': KGOY. The acronym KGOY stands for Kids Getting Older Younger and it refers to an area of marketing with a direct pertinence to G-strings and porno-chic. A search on 'KGOY' on Google in 2006 generated more than 12,000 direct hits: articles, reports and action strategies to help companies market products or services previously thought of as adult to younger consumers, particularly teenagers. KGOY consultants promote psychological techniques that will be particularly effective when used on children and young people. They devise tailored strategies that will aid their client companies in getting past adult 'gatekeepers' such as parents and teachers. They highlight the importance of mimicking young people's speech or even creating a 'teen demotic', and they emphasize that a language of autonomy and empowerment works best when selling to young women.



In KGOY, then, two things become clear. First, there is the relatively obvious point that an enormous amount of time, money and energy exists to deliberately target girls and young women's consumption; a matrix of power/knowledge designed to chart and anatomize (in minute detail) teenagers' passions, desires and behaviours and then to use this knowledge to devise new strategies of communication and influence. Second, KGOY marketing makes evident the idea that in an era marked by what Robert Goldman (1992) has called 'viewer scepticism' and 'sign fatigue', consumers – especially young, media savvy consumers – must be interpellated through discourses that appear not to be selling or promoting anything, that flatter the consumer that she is too knowing and sophisticated to be 'got at' by an advertising message, and which stress that in buying the product, the style or idea, she is purchasing a sign of her own individuality and empowerment.

A discourse of choice, in short, is central to neoliberal culture generally, and to the ways in which advertisers know they must approach young consumers in particular. Is it any wonder, then, that such ideas dominate women's accounts? But why must women's studies scholars remain trapped within this framework?

A further problem with the emphasis upon choice is that it appears to cast aside the last 20 years of social theory influenced by poststructuralism, postmodernism and psychoanalysis. Covertly, it reinstates precisely the model of the rational, deliberative, unified self that this work – much of it in women's studies – sought to interrogate. It offers an overly rational and overly unified view of the self, with no space for fantasy, desire or unconscious investments, or for splits or contradictions. Indeed, the autonomous, freely choosing subject appears peculiarly affectless, apparently not governed by any forces other than those she could fully articulate if asked to do so by an academic interviewer.

This model of choice eschews psychological complexity by refusing to address how power works in and through subjects, not in terms of crude manipulation, but by structuring our sense of self, by constructing particular kinds of subjectivity. It avoids all the important and difficult questions about the relationship between the psychic and the social or cultural – how it is, for example, that socially constructed ideals of beauty or sexiness are internalized and made our own? That is, really, truly, deeply our own, felt not as external impositions but as authentically ours.

Finally, I want to turn to the notion of 'respect' that Duits and van Zoonen introduce. Angered by the ways in which young women's sartorial decisions are treated, they call for an engagement that 'respects' young women's choices about what they wear. Interestingly, from where I sit (across the North Sea from Linda Duits and Liesbet van Zoonen) it would appear that 'respect' has emerged as a key term in the vocabulary of Dutch feminist research in recent years. Joke Hermes began her book on women reading magazines with the following statement:

I have always felt strongly that the feminist struggle should be aimed at claiming respect. It is probably for that reason that I have never felt very comfortable with the majority of feminist work that has been done on women's magazines . . . the media in this type of discourse are seen as Janus-faced monster: agent of change and progress, but also the devil in disguise, agent of alienation, anomie and despair in the powerfully seductive guise of provider of entertainment and excitement . . . The worry and concern in older feminist criticism leads to a highly unequal relationship between the feminist author and 'ordinary women'. The feminist media critic is prophet and exorcist . . . Feminists . . . speak on behalf of others who are, implicitly, thought to be unable to see for themselves how bad such media texts as women's magazines are. They need to be enlightened; they need good feminist texts in order to be saved from their false consciousness. (Hermes, 1995: 1)

The tone of this, and its argumentative targets, are very similar to Duits and van Zoonen's. Likewise, Kathy Davis's (1995) work on women choosing to have cosmetic surgery is also animated by a discomfort with many feminist accounts of the practice, which do not listen to women's voices and instead treat the women who make such decisions with condescension and disrespect. In all this work, respect is a vital counterpoint to the patronizing dismissal of women's 'choices', and it is, I believe, a principled and ethical stance.

It is absolutely crucial that a feminist account of the popularity of G-strings, glossy magazines, cosmetic surgery or any other practice should listen to and treat respectfully women's accounts of their experiences of such practices. This is axiomatic to feminist research. Yet surely this 'respect' does not mean treating those accounts as if they are the *only* stories that can be told? The role of the feminist intellectual must involve more than listening, and then saying 'I see'. Respectful listening is the beginning, not the end, of the process and our job is surely to contextualize these stories, to situate them, to look at their patterns and variability, to examine their silences and exclusions, and, above all, to locate them in a wider context.

This does not involve 'elevating' the feminist scholar above other women; it starts from the proposition that we are *all* enmeshed in these matrices of power. No position affords perfect vision – the God's eye view, as Haraway famously called it. Moreover, to situate an individual's account is not to disrespect it. Indeed, sometimes *not* doing this would be irresponsible and disrespectful. I struggled with this issue in a research project about the experiences of freelance new media workers in six European countries (Gill, 2002). From the analysis of men's and women's accounts of their earnings, contractual statuses and work biographies, I was able to see that there was a stark gender inequality, with men earning more, getting a much bigger share of available contracts, and consequently fashioning more secure careers in this new sector – while women were pushed de facto into part-time new media work and frequently had to supplement this with other kinds of paid employment simply to earn

enough to get by. However, when listening to women's accounts of their working lives it became equally clear that women did not or could not see this inequality as such, and were deeply invested in a representation of new media as a field that was 'cool, creative and egalitarian'.

What was I to make of this: on the one hand, a clear and unambiguous pattern of gender inequality, and on the other, an equally clear presentation of the field as meritocratic and fair. I could have merely listened respectfully to the women who told me this, and faithfully reproduced their accounts in the report that was delivered to the European Union. However, it seems to me that this would have been irresponsible, and yes, even disrespectful to the women I had interviewed – somehow patronizing them by including their accounts, while 'knowing' that there was a profound inequality that they simply did not address. Instead, I chose to make the paradox itself the focus, and to argue that the women's accounts of new media as meritocratic, in the face of vivid evidence to the contrary, were themselves part of the analytical field, were part of the phenomenon that needed explanation. This led to entirely new questions about new media work: why were women so invested in a meritocratic discourse that implicitly pathologized them – since if they were doing less well than their male peers in a fundamentally fair and meritocratic arena, this must be their own fault? Why did they so insistently refuse any structural accounts? Why were positions associated with feminism so thoroughly repudiated? And so on.

I would frame this in terms of an orientation of *critical respect* – it involves attentive, respectful listening, to be sure, but it does not abdicate the right to question or interrogate. It is perhaps akin to the role of a member of a solidarity movement – that is, offering support, but recognizing that the support is worth more when the person giving it has not given up their right to engage critically, to ask questions, rather than be rendered a mute supporter.

Such a stance might be needed in Duits and van Zoonen's research, if they are to go beyond affirmative endorsements of girls and young women's accounts of why they dress in a particular way, such as the girl they quote who does not want to 'bundle up' in warm weather. It seems to me that this does not remotely capture the complexities of girls and women's decisions about what they wear and indicates that discourses about 'comfort' are perhaps much more acceptable than others which might stress presentation of a sexual body. There are all the usual issues about interview settings and the occasioned nature of discourse, as well as the fact that it is incredibly difficult for *anyone* – including feminist academics who write and think about such topics a great deal – to give an account of their physical self-presentation that would go beyond banalities: it is perhaps the domain par excellence that is at once public and intimate, social and psychic, that represents the intersection between subjectivity and culture.

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## CONCLUSION

Duits and van Zoonen's article on headscarves and porno chic has made a number of important contributions to debates about young women – in particular, highlighting the double standards in the ways that girls' and boys' clothing choices are understood, and in exploring how the female body is the site of anxieties and contestation about multiculturalism and feminism. In this article, I have sought to engage with their article on a topic of significance to feminism: conceptualizations of choice and agency. Using one of the two examples that Duits and van Zoonen used, I have argued that girls' decisions to wear or not wear the G-string have to be understood in relation to a broader cultural context in which a particular kind of sexualized self-presentation is increasingly required, and in which compelling commercial pressures are brought to bear on young women. More broadly, I have interrogated the move away from notions of cultural influence and in their place the promotion of the figure of the autonomous, freely choosing female subject. I have suggested that such a notion reinstates, via the back door, the rational, unified subject that has been the object of such sustained feminist critique; that it does not allow for an understanding of the complexities of the relationship between the social/cultural and psychic; and, moreover, that it remains complicit with, rather than critical of, the discourses of individualized, postfeminist neoliberalism.

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