The girlfriend gaze

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Women's friendship and intimacy circles are increasingly taking on the function of mutual self-policing, writes Alison Winch. In a relentlessly visual landscape, the feminine ideal is the girl and the girled body is an asset.

As an object of scrutiny and anxiety, offering consumers the aspirational possibilities of image change, makeover and reinvention. Here, however, I want to focus on the role played by the “girlfriend gaze” in constructing contemporary mainstream femininity, which is increasingly written through the metaphors and language of friendship and girlhood – frequently through a nostalgic rebranding of the closeness of adolescent intimacy. This culture of girlfriendship places women’s relationships at the core of feminine identities, rather than relationships with men, or a search for male approval. The male gaze is thus rendered benign, and men are cast as an accessory in proving a girl’s worth to the most important people in her life – her circle of friends.

In what is a relentlessly visual landscape, the feminine ideal is the girl, and the girled body is an asset. Freed from the marriage market, it is invested in as an essential part of self branding. But the labour undertaken to achieve this body is glossed as “me-time”, and portrayed as a strategic means of achieving self-coherence, empowerment and autonomy. A body image that matches the adolescent norm is a signifier of success.

Women’s sociality – or girlfriendship – is harnessed as a way of naturalising such a body – thereby ensuring that women are perpetually in service to the lifestyle industries’ promise of everlasting youth. Girlfriendships are exploited as a means of marketing; they act as a system of mutual governance for the attainment of the ideal body, as women seek to prove their worth for the approbation of other women. My argument is that in so doing women preserve and perpetuate discourses of misogyny. And that it is therefore essential that feminists – of whatever variety – start to address women’s complicity in their own disempowerment.

The marketing of eternal girlhood functions in a number of ways. It is clearly necessary for the health and beauty complexes that women are provoked into striving for youth, as this means they will spend more on veiling the inevitable. However, the idealisation of adolescence also forecloses the possibility of not
appearing youthful. The girl is waxed pre-pubescent, flat-stomached, fresh-faced and happy. And as her dewy teenage skin shimmers through urban public spaces, it is difficult not to perceive an ordinary woman’s face as abnormally aged. To look like a mature woman becomes a failure of self marketing. For the spectacular pinkness of the girl is in no way a return to an essentialized femininity. There is a strong performative aspect to this striving to become the embodiment of the teenager. Girlhood is sold as a consumer choice and a form of self-definition that points up affluence and exclusivity. In an aggressive job market, the perfected girly self leverages a competitive edge.

The colourful happiness of the girl also functions to offset the punishing nature of neoliberal society, and reconfigures her anxiety as personal. To be critical or to opt out of striving for attractiveness is to be melancholic and old. It is no coincidence that the ubiquitous girl embodies the aspirational qualities sold by the pharmaceutical, beauty and wellbeing industries: health and happiness. These nebulous terms connote a middle-class sense of self and an affluent lifestyle - and they also contribute to the perception of an apparent erasure of labour. Refusal, rage, or insecurity are coded as personal illnesses or pathological failings. The happy girl encourages incompetent consumers to recognise themselves as abnormal or “wrong”, but her freshness also vindicates relentless consumerism, and takes our attention away from precarious institutional structures and the destabilisation of communities. The girl glosses over an increasingly business-oriented approach to identity, and is effective in covering up what the branded spaces disavow: the strategic ways in which intimacy itself is being reconfigured.

The gaze

The starkest examples of the surveillance of the female body are in celebrity culture, particularly in gossip blogs and the magazine industry. *Heat, Closer* and *Now* all position celebrities as subjects of scrutiny within a world of women. In June 2012 the front cover of *Heat* zoomed in on the apparently round bellies of five female celebrities, including Josie Gibson and Colleen Rooney, with the strapline: “In Love and Ditching the Diet: Who cares about letting go? They’re loved up!”. [1] Colleen is “eating more and Wayne likes her bigger”, while Josie “Loves her curries with boyfriend Luke”. Among the omnipresent glossy and airbrushed flat stomachs, these curves are an anomaly. But *Heat* understands what has happened:

We’ve all been there. You get a new boyfriend, and suddenly the gym doesn’t seem as inviting as the sofa [...] suddenly you’ve gained half a stone.

The “we” speaks to a (mainly) female group who are aware of body image and the rigours involved in attempting to maintain an ideal look. The readers are on the same plane as the loved-up women, who are “just as guilty of scoffing junk with their new men as we are”. The democratisation of celebrity means that all women now have the potential to be hyper-visible, and so *Heat* includes its readers in its sphere of body analysis. And it also includes its readers in its apparent celebration of that unaspirational and working-class vice - the eating of junk food.
Heat ostensibly celebrates these “happier” bodies – “Ladies, we salute you” – and insists there is no need to apologise for them; and in doing so it pokes fun at the mechanics of celebrity culture. However the magazine wants to have it all: the glamour of skinniness as well as the animalistic pleasures of letting rip into a takeaway pizza. It wants humiliating photographs of Josie caught with a slow-speed shutter that captures her cellulite mid-wobble, as well as the delicious revelling in her rebellious weight gain. And of course, it can have it all. But through doing so it promotes a volatile and insecure attitude towards the body. Its contradictions encourage “loosening the reins” of food control as the route to health and happiness, while at the same time touting skinniness as the ultimate ideal. It both embraces the working-class section of its demographic and governs them.

The issue here is not so much whether Heat celebrates or condemns fat. What is important is that the female body is the subject of analysis. In this particular feature, the women’s weight gain is collected as data. The copy details the women’s dress size, weight and “love gain”. Josie, for example, weighs 14 st. 7 lb., her “love gain” is 2 st., and her dress size is recorded as 16. Her diet consists of takeaway curries.

The volatility of Heat’s attitude to consumption helps to keep its brand “new”; its irony and lack of fixity means that it is always in process, always becoming, and therefore always distinctive. The celebrities’ apparently fluctuating bodies are a way of writing large its inconsistent messages about consumption. This is presumably part of their fascination: consumers can read how the celebrities’ weight gain reveals their lack of discernment over how to have it all. Their failure to make the correct consumer choices is marked on the body. And the female belly also becomes a sign of woman’s sexual appetite, evidencing the devouring of food, menstrual bloat or motherhood.

Across media platforms, the curved stomach is a source of shame. It also betrays what happens when you become dependent on men: you let go. The only way out of this trap is to have girlfriends who will advise on the right choices and offer support through a calculating gaze. In magazines such as Heat the female gaze is honed. It is trained, guided and informed so that it can always locate the spectacle of the female body as subject to calculation by other women. But it is not just celebrities who are held up for analysis in this way, and such detailed body analysis is not confined to the most obvious outlets – the weight-loss brands such as Weight Watchers or Slimming World, for whom the calculations of dimensions of the body are central. It is also prevalent in internet forums marketed to women, particularly those targeting mothers and brides.

The stupid belly

On 31 July 2012 Candy Crate posted on the enormously popular mumsnet.com:

I have a stupid belly that I need to get rid of. I am 5’ 10, have no idea how much I weigh but I’m a size 12. I would be perfectly happy with my body except since I had DS [darling son] two years ago my belly just seems to always be big and sticks out over my jeans! [2]
In response, users advise on work-out videos, diets, control pants, tummy tucks or the MuTu System, which is “great because you get connected with other mums also trying to get/stay in shape. Brilliant”. Another mum – “tittytittyhanghang” – suggests that Candy Crate has split stomach muscles and developed a “mum tum”.

puds11 posts:

hate to say this, but you may never get rid of the saggyness of your belly (if that is what it is?) but you most certainly can get rid of the excess weight although it will be hard work. I am embarking on a belly blitz myself starting today. So far i have had my SF shake for breaky and have done 100 sit-ups and a 30 min cycle ride. Now i have no intention of doing a 30 min cycle ride everyday but i am aiming to do 200 sit ups per day. If you like i shall report back after a week to see if the intense sit up madness has made any difference?

Other users are eager to hear about how pudd11 develops, and through this online community she is inspired and supported in her attempt to rid herself of something which brings her pain.

On the wedding site confetti.co.uk, the threads are posted under the section “live talk”, which is adorned with a photograph of two women in an intimate conversation, to signify the cozy friendliness of the forum. Indeed, the threads are extremely personal. It seems that the virtual privacy of an online community means that it is possible to expose insecurities and shame. On youandyourwedding.co.uk there is a weekly weigh-in. [3] Here the body is subject to analysis in a similar way to Heat:

Whether you have a little or a lot to loose [sic], join the rest of the 2013 brides to be with a weekly weigh in every Sunday!
My starting weight is 78.3kg. (I am going with kg as I am using the wii fit).
My BMI is 29.84 (Overweight)
Aim – to lose at least 13.3kg
Let’s cheer each other on!
I used this website to calculate my BMI http://www.dropadresssize.myforever.biz/nutrilean/calculators/bmi.html

As members join they give their measurements: present weight, ideal weight, as well as the lightest weight they have ever achieved. Armed with statistics, information and each other’s support, the women unite against the recalcitrant body. It is significant that the women use misogynist language to describe their bodies – “tittytittyhanghang”, “bingo wings” or “stupid belly”. This mimics other political reappropriations of words that were previously abusive, and indeed there is a strong sense of solidarity. However, in this context – and across girlfriend cultures – such
solidarity contributes to body hatred.

**Friendship as market**

Girlfriendship is also used to sell things in a variety of ways. Its strong emotional significance makes it a useful promotional tool: the convergence of marketing strategies with powerful stories of intimacy gives added value to a product. One form this can take is the expert bestfriendship of Trinny Woodall’s and Susannah Constantine’s *What Not to Wear* brand, or Rory Freedman’s and Kim Barnouin’s best-selling *Skinny Bitch* series. The feminine knowledges of these co-authors, as well as the trust garnered through the performance of their friendship, gives their co-brand added emotive value. The images and accessories of friendship can be sold through the intimate and direct language of advertising. Or they can be harnessed as a means to give a celebrity a more interesting story. Figures like Courtney Cox and Jennifer Aniston, or Fearne Cotton and Holly Willoughby, can use their girlfriend performance to add dimensions to their public personae. The representation of female friendship in television shows is also enormously popular, as evidenced in such disparate programmes as *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), *2 Broke Girls* (2011), *Scott and Bailey* (2011-), *Mistresses* (2008-2010) and Paris Hilton’s *My New BFF* (2008-9); and also in films like *Bride Wars* (2009), *Baby Mama* (2008), *The Women* (2008), *Bridesmaids* (2011), *Sex and the City* (2008, 2010) and other girlfriend flicks, which portray girlfriends through the signifiers of the romcom. In these it is the women’s intimacies – rather than boy meets girl – that provide the source of love, resolution and belonging.

And girlfriendship is also a market. That is, networks of friends are mined in the corporate spaces of social media in order to “spread” brand loyalty. Internet forums are effective in developing trust through the co-production of a brand, especially if they build on personal and emotive experiences such as motherhood or marriage. In particular, women who congregate through body anxiety are a prime demographic. youandyourwedding.co.uk, for example, provides a virtual interactive sociality around its own products and those of the other retailers it promotes. Users on the websites cited above spread information about weight-loss brands such as the MuTu System, Slimming World, bmi websites, or the 30 Day Shred. The forums are crucial places for these products to develop deep loyalties among consumers, especially if the interaction is through group participation in weight loss; the brand enables and consolidates women’s sociality.

Brands also capitalise on the quality of trust that they have established with their consumers by using them to let their product “go viral”. The “like” function in Facebook means that a brand can colonise new consumer territories that have already been opened up through friendship networks. The intimacy of friendship is appropriated by brand managers in order to open up wider markets of potentially steadfast consumers. This is particularly effective as it can mine the intimacies of private relationships in order to extend the reach of its demographic. Significantly, the emotional investment that women put into their friendships can work to personify a brand and give it human qualities. Furthermore, female knowledges and expertise, which play an integral part within women’s intimacies, can render a brand’s narrative more reliable. This is shown to be the case with the MuTu System,
for example, which is spread by mothers through mumsnet.

These virtual networks and friendships function to provide support, advice and empathy, but they are also necessary for the promotion of the self. Losing weight is a bid for individual recognition and self-profiling. Consequently, these relationships are built around systems of exchange: women support each other in becoming more visible and therefore apparently more empowered. As the male gaze is mystified as retro, discipline is meted out between girlfriends. Whereas *Heat* offers the celebrity body to be consumed, online women offer their own bodies for surveillance.

In a culture where private lives are increasingly understood through this commercialisation of intimacy, being seen to have the right kind of friends – such as on Facebook – is an excellent form of self-marketing. It is a way of accumulating social capital. It is also a means to display the perfect self to friends – both real and virtual. The emphasis on photographs and the profile picture means that the cultivated body can be subject to further analysis by networks of acquaintances, family and “close friends”.

In addition, insecurities over self-profiling are exploited by the advertising banners which appear alongside the web pages. Because users’ data is collected by marketing companies, we are specifically targeted, particularly along the lines of gender. My Facebook page tells me that Adele has dropped over two stone, and that 5351 people like this. Underneath is an advert by Fitness Advice Guru, which promises to teach me how to lose two stone in one week: “Learn how to shed pounds and pounds of weight from your belly by following this 1 tip!” There is that hideous female belly again – hopefully not make a spectral appearance in any of my photographs or profile pictures. If I “like” these brands then this will signify to my friends and acquaintances how repulsive I find a big belly. It will show how I trust a particular product to cure me – and them – of this excessive marker of womanhood. I will make it appear more vital and necessary. I will give it a story and, depending on how my mediated friends view me, render it more reliable.

**The girlfriend gaze as governance**

What is striking about features such as the one in *Heat* discussed above, the internet forums and girlfriend culture in general is the passivity of the male gaze: women put on weight because they are adored by their fat-blind and indulgent men. Indeed, men are cast as benign and friendly. They are outside the preserve of anxiety about body image and this means that they are loveable. But they are also high-risk and undependable. Straight men do not have the expertise to recognise the labour and strategy that has been invested in the body. Furthermore, in neoliberal popular culture, dependency on the marriage market is promoted as shameful. As identities become increasingly privatised and individualised, the woman who opts out of the job market is vilified as a “gold-digger”. Marriage is a gamble, and dependency on men smacks of old-fashioned victimhood. This is reinforced by the ubiquity of images of the male slacker, whether in the shape of Homer Simpson or the bromance characters in buddy movies; in *Peep Show* (2003-2010), or in more recent films like *Five Year Engagement* (2012) and *Your Sister’s Sister* (2011). What’s more, it is no longer possible to hide from the strictures of body image through the roles of
motherhood and wife. The female body, from yummy mummy to cougar, is subject to display and analysis.

This obfuscation of the male gaze helps to mystify the technologies of patriarchy that profit from women’s body hatred, particularly through the beauty and lifestyle industries. It reconfigures obsession with body image and consumption as an exclusively female preserve. The women in *Heat* are in danger of losing their celebrity status as they are seduced into the domesticated spaces of heterosexual love. Because the skinny body is a woman’s cultural capital, the magazine’s subtext implies that to let go of the rigours of self-discipline is a form of naivety. And it also perpetuates the pervasive discourse that defines women’s empowerment through the control they exert over their bodies. Being skinny, or a discerning and avid shopper, is sold as signifier of autonomy: it is because she is worth it that she botoxes, not because she is a victim of the heterosexual male gaze.

Because women exercise ownership over their bodies and can profit from this through the processes of branding, the surveillance of body control is sold as enablement. In an overwhelmingly visual culture, the spectacle of the female body is necessary for self-promotion and therefore success. As the practices of beautifying and “girling” become more complex, it is women who are able to recognise and appreciate the work spent and expertise accumulated. Because the body is represented as integral to success in the labour market, this surveillance of women by women through friendship is represented as entitlement. It is marketed as solidarity or sisterhood through the rhetoric of girlfriendship; it is “girl time”.

### Fat, feminism and friendship

Interviewing individual women and focus groups about female friendships is often revealing. Women’s experience of friendship is diverse, and depends on a number of socio-economic and familial factors. What is relevant here, however, is that women feel a complex mixture of love and envy, competition and solidarity, within their female networks. Thus Ela (34) participates in relations of support and rivalry with her best friends, particularly over body image and self-promotion. She finds that this is exacerbated by personal profiling in social media, such as the uploading of photographs on Facebook. Helen (39) criticises an increasingly competitive culture which promises that women can have it all: motherhood, career, beauty, property, marriage, perfection. She argues that there are no role models or pathways which explain how, or even if, these routes can be achieved. Consequently women compare themselves to their peers, with both positive and negative repercussions: “It’s not the male gaze I’m worrying about so much anymore, it’s probably my peers. They’re the ones I’d want to have esteem me.”

One group of third-year English Literature students at Middlesex University discussed how women look at each other. Debbie maintained that “it’s a critical gaze [...] other girls look at each other [...] it’s a derogatory gaze”. Tina agrees:

> It is more the female gaze. I’m more worried about what other girls think of me than what boys think of me. So, like, I might feel fat today and a boy will say “you don’t look any different from yesterday”, but
girls might think “oh look at her belly”.

These students also feel this pressure in the workplace, and experience more stress from female bosses than their male counterparts. Clare worries that women have more expertise around the body – “I feel a lot more pressure from women” – and so a female manager is “going to be expectant from you”. They also recognise their own complicity. Debbie admits that she judges the appearance of other women: “I would say ‘what is that person wearing?’ [...] I know that’s mean [...]”

Governance in the field of the body divides women, as they judge themselves through ever multiplying frameworks of analysis, calculation, comparison and exclusion. Women are uniting in sisterhood against their own bodies. The body is alienated from the self, commodified and subjected to analysis. Misogyny itself is being rebranded and appropriated by women for women. Terms of self-abuse like “stupid bellies” render women apolitical, solipsistic and disengaged. They also sustain suffering. Moreover, this competitiveness and surveillance is not confined to the body: in our competitive and individuated culture, where the onus is always on self-responsibility and autonomy, women are encouraged to – and do – pit themselves against each other in many other areas. This is evident in academic and political circles, in the job market and across popular culture. 

The ideal body is also heavily influenced by dominant discourses on class, race and ethnicity. As girlfriend culture utilises the white middle-class gaze and promotes the white thin body as aspirational, among other things this has implications for women’s political solidarities. In my seminar groups, for example, female students unapologetically use the term “chav” to distance themselves from what they perceive to be undesirable femininities.

Elsewhere I discuss the repercussions of this for women relating across difference. [5] However, I want to end with one interviewee’s more positive take on body image, and the possibilities that women friends and the media can offer. Jas (29) describes herself as “British-Mauritian-Indian”. As a child she thought that white people were more beautiful: “The media does influence a lot [...] They used to make me want to be thin all the time. And I used to have kind of like eating disorders and I used to make myself vomit, like bulimia.” It was her sister, who is also one of her best friends, who eventually encouraged her to embrace her body, and supported her in overcoming these rituals of self harm. Jas explains how she now uses the internet to explore other ideals of beauty: “I’ll go on the internet and I’ll think what am I? I’m not thin so [...] I’m not fat so [...] I’ll put in ‘curvy African woman’.” Jas experiments: “if you’ve got a bit chub on you, it’s OK you can wear this or do that and I feel it works for me [...] I love my body.”

So there are ways in which popular culture can be used to offer women alternative means to re-connect with their bodies, and women do have the possibility of supporting each other in exploding the analytical and misogynist girlfriend gaze. This means that there is still a potential for feminists to engage with the female energy that unites against womanhood, and harness it for more radical,
self-loving and friendly ends.

**Footnotes**

1. *Heat*, June 2012


4. All names have been changed.


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