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Body image & female identity: A multi-method approach to media analysis

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Contributor Biography

Jessica Francombe-Webb is a lecturer in physical cultural studies at the University of Bath, United Kingdom. Her work is focused around the interdisciplinary interrogation of the practices of the body and subjectivities that are included and excluded in relation to health, body size and appearance, gender, social class, race, (dis)ability across the life span, and the way this is understood in relation to the media and technology. Principal publications include “‘I Cheer, You Cheer, We Cheer’: Physical Technologies and the Normalized Body” (*Television & New Media*, 2010), “Methods That Move: A Physical Performative Pedagogy of Subjectivity” (*Sociology of Sport Journal*, 2014), and “Learning to Leisure: Femininity & Practices of the Body” (*Leisure Studies*).

Relevant Disciplines

Physical Cultural Studies, Sociology, Media, Gender

Academic Level

Intermediate Undergraduate, Advanced Undergraduate, Postgraduate

Methods Used

Media analysis, qualitative ‘workshops’

Keywords

Body image, female identity, media analysis, qualitative research, workshops, reflexivity

Link to Research Output

[Francombe, J. \(2010\). “I cheer, you cheer, we cheer?”: Physical technologies and the normalized body. *Television & New Media*, 11 \(5\), pp. 350-366.](#)

[Francombe, J. \(2013\). Learning to leisure: Femininity & practices of the body. *Leisure Studies* DOI: 10.1080/02614367.2013.833970](#)

Abstract

In 2008 I undertook a three year long PhD project focused on the media, body image, physical activity and female identity. The methodology that I deployed involved a two part strategy of inquiry that combined media analysis of the Nintendo Wii game 'We Cheer' alongside qualitative 'workshops' with young girls. Many studies have sought to analyse the images and narratives represented across various media and additionally many have tested the effect of the media on females' body image, however my PhD explored the media within the context of young girls' everyday lives and their negotiation of feminine identities. The methodological approach resulted in rich, descriptive data that is full of exciting nuances and has significant consequences for Media Literacy interventions.

This case study takes the reader on a journey through research; from the project conceptualisation to the potential impact of its dissemination, but substantial attention is given to the benefits and challenges of the methods that were utilised.

This case provides an account of a 3 year long PhD study and is designed to give new researchers an applied understanding of methodological encounters and the role of reflexivity when conducting research into body image and femininity.

Learning Objectives

- To have a better methodological understanding of the relationship between media analysis and qualitative ‘workshop-style’ methods.
- To be able to assess the pros and cons of combining media analysis with person-centred methods.
- To be able to apply the principles of ‘Reading Texts for Dominance’ as an analytic framework.
- To be aware of the complexities of drawing conclusions in relation to the ‘effect’ of media on individuals.
- To understand the role of the researcher in qualitative methods and be able to think about the concept of reflexivity.

Project Overview

In Western societies acute attention is given to body image and physical attractiveness is often represented by a limited range of attributes for females and males. Holmqvist and Frisen’s research highlights the increasing prevalence of these appearance ideals in magazines, advertisements and on television. They argue that this undoubtedly influences an individual’s identity because positive or negative body image emerges as a result of the pressure to conform to these body and beauty ideals. Research that discusses the representation of ‘normalised’ embodiment across media platforms is extensive, and there is growing recognition that, in an era of digital technologies, our scholarly attention needs to

also take into account the multiple ways in which the body is being represented and consumed across video games and social media networks.

From interdisciplinary perspectives scholars have sought to interrogate the pervasive ‘normalisation’ of certain bodies throughout popular culture. Whilst this is insightful in terms of addressing the mediated representation of the body, this form of media analysis did not seem adequate on its own in order to answer my research questions that sought to understand young girls’ media engagement within the context of their everyday lives. I felt that in order to better understand the ways in which young girls engaged with popular culture my research needed to synthesise the mediated and the embodied.

Research Practicalities

The research was carried out between September 2008 and June 2011 and within that time I had to:

- Review the literature from the disciplines of physical cultural studies, sociology, gender studies, media studies (a far from exhaustive list);
- Finalise the research design;
- Organise access to conduct the qualitative ‘workshops’, including gaining consent from the young participants’ parent/guardians.
- Collect and analyse data
- Write a PhD Thesis and other publishable outputs.

The academic context for this study evolved through a literature review and in response to my own interest in the area. Through this literature review it became clear that there was a plethora of research into media representation of young girls that centralised the media text itself (be that written or spoken word, or image). There was also a lot of work that looked to

measure the ‘effect’ of the media on young girls’ body image or body dissatisfaction, pointing to the ways that this may be linked to disordered eating and exercising practices. I felt that these accounts were extremely valid in contributing to our understanding of the potential causal effects on individuals. But as a qualitative researcher driven by a propensity to learn about the social world, I was more interested in the everyday contexts within which media engagement takes place; how young girls interacted with the media, the role that it served as part of their leisure time as well as their own negotiation of their feminine identities. For me this necessitated having an understanding of both the wider cultural discourses *and* the ways that these played out day to day. My research design then needed to reflect my concern to better understand contemporary femininities and this meant starting from a position that there were no-necessary correspondences between the realms of the media and the everyday. Brad Millington and Brian Wilson argue this in their own research around young males’ media use and masculine identities. They found that we cannot assume individuals will consume the media in a definitive or universal way. With this in mind, I decided to combine media text analysis alongside qualitative ‘workshop-style’ methods with young girls aged 12-13 years old. This design was not intended to prove a definitive linkage, but instead to explore the complexities of how these collide and weave together.

I have developed a keen awareness of methodology as a result of this multi-method approach and of course a number of challenges presented themselves as I conducted this study. I will signpost these main issues as I unpack the research process, suffice to say that the initial stage of ‘designing’ the research itself offered two such challenges in relation to sampling:

Challenge: Sampling Games Throughout this case so far I have referred to my interest in popular culture and the media in the broadest possible terms. However, when conducting a piece of research within a certain timeframe and budget, and as the sole investigator there is a need to be more discerning in terms of the ‘text’ that you choose to focus on. Thus, I decided

to select a Nintendo Wii computer game called ‘We Cheer’ as the media text to be analysed. This was timely in terms of the way that the Nintendo Wii captured the public’s attention as a deliberately active addition to a traditionally sedentary pastime and pertinent because game play has been identified as an important aspect of young people’s leisure—Livingstone and Bober highlight that 82% of 9-19 year olds have games consoles. This specific dancing game was deployed as it got to the crux of my research interests: media, body image, physical activity and gender.

Challenge: Sampling Girls I was unsure about the practicalities of recruiting girls of a similar age and demographic who would attend regular workshops. Albeit not ideal given the restrictions of time and space, I opted to contact schools in the local area to see whether they would be happy for me to research with some of their female students. This did not generate a huge number of positive responses, but one private (fee paying) school took a keen interest in my research and were happy for me to run my ‘media and body image workshops’ weekly with as many girls who wanted to participate. In total twenty girls attended the workshops. It is imperative to always fully delineate the context of the data collection as this will have implications for the interpretation of the data and the conclusions drawn. Needless to say then, in this study the girls shared a similar middle-upper class background that meant they spoke from positions of privilege which had some interesting connotations for the way that they discussed ‘(un)desirable’ femininity.

Research Design

The year of data collection for my PhD began in September 2009. I employed a multi-method approach that was based upon a two part strategy of inquiry; this firstly involved media analysis of the Nintendo Wii game ‘We Cheer’ followed secondly by qualitative ‘workshops’ with twenty young girls. The workshops were highly interactive and the girls participated in

various research activities including playing 'We Cheer'. In a practical sense my analysis of 'We Cheer' brought to the fore some key issues about the representation and performance of the young, slender, heterosexy body and this preliminary data shaped the research activities that I encouraged the girls to participate in. I will now provide more detail about each of these elements of the research design.

Media Analysis: Production or Consumption Studies?

The media has grown and diversified exponentially; in fact it would not be too much of a stretch to suggest that it is now an omnipresent part of contemporary society. Furthermore, it continues to evolve and we see the emergence of mobile and digital technologies that are changing the way the public interact with the media. Many theorists have begun to explore the complex role of the media in the present moment, noticing that it no longer operates solely as a source of entertainment but instead is imbued with information about how we should conduct our civic life. This increased consideration of the media as an educational force means that it cannot be regarded in a generalisable, linear way, instead media analysis needs to be able to contend with these shifts and fluctuations and thus requires flexibility. The key thing to be able to explain when analysing media is why: why have you adopted a certain approach and why have you focused on a particular media 'text'? In answering these questions you will be able to contribute to knowledge about the cultural politics of the present and how your chosen media is indicative of these.

The media can be approached from a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives that span the positivist and humanist paradigms and Darcy Plymire's work in this area is instructive. For instance, empirical 'effects' analysis such as content analysis looks to measure the relationship between media consumption and certain behaviours. Data can be gathered through measuring certain moments, be they actions, words or phrases used. The

effects on the audience can subsequently be assessed through questionnaires using Likert scales. This approach has been criticised for establishing a monolithic, causal relationship that places emphasis on the role of the media and suggests that the audience are simply unquestioning consumers. In response, scholars from the critical tradition have adopted qualitative approaches that look to redress the balance and examine the complex relationship between media production and the audience—giving the audience some agency in relation to their ability to question and resist certain mediated messages. Critical media analysis of this kind is usually underscored by the theoretical perspective of the researcher conducting it and so will often vary between approaches influenced by Marxist-based hegemony theory; semiotics and structuralism, post-structuralism and feminism. Moreover—and often based on these theoretical perspectives—media scholars have pursued three avenues for research:

- (1) Studies of textual production
- (2) Studies of media representation
- (3) Studies of audience response to media content

In this case I was guided by a feminist post-structural framework and theorised the media as a cultural and ideological force that resonates and reverberates throughout lived experiences with particularly gendered consequences. For this reason I opted to combine two of the aforementioned avenues for research in order to answer my research questions and this meant my study looked at media representation as well as audience responses and it looked to situate these within the life worlds of my female participants.

Media analysis is a unique method to employ as it is at once both a method of data collection and a framework for analysis. Therefore, it is not really appropriate to separate the ‘doing’ and analysis phases of the research process, nonetheless for the sake of clarity I have done so

here and I will more comprehensively discuss the analysis framework towards the end of this paper.

“I Cheer, You Cheer, We Cheer”: *Gameplay as Method*

‘We Cheer’ is a dancing game designed to offer an ‘authentic cheerleading experience.’ Central to success when playing any of the games for Nintendo Wii is the movement of the player and it is this interactivity that differentiated it from other products on the market at the time. I played ‘We Cheer’ many times over the course of approximately two months; I saturated my reading of the game, convincing myself that I had played all the platforms and engaged with all the extra activities. Within ‘We Cheer’ the prerequisite for movement is accompanied by player engagement with different cheerleading competitions and cheering in support of different male sport teams and to impress groups of young males. Furthermore, the player negotiates dressing rooms and gymnasias in order to sculpt a body that appears like those in the cheer squad. As you can imagine this requires a repertoire of forms of body work, from exercising in the workout mode through to selecting your avatar’s hairstyle, hair colour and their cheer uniform. I continuously wrote down my observations as well as how I felt after each dance/activity. As I played I became aware not only of how much my arms ached from throwing them into different shapes but also how invested I became in the ‘glitz and glamour’ of the preparation and performance. It was vital that I captured both my observations of the forms of representation as well as my own subjective experiences of playing and researching as will become clear later.

A comprehensive analysis of the media-text of ‘We Cheer’ has been published [elsewhere](#), suffice to say that although the game does not venture into the prescription of girlhood per se—as magazines targeted at young girls might—through the body’s movement, how it is dressed, coiffed and exercised, questions can be raised about the convergence of digital

culture and wider gender struggles. With this in mind computer games such as ‘We Cheer’ operate as yet another form of media that re-establishes a pervasive ‘thin’, heterosexy, young feminine ideal and cultivates the governance and management of embodied identities. This ‘normalises’ a very particular, yet utterly pervasive version of femininity that creates patterns of inclusion and exclusion. What remained following this media analysis was to explore the way that the game is consumed by young girls and the oscillations between their engagement with the representation of femininity and their own experiences and body work.

Media and Body Image ‘Workshops’

Alongside media analysis, this project collected data from a group of 12-13 year old girls during a series of qualitative ‘workshops’. I deliberately used the term ‘workshop’ rather than focus group as I felt that it reflected the collaborative nature of our interactions and my utilisation of many novel and diverse research activities each week to engage the girls in discussing their everyday lives. Like focus groups, workshops are a useful method for eliciting rich, educative dialogue and they facilitate an open, participatory atmosphere in which it is possible for participants to input into the direction of the research activities. Therefore, the data was generated from ‘workshops’ that ran weekly over the course of a school term. Each session was on the same day and at the same time each week and they were qualitative in nature, uniquely contextual and highly animated as we—myself and the girls—played ‘We Cheer’, read magazines, drew pictures, wrote narratives and made posters. The ‘workshops’ were designed to capture the girls’ everyday lives, how they spent their time, how they felt and how they negotiated their young feminine identities as well as their interactions with popular culture such as ‘We Cheer’. As such, the ‘workshops’ included a number of different methodological strategies:

- Personal Histories/Biographies. I asked each girl to “tell me all the things that you think it is important for me to know about you”. I used these written accounts within my dissemination to describe the girls in their own terms.

my favorite subjects are Art and Geography! I love cooking and Art. I like my hair, but I hate my skin. I think I am quite fat

Figure 1 example personal biography

- Personal Maps. I asked the girls to create personal maps that revealed the things that were important to them, the activities they liked doing, those they did not, where they did these, how often and who they were with. Prompted by my questions the girls created colourful illustrations with accompanying text that mapped their experiences and allowed them to talk about their own lives.



Figure 2 example personal maps

- Free Writing (utilised by Oliver and Lalik). I was keen to employ a free writing strategy as a way to engage the body perceptions of the girls. The girls wrote responses that were instantaneous; this was an opportunity for them to express whatever came to mind as quickly as possible without censoring words or thoughts. I used an opening sentence as a stimulus to probe into what they thought of when they thought about their active, inactive and desirable bodies (1. I notice my body most when . . . 2. when I am active I feel . . . 3. when I am inactive I feel . . . 4. when I am active my body is . . . 5. sometimes I wish my body was . . .)

1. ~~Be~~ Self consous embassied slow

2. Safe within comfort zone alively

3. Slow ~~seen~~ sweatya horrible

4. PE Games Health checks My brothers.

5. THINER CURY ELIGANT BETTER
MATTABISISOME

Figure 3 example free writing responses

‘We Cheer’ was just one component of these workshops and it was employed variously as I encouraged the girls to not only play the game but articulate how they felt whilst playing and watching others play. They commented on the images and actions they saw and performed and they wrote these down—even those watching would dance and sing along to the routines and there were fervent discussions when especially ‘tricky’ or ‘provocative’ moves were performed well or poorly. On some occasions I asked the girls to elaborate on their comments, but for the most part they gave detailed and expansive, spontaneous reactions to

the images on the screen and the movements they performed. Although less structured than focus groups the workshops were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed.

The advantages of multi-method qualitative ‘workshops’ are that they allow for the participants’ voices and experiences to be heard at as many points as possible. Still, they also raise some points for critical reflection; particularly, reflection on the researcher-participant relationship.

Challenge: Reflexivity Throughout the year of data collection I kept a research diary. This was essentially a collection of my own notes, observations and emotions. By referring to it as a diary as opposed to field notes I wanted to reiterate that these records were constructed within my own frame of reference and I could therefore assume a forgiving, understanding reader for whom there was no need to present a best face. Oftentimes done from a distance, from a memory, these moments of the researching ‘self’ functioned to confirm and also contradict the data gathered. As time progressed and I began to develop more of a reciprocal relationship with the girls it became clear that I needed to ensure that my project allowed space and empirical room for how my own identity was intricately interlaced in the research act. It seemed that my own embodiment had consequences for the nature of the data that was collected. For example, at the same time that I was an outsider who walked into the school every week with a visitor name-tag hanging around my neck, I also seemed to trouble the student-teacher binary. Perhaps this was a result of my age (I was 24 at the time), perhaps my nervous and tentative mannerisms within the ‘workshops’; whatever the reason my identity was confusing for the girls as they did not know whether to approach me as a teacher. It was vital that I broke down this hierarchical relationship to maximise the opportunities for collaboration and so I found myself continuously reiterating that there was no need to call me ‘Miss’ and there were no right or wrong answers to my questions. Thankfully over the course of the first few weeks it became evident that they regarded their relationship with me to be

different from one they shared with their teachers and they were more inclined to discuss personal experiences.

Likewise there were other entanglements that violated academic neutrality and objectivity. Within the 'workshops' the girls often commented on my clothes, asking where I shopped, recalling outfits they liked and I often found myself pondering and scribbling in my diary how my own body and the other bodies the girls encountered were integral to their lived experiences. Whilst I do not claim that a feminist agenda can or indeed should be read onto or against the body's shape or size, I was struck by the way my body seemed to legitimise the girls' persistent quest for slenderness. The girls commented on my own physique and they often constructed their own opinions around my body, anticipating that I could not appreciate their desire to be thin because I was not overweight. At times my apparent lack of understanding due to my own shape and size brought the conversation to a premature end. Comparatively, there were other moments when the girls assumed that I would empathise with their experiences and that I too shared their desire to appear conventionally feminine. My reflections in my diary tell a story of a distressed researcher at this point as my seemingly complicit femininity was used alongside theirs to 'other' and stigmatise certain femininities, especially working class femininity. They talked about the way that 'we' were different to 'them'. This discursive marginalisation was, once again, established on the basis of 'our' collective body politic and this made me incredibly uncomfortable. My body was unavoidably situated within the research and rather than consider this as a contamination of the validity of the research, qualitative researchers posit that this is simply one of the many layers of interpretation that our research must consider, respond to and reflect upon.

Analysis: Reading Texts for Dominance

For scholars such as Henry Giroux there is a need for researchers to expand their understanding of the term ‘text’ in order to move beyond the printed word most often associated with books and instead acknowledge texts as mediated forms of knowledge that take many forms—audio, electronic and visual. Taking this as a starting point meant that the multiple data sources that were collected over the course of the year (e.g. spoken and written word, drawings) could be ‘read’ or analysed as texts. The aim of this analysis was to tease out the link between individual experiences and the social context. Analysing these texts allowed me to move between the young girls’ lived experiences, their engagement with ‘We Cheer’, my own interpretation of the game and key intersecting themes such as gender, sexuality, social class and race. It should be noted that in no way were the methods I deployed nor the data they generated structured or orderly, they merely asked questions, raised issues and were guided by the girls’ interests and interpretations. The project as a whole had to be sensitive to this multidisciplinary approach and so the research activities produced multiple texts that were layered upon each other and the analysis moved between these different layers of representation. Richard Johnson and his colleagues propose that this form of analysis can be thought of as a dialogue between the texts that makes known and reveals the relations of power that can be found in the most ‘innocent’ of places (e.g. girls’ engagement with the media). This is a process of reading texts for dominance and this analysis framework is concerned with exposing the tensions between individual agency and cultural conditions that shape everyday life. In line with Johnson et al’s framework there are four forms of reading that structure the analysis:

First Reading—Analysing the written, spoken, drawn data collected from participants. This was a process of transcribing the recorded ‘workshop’ conversations, organising the data followed by familiarisation with the key points.

Second Reading—Analysing the cultural forms around which the meanings of the participants are organised. Guided by the research questions, this entailed analysing the representation of idealised femininity within ‘We Cheer’ and the way that the girls mobilised these heteronormative discourses as they discussed their lives within the ‘workshops’.

Third Reading—This is less media text or participant specific and is a more wide-reaching analysis of the context and the power relations that shape it. This involved locating the texts within wider cultural conditions and therefore considering how the gendered discourses identified in ‘We Cheer’ and the girls’ body texts were shaped by cultural struggles around gender, sexuality, social class and race.

Fourth Reading—This final dialogue is between the researcher and the data. It is concerned with analysis of the researching ‘self’—my identity and the way I impacted the field.

Through a combination of critical media analysis of the Nintendo Wii game ‘We Cheer’ and analysis of the data collected from the weekly qualitative ‘workshops’, I was able to explore the ways in which the female body was being represented in narrow and restrictive ways across media texts as well as how a group of young girls engaged with this media product and how they negotiated their own body image and femininity. This project was insightful in terms of shedding light on the way the media is consumed and the ubiquitous aspiration to achieve a particularly gendered, slender ‘normalised’ identity. However, the analysis did not usher forth a direct relationship between engagement with the media and body image. Instead, I was able to examine the ways in which the girls both actively disapproved of the representation of the female cheerleaders in ‘We Cheer’ yet did not transfer this criticality when they talked about/wrote about their own bodies. For example, the girls explicitly criticised the unrealistic body images presented in the game and the media more broadly, as well as the consequences of airbrushing and the pressure to look like celebrities, but these

sentiments did not apply to their own quests to be increasingly slender, their manipulation of their calorie intake to reflect levels of physical exertion, their desire to wear more make-up, have more time available to style their hair and decide on clothes to wear.

Conclusion

Over recent years we have seen a range of parliamentary inquiries into the issue of body image and often responses are centralised on creating and implementing Media Literacy programmes in schools. The aim of these is to ensure that young people are educated to become critical consumers of media and it is believed that this will result in a reduction of body image dissatisfaction. Among other things, the findings from my PhD identified a gap between young people's media literacy and the way they feel about their own bodies. This then has various implications for the anticipated success of Media Literacy as a way of impacting girls' embodied identities and is suggestive of the need for more contextually specific, longitudinal interventions that are guided by the voices of young people rather than administered in order to effect behaviour change.

In this small case at least, the benefit of this methodological approach was that it allowed for detailed engagement with, and exploration of, these nuances between representation, consumption and lived experiences of femininity. This would not have been possible had I decided just to focus on analysis of the media or had I not incorporated the media into the qualitative research I conducted with the young female participants. Whilst the research activities I designed and employed required planning and resourcing the investment was worth it in terms of the diversity of the data that was collected and the way that the young girls actively engaged and reshaped the activities in line with their own interests and experiences. I have highlighted some of the more challenging methodological moments around the sampling of the media text, the sampling of the female participants and the

interpersonal relationships that develop and impact a research project. I am sure that others may have contended with these challenges in different ways, but for me the key was to remain reflexive and to transparently discuss the decisions that I made. Rendering myself, my motivations and my methodological strategies available for scrutiny was envisaged as part of what Michelle Fine engenders as a self-reflexive critical consciousness that meant I consistently thought about who was affected by my research, in what ways and why.

Exercises/Discussion Questions

1. What are the benefits of combining media analysis with ‘person-centred’ research such as ‘workshops’?
2. This case identified some of the impacts of establishing relationships between the researcher and young people. These could be considered as ethical issues that need managing as part of the research process, what are other ethical issues to bear in mind when working with young people?
3. Select a media text and begin to think about analysing it using Johnson et al’s (2004) ‘Reading Texts for Dominance’ framework. Think about:
 - 1—what are the images/narratives being represented?
 - 2—are these images/narratives particularly gendered? Classed? Racialised? Do they present a dominant way of thinking about a topic and if so what is this?
 - 3—what are the wider social struggles that might help explain why these images/narratives are represented in a certain way? What light can this shed on contemporary power relations?
 - 4—how are you positioned in relation to the media text chosen? What are your motivations for choosing it? Has your identity influenced how you may have analysed it, if so, why/how?

4. Select a media text and think about how your analysis of this could be extended by qualitative research with consumers of this text. Think about who the target audience is; are there expectations about how this media *should* be consumed? What might your research questions focus on and how might this combination of methods best answer them?
5. Within this case, ‘workshops’ are presented as less formal and structured than focus groups and encompassing more innovative research activities for the young girls to participate in. What do you think are the disadvantages of ‘workshops’?

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