**Colluding with Neoliberalism: post-feminist subjectivities,**

**whiteness and expressions of entitlement**

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ABSTRACT

This discussion contributes to the ongoing debates regarding the (re)sexualisation of female bodies in popular and visual culture. Visual texts display the upper middle class white female as the carrier of mainstream neoliberal values in Western societies, and the success of this approach is the twinning of the culture of individualism, self-interest and market values with feminist vocabularies; namely choice, freedom and independence. Drawing on a broad feminist scholarship that includes discussions on the influence of the HBO series, *Sex and the City*, semiotic analysis is combined with intersectionality to gain an understanding of how gender, class and sexuality shape and reinforce whiteness as entitled to luxury in an advertising campaign for Michael Kors luxury goods. Contemporary representations have expanded to include representations of affluent women who appear to *‘have it all’.* These new postfeminist subjectivities promote an aesthetic of wealth, to display privileged whiteness, heterosexuality, normative Western beauty ideals and individualism. An intersectional approach reveals the apparent neutrality of neoliberal values as being an expression of whiteness, specifically in representations of white women as economically independent neoliberal subjects who display their status through the conspicuous consumption of luxury brands.

**Key Words:** Neoliberal vocabularies, representation, visual texts, Whiteness, gender, luxury

Discussions regarding the links between ‘sexual objectification and white female agency’ (Genz, 2012: 5) are well established within feminist scholarship (see Rosalind Coward, 1984; Beverley Skeggs, 2004). However, feminist and cultural critiques have expanded these debates by exploring how the neoliberal contemporary context tells us something new about the representations of femininities in popular visual culture (Gill and Scharff, 2011). Rosalind Gill’s (2007) discussion regarding postfeminism as a ‘distinctive sensibility’ (Gill, 2007: 147) articulates the different ways that femininities have been shaped by contemporary popular media. To contribute to these ongoing debates, this article discusses the influence that neoliberalism has had on these sensibilities, specifically in the celebration of affluent white women who are symbolically central in the portrayals of wealth as desirable in contemporary popular culture. The discussion is located within the context of an Anglophone readership that is exposed to visual and media discourses of white privilege through American cultural texts, *Sex and the City* being one example. These displays of wealth and consumption are articulated in a familiar aesthetic of the idealised white female who conforms to narrow prescriptions of femininity (author, 2013: 34) as a mark of status (Cole and Sabik, 2009), and conveys her financial independence through the consumption of luxury goods. What is new in this ‘attention economy’ (Gill and Scharff, 2011: 2) are the new gender and class hierarchies that are underpinned by a sense of entitlement which according to Martin A. Berger ‘has long been naturalized as a central principle’ of whiteness (Berger, 2005: 26) and presents the ‘self-importance’ (McRobbie, 2009: 125) of affluent, heterosexual white women as the idealised norm. Such representations are transmitted via global media that ‘privilege[d] American styles and tastes’ (Jameson 1998, Lomnitz 1994, Trouillot 2001, cited in Thomas and Clarke 2006: 7). An image from the 2015 advertising campaign for the American fashion brand, Michael Kors[[1]](#endnote-1), is used to demonstrate how an aesthetic of wealth and entitlement is conveyed by whiteness in the form of attractive, toned and blond females, modelling statement dresses and accessories.

The increased consumption of luxury products in the UK coincided with the deregulation of financial markets, easier access to consumer credit, and women’s entry into high-paying professional jobs, having gained access to such employment in Western Europe, significantly in Sweden, England and the United States since the 1970s (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2011: 237). These economic and social changes coincided with the adoption of free-market systems by Western governments, the dismantling of welfare states, the intensification of a commodified consumer culture and the maximising of profits due to ‘the interests of wider global market[s]’ (Skeggs, 2001: 297) and local ‘economic restructuring’ (Bhattacharyya, et al, 2002:8; see Hennessey and Ingraham, 1997) in the North.

The mainstreaming of feminist values (Walby, 2002 cited in McRobbie, 2009: 56) can be identified in ‘engage[ments] with government’ (Walby, 2011: 9) and policy makers, issues regarding gender equality have become common sense as [they have] *sic* intersect[ed] with allies and competing forces’ (Walby, 2011: 9). These views towards gender relations and feminism some have argued, has rendered the feminist movement dead, unnecessary and the subject of much public disapproval and frequently described as a ‘backlash’ against feminism (Faludi, 1992; McRobbie, 2009).

Scholarship which has addressed the increasing presence of women in the workplace has included acknowledgement of the achievements of professional women in ‘tough ‘male world’ careers’ (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2011: 238). However, the attention paid to the successes of a minority, yet significant number of privileged white women has detracted from the alliances that were formed with neoliberal governance to achieve what now appear to be limited gains (Alvarez, 2014; Fraser, 2013), as women are largely paid less than men for the same work (hooks, 2000: 49) and for work in which they are employed in large numbers (Campbell, 2013). The feminist and neoliberal alliance has not materialised as an approach that enriches the lives of poor women who perform low-paid service sector roles, nor has global finance capitalism improved women’s lives, ‘especially those of rural, Afrodescendant and indigenous women’ (Alvarez, 2014: 221).

*The feminist and neoliberal alliance*

Nancy Fraser (2013) has argued that secondwave feminism formed ‘a dangerous alliance’ with neoliberalism. Fraser (2013) argues that it is with hindsight that she is able to set out the key areas of this union; the first being the challenge to “the family wage” based on men as breadwinners and women’s domestic labour within the patriarchal, two-parent nuclear family. Secondly, Fraser (2013) argues, that the focus on gender identity shifted public feminist discussions away from economics and politics.

These areas of challenge which concerned hegemonic feminism overlooked the fact that the movement did not effectively consider the economic situation of working class women, who worked out of necessity (hooks, 2000). Consumer capitalism encouraged female employment as this supported a ‘depressed economy’ (hooks, 2000: 50), reduced expectations on men to be the sole provider, sustained middle-class status and lifestyles (ibid), and hailed women as autonomous consumers. However, not all feminists wanted or indeed desired the alliance with neoliberalism. Alvarez (2014) has noted that there were feminists who ‘remained critical of working with the State and international institutions under conditions of restricted democracy and global neoliberalism’ (Alvarez, 2000: 221). They were however ‘increasingly politically marginalised and publically silenced’ (ibid: 221).

Fraser’s (2013) critique of the emphasis that some in the feminist movement placed on women’s entry into paid employment and the language of independence that was appropriated by neoliberalism, does not take into account that there were a number of privileged white women who gained access to high-paying jobs and distanced themselves from the movement once they had gained ‘access to class power with their male counterparts’ (hooks, 2000: 37). Indeed, Fraser does not draw attention to the limitations of the movement which did not acknowledge differences between women and instead professed a message of shared female experience (hooks, 2000).

One of the difficulties of discussing structural inequality in the contemporary context is the common sense nature of the language of the market, which frequently frames social and political discussions. The social movements that brought about changes in social attitudes and government policies are significantly absent in discussions of the autonomous individual (McRobbie, 2009). Recognition of the collective struggles that challenged social inequality during the 1960s and 1970s are omitted in favour of representations in popular visual culture that appear to be neutral and unmoored to any political or ideological context. Neoliberal discourses deny the impact of feminism, yet convincingly draw on shared themes of achievement and progress, ‘individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills’ (Gill and Scarff, 2011: 5).

Feminism and neoliberalism appear to have merged, so that presently, a ‘range of feminist ideas’ (McRobbie cited in Skeggs, 1997: 144) are incorporated into apparently neutral neoliberal notions of choice and agency (Gill and Scharff, 2011) and are entangled in discourses of individualistic pursuits of hyper-consumption. Thus, neoliberal ideologies that have come to shape and frame displays of white femininity as *having it all* (sexual and reproduction rights, access to professional occupations and economic independence) encourage a view that the advantages that have been gained by affluent and privileged women is a positive development for all women (see hooks’ (2000) discussion on this).

The trend has been to portray the contemporary context as a new era of gender equality in which white women are the carriers of representations of freedom and individualism. However, this illusionary equality rests on professional women having ‘greater consumer expectations … in more developed economies [and also having] … greater access to a range of personal services, an expansion of the activities and expectations in the public spaces of privileged work that requires feeding, cleaning, [and] guarding…’(Bhattacharyya, 2011: 311).

These expectations extend to the ‘luxurious extras of personal services [that] the necessary army of low-paid labour’ (Bhattacharyya, 2011: 311) provide ‘in times of relative affluence’ (ibid: 311). Thus what is presented as freedom is the disposable income to pay for these trappings of affluence, which are perhaps ‘new/old incarnations of gender subjugation’ (Bhattacharyya, 2011: 307) that do not challenge the patriarchal status quo. Contemporary representations of new female subjectivities appear to be ‘remaking boundaries and occupying familiar divisions at the same time’ (Bhattacharyya, 2011: 309) by playing with (Törrönen and Juslin, 2013) traditional forms of gendered representation. They have been remodelled to appear ‘new’, liberated and progressive, as in the active and independent, ‘single girl’ (Radner, 2011) characters in the American HBO series, *Sex and the City* (Arthurs, 2003). Significantly, this series made popular an affluent white aesthetic, and visualised a new cosmopolitanism in the form of social urban spaces as sites of play for sexually liberated females.

Displaying uninhibited sexuality continues to be central to the white female and provides her with access to the neoliberal realm. Thus she is negotiating power and privilege (Bhattacharyya, 2011) by playing with traditional gender stereotypes. The trend in contemporary advertising is to ‘invite and valorize’ (Parker 2008: 193) the white female subject as the central ‘hook’ around which discourses of wealth are constructed.

These advances tend to be couched in terms of a ‘commodity logic’ (Dow, quoted in Genz, 2009: 186), as economically independent women use their consumer power to beautify themselves (Barnett, 2014) and enhance their visibility as a route to power (Cole and Sabik, 2009), thus it appears to be the case that there are ‘aspiration[s] [for white women] to become more distinctly visible’ (Winch and Webster, 2012: 52), in ‘spaces of attention’ (McRobbie, 2009: 54). In contemporary representations the white female is presented as taking centre stage in narratives of ‘privilege and belonging’ (Redmond, 2013: 58). As we shall see in the discussion on the Michael Kors images, these messages display the affluent white female as the ideal beauty standard. This is the old/new technique, as these reworked gender positions are designed to appeal to a younger generation of women. They need to appear to be modern and have the capacity to ‘take feminism into account’ (McRobbie, 2009) and ‘educate’ young white female audiences of their entitlements, as white women, but also as standard bearers for neoliberal values of self-reliance and competition.

*Postfeminism: an agent of neoliberalism*

The contemporary context in which these new freedoms have been framed, has been described as postfeminist, a term which is widely used, yet its meaning has been contested in ‘feminist cultural critique[s]’ (Gill and Scharff, 2011: 3). Here, the rhetoric of quasi-feminism (Walter, 2010) and its entanglement with neoliberal ideologies are examined as they are presented in luxury advertising. What appear to be neutral ideas regarding choice and agency are narratives that collude with the ideology of neoliberalism and the aggressive marketing messages that encourage consumption. Winch (2013) argues that ‘postfeminist identities are difficult to enable, but they are represented as lucrative’ (Winch, 2013: 108) and aspirational. As can be seen in *Sex and the City*, the characters’ unabashed consumption of designer goods which made Manolo Blahnik[[2]](#endnote-2) a household name and produced new forms of social distinction and examples of good taste that enacted implicit assumptions regarding entitlement to material goods in the global brand city of New York (Arthurs, 2003; Massey, 2013). Urban Manhattan is celebrated and represented as an all-white prosperous city, with a few exceptions of working class Asian people providing services; women of colour are not addressed or included in the series (Kim, 2001), but serve to depict[ing] the different tiers of work in the global economy’ (Bhattacharyya, 2011: 310). Only in the first film adaptation, an attempt is made to address this omission[[3]](#endnote-3). An all-white portrayal of New York City provides a focus for understanding how ‘white’ spaces are represented as desirable, neutral and safe for the postfeminist single white girl. In short, the race, class and gender hierarchies reinforce the symbolic and material value of the brand savvy, white and upper middle class female. As can be seen in the example of the aesthetic used by the Michael Kors brand, the key preoccupation of the neoliberal female subject appears to be a steadfast dedication to her image to represent wealth and pleasure (Törrönen and Juslin, 2011).

*Gender and the privileged white aesthetic*

Scholarly discussions regarding whiteness have frequently argued that whiteness is an unmarked racial category (Dyer, 1997; Bhattacharyya et al, 2002; Garner, 2009) and yet whiteness is a paradox, as its power lies in its ability to shape the visual representations of all ethnicities through ‘its invisibility’ (Redmond, 2013: 60). This analysis presents the argument that although whiteness continues to present itself as the unquestioned norm, against which all other ethnic groups are measured, it is made visible and desirable by performances that normalise the values, cultural capital and aesthetic tastes of the dominant white upper and middle classes (Tyler, 2012; Lawler 1999). The ‘mass produced images of idealized thin femininity’ (Hodge, 2014: 76) is the medium through which the discourse of white privilege is disseminated. American styles and tastes are channelled through dominant consumer brands such as Michael Kors. The brand’s use of the white female body as a text (Hodge, 2014) on which to inscribe and communicate what it means to be white, female and privileged are ‘visible markers of class identity and distinction [that] become inscribed on the body and can be read and interpreted by others’ (Tyler, 2012: 21).

Those ‘others’ in the global market can read and interpret that a luxury jet-set lifestyle is a standard which should be aspired to. To construct an aesthetic of whiteness as entitled to luxury, the Michael Kors advertising images are staged on large luxury boats, as in the image presented here for analysis.

The image was photographed by the celebrity photographer Mario Testino for the 2015 resort collection and features the female model, Karmen Pedaru with two white male models at the scene of a luxury yacht. The hazy focus at the edge of the image gives the impression of a fantasy or a dream and the reflection of the sun on the sea provides a backdrop for a display of neoliberal femininity at leisure. Pedaru is positioned at the centre of the image and is white, conventionally attractive, with bronzed skin to connote wealth. She has a slim figure and her long blond hair is wet and tousled as though she has just stepped out of the water. She is wearing the collection’s white crochet, sleeveless signature dress. The open knit design of the dress emphasises and sexualises her body as she does not appear to be wearing anything underneath the dress. Her aviator style, gold trimmed sunglasses and her large leather tote bag completes her look. The ‘stylization of the body’ (Butler 2007: xv) draws on the ‘fashion-beauty complex’ (Bartky, 1990 quoted in Redmond, 2003: 171) to produce a sexual appeal for the patriarchal palate (hooks cited in Wong, 1994: 138). This successfully meets neoliberal market demands for profits as the new postfeminist subject achieves her sexual appeal through the consumption of luxury brands that also promotes an aesthetic of wealth.

This is a heteronormative display which positions the female as the subject of the attention of the men in her company. One of the male models, standing at the edge of the image displays traditional gendered behaviour by using both hands to steady the female model as she sits on the edge of the boat. Her comportment suggests that she is special, a lady, yet the representation subscribes to the tradition of presenting women as ‘first and foremost as a sexual and erotic being’ (Törrönen and Juslin, 2013: 476). The campaign serves to convey the message of the female’s ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ (Mulvey, 1975) and the desirability of hedonistic lifestyles as performed by gendered whiteness.

The Michael Kors image invites us to ask questions about the representations of classed social groups, and in the case of all good advertising campaigns, the focus is not on the product, but the lifestyle that is represented as being available and accessible to the reader of the image (Howells, 2003). They provide insight into the aspirations and values that society holds and chooses to celebrate and provides an understanding of the transformations that have taken place in popular visual culture. Traditional representations had predominantly portrayed women as guardians of the home (Coward, 1984; Törrönen and Juslin, 2013) and in the contemporary context the white female is also represented as a self-sufficient, yet sophisticated image and body conscious female as in *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives* and more recently in the film, *I Don’t Know How She Does It*. Significantly, these widely distributed American media texts convey a preoccupation with the lives of largely white middle-to-upper class North American women (Gill and Scharff, 2011) that reinforces those identities as the norm, and obscures the reality of women’s lives that are not structured by racial and economic privileges.

The messages and images that are disseminated by the mass media, specifically addressing women to focus on beautification *and* to aspire to educational success and employment may appear to be contradictory and confusing, yet by enlisting the interlocking discourses of whiteness, consumer citizenship and the call to employment are all messages that facilitate neoliberal market demands. As Parker (2008) argues, the ‘processes of neoliberalization’ have been deeply tied to and dependent upon a number of related discourses’ (Parker, 2008: 152).

There has been a ‘counter’ backlash against this continuing assault on women to position their bodies as the ‘primary source of capital’ (Hodge, 2014: 82). Feminist websites such as Vagenda[[4]](#endnote-4) have been launched in recent years and critique the ways in which young girls and women are persuaded by ‘the mass produced images of idealised thin femininity’ (Hodge, 2014: 76) to conform and equate these messages with happiness and success (Hodge, 2014).

*Educational success for the autonomous white female*

The adoption of neoliberal market-led policies in Western democracies has included a shift towards knowledge economies, and during the 1990s and 2000s, led to the expansion of higher education in the UK (see Purcell and Elias, 2009). The expansion of higher education is one of the key social changes that Beck and Beck-Gernscheim cite as making available an apparently broader range of choices for young women. This change enabled large numbers of young middle class white women to gain valuable university qualifications. Critiquing Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck’s articulation of reflexive modernisation, Angela McRobbie (2009) scrutinises the representations of affluent women in contemporary popular culture as they are presented as educated autonomous individuals, a symbol of social change and the apparent beneficiaries in this choice-based, consumption driven landscape. They are no longer subject to the obligations of family duties and can choose to delay marriage and children in favour of the pursuit of careers and personal pleasure. McRobbie (2009) questions the ‘new “normal biographies”’ (Beck and Beck-Gernscheim quoted in McRobbie, 2009: 45) produced by young women that Beck and Beck-Gernscheim refer to. They are subjects who are already informed and have the material means to make the ‘right’ choices. In the popular press they are represented as ‘‘A1’ girls…glamorous high-achievers destined for Oxford and Cambridge’ (McRobbie, 2009: 15). This success is repeatedly celebrated and taken for granted as a preserve of whiteness; an unspoken entitlement to privilege. Indeed, ‘whiteness [as materially successful appears to be] … a given social position’ (Mirza, 1997: 9).

However, these successes are ‘derived from an unequal and competitive system’ (author, 2013: 35) that is routinely presented as a standard; a norm which does not take into account that it is the existing social structure that facilitates that success. Specifically, it is economic and social capital that largely reproduces upper and middle class educational achievement, gained by attending private schools, employing private tutors and moving house to get into highly desirable school catchment areas (Murray, 2012). This celebration of educational achievement as idealised whiteness can be located within a clear binary; the other half being the discourses that maintain and reproduce the myth of black underachievement in British state schools (see Mirza, 2008). Heidi Safia Mirza (1992, 2008, 2012) has researched extensively the relative educational achievements of black females despite the ‘discourse whose underlying premise maintains the ‘“idea” of underachievement’ (Mirza, 2008: 11). In this instance as Wright (2013) argues, ‘it is important to note intersecting dimensions of race, class and gender can result in privileges or penalties depending on their positioning’ (Wright, 2013: 90). As we can see above, within the context of education, gender is raced, and race is classed and gendered (ibid).

*The power of beauty ideals*

Social networks and educational success translate into work experience and ‘internships at prestigious firms’ (Little, 2013: 11), and form part of the ‘wage earning capacity’ (McRobbie, 2009: 61) for salary earning white women, who become identified as consumer citizens (ibid: 29). As we have seen, they are displayed as ‘symbolically’ central (Hall 1996: 475) to the articulation of elite whiteness and neoliberalism in visual texts; however, they are socially constructed in relation to heterosexual white men. By virtue of their ethnicity, white women are invited by patriarchy to share power (Genz, 2012: 5), yet within the discursive formation of choice, luxury and self-indulgence, the female must be inscribed as ‘beautiful, gentle and ultimately performing’ (author, 2013: 38) to fulfil narrow prescriptions of femininity (Kilbourne, 2000; Butler, 2007; Sherwood, 2009).

The invitation to share power is persuasive and ‘seductive’ for white women who are promised status and worthiness by complying with narrow patriarchal beauty ideals (Genz, 2012) ‘long flowing hair, snow white skin etc’ (Cole and Sabik, 2009: 173). Therefore, it could be argued that some ‘white women collude in the reproduction of white power and privilege within society’ (Tyler, 2012:16; Cole and Sabik, 2009) as they appear to have the most to gain ‘under the pretence of sharing power’ (Audre Lorde 1984, quoted in Genz, 2012: 5). Indeed, the heteronormative representations portray women who are ‘relaxed about being the focus of the male gaze’ (Julkunen, 2010 cited in Törrönen and Juslin, 2013: 487), and produces a narrative of white femininity as ‘special’ (Davis, 2006: 566).

Therefore, upper and middle class white women are positioned as guardians of beauty (Goldberg, 1993) and supported by references to the conditions which make their class position visible; their elaborate decoration and their conspicuous consumption of luxury goods (Craik, 1994). Bridget Byrne (2006) argues that ‘femininity is always classed [and raced when], representing middle-class respectability’ (Byrne, 2006: 106). The Michael Kors images imply that white women continue to be identified as occupying this social position. The need to look feminine as an authentic middle class woman requires a performative display. These displays demonstrate the interlocking of gender, race, class and sexuality and significantly makes visible the ways in which ‘privilege [in the period of late modernity, continues to be] defined in relation to its other’ (Collins cited in Thornton Dill and Kholman, 2012: 156).

The juxtaposition of white middle class women against their black and working class counterparts has a ‘historical inscription’(Skeggs, 2004: 2; Anim-Addo, 2007; author, 2008). Gender, sexuality, class and ethnic inequalities have historically interacted and reinforced ‘one another in shaping white ethnicities’ (Ferber, 2007 cited in Tyler, 2012: 27) as ‘white women’s privileged position with respect to beauty is premised, in part, on their comparison to women of colour, particularly black women’ (Collins, 2000; Trepagnier, 1994 cited in Cole and Sabik, 2009: 181). Here, elite power is mediated through beauty standards that are ‘set up in dichotomies of Otherness and power hierarchies between women’ (Davis, 2006: 566). Thus, ‘blue-eyed, blonde, thin white women could not be considered beautiful without the Other – Black women with classical African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair’ (Collins, 1990: 79). This is not a ‘common [or universal] identity’ (Butler, 2007: 4).

Significantly the mythologizing of the superiority and beauty of the middle class white female can be located within nineteenth century travel discourses (see Sheller, 2003 and author, 2013), English literature, philosophy and art, and were frequently presented in contrast to caricatures of black women as examples of ugliness. Janelle Hobson (2005) and Joan Anim-Addo (2007) have provided detailed analysis of these imperial and colonial racialised gender relations. In the contemporary context, this juxtaposition continues to be made visible and explicit by setting the northern European appearance as the desired beauty standard and the positioning of the white female as the carrier of neoliberal discourses of freedom and choice. Subscribing to these ideals and values equals success and social acceptance. Gill and Scharff (2011) contend that maybe ‘neoliberalism *is always already gendered*, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects?’ (Gill and Scharff, 2011: 7). As neoliberal ideologies are concerned with convincing the individual to ‘invest’ in themselves, so too are messages of postfeminism that instruct women to invest in their appearance and bodies as ongoing projects, as demonstrated by make-over television shows such as *What Not to Wear*, *10 Years Younger*, and *Cook Yourself Thin[[5]](#endnote-5)* (McRobbie, 2009).

*Whiteness and entitlement to luxury*

This discussion has aimed to set out the intersecting categories that shape idealised white identities. Key to this positioning is the established idea that entitlement and affluence are represented as female. As we have seen, central to whiteness is its ‘power to define the ideal and the idealised’ (Redmond, 2013: 60). Claims to beauty and entitlement extend to ideas regarding worthiness (see Cole and Sabik, 2009) and have been endorsed and reproduced in representations of postfeminist identities in beauty advertising. The language used to convey the worthiness of whiteness (Gilroy, 2001) can be identified in the long-running L’Oreal campaign which uses the tagline *Because You’re Worth It* and enlists celebrity ambassadors to epitomise a version of femininity that is worthy of privilege. L’Oreal’s roll call of celebrities includes African Americans, Latin Americans, Hispanic women and Indian women identified as diversely beautiful, yet it is largely beauty ‘defined from a white perspective’ (Bhattacharyya et al, 2002: 131). Indeed, ‘diversity is always extrinsic to the ‘white we’ for if the ‘we’ were genuinely diverse then there would be no room for valuing anything other than the all-inclusive ‘ourselves’ ’(Hage, 1998 cited in Bhattacharyya et al, 2002: 131, 132).

Therefore, what it means to be a woman is closely linked to race and is mediated by cultural representations (Conboy, Medina and Stanbury 1997 cited in Cole and Sabik 2009: 180). In Western cultures the white European beauty standard is the most valued in patriarchal ideology and thus has the appearance of being the closest to power (ibid). Popular visual texts emphasise the fact that ‘some women are socially more valued than others’ (Cole and Sabik, 2009: 184), which also support racist and heterosexist frameworks (Imelda Whelehan, 1995 quoted in Genz, 2009: 186). Skeggs (2004) succinctly draws attention to the processes that produce valued identities, yet are taken for granted as natural:

First, how do certain bodies become inscribed and then marked with certain characteristics? Second, what systems of exchange enable some characteristics to be read as good, bad, worthy and unworthy? Thus, how is value attributed, accrued, institutionalized and lost in the processes of exchange? And how is this value both moral and economic? (Skeggs 2004: 2).

*The female highflyers: who is the target audience for this new face of feminism?*

Although there has been some expression of disenchantment with the ‘meagre fruits of [feminism’s] engagement with neoliberal governance’ (Alvarez, 2014: 221; Fraser, 2013), contemporary representations of white females depict a harmonious present in which the neoliberal project confers with the aspirations and ambitions of an economically independent white female elite. Their material success is universalised ‘in images…from television commercials for credit cards, cell phones, and airlines, female executives jet about the world, phoning home from luxury hotels and reuniting with eager children in airports’ (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2011: 238). Now the independent white female has become the carrier of global discourses of white privilege, but this does not conflict with her designated role as parent. These representations allow the ‘idealized family’ which neoliberalism has ‘at its centre’ (Moody, 1997: 119), to appear to be transformative by valorising the highflying female executive for obtaining the attributes of postmodernity; independence and mobility, whilst retaining the sacred status of mother. This is a masculinist approach that addresses the female as parent and carer to portray an unchanging ‘continuum’ (Chambers, 2001: 145) of family structures in Western societies, as the female is addressed as being solely responsible for the well-being of this idealized family. Indeed, these images do reflect the fact that many women are both providers and primary carers (ONS, 2011)[[6]](#endnote-6), yet this visual discourse of can-do women occludes representations of men as active fathers. The increasing number of women in the workplace (65 per cent of mothers in the United States are in employment, see Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2011), has been matched by a significant increase in the hours that women work in managerial and professional jobs (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2011). However transformative women in the workplace appear, the continuum of women as primary carers and managers of the home, reveals that masculinity is ‘reassuringly’ unchanged. In *Feminism is For Everyone*, bell hooks (2000) notes that progressive changes regarding sexual equality were not matched with equal sharing of domestic chores. Over a decade later, Campbell (2013) asserts that ‘progress towards domestic democracy has stalled’ (Campbell, 2013:10). Thus, in the UK, the rate of British men’s contribution in the home has increased by a rate of about one minute a day, per year – that is, by about 30 minutes – over the three decades from the 1970s to the 2000s’ (Campbell, 2013: 10).

Neoliberalism may have produced economic freedom for some women, however, global capitalism expects and demands that all workers work harder and for longer; ‘patriarchal principles’ (Campbell, 2013: 5) that assume workers to be responsible to no-one, enduringly flexible and mobile. In response to these demands, affluent women have turned over their domestic and caring work to other (often migrant) women by hiring them as nannies and maids (Bhattacharyya, 2011). Thus, it continues to be possible for affluent men to avoid the ‘second shift’ (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2011: 242).

This is one of the ways in which patriarchal whiteness is ‘both strategically and ideologically procured and maintained’ (Garner, 2009: 8), by representing race, class and gender positions, which must be repeatedly displayed, as though they are universally accepted, and the norm. The patriarchal culture of capitalism is made all the more convincing with ‘legitimizing and normalizing discourses, including discourses that ‘naturalize’ the market…and portray ‘idealized, autonomous, self-sufficient, market citizens’ (Parker 2008: 152), with examples of neoliberal female success that has been achieved within the existing patriarchal framework, and claiming that routes to power do not require a restructuring of the system.

The messages that are being communicated by well-educated business executives such as Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook[[7]](#endnote-7), and Karren Brady, a sporting executive and vice chair at West Ham Football Club, appear to be accessible to all women. This is familiar territory as bell hooks (2000) has aptly noted that it was middle class women who were given access to the media during the feminist movement and ‘the issues that were most relevant to working women or masses of women were never highlighted by mainstream mass media’ (hooks, 2000: 37). Therefore, it is significant that in the contemporary context, privileged white women who appear to share solidarity with men in their own class, more so than they do with working class women (hooks, 2013), have emerged as authoritative speakers on feminism. The issues that Sandberg raises, that she wants women to be paid more and Brady’s concerns regarding good quality child care and equal pay for women are indeed issues that many women would identify with. However, raising these issues does not threaten patriarchal sensibilities as they are not calling for patriarchy to be overhauled. They are distinctly addressing the corporate and commercial world when they loudly eulogise neoliberal principles of competition, self-help, and meritocracy (McRobbie, 2012).

Karren Brady was the first woman to be appointed as managing director of a football club in the UK (Birmingham City F.C.). She is the daughter of a self-made millionaire. As a successful business leader, Brady is also on the board of Taveta Investments, owned by Philip Green, the billionaire retailer and is a management consultant to Simon Cowell’s Syco Entertainment (Brady, 2015)[[8]](#endnote-8). Along with these high-profile connections and her appearances on the television programme *The Apprentice*, Brady was recently made a Conservative peer and has taken up her seat in the House of Lords with the title of Baroness Brady of Knightsbridge. Brady expresses the mantra of the neoliberal subject through a narrative of ‘moral authoritarianism’ (Moody, 1997: 119) as she says, ‘I do believe you need to live in a country that’s full of aspiration. That if you want to do well, you can do well’ (Brady, 2015). Brady’s comments chime with neoliberal philosophy which directly centres the responsibility to ‘do well’ on the individual and does not acknowledge the racial and class structures of society that shape an individual’s life chances.

When questioned about the negative impact of the British coalition government’s economic policies, particularly on vulnerable people, Brady responds, ‘I don’t see any evidence of that at all’ and when asked about zero-hours contracts (work that does not guarantee a minimum number of hours) and whether they provide enough money for employees to live on, Brady replies that she has friends who are employed on zero-hours contracts, and believes that they allow women to ‘stay at home and … work the hours that they want to work’ (Brady, 2015).

To frame discussions regarding zero-hours contracts as a simple choice that women make, betrays the fact that it is in the interest of companies to present zero-hours contacts as providing employees with flexibility. By employing a large number of workers on insecure contracts, for example, ‘it is estimated that 300,000 care workers are on zero-hours contracts’ (Campbell, 2013: 9), meets the demands of business to reduce costs and increase profits. By issuing zero-hours contracts, employers are not required to pay pensions, make holiday payments, sick pay.

The contradictions in what Brady appears to stand for and represent are apparent as she appears to be ‘speaking for everyone’ yet in practice is concerned with … ‘represent[ing] the views and interests of a privileged minority’ (Fiske 1994 cited in Bhattacharyya et al, 2002: 24). Brady’s championing of neoliberal entrepreneurialism is equally balanced with free-market hostility towards welfare as she states, ‘I think it should always pay to work more than it should pay to be a burden on society’ (Brady, 2015). Such views towards welfare ignore the direct relationship between low wages and poverty. It is also significant that despite the contribution that women make to the UK economy, this has not been matched with proportionate provision in public services (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2011: 243). Significantly in the United States, where 65 per cent of women with children are in employment, there is no public childcare for working mothers or ‘paid family or medical leave’ (ibid: 242).

As a member of the upper classes and a lifelong Conservative supporter, Brady reveals that gender relations in this class remain ‘male dominant’ (Sherwood, 2009: 139), however, she is able to demonstrate how a heterosexual white female, married with children, can also stand for status and power (Nemoto, 2009). Brady centrally points towards the social and political double standard of gender and childcare; that this continues to be a challenge for women to balance work, but is not considered to be the case for men who are fathers.

The elements of the *having it all life* and male resistance to increase their contribution to domestic work are represented as the norm in media representations that also appear to suggest, ‘this is what you asked for’. In the film *I Don’t Know How She Does It*, an adaptation of the bestselling book of the same name, Sarah Jessica Parker stars as Kate Reddy, a finance executive trying to balance a demanding job with a marriage and two children. The film appears to draw on the popularity of *Sex and the City*, by casting Sarah Jessica Parker in the lead role.

The film is a comedy which takes feminism into account by portraying women who have gained access to male dominated occupations and suggests that this continues to be aspirational for (white) women. Although the film has received negative reviews by critics[[9]](#endnote-9), it effectively conveys the relationship between Reddy’s role as an employee and how this directly impacts on her relationships with her children, husband and mother-in-law. The film reinforces the ideological and cultural pressures at work to present parenting and employment as challenges relevant only for women. This is effectively conveyed by the stark contrast between Reddy’s ‘maternal guilt’ (Sharpe, 1984: 157) about not being with her children full-time and her husband’s detached attitude towards childcare. Although Reddy’s husband is visible in the lives of his children, he undermines his wife’s right to work by responding negatively when he is required to be solely responsible for the children when Reddy is called away on business.

The film represents the concerns of a privileged minority of women who are successful and are in the financial position to pay for childcare, such as nurseries and nannies, yet despite valorising their lives as successful women, it also raises the issue that successful white women navigate their lives and work within neoliberal sexist regimes.

*Conclusion*

This article has used an intersectional approach to draw attention to the discourses of postfeminism and neoliberalism that appear to overlap and ‘bolster’ each other; apparently neutral terms that make the privileged white female an ally of the neoliberal project. The intersecting categories of gender, race, class and sexuality, are represented by the career woman, who offers an understanding of the new subjectivities; the ideal is gendered whiteness, and marked as exclusively middle to upper class with the ability to consume luxury products, choose motherhood and make career choices (defined as *having it all*), albeit difficult decisions within the existing patriarchal framework. The messages that are communicated regarding women’s right to work and their positioning as consumer citizens supports market-driven economies that encourage individualised routes to wealth, but simultaneously discounts the interdependency of society with the removal of the ‘public investment in the work of care that falls to women’ (Campbell, 2013: 9).

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Notes

1. Images of the Michael Kors Spring 2015 campaign can be accessed via this link:

   <http://destinationkors.michaelkors.com/runway/ad-campaigns/spring-2015-4/> Last accessed 30 March 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In Season Four, episode *Just Say Yes,* Carrie Bradshaw realises that she had spent $40, 000 on designer shoes. In that episode she asks herself ‘whether she might actually become “the old woman who lives in her shoes”’ (Gennaro, 2007: 255). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In *Sex and the City* I, (2008), the African American actor and singer Jennifer Hudson was cast as Carrie Bradshaw’s personal assistant. Although casting Hudson in the film was a welcomed departure from an all-white cast, her character, Louise was still on the margins of the plot. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The Vagenda website can be accessed via this link:

   <http://vagendamagazine.com/> Last accessed 29 March 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *What Not to Wear was* presented byTrinny Woodall and Susannah Constantine; *10 Years Younger* was presented byNicki Hambleton-Jones and *Cook Yourself Thin* was presented by Gizzi Erskine. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The Office for National Statistics’ data on lone parents with dependent children can be accessed via this link:

   <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/family-demography/families-and-households/2011/sum-lone-parents.html> Last accessed 30 March 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. A *Guardian* interview with Sheryl Sandberg can be accessed via this link:

   <http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2013/mar/15/facebook-sheryl-sandberg-lean-in> Last accessed 27 March 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Karren Brady interview with Sophie Elmhirst for *The Guardian* Saturday 7 March 2015 can be accessed via this link:

   <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/mar/07/karren-brady-interview-no-desire-to-become-an-mp> Last accessed 30 March 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Reviews for the film *I Don’t Know How She Does It* can be accessed via this link:

   <http://www.theguardian.com/film/movie/143372/i-don-t-know-how-she-does-it> Last accessed 10 March 2015.

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