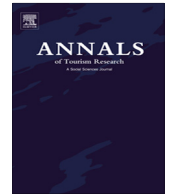




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## Women's "beach body" in Australian women's magazines



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## ABSTRACT

Representations of tourism subjects, both people and places, extend beyond specifically tourism media. This paper explores the presummer images of swimwear and beach bodies in Australian women's lifestyle magazines. A content analysis of swimwear images confirmed British findings that there was a general uniformity in the characteristics of the women modelling the swimsuits: young, slim, white ethnicity (but tanned) and able-bodied. Critical Discourse Analysis highlighted that the beach body discourse is in many ways contested. On the one hand the beach is a place of abandonment, but women need to work hard to achieve the required normative image. Women's agency and choice is questioned due to the narrow normative image and the neo-liberal, consumerist systems underlying the discourse.

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## Introduction

Understanding the holiday as an embodied experience, a space in which our bodies perform and do tourism (Crouch & Desforges, 2003; Pritchard, Morgan, Ateljevic, & Harris, 2007; Small, 2007; Small & Harris, 2012; Swain, 2004; Veijola & Jokinen, 1994), has taken tourism beyond Urry's (1990) "tourist gaze". At the same time that the tourist body is performative, the meaning of the body is socially constructed through language and social practices. So while the body is "a practical, direct locus of social control" it is also "a text of culture" (Bordo, 1989, p. 13). As Hall (1997) says, cultures are based on shared meanings articulated and constructed through language and representation. We give things meanings by how we use them and how we represent them – "the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them" (Hall, 1997, p. 3). Inherent in an examination of representations is the implicit acknowledgment that text is not neutral or objective but replete with meaning and that these meanings lie within the sociocultural system of time and place in which the text or image is situated and can lie beyond any initial intended message. The consumer of images/text is active in interpreting and imposing meaning perpetuating a system of seeing the world (circuit of culture, circuit of representation – Hall, 1997).

Acknowledging that (tourism) spaces/landscapes and the people in them are created through social practices has led tourism scholars who are interested in poststructuralist and discursive approaches to examine the politics of representation, its impacts and consequences as presented in tourism media such as guide books, tourist brochures, postcards, industry websites, and in-flight magazines. Representations of tourist destinations and people have been studied according to gender (and also ethnicity, disability, age, sexuality etc.) and have highlighted the ways in which the images reflect and can reinforce such relations in society. Second wave feminist analyses of representations of gender of people in tourism brochures (see Davies & Bradbery, 1999; Edelheim, 2007; Jordan, 1998; Pritchard, 2001; Sirakaya & Sonmez, 2000; Young & Brown, 1999) highlight the objectification of women as sexual beings and the stereotypical portrayal of women as submissive

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and subordinate to men. A significant amount of advertising is centred on representations of attractive, young, white women. Men are portrayed in sporting roles and working roles. Marshment claims that the young woman on the cover of travel brochures “is almost always wearing a swimsuit” (1997, p. 19). As Hemmati says, the images of women tourists in the brochures “are rarely realistic representations of the actual women travelling (1999, p. 12).

Representations of tourism subjects extend beyond specifically tourism media. The interrelationship between leisure, popular culture and general media can be significant in shaping the constructions of gender identities (Bolla, 1990; Bonner & McKay, 2000; Massoni, 2004). Women’s lifestyle magazines are one site for the construction of gender and concomitant accusation of the objectification of women’s bodies (Backett-Milburn & McKie, 2001; Grogan, 2007). Certainly the literature on body image and eating disorders questions the images presented in women’s magazines (Botta, 2003; Dawson, 2005; Kim & Lennon, 2007). Much of the focus of women’s lifestyle magazines is instructional: directing women to the aspirational body image and dictating what must be done to achieve that image. Yet, there are only a few studies of tourism and tourist imagery (such as social messages directed at a holiday body image or readers’ bodily preparation for a holiday) in the non-tourism media (Aitchison & Jordan, 2001; Jordan, 2007; Rosselson, 2000).

Of particular relevance to the present study is Jordan’s (2007) work which explored images of women’s beach-holiday bodies in British women’s lifestyle magazines. Here she examined the ways in which “power, discourses, sexuality and surveillance serve to direct how we (re)produce and (re)present our bodies” (2007, p. 95). From her findings, Jordan concluded that the magazines reinforced the normative gendered body to which women should aspire: slim, toned, tanned and well-groomed. The message of the magazines was that one should work to achieve this body and “that without such a body women should not be happy to be unclothed in the public spaces of tourism” (2007, p. 16). Jordan suggested that the image of the young, tanned, beautiful body, rather than inviting a woman to imagine herself as such, can, through undermining a woman’s confidence, deter her from participation. Inherent in the magazines were the exhortations (or “orders”) to prepare for summer: “the disciplined (bikini boot camp) body” whereby “the attainment of the beach or bikini body was planned out with militaristic precision” (2007, p. 100). Jordan likened this body to Foucault’s docile body – “a self-surveillant social project in response to societal norms” (2007, p. 101). Such messages to work on one’s beach body are similarly exemplified in other media, such as inflight magazines: “Beach-ready body – Left it a bit too late to shed those last five pounds before hitting the beach in your bikini or shorts? easyJet comes to the rescue with some instant weight loss solutions” (easyJet, 2006, p. 16). While a holiday is generally promoted as a time of relaxation and non-work, an escape from the personal and social pressures of home, the evidence above suggests that for women there is much preparatory work (in addition to any family holiday preparation – Small, 2005) in preparing themselves, their bodies, for a “relaxing” beach holiday. Jordan’s work in Britain was a stimulus to take this research further and examine images of swimsuit bodies (and text related to them) in lifestyle magazines of another Western, Anglo-Celtic country, Australia.

While earlier second wave feminism focussed on the objectification of women, claiming that the interiorised gaze is a male gaze that should be resisted (see Jeffreys, 2005), a postfeminist reading argues that today’s women have choices and that even conforming to the dominant image of the body is not necessarily oppressive; it questions the feminine as solely an object of consumption. Ringrose and Walkerdine explain that under neo-liberalism the feminine is intensified “as site (both subject and object) of commodification and consumption” (2008, p. 230). They continue, “The new importance of the feminine is intimately linked to the rise of the psychological subject, a rational subject of choice, flexibility, who has to have the necessary skills to succeed in the constant necessity to change oneself and cope with constant instability across major sites of social formation” (2008, p. 230). Thus, as gender structures fade, “individuals are increasingly called upon to invent their own structures” (McRobbie 2004, p. 260). Self-improvement messages in magazines such as those highlighted by Jordan (2007) can be seen as one means by which self-monitoring happens. Gill (2008), taking a poststructuralist feminist approach, questions the neoliberal injunction to choose and be free. She claims that included in the compulsion for individuality and agency is the necessity of sexual agency. As Gill says, the “sexy body” today “is presented as women’s key source of identity” (2008, p. 42).

A crucial aspect of both the obsessional preoccupation with the body and the shift from objectification to sexual subjectification is that this is framed in advertising through a discourse of playfulness, freedom and, above all, choice.

[Gill, 2008, p. 42]

Associated with freedom and choice are emancipation and empowerment and thus the assumption that feminism no longer has a place in contemporary Western society. In studying the “midriff” (this new Western woman/body named after the fashion item exposing the middle), Gill (2008) acknowledges the positive developments from the passive, victimised, objectified body of the past but cautions that one cannot celebrate the new “empowered sexual agency” of women, for a number of reasons: the “midriff” woman fits a very narrow standard of female beauty and sex appeal; advertising ignores the costs of disciplining the body; agency is confined to physical appearance and consumerism; and there is a shift in power from an external male gaze to an internal gaze forming a new disciplinary regime – women “*must also now understand their own objectification as pleasurable and self-chosen*”(p. 45). Gill adds that here sexual agency “becomes a regulatory project” (2008, p. 53). While women’s magazines have always encouraged self-surveillance and discipline, Gill (2007) argues that there has been an increase in the intensity and extensiveness of self-surveillance with more and more aspects of the body under surveillance. Additionally, there is a focus on the psychological – the remodelling of the interior of one’s life. Feminist media studies have focussed attention on “the make-over” which, as Gill says, “extends beyond the body to constitute a

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