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TRIPLE-ACCREDITED, WORLD-RANKED



Economies of Visibility as a Moderator of Feminism: “Never mind Brexit. Who won Legs-it!”

ABSTRACT

This article utilizes economies of visibility to interpret how two UK women political leaders' bodies are constructed in the press, on-line and by audience responses across several media platforms via a multimodal analysis. We contribute *politicizing economies of visibility*, lying at the intersection of politics of visibility and economies of visibility, as a possible new modality of feminist politics. We suggest this offers a space where feminism can be progressed. Analysis illustrates how economies of visibility moderate feminism and tie women leaders in various ways to their bodies; commodities constantly scrutinized. The study surfaces how media insist upon femininity through appearance from women leaders, serving to moderate power and feminist potential. We consider complexities attached to public consumption of powerful women's constructions, set up in opposition, where sexism is visible and visceral. This simultaneously fortifies moderate feminism and provokes feminism. The insistence on femininity nevertheless disrupts, through an arousal of audible and commanding feminist voices, to reconnect with the political project of women's equality.

INTRODUCTION

Drawing upon economies of visibility as a lens, we contribute to understandings of moderate feminism via media analysis of two of the UK's most powerful women political leaders. In exploring the potential of moderate feminisms for work and organizations and their impact on theorizing and understanding experiences of work-based gender relations the paper aims to do two things. Firstly, we extend understandings of economies of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2015a/b) and moderate feminism. We highlight the various ways in which women leaders are tied to their bodies: how their bodies are commodified; how women leaders themselves engage in this commodification and how women consumers of this media are fragmented in their responses. We

illustrate how the British media insist upon femininity from women leaders, demonstrated through their appearance; how they are sexualized and infantilized; how their power and potential for feminism is diffused and moderated and how women leaders are set up in competition and opposition with each other. In doing so we also advance research into how UK media constructs women as out of place as political leaders (e.g., Pullen and Taska, 2016; Author, 2018; 2010).

Secondly, in advancing Dean's (2010) call for research into how feminism can be established in media discourses through a "double movement" (Dean, 2010: 397), where feminism is affirmed while distance from radicalism is secured, we surface complexities attached to public embracing and response to some feminist norms (e.g., women in elite positions of power). We illustrate how moderate feminist discourse circulates through various media and audiences simultaneously fortifying moderate feminism and provoking feminism. Feminism here is used as a "floating signifier", following Dean's (2010) understanding to indicate how feminism's precise meaning is left open. This is helpful to explore different types of exclusions and associations as we 'see' feminism in our analysis (e.g., women political leaders are an indication of equality for women and therefore feminism).

The media constructions under scrutiny relate to a meeting between Scotland's First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon and the United Kingdom's Prime Minister, Theresa May, which took place two days prior to the triggering of Article 50 as part of the UK departure from the European Union. The analysis focuses upon media reporting of, and audience responses to, the meeting between the political leaders. A multimodal media discourse analytic approach is adopted to recognize the media's role in influencing how individuals, and in turn organizations, make sense of and give sense to women as leaders (Hellgren et al., 2002; Author, 2018).

We are not postfeminist researchers but adopt a postfeminist lens to critically analyse a particular event in U.K. society as part of a gender regime (Lewis, 2014) or postfeminist sensibility (Gill et al., 2016). This postfeminist sensibility is an "analytical category designed to capture empirical regularities in the world" (Gill, et al., 2016: 621) and which constructs discourses where individual choice is paramount, detached from broader societal contexts, and where gender parity,

merit and career success is based on individual agency (Lewis and Simpson, 2017; Lewis, 2014). This reflects hyper-individuated, entrepreneurial subjects required to self-regulate and monitor and focus on self-care to meet postfeminist requirements. Subjects ‘see’ gender inequalities but view solutions as dependent on individual action and distant from challenge to inequalities, masculine norms and criticism of men (Rottenberg, 2014). In this way postfeminist sensibility is used to identify a range of predictable cultural uniformities which have impact, gendering in particular ways and constituting subjectivities (Lewis et al., 2017: 214).

The paper begins by providing a brief overview of economies of visibility and a context to moderate feminism and the media. Following this, the ‘Sturgeon-May’ meeting is introduced before the research approach is outlined. Various media and audience responses relating to the ‘Sturgeon-May’ case are analysed and the contributions outlined. We conclude with a discussion of the implications for theory and practice.

Economies of Visibility and Moderate Feminism

A fundamental assumption in this analysis is that economies of visibility act as a moderating force on feminism in that “a postfeminist cultural landscape, neoliberal capitalism and the normalization of the brand and lifestyle of ‘girl power’ sees organizations treat girls and women as investments upon which organizations can thrive” (Banet-Weiser, 2015b: 64). Banet-Weiser (2015b: 55) distinguishes between a politics of visibility, which implies a “struggle, a recognition of inequity, and more importantly, a highlighting of dynamics of power” and economies that define themselves as “sort of neutral” (Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018). Through economies of visibility an individual’s visibility has become *the* new form of currency (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 56). Wiegman (1995: 8) defined economies of visibility as “the epistemology of the visual that underlies both race and gender: that process of corporeal inscription that defines each as a binary, wholly visible affair”. This visual inscription of the body manifested in cinema, television, video and the representation of bodies as kinds of commodities. Banet-Wieser (2015b) extends this understanding to thinking

how economies of visibility work in an era of advanced capitalism, brand culture, postfeminism and multiple media platforms.

Economies of visibility structure our mediascapes and our cultural, economic practices and daily lives and transform politics of visibility because “gender as a political identity has transformed its logics from the inside out and through visibility is self-sufficient, absorbent and enough on its own” (Banet-Weiser, 2015b: 55) – gender has absorbed into an economy. Economies are about individuals – consumers, buyers, sellers. As “part of a postfeminist sensibility, economies of visibility privilege and give value to the individual within that economy and are “gendered economies that function to make the feminine body central, not just in media representation but in law, policy, health and discourses of sexuality” (Banet-Weiser, 2015b: 56).

As a “characteristic of a postfeminist regime” (Lewis and Simpson, 2017: 5), we argue that economies of visibility are a moderator of feminism which produce an empowered subject with agency, distanced from ideas of women’s disadvantage. This is reflected in “a discourse of a highly individuated new femininity which leaves little room to raise questions of gender inequality or to articulate the experience of difficulty and disadvantage” (Baker, 2010: 186). It is flavoured by an emphasis on individual women’s empowerment (Dean, 2010; Lewis et al., 2017) reflected in discourses of individualization, self-management and success, where “women, in displaying sexual and economic agency within the public sphere, must withhold critique of hegemonic masculinity and thus disidentify as feminist” McRobbie’s (2009: 85).

Moderate feminism is considered more reasonable, modest, and sensible, constrained and restrained than perceived ‘excessive’ (extreme/threatening) feminism and thus a more ‘acceptable’ feminism in Western society currently. This temperate feminism reflects an individuated female subject who sees the obstinacy of gender inequalities but considers solutions to be based on her individual action (Rottenberg, 2014). The achievement of equality is the responsibility of individual women and their success is based on their own personal initiative (Baker, 2010). Such ‘Can Do’ women are generally white, middle class and entrepreneurial (Banet-Weiser, 2015b).

Can-Do and At-Risk girls (typically working class girls of colour) are the subject of Banet-Weiser's (2015b: 57) economies of visibility where in the media there is "current *demand* for girls and women's visibility and the *supply* for visibility takes many forms, enhanced by social media". Banet-Weiser (2015b: 57) outlines how the individual girl or woman is an agent for change, with the burden of confidence on her body, rather than addressing structural inequalities that encourage girls' lack of confidence in the first place. This focus on empowerment lends itself to commodification because it is so often expressed within a postfeminist sensibility and context of capitalist marketability.

The *product* scrutinized in this paper, through economies of visibility, is the woman political leader; commodified as the feminine body, drawing attention to how its *value* is perpetually scrutinized and evaluated. Thus economies of visibility "serve up bodies as commodities and the self as a *brand* (Banet-Weiser, 2012)" (Banet-Weiser, 2015b: 57). Indeed, a key strategy through which women today make themselves visible, is by branding oneself (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018). Using economies of visibility as an analytical lens enables us to analyse media construction of women political leaders and to advance understandings of economies of visibility and moderate feminism.

MEDIA CONSTRUCTIONS

In the critical analysis of media that follows we are informed by Rhodes and Parker (2008), in that media offers important representations of work, organizations and in this case leaders (Author, 2010) "that exceed those available to theory" (Rhodes and Westwood, 2008: 22). We argue that the media plays a critical role in shaping our understanding of ourselves and the world around us (Author 2010b), with constructions perpetuated by media shaping the actual behaviour of people not least in workplaces (Czarniawska and Rhodes, 2006).

Media constructions of U.K. women political leaders have been reported as gendered and powerful in messaging "women's (un)acceptability as leaders against embedded stereotypes... trivializing their contribution and detracting from their credibility as leaders" (Author, 2010: 550).

This type of research is fairly recent in GOS (see Author, 2018) but the literature examining women's representation more broadly in the media (e.g. Tuchman, 1978; Gill, 2007), including representations of feminism (Gill, 2007; Jaworska and Krishnamurthy, 2012), are more extensive. The relative invisibility of women leaders featured in the media and the biased reporting of women's role in public life (e.g., Global Media Monitoring Project, 2015; The Women's Media Center, 2017), takes place in a context where those women who feature in media are hyper-visible; their bodies are seen as commodities and they face personal criticism and sexist and gendered representations, rather than a focus on legitimacy and credibility.

Textual studies of the discursive construction of feminism in 998 British and American news items between 1968 and 2008 (Mendes, 2012) and discourses of feminism from a corpus of German and British newspapers from 1990 to 2009 (Jaworska and Krishnamurthy, 2012), draw our attention to the contemporary problematization of feminism in the media. Reflecting a postfeminist sensibility, feminism is regularly positioned in the media as "outdated, and no longer relevant" (Jaworska and Krishnamurthy, 2012: 423); it is marginalised with a "climate of negativity surrounding the term" (ibid: 424). This is a persistent issue evident over time, illustrating how feminism has been caricaturised and characterised, through "demonization" (Rhode, 1995: 692-696), "personalization and trivialization" (ibid: 696-701), "polarization" (ibid: 701-703), and by "blurring the focus" (ibid: 703). Thus the "media's coverage of feminist issues undermines feminist objectives", focussing on individual women's "self-transformation rather than social transformation" (Rhode, 1995: 703).

Dean (2010) offers an alternative way forward for contemporary feminism, theorizing a domestication of feminism through a media analysis of discourse on feminism in two UK newspapers. Dean (2010) argues that discourse about feminism in the quality press is mostly structured around sets of binaries typically between a reasonable/moderate feminism and an excessive/overly radical feminism. Yet in his study, "discourse on feminism in the two newspapers - which politically might be seen as at odds with one another - nonetheless partially converge in certain ways, as both at times create a legitimate space for a "moderate" feminism via disavowals

of its more ‘extreme’ incarnations” (Dean, 2010: 402). Dean (2010) invites further theoretical and empirical development of moderate feminism as a useful way to analyse various moderate, ‘acceptable’ forms of feminism within the public domain. We respond to this call by drawing upon economies of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2015b) as an analytical lens to examine women political leaders’ media constructions and audience reactions. The research approach now follows.

MULTIMODAL DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS

Through an economies of visibility lens we conducted a multimodal discursive analysis of media outputs published in the UK over a two-day period relating to the *Daily Mail* case, published on the 28th March 2017. We examined on-line reporting of newspaper articles, twitter, radio and television news broadcasts and explored discussions on a day-time television programme, between the 28th and 29th March 2017. We limited the search to this two-day period to contain the amount of textual and visual data for analysis. Texts were collected on the web through the search terms ‘Brexit’ and ‘Legs-It’ to discover audience responses most directly relevant to the *Daily Mail* front page headline. The nature of the sources and their dates of publication are listed in Table 1. The researchers were co-located during 29th and 30th March 2017 which allowed for an iterative series of data analysis points to occur and to make comparisons between each researcher’s interpretations.

<INSERT TABLE 1 DATA SOURCES>

Multimodal discourse analysis recognises that the meaning of texts, including on-line newspaper reports and television programmes are achieved through more than one semiotic mode (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006) and is appropriate to explore how women leaders and moderate feminism discourses are constructed in a range of media outputs, and the interdiscursivity between constructions. We frame the front-page and the responses to it as a ‘discursive event’, and examine how discourse circulates from the *Daily Mail* front-page through audience responses in various media. Feminist media studies recognize that how leaders are constructed in the media impacts on

audiences (Author, 2014) and effects “women’s cultural ‘acceptance’” (Author, 2015: 347) as leaders. As a discursive event, the *Daily Mail* front-page and audience responses constitute a portrayal of a phenomenon or occurrence which travels and provokes responses (Jäger and Maier, 2009). This positioning enables analysis that seeks to understand how economies of visibility and moderate feminism are visibly and textually represented from the ‘ground-up’ (Meadows and Sayer, 2013) in the media. Drawing upon economies of visibility as an analytical lens sheds “light on how gender is constructed, performed, referenced and indexed” (Angouri, 2001: 387) as part of a postfeminist sensibility. The analysis begins with the *Daily Mail’s* front-page of 28th March 2017 and extends to the thread of discourse generated in response to the headline and accompanying photograph and how this is reinterpreted across and between multiple media texts. A multimodal discourse analysis can study whether an event becomes a discursive event. If it “becomes a discursive event it further influences the development of discourse” (Jäger and Maier, 2009: 49).

We apply and advance Author’s (2018) methodological framework to analyse economies of visibility and how this moderates feminism through a discursive event. The analysis encompasses responses (communicated through traditional and social media) to the original text’s representation of the ‘Sturgeon-May’ meeting. We understand discourse as “a focus on relations between linguistic/semiotic elements of the social and other (including material) elements”, in order to gain insight into how discourse reflects wider social relations (Fairclough, 2005: 916). Discourse is socially constitutive (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258), able to reproduce and transform social norms and socially conditioned in that it is shaped by the situation and by the socio-cultural context. Positioning our case as a discursive event our analysis necessarily recognises its intertextual nature and how the specificities of its intertextuality reflect power relations between the micro (individual actors) and the macro (institutions).

The analysis comprised three stages which focused on argumentation in text and composition of visual imagery. This enables us to explore how media representations through an

economies of visibility lens connects to moderate feminism, drawing upon social norms and stereotypes to interact with their perceived audience.

In stage one, we examined the arguments, viewpoints and interests (Hellgren et al., 2002; Author, 2018) in media reports of the ‘Sturgeon-May’ meeting. Studying how a text lays claim to different representations helps to make explicit the reproduction of discourses, including representations of feminism in the media. Stage two of the analysis adopted visual semiotic techniques which bring attention to how images involve interaction with an audience, so are concerned to explore how “visual images produce social meaning” (Scollon and Scollon, 2003: 217). This encourages an appreciation of how images are independently organized, structured messages but are also connected to the written text (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). Four aspects of visual imagery were studied: representational meaning which explores what an image includes and how the image’s constitutive elements interact; modality, which surveys the extent to which an image is perceived as believable or ‘real’; composition, which focuses on the elements in an image are arranged, and interactive meaning which focusses on the relationship the image creates with the audience.

The third stage compared and contrasted articles’ text and accompanying images. This draws awareness to how visual imagery and text combine to ‘heighten’ responses to messages (Liu, Cutcher and Grant, 2015). We concentrated on examining whether text and imagery were congruent or were in tension. The stages and analysis are summarised in Table 2. Finally, we analysed across the data to identify dialectics at work in the media constructions of the ‘Sturgeon-May’ meeting. Next, we analyse the article and imagery.

<INSERT TABLE 2 STAGES OF ANALYSIS OF DAILY MAIL 28TH MARCH 2017>

A focus on the *Daily Mail* case by Vine (28th March, 2017) allows the tensions inherent in how women are positioned as leaders to be surfaced. An analysis of audience responses follows to examine how discourses travel through media and various audiences.

NEVER MIND BREXIT. WHO WON ‘LEGS-IT’!

The initial report of the event was published in the *Daily Mail* on 28th March, 2017 (Vine 2017b). The text analysed is based on the *Daily Mail* columnist Vine’s piece written as a commentary on the newspaper’s front-page photograph (see Figure 1.), accompanied by the headline “Never mind Brexit. Who won Legs-it!” Vine has been a columnist for the *Daily Mail* since 2013, and formerly wrote for *The Times*. We consciously position Vine as wife of Conservative MP Michael Gove (former *Times* journalist and early challenger for leadership of the Conservative Party after the June 2016 EU referendum result) to emphasise how media producers are not neutral or objective carriers of news, they also comprise the rich socially constituted and cultural context of a discursive event. Vine is known for writing intimate accounts of her relationship with Gove and for critiques of feminists in her *Daily Mail* column. She once described Justine Miliband MP., as “like an alien, there’s no home-making, she’s too busy sticking to feminist principles ...” (Martinson, 2016). However, Author (2010) outlines how when writing for *The Times* in 2007, Vine indicated her feminist principles when defending Jacqui Smith, a former Home Secretary, declaring:

“[...] this is a woman who is trying to cope with one of the biggest terrorist threats that Britain has ever faced – and all people care about is her bosom”.

Vine highlighted the inherent sexism by pointing out that a similar attack on a male Home Secretary’s personal appearance during a time of national crisis would be unthinkable (Vine, 2007). Ten years later her *Daily Mail* (2017) article on the ‘Sturgeon-May’ meeting, which began by comparing Nicola Sturgeon’s clothing to the appearance of the Scottish knight William Wallace, signals a journalistic move from defender of feminism to a position that regards feminism as outdated and irrelevant, and messages in postfeminist tradition that the battle has been won. Viewed through economies of visibility this context also points to how women’s bodies are now

in high demand, commodified and available for critique and consumed. This is a woman journalist constructing women political leaders in sexist ways.

<INSERT FIGURE 1. PHOTOGRAPH OF THE FRONT-PAGE>

Through textual and visual analyses we examined constructions of the ‘Sturgeon-May’ meeting to provide insights into economies of visibility and moderate feminism through women political leaders’ media representations. The analysis identified two sets of dialectics operating in the media constructions: seductress/infantilized, and warrior/vicar’s daughter. These dialectics construct Nicola Sturgeon and Theresa May in opposition with each other as individual, entrepreneurial, highly successful women. Table 3 provides illustrations for each dialectic.

<INSERT TABLE 3 DIALECTICAL ANALYSIS>

Seductress/Infantilized

Through a lens of economies of visibility where the demand for girls is constant; they are the objects at which we gaze whether we want to or not (Projansky, 2014), a seductress/infantilized dialectic draws attention to the postfeminist ties that bind women political leaders to their bodies in media constructions. The media turns women, as well as “girls into spectacles – visual objects on display” (Projansky, 2014: 5) to be consumed as commodities (Banet-Weiser, 2015a). Women leaders’ bodies in this case are represented as their defining characteristic, constructed as a seductive weapon, diluting their power as political leaders. The women’s pins (legs) are represented as ‘flirty’, ‘tantalising’ and ‘shapely’, constructing these important political leaders as enticing, tempting and alluring – sexualized.

“There is no doubt that both these women consider their pins to be the finest weapon in their physical arsenal. Sturgeon's shorter, but undeniably more shapely shanks are altogether more flirty, tantalisingly crossed, with the dominant leg pointing towards her audience" (Vine, 2017a).

Yet, through a focus on their feminine presence symbolised by an emphasis on legs, the women's bodies are infantilized. They are portrayed as a child or treated in ways which denies their maturity in age or experience or status. For example, Theresa May is constructed as a school girl which undermines the status and power of her Prime Minister position.

"May's (legs) are "demurely arranged in her customary finishing-school stance" (Vine, 2017a).

The commodification and subjugation of the women's bodies is reinforced by judgments cast by panellists on the *Loose Women*¹ U.K. day-time television show (Loose Women, 28th March, 2017) which focussed on the political leaders' legs. Rather than a commentary on Sturgeon and May's political discussions, the panel's focus is on the *Daily Mail* front-page photograph and headline. The *Loose Women* chair, Ruth Langsford, introduces the panel discussion by expressing a concern that the article, which makes women's bodies visible, diminishes the women's political leadership. She refers to them as "the most powerful women in Britain" and "high powered women" who have "climbed the career ladder in politics", referencing a 'Can-Do' postfeminism which locates the women's achievements as a function of their individuated ambition. Comments that immediately follow Langsford's introduction reinforce an acceptance of the absorption of gender into the economy (Banet-Weiser, 2015b) and the centrality of the feminine body. The panellist Gloria Hunniford, expresses a delight that the two women "have good legs" and that it would be worse if "we were talking about what stumps they brought out yesterday", prior to swivelling her chair to face the audience to show her own legs. In doing so Hunniford fortifies the commodification of women's bodies as the norm and dilutes Langsford's opening challenge - which had such potential for feminist discussion on day-time television. Rather than a normalization of women leaders' visibility in a historical situation, the feminine body is assumed and consumed as central to women's success; leadership becomes invisible.

¹ *Loose Women* is a UK daytime television talk show, broadcast by ITV. It is usually comprised of a panel of 4 publicly known women, including a panel chair.

The absorption of gender into the economy, non-politicized and something to be consumed is reinforced by Hunniford's subsequent story of a New York news station that requires its women presenters to wear dresses and skirts of a certain length as 'it attracts viewers'. In doing so Hunniford normalizes economies of visibility where women's bodies are part of a commercial exchange and subject to commodification between media and audiences. Here an economy of visibility dilutes potential for feminism; this moderates the equality of the elite positions the women leaders hold. Femininity appears to be insisted upon in the media when women take on positions traditionally held by men i.e. the focus on the clothing and bodies of Sturgeon and May. Here women are in positions of power in traditional masculine leadership positions but it is a feminine presence symbolised by the emphasis on legs. Women cannot lose femininity by enacting this masculinity.

While at first glance the visual representation of the 'Sturgeon-May' meeting suggests progress towards gender equality, as these women hold the most senior political leadership roles, this is juxtaposed against text and imagery that diminishes the women's status through an emphasis on their bodies. This tempers potential for feminism while simultaneously heralding women's progress, as the women leaders are the 'headline story'. These women are important, they have gained equality reflected in 'holding the front-page', signalling how the battle for equality has been won. However, the political leaders are simultaneously sexualised and infantilized and positioned in competition with each other both visually and textually. Women leaders' appearance is therefore consumed by audiences through their embodied identity work (Author, 2016a) and women are regarded as essentially feminine. While they disrupt the male norm by holding these leader positions (Author, 2016a), through economies of visibility women's bodies are constructed in ways which moderate their potential for feminism. Their bodies are constructed as unsuited to leadership roles (Author, 2018); they are the wrong currency for positions of power.

The second dialectic which emerges focusses upon how the women leaders are individualized and set up in opposition and competition with each other whilst also positioned in relation to men. In Vine's story Theresa May's leadership identity is intimately tied to her father's occupation.

“May's famously long extremities are demurely arranged in her customary finishing-school stance – knees tightly together, calves at a flattering diagonal, feet neatly aligned. It's a studied pose that reminds us that for all her confidence, she is ever the vicar's daughter, always respectful and anxious not to put a foot wrong” (Vine, 2017a).

Viewed through economies of visibility this description of May's posture in the front-page photograph alludes to a femininity tied to traditional gender roles performed in middle and upper-class families. This offers us an alternative way of viewing how women leaders are tied to their bodies. The Prime Minister can be seen to be enacting “respectable business femininity” as “a process of maintaining respectability as an elite leader within subjective expectations of what it is to be a ‘proper’ idealized feminine woman elite leader” (Mavin and Grandy, 2016: 5). The UK may have its second woman Prime Minister but the media construction of her body moderates any threat of challenge to the established gendered status quo. The text, possibly unwittingly, affirms that May recognizes her bodily deportment is subject to judgemental gazes given her apparent anxiety “not to put a foot wrong”. As such using economies of visibility as an analytical lens allows us to surface how women political leaders are commodified and their bodies sold to consumers, “disempowering them through the regulating and policing of their bodies” (Banet-Weiser, 2015b: 66). This reflects how, in a postfeminist regime, individual success rests on women's own processes of self-management (McRobbie, 2004) and surfaces a restrictive femininity which is pre-feminist in its reference to an era that precedes middle class women's participation in the workforce. Associating May with a finishing-school positions her as infantilized; feminine, but not feminist, and tames her potential power as a symbol for more radical or threatening feminism. The discursive move to entwine May's leadership identity with her

father's occupation appears 'natural' and thus mediates her power and feminist threat as Prime Minister. As such this media construction highlights complex manifestations of a moderate feminism, in that women have equality, they are able to hold the ultimate UK political role, yet potential feminism is tempered through economies of visibility.

Sturgeon's leadership identity is also tied to a male figure, but an historical one associated with Scottish resistance to English rule.

“Legend – or rather Hollywood – has it that the Scottish knight William Wallace daubed himself head-to-toe in blue woad paint to defeat the English army at the Battle of Stirling Bridge in 1297. Centuries later, Nicola Sturgeon has gone one step further, arriving to greet her Southern nemesis Theresa May apparently dressed as the Scottish Saltire” (Vine, 2017a).

In comparing Sturgeon's clothing with the Scottish flag and a medieval knight, the text situates Sturgeon's leadership in the context of historical battles associated with violent masculinities. We interpret how she is constructed as an exceptional, entrepreneurial and successful individual, using her initiative and ready to take what is rightfully hers, thus a manifestation of postfeminism. However, the media constructs her in opposition and competition with the other woman. This arbitrates any 'real' threat she poses to the status quo via her leadership position and any potential collective action between women to progress feminism. The textual depiction of Sturgeon as a warrior continues the discourse perpetuated by existing English newspapers' and politicians' who use symbolically violent references to her where she is described as 'Lady Macbeth', 'a political dinosaur in boutique couture', 'Tartan Barmy', 'a liar and a traitor' and 'a treacherous Queen of Scots' (Robinson and Kerr, 2017). The discursive move to entwine Sturgeon's leadership identity with historical and mythical figures distances her threat of challenge

to broader contemporary gendered inequalities and represents her as an individuated female subject.

This dialectic exposes the attribution of leadership identities to Sturgeon and May that associate them with masculinist leadership models which tame potential feminism. Their power is intimately moderated; the femininity of the vicar's daughter, and the otherness of the warrior woman. This positioning, taken with the emphasis on their bodies, signposts how the women cannot lose femininity by enacting masculinity. The significance of femininity is reinforced as the media constructions distance the women leaders from feminist opportunities for collective action.

Audience Responses

Turning to audience responses to the *Daily Mail* constructions of the Sturgeon-May meeting we analysed on-line reporting of newspaper articles, twitter, radio and television news broadcasts and reporting on an ITV lunchtime television programme, where the *Daily Mail* piece was the opening story for discussion. We returned to UK newspapers (on-line versions) and analysed the *Daily Mail*, *Guardian* and *Telegraph*. Through an economies of visibility lens, where women are market commodities in the media, we are able to surface how discourses of moderate feminism travel. That is, in a circuit of media visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2015a) the discourse moves through various media and audience responses and in doing so provides space *for* feminism.

In counterbalance to Vine's initial *Daily Mail* report, the analysis identifies how the gendered media constructions of the 'Sturgeon-May' meeting circulate in ways which *provoked* feminism and further discourse, thus bolstering its characterisation as a discursive event. By this we mean that the Vine headline, story and photograph triggered, and in some cases incited, audience responses which reflect feminist principles i.e. they challenged sexism, called for equality. We noted earlier how Ruth Langsford's opening statement on the '*Loose Women*' television programme offered an opportunity for feminism, when she called out sexism in the Vine piece. This was quickly closed down by Gloria Hunniford's response which immediately brushed

feminism aside and normalized the sexism. While this was a lost opportunity, the exchange between the women was also a provocation of feminism within everyday public discourse.

Stronger rejoinders to the gendered constructions of the ‘Sturgeon-May’ meeting came from women and men politicians across political parties who were provoked into feminism. Members of Parliament responded vociferously. The gendered media constructions in the *Daily Mail* of such a noteworthy event led to the relegation of what was a significant and historical political meeting. The Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn was among the politicians and public figures to tweet a condemnation of the coverage as sexist.

“Its 2017. This sexism must be condemned to history. Shame on the *Daily Mail* (BBC News, 2017a)”.

Yvette Cooper MP also tweeted.

“It's 2017. Two women's decisions will determine if United Kingdom continues to exist. And front-page news is their lower limbs” (Malkin, 2017).

The response from the former leader of the Labour Party Ed Miliband was also via twitter.

“The 1950s called and asked for their headline back. #everydaysexism” (BBC News, 2017a).

Former Deputy Labour Leader Harriet Harman said on Twitter “Moronic! And we are in 2017!”. While Nicky Morgan a former Rt. Hon. Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women and Equalities, told BBC Radio 5 Live that the Mail's coverage was "deliberately provocative, and deliberately demeaning." Here Morgan is provoked into feminism yet reinforces postfeminism by locating how the Prime Minister should treat it as an individual and not a collective matter; "how the prime minister deals with it is entirely a matter for her." She then counterbalances this by calling out the inequalities of the media representations.

"You've got two very senior female politicians who are discussing weighty issues and this is what a national newspaper thinks is appropriate" (BBC News, 2017a).

Beyond the radio appearance, Nicky Morgan is also provoked into feminism on twitter.

"Seriously? Our two most senior female politicians are judged for their legs not what they said #appallingsexism" (BBC News, 2017a).

Members of the public were also provoked (i.e. motivated) into feminist action, calling out the sexist media constructions on Twitter, calling for this inequality to stop. Through economies of visibility we see how the commodification of women leaders' bodies demonstrates how gender is absorbed into the economy as well as how this triggers and mobilizes feminism. We argue that economies of visibility, while they moderate feminism as reflected in gendered media constructions, also offer space for affirmation of feminism within mainstream public discourse (Dean, 2010).

The *Guardian* itself opens up space for feminism through its headline of "The bigots are on the march – and with "Legs-it" the *Daily Mail* bears the flag" (Jones, 2017) and in a further article noted the number of complaints received about Vines' piece.

"...more than 300 people complained to press regulator Ipso over the coverage, including a double-page spread inside that focused on the two leaders' clothes and an article by Vine headlined "Finest weapons at their command? Those pins!"

Ipso said most of the complaints accused the Mail of discrimination, a clause of the editor's code that is meant to outlaw using "details of an individual's race, colour, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical or mental illness or disability... unless genuinely relevant to the story" (Martinson, 2017).

Vine appeared on the BBC's *World at One* programme (as reported online) to defend the *Daily Mail* front-page and said, "In the piece I don't just talk about the legs". In response, the

presenter Martha Kearney is provoked (i.e. incited) into calling out the sexism by challenging Vine's view with "No, you talk about the jackets too," then points out that while there was some serious news reporting "Legs-it dominated the front-page and two-thirds of the inside pages" (www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk). The discursive event emphasises how economies of visibility are embedded into contemporary culture and yet holds potential for feminism.

In response to feminist challenge to 'Legs-It' sexist media constructions, the *Daily Mail* responded to the criticism in a statement which said "For goodness sake, get a life!" A *Daily Mail* spokesperson trivialized the stark sexism; they played down the headline and narrative in the following comments.

[It was] "light-hearted" and was a sidebar alongside a "serious political story"... "Is there a rule that says political coverage must be dull or has a po-faced BBC and left-wing commentariat, so obsessed by the *Daily Mail*, lost all sense of humour... and proportion?" (BBC News, 2017a).

Here we interpret how, by framing gendered media constructions as "light-hearted" and any feminist audience as having "lost all sense of humour and proportion," needing to "get a life!", the "present can be marketed as post- rather than antifeminist" (Duffy et al., 2017: 261). The *Daily Mail* is positioned as "knowing better than their sexist predecessors... so that its (knowingly ironic) successor can be mobilized" (Duffy et al., 2017: 261). Vine on *World at One* commented "I'm perfectly happy to stand by what I wrote. I wasn't horrid about them. I didn't insult either of them" (Martinson, 2017). Thus equality has been won; gender is enough on its own - absorbed into the economy (Banet-Weiser, 2015b). Economies of visibility therefore moderate feminism and refute "crucial questions about how socially constructed, mass mediated ideals are internalized and made our own" (Gill, 2007: 154).

The day after the *Daily Mail* headline, Vine uses her regular weekly column to respond to feminist challenge and reaffirm a moderate feminism. She comments "If one really believes in equality, it has to cut both ways." Vine adds: "It's all the snowflakes still stuck in a rut of

Seventies-style feminism who need to catch up.” Reflecting a postfeminist sensibility, as a way of thinking about and perceiving gender and feminism (Gill, 2007), Vine reinforces her messages and emphasizes how bodies and appearance are embedded in our culture when referring to the ‘Legs-it’ case she says that the choice dresses which exposed their legs “was deliberate”.

“I’ve lived politics up close. I know how this game works. Those choices would not have been accidental. The kitten heels, the just-above-the-knee skirts and carefully selected jewelry. All that would have been planned meticulously... Pointing out that they were making the most of their best physical assets... is not sexism, it’s observation” (Vine in Ponsford, 2017).

Through a lens of economies of visibility, Vine’s assumptions demonstrate “how it is women (and girls) under neoliberalism who are compelled to not only produce the self (both as visible feminine subjects and as empowered and entrepreneurial actors) but also to be seen as crafting body and self in branded terms” (Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018: 18). This marks a profound shift away from objectification arguments that underpin most studies of women leaders’ representations; in a postfeminist age women leaders are now acknowledged for producing their own brand rather than being passive objects of the patriarchal gaze (Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018: 18). However, we see ambivalence in the responses from Sturgeon and May themselves to the gendered media constructions. Sturgeon clearly positions herself in feminist challenge to the commodification of women’s bodies and the inequalities communicated by media discourses. The *Guardian* reports how:

“Nicola Sturgeon accused the *Daily Mail* of taking Britain back to the 1970s after the tabloid featured a picture of her with Theresa May under the headline “Never mind Brexit, who won Legs-it!” following their summit on Monday.

The paper's leering front-page featuring Nicola Sturgeon and Theresa May is part of a wider attack on liberal values. We must be prepared to fight back.

Brexit may risk taking Britain back to the early 1970s, but there is no need for coverage of events to lead the way," Sturgeon's spokesperson added (Martinson, 2017).

The *Telegraph* ran the headline "Legs-it sexism row: Theresa May says it's a 'bit of fun' as *Daily Mail* tells critics to 'get a life'", and reports May's response.

[It was a] "bit of fun", telling the Wolverhampton Express and Star: "You will notice that I am wearing trousers today!

As a woman in politics throughout my whole career I have found that very often, what I wear - particularly my shoes - has been an issue that has been looked at rather closely by people.

Obviously what we do as politicians is what makes a difference to people's lives. I think that most people concentrate on what we do as politicians.

But if people want to have a bit of fun about how we dress, then so be it" (May in Horton, 2017).

May distances herself from feminism and airbrushes it from her narrative; a manifestation of moderate feminism. May acknowledges how she is commodified and indicates that she is well aware of how she is policed and evaluated on the basis of her body and appearance; the kitten heels are now part of her brand. Yet she fails to challenge the underpinning gendered structures and systems which produce economies of visibility. Like the *Daily Mail* she takes a "light hearted" approach to deflect feminism, positioning sexism in the past. In effect by associating sexist media constructions based on women's dress, with "a bit of fun" May dilutes her own leadership power.

Economies of Visibility as a Moderating Force on Feminism

We now consider what new understandings have been uncovered by drawing on economies of visibility as an analytical lens to critique a discursive event based on the ‘Sturgeon-May’ meeting reported in the *Daily Mail*. Utilising economies of visibility, the multimodal analysis surfaced the various ways in which women leaders are tied to their bodies. Economies of visibility are about individual girls and women and their subjectivities and in this case, women leaders and their bodies. Economies of visibility are gendered; “the *product* in the economy of visibility is the feminine body but women and girls are also the *buyers*; the *consumers* in this economy are also the products. These components are not discrete but rather inform and constitute each other” (Banet-Weiser, 2015b: 58). In the *Daily Mail* case the media ties women leaders to their bodies and constructs women leaders as hyper-visible. Yet the constructions also commodify their bodies in gendered ways e.g. sexualized/infantilized and warrior/vicar’s daughter which renders women invisible as leaders. What is uncovered in the media analysis is ‘Visible bodies – Invisible leaders’. It is this tension between woman-bodies-leader that “transforms this into an individual rather than a social or feminist problem” (Banet-Weiser, 2015: 62).

Through the analysis we demonstrate how, through ‘Visible bodies,’ femininity is insisted upon in the media. Women leaders in the media gaze cannot shed femininity; their bodies are served up as commodities for exchange, forever scrutinized and evaluated (Banet-Weiser, 2015b). Through economies of visibility we see how gender is absorbed into the economy and femininity is insisted upon for the market – but constructed as a “safe canvas” (Banet-Weiser, 2015a: 187) and in this case, through sexualizing, infantilizing and tying women leaders’ bodies to men.

We surface ‘Visible fragmentation between women’ by illustrating how the women leaders’ bodies are constructed in complex ways which set them up in opposition and competition with each other and with other women, while simultaneously constructing their leader identity in relation to men – father or historical warrior. That the original media constructions and subsequent rejoinders were by Vine, a woman journalist, highlights how female misogyny (Author, 2016), as sexist constructions of women by a woman, is made invisible in economies of visibility and subsumed in a postfeminist sensibility.

This fragmentation between women is also visible in those who consume the media constructions. For example, on *Loose Women*, Langford claims the women's credibility as elite leaders and offers space for potential feminist discussion. Hunniford however reinforces how normalized it is for women's bodies to be consumed in the workplace, closing down any space for feminism. This fragmentation illustrates how gender and women's bodies are absorbed into an economy of visibility so that sexism and feminism are rendered invisible. Drawing upon economies of visibility enabled us to surface complexities attached to women's public response to some feminist norms (e.g., women in elite positions of power).

The analysis also demonstrates how women leaders themselves engage in their commodification and we reveal a conscious 'Visible branding' e.g. Theresa May's kitten heels. Women are required under neoliberal logics to present as empowered, capable and entrepreneurial (Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018) so that women become "particular kinds of economic subjects" (Banet-Weiser, 2015b: 59). In this case the women leaders self-regulate and self-manage to create an individual brand. However, despite working on her brand, May is constructed as enacting "respectable business femininity" (Mavin and Grandy, 2016: 5) as a means of establishing respectability as an elite leader *and* idealized feminine woman. As a "Can-Do" woman, Theresa May, in her response to the media furore, acknowledges her context of visibility and intense surveillance; "a practice of looking that traces their every move to see if it is on the path to Can-Do or At-Risk" (Banet-Weiser, 2015b: 57). Viewed through economies of visibility this practice involves the individual woman as an agent for change, with the burden of confidence on her body, rather than addressing structural inequalities that position her out of place as a leader. The individual women leaders' bodies lend themselves to commodification because they are so often expressed and understood within a postfeminist sensibility and context of capitalist marketability (Banet-Weiser, 2015b).

Through economies of visibility we illuminate how the commodification of women leaders' bodies dilutes their power as leaders and diffuses and constrains potential feminism in elite positions. The women leaders' bodies deflect from their credibility and competence as

leaders. This tames their power by subjecting them to judgements on their appearance by the audiences' gaze and serves to remind women that even those who have achieved perceived equality must succumb to tightly subscribed gendered norms about their leadership appearance. That the two women leaders have achieved perceived equality with men; are at the top of their organizational hierarchies and are making political history through their actions and decisions, is rendered invisible.

We understand the *Daily Mail* media representations as explicitly sexist - based on two women wearing skirts. That this is seen as acceptable, "light hearted" or "a bit of fun" by some (e.g. *Daily Mail*) and that women's bodies are fair game for sexism based on an equality rationale (e.g. Vine), reflects postfeminist assumptions that inequalities have been overcome. This is reinforced by the fact that the two women hold the most important UK political roles. Thus there is no need for feminism – this is a postfeminist age. The media constructions that circulate and comprise a discursive event almost erase women leaders' more overt feminist opportunity for working collectively to challenge systematic discrimination (Banet-Weiser, 2015b). Within economies of visibility the dialectical media representations of the women leaders becomes a moderating force on feminism. The sexualisation/infantilization of the leaders corresponds to a postfeminist sensibility that regards women's bodies as available for attention and criticism and femininity is insisted upon. A focus on their bodies renders them feminine, and moderates their feminism. In the warrior/vicar's daughter dialectic we observe a moderation of women's leadership that ties them to masculinist leadership norms. Women can only attain leadership positions if they are sponsored by a senior man or take on masculine characteristics and even then, they have to retain femininity. The commodification of women leaders' bodies also produces fragmentation between women which adds complexity to how economies of visibility moderate the potential for collective action and feminism.

Politicizing Economies of Visibility

We next turn to Dean's (2010) call for research into how feminism can be established in media discourses. Banet-Weiser (2015b) reflects on how she views shifts from the *politics* of visibility to *economies* of visibility in thinking about feminism as "not the replacement of one context with another, but rather one that overlaps, with spaces of ambivalence in between" (Banet-Weiser, 2015: 55). The politics of visibility in this respect describes the process of making visible a political category which has been marginalized in the media, law, policy etc. such as gender. This visibility takes on political valence where politics is a descriptor of the practices of visibility – as struggle – which will hopefully result in political change. We focus here on a space we have uncovered in the commodification and consumption of women's bodies in the media. In this space we identify an entanglement of *politics* and *economies* of visibility, surfaced through competing and incommensurable voices. In our analysis we illustrate how discourse circulates through various media and audiences who, in consuming and confronting economies of visibility, are provoked into politics, challenging the commodification of women's bodies as sexist. This space of *politicizing economies of visibility* is where politics and economies of visibility converge in certain ways to produce a place for feminism within a public domain.

Politicizing economies of visibility is a theoretical and empirical development of Dean's (2010: 397) "double movement" found in two newspapers which might have seemed at odds with each other where an alternative moderate feminism is located. In this current analysis we have highlighted some of ways in which audiences, in a space of politicizing economies of visibility, voice their struggles with the sexist and inequitable media construction of women political leaders e.g. members of the public, Members of Parliament, other journalists and *The Guardian*. In this space there is potential for challenging the way that economies of visibility moderate feminism and for asking "crucial questions about how socially constructed, mass mediated ideals are internalized and made our own" (Gill, 2007: 154).

Banet-Weiser (2015a) argues that the demand for visibility as something that is *not* coupled with a political project is becoming more paramount. "The shift in an economy of visibility is from *liberation to empowerment* but in a postfeminist context, where the historical feminist goals of

liberation have transformed to empowerment because ostensibly women and girls have been liberated” Banet-Weiser (2015b: 69). The political ramifications of this (transformation) are not part of feminist politics currently (Banet-Weiser, 2015b) and women continue to be “disempowered through the regulating and policing of their bodies” (Banet-Weiser, 2015b: 66). It is important to attend to the discourses and practices that provide logic for how individual entrepreneurialism is validated and has political ramifications for women’s subjectivities. The feminist voices found in a space of *politicizing economies of visibility* offer hope of critiquing the cultural conditions that have made it important for women to demand visibility in the first place e.g. “not enough representation; representation that is highly stereotypical; institutionalized sexism – those which have shifted in an age of postfeminism and advanced capitalism so that demand looks different” (Banet-Weiser, 2015b: 69). While we have highlighted how economies of visibility are a moderating force on feminism, there are opportunities for alternative feminisms where “feminism can and does exist in mainstream public discourse in a manner that is substantial rather than merely spectral” (Dean, 2010: 363) and which reconnect with the political project of women’s equality.

CONCLUSION

Women leaders’ bodies are an exhibition and commodity ripe for evaluation and scrutiny. Through a multimodal media analysis of UK women political leaders, we offer new understandings of economies of visibility as a moderator of feminism. Using economies of visibility as an analytical lens allowed us to surface how these women political leaders are commodified and their bodies sold to consumers. We offer the various ways in which women leaders can be tied to their bodies: ‘Visible bodies – Invisible leaders’; ‘Visible bodies – Femininity is insisted upon’; Visible branding by women leaders’; ‘Visible fragmentation between women’; ‘Female Misogyny is Invisible’; ‘Feminism is Invisible’ and ‘Sexism is Invisible.’ Analysis of audience responses showed how an insistence on femininity through appearance also has power to disrupt through arousal of audible and commanding feminist voices in public discourse. We contribute *politicizing*

economies of visibility as a possible new modality of feminist politics, offering a space where feminism can be affirmed, encouraged and progressed. Utilizing media, such as the *Daily Mail* case, in organisational training and development interventions would be a useful way to elicit discussion about and raise awareness to economies of visibility and how women are portrayed in sexist ways in the media.

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