

Postfeminism, consumption and activewear: Examining women consumers' relationship with the postfeminine ideal

Journal of Consumer Culture

2022, Vol. 0(0) 1–20

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DOI: 10.1177/14695405221129826

journals.sagepub.com/home/joc



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Abstract

Activewear (clothing designed specifically for fitness and functional movement) has become a hugely popular fashion style for women around the world. Scholars have critiqued the activewear industry for reproducing postfeminist and neoliberal discourses, with advertising and marketing primarily featuring heteronormative women's bodies (thin, toned, white, young), with a strong emphasis on consumption and choice. In this article, we contribute to the literature on activewear and feminist consumption practices to examine how women consumers of activewear clothing understand and respond to postfeminist discourses inherent in the industry. In so doing, we speak to how the often-critiqued idealised femininity is 'taken-up' and interrogated by women activewear consumers. Specifically, we draw upon focus groups and interviews conducted with women from New Zealand, examining how some women are complicit in the production of particular femininities, while others are critical of the industry partaking in an array of everyday 'acts of resistance' against (and within) the industry. We conclude with a brief discussion of some of the women-led changes occurring within the activewear market. Ultimately, this article highlights the complexities and attitudes of some women activewear consumers and their contribution (and challenges) to the production of femininity within society.

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Keywords

Activewear, postfeminism, neoliberalism, consumption, femininity

From lipstick to underwear to tanning products, everyday millions of women are bombarded with advertising and messaging promoting the newest products they can purchase which claim to help them become more beautiful, thinner, stronger and 'empowered'. Many feminist scholars have critiqued these popular discourses for their postfeminist and neoliberal rhetoric where feminist principles of choice and empowerment are commodified and co-opted for capitalistic gains and where femininity, success, and beauty are linked to consumption practices (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Gill and Schaaf, 2011b; McRobbie, 2009, 2020). Simultaneously, these scholars have emphasised how advertising and popular culture have not only promoted the postfeminist subject as one that is highly individualised, disciplined and consumer-oriented, but also one that is young, white, middle-class, and embodies a narrow version of heteronormative femininity. One of the most recent commercial sectors that has contributed to the popularisation of this postfeminine neoliberal subject has been the activewear industry.

Activewear has been understood in various ways, but, in general, we define activewear as casual clothing designed with an intent for physical activity. The popularity of activewear as both gym and everyday functional and comfortable clothing for women has grown exponentially in the past 10 years resulting in an international industry that is expected to grow to upwards of 439 billion USD by the end of 2026 (Shahbandeh, 2021). As an industry primarily targeting women, critical analyses of activewear have acknowledged its role in the construction of the feminine ideal, highlighting how the clothing has become 'a visual image of fashionable female modernity' that works to intensify the 'symbolic value of an active body' (Horton et al., 2016: 191). Thus, the phenomenon represents another example of the ways in which clothing plays an important role in the production of idealised femininity and standards for women's physically active bodies (Entwistle, 2000; Fuller, 2021; Warner, 2006). Recognising the important links between activewear with gender, fitness, wellness, and consumption, an emerging body of literature is examining this phenomenon from a multitude of perspectives (Brice and Thorpe, 2021b; Hwang and Kim, 2020; Luna Mora and Berry, 2021; Rothwell, 2023).

In this article, we contribute to this growing body of literature, as well as to scholarship on feminist consumption, by looking towards the ways in which women consumers are understanding and responding to the singular postfeminine ideal presented across the activewear industry. We begin by explaining the conceptual framing of the research. Following this, we outline our methodology which included conducting focus groups and interviews with women from New Zealand (hereafter referred to as Aotearoa, the Māori/Indigenous word for New Zealand). Our findings, described in the following substantive section of the article, reveal how some participants in the research conformed to particular ideals within the industry, while others were critical consumers often taking measures to negotiate and challenge the singular presentation of femininity. As well as revealing how our participants interacted with the postfeminine ideal manifested by the activewear

industry, we also identify changes within the industry as a result of growing criticisms of the lack of diversity of body shapes, sizes, and identities. In exploring how the often-critiqued idealised femininity is ‘taken-up’ and interrogated by female activewear consumers, we contribute to scholarship on feminist consumption interrogating post-feminism and neoliberalism, as well as research into women’s fitness and clothing practices.

Conceptual framing and literature review

Building upon a strong foundation of cultural studies (Storey, 1999) and feminist scholarship on consumption (McRobbie, 1994; Nava, 1992), leading feminist cultural studies scholars, such as Angela McRobbie, Rosalind Gill, Christina Scharff, Sarah Banet-Weiser, and Catherine Rottenberg, have expanded understandings of women’s consumption of diverse media (i.e. beauty magazines, television, social media) and products. In so doing, they have contributed a range of feminist concepts and sensibilities, such as postfeminism (Gill and Schaaf, 2011b; McRobbie, 2009), popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018) and neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2014). Within this scholarship, postfeminism has been understood in varying ways (e.g. a sensibility, a doing/undoing of feminism, aftermath of feminism) (Gill and Schaaf, 2011a). Despite varying approaches, a common focus is how presentations of feminism are continuing to change in the context of neoliberalism. In particular, the literature documents continuities and shifts in consumption, individualism, choice, empowerment, and self-branding and entrepreneurialism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). Scholars across different disciplines have critically engaged and applied these ideas in a range of contexts, including education (Ringrose, 2012), literature (Harzewski, 2011; Missler, 2016), Muslim women’s studies (Husain, 2020; Muhammad and Awan, 2017; Peterson, 2016), queer studies (Gerhard, 2005; McKenna, 2002), and sport and fitness practices (Brice and Andrews, 2019; Glapka, 2022; Toffoletti et al., 2018).

Importantly for this research, across postfeminist and neoliberal discourses, there is a strong emphasis on the role of consumption. As Gill (2021) describes, ‘whether it is characterized as post-feminism, popular feminism or neoliberal feminism, the broad contours of the sensibility are clearly capitalism friendly rather than critical, and easily assimilable into corporate life’ (p. 11). These frameworks provide a way to think about how popular culture, capitalism, and the media work to commodify feminist ideals through the figure of the woman as the empowered consumer. Consumption becomes a practice of the self where women are ‘required to constantly labour on and transform [themselves] through the consumption of products and services’ (Dutta, 2021: 2). Thus, many scholars analysing the beauty and fitness industries have drawn upon postfeminism and neoliberalism to analyse how companies are using ideas of self-transformation, individuality, and choice to gain profit (Dutta, 2021; Drake and Radford, 2021; Elias et al., 2017; Heywood, 2007; Prins and Wellman, 2021).

This focus on consumption also puts pressure on women to continuously self-discipline and self-manage their appearance and bodies. While there is a long history of scholars exploring women’s surveillance and self-disciplinary bodily practices

(Luna Mora and Berry, 2021; Markula, 2006; Winch, 2015), Riley et al. (2016) emphasises the increased role of *peer* (women to women) surveillance in contemporary societies. They describe this as the *postfeminist gaze*, ‘characterised by a judgmental gaze that foregrounds women and which is consumption oriented [and] prioritised over a male gaze’ (p. 104). It involves blurring object and subject where women are required to understand their value through their ability to ‘work on their bodies and to produce themselves into recognised (hetero)normative, consumer-oriented definitions of beauty as judged by other women’ (p. 194). An important aspect of the postfeminist gaze is the focus on consumption where women judge other women based upon their ability to consume products that enable them to conform to hyper-feminine femininity. This results in one’s appearance becoming the ‘vehicle to female recognition and validation’ (p. 108), and on the flip side, also disapproval and rejection when women are unable or unwilling to conform to such consumer driven ideals. Research has shown how this ‘postfeminist gaze’, as well as the broader ideas within postfeminism and neoliberalism, are exemplified in the activewear industry (Brice and Thorpe, 2021a; Lavrence and Lozanski, 2014; Nash, 2016; Posbergh et al., 2022). In particular, activewear clothing has been described by some as a ‘tracking device on the yogic body’ (Luna Mora and Berry, 2021: 417) showing the bumps, the curves, and the fat on a body and providing an avenue for women to judge other women’s attempts to modify and transform their physique.

Other scholars have analysed the postfeminist and neoliberal rhetoric across activewear companies’ advertising. For example, Nash (2016) focuses on the Australian-based fitness fashion company, Lorna Jane (LJ). Conducting a discourse analysis of the company’s Web site, Nash (2016) looks at the ways in which empowerment, choice, ‘body love,’ and ‘holistic’ health are used as key themes to attract women consumers. In line with a postfeminist sensibility, LJ markets their brand and their brand community as ‘empowering’ for all women, encouraging them to purchase products to maintain a ‘healthy’ and ‘active’ lifestyle. In so doing, Nash (2016) argues that LJ does not just sell clothing, but ‘independence, power, and fun’ (p. 227) and where consuming LJ clothing is ‘positioned as an investment in the self—a “responsible” action [and] commitment to developing and maintaining a “healthy” body’ (p. 227).

Similarly, Lavrence and Lozanski (2014) analyse lululemon – a Canadian-based transnational leader in the activewear industry – and how their branding sits at the intersection of consumerism, empowerment, and neoliberalism, reinforcing discourses of choice and self-care. Interestingly, they examine how lululemon has capitalised upon neoliberal anxieties around the body by promoting a brand that centres on self-improvement, wellbeing, health, and spirituality. The authors summarise that lululemon’s branding strategy shows ‘how the quests for self-fulfilment and consumption are mutually reinforcing and illustrates how discourses of choice and self-care reiterate the responsibilised self that is at the core of contemporary neoliberal societies’ (p. 91).

Scholars interested in consumption and popular culture have also questioned the ways in which postfeminism and neoliberalism have perpetuated a singular ideal of femininity resulting in class, age, and racial exclusions (Butler, 2013; Dutta, 2021; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2020). Postfeminism and neoliberalism are premised on an ideology that purports gender equality has been achieved as evidenced by the endless choices for

women. However, this fails to acknowledge the various overlapping systems of oppression different women face and the systemic inequalities that exist within society. It is only particular women in society who have the opportunity and privilege to access choice, whether that be through their consumer behaviours, career opportunities, and/or education. Thus, the postfeminist-neoliberal subject is embedded within systems of privilege excluding those that may face discrimination based on race/ethnicity, sexuality, age, or class. Hence, primarily the postfeminist subject is one that is white, young, cisgender, and embodies heterosexuality (Dutta, 2021; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2020).

Such exclusionary practices have been seen across the fitness industry where magazines, social media, fitness manuals, exercise regimes, and broader fitness discourses work as ‘increasingly important tool[s] for shaping the body into a narrowly defined, singular feminine ideal’ (Markula and Kennedy, 2011: 2). This has been true in the activewear sector, as well, which not only promotes ideals of empowerment, choice, and freedom in line with postfeminist values (Horton et al., 2016; Nash, 2016; Posbergh et al., 2022), but also primarily features ‘the white middle-class (heterosexual) female body’ (Nash, 2016: 224). For example, in their analysis of the Instagram accounts of lululemon and Aloyoga, Luna Mora and Berry (2021) show how the company mainly posts images of White, youthful, slim yoga models which become associated ‘with higher and better morals’ (p. 406). Beyond academic literature, the popular press has critiqued lululemon for only catering to particular women, with some describing the brand as an ‘elite fitness status symbol for the skinny and wealthy set’ (Wakeman, 2013). Indeed, many prominent international activewear companies (e.g. lululemon and Lorna Jane) are well known for their premium price of clothing with leggings often selling for over 80USD (Horton et al., 2016; Lipson et al., 2020). Scholars have also examined the exclusionary and discriminatory practices of the activewear industry against women of colour (Azzarito, 2009; Malin, 2021), veiled Muslim women (Hwang and Kim, 2020), women in some Arab countries (Saied and Creedon, 2021), and large, ‘fat’, or plus-sized women (Hauff and Green, 2021).

Our focus on women’s activewear consumption practices draws inspiration from a longer history of feminist scholarship examining the complex relationship between culture, consumption, and subjectivity (Brown, 1990; De Waal Malefyt and McCabe, 2020; Hermes, 1995; McCabe et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2014). Much of this scholarship has shown that women are not ‘passive dupes’ who simply uncritically absorb media/advertising discourses, but experience and negotiate tensions and critical understandings. Recently, feminist scholars have explored the ways in which women consumers interact more specifically with the postfeminine and neoliberal discourses within the beauty and fashion industries. A prominent focus within this particular research has been on how women and girls construct their own postfeminine, neoliberal subjectivities through the use of fashion, within online digital spaces and/or consumption practices (Dobson, 2015; Dosekun, 2017; Jackson et al., 2012). However, to date, less research has considered how women consumers understand, negotiate, and *critically* engage with postfeminist and neoliberal marketing devices. Therefore, in this article we contribute to both research on the activewear phenomenon and expand understandings of postfeminine and neoliberalism in consumption research to focus on how the singular postfeminine subject

portrayed across the activewear industry ‘gets inside’ (Gill, 2008: 433) the consumer. and its impact on women’s consumption behaviour.

Methodology

In order to understand women’s consumption practices, we draw upon focus groups, interviews, and photo diaries. Both the focus groups and interviews were conducted with the same group of women (focus groups first, followed by interviews for those women who were interested). With the aim of understanding how different women experience activewear, we recruited participants widely with few limits on participant requirements, using criterion-based and snowball sampling (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). The three requirements for participants were: (1) Self-identify as a woman; (2) at least 18 years old; and (3) are active consumers of activewear, owning at least five pieces of activewear clothing. Fliers were distributed across various fitness centres and cafes across a large city in the North Island of Aotearoa, in addition to contacting sporting groups/clubs across the city. Overall, we recruited 35 participants (21–63 years old, average age of 37) and conducted five focus groups. From the 35 women who participated in the focus groups, 18 self-identified as Pākehā (New Zealander of European Descent), four as Australian, three as Māori/Pākehā, three as European, two as Middle-Eastern, two as Pasifika/Pākehā, one as Asian, one as American, and one did not report.

The first ‘stage’ of data collection consisted of conducting focus groups. Each of the five focus groups had between five to 10 women and lasted approximately 60–75 min. During each session, the women were asked key questions about their observations of activewear in Aotearoa. This resulted in discussions around similar topics across the groups, such as popular activewear brands, the women participants saw wearing it, the places people wore activewear, and participants’ definitions of activewear. Participants were then asked if they would like to continue with future stages of the project, including a semi-structured interview and photo diary.

In total, 22 women agreed to be interviewed. Prior to the individual interview, participants were asked to complete a photo diary for 2 weeks. Participants had the option to take selfies of themselves in activewear, screenshots of activewear on social media/ advertisements, or to take photos of just their activewear clothing on a daily basis. Many women chose to do a combination of all three approaches, with participants’ photo diaries ranging from containing seven to 31 photos with an average of 13. The photo diaries were then brought and used as prompts in the interviews. All interviews were conducted by the lead author, lasting between 40 and 60 min at a (quiet) location of the participants choosing (e.g. university office, participant’s workplace). A semi-structured interview style was used which allowed for both a general sense of uniformity across all interviews (similar topics and question themes) and enough flexibility and space for a more free-flowing dialogue (Atkinson, 2012) to explore different topics with each woman. Importantly for this article, approximately a quarter of the interview questions were concerned with women’s consumption behaviours: their brand preferences, what attributes in clothing they looked for, why they shopped at particular places and their experiences in

those stores, the importance of social media on their consumption practices, the importance of price and quality, and how they felt about the industry as a whole.

All the focus groups and the interviews were transcribed and the transcripts were sent to participants for approval. From there, a reflexive thematic analysis was conducted based upon [Braun and Clarke's \(2021\)](#) framework. Per their suggestions, the analysis began with the first author familiarising herself with the data by reading through all the transcripts. From here, she began initial coding, particularly looking for ideas around women's consumption behaviour and discussions around femininity within the activewear industry. Once the initial coding had been completed, the authors began to cluster similar codes and ideas, eventually developing them into general themes across the data set. While we followed this general process, [Braun and Clarke \(2021\)](#) emphasise the flexibility and fluidity of a reflexive thematic analysis. For us, this flexibility allowed our analysis to be deductive in nature, while also shaped by feminist cultural studies research on consumption, particularly understandings of postfeminism and neoliberalism. This flexible approach also meant we were able to bring together multiple data sources, exploring themes across the focus groups, individual interviews, and the photo diaries. Furthermore, as feminist scholars who are critical of the activewear industry, but also continue to consume (in a range of way) some of its products, our analysis was shaped by our ongoing conversations about the activewear phenomenon.

Women's perspectives on activewear and fit femininity:

Buying in, pushing back and feminist alternatives

In this section, we analyse the ways in which our participants both conformed to particular feminine ideals popularised in the activewear industry, as well as the specific practices and tactics they used that resisted and challenged prominent discourses. We then offer examples of women's responses to critiques of the activewear industry.

The feminine ideal and the postfeminist gaze

In various ways, many of our participants idealised the thin/toned, cisgender singular understanding of postfemininity popularised across the activewear and fitness industries. Some of our participants discussed how they purchased and wore clothing to conform to this fit feminine ideal. For example, Lana (36 years old, Pākehā) described how she only bought shorts that made her legs look thinner and slimmer. As she said when discussing pants that she would buy, 'they feel firm, in control and fitted and slim...if they hold everything in and come up high enough, I feel quite slim.' Similarly, Tara (44 years old, Pākehā) discussed purchasing compression clothing because that 'stuff will hold you in more...you feel more fit in that.' There was a focus on purchasing clothing that would hold in fat, flab, and rolls, providing a 'thinner' and more toned appearance. In line with postfeminism and neoliberalism, the participants chose and consumed products which they felt enabled them to transform their bodies into 'acceptable' shapes and conform to dominant ideologies of (cis white) women's bodies.

While some women purchased clothing to make them feel ‘fitter’ and leaner, we more frequently noted the ways in which this ideal was popularised through participants commenting on other women’s bodies. In particular, there were ideas around who can/should be wearing tight-fitting activewear, often pointing to the thin-toned bodies as those who ‘looked good’. For example, Katherine (31 years old, European) would often take photos of advertising she saw in her Instagram and Facebook feeds, with comments underneath around how the outfits would only ‘look good’ on particular bodies. The idea that only particular bodies – thin, toned and young – could and should wear activewear was also discussed when participants spoke of activewear being worn by other women. While many saw activewear on a range of bodies in public, some of the participants critiqued body sizes and shapes that they felt did not adequately conform to the idealised form. This was particularly true for discussions around crop-tops and the need to have a thin stomach when showing the midriff. Hannah (50 years old, Pākehā) stated, ‘I mean just people just wearing casual clothes and girls wearing casual clothes and everything is hanging out, I think they’re asking to be judged basically. Why are they doing that?’ Similarly, Dana (34 years old, Middle-Eastern) talked about how she did not like seeing bigger women’s stomachs in activewear: ‘If you have a big tummy... you can wear something loose to cover it up until you get a bit in shape... It’s not nice to show that. It’s quite bothering seeing all those layers like above each other.’ Hence, many participants not only internalised the singular feminine ideals setting particular standards for their own bodies, but also placed these standards and ideals on other women.

As discussed, research has shown how postfeminism can lead to increased surveillance of women’s own bodies and of other women resulting in the development of the ‘postfeminist gaze’ (McRobbie, 2009; Riley et al., 2016; Ringrose and Coleman, 2013). In our research, participants exhibited such behaviour and we saw how this peer surveillance was operating across the industry and women’s experiences with activewear. Many of our participants not only judged their own bodies and sought to purchase clothing that would enable them to embody a particular form of femininity, but criticised the bodies of others. Much of this judgement was associated with the activewear clothing women purchased and the ‘poor’ and ‘inappropriate’ choices these women made (i.e. purchasing clothing that was too tight and/or revealing). In line with research on the ‘postfeminist gaze,’ men’s ideas and opinions were absent from this discussion and rather, it was women who judged other women’s bodies and consumption choices. Thus, here our participants were employing a ‘postfeminist gaze’, (re)enforcing a woman’s responsibility in this postfeminine era to make ‘appropriate’ consumption choices that help craft their appearance to conform to particular feminine ideals. Those who make poor consumption choices are thus seen as ‘failing’ to conform to postfeminist discourses, and this was a fear that some of our participants internalised in their own clothing consumption practices.

Critical consumption and everyday ‘resistance’

Whereas some of the participants idealised particular forms of femininity, others were critical of the industry and the limited representations of femininity available to women. Across the interviews and focus groups, different women voiced their frustrations and

concerns with the singular postfemininity popularised, particularly regarding its heteronormativity and its lack of racial and body diversity. Speaking as a queer woman, Megan (54 years old, Pākehā) discussed her frustration with activewear stores saying:

I think they're a bit limited, like if you go into a store, it's very binary so these are the women's things and these are the men's things...it reinforces that identity whereas I'm always looking for something that is more androgynous or gender queer and there is just nothing really that comes in between, hyper-fem or masculine. I find that really annoying.

Similarly, Shana (25 years old, Asian) described how she was frustrated with many activewear companies, like lululemon, because 'they shouldn't always portray female activewear as one certain type' and discussed how she and her 'tomboy' friends would often purchase clothing from the men's section. Thus, Shana alludes to this clearly demarcated binary within the activewear industry that functions to promote hegemonic notions of femininity and masculinity.

Interestingly, Janice (25 years old, Pākehā) discussed how, although she feels comfortable in activewear clothing and only shopped in the women's section, she understands her comfort as a result of her fitting into a particular form of femininity. In her own words, activewear is 'designed for binary women and men, and my body shape.' Other participants echoed this understanding. For example, Lily (29 years old, Australian) described how she did not often receive criticism or feel uncomfortable in activewear because, 'I do feel I look quite "normal" in activewear. I don't buck the trend of the kind of person who would wear activewear.' While Janice and Lily were aware of the status their body size and race provided them in wearing and buying activewear, some participants of Māori and Pasifika descent talked about not feeling included in various aspects of the industry. For example, Brenda (32 years old, Māori/Pākehā) discussed how she would never shop at a lululemon 'because they have a stereotype of a person that wears their clothing... I would never even look at their stuff because I know it's for a particular type of person or a particular body type.' She went on to describe how there are times when 'we [Aotearoa] get American ads like the big sporting brands and stuff. It's that right height, skinny, yeah, fair woman.' She took notice and often felt excluded or ignored by some of the larger US and Canadian brands that touted their versions of white, North American femininity. The global activewear industry has been dominated by North American companies, and some of our participants preferred companies that offered more Aotearoa-specific versions of femininity.

In addition to recognising the whiteness and heteronormative nature of the industry, many participants commented on the lack of body diversity, with advertisements primarily having thin, young women. Nina (63 years old, Pākehā) said:

When you look at images of women that are often in advertisements in activewear things that are intended to be, if you buy this, you look like that. The women have no thighs, and tight butts and they're all about 12 [expressed with exaggeration].

Georgia (55 years old, Australian) echoed Nina, commented, 'I still think that a lot of activewear is designed for very thin people and that there isn't a lot of selection for people who don't like to wear tights or clingy stuff.' Interestingly, even when companies did use plus-size models, some of the participants discussed how they still embody a particular curvy shape. As Lily said, 'You have to be really hour glass looking, big hips and big boobs and being really sexy. In another stereotypical way, it's not really breaking the mould....it seems to be a little bit of superficial engagement with diversity.' Thus, participants were aware of the singular form of femininity being promoted across the activewear industry and found this problematic in its heteronormativity and hyper-heterosexuality ('big hips, big boobs, really sexy').

In response to such critiques, some of the participants developed subtle strategies where they attempted to use their purchasing power and consumption choices to find alternatives. One tactic was to purchase only from local, Aotearoa-owned companies that featured Aotearoa models or from companies/stores who catered to all women. For example, Brenda purchased from Aotearoa-owned and operated stores such as Rebel Sport, because 'even though I know they use athletes they don't, to me, perceive like you've got to be like this person. To me I think they just use familiar faces.' She continued that she appreciated Rebel Sport using Aotearoa athletes in their advertisements because, 'you know that person, you can relate to that person.' In such actions, Brenda was prioritising local representations of fit femininity over North American discourses that did not align well with her. In a different vein, in the focus group, Rita (56 years old, Pākehā) discussed how she primarily purchased clothing from The Warehouse (founded by New Zealander Sir Stephen Tindall and the largest general merchandise retailer in the country) because 'they've got really good women's clothing as well and up to large sizing.' In her individual interview, she discussed how The Warehouse now has 'bigger sizes whereas before you were struggling to get anything over a 16 [12 in USA].' As someone who had lost a significant amount of weight and worked in the sporting sector, she was adamant supporting stores that allowed activewear to be accessible to all women regardless of body shape or financial status.

Along with being critical consumers, other participants employed a tactic of either simply making their own activewear or purchasing secondhand clothing from local opportunity/charity shops as everyday resistance to large transnational activewear companies. Sherry (24 years old, Pākehā) described a range of reasons for buying secondhand including reducing the environmental impact of her consumption choices and cost, but also as a way to push back against particular representations of women in the industry and what she sees as exorbitant pricing on particular brand's clothing. In her own words, buying secondhand is 'my way of putting my middle finger to that [expensive clothing, industry standards].' In response to the singularity of activewear, Karlie (34 years old, Pākehā) designed the pattern and sewed her own leggings. In discussing the reasons that she made her own clothes, Karlie said, 'I wanted something that was a point of difference. I like being creative so that was just a creative outlet.' While not necessarily resisting capitalist tendencies or the heteronormativity in the industry, Karlie's actions were shaped by a conscious desire not to conform to activewear appearance standards.

Despite important scholarship highlighting the exploitation and human rights abuses experienced by women working in fashion and sportswear sweatshops in the Global South (Mezzadri, 2016; Clancy, 2001), within our research, none of the participants explicitly discussed fair trade or the impact workers' rights had on their purchasing behaviour. However, many of the women did discuss the importance of the environment. For example, in talking about both her activewear and broader beauty purchases (e.g. dying her hair, buying 'dressy' clothing), Kae (52 years old, Pākehā) described how she has begun to reduce how much activewear she purchases and from what stores as a way to reduce her environmental impact. As she stated, 'It's nice to have new stuff all the time but I don't know how sustainable that is... I do feel like I'm making a difference if I choose not to consume all of these cheap, mass produced things'. Other women discussed the importance of clothing being sustainably made and using more sustainable materials (i.e. cotton) in their activewear purchasing choices. Therefore, for our participants there was more emphasis on environmental sustainability than on workers' or human rights (Brice and Thorpe, 2021b).

Many scholars have explored the political power of consumers and how politics and social justice issues have become important factors affecting consumers' purchasing decisions (Micheletti and Stolle, 2008; McRobbie, 1994; Nava, 1992). Certainly, across many critiques that draw on postfeminism and neoliberalism, feminist researchers have shown how one's political agency is redirected away from collective action and towards individualised consumer choices. In writing about the 'can-do' attitude and young female consumers, Harris (2004) describes how in this era, 'consumption has come to stand in as a sign both of successfully secured social rights and of civic power' (p. 163). Similarly, Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee (2012) describe this form of consumption as 'commodity activism' where one's consumer choices become a form of political engagement. Although commodity activism can be understood as a form of corporate appropriation to secure larger products, Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee (2012) also suggest it may illuminate 'cultural innovations that bear critically, if in surprising ways, on modes of dominance and resistance within changing social and political landscapes' (p. 3). Therefore, they suggest commodity activism not be thought of just in terms of binaries (marketing strategy or social activism), but rather that it can function in multiple ways.

For our participants, they were still, in many ways, supporting an industry that continues to perpetuate singular feminine standards, and engaged in everyday forms of resistance through their consumption behaviours. However, they were also highly critical of the activewear industry, and worked within their means to offer alternatives (i.e. purchasing at local, Aotearoa-owned stores; buying secondhand; making their own clothes) to a powerful multi-billion-dollar industry. While much activewear research has tended to critique the postfeminine ideal perpetuated within the industry and emphasised its omnipresence, our participants' critiques and resistance add a further dimension to such narratives. They were not 'duped' into conforming to particular feminine ideals but rather enacted subtle forms of 'resistance' through their daily activities. The women carefully thought through their decisions and engaged in various actions that they believed could impact the representation of gender and femininity in the industry. Hence, there was not a uni-directional relationship of postfeminist ideals acting on consumers, but

rather there was a pull and push between consumer-producer. Our participants' consumption behaviour was also impacted by a host of factors besides advertising and activewear discourses: their own body shape, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality. Such factors, in subtle ways, affected how our participants interacted with and associated with the postfeminine neoliberal ideal. Thus, our participants' understandings and responses to the postfeminine ideal within the activewear industry showcase the complex relationship between consumer-producer, as well as highlighting various factors that impact such relationships.

Expanding definitions of fit femininity

Our participants discussed the ways in which they are using their consumption choices to subtly resist dominant ideologies within the activewear industry. Other women across the world have taken more significant steps towards change, with some speaking out publicly to challenge discourses within the activewear industry and how women's activewear clad bodies are policed and regulated in different public spaces (i.e. schools) (Alesali and Zdanowicz, 2019; Carey, 2018). Others have responded by starting their own activewear companies. Many of these women entrepreneurs described how they started their businesses specifically because they were frustrated with the lack of diversity represented in large transnational activewear companies. Here we offer three examples of such initiatives: Hine, GLOWco and Vertical Activewear.

In Aotearoa, one such company is Hine Collection (Hine translates to girl or daughter in Te Reo Māori), a business started in 2019 by Miria Flavell, a Māori woman from Rotorua (a city in the North Island where 43% of the population identify as Māori). When Flavell began the company, she had no business experience and was instead working as a freelance makeup artist, but the lack of diversity she was seeing on social media inspired her to start an inclusive activewear company:

I noticed that a lot of fitness and clothing brands didn't show any women that were any bigger than a size 6 [size 2 in the USA] with six-pack abs. It frustrated me that they didn't represent all women, and all their different shapes and sizes (Flavell quoted in Phare, 2020).

Hine Collection currently stocks sizes up to a 6X and uses a range of different models in their advertising including different ethnicities, sizes and shapes (see Figure 1). In addition, unlike in many 'plus-sized' modelling, in Hine's marketing there are visible signs of cellulite, fat rolls, and wrinkles. According to Flavell, Māori culture is strongly celebrated across the brand with 'strong kaupapa Māori (Māori values) behind it' (cited in Storyo, 2019), including the focus on Māori women in clothing designs and imagery, as well as a whanau/family oriented focus inside the company. This resonated with some of our participants, such as Brenda, who described how she liked Hine because the company 'uses normal people, normal Māori women' as models.

Similarly, in 2018, Singaporean female entrepreneur, Nawal Alhaddad, started her own fitness apparel line, GLOWco in response to the lack of clothing available for Muslim women and those who prefer more modest activewear. She discussed not only the lack of



Figure 1. Image from Hine Collection website (June 2020).

available fitness clothing for Muslim women as an impetus for starting the company, but a desire to change the narrative around how Muslim women are portrayed across media and within sports. Her company focuses on highlighting Muslim women in their advertising: ‘It was very important to us to be able to showcase empowered Muslim women through our photo shoots and in our community’ (Alhaddad quoted in [Lin, 2021](#)). In so doing, Alhaddad is attempting to use activewear marketing and the brand to increase the cultural diversity of femininities within the industry ([Figure 2](#)).

Wanting to create activewear that was available to women of all different sizes for a range of activities and that was sustainably made, in 2017, Tia Robinson (an African American woman in the US) started her company, Vertical Activewear. Robinson stated that she began Vertical as ‘a way to provide women of all shapes, sizes, and fitness activities, activewear options that were cute and multi-functional, yet sustainable’ (Robinson quoted in [Wilson, 2021](#)). Vertical Activewear’s website (and social media pages) often features women of different shapes, ages, and races performing diverse activities (e.g. aerobics, aerial yoga, pole dancing) with a mission statement that reads, ‘Created for women who see things differently. Do things differently. Want different things’ ([Vertical Activewear, 2022](#)) ([Figure 3](#)).

Companies such as Hine Collection, GlowCo and Vertical Activewear are just a few examples of the many smaller female-led brands that have begun to emerge in the past few years as women demand change in the industry.

These women-led companies are not necessarily working to enact *massive* structural change or subvert the industry, but are rather developing a niche sector. Thinking critically through postfeminism and neoliberalism, in many ways these companies are continuing to emphasise key postfeminist-neoliberal ideas such as empowerment, self-transformation, and personal responsibility and where consumption becomes a form of political activism. ([Harris, 2004](#); [McRobbie, 1994](#); [Nava, 1992](#)). Similarly, their advertising, which highlights difference and diversity, can be understood as a brand strategy ([Banet-Weiser](#)

and Mukherjee, 2012; Cole and Hribar, 1995). In particular, it mimics neoliberal marketing strategies that ‘manage, contain, and actually design identities, difference, and diversity as particular kinds of brands [sic]’ (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 4). Thus, by developing these advertising campaigns, marketing themselves as companies which cater to *all* women, and using ideas of self-empowerment, and choice in their branding, these women-owned businesses might be seen as exemplars of feminist neoliberalism in action (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Rottenberg, 2014).

Neoliberalism, however, is also rife with contradictions and paradoxes. Therefore, Banet-Weiser (2012) argues that such branding strategies that emphasise difference do not only exist as a ‘function of capitalist exchange, but also as a vehicle through and within which individuals create particular kinds of political and cultural identities’ (p. 43). As one of our Māori/Pākehā participants said in our study, seeing the success of Hine

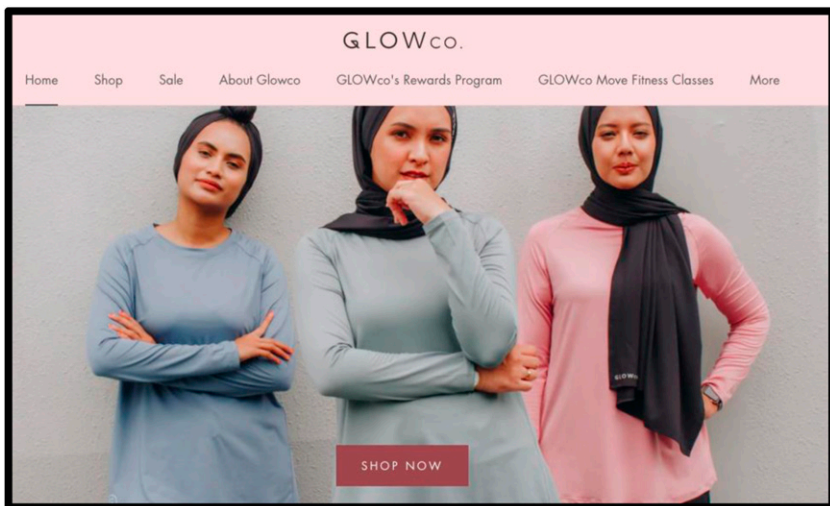


Figure 2. Image from GlowCo website (March 2022).



Figure 3. Images from Vertical Activewear's Facebook (collected March 2022).

Collection and models that looked like her, offered her a source of cultural pride and made her feel more accepted by an industry that has often excluded non-white bodies. For other 'larger' women, advertisements that feature women of varying shapes can engender feelings of confidence and acceptance. Therefore, it is necessary to explore and acknowledge the importance and positive impact of such women entrepreneurs when analysing postfeminism and neoliberalism's impact on society and gender.

Conclusion

In this article, we have drawn upon feminist cultural studies to examine how women consume activewear and interact in different ways with the singular postfeminine ideal (young, thin, white, consumer-oriented) perpetuated across the industry. In speaking with a group of diverse women from Aotearoa, we found a range of understandings and approaches to this ideal. Some participants internalised and (sought to) embody the postfeminine subject, placing standards on both themselves and other women, enacting a 'postfeminist gaze.' However, other participants were also acutely aware of the singularity and homogeneity across the activewear phenomenon, critiquing the binary nature (feminine/masculine) of the clothing, the lack of diversity in advertising, and the bodies of activewear models. In response, some participants employed tactics as a means of their own everyday resistance to the ideal: only buying from Aotearoa-owned companies, buying secondhand clothing, and making and upcycling their clothing. Some women across the industry have taken greater steps and started their own clothing lines that are inclusive of diverse femininities. Importantly, these businesses are not large, multinational corporations commodifying feminism for capitalistic gains, but are rather often local women-owned businesses that are attempting to move into a sporting apparel market that, thus far, has been primarily dominated by white men. Their presence as women entrepreneurs and their alternative offerings of clothing for more diverse identities and body shapes are important signs that the activewear industry is not fixed, but dynamic, expanding, and responding to women's growing critique. Thus, while the singular feminine ideal continues to dominate much of the activewear industry, our participants and women-owned businesses illustrate that in recent years, there is a shift occurring that perhaps signals a long over-due and important change in the representation of femininities in fitness and activewear cultures.

This research provides a deeper understanding of the ways in which both the activewear industry and women consumers are agentic in shifting definitions of femininity. Similarly to previous feminist consumption research, the women in our study were not 'duped' by the activewear industry; rather, their consumption practices were often critical and considered. While many scholars have critiqued the singular (post)feminine ideal in the beauty and fitness industry, our research provides a more nuanced insight into the complexities of consumers and the multiple ways in which gender is negotiated and (re) made through women's experiences with activewear products. Although critiques of postfeminine discourses often explore the contradictions within these discourses (i.e. doing/undoing of feminism, empowerment/constraints), there has been less engagement with how these contradictions are understood by consumers and how they impact their

behaviour. In our research, we identified multiple (and often over-looked) factors that affect how postfeminism is being taken up by women consumers (e.g. consumer's body shape, sexual identity, nationality, ethnicity) and how women are critical of the industry and enact subtle forms of everyday resistance. In highlighting such nuances in consumer's understandings of postfeminine neoliberal discourses and behaviour, this study contributes to and complicates the critiques of postfeminine discourses. It emphasises the need to continue thinking through, analysing, and exploring the impact of such narratives. We see valuable opportunities for further research that examines how quickly changing postfeminist discourses are being critically negotiated by diverse women consumers and across different places and consumption spaces.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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