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**Media constructions of extreme female thinness:  
The case of the British national newspaper  
coverage of London Fashion Week's refusal to ban  
very thin models**

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# **Media constructions of extreme female thinness:**

## **The case of the British national newspaper coverage of London Fashion Week's refusal to ban very thin models**

Nelly Abravanel

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### **ABSTRACT**

When in September 2006, London Fashion Week refused to ban extremely thin models from its shows, a popular debate arose on whether the fashion industry should regulate the size of models who work for them. This debate was immediately taken up by the media. The purpose of this research was to examine the British national newspaper coverage of London Fashion Week's refusal to regulate. The research focused on how the newspaper articles positioned themselves in the debate on the acceptable weight and size of female models, as well as on their diverse constructions of extreme female thinness and their related discourses. Because of the gender-themed nature of the issue covered, a secondary objective of this study was to evaluate whether this newspaper coverage pertained to what Gill (2007) calls a postfeminist media culture. A content analysis of 84 articles, pertaining to the coverage of two London Fashion Week events was used to identify patterns between the articles' position and their representations of an exceptionally thin female body. In addition, critical discourse analysis of a smaller but representative sample of articles was conducted in order to achieve a more in-depth examination of the discourses associated with each position and its relevant constructions of female thinness.

The results of this study illustrated a dichotomy between the broadsheet and tabloid coverage of the issue. Broadsheet articles were generally found to be supportive of the decision not to ban, and constructed extreme female thinness in association to discourses of personal achievement and success. This construction fitted within the broadsheets' general intention to detract blame from the fashion industry. Alternatively, tabloid articles were found to be slightly more interested in the issue than the broadsheets, and were generally found to be unsupportive of London Fashion Week's decision not to ban. Tabloid articles also relied on a more diverse range of constructions of extreme female thinness. These constructions were related to discourses of despair and submission, danger and threat, or visual and sexual undesirability. In general, these specific constructions of the acutely thin female body worked towards legitimizing the tabloids' attack of the fashion industry. Finally, only the tabloid coverage could be defined as pertaining to a postfeminist media landscape, because of its distinct entanglement of feminist and antifeminist ideas. The main conclusion of this research is that in each case, the articles' specific constructions of extreme female thinness worked towards reinforcing or legitimizing the media texts' positioning within the debate.

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## Introduction

In early September 2006, Madrid International Fashion Week decided not to allow models that had a body mass index (BMI) lower than 18 to take part in their fashion shows.<sup>1</sup> When their British counterparts did not follow suit, a public debate broke out regarding the acceptable size of participant models, as well as the responsibilities of the fashion industry in relation to a concern about the effects of images of extreme thinness on girls and young women in general. A written assignment required for the completion of the course MC4M1, provided an opportunity to study the British newspaper coverage of London Fashion Week's refusal enforce a regulation on the size of its models. Although it was hardly an extensive study, relying on a mere analysis of four articles, the paper suggested that there was an association between the articles' position in the debate and their manner of representing extreme female thinness; more specifically, tabloid articles were found to invoke a discourse of blaming the fashion industry, and simultaneously construct the very thin woman as child or object. In contrast, broadsheet articles were found to engage in a discourse that positioned them outside the debate, lending a voice to the fashion industry, and understanding the extremely thin woman as dominant and influential. This research seeks to contribute further insight on the British coverage's positioning within the debate in association to its constructions of extreme female thinness.

Studying contemporary media constructions of femininity requires an approach that is sensitive to the contradictory elements of discourses found within and across media texts. The present research assumes a social constructionist perspective that understands representations of femininity not in relation to the dichotomy of 'realistic/unrealistic,' but as part of particular discourses, that is, 'set[s] of overlapping and often contradictory cultural descriptions and prescriptions' that arise from and regulate 'particular economic, social, political, technological and other non-discursive contexts' (Van Zoonen 1994: 33). Essentially, representations are understood as both referring to preexisting ideas *and* as working towards constructing the world we come to know (St. Pierre 2000: 482).

In *The Media and Body Image*, Wykes and Gunter (2005) examine whether the proliferating media imagery of an acute thin female ideal can have serious consequences for

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<sup>1</sup> The BMI is a measurement of a person's height to weight ratio, and gives some insight about the person's physical health. The World Health Organization has announced that a BMI of 18.5 or less makes a person underweight, while a BMI of 25 and over makes a person overweight. ('BMI Classification' at [http://www.who.int/bmi/index.jsp?introPage=intro\\_3.html](http://www.who.int/bmi/index.jsp?introPage=intro_3.html) )

young women's body image, leading to an increase in eating disorders among the same group. Their first analytical task – namely, an analysis of women's representations in British national newspapers – is most relevant to the present research. Equally pertinent is the context within which the respective newspaper articles were produced.

In June 2000, the Women's Unit in London called for the realization of the Body Summit, which reflected a serious concern on the ways magazine representations of femininity affected the body image of young women (Wykes and Gunter 2005: 69). This official declaration of concern was then taken up by newspapers, which reproduced the 'panic' surrounding the issue of the summit; fashion spreads were targeted as responsible for idealizing an unrealistically thin female body, and guilty of putting young girls at risk (Wykes and Gunter 2005: 69-71). One of the premises of this part of the study rests on the authors' suspicion of such blame. They observe how the press, although obviously more than happy to prosecute magazines for exposing images that normalize extreme female thinness, are hardly innocent themselves. By studying samples taken from up to three years after the period of the summit, they maintain that printed news also contributes to this normalization. They conclude that outside the press' coverage of the Body Summit, women are featured much less than men, and when they are, their representation seems limited: women tend to appear 'young, slender, blonde, famous and underdressed' (Wykes and Gunter 80-81).

Their conclusions are certainly useful in pinpointing the paradox in the newspaper's act of blaming. How fair is it after all for newspapers to set themselves outside the debate and acquire the role of prosecutor, when evidence points to their own liability? Nevertheless, there remains the unasked (and by default, unanswered) question of what happens at the very moment these acts of blaming are employed. How is the discussion framed? How do girls and young women fit in the discussion? And, finally, what are the discourses informing these specific representations of femininity? These questions pertain to the subject of this research, which focuses on the ways the UK press constructed extreme female thinness while covering London Fashion Week's refusal to ban very thin models from its shows – a decision which seemed to resuscitate a public concern for the effects of thin feminine ideals on young women's body image. The potential contribution of this research lies in its intention to analyze representations of femininity *within* a framework of debate *about* representations of femininity.

## **1. THEORETICAL CHAPTER**

The purpose of this chapter is to derive a theoretical framework that will best support and justify the rationale of the research. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section provides a critical assessment of the academic literature relevant to the research. The second section outlines those theoretical concepts derived from the preceding literature review that proved to be most influential for the research plan and framework of analysis. The final section clearly states the study's objectives and research questions.

### **CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE**

#### ***News frames***

*'[T]he meaning of the news is about the act of deploying shared interpretative resources, and the job of close analysis of news texts is to analyze how those resources are being deployed.'* (Matheson: 2005: 15)

In *Language in the News*, Fowler (1991: 17, 43) suggests that the news coverage of a specific issue largely depends on 'frames' or 'stereotypes.' He defines these as 'socially-constructed mental pigeon-holes[s] into which events and individuals can be sorted, thereby making such events and individuals comprehensible.' According to this rationale, when the news covers a certain event or issue, it is more likely to sort it in relation to certain preexisting constructions of meaning that make sense to the readers. Altheide (1997: 651) also refers to news 'frames' and argues that they provide the focus for 'what will be discussed, how it will be discussed, and above all, how it will not be discussed.' While Fowler (1991) underlines the importance of news frames as providing recognizable schemata within which the issues covered can be understood, Altheide (1997) centers on the news frames' functionality in the media text itself, whereby a frame functions as a delimiting factor for the discussion of a particular issue. Both approaches though understand news frames as pertaining to specific sets of discourses. Whether a news frame is understood as a socially constructed schema or as a definer of a discussion's parameters, it has to depend on, and produce particular sets of discourses.

Van Zoonen (1994: 40) suggests that 'the power of discourse lies [...] in its prescriptions of how an issue should be understood, the legitimate views on it, the legitimacy

and deviance of the actors involved, the appropriateness of certain acts etc.' Discourses can be thus understood as a backdrop for news framing. They work as prescriptions for both the way the issue is sorted into recognizable schemata (Fowler's frame) *and* the way it is focused upon (Altheide's frame).

As Van Zoonen's (1994) quote suggests, one of the attributes of discourse is its power to assign a legitimate or deviant status to the actors involved. This is certainly true when the news – after defining an issue as a social problem – proceed into a discussion of who is to be blamed for it. In a study evaluating the US newspaper coverage of obesity as a social problem, Lawrence (2004: 57) suggests a method for studying the news' acts of blaming by categorizing them in two frames: 'individualizing' and 'systemic.' While individualizing frames focus the social problem on individuals, systemic frames open up the spectrum, focusing on institutions.<sup>2</sup> This approach allows for a further exploration of the potential distinctiveness of representations related to each frame. For example, a precise attention to a framework of blaming facilitates Lawrence's (2004) analysis by allowing her to situate competing constructions of obesity within each frame of blame. Once again, 'frames' are understood as inextricably connected to the discourses that are being invoked and produced by the text.

### ***Worrying about young women: the 'Reviving Ophelia' discourse in the media***

Earlier in this chapter I referred to the case of British newspapers taking up the Body Summit's concern about the media's effects on young women's body image and health (Wykes and Gunter 2005). This concern can be understood as part of a larger 'proliferation of images, texts and discourses around girls and girlhood in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries' (Gonick 2006: 1). The media's preoccupation with girls however, has been largely associated with the construction of girls as being in a constant state of crisis, and thus producing a very specific way of thinking about young femininity (Mazzarella and Pecora 2007, Gonick 2006, Aapola et al 2005). This proliferating concern about girls and young women resonates with the 'Reviving Ophelia' discourse, which took its name from American psychologist's Mary Pipher's book, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1994), and 'presents girls as vulnerable, voiceless and fragile,' susceptible to violence, coercion and self-destructive practices (Gonick 2006: 2).

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<sup>2</sup> Her terminology of framing is based on the works of Bennett (1991), Edelman (1988), Entman (1993), Iyengar (1991), and Schattschneider (1960).

In their longitudinal study of US newspaper coverage of adolescent girls' lives and issues, Mazarella and Pecora (2007: 19) argued that newspapers constructed girls as 'a generation in crisis, a crisis that is, more often than not, linked to low self-esteem and poor body image.' The authors problematized such constructions of young femininity as denying young women any form of agency. This denial of young women's agency resonates with Hartley's (1998: 64) discussion on youth in general, whereby youth are 'characterized by 'colonized' discourses of control, which function to represent them as weak, prone to victimization or unruliness and incapable of self government.' Hence, although the 'Reviving Ophelia' discourse can be understood as part of a positively increasing media interest in young women's issues, it is nevertheless problematic in the ways it refuses them any form of power, attempting to regulate their alleged crisis. Alternatively, 'Reviving Ophelia' has also been understood as emphasizing 'young female subjectivities as projects that can be shaped by the individual' (Aapola et al 2005: 54). According to this approach, the discourse of girls-in-crisis is inextricably related to notions of increasing individualization in all aspects of a contemporary neoliberal society. In this case, young female agency is not denied, but understood as a driving force for a process of self-work and self-regulation.

### ***A postfeminist media landscape?***

The main focus of this research project is to examine specific articulations of female thinness within the British newspaper coverage of London Fashion Week's decision not to ban very thin models from its shows. The context of this coverage is inevitably linked to feminist concerns about the representation of women in the media (and by default, in the fashion world). It is important thus to assume an approach that would be sensitive to the articles' potential appropriation of feminism. Gill's (2007) conceptualization of postfeminism allows for such an approach. She defines postfeminism 'as a *sensibility*' and conceives it as a critical tool for examining 'what is distinctive about contemporary articulations of gender in the media' (Gill 2007: 254; emphasis in the original). Before exploring certain themes associated with postfeminism as sensibility, I briefly refer to a number of other approaches to the term, acknowledging its much contested definition.



*Defining 'postfeminism'*

Faludi (1992) defines postfeminism as a 'backlash,' whereby feminism of the '70s and '80s is deemed responsible for contemporary women's unhappiness. Along the same lines, Whelehan (2000: 22) understands postfeminism in terms of a new generation of women who call themselves feminists, but whose only aim seems to be 'equality within patriarchy.' The 'backlash' theory though, is somewhat contradictory, as it is simultaneously informed by claims such as: 'you can't have it all' *and* 'all the battles have been won' (Gill 2007: 253). Alternatively, Negra (2004) understands postfeminism as a cultural ground devoid of the unresolved questions of the past. In the context of Negra's (2004) postfeminism, 'old' feminism is not directly attacked for its current irrelevance or for its harmful effects on contemporary women's lives; it is simply deemed unproductive. The problem with the aforementioned approaches is that they rely too much on predetermined notions of true feminism (Gill 2007: 254). Moreover, postfeminism is understood as a cultural phenomenon rather than a critical tool used to examine the characteristics of a cultural phenomenon. Lotz's (2001) approach comes closer to understanding postfeminism as a critical tool. It resonates with what Gill (2007: 250) describes as an 'epistemological break with second wave feminism,' whereby this version of postfeminism puts the spotlight on differences rather than equality. It is informed by an intersectional analytical approach, viewing gender as inextricably connected to age, ethnicity, race, sexuality etc. The problem with this approach is that such intersectional analysis can acquire infinite proportions, in a never-ending effort to account for all the subtle differences in gender articulations. As Gill (2007: 251) points out, more often than not, the intersectional analysis promoted turns out to be simply unsuccessful.

*Postfeminism as sensibility*

Gill's (2007) more useful understanding of postfeminism as a sensibility relies on examining certain recurring themes and constructions of gender. Two of these themes are especially pertinent to the present study. The first deals with the coexistence of both feminist and anti-feminist ideas in the current media. The second refers to the construction of women as the perfect 'disciplinary subjects' in contemporary media culture.

Gill (2007: 199) maintains that it is without any doubt that contemporary media are 'informed by feminist ideas:' in an era following the peak of second-wave feminism, women's

rights regarding career, motherhood and sexuality are certainly acknowledged. Nevertheless, she denies any suggestion that contemporary media have 'somehow become feminist' (Gill 2007: 268).<sup>3</sup> McRobbie (2004: 255-6) coins the term 'double entanglement' in order to describe a contemporary coexistence of contradictory attitudes towards feminism: feminist ideas are deemed as 'common sense' while at the same time, they are at best set aside, and at worst, detested. In her discussion of the role of feminism in the postmodern context, McRobbie (1994: 69) considers the ways in which feminism can still legitimately address contemporary women. She too acknowledges the increasing presence of 'new feminist discourses' in sites other than the academy – such as the mass media, – and their role in controlling social constructions of the woman. Nevertheless, she wonders about their nature and degree of influence: 'There still remains the question of what sort of feminism is found in these spaces and to whom it is speaking?' (McRobbie 1994: 72) It seems to me that the sort of feminism found in these spaces depends on the level of its entanglement with anti-feminist ideas, and according to Gill (2007: 269) it is exactly this entanglement that 'signifies a postfeminist sensibility.'

The second theme comprising what Gill (2007: 261) defines as a postfeminist media landscape is the construction of women as ideal disciplinary subjects; she contends that '[w]hat marks out the present moment as distinctive [...] [is] the intensity of the regulation of women (alongside a disavowal of such regulation).' Once again, what characterizes gender articulations in contemporary media is a sense of contradiction. The regulation of women's bodies in magazines for example, is quite complex: '[m]agazines offer tips to girls and young women to enable them to continue the work of femininity but still appear as entirely confident, carefree and unconcerned about their self-presentation' (Gill 2007: 262). The concept of a coexistence of intense regulation of the female body along with a disavowal of such regulation constitutes another level of entanglement that defines a postfeminist media landscape.

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<sup>3</sup> This is illustrated by the case of women's magazines and their construction of women's sexuality. Magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* are said to simultaneously invoke discourses of 'pleasing your man' alongside more 'feminist' discourses of '[taking] charge sexually' and 'only do things you feel comfortable with' (Gill 2007: 192).

### ***Regulating the (thin) female body***

*'The body (besides being evaluated for its successes or failure at getting itself in order) is seen as demonstrating correct or incorrect attitudes toward the demands of normalization itself.'* (Bordo: 2003: 203)

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1979) introduces the term 'docile bodies' – bodies subject to the disciplinary forces of social control linked to a specific institutional context. He contends that a continuous and rigid control over the body ends up being internalized by its subject, leading to a constant state of self-surveillance.<sup>4</sup> However, Foucault (1979) hardly pays any attention to the gendered body. His concept of 'docile bodies' is criticized by feminist scholars such as Bartky (1990: 65), who argues that he 'is blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine.' She specifically refers to disciplines associated with attaining an ideal size, appearance, behavior and movement. Wolf (1990) understands these practices as part of the 'beauty myth,' whereby women's obsession with attaining the ideal body results from patriarchal oppression. However, Foucault (1979) insists that the kind of power hidden behind the disciplinary practices of the body does not work from above; its nature is much more subtle. Bartky (1990: 74) rearticulates this idea as 'the modernization of patriarchal power' in the current disciplinary practices of the female body, whereby the 'disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and nowhere.'

Regardless of the form of power hidden behind disciplining the female body, Bartky (1990: 71) notes that such constant regulation inscribes a deficient status on the female body; hence, femininity is constructed as constantly lacking. In an article on the parallel constructions of the ideal woman and of the ideal weight, McKinley (1999: 100) takes this idea a step further, adding that ideal weight is yet another functional category 'for defining people as deviant.' At the intersection of the two categories – femininity and weight – rests a very specific disciplinary force on women, aimed at regulating their gender, their body size, and the meanings associated with them.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> He compares society to a specific prison structure, the Panopticon, where the disciplining of the body is ever-enforceable from all directions (Foucault 1979: 200).

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note here that in the context of this paper, constructions of the body are more pertinent than the material body itself, as the meanings they carry constitute the building blocks for the body's representation in the media.

Do media representations of an ideal female beauty pertain to this sense of regulation of the female body? In her seminal study on the female body, Bordo (2003) decodes Western culture's constructions of the 'thin' female body.<sup>6</sup> She argues that a 'slender, fit body [is] a symbol of 'virile' mastery over bodily desires that are continually experienced as threatening to overtake the self' (Bordo 2003: 15,190). Here, the construction of the thin ideal implies a sense of regulation over the body's naturally 'deviant' attributes. According to Saukko (2006: 153), constructions of the thin ideal and the extremely thin (anorexic) body both contribute to a sense of regulation; she claims that 'popular discourses on thinness and popular discourses on eating disorders are very similar, fomenting women's anxieties about not being strong and independent enough or not being adaptable and caring enough.' These contradictory – yet, omnipresent – anxieties are reflected in what Bordo (2007: 171) distinguishes as the two main constructions of extreme thinness: the first connotes a sense of submission, fragility and lack of power, while the second relates to a transcendence of femininity and its 'normal' nurturing and domestic attributes, and is associated instead with the more 'masculine' social inscriptions of 'self-control, determination, cool, emotional discipline, mastery and so on.' The constructions might be contradictory, but they both feed into Bartky's (1990) idea of the woman as constantly lacking, and thus, in need of constant discipline.

## **FRAMING THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

This research is framed by a social constructionist approach to studying the representation of extreme female thinness in the printed news. In particular, Bordo's (2003) theory on the social constructions of the extremely thin female body is used to explore potential patterns of representation of the thin models within the articles. Essentially, this enables the establishment of a potential relationship between (i) the articles' representations of extreme thinness and (ii) their positioning within the debate on the ban.

Theories on the discipline of the body also frame the research project. In particular, Bartky's (1990) feminist appropriation of Foucault's (1979) theory of the 'docile body' helps structure the study's interest in identifying potential practices of regulating the female body. These can include obvious instances like the call for a ban of extremely thin models, to more

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<sup>6</sup> Bordo's work has provided the theoretical framework for sociological psychological and media studies on constructions of the thin woman, and is thus considered most relevant to the present research (Saukko 2006, McKinley 1999, Germov and Williams 1999, Malson 1998).

subtle cases, such as the nature of the alternatives proposed (e.g. whether they still pertain to beauty ideals), or even the ways unwanted thinness is constructed within the text.

Moreover, the research is framed by theories on media discourses on girls. Both understandings of the 'Reviving Ophelia' discourse (i.e. denial of agency vs. individualization) are applied to the examination of the articles' concern on girls and young women as threatened by negative body image and eating disorders.

An attention to news framing, with a particular focus on the act of blaming, also frames this research project. Lawrence's (2004) paradigm of analyzing the printed news' coverage of a social problem in distinct frames of blame (individualized or systemic) is extremely useful in the present context. It helps categorize the newspaper articles according to their way of assigning if and who is responsible for the models' visibility and state of thinness. The practice of identifying distinct frames of blame proves useful for spotting the possible differences in the discourses invoked in each case.

The final approach framing the research project is derived from Gill's (2007) concept of postfeminism as a sensibility. It provides a theoretical framework for dealing with a gendered theme – namely, the representation of female thinness – within a specific site of contemporary media culture. Hence, following Gill (2007), the aim is to be sensitive to the contradictory elements in the discourses invoked; do the newspaper articles acquire a 'feminist' position towards London Fashion Week's refusal to ban very thin models, and if they do, does their representation of the extremely thin woman comply or contradict their assumed feminist position?

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH**

The rationale of this research centers on an analysis of the distinctive nature of gender articulations found within UK newspaper articles covering London Fashion Week and its refusal to ban extremely thin models from its catwalks. Focusing wholly on their constructions of the thin female body, the aim is to investigate the extent to which these constructions reinforce or contradict the discourses invoked. More precisely, this research seeks to understand the connection between the texts' positioning regarding the ban, and their representation of extreme female thinness. Another objective of this research is to evaluate whether these newspaper articles fit in the context of a postfeminist media culture,

which is characterized by a coexistence of feminist and anti-feminist ideas, in conjunction with a simultaneous regulation and refusal of regulation of the female body.

The rationale of this research is based on the interweaving of the following themes:

- Social constructions of the very thin female body
- Theories on the regulation of the female body
- Media discourses on girls-in-crisis
- News frames of blame
- The conceptualization of postfeminism as sensibility

The central concern of this research is summarized in the subsequent questions:

**In the context of the UK newspaper coverage of London Fashion Week's refusal to ban extremely thin models from its shows, how do the articles situate themselves within the debate on the acceptable weight of female models? How do specific constructions of extreme female thinness relate to the discourses invoked?**

Previous research has indeed focused on news coverage of a debate on the visibility and presence of extremely thin female ideals (Wykes and Gunter 2005). However, the study rested on investigating whether the news' positioning against this visibility was fair in light of its own constant propagation of the similarly limited representations of femininity in different settings. The potential contribution of the present research rests on its focusing solely on the coverage of such a debate. It does not ask whether it is fair for newspapers to participate in the debate about the catwalk ban of extremely thin models; rather, it investigates the newspapers' possibly diverse positions and the discursive and signifying practices that accompany them.

## **2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **RESEARCH STRATEGY**

The methods used to conduct this research were content analysis and critical discourse analysis. The former was first used to identify the larger trends in the UK national newspaper coverage of London Fashion Week's attitude towards employing very thin models. Berelson (1952: 18; as cited in Hansen 1998: 94) defines content analysis as 'a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.' The merits of content analysis involve the isolation and charting of the constituent parts of a text, followed by the interpretation stage, which examines 'which ones co-occur in which contexts, for what purposes, and with what implications' (Hansen 1998: 123). The method is useful in this research because it lends some insight on specific patterns occurring between the texts' positioning within the debate on the use of very thin models, and their constructions of female thinness.

However, the research method has been critiqued 'for its quantitative nature, for its fragmentation of textual wholes' and 'for its lack of a theory of meaning' (Hansen 1998: 91). Hansen (1998: 124) suggests that since content analysis does not help us 'interpret the wider social significance or meaning of the qualitative indicators generated,' it is indispensable to combine it with other, more qualitative methods.

Fairclough (1995: 15) agrees that an analysis of media output should always involve complementary methods and specifically suggests the pairing of content and discourse analyses. Critical discourse analysis allows for establishing 'systematic links between texts, discourse practices and sociocultural practices' (Fairclough 1995: 16-17).<sup>7</sup> A focus on 'texts' requires a linguistic analysis, while a focus on 'discourse practices' involves sensitivity to the processes of text production and consumption, and finally, a focus on 'sociocultural practices' involves sensitivity to context (Fairclough 1995: 57-62). In my investigation of the UK's press coverage of London Fashion Week's attitude towards employing very thin models, I depend on critical discourse analysis in order to understand the connections between the articles' representation of thin women (text) and the respective discourses they rely on (discursive practice). Fairclough (1995: 61) defines this approach as 'intertextual analysis,' the analytical

act of 'looking at the traces of the discursive practice in the text.' Ultimately, the objective is to explore whether the studied connections pertain to a specific context (sociocultural practices) – possibly, a postfeminist one.

It is important though to acknowledge some known criticism of this qualitative method.<sup>8</sup> In his explanation of the characteristics of intertextual analysis, Fairclough (1995: 61) raises the issue of objectivity: "in intertextual analysis, the analyst is more dependent upon social and cultural understanding." Hence, while carrying out a critical discourse analysis, the researcher must be reflexive, and acknowledge the fact that his own language is as constructive as the one he or she is studying, and thus constitutes yet another instance of influenced and influencing construction of reality (Gill 2000: 188). Ultimately, the complementary use of content and discourse analyses alleviates the limitations of each approach, potentially lending more validity to the research conclusions.

Following Wykes and Gunter (2005: 71-72), I base my focus on UK national newspapers on the idea that news tends to be 'more complex, more frequent, more subtle and more popular' than other printed media; it also 'has to fit prior knowledge to make sense.' I centered the research on nationally distributed newspapers, because they addressed a broader readership than local publications. Both tabloid (*The Daily Star*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Express*, *The Mirror* and *The Sun*) and broadsheet publications (*The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Observer*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Times*) were studied because of their reported different target readership: 'broadsheets [are] mainly aimed at the educated and professional middle classes and tabloids [concentrate] on the working and lower middle classes' (Day et al 2004: 168).<sup>9</sup> Studying articles from both categories offered a more inclusive approach to accounting for trends in the press' coverage of London Fashion Week and the debate surrounding it.

The retrieval of the articles was done through a search on LexisNexis News, an online archive that includes all major UK newspapers in full text. The archive has a standard presentation format, an attribute which largely facilitated the coding process. Although

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<sup>7</sup> Wetherell (2001) mentions a variety of discursive analytical models, used by different academic disciplines. The model of 'critical discourse analysis' is deemed the most pertinent to media studies (Fairclough 1995, Fowler 1991, Matheson 2005).

<sup>8</sup> The points on the limitations of critical discourse analysis have also been covered in the context of this candidate's MC4M1 – Methods of Research in Media and Communications' written assignment.

<sup>9</sup> The titles were assigned 'broadsheet' or 'tabloid' status according to their self-classification on their websites.



LexisNexis does not include illustrations or photographs accompanying the articles, it does indicate their existence, as well as a list of captions in full text (during the coding process, these captions were taken into account in the analysis of the texts).

## **SAMPLING**

Sampling was done in two stages. The first stage involved the search keywords, while the second involved the time frame selected. The keywords used in the LexisNexis search were 'London Fashion Week' and 'weight.' The first keyword ensured that the articles retrieved were explicitly referring to the biannual event, while the second keyword reflected the research's interest in studying articles that were directly involved in the debate about the models' thinness. The second keyword primarily helped to exclude articles only serving as fashion show reviews. Keywords such as 'body,' 'model,' and 'woman' were also tested in conjunction with 'London Fashion Week,' which remained stable throughout the searches. Ultimately, the articles found through the test searches revealed a considerable overlap, and were generally included in the search results associated with the keyword 'weight.'

Usually, the method of content analysis is deemed more successful when the time frame studied is as extensive as possible, controlling for one-off events that could distort the results (Deacon et al 1999). However, since the research topic is centered on the coverage of a particular event, the selection of articles for analysis had to reflect that. First, it seemed reasonable to focus on the articles surrounding the London Fashion Week events that came after Madrid Fashion Week's decision to place restrictions on the participation of some models. It was only after Madrid's decision that the British Fashion Council announced it was not going to follow suit. The Madrid event took place during 1-3 September, 2006. Hence, the article search was based around the UK press coverage of the two London-based events that followed – i.e. the event taking place during 18-22 September, 2006, and the one taking place during 12-16 February, 2007. An initial search was conducted between September 1<sup>st</sup> and March 16<sup>th</sup>, one month after the end of the second event. The search generated 119 articles, of which 57 appeared during the months surrounding the first event, while 55 appeared during the months surrounding the second one. The 7 remaining articles were scattered during the months of November and December 2006, and were excluded from the analysis in order to establish a dichotomy of coverage pertaining to each event. Of the 112 articles remaining, 28 articles were excluded as irrelevant to the research because of their use of the word 'weight' as something other than a bodily property (e.g. 'weight of the

issue'), or the random use of the phrase 'London Fashion Week' in a calendar-like format (e.g. 'since London Fashion Week'). Ultimately, the number of articles remaining was 84, making it possible to analyze them as an entire population, without the need of further sampling.

## **DESIGN OF RESEARCH TOOLS**

The coding frame (Appendix 2) devised reflects three groups of categories. The first group consists of three identifier categories: the year the article was published, the type of newspaper the article was published in, and the article's positioning against London Fashion Week's refusal to ban models according to their body size. The potential distinctions between the publication time, source, and position of the articles, were deemed important characteristics that could prove influential for the discourses invoked in relation to the articles' representation of female thinness.<sup>10</sup> The second group of categories reflects the research's focus on frames of blame; its categories involve whether or not the text identifies a problem related to the existence of very thin models in fashion shows, what this problem is and who is blamed for it. Again, these categories work towards identifying potential patterns between frames of blame and their associated signifying practices. A final category relates to the ways female thinness is represented within the texts. This category is not meant to provide conclusive results, but a general mapping of the representation of thin models that will be further explored through critical discourse analysis. This last category, as well as the category on the types of problems identified by the articles, were added as a result of a pilot coding of a random sample of 30 articles – the two coders kept a running list of the types of problems and the portrayals of very thin models, which then served to define the values of the two categories. In the end, following Hansen (1998: 107, 119), the naming of categories and values resulted from both the theoretical framework, and a preliminary immersion in the textual material.

Weber (1990: 17) underlines the importance of the method's reproducibility, strongly suggesting the presence of a second coder with similar cognitive characteristics to the researcher, as well as the existence of clear coding instructions. The second coder was chosen to have a similar academic background and research experience as the researcher. Moreover, a coding book (Appendix 1) was created, providing instructions for the coding

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<sup>10</sup> Winship (1983) for example, suggests that often, there exist differences in the types of representations and accompanying discourses found in broadsheet and tabloid newspapers.

process and definitions of words used in the descriptions of categories and values. Holsti's (1969) method for calculating inter-coder reliability was used, whereby reliability is equal to twice the number of coding decisions agreed upon by the two coders divided by the sum of coding decisions of both coders. Inter-coder reliability was found to be 0.90, reflecting a 90% agreement in decisions. The researcher's coding decisions were then entered into SPSS 14.0, which was used to generate frequency and cross-tabulation tables.

### 3. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

This overriding purpose of this chapter is to present and discuss the research's results. The first section presents the content analysis results, while the second is dedicated to a critical discourse analysis of a number of representative article extracts. The third section seeks to link the results of the analyses to the theoretical framework established in Chapter 2, and concludes by considering further developments of the project.

#### CONTENT ANALYSIS

Of the total number (84) of articles analyzed, 46.4% appeared during the time surrounding the first London Fashion Week event taking place in September 2006, while 53.6% appeared during the months surrounding the second event, taking place in February 2007. Both tabloid (39.3%) and broadsheet (60.7%) newspapers produced coverage of London Fashion Week's decision not to ban very thin models from its shows. The respective percentages show that tabloid publications exhibited an approximately 20% higher interest in covering the issue (see Table 1). However, a crosstabulation of the articles' year and source of publication shows that the tabloids' higher interest was more significant during the time surrounding the second event (see Table 2). In 2006, the difference between the coverage from broadsheets and tabloids was only 12.4%, while in 2007, the difference rose to 33.4%. Hence, although broadsheet newspapers were almost as interested as tabloids in covering the issue in its initial stage, relevantly to tabloids, their coverage dropped significantly during the second time around – i.e. when nothing had really changed in London Fashion Week's attitude towards employing very thin models.

**TABLE 1: Articles' Year and Source of Publication**

		Frequency	Percent
Year of publication	2006	39	46.4
	2007	45	53.6
	Total	84	100.0
Source of publication	Broadsheet newspaper	33	39.3
	Tabloid newspaper	51	60.7
	Total	84	100.0

**TABLE 2: Crosstabulation of Articles' Year & Source of Publication**

			Source of publication		Total
			Broadsheet newspaper	Tabloid newspaper	
Year of publication	2006	Count	18	21	39
		% within Year of publication	46.2%	53.8%	100.0%
	2007	Count	15	30	45
		% within Year of publication	33.3%	66.7%	100.0%
Total		Count	33	51	84
		% within Year of publication	39.3%	60.7%	100.0%

An analysis of the articles' position towards London Fashion Week's refusal to establish a ban, shows that 25% were supportive of such a decision, 17.9% took a neutral position, while the majority 57.1% was not supportive (see Table 3). Hence, the articles studied were generally found to be less supportive of London Fashion Week's decision, calling instead for an enforcement of regulation as far as the models' appearance was concerned. However, once again, a crosstabulation of the articles' position and their source of publication, demonstrates further differences between the broadsheet and tabloid coverage of the issue. Of those articles that were not supportive, a staggering 88.2% came from tabloid newspapers, while only 9.1% came from broadsheets. Broadsheet articles were generally found to be supportive of the decision (54.5%) or simply neutral (36.4%).

**TABLE 3: Crosstabulation of Articles' Position towards London Fashion Week's Refusal to Ban & Source of Publication**

			Position towards London Fashion Week's refusal to ban			Total
			Supportive	Not supportive	Neutral	
Source of publication	Broadsheet newspaper	Count	18	3	12	33
		% within Source of publication	54.5%	9.1%	36.4%	100.0%
	Tabloid newspaper	Count	3	45	3	51
		% within Source of publication	5.9%	88.2%	5.9%	100.0%
Total		Count	21	48	15	84
		% within Source of publication	25.0%	57.1%	17.9%	100.0%

Furthermore, a majority of 57.1% of the articles straightforwardly problematized the existence of very thin models in fashion shows, of which 88.2% were articles stemming from tabloid newspapers – both results corresponding to the respective percentages of articles not supporting London Fashion Week's decision not to enforce a ban (see Table 4). A fraction of

28.6% of the articles partially acknowledged a relevant problem, the entirety of which came from broadsheet publications, while a balanced 14.3% did not see a problem at all.

**TABLE 4: Crosstabulation of Articles' Reference to Problem Related to Very Thin Models & Source of Publication**

			Reference to problem related to very thin models			Total
			Yes	Partially	No	
Source of publication	Broadsheet newspaper	Count	3	24	6	33
		% within Source	9.1%	72.7%	18.2%	100.0%
		% within Reference to problem	6.3%	100.0%	50.0%	39.3%
	Tabloid newspaper	Count	45	0	6	51
		% within Source	88.2%	.0%	11.8%	100.0%
		% within Reference to problem	93.8%	.0%	50.0%	60.7%
Total		Count	48	24	12	84
		% within Source	57.1%	28.6%	14.3%	100.0%
		% within Reference to problem	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The following table illustrates the frequencies and percentages pertaining to the type of the problem the articles referred to.<sup>11</sup> A majority of 70.8% associated the presence of very thin models in fashion shows with effects on the body image of girls and young women, effects on the wellbeing and health of the models themselves, or a combination of both. This cumulative percentage demonstrates a high concern for young women and girls in general, a point that will be further explored as part of the discourse analysis. Moreover, a fraction of 25% problematized the presence of very thin models as offering an unrealistic representation of women's bodies in general. The remainder 4.2% of the articles acknowledged various other one-off issues, which were marked as 'other' during the coding process. Finally, as illustrated below in Table 6, these overall percentages of the types of problems acknowledged by the articles were found to be representative of both tabloid and broadsheet articles.

<sup>11</sup> The 'missing' values of the tables reflect the absence of articles that did not acknowledge a problem at all. The column 'Valid percent' included in the statistic analysis of the categories 'Type of problem related to very thin models' and 'Target of blame for the problem,' is calculated by taking into account those missing values.

**TABLE 5: Type of problem related to very thin models**

		Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Effects on body image of young women and girls	27	37.5	37.5
	Effects on wellbeing/health of models	15	20.8	58.3
	Effects on body image of young women and girls AND on models' wellbeing/health	9	12.5	70.8
	Unrealistic representation of women	18	25.0	95.8
	Other	3	4.2	100.0
	Total	72	100.0	
Missing <sup>1</sup>		12		
	Total	84		

**TABLE 6: Crosstabulation of Type of problem related to very thin models & Source of publication**

			Source of publication		Total
			Broadsheet newspaper	Tabloid newspaper	
Type of problem related to very thin models	Effects on body image of young women and girls	Count	9	18	27
		% within Source of publication	33.3%	40.0%	37.5%
	Effects on wellbeing/health of models	Count	6	9	15
		% within Source of publication	22.2%	20.0%	20.8%
	Effects on body image of young women and girls AND on models' wellbeing/health	Count	3	6	9
		% within Source of publication	11.1%	13.3%	12.5%
	Unrealistic representation of women	Count	6	12	18
		% within Source of publication	22.2%	26.7%	25.0%
	Other	Count	3	0	3
		% within Source of publication	11.1%	.0%	4.2%
Total	Count	27	45	72	
	% within Source of publication	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Of the articles acknowledging (whether entirely or partially) the existence of a problem associated with the presence of very thin models on the catwalks, 58.3% blamed the fashion industry, while 16.7% focused their blame on individuals. A fraction of 20.8% of these articles did not assign any blame for the problem they perceived (see Table 7). Table 8 consists of the results of a crosstabulation of the articles' target of blame and source of publication, which illustrate that the articles blaming the fashion industry, all stemmed from tabloid publications. Broadsheet articles either focused the blame on individuals or did not assign anyone responsible for the problem they referred to.

**TABLE 7: Target of blame for the acknowledged problem**

		Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Fashion industry	42	58.3	58.3
	Individuals	12	16.7	75.0
	No assignment of blame	15	20.8	95.8
	Not determinable	3	4.2	100.0
	Total	72	100.0	
Missing		12		
Total		84		

**TABLE 8: Crosstabulation of Target of blame for the problem & Source of publication**

			Source of publication		Total
			Broadsheet newspaper	Tabloid newspaper	
Target of blame for the problem	Fashion industry	Count	0	42	42
		% within Target of blame for the problem	.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	Individuals	Count	12	0	12
		% within Target of blame for the problem	100.0%	.0%	100.0%
	No assignment of blame	Count	15	0	15
		% within Target of blame for the problem	100.0%	.0%	100.0%
	Not determinable	Count	0	3	3
		% within Target of blame for the problem	.0%	100.0%	100.0%

As far as the articles' portrayal of the models is concerned, models were found to be presented as victims (28.6%), ugly (17.9%), threatening (14.3%), or as successful professionals (25%). Several other portrayals were identified during the final coding process, and were marked as 'other' (7.1%). The rest of the articles (7.1%) were marked 'indeterminable' because they employed a combination of the already listed portrayals (see Table 9). However, the percentages as such don't really tell us anything remotely interesting. Table 10 illustrates that all articles portraying models as successful professionals stemmed from broadsheet publications, while most articles that presented the models as victims came from tabloid newspapers (70.8%). Furthermore, the 'ugly' and 'threatening' portrayal of models were both exclusively found in tabloid articles. In general, tabloid articles exhibited a larger spectrum of portrayals (ugly, threatening and victims, with the latter occurring more frequently).



**TABLE 9: Models' specific portrayal**

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Victims	24	28.6	28.6
	Ugly	15	17.9	46.4
	Threatening	12	14.3	60.7
	Successful professionals	21	25.0	85.7
	Other	6	7.1	92.9
	Not determinable	6	7.1	100.0
	Total	84	100.0	

**TABLE 10: Crosstabulation of Models' specific portrayal & Overall impression of models' portrayal**

			Source of publication		Total
			Broadsheet newspaper	Tabloid newspaper	
Models' specific portrayal	Victims	Count	7	17	24
		% within Models' specific portrayal	29.2%	70.8%	100.0%
		% within Source of publication	21.2%	33.3%	28.6%
	Ugly	Count	0	15	15
		% within Models' specific portrayal	.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% within Source of publication	.0%	29.4%	17.9%
	Threatening	Count	0	12	12
		% within Models' specific portrayal	.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% within Source of publication	.0%	23.5%	14.3%
	Successful professionals	Count	21	0	21
		% within Models' specific portrayal	100.0%	.0%	100.0%
		% within Source of publication	63.6%	.0%	25.0%
	Other	Count	0	6	6
		% within Models' specific portrayal	.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% within Source of publication	.0%	11.8%	7.1%
Not determinable	Count	5	1	6	
	% within Models' specific portrayal	83.3%	16.7%	100.0%	
	% within Source of publication	15.2%	2.0%	7.1%	

### ***Summary of results***

Although the initial aim of this research project did not directly involve a dichotomy of tabloid and broadsheet articles, content analysis showed that such a dichotomy was extremely pertinent to the specific population of articles. The patterns drawn by comparing the textual elements counted, proved to be distinct among the two types of publications.

Articles stemming from tabloids were generally found to present thin models as victims, ugly or threatening. These portrayals were linked to a generally unsupportive attitude towards London Fashion Week's decision not to ban, whereby tabloid articles were found to straightforwardly acknowledge a problem related to the presence and visibility of very thin models. The problem was mainly associated with a concern about the effects of images of thinness on girls and young women's body image in general, or on the models' health and wellbeing, or both. Finally, the portrayals of models as victims, ugly or threatening were also found in association with the tabloid articles' position of blaming the fashion industry for the problem observed.

On the other hand, articles stemming from broadsheets were generally found to present thin models as successful professionals. This portrayal appeared in association with a generally supportive or neutral position towards London Fashion Week's decision not to enforce a ban in its shows. The broadsheet articles' positive image of thin models was nonetheless associated with their identification of a problem related to the presence of images of extreme thinness (a similar concern about girls' and young women's body image, models' health and wellbeing, or both). However, the distinction from the tabloid cases, is that the broadsheet articles focused much less on the problem, detracting blame from the fashion industry, by assigning responsibility on individuals, or by not assigning any blame at all.

## DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The representation of thin models was deemed as the most relevant textual unit for studying the articles' constructions of female thinness. Content analysis revealed four main portrayals of thin models as: successful professionals, victims, ugly, and threatening. A closer look at some representative article extracts should provide more insight into their constructions of the extreme female thinness.

For instance, broadsheet articles that were coded as portraying thin models as 'successful professionals' included the following phrases:

*The Guardian, September 21, 2006:*

'[...] with her lanky build and androgynous figure, O'Connor, 28, is clearly naturally thin.' 'Her painterly angular features have made her hugely successful and she has worked for most top designers [...]'

*The Times, September 21, 2006:*

'Suddenly the models look less like hapless victims and more like consummate professionals.'

*The Times, September 23, 2006:*

'In fact, they are naturally thin young women who because of the business they're in probably keep an eye on what they eat.'

*The Daily Telegraph, September 19, 2006:*

'I am fine. I am healthy. I eat, says 'too thin' Lily.'

'The 5ft 11in model recently achieved three A-levels and two AS-levels and has won a place at King's College, Cambridge, where she plans to start a degree in social and political science next year [...]'

*The Observer, February 11, 2007:*

'The fashion industry should not be singled out, when other professions which have skinny women in prominent roles, such as broadcasting and acting, are also influential'

These articles invoke a discourse of the very thin female body as pertaining to success and achievement. Phrases, such as 'painterly angular features,' are found in close connection with 'hugely successful.' Masculine attributes ('lanky build and androgynous figure') also contribute to this discourse of agency and accomplishment. The thin female body is linked to accomplished professionalism ('consummate professionals'), whereby self-control is

applauded as being part of the professionalism exhibited ('because of the business they're in'). Elsewhere, academic achievement and ambition is also linked to representations of thinness: words such as 'achieved' and 'has won' are used in the description of the famously thin model, Lily Cole. At the same time, the decision to enclose the words 'too thin' in quotation marks, works towards distancing the broadsheet article from the kind of representational harassment employed by the tabloids. Even within cases that acknowledge a problem related to the visibility of very thin women, the link between thinness and achievement remains intact; in an effort to detract blame from the fashion industry, the final quote from an article extracted from the *Observer* deploys a discourse which acknowledges female professional prowess in close association to thinness – there is no apparent motivation to disassociate 'skinny' from 'prominent.'

On the other hand, the tabloid articles' constructions of extreme female thinness rely on diverse types of discourses. First, there is the portrayal of the thin models as unattractive:

*The Daily Star*, September 25, 2006:

'We lurve curves; Bigger catwalk babes after stick-insect ban'

*The Sun*, February 13, 2007:

'Skinny models look horrible.'

'Models starve themselves which is pointless and unattractive.'

*The Sun*, September 21, 2006:

'Here, Page 3 favorite Keeley Hazell explains why she would never give up her curves to look like the waifish London Fashion Week stick thin 'size zero' model Lily Cole'

'I often overhear blokes looking at skinny girls saying they would be afraid they would snap if they had sex with them.'

*The Daily Star*, February 16, 2007:

'Sexy Eleanor Glynn has got the kind of figure to make fellas' jaws drop and women go green with envy. And the reigning Miss England – whose stats are an impressive 34C-24-34 – aims to keep it that way, despite pressure from fashionistas to be stick-thin.'

In this case, acute thinness is straightforwardly described as visually unpleasant: thin models are deemed 'horrible' and their state of thinness 'pointless and unattractive.' Most remarkably though, the abovementioned quotes seem to juxtapose the unattractiveness of the thin models with alternative ideals of beauty: sexiness and curviness provide the points of contrast to this specific construction of the thin female body. Epithets such as 'waifish,'

'stick thin' and 'stick-insect' are directly contrasted to the words 'sexy' and 'bigger catwalk babes.' In an effort to discredit the thin female ideal, these tabloid articles rely on discourses of a sexually-charged beauty ideal by normalizing figures such as *The Sun's* 'Page 3' women, or beauty pageant contestants. Not surprisingly, this alternative beauty discourse is also linked to men – female thinness is understood here as being unattractive primarily to men (who 'would be afraid [the skinny girls] would snap if they had sex with them'), and as lacking the attribute of making 'fellas' jaws drop.'

The other two major approaches to extreme thinness, particularly found in tabloid articles, can be identified in the models' portrayal as threatening or as victims. Both cases are inextricably connected to the articles' parallel concern about girls and young women's body image and health. While the first case obviously does not include models in the pool of vulnerable young women, the second case (i.e. models as victims) does. The following quotes provide examples for the portrayal of models as threatening:

*The Daily Star*, February 7, 2007:

'The skeleton crew.' (Headline)

'[...] yet again the catwalk is set to be the march of the walking skeleton.'

'[...] the stage is set for hollow eyes, crater-like cheekbones, jutting hip bones and sunken chests.'

*The Daily Star*, September 16, 2006:

'DEATH OF THE SKINNY MODEL; Plea for a ban on Size 0' (Headline)

'BARE BONES: Rolling Stone Sir Mick's daughter Lizzy Jagger' (Caption)

'NOWEIGH: Skinny Lily Cole is seen as a bad role model' (Caption)

*The Daily Mail*, January 26, 2007:

'Fashion fails to act over the size zero freak show.' (Headline)

*The Daily Mail*, September 21, 2006:

'[...] her back was so cadaverous, her arms and shoulders so eaten away [...]

'But what I found most infuriating of all, and which made me want to run onto the catwalk last night at Biba with a 'Thin scum!' banner, was how the fashion industry has closed ranks.'

Here, the discourse invoked pertains to a sense of danger or fear. Thin models are called 'the skeleton crew,' matched by descriptions such as 'cadaverous,' 'eaten away,' 'bare bones,' 'noweigh' and 'hollow eyes, crater-like cheekbones, jutting hip bones and sunken

chests.’ The choice of words assemble zombie-like female figures, whereby death is not only projected by the thin female bodies, but in one particular example, it is also wished upon them (*The Daily Star’s* headline reads ‘DEATH OF THE SKINNY MODEL’). This sense of hostility is also apparent in another example, when the tabloid article’s author expresses the desire to hold up a sign on the catwalk, reading ‘Thin scum!’ In these cases, thin models are not simply portrayed as deathly – they are also represented as legitimate targets of attack. Moreover, parallel to constructing female thinness as morbidly terrifying, the articles also exhibit a direct hit on the fashion industry: ‘fashion fails to act over size zero freak show’ and ‘what I found most infuriating of all [...] was how the fashion industry has closed ranks.’ Hence, as illustrated also by the content analysis results, the tabloid articles’ construction of female thinness relies on a frame of blame that deems the institution of fashion as responsible for allowing these kinds of images to harm girls and young women. What is interesting here is that within this construction of female thinness as threatening, models are not included in the pool of young women that the articles are concerned about – rather, they are set aside as ‘freaks’ and most importantly, as part of the industry targeted.

Alternatively, in the articles coded as portraying the thin models as victims, models do become part of the concern. The following extracts offer examples of the ‘victim’ portrayal:

*The Sun*, September 23, 2006:

‘These young women are nothing more than coat hangers. They are stripped of their dignity, their femininity and their personality for the dubious honor of galumphing down a catwalk wearing unsuitable shoes and silly frocks.’

‘Some of these girls looked positively starved, with sunken cheekbones and hungry eyes.’

*The Daily Mail*, February 19, 2007:

‘the model [...] was crawling up and down the catwalk’

‘I asked two or three whether they knew their BMI or what they weighed, and received only uncomprehending stares’

*The Sun* January 26, 2007:

‘Starving to size zero has given me bones like cripple aged 90’ (Headline)

These examples construct the thin female body as falling prey to the fashion industry – once again, these constructions are engulfed within a specific frame of blame, wherein the target is the fashion industry. Some text directly acknowledges this state of victimhood: one

article for example claims that the models 'are stripped from their dignity, their femininity and their personality,' while another's headline reads 'Starving to size zero has given me bones like cripple aged 90.' But there are also the less explicit phrases such as 'positively starved,' 'hungry eyes,' 'crawling up and down' and 'uncomprehending stares,' which draw on a discourse of despair, constructing female thinness as the hopeless and devastating result of exploitation. Thin models are represented as expressing this despair through their very body: their eyes ('hungry'), their posture and movement ('crawling') and even their mind ('uncomprehending') are seen as surrendered to the exploits of the fashion industry.

Before proceeding to a discussion of the results, it is important to also look at some extracts illustrating the articles' predominant concern about the effects of images of thinness on young women. The following examples stem from both broadsheet and tabloid articles:

*The Times, February 3, 2007:*

'The biggest conclusion I've come to is that we women are doing it to ourselves. And that, as mothers, if we're constantly on a diet and scrutinizing ourselves, why are we surprised when we pass on that neurosis on our daughters?'

*The Times, October 15, 2006:*

'Young women starve themselves for all sorts of reasons but mostly, I think, as a muddle-headed response to their own internal chaos [...]'

*The Times, January 29, 2007:*

'It is, of course, very easy to blame the nebulous "fashion industry" for how teenage girls look, think, and feel.'

'Tessa Jowell, the Culture Secretary, has missed no opportunity in lecturing us on the "tyranny of thinness".'

*The Daily Mail, February 19, 2007:*

'Surely they must know that their money is going towards the creation of longing and dissatisfaction in the minds of young women.'

*The Daily Mail, January 26, 2007:*

'I am concerned about the sheer volume of letters I get every week from women who are either suicidal, or who merely just feel bad about themselves. [...] You think your daughter is safe at school? Here's a letter from Emma, who attends public school in West London. 'If you go in the toilets after lunch, it smells of sick [...]'

*The Sun, January 26, 2007:*

'The [model] started starving herself at the age of 12, when she began to dream of a life on the catwalk. At 15, she was diagnosed with anorexia but felt she had to stay super-skinny to get work [...]'

On the one hand, in the case of first two broadsheet examples, we see a discourse that works towards individualizing the problem. The concern is present – girls and young women are indeed represented in a state of crisis through words such as 'neurosis' or 'internal chaos' – but the blame is detracted from the fashion industry and redirected on a focus on individuals, whether the mothers, or the girls themselves. The third example is representative of those broadsheet articles that in spite of problematizing young femininity, do not explicitly assign anyone responsible for it, but make sure again to detract blame from the fashion industry by discrediting official pronouncements of such blame: politician Tessa Jowell is presented as annoyingly 'lecturing' about an issue that is deemed irrelevant. On the other hand, extracts from tabloid articles problematize young femininity by relying on a frame of institutional blame. Young women's 'longing and dissatisfaction,' their 'suicidal' feelings, as well as their self-damaging behavior are inextricably linked to the images produced by the fashion industry. The tabloid articles' solution for such a crisis in young femininity is suggested through a discourse of control and regulation of such images, directly reflected by their opposition to London Fashion Week's decision not to regulate.

## **DISCUSSION**

The previous pages have illustrated that the articles studied construct extreme female thinness in four distinct ways. First, the broadsheet articles' construction draws on discourses of personal achievement and success. This construction resonates with Bordo's (2003: 171-3) understanding of the extremely thin female body as pertaining to a sense of autonomy, self-mastery and an appropriation of 'masculine' resolve. The 'masculine' inscriptions are not only apparent in the professionalism attributed to the models, but also in instances describing their very bodies (e.g. 'androgynous'). This particular construction of acute thinness works well in a frame that seeks to relieve blame from the fashion industry, representing the protagonists of the debate as lively actors, and not passive victims.

Conversely, the tabloid articles' most frequent construction of the extremely thin woman, found within their representation of models as victims, resonates with Bordo's



(2003: 26) other, parallel understanding of the exceptionally thin female body as 'suggesting powerlessness and contraction of female social space.' By constructing female thinness in association to discourses of hopelessness and submission, the tabloid articles' prosecution of the fashion industry becomes easier and more legitimate. Similarly, the third construction of acute female thinness – related to the models' portrayal as threatening – also serves to legitimize the tabloids' attack of the fashion industry. However, in this case, the very thin female body works almost as a personification of the target of blame. Extreme thinness is constructed as deviant, facilitating the tabloids' call for more regulation in the fashion world. This echoes Bartky (1990) and McKinley's (1999) theories on the disciplinary practices on the female body, whereby femininity, in association to weight, are understood as functional categories for inscribing a deviant status on the female body.

Furthermore, the fourth construction – related to the tabloids' portrayal of models as unattractive – also works towards inscribing a deficient status on the bodies of very thin women (Bartky 1990). In this case, tabloids rely on an alternative beauty discourse that praises sexiness. The normalization of a sexually pleasing femininity works as a disciplinary force on the very thin female body, which is seen as lacking the praised attribute of sexual desirability. This specific construction of acute female thinness resonates with Saukko's (2006) understanding of popular discourses on the anorexic female body, as stimulating women's anxieties about lacking a sense of adaptability and care; in this case, the models' thinness deems them inadaptable to the inscriptions of the ideal praised by the text.

Although the latter construction of extreme female thinness is associated with a concern on how women should be ideally represented, the other three constructions are found in close association to a concern about young femininity, whether regarding the body image of young women in general, or the wellbeing and health of the models, or both. The 'Reviving Ophelia' discourse is present in both tabloids and broadsheets, feeding into a popular understanding of girls and young women in crisis. However, the discourse is deployed in two diverse manners. The tabloids' invocation of 'Reviving Ophelia' provides a rightful impetus for their opposition to London Fashion Week's refusal to regulate. By relying on a discourse that constructs girls and young women as vulnerable to outside influences, and incapable of self-control, these articles justify their own call for regulation. This echoes Mazzarella and Pecora's (2007) findings, whereby the media's representation of girls-in-crisis denies young femininity any agency by attempting to regulate their alleged crisis. Alternatively, in the case of broadsheet articles, the resolution of such a crisis is not to be

met through external control, but through individual or familial self-regulation. This resonates with an understanding of the 'Reviving Ophelia' discourse that stresses young femininity as a project to be shaped by means of individualized self-work (Aapola et al 2005).

Not surprisingly, the two opposing uses of the girls-in-crisis discourse operate within distinct frames of blame. Here, it is helpful to use Lawrence's (2004) 'systemic' and 'individualizing' frames. Firstly, tabloid articles rely on the girls-in-crisis discourse in the context of a 'systemic' frame of blame, whereby the responsibility for the problem is focused on the fashion institution. Alternatively, in those instances that broadsheet articles do assign responsibility in relation to a concern about young women, this is done through an 'individualizing' frame, whereby individuals rather than institutions are deemed responsible for the problem and its resolution. Ultimately, these frames are closely related to specific constructions of extreme female thinness and their pertaining discourses.

One of the objectives of this research was to evaluate whether the British national newspaper coverage of London Fashion Week's refusal to ban very thin models from its shows pertains to what Gill (2007) describes as a postfeminist media landscape, wherein feminist and antifeminist ideas exist simultaneously. Once again, a dichotomy of tabloid and broadsheet coverage is most appropriate. Although the broadsheet coverage of the event does not contain the contradictions pertaining to a postfeminist media landscape, the articles' analysis provides evidence that the coverage stemming from tabloid newspapers can indeed be situated within a postfeminist media culture.

The tabloids' predominantly unsupportive position towards London Fashion Week's decision to continue employing extremely thin models, can be understood as an appropriation of a feminist concern about the effects of the propagation of an exceptionally thin female ideal on young women in general, and about the representation and treatment of women in the fashion industry, and by default, the media. This feminist appropriation can be also understood as a call to expand the range of women's acceptability in the popular and much covered fashion world. However, this noble intention to transform the fashion industry into a more inclusive culture, takes a wrong turn. It ends up instead as a call for *more* regulation, which is primarily reinforced by the problematic construction of the texts' female actors (the models). As illustrated in the previous pages, the models are frequently represented as the powerless casualties of the fashion world, and are denied any form of

agency. In other occasions, they are represented as a personification of the villain of the story (the fashion industry) by way of their very construction as dangerous and threatening. Elsewhere, models are portrayed as unattractive, negatively compared to more sexually arousing alternatives. All three constructions can hardly be deemed feminist in as much as they deny female agency, inscribe a deviant status on the female body or attempt to further regulate the thin female body by suggesting a sexualized alternative. Hence, in what McRobbie (2004) terms 'double entanglement,' the tabloids' seemingly feminist opposition to London Fashion Week's employment of very thin models is paired with representations of femininity that would reasonably make feminists such as Bartky (1990) quite critical. Ultimately, the coexistence of (i) feminist and antifeminist ideas, and (ii) an assumed disavowal of the fashion industry's control over the limited range of representations of femininity alongside the articles' own regulative constructions of the models, is what makes the tabloid coverage part of a postfeminist media culture.

### **Limitations and proposals for further development**

The final part of this discussion section is dedicated to considering the limitations of this research, suggesting possibilities for the project's further development. The main objective of this research was to look at representations of extreme female thinness and the discourses they invoked. Firstly, the time span of the research was limited because of the recentness of the issue covered. In the time frame given for preparing this dissertation, only two Fashion Weeks had occurred in the context of the public debate on the acceptability of models according to their size. Although content analysis controlled for the articles' relevance to each event, apart from a difference in the amount of broadsheet and tabloid coverage, no other differences were noted between the two time frames. Further research should focus on the possible changes in the representations and discourses invoked across the coverage of future events.

Furthermore, the research plan did not include an analysis of accompanying visual material. This exclusion was inevitable because of the resource used to retrieve the articles studied – although LexisNexis News did provide indicators of accompanying photographs, it did not include the actual image, making it impossible to know anything about the image, except for its caption. In his work on analyzing media discourses, Matheson (2005: 110-8) argues that apart from written or oral texts, images are also organized in systems of meaning, which can indeed be explored by methods of discourse analysis initially developed

to explain verbal and written language. Images are thus another form of language – visual language – and possess what Fairclough (1995: 2) defines as a 'signifying power:' the power to construct things in a variety of ways. Hence, a further development for the present study would involve an emphasis on the photographs accompanying the articles studied. Almost all the captions encountered during this analysis, referred to either famous models or extremely thin celebrities; this inevitably raised an unfulfilled analytical yearning to find out how these pictures were organized, and in what relation to their matching text?

A related problem of this research is associated with the standardized layout of the texts. In the chapter describing the methods used to conduct this research, I praised LexisNexis' standardized format of presentation, claiming that it would facilitate the coding process, which it largely did. However, an article's layout is yet another communicative aspect that needs to be included in the analysis of the article, and its construction of meaning. Hence, another further development of the project would involve an emphasis on the original layout of the articles, paying attention to titles, subtitles, casing etc.

Finally, this research is also limited in as much as it has not focused at all on the voices of the main actors presented in the articles; namely, the models. Fairclough (1995: 79) suggests that 'a single news item commonly weaves together [...] a complex web of voices,' which serve to represent distinct discourses. Some articles included quotes from models, which were used in the text in various ways. The discourses produced through these quotes should be further explored in association with the present findings.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study sought to investigate the UK newspaper coverage of London Fashion Week's refusal to ban very thin models from its catwalks. The focus was put on the articles' positioning within the debate on the acceptable weight of female models, as well as their constructions of extreme female thinness and their related discourses. The study concluded that there were differences between the broadsheet and tabloid coverage of the issue. Firstly, broadsheet articles were generally found to be supportive of the decision not to ban. They relied on constructions of acute female thinness that related to discourses of personal achievement and success. These fitted in the broadsheets' intention to detract blame from the fashion industry. On the other hand, tabloid articles were found to be slightly more interested in the issue than the broadsheets, and were generally observed to oppose London Fashion Week's decision not to ban. Tabloid articles also relied on a more diverse range of constructions of the very thin female body, which were associated with discourses of despair and submission, danger and threat, or visual and sexual undesirability. These constructions were also found to normally reinforce or legitimize the tabloids' attack of the fashion industry. Finally, the tabloid coverage's simultaneous appropriations of feminism, by way of its initial position, and antifeminist ideas, by way of its constructions of thinness, resulted in assigning it as part of what Gill (2007) defines as a postfeminist media culture.

The limitations of this research were outlined as pertaining to the time frame studied, the omission of an analysis of visual material and layout of the articles, as well as the lack of emphasis on the voices of the actors present in the texts. These limitations also suggest the possibilities for the further development of the specific research project. Further research should also consider the possibility of studying a diverse range of material, stemming from different media outlets.

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**Online resources:**

'BMI Classification,' World Health Organization website:  
[http://www.who.int/bmi/index.jsp?introPage=intro\\_3.html](http://www.who.int/bmi/index.jsp?introPage=intro_3.html) (accessed on 17/08/2007).



## **APPENDIX 1**

### **Coding Book**

**Information and instructions:** This coding book is part of a research project on the UK national newspaper coverage of London Fashion Week and its refusal to ban very thin models from its catwalks. The study looks at the texts' positioning against London Fashion Week's decision. It also looks at the different representations of the thin woman. The coding book is designed to support the coding process. The following definitions describe the variables used in the context of this study. It is important to base your coding on these definitions only, and following the associated instructions, regardless of any prior familiarity with the variables and regardless of any previous experience with content analysis coding. The aim is to read the articles and find textual elements (words or phrases) that relate to the variables indicated. The first task is to establish a familiarity with the variables described. Then, each article should be read twice. During the second time over, attention should be paid for the presence of the variables listed on the coding sheet. The variables could exist in the title, within the texts (from words, entire phrases, abbreviations etc.) or even in captions describing accompanying photographs. Once values for the corresponding variables have been identified, they should be marked on the coding sheet. If the question cannot be answered for some reason, then the option 'non determinable' should be used.

#### **Definitions:**

Date of publication: This refers to the year the article was published. The date the article was published can be found at the beginning of each article.

Type of newspaper: This refers to whether the newspaper the article was published in is a 'broadsheet' or a 'tabloid.' The newspaper source of the article can be found at the beginning of each article. The *Daily Telegraph*, *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Independent* and *Times* should be marked as broadsheet. The *Daily Mail*, *Daily Star*, *Express*, *Sun* and *Mirror* should be marked as tabloid.

Position of the article: This refers to the article's opinion on a subject.

Portrayal: This refers to the way the article constructs a certain subject/actor according to single words or phrases.

## **APPENDIX 2**

### **Coding frame**

#### **1. Date of publication**

- (1) 2006
- (2) 2007

#### **2. Source of publication**

- (1) Broadsheet
- (2) Tabloid

#### **3. What is the article's position towards London Fashion Weeks decision not to ban models according to their size?**

- (1) Supportive
- (2) Not supportive
- (3) Neutral position
- (4) Not determinable

#### **4. Does the article refer to a problem related to the presence of very thin models in fashion shows? (If answers (3) or (4) are chosen, please skip the next two questions and proceed with question #7)**

- (1) Yes
- (2) Partially
- (3) No
- (4) Not determinable

#### **5. What is the nature of the problem it refers to?**

- (1) Deteriorating body image of girls and young women, with possible implications for health
- (2) Concern about models' wellbeing and health
- (3) Both (1) and (2)
- (4) Unrealistic representation of women
- (5) Other
- (6) Not determinable

#### **6. Who does the article blame for the problem it refers to?**

- (1) Fashion industry
- (2) Individuals
- (3) No assignment of blame
- (4) Not determinable

#### **7. How does the article portray very thin models?**

- (1) As victims
- (2) As unattractive/ugly
- (3) As threatening
- (4) As successful professionals
- (5) Other
- (6) Not determinable

### APPENDIX 3

#### **Samples of articles used in the critical discourse analysis**

(Source: LexisNexis News Online)

The Sun (England)

**September** 23, 2006 Saturday

Let's have fashion models with a bit of meat on them

**BYLINE:** Lorraine Kelly

**SECTION:** OPINION

**LENGTH:** 475 words

I AM fed up to my back teeth of the cynical fashion business trying to justify the use of chronically skinny models to sell their wares.

These young women are nothing more than moving coat hangers.

They are stripped of their dignity, their femininity and their personality for the dubious honour of galumphing down a catwalk wearing unsuitable shoes and silly frocks.

During London Fashion Week, most of the backstage and front-of-house gossip wasn't to do with the clothes -but the models wearing them.

Some of these girls looked positively starved, with sunken cheekbones and hungry eyes.

Their legs were whip-thin and their arms were wasted away.

Breasts were a rarity and hip bones jutted out like sharp blades.

With the notable exception of the likes of Ben De Lisi, John Rocha and Jasper Conran, many of the highly strung designers create clothes that are virtually unwearable and are also impossibly teeny tiny.

Only those models with the figures of pre-pubescent boys are able to squeeze into the creations.

Unless they just so happen to be one of the very few women who are born like that, models need to starve themselves to get work. Some subsist on a diet of paper tissues, zero-calorie fizzy drinks and fags.

Hungrier

Drugs are rife and there's always someone younger, thinner and hungrier (for food as well as success) who will take your place.

I recently interviewed the glorious Anne Hathaway, who stars in The Devil Wears Prada - a film all about the insanity of the fashion business.

Anne is a perfect UK size ten but she has been asked in the past to lose **weight** for film roles.

She refused and so far it hasn't affected her career.

But when 22-year-old South American model Luisel Ramos was told she would make it big if she became even thinner, she subsisted for three months on a diet of green leaves and Diet Coke. Last month she stepped off the catwalk in Uruguay, suffered a massive heart attack and died.

I wonder if having been a corpse for several weeks the fashionistas would consider her thin enough now.

A small backlash has now begun, with models in Madrid recently being refused work if they were seriously underweight.

This might have a gradual effect on the rest of the fashion industry but so far nothing has really changed.

A good start would be to stop glamorising ultra-thin celebrities such as Victoria Beckham, Lindsay Lohan and Nicole Richie and all the others who look like seven-year-old boys who've raided their mum's wardrobe and make-up bag.

It's time for a change. We don't want any more tragedies like Luisel.

I'M looking forward to having Paul O'Grady back on my telly on Monday.

He is not only one of the most delightful people in showbiz but also possesses that rare gift of being effortlessly charming.

I've missed Paul's razor-sharp wit and his disarming way of getting his guests to reveal all kinds of interesting secrets.

**LOAD-DATE:** September 23, 2006

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**PUBLICATION-TYPE:** Newspaper

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The Times (London)

**September** 23, 2006, Saturday

Thin argument does a fat lot of good

**BYLINE:** Lisa Armstrong Fashion Editor

**SECTION:** HOME NEWS; Pg. 31

**LENGTH:** 653 words

In case it had escaped your attention, we've managed to get through another **London Fashion Week**. You know the one: it has designers, models, Julien Macdonald attempting to lure protesters onto his catwalk through gratuitous use of fur and next season's clothes, variations of which will filter into the high street and the wardrobes of millions over the coming months.

Except that this time we hardly got to hear about the clothes or the designers.

Even the models at the eye of the furore became submerged beneath a tidal wave of simplification and cant.

It all began three weeks ago when Madrid Fashion Week banned size 00 models.

Actually, a few months beforehand, a wedding-dress exhibition in Barcelona had vetoed models below a UK size 10. But no one took much notice of the Barcelona announcement - perhaps there was more competition for column inches that week than the Liberal Democrat conference has provided.

It may be unfair to cast aspersions on Madrid's motives, although its statement about not wanting fashion to be associated with promoting unhealthy images of young girls whiffs of brand control rather than of the milk of human kindness. It certainly put Madrid Fashion Week, a hitherto overlooked event, on the media map.

By last weekend, the British Fashion Council was being urged to follow Madrid's example. When its chairman, Stuart Rose, suggested this would be impractical, not least because prohibition does nothing but give the outlawed a certain cachet, the row stepped up. Lily Cole and Erin O'Connor were pictured beside banner headlines suggesting that they were anorexic (and by extension, promoting anorexia). In fact, they are naturally thin young women who because of the business they're in probably keep an eye on what they eat. So did my grandmother, and **London Fashion Week** didn't exist in 1937. It seems ironic that in their concern for young women, some of the press are causing two of them considerable distress.

Yesterday, the London Evening Standard ran a name-and-shame feature, featuring members of the British Fashion Council (which comprises most senior fashion journalists, including its own).

Just as six years ago when Tessa Jowell, who was then Minister for Women, held her body image "summit" with the fashion industry and media, two separate issues are being conflated: the unhappiness of a minority of girls in a cynical industry and the serious **weight** issues that face the West. A reminder of what these are: about 2 per cent of the UK population are anorexic (90 per cent of them women); 23 per cent are clinically obese (as of 2002).

Politically though, attacking the morbidly overweight is risky -perhaps that explains the venom about skinny women. Moreover, scarcity is always prized and if as a whole we're getting fatter perhaps it's inevitable that we will aspire to, or be fascinated by, being underweight.

As countless studies have shown, eating disorders cannot be contracted by exposure to photographs of thin people. Of course it is reprehensible when designers or magazines use skeletons -mainly because it is a tragedy for the individual girl involved and not because it tips thousands of women into starvation mode. Most of us are sufficiently balanced not to want to look like a cadaver.

What I yearn to understand is why we women have subjected ourselves throughout history to corsets, footbinding, waxing, arsenic and starvation -evidence for which exists even in the Middle Ages. For once, we can't blame most men.

Instead we need to look into ourselves and ask why it is that the circulation of celebrity magazines with their faux concern for the "too" thin and the "too" fat continues to soar and why newspapers that berate Cole and O'Connor have their own unhealthy diet -of pictures of Nicole Richie, Paris Hilton and Nicole Kidman.

Still, while the debate continues to be waged on such a simplistic level, I don't suppose we will.

Janice Turner, page 24

**LOAD-DATE:** September 23, 2006

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**PUBLICATION-TYPE:** Newspaper

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