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Aesthetic labouring and the female entrepreneur: ‘Entrepreneurship that wouldn’t chip your nails’

Katrina Pritchard¹, Kate Mackenzie Davey² and Helen Cooper²

1: School of Management, Swansea University, Bay Campus, Fabian Way, Swansea, SA1 8EN.

2: Department of Organizational Psychology, Birkbeck, University of London, Malet Street, London, WC1E 7HX.

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Contact: k.l.pritchard@swansea.ac.uk

Abstract

Recognising significant interrelations between neoliberal and postfeminist discourses, we advance understandings of constructions of female entrepreneurs by unpacking their visual representation and exploring the role of aesthetic labour. Given the impact of contemporary media, we focus on key images integral to the marketing of Mattel’s Entrepreneur Barbie as a postfeminist ‘cultural motif’ (Duffy et al., 2017: 262) and investigate how these representations of female entrepreneurship are consumed. First, we highlight the practical demands and emotional risks of the aesthetic labour required to achieve such postfeminist glamour. Second, links between conventional femininity and entrepreneurial success are both celebrated and challenged, highlighting perceived limits to achievement. Finally, we unpack understandings of the relations between entrepreneurialism and aesthetic labour to move beyond assumptions of the instrumental power of the makeover. Our findings thus, enrich understandings of the consumption of postfeminist images of entrepreneurs.

Introduction

Neoliberalist and postfeminist discourse are shaping contemporary working lives, with an entrepreneurial sensitivity conceptually embedded in both (Rottenberg, 2014; Lewis et al., 2018). We recognise this ‘compelling’ (Lewis et al., 2017: 215) relationship and respond to calls for investigation (Adamson, 2017) to advance understandings of constructions of recognisable female entrepreneurs; both their visual representation and role of aesthetic labour in this context. With others (Ahl and Marlow, 2018; Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis, 2017), we argue that through these discourses, ‘success’ for female entrepreneurs is presented as a personal triumph. Here we are not dealing with success in the normative sense of performance. Rather, as Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis (2017) outline, both neoliberal and postfeminist constructions of success emphasise personal responsibility to celebrate the empowered entrepreneurial woman taking control of her life and career (Lewis et al., 2018). Furthermore, the postfeminist focus on aesthetics highlights a woman’s image as key to both achieving and demonstrating recognisable entrepreneurial success (Mavin and Grandy, 2016; Sullivan and Delaney, 2017). Committing to this vision of success without compromising a natural femininity is premised in equality of opportunity (Ahl and Marlow, 2018) offering the possibility of ‘having it all’ to women who choose to make the effort (Byrne et al. 2018).

This emphasis on personal responsibility for image highlights the significance of aesthetic labour (Stevens, 2012, Elias et al., 2017) in understanding the construction of the recognisably successful female entrepreneur. Conceptually aesthetic labour (Hancock and Tyler, 2007; Witz

et al., 2003) addresses the often unrecognised work to achieve the ‘right look’, particularly when this benefits an employing organisation. Here, we empirically reposition aesthetic labour in the neoliberal context of entrepreneurial work, where the subject performs the labour and is expected to reap the rewards. We suggest a need to consider how, through this commodification of the self (Brown, 2017; Rose and Miller, 2013), a woman’s aesthetic labour becomes critical to shaping her entrepreneurial venture. We build on Gill’s (2008: 42) observation of contemporary media’s emphasis on appearance as the ‘primary source of women’s capital’ and others (Twigg, 2010; Kelan, 2013) who highlight concerns regarding image consumption. Certainly image and reading of image are increasingly central to gender debates, from McRobbie’s (2004) classic study to Chen’s more recent suggestion that ‘popular women’s culture is an ideal subject for criticism and critique’ (2013: 450). We therefore, review how representations of female entrepreneurship are consumed and explore the implications of aesthetic labour for understandings of recognisable success for female entrepreneurs (Elias et al., 2017; Warhurst and Nickson, 2009).

Our exploration of female entrepreneurship as a postfeminist achievement within a neoliberal framing of success focuses on a particular ‘cultural motif’ (Duffy et al., 2017: 262): Mattel’s Barbie¹. Barbie regularly features in news stories (Valenti, 2015; Elsesser, 2016), across social media (Sam and Mickey, 2012), as the subject of exhibitions (Les Arts Decoratif, 2016) and documentaries (Channel 4, 2017; Nevins, 2018). Barbie is part of contemporary ‘media spectacle’ (Tan, 2011: 169) and so is significant in how ‘gendered discourses saturate our society and guide the way we think of ourselves, respond to others and negotiate identity in our interactions’ (Mackenzie Davey, 2008: 654). Previous research on Barbie explored her impact on children’s understandings of gender roles (Martincic and Bhatnagar, 2012; Sherman and Zerbrigen, 2014), body aesthetics (Frederick et al., 2008) and sexuality (Dobson, 2015).

Indeed, Barbie has become shorthand for a specific kind of femininity (Brown, 2017) and regarded as a well-established cultural phenomenon (Rogers, 1999; Toffoletti, 2007; Czarniawska and Rhodes, 2006). We focus on Entrepreneur Barbie (EBarbie hereafter) from the ‘I can be’ career range. She was launched in February 2014, following an appearance in a controversial glamour shot on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, which prompted much debate vis-a-vis gender politics (via #unapologetic, Elliot, 2014). Our research focuses on key images integral to EBarbie’s marketing, which attracted considerable media attention. The three images explored include an image of EBarbie, of ten real-life female entrepreneurs appointed as Barbie’s CIOs (Chief Inspiration Officers) and of a female entrepreneur who modelled for a special edition EBarbie. Collectively these offered the opportunity to examine responses to EBarbie, but also to explore the ways relationships with actual female entrepreneurs were positioned in support of EBarbie. We suggest that EBarbie is positioned as an embodiment of the unbounded individual choice of neoliberalism (‘If you can dream it you can be it – anything is possible’, Mattel, 2014) with the feminine glamour celebrated in postfeminist images of women’s achievement (Chen, 2013; Gill, 2012).

Relating this to the entrepreneurship literature, we find that this construction combines elements of a previous emphasis on masculine heroism (Hamilton, 2013) and a softer, feminine lifestyle focus (Lewis, 2013), in a glamorous presentation of the postfeminist entrepreneur. However, recent debates about ‘excessive entrepreneurial femininity’ (Lewis, 2014: 1858) and the ‘diva-entrepreneur’ (Smith, 2009), problematise such subject positions. Here, achieving recognisable success is embedded in the entrepreneurial venture and embodied in the female entrepreneur (Byrne et al. 2018). Indeed, Duffy et al. (2017: 262) suggest viewing postfeminism as an ‘aesthetic phenomenon’ in which the production of the recognisably successful postfeminist entrepreneur requires managing appearance. Accordingly, in focusing

upon EBarbie we have selected a high-profile representation, further reflecting Gill's call for 'studying post feminism as a cultural object' (2017: 607).

Our empirical focus on the visual reflects this aesthetic concern. Building on an emerging body of visual research in both entrepreneurship and gender studies (Duffy and Hund, 2015; Riot, 2013; Swan, 2017), as well as interest in how entrepreneurship is culturally represented (Swail et al., 2014), we aim to advance understandings of constructions of female entrepreneurs. Developing the contribution of existing academic analyses, we utilised photo-elicitation with 58 post-graduate students to explore responses to images associated with EBarbie. Specifically, we are interested in how participants understood these images vis-a-vis recognisable entrepreneurial achievement and the extent to which they made inferences about the aesthetic labour involved. Our overall research questions (RQ) guiding this analysis are:

RQ1: What responses do these images of female entrepreneurship provoke?

RQ2: To what extent are these images convincing as representations of successful female entrepreneurship?

RQ3: How is aesthetic labour understood in relation to the representation of successful female entrepreneurs?

Our analysis explores participant reflections and concerns about the pressure for women entrepreneurs to embody the perfect, postfeminist entrepreneur. We examine their readings of the representation of entrepreneurial success and unpick how participants offered a range of different relationships between aesthetic labour and entrepreneurial achievement. This builds on existing research by enabling us to examine the extent to which participants both engage

with and challenge postfeminism and the implications for their own work practices. In so doing, we reposition the concept of aesthetic labour as exposing anxiety about female entrepreneurial self-presentation. We highlight the additional labour women face in crafting a credible entrepreneurial image and expose the ways such an image may be read.

We begin below with a review of relevant literature on gender and entrepreneurship before turning to consider aesthetic labour in this context. Subsequently we consider existing visual research that has examined female entrepreneurship before setting out our own research approach. We then present our findings before reviewing the implications for both research and practice in our discussion.

Gender and the successful entrepreneur

Understandings of entrepreneurial achievement are embedded in various discursive constructions of success and intersect with different perspectives on gender. Classic standards for entrepreneurial success focus on innovation, growth and profit (Galloway et al., 2015; Tagg and Wilson, 2010), but there has long been concern that ‘this entrepreneur has become normalised as male’ (Galloway et al., 2015: 3). Achieving success draws on the masculine entrepreneur as a ‘mythic, rugged individualist’ (Smith, 2014: 478); this heroic entrepreneur being widely popularised (Radu and Redien-Collot, 2008). In effect, women who perceive success as meritocratic minimise femininity (Lewis, 2014, Stead, 2017). However, as women can never meet the traditional masculinised ideal (Smith, 2010) they are seen as ‘lacking and incomplete men’ (Ahl and Marlow, 2012: 543) and thus, are not recognised as entrepreneurs (Ahl, 2006).

An alternative approach to female entrepreneurship draws on traditional femininity both as the commercial product and in the lifestyle choices through which success is judged, commonly the ‘mumpreneur’ or lifestyle entrepreneur (Duffy and Hund, 2015; Lewis, 2014; Sullivan and Delaney, 2017). This perspective positions success more broadly as encompassing lifestyle goals and reflects that many women’s entrepreneurial ventures remain small-scale generating sufficient but not excessive financial reward (Marlow and McAdam, 2013). Often, entrepreneurial activity is combined with childcare (McGowan et al., 2012; Bjursell and Bäckvall, 2011; Duberley and Carrigan, 2013), in order to author an alternative ‘life project’ that successfully balances work and family roles (Gherardi, 2015). However, the priority of the feminine roles simultaneously enable and constrain as these enterprises appear more marginal; domestic activities are not ‘real’ work (Bourne and Calás, 2013) and certainly not valid entrepreneurial ventures (Ahl, 2006). Overall, in spite of challenges from feminist critiques (Bruni et al., 2004; Calas et al., 2009), the home-based businesses and part-time roles that are more common to women entrepreneurs are deemed less successful (Marlow and McAdam, 2013). Furthermore, the accompanying rhetoric may position failure as resulting from personal shortcomings or lack of ambition (Ahl & Marlow, 2018; Sullivan and Delaney, 2017).

In contrast, the postfeminist entrepreneur stresses feminine difference as complementary to masculine values (Lewis, 2014). This draws, in part, upon the masculinised elements of success, acknowledging the necessity for financial profitability, but expands this to include a particularly feminine consumerist lifestyle (Adamson, 2017). Entrepreneurship is constructed as the potential key to ‘having it all,’ offering women the opportunity to seamlessly blend work and family (Sullivan and Delaney, 2017). So, whilst postfeminism claims to move beyond

gendered norms of entrepreneurial success, the manner in which the feminine can be incorporated within successful entrepreneurial identity remains subject to debate. More specifically, femininity is no longer seen as inherently problematic unless there is too much of it; an ‘excessive entrepreneurial femininity’ (Lewis, 2014: 1858). Such excess can be associated with problematic labelling of women’s entrepreneurial activities such as the dangerous ‘sexual entrepreneur’ (Harvey and Gill, 2011) or the demanding ‘diva’ (Smith, 2014). Indeed, excessive femininity without counterbalancing masculine values results in failure, a position that Lewis (2014) describes as the ‘nonpreneur’. Performing acceptable femininity is in effect, ‘dependent on the successful calibration of masculine and feminine behaviours’ (Lewis, 2018: 28). Success then is constructed as more than simply financial performance and highlights the difficulty for women to balance the embodied performance of merit and the postfeminist ‘sassy, sexy, feminine’ (Kumra and Simpson, 2018: 126).

Postfeminism leaves the masculine ideal unchallenged as based on merit (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008; Ronen, 2018); it focuses upon individual effort enjoining women to ‘lean in’ (Sandberg, 2013). However, merit is not disembodied and women need to work harder on self-management, judge their appearance, avoid the trap of excessive femininity (Lewis, 2014), and ‘present actions as freely chosen’ (Kumra and Simpson, 2018: 129). Furthermore, recognisable entrepreneurial success can itself be reflected through luxury consumerism, from personal grooming to designer clothing and accessories (Smith, 2014; Sullivan and Delaney, 2017, Swan, 2017). As a result, the aesthetic and its associated labour have taken centre stage in postfeminist conceptualisations of female entrepreneurship.

Aesthetic labour and the female entrepreneur

Aesthetics are a defining feature of the recognisable postfeminist entrepreneur; key ‘to entrepreneurial success in a neoliberal landscape’ (Sullivan and Delaney, 2017: 18) as well as an outward demonstration of that success (Mavin and Grandy, 2016; 2018). The ‘aesthetic worker’ is someone who ‘embodies and materialises the organisational aesthetic’ (Stevens, 2012: 147). Aesthetic labour is implicit in postfeminist constructions of the recognisably successful female entrepreneur; through the revival of ‘traditional re-articulations of (groomed, sexual) embodied femininity’ (Kumra and Simpson 2018: 126) and the neoliberal focus on individual responsibility for agentic self-improvement through ‘makeovers’ (Lazar, 2006, Evans and Riley, 2017). This means not only identifying an appropriate ‘look,’ but also labouring to achieve it (Hancock and Tyler, 2007; Witz et al., 2003).

How women present themselves has come under increasing scrutiny via contemporary media (Elias et al., 2017; Warhurst and Nickson, 2009). Perfect hair, teeth and nails (Smith, 2014), flawless complexion (Gill, 2017), choice of clothes and accessories (Smith, 2009; Swan, 2017) to display just the right amount of skin (Jackson et al., 2012) and, of course, a winning smile may all be considered critical to the construction of a woman’s entrepreneurial endeavor (Sullivan and Delaney, 2017). This focus on the importance of the aesthetic in judgments of women’s entrepreneurial success reinforces previous work on additional labour necessary for women (Mavin and Grandy, 2016; Kumra and Simpson, 2018). However, given the postfeminist focus on self-management, our study involves investigating how aesthetic labour can be understood in relation to visual representations of successful female entrepreneurs.

Using visual research to explore aesthetic labour and entrepreneurial success

There is a developing application of visual research to unpack the ‘way representations are constructed’ (Riot, 2013: 283) in entrepreneurial research. This builds on a significant body of research examining how images impact our understandings of work (Bell et al., 2014). The ubiquity of images across contemporary media (Rämö, 2011) and (compared to text) the under-explored impact of image in processes of social construction have also been highlighted (Shortt and Warren, 2017). Given our approach, we focus here on research that has examined “pre-existing” visual artifacts and data that the researcher can collect and interpret in order to reconstruct underlying meaning structures’ (Meyer et al., 2013: 504).

Earlier we highlighted the significance of the aesthetic to postfeminism (Duffy et al., 2017) and examined the emergence of aesthetic labour (Elias et al., 2017) as a useful conceptual lens for unpacking overlapping concerns with neoliberal constructions of success for female entrepreneurs. We have noted Barbie’s cultural significance and the entrepreneurial edition reflects the increasing visibility of entrepreneurship in the media. In this respect Swail et al. (2014: 871), focusing on television, note that ‘entre-tainment plays a significant role in shaping attitudes and intentions of individuals towards entrepreneurship’. Given our focus, Duffy and Hund’s (2015) review of self-presentation on female entrepreneurs on Instagram is of particular note. They highlighted that women were predominantly thin, white, young fashion bloggers who constructed a glamorous image that emphasised consumption. They concluded these women were ‘bound to a capitalist system that reifies particular conceptions of femininity’ (Duffy and Hund, 2015: 9).

In a further consideration of aesthetic concerns, Smith (2014) used the visual analytic approach of photo-montage to identify six visual stereotypes of female entrepreneurs from their websites (business woman, matriarch, diva, CEO fashionista, pink ghetto girl, poor-girl-made-good).

Arguing that there is only one central male stereotype, he observes that the potential availability of six alternative stereotypes for women is less restrictive than others have suggested. This celebration of the absence of a single overarching image of a female entrepreneur contrasts with the problematic associations with many feminine stereotypes (Lewis, 2014; Harvey and Gill, 2011). An alternative interpretation is that while men easily fit the stereotypical entrepreneur mold, women struggle to overcome stereotypical feminine roles in order to be recognised as successful entrepreneurs (Achtenhagen and Welter, 2011; Lewis, 2006). In contrast, Swan's (2017) focus on an individual entrepreneur's website offers an in-depth multi-modal analysis of 'post-feminist stylistics' (p. 286). Given our focus on EBarbie, it is pertinent that Swan (2017) highlights bright pink as strongly associated with postfeminism in popular culture, while also noting designer handbags have become symbolic of 'postfeminist consumerist femininity' (p. 287). A further theme of stylised and isolated (from work and other women) images strike a chord with the representations of EBarbie explored below.

Overall, studies into gendered entrepreneurial identities could be seen as rather late in adopting visual research but the innovative approaches of Swan (2017), Duffy and Hund (2015) and Smith (2014) are at the leading edge of these endeavours. However, whilst these studies place an academic reading of imagery centre stage, our research explores participant interpretation and consumption of images by adopting a photo-elicitation approach. This shift enables a new and complementary contribution to the use of visual methods in entrepreneurial research.

Two studies contributing to methodological developments here are Kelan (2013) and Pritchard and Whiting (2015). Both explore participant interpretations of gendered representations via photo-elicitation. Kelan (2013) explored MBA student positioning in relation to images of business women within an interview-based photo-elicitation process, highlighting how sexual

attractiveness and sexuality were negotiated. In contrast, Pritchard and Whiting (2015) used group photo-elicitation to explore reactions to images of gendered ageing, offering understandings of how acceptable femininity and masculinity are constructed differently across the lifespan. Our research draws on Kelan's (2013) suggestion that post-graduate students undergoing 'identity formation' (p. 46) are a particularly relevant audience with whom to explore such issues, but utilises the group photo-elicitation approach of Pritchard and Whiting (2015).

Methodology and Method

Our research is situated within a social constructionist perspective and applies an interpretive approach so that we can expose constructions of female entrepreneurship. This positioning is reflected in our orientation to the role of the visual in processes of constructing social reality (Rose, 2012). Images are no longer 'windows' (Meyer et al., 2013: 494) which represent or reproduce what already exists, rather images confirm particular understandings of the world while concealing others. Our empirical focus here is the participant response to specific images, enabling us to address the third of Rose's (2012: 19) contributions of visual research in examining the 'three sites of production, the image itself and its audiencing'.

As part of a broader research project starting with EBarbie's launch in February 2014, we collected online coverage and marketing information about EBarbie via daily downloads of text and images over twelve months. In all we collected over 200 media sources and over ten thousand tweets alongside Mattel's own promotional and marketing materials. We observed, first, a consistent use of Mattel's marketing images across the media, both positive reviews and

critiques drew from the same set of imagery. Mattel's marketing was not only based on play value but on implications for the career aspirations of girls (Mattel, 2015). Marketing for EBarbie included launching a LinkedIn page, a 'Barbie Business Bursary' competition, and hosting a twitter 'pink power lunch', all events promoted to adults. Across these the blonde EBarbie appeared as the primary marketing shot of the doll. Second, we noted the campaign linked EBarbie with 'real' female entrepreneurs, appointing ten female entrepreneurs as Barbie's CIOs. The launch press release emphasised this connection with 'a diverse group of female entrepreneurs' (Mattel, 2014). Relatedly, we also observed coverage of a 'special edition' of EBarbie for a particular female entrepreneur. Therefore, while media predominantly used marketing shots of EBarbie, she is also shown with successful female entrepreneurs who lend authenticity to Mattel's message, providing a particularly rich context for exploring entrepreneurial femininity and success.

We explored these images in a research seminar (Pritchard et al., 2014) and, informed by feedback, decided a group photo-elicitation process offered significant potential. From our early explorations outlined above, we focused on the three related images described below. Selecting a small number of images is typical of visual studies deploying photo-elicitation approaches since this allows for the necessary interpretative depth (Meyer et al., 2013; Kelan, 2013). In common with other studies (Kelan, 2013; Swan, 2010), for both copyright and ethical reasons the images concerned are not reproduced within this paper. However, we note that they are widely available (see for example, <https://www.solopress.com/blog/business-marketing/entrepreneur-barbie/>). Because of our observations on the dominance of a relatively small set of images in our data and to address EBarbie's association with 'real' female entrepreneurs, the three images used were:

- the standard full-length marketing shot of EBarbie²
- the announcement of her ten CIOs on the Mattel website
- the main image from a related website of the entrepreneur on whom a special edition EBarbie was modelled.

A more detailed description of these images is offered in table one below.

Table 1: The three images

Image One: EBarbie	Image Two: EBarbie & CIOs	Image Three: Special Edition EBarbie
The image showed a blonde, blue-eyed Barbie ² wearing a pink fitted dress, heels and holding accessories (smartphone, tablet, pink clutch and black briefcase).	This image was a mosaic comprising Barbie (in the centre) surrounded by headshots of the ten women who were ‘appointed’ as her Chief Inspiration Officers. These CIOs were racially diverse, young and smiling.	This was from the home page of the website of a female entrepreneur, subject of a ‘Special Edition’ of the doll. The image showed her wearing a red dress, smiling and seated on a black leather, office style chair.

Our 58 participants were a mix of mature part-time and full-time students attending a master’s course within the business school of a UK university. As already discussed, Kelan (2013) has suggested that such participants might be viewed as in a transitional identity state rendering their positioning of, and reaction to, such images as being of particular interest. Furthermore, in common with broader observations of Higher Education, entrepreneurial career aspirations were embedded in the University’s employability agenda (Farny et al., 2016). Indeed, in reflecting on their use of student participants, Swail et al. (2014: 865) suggest they ‘carry the hopes of those that seek to build more entrepreneurially dynamic societies’. In this vein, students can be seen as both direct (as entrepreneurial subjects) and indirect (as users of entrepreneurial services) consumers of discourses. Moreover, many commentators have highlighted concerns with the gendering of business school curricula suggesting exploring

relationships between postfeminism and entrepreneurship with this group could be particularly fruitful (Simpson, 2006).

Our research activity ensued at the end of a research workshop delivered by the authors. Following institutional ethical approval, we ensured it was clear that participation in the research was voluntary and 58 participants (both male and female) provided responses. All were given unique identifiers should they wish to withdraw later. Participants were given a printout of the images (black and white) with a space alongside each to annotate or write comments. Participants were asked to state their gender if they wished, but no further identifiers were requested. The group was predominantly female, and of the returns: 12 did not specify a gender, 11 identified as male and 35 as female. As participants looked at the printouts, colour images were also displayed. We adopted an open, informal approach by asking participants, ‘What are your impressions of these images?’ We worked through one image at a time, allowing approximately 10 minutes per image with a further 10 minutes at the end for participants to note further reflections. At the end, we shared our impressions and discussed similarities and differences with the participants. However, our analysis focuses only on their completed forms, and verbal discussions were not recorded.

Mindful of our aims and stated research questions, we began with a thematic analysis. All three authors working in parallel undertook an initial descriptive coding of responses by image (Richards, 2009). We then met (several times) to work through our respective analyses and agree next steps. Further analysis subsequently reviewed how our understanding of themes related to each research question, with regular discussions between the authors. This reflexive and iterative analytic process involved a continual ‘to and fro’ between these data, our

understandings of relevant themes and our research questions. This was guided by our social constructionist orientation to these data, as we sought to unpack the ‘socio-cultural contexts, and structural positions, that enable the individual accounts that are provided’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 90).

Recognising the methodological move to examine the consumption of these images, in relation to our first research question (What responses do these images of female entrepreneurship provoke?) we applied Baetans (2013) guide to unpack responses to the images themselves, responses to the images as representation; and finally more personal reactions to the images. However, in relation to our second and third research questions, we were able to explore our analysis in relation to the existing research. This more detailed analysis unpacked judgments of entrepreneurial success and then explored the ways such success was linked to perceptions of aesthetic labour. Accordingly, our analysis drew on participant interpretations of entrepreneurial competence as represented in these images of postfemininity.

Findings

First, we explore participant personal reflections on these images and what they represent, revealing concerns about pressure for women entrepreneurs to embody the perfect, postfeminist entrepreneur and become EBarbie. We go on to examine readings of the images as representations of entrepreneurial success, particularly drawing links with Lewis’s (2014) postfeminist entrepreneur, feminine entrepreneur and nonpreneur. Finally, we unpick a range of different relationships between images of aesthetic labour and judgments of entrepreneurial success exposed in participant comments and highlight the problematic nature both of aesthetic labour and of representing women’s entrepreneurship.

Our analysis is thus presented in three sections:

- Participant reflections (RQ1)
- Representations of entrepreneurial success (RQ2)
- Aesthetic labour and entrepreneurial success (RQ3)

Participant reflections

Using the three lenses of image, representation and reaction (Baetans, 2013), highlights the visual details that informed participant readings, providing a foundation to our later analysis of aesthetic labour and entrepreneurial success. Core themes related to the homogeneity of the images and the relations between EBarbie and real entrepreneurs; the representation of privilege (genetic and financial) and the absences of work. Reactions considered the impact upon expectations of entrepreneurial women or on the kind of entrepreneurial service on offer. In this section, we have drawn links between the responses of our participants and findings from other academic visual analyses.

Image. Examining distinctive qualities of each image, highlighted EBarbie’s dress as ‘*very pink – not the usual business attire*’_[53F]. While pink may be unusual in business, as Swan (2017) notes, it is linked with postfeminist images celebrating the feminine. Links between EBarbie’s image and representation were explicitly noted as ‘*success is equated with a form of contrived beauty – make up, jewellery, accessories, tight constricting clothes*’_[7F]. Furthermore, the work involved in presenting this polished, feminine appearance was revealed, as she had ‘*put a lot of effort into the details in terms of her look*’_[22F].

The second image shows *'Barbie engaging with the 'real women' in the 'real world'* [27F] and encouraged comparison. Participants noted the real entrepreneurs' characteristics of youth, beauty, long hair, excellent teeth, smiles, grooming and make-up and concluded they were *'chosen primarily for their appearance'* [6M]. While comments acknowledged some racial diversity amongst the CIOs, they argued the similarities outweighed differences and *'support the Barbie look'* [16F]. The real entrepreneurs were *'all attractive women fair skinned (even the ethnic minority women have fairer skin) and 'wholesome' all young and seemingly unrealistic'* [66NS]. Thus, ethnicity is harmonised in this montage of smiling entrepreneurs providing a comforting uniformity (Swan, 2010). Despite EBarbie's absence from the third image, comments noted the similar glamorous style of feminine appearance, even asking: *'which came first? [name] the entrepreneur or Barbie the entrepreneur? Life imitating art?'* [2F].

Representation. Our analysis highlighted the reading of appearance (race, class, beauty) in these images as representing privilege, and excess: *'too perfect, blonde, pretty, thin'* [35NS]; or *'Dragon's Den sleek and polished'* [16F]. These comments showed sensitivity to both the representation of privilege highlighted in other images of postfeminsim (Duffy and Hund, 2015) and in TV 'entre-tainment' (Swail et al., 2014). One overarching theme was the absence of any work as participants noted there is *'no particular hint of entrepreneurship'* [8M] to challenge the link between appearance and entrepreneurial success (Swan, 2017). More specifically, on the CIO images participants commented *'I don't like the lack of image composition diversity – limiting images to glamour shots. Would prefer action shots, i.e. woman at desk, delivering speech etc, more natural style images'* [1M]. This contrast between the 'natural' image of an active, working woman and the inauthentic 'glamour shots' in the performance of entrepreneurial femininity reinforced arguments for appearance as women's

capital (Gill 2008). This lack of images linked to substantive work has been noted and explored, (Duffy et al., 2017) and highlights the challenges in representing female entrepreneurs.

Participants questioned the motives of those represented with EBarbie asking, *‘what value do these women consider Barbie gives them?’*^[5F] and even: *‘wonder if these women are really successful entrepreneurs’*^[25F]. However, while the benefits for the CIOs were challenged it represented *‘definitely good marketing’*^[47NS] for the special edition entrepreneur. So, while for some these images were a validation of EBarbie’s representation of women entrepreneurs, other participants questioned their credibility. Participants labelled EBarbie as a *‘role model’*^[28M], for *‘young girls’*^[39F], or more critically as a *‘media caricature’*^[10M]. While some applauded her success, others argued she represented *‘what society expects of a successful female entrepreneur’*^[38F] and challenged the images as *‘an unrealistic role model’*^[38F] and *‘more likely to put women off’*^[5F] discouraged by the *‘higher expectation’*^[21F] of beauty associated with successful female entrepreneurialism.

Personal reactions. Participants ironically reflected on the artificiality of the real women: *‘oh, I forgot – these are successful entrepreneurs they don’t look how I imagined successful women entrepreneurs to look – they look like Barbie! Mattel must have got EBarbie right after all!’*^[51NS]. For the Special Edition entrepreneur this was linked to concern regarding her lack of credibility as a role model as, *‘I cannot take seriously any woman who would be a model for Barbie. Who is more fake – Barbie or [name]?’*^[46F]. Her appearance was seen as indicative of a lack of originality and authenticity. Exploring personal reflections exposed ambivalence or discomfort from those who identified as working women. On a practical level, some noted that

'her feet will be aching so bad at the end of an entrepreneurial day' [21F]. Others, more critically, compared the image with their own role: *'is this what entrepreneurial women should look like? I am one and don't agree with this image even though I dress like a 'girl''* [32F]. The glamour of the image, seen by some as *'empowering'* [27F], could also be alienating as *'she looks quite smug...I feel inadequate'* [51NS]. While irony was widely used, there was also a strong, explicitly negative response specifically to the special edition entrepreneur which rejected the image as *'nauseating'* [4NS], *'scary'* [55NS] and even questioned *'would you want to be this woman????! (I wouldn't)'* [16F].

Sometimes, this reflected participant struggles with self-presentation, as *'It feeds into the stereotypes that I buy into as a working woman, the stress I need to go through to get to work looking half decent...these fully pulled-together women make being a successful business woman difficult and stressful'* [15F]. A concern was that this offered *'just another image that places even higher expectations on not only being dynamic but good looking also'* [21F]. Indeed, as one commented of the CIOs, even *'these real entrepreneurs don't do women any favours'* [46F]. Some comments, while critical, focused on the freedom of women to represent themselves as they choose so *'women should also not feel like this image is derogatory to women, if female entrepreneurs want to dress like this then they shouldn't feel like they can't'* [38F]. Thus demonstrating the difficulty, as noted earlier, in criticism of actions seen as *'freely chosen'* (Kumra and Simpson, 2018: 129).

In summary, while participants celebrate positive role models who can *'have it all'* (Lazar, 2006: 505), others questioned representations of credible entrepreneurs and more personal responses suggested concern about the impact of judging appearance. Those who identified as

working women, while they were critically aware of the artificiality of these images, acknowledged links to work practices, impact on their own behaviour and on perceived expectations. Common themes were the homogenised, glamorous image of traditional femininity associated with postfeminism (Gill and Scharff, 2011), and the lack of representation of any work activity (Duffy et al., 2017, Swan, 2017). Specifically, the presence of real women entrepreneurs raised troubling questions about the extent to which these images both reflected and raised expectations about self-presentation by these female entrepreneurs.

Representations of entrepreneurial success

As we have seen, while for some participants there was no doubt that these images represented an inspiring reflection of women's entrepreneurial success, overall in our data we found four types of response (see Table 2), three of which particularly resonated with Lewis's (2014) categories. First, we explore the celebrations of these images as representing successful entrepreneurial femininity; second, we consider the more critical comments around how these images represented limits to entrepreneurial success. Finally, we examine the rejection of these as representing successful entrepreneurial femininity.

Table 2: Images as representing a successful entrepreneur

Representation	Image	Aesthetic labour	Sample quotes
Successful postfeminist entrepreneur	Glamorous, professional, sexy and powerful	Integral to entrepreneurship.	<i>'modern woman, multitasking, fashion, business but still feminine'</i> [24F] <i>'empowered sexy inspirational'</i> [67F],
Feminised or corporate success	Pretty, feminine, conventional young women looking their best.	Specific to limited entrepreneurial roles.	<i>'stereotypical city woman – quite in contrast to the notion of an innovative entrepreneur'</i> [46F].
Not credible 'Nonpreneur'	Excessive femininity, party girl, happy, not serious	Inappropriate to entrepreneurship	<i>'very feminine, glamorous, receptionist, lacks authority, not professional...does not take work seriously; interested in fashion, slim'</i> [43NS]
Inauthentic	Inauthentic, plastic, fake. A false image.	Illegitimate.	<i>'She looks incredibly fake and I certainly wouldn't take advice from her I'd expect it to be hackneyed and trotted out'</i> [55NS]

Postfeminist success. For some participants EBarbie represented the postfeminist ideal, *'uber professional'* [33F], who *'glamorises business'* [10M]. Similarly, the image of Barbie and her CIOs shows: *'a prototype of a kind of perfect woman beautiful and successful at the same time'* [45F] and so *'empowering to women and young ladies'* [27F]. These images challenge past stereotypes, showing *'that glamorous attractive women can be successful entrepreneurial females'* [33F], even offering *'unlimited potential irrespective of gender'* [28M]. Thus, women's equality is celebrated and historic, structural barriers rejected as irrelevant for entrepreneurial women today (Gill et al., 2017; McRobbie, 2008).

Comments identified the special edition entrepreneur not just as successful, but specifically: *'in charge, in control, successful, very feminine, manipulative'*^[16F]. The comments suggested her feminine advantage (Gill et al., 2017) and implied she was successfully drawing on self-conscious, 'power femininity' (Lazar, 2006: 505) to exert control. These responses extol the successful mix of masculine agency with feminine glamour central to Lewis's (2014) postfeminist entrepreneur.

Limited feminine entrepreneurial success. Others were more critical, arguing that entrepreneurial opportunities were circumscribed and success costly. Specifically, even comments focused on business-related success expressed reservations: *'I'd say her business is rather successful, obviously she might be a corporate director not necessarily an entrepreneur'*^[47NS]. The *'stereotypic, not very creative look'*^[23F], certainly didn't fit Smith's 'risk taking, nonconforming' (2014: 468) male stereotype and suggested EBarbie presented a rather limited feminine entrepreneurship as *'biased - entrepreneur could set up any business not just an office business'*^[13F]. Thus, while notions of the entrepreneurial-self are central to notions of postfeminism, EBarbie's conventional femininity was associated with conservative, corporate feminism rather than innovative, entrepreneurial activity.

Others focused on feminised activity and its lower status (Ronen, 2018). For one participant EBarbie looked like *'she is modelling her outfit'*^[48F]. Ultimately her power might be both celebrated and challenged, sometimes simultaneously: *'Girl Power!!??'*^[27F]. Similarly, comments related to image three suggested the breadth of her entrepreneurship was limited: *'her business is coaching, lifestyle blogging etc, not engineering, drug development or waste haulage. What kinds of areas can women entrepreneurs go into?'*^[15F]. More problematic

comments on the special edition entrepreneur acknowledged the challenges entailed in performing the postfeminist ideal: *'classic image of women who are aiming to look perfect, be perfect, and on top trying to be everything a fashionable woman, an entrepreneur and possibly the perfect mother and not forget the perfect wife'* [22F]. This recognition of the effort of 'having it all' allows doubts about the image's authenticity: *'delving into the world of business while still maintaining her femininity – but is this a realistic portrayal?'* [33F]. The focus is on her attractive appearance as a woman and a *'business woman second'* [36F]. As one participant, highlighting the limits a feminine aesthetic sets to entrepreneurial activity, succinctly described *'entrepreneurship that wouldn't chip your nails'* [50F]. The kind of traditional glamour achieved in these images suggested activity would be limited both by her acceptance of conventions and by maintenance of her appearance. So, whilst there is no hint of the 'mumpreneur' in EBarbie and her associates, her femininity still sets limits to her entrepreneurial activity.

Failure to convince as successful entrepreneur. While some were skeptical about success, others directly challenged her representation of any work and saw her as a *'party girl with bling... tottering heels and hi-tech gadgets, does she look like she is going to work? NO!'* [44NS]. In these responses aesthetic labour took priority over work. The special edition in particular could be seen as: *'sexuality/objectifying'* [25F]. This focused on the limitations of excessive femininity without any counterbalancing, masculinity to judge the images as 'nonpreneurs' (Lewis, 2014). For the successful, postfeminist entrepreneur, aesthetic labour was integral to the image. Others judged the kind of aesthetics represented as specific to particular, traditionally feminine roles either through the conventional approach they were seen to represent or through the practical limitations to activity they presented. Finally, the aesthetic may be rejected as excessively feminine and seen as inappropriate for work. As work was not represented, justifications were explicitly linked to the reading of the appropriateness of the

aesthetic labour represented, so exposing the way that participants read the aesthetics in identical images very differently. Having established the range of responses we go on to unpick the different relations that participants imply between aesthetic labour and entrepreneurial success.

Aesthetic labour and entrepreneurial success

Here our analysis finds complex and overlapping relations between perceptions of aesthetic labour and entrepreneurial success (see Table 3). So, while approaches to postfeminist self-improvement imply both that aesthetic labour *contributes to* entrepreneurial success and that it represents the consumption of goods and services that are a *reward for* success, other readings surface ideas of underlying *privilege*. Alternative readings focus on the *limits to* entrepreneurial success represented by feminine appearance. More directly aesthetic labour was in *conflict* with entrepreneurial labour in terms of time demands, practicality, or by excessive femininity undermining any claim to be taken seriously (Lewis, 2014; Kumra and Simpson, 2018).

Table 3: The relation between aesthetic labour and entrepreneurial success:

Illustrative extracts

Aesthetic labour	EBarbie	CIOs	Special edition
A sign of privilege	Blonde, Wealthy, Young, Upper class [13F]	They look successful and relatively wealthy in terms of the way they dress [53F]	Seems that she was born in a rich family success is not related to her competencies [59F]
Instrumental to entrepreneurial success	Entrepreneur seems to be being portrayed as linked to appearance (dress	Confident smiles perfectly groomed hair and full make up Plastic surgery Botox and fillers are all very important tools in the life	The pose and short dress overtly provides a sexual tone to the female entrepreneur It suggests that a short dress and a large about

	well and you will succeed) [34F]	of an entrepreneur, clearly! [31F]	of skin on show are linked to success as a woman [20F]
Result of entrepreneurial success	Perhaps she is so successful that she may well have an entourage of people taking care of her business while she shops and gets her hair done [31F]	In a very general realm successful women who are interested in fashion do aim to look perfect [22F]	Has she constructed herself to look like Barbie for the project with Mattel? [5F]
The entrepreneurial product	She looks like someone who owns a mobile nail salon making house calls etc. which I assume is being an entrepreneur [19F]	Full make up glamorous Like Miss World contestants [43NS]	She could be an excellent example for fashion or beauty cosmetics [59F]
Conflict with entrepreneurial success	Looks like she spends so much time on her appearance that she would struggle to find time to do any work [51NS]	It would be a full time job just to be able to look like this – forget being able to do any other work/entrepreneurial business [3F]	Basically entrepreneurship that wouldn't chip your nails [50F]

The range and complexity of these different positions emphasise the difficulties that aesthetic labour presents (Mavin and Grandy, 2016). The same image may be read as supporting or undermining entrepreneurial success. Both the glamorous appearance and any entrepreneurial success may be attributed to underlying privilege of wealth and good looks noted by Duffy and Hund (2015) and neglected in postfeminism. Further challenges for aesthetic labour as instrumental to entrepreneurial success were highlighted by judgments of the appropriateness of EBarbie's management of the female body: '*professional appearance – perhaps sleeves too short for office environment but it is an entrepreneurial one*' [40M]. While the amount of skin

revealed must be limited as noted by Jackson et al., (2012), appearance should still emphasise the feminine body to achieve a *'professional look e.g. length of skirt is to the knees, focus on female silhouette with belt – hourglass figure comes more to life'* [25F].

However, the special edition was described as *'provocative'* [43NS] as participants challenged the instrumentality of her powerful pose and exposed skin. As one comment put it *'looks like she is a typical entrepreneur – power dressing corporate image well presented, dressing to impress men'* [40M]. More extremely, the 'sexiness' of the image was critically linked to EBarbie as *'like a doll – plastic sexualisation of entrepreneur'* [5F]. The work involved in managing a powerful professional feminine image was reflected in a strong focus on the erotic as a source of power (Gill, 2008) leading to disagreements about the credibility of this entrepreneur (Kelan, 2013). Even EBarbie's bag was carefully scrutinised and judged *'more like a handbag than a briefcase'* [6M] as an entrepreneur would have *'a laptop bag to avoid back problems'* [20F]. This distinction raised concerns about the conflict between the feminine aesthetic and the practical: *'How exactly does she expect to move around with all that stuff and without a big enough bag? A clutch? Seriously?'* [37F.] Supporting Swan's (2017) argument of the bag as representing consumption or reward rather than utility, one participant noted it was *'modelled on a high end brand'* [10M].

The risk was that her aesthetic and entrepreneurial labour in her feminine appearance were seen as conflicting. EBarbie might be *'too well dressed to be efficient and proactive'* [59F]. These comments on the tight dress, uncomfortable high heels and impractical clutch bag suggested this image of aesthetic labour could present practical difficulties for working women. So, for many participants, this conventional, well-groomed appearance was a difficult performance

that involved considerable effort and some discomfort (Brown, 2017). Moreover, there remains the risk that such aesthetic labouring will be rejected as illegitimate and in direct opposition to the postfeminist claims for ‘authentic’ femininity. Some participants argued that the aesthetic labour required presented an unnatural vision of women that undermined the credibility of their work.

In summary, while responses were diverse, our analysis demonstrated the impact of aesthetic details of images in reading and reacting to representations of female entrepreneurship. Participants interrogated the conditions and limits to female entrepreneurial careers (Smith, 2014). Drawing together the exploration of aesthetic labour and representations of success presents a complex picture of the ways such labour is interpreted. Furthermore, the analysis highlights the risks in aesthetic labour, both in achieving an appropriately balanced image and in the additional effort required to construct such entrepreneurial femininity.

Discussion

Recognising significant interrelations between postfeminism and entrepreneurial discourses (Lewis et al., 2017), we advance understandings of constructions of recognisable female entrepreneurs by unpacking their visual representation and argue that the role of aesthetic labour (Elias et al., 2017) is fundamental to neoliberal assumptions of empowered agency and entrepreneurial success (Lewis et al., 2017). Given the impact of contemporary media (Tan, 2011; Twigg, 2010), we focused on key images integral to the marketing of Mattel’s Entrepreneur Barbie and investigated how these representations of female entrepreneurship are consumed.

Reflecting our move to consider what Rose (2012: 19) refers to as audiencing, our first consideration was participant responses to these images. Building on previous academic visual analyses (Duffy and Hund, 2015; Smith, 2014; Swan, 2017), we reviewed participant personal reflections and concerns about the pressure for women to embody the postfeminist entrepreneur by becoming EBarbie. First, there were questions of image homogeneity and the stereotype of a privileged woman as a particular kind of entrepreneur, supporting Duffy and Hund's (2015) findings. Here, even acknowledged racial diversity seemed to disappear behind a uniform 'look' (Swan, 2010). Second, the images led many to comment of the artificiality, not just of EBarbie, but of all the women, which was seen as a particular kind of femininity requiring both good (genetic and financial) fortune, and high maintenance. The visual similarity between EBarbie and the real women within Mattel's marketing prompted scrutiny and attention to this particular version of success. Finally, the images elicited humour and depression, anger and shame, seen in ironic exclamations of admiration for hair or dress and expressions of sympathy for the pain from high heels, impractical bags, constant smiling and not eating. The humour showed recognition that these images are both unrealistic and a reflection of the expectations of women and indeed by women, both 'fascinating and unsettling' (Evans and Riley, 2017: 134). A particular 'discomfort discourse' is highlighted here, which we return to later in our discussions of aesthetic labour. Many female participants reflected on their own appearance and even offered feelings of inadequacy. Others reflected on their own work experience and ambitions, but very few could imagine becoming an entrepreneur similar to those represented. Indeed, if being a successful entrepreneur implied achieving these images, it was out of reach. While some endorsed neoliberal choice, there remains an underlying concern about authenticity. However, it was beyond our current scope to explore how such authenticity might be visually represented, highlighting a potential avenue for future research.

Our second research question allowed us to examine the extent to which the images were convincing as representations of success. Here we unpacked participant readings and revealed the difficult positioning associated with such judgements in relation to aesthetic labour and entrepreneurial success. Our analysis reviewed the themes of postfeminist entrepreneurial success, limited feminine success and failure to convince as a successful entrepreneur. While these images could be understood as representing an empowering, assertive ideal personifying postfeminist success (Lewis, 2014), the femininity may be read as limiting entrepreneurial work to the mobile nail salon (the pink ghetto, Smith, 2014) or a more corporate role. Participants specifically excluded creative, innovative or STEM entrepreneurial activity. Not only were these women seen as visually inauthentic (Lewis, 2013), their entrepreneurial credibility was also challenged. Here the co-location of EBarbie and the real women prompted an interesting reaction. In contrast to previous studies looking at individual entrepreneurs (Duffy and Hund, 2015; Smith, 2014; Swan 2017), these images juxtaposed these women with each other and EBarbie (particularly image two) and participants therefore, questioned their relationships. Intriguingly however, while we reflected these women's involvement with EBarbie could be seen as a successful entrepreneurial move given the resulting media coverage, few of our participants reached the same conclusion. Rather participants questioned the entrepreneurial value in the association with EBarbie.

We noted that the positioning of EBarbie as inspirational was embedded within the marketing campaign. However, our participants suggested these idealised images might discourage women and undermine the credibility of those who associated themselves with EBarbie. Their feminine glamour was seen as excessive (Lewis, 2014), especially when linked to the embodied representative whose sex appeal was both powerful and 'manipulative' (Harvey and Gill, 2011; Lewis, 2014). This approach reinforces ideas of women's bodies as out of place and 'other' in

the work place and of the difficulty of ‘achieving a professional balance’ (Mavin and Grandy, 2016: 1097). The ideal of both being authentic and able to ‘have it all’ represented by these images of feminine beauty and entrepreneurial success is challenged (Lewis, 2013). Not only do our findings reinforce our participants understanding of the gendered normativity of EBarbie; they specifically highlight the conventionality of this image in contrast to ideals of innovative and creative entrepreneurialism. Furthermore, this conventional image requires intense labour that may be at the cost of other forms of entrepreneurial work.

We turn to our final research question that focused on the role of aesthetic labour and how this was understood in relation these representations. Specifically, it raised questions about the role of aesthetic labour for women as representing an investment of time and resource that may be i) a sign of privilege; ii) instrumental to entrepreneurial success iii) a result of entrepreneurial success, iv) the entrepreneurial product, or v) in conflict with entrepreneurial success.

Studies have exposed the complexity in negotiating appropriate body management for women (Mavin and Grandy, 2016), especially in representing merit (Kumra and Simpson, 2018). However, in line with the discourse of choice and agency, aesthetic labour may be seen as the outcome or reward for entrepreneurial success. Studies have pointed out that femininity is often presented as a marketable product (Duffy and Hund, 2015) and EBarbie was seen as offering aesthetic labour as a service. The time and cost of that aesthetic labour was interrogated as conflicting with more substantive entrepreneurial work, and to the detriment of success. Overall, aesthetic labour, or more precisely EBarbie’s polished glamorous image, was associated with her existing aesthetic privilege as white, young, pretty and able-bodied. Furthermore, that highly polished image requires investment of time and money available only to the wealthy. As such, EBarbie’s glamour may be the result of privilege, possibly associated with success in wider realms including entrepreneurialism.

While research on aesthetic labour has positioned this as instrumental to work success (Sullivan and Delaney, 2017), a postfeminist perspective obscures this relation by regarding the makeover as individual choice (Duffy and Hund, 2015). First, this undermines any recognition of aesthetics and the management of the (female) body as work. The implications for women are that they have additional demands on their resources not experienced by men. Second, judgement of the appropriate aesthetic is complex and uncertain, as criteria may be shifting and contradictory (Kumra and Simpson 2018; Mavin and Grandy, 2018). Third, the physical demands made by conforming to traditional feminine glamour impose practical limitations on women entrepreneurs (such as high heels and constricting clothes). This discomfort discourse ran across our data, despite the dominance of smiling faces. Discomfort is positioned as integral to aesthetic labouring, acknowledged as inevitable but also accepted as hidden behind a smile. Reflecting Swan (2017), such discomfort might also be outweighed by the prospect of being able to display the signs of consumption, although such consumption was not read positively by our participants. Fourth, women may be judged as unprofessional for both too much or too little aesthetic labour. Accordingly, it seems that the most successful aesthetic labour would be unnoticeable and those who are privileged by their fit to the stereotypical norm will be perceived as more effective.

Superficially, it is possible to dismiss EBarbie as simply made of plastic or indeed, as some of our participants noted, to dismiss the images of the real women in similar terms. Our research however, supports Gill's call for 'studying post feminism as a cultural object' (2017: 607) and the potential for a focus on its consumption via approaches such as photo-elicitation. A small but growing number of visual studies are drawing attention to the complex issues at stake in

the representation of successful female entrepreneurs. Our research highlights the difficulty for those consuming such images, as our participants recognised elements of excessive femininity (Lewis, 2014), highlighted aspects of ‘diva’ (Smith, 2010) and struggled with interpreting sexualisation (Harvey and Gill, 2011; Kumra and Simpson, 2018). Further difficulty lay in reconciling these with successful entrepreneurship; EBarbie was not ‘leaning in’ (Sandberg, 2013) enough, her aesthetic labour devalued her entrepreneurial success though these women were lauded for smiling through the pain. Through their generic and homogenous representation, other female entrepreneurs became, via these images, EBarbie too. These images are not neutral, but act to reinforce understandings of recognisably successful female entrepreneurship. In this context, female entrepreneurs are not invisible at all (Ahl, 2006), they are exposed. We suggest these representations offer complex and contradictory ways in which the gendered entrepreneur may then be seen. In this ‘seeing,’ our participant responses highlight the difficulty of managing an appropriate or acceptable presentation that avoided too much femininity (Lewis, 2014).

Overall, our research allows us to examine the how participants engaged with and challenge postfeminism in relation to entrepreneurial success. In doing so we reposition the concept of aesthetic labour as exposing anxiety and pain. This highlights that responsibility for the psychological and physical risks of self-presentation and self-marketing, central to neoliberalism, are borne and managed by the entrepreneur (Gill and Scharf, 2011). Furthermore, our findings expose the artificiality of postfeminist notions of ‘authentic’ femininity, revealing the conflicted and ambivalent responses to aesthetic labour and female entrepreneurial success. Specifically, the innovation and creativity associated with entrepreneurship could be used to challenge the stereotyped femininity presented here and noted elsewhere (Lewis, 2014).

However, we acknowledge our methodological decisions imposed some important constraints. In particular, a limited number of images were investigated, although the consistency of image use across the media helped in this regard. Given existing research has either taken a very broad perspective (Smith, 2014; Duffy and Hund, 2015), or focused on a single entrepreneur (Swan, 2017), we felt a mid-range option offered a novel opportunity to engage in how these images were consumed. In common with others (Kelan, 2013; Swail et al., 2014) we explored these images with students. While we see benefits from examining their reading of these images, further research that extends the range of participants and allows for more interrogation by various demographic differences, including but not limited to gender, would be a welcome extension of this research.

At a time of ongoing concern about the under-representation of women in entrepreneurship (European Commission, 2018), these findings have a number of implications for practice. They enhance recent studies highlighting the need to feature more diverse female entrepreneur role models across race, class and age spectrums in the media, policy initiatives and communication campaigns (Byrne et al., 2018; Duffy and Hund, 2015; Smith, 2014). Beyond this, our findings suggest that visual images should include relatable women operating in real-life work settings, since glamorised head shots may actively deter some women from pursuing an entrepreneurial career. Furthermore, imagery should feature women working across a range of sectors including manufacturing, technology and science, rather than only emphasising office or corporate settings. Our research also suggests that aspiring female entrepreneurs would benefit from more direct discussion about the physical and psychological demands of aesthetic labour in our postfeminist and neoliberal society. The imperative to do so is arguably exacerbated by the rise of an image hungry media that pervades everyday life, including that of female entrepreneurs. Networking, mentoring and training entrepreneurship programs targeted at

women all offer opportunities to incorporate such discussions and could, informed by our research, now utilise the widely recognised cultural motif of EBarbie as a valuable stimulus for debate.

Conclusions

Our innovative, visual methodology took advantage of the promotional launch of EBarbie to explore aesthetic labour and the social construction of a successful, postfeminist entrepreneur. This identified critical awareness of the constructed nature of key marketing images, but also anxiety about the ways these images shape expectations about female entrepreneurs. It also demonstrated how the images were read as representing a range of degrees of entrepreneurial success from the sassy, manipulative, have-it-all postfeminist to the friendly, party girl ‘nonpreneur’. Finally, it highlighted the different ways the relationship between aesthetic and entrepreneurial labour may be understood and enabled us to unpick postfeminism’s instrumental links between labour and success. Our research contributes to understanding aesthetic labour in entrepreneurial work in four ways. First, we highlight the importance of visual imagery in understanding social constructions of entrepreneurial success. Second, we expose the physical and psychological demands aesthetic labour makes on women entrepreneurs. Third, we demonstrate that criteria used to evaluate female entrepreneurial success remain unclear and shifting. Finally, we argue that the postfeminist aesthetic reinforces privilege through promoting a specific look, implying it is achievable for all and failing to acknowledge the costs. We conclude that postfeminism, rather than making the female entrepreneur invisible, risks leaving her exposed.

Notes:

¹Barbie name and image TM and © 2014 Mattel. All Rights Reserved.

²Most coverage featured a blond, blue-eyed version, although ‘Barbie Entrepreneur Hispanic Doll’, ‘Barbie Entrepreneur African-American Doll’ and ‘Barbie Entrepreneur Asian Doll’ were also available. Images were available at the time of the launch via

<http://www.barbie.com/en-us/news-and-deals/barbie-celebrates-women-entrepreneurs>

(accessed: 27 June 2014).

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