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# Constructing girlhood: abject labour in magazine offices

## **Abstract**

Girls' magazines act as important texts through which meanings of childhood, girlhood and womanhood are mediated and constructed. However, previous research has focused on either the conditions of work practices or cultural production of the magazine as a product. Separately in each context women or girls have been described as abject. The paper will argue that employees working on girls' magazines experienced a simultaneous double abjection: in the gendered working practices and as an outcome of the construction of girlhood they produced. Two studies of all female teams producing teenage and pre-teen magazines were used including interviews and observations. Our approach engaged with the difficulty of examining abjectivity in working practices, as present but marginalised, silenced or othered. As a result of scrutinising the gendered embodiment in these studies, the findings suggest there is a relation between the working practices and gendered cultural production, forming a process of abjection. This process was threefold: a marginalisation of a particular gendered embodiment, the cracks or leaks where abjectivity became apparent and the silencing of those leaks. This study will be of value to scholars interested in gendered embodiment in workplaces, abjectivity and cultural production, noting the interrelation between these areas.

Key words: Abjection, femininity, magazines, girlhood, work practices

## **Introduction**

Women's embodiment is negotiated within conflicting norms at work, where employees are involved in creating, maintaining and challenging forms of gender and representations of femininity. Women often experience the physicality of their bodies in problematic ways, especially as they are organised in the workplace. Kristeva's (1982) concept of the abject can broadly be understood as the separation of 'undesirable' elements of being, which necessarily remain attached to the body but which need to be concealed. This paper investigates how women become disembodied in the process of writing and producing magazine material for girls. We look at how women's bodies are effectively hidden or silenced in work practices, suppressing 'leaky' or messy female lived bodies (Grosz, 1994). Recent studies have investigated how women have abject encounters in highly masculinised environments like academia (Fotaki, 2013, see also Kenny, 2010). However, it is worthwhile to explore abjection in other contexts, especially those where women themselves might construct abjection. We focused on an environment where the women dominated the workforce and where the product, pre-teen and teenage magazines for girls based in the UK and a Nordic country, was highly gendered. We examined the cultural production of girlhood and creative work in publishing and how the employees related to the magazines' messages. Ultimately, we argue, this resulted in an abject experience for the employees.

While there are some academic studies on products aimed at children's consumption (Currie, 1999; Cook, 2004; Langer, 2002; Langer, 2004; Martens et al., 2004), the examination of these industries as workplaces, where the process of production takes place, is to a large extent ignored or overlooked (however see Tyler, 2009). The shift from younger childhood into the stage of adolescence marks a change in consumption, where 'tweens' are seen as an

ideal market who have more financial independence but are easily manipulated by marketing (Siegel, et al., 2004). Creating a magazine as a cultural product requires a process of forming the reader's identity, specifically around gendered norms of femininity (Currie, 1999). Magazines are symbolic and aesthetic products on growing up, forming discourses of girlhood around gendered norms. McRobbie (1991/2000) argues that women and girl's magazine are embedded with ideological meaning constructing the reader's idealised views of femininity and, in her later work (1999), how the producers of the magazine are active in this process. It is therefore of interest how employees negotiate through conflicting norms, in both the representation of the female reader in the product and in their own bodies (Kenny, 2010). According to Young (2005), embodiment changes at different stages of life for women, due to cultural meanings and women's experiences of their physicality. Following on from McRobbie, the stages of girlhood and womanhood become intertwined as the producers of the magazine become active in the cultural production.

In our study complex relationships were built between the different meanings of girlhood that these magazines represented and the embodiment of the female adults making the magazines. Employees needed to demonstrate an understanding of girlhood. However, the requirement for employees to present themselves as competent also necessitated a separation from the messiness of girlhood. The child and the teenager were presented and thought of as incomplete, spotty and leaky bodies to be moulded, guided and transformed into an idealised form of femininity (Grosz, 1994). The workers' bodies were also being disciplined through the process of production (Foucault, 1977/1991). We argue that employees working within magazines for girls undergo a form of abjection (Kristeva, 1982): the separating off of the undesirable and the silencing of the lived body (Höpfl, 2000). This abjection is similar to the experience of working in environments with male norms, especially where rational processes

underpin work practices and employee expression (Fotaki, 2013). The employees' own embodied recollection of being younger and 'incomplete' was juxtaposed with the embodied work practices within the two magazines. The discourses on girlhood excluded the 'messiness' of 'growing up' and indeed adulthood such as periods and pregnancy. However, these elements remained part of female experience and leaks appeared in the boundaries, which were constructed to protect the subject (Shildrick, 1997).

The article will first set out the current literature on embodiment, abjectivity and gender at work (Höpfl, 2000; Phillips and Rippin, 2010; Kenny, 2010; Tyler, 2011; Rizq, 2013; Fotaki, 2013). In particular, we draw on the work of Kristeva (1982) and Grosz (1994) to explore how a woman's embodiment can be understood through abjection. Despite the significant work in this area, little has been done to investigate women's experiences in 'feminised' environments and working on products for girls and teenagers. Children's culture industries are a context where gendered norms are prevalent in products (McRobbie, 1991/2000); however there is little consideration of the role of employees in constructing gender discourses in their production. Drawing on the work of Tyler (2009), we ask what critical approaches to the construction of childhood can tell us about the nature of employment within these industries, especially in work which is often hidden in backstage locations, out of sight of the child consumer and their parents. We analyse interviews and observations of how women working in pre-teen and teenage magazines negotiated the production of childhood in their product. Despite the attempt to silence women's bodies into standardized products and work practices, 'leaks' and cracks appeared in the everyday experiences of women's embodiment (Douglas, 1966; Shildrick, 1997; Dale, 2001). Secondly, we explore women's reactions to this silencing of their embodiment by either acceptance or eventual disenchantment from the work. As such this article contributes to the discussion of how

problematic aspects of gender are often hidden or silenced in the everyday, lived level in the workplace.

### **Abjection and leaky bodies**

Following Foucault (1977/1991), the body is in different ways disciplined, controlled and managed at work (Trethewey, 1999; Hassard et al, 2000; Höpfl, 2003; Ball, 2005). However bodies are not passive but intertwined with our subjective embodied experiences: the body is not simply an object but the medium through which we are in the world (Witz et al., 2003; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Work is performed through the body but the working body is also subject to complex power relations through which it is punished, rewarded and controlled (Hancock & Tyler, 2000). As Schilling (1993) points out the body is always incomplete and unfinished, in a constant state of becoming. For Young (2005) the chest, and, in particular, our breast is central to being-in-the-world. The chest forms profoundly different experiences of embodiment for men and women. Breasts remain a 'visible and tangible signifier of her womanliness' and indeed her identity (Young, 2005, 76). Researchers have focused on the gendered body and 'feminized' work where the presentation of the female body in terms of shape, size and appearance are controlled through symbolic expression (see e.g. Tyler & Abbott, 1998; Hancock & Tyler, 2000; Witz et al., 2003). Entwistle & Wissinger (2006) argue that aesthetic labour is not only the production of an aesthetic surface but of a 'personality', simultaneously physical and emotional. Contrary to for example Witz et al. (2003), Entwistle & Wissinger show that aesthetic labour extends beyond the workplace. Even though a case study of fashion models can be seen as an overtly obvious case in point, Entwistle & Wissinger argue that the on-going production of the embodied self is a necessity for many workers who move between employers and workplaces. This is true for many

freelancing media professionals, who offer their services to different publishers and media. Aesthetic labour constructs the idealised form, especially in the gendered body, which necessitates removal or hiding of undesirable properties (Tyler & Abbott, 1998; Entwistle & Wissinger, 2003).

Feminist theory extends this exclusion by discussing the ‘sexual specificity of bodies’ (Grosz, 1994: 189), which can be characterised as an abject experience (Kristeva, 1982). Organisations adopt a masculine norm, which dismisses women’s bodies by positioning them as ‘leaky’, ‘uncontrolled’ and dangerous to the status quo of organisations (Dale & Burrell, 2000). ‘Abnormal’ types threaten organisational boundaries: “In fearing leakages, it is the disruption of *organ*-ization, of the *structure* of the body which is a problem” (Dale & Burrell, 2000: 26). We wanted to explore abjection in media work to investigate the relationship between employees and the cultural production they engage with. The next sections consider Kristeva’s and Grosz’s contributions to abjectivity and organisational theory influenced by their ideas on how women’s bodies threaten the rational masculine organisation.

### ***Abjection: disruption and leakages***

Abjection is one of the central concepts in Julia Kristeva’s writing, particularly developed in her essays *Powers of horror – An essay on abjection* and *Stabat Mater*. There is an inherent conflict in abjection where the unthinkable and the unbearable poke us: present, close by but impossible to assimilate (Kristeva, 1982). The abject is for the subject a “land of oblivion” (p. 8), which can suddenly be remembered, brought to the front. “The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation

bursts forth.” (p. 9) For Kristeva, the abject is that which disturbs an identity, a structure, a given order.

*“We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens [sic] it —on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger.”*

(Kristeva, 1982: 9)

Building on Mary Douglas’ (1966) writings on dirt and purifying rituals, Kristeva argues that the female body, the mother and bodily fluids are abject, threatening the masculine order through disorder (Kristeva 1982, see also Höpfl, 2000). For Kristeva, the abject is neutralised through religion and rituals of purification, which at the same time give power to the abject. Drawing on theorists such as Merleau-Ponty and Kristeva, Elizabeth Grosz theorises how the lived body is part of a system of meanings that it both constitutes and is constituted by. Central to Grosz’s stance is the argument that social practices become inscribed upon the body (Grosz, 1994), both through the practices within the workplace and beyond (cf. Dale, 2001; Linstead, 1997). She does so by questioning the “ontological status of the sexed body” (Grosz, 1994: 189): that while bodies necessarily have a materiality, there is a degree to which “Bodies are not fixed, inert.” (p. 190) She is very clear that the body is not a neutral material, but that it has sexual specificity ‘etched’ upon the body through social practice. Similarly, body image also consists of the objects around the body: “Anything that comes into contact with the surface of the body and remains there long enough will be incorporated into the body image – clothing, jewelry [sic], other bodies, objects. They mark the body, its gait, posture, position, etc.” (Grosz, 1994: 80) In the workplace it includes objects introduced by individuals, others and the organisation. Abjection is central to both Kristeva and Grosz’s arguments: the separation of the socially undesirable in a way that problematizes elements, such as fluids of the body, and particularly the female body. For Grosz, these objects of

disgust and desire cannot be detached from the body image, even if they are detachable from the body.

“Detachable, separable parts of the body – urine, faeces, saliva, bloody, vomit, hair, nails, skin – retain something of the cathexis and value of the body part even when they are separated from it. There is something of the subject bound up in them – which is why they are objects of disgust, loathing, and repulsion as well as desire.” (Grosz, 1994: 81)

Fluids of the body often have association with taint or stain: ‘dirty’ not as an inherent state of being but instead an association of with disorder and disgust. Embodiment is essentially a fluid state, which will “seep, flow, pass with different degrees of control...” (Grosz, 1994: 195) The abject is thus associated with a degree of disgust and fascination with that fluidity. The ideal working body is presented as masculine: solid, contained, and impenetrable while women’s leaking bodies can only be understood as representations (Phillips & Ripplin, 2010). Motherhood and the pregnant body become representational of all women and threatening to the rational order (Kristeva, 1982); they need to be hidden or even removed (Grosz, 1994). The leaky, uncontrolled pregnant body has been explored in depth by Gatrell (2011, 2013), noting that women who are pregnant often have to enact coping mechanisms to not be perceived as abject in the workplace (cf. Shildrick, 1997).

As Höpfl (2000) argues, there is, therefore, no place for women’s embodied experience in rational, disembodied organizations. The female body subverts the organisation and introduces disorder that needs to be controlled and remove (Höpfl, 2000; Rizq, 2013). The interesting question becomes how the boundaries between the abject threaten the symbolic order are performed in contemporary organisation (Rizq, 2013). Fotaki’s (2013) analysis of

women in academia is an example of the lived experience of abjectivity. Fotaki explores a range of often harrowing stories of women feeling marginalised and Othered. This Othering is compounded by the conventions of masculinity, which underpin academic work, such as academic writing. Fotaki shows how women both collude and resist this marginalisation, through looking at the accepted attitudes of inequality, but above all she shows how women in academia learn to live the abject.

One similarity between Fotaki's study and the studies in this article is that both academics and media professionals engage in the production of text. Writing is central to Kristeva's *Stabat Mater* as a rationalised, disembodied order which excludes the maternal, or the Other (Höpfl, 2000). In her reading of Kristeva, Fotaki (2013) highlights how the abject produces a different subject through destabilizing language. It is particularly the symbol of the Virgin Mother, which in Kristeva's thinking is crucial for the patriarchal social system and which makes the removal of the female, maternal mother necessary. "What we designate as "feminine," far from being a primeval essence, will be seen as an "other" without a name, which subjective experience confronts when it does not stop at the appearance of its identity" (Kristeva, 1982: 58-59). As Fotaki (2013) points out, crucial for Kristeva is that for her the subject is always both symbolic and semiotic. Höpfl (2000: 99) writes: "*In simple terms, the symbolic is equated with regulation and the semiotic with the unorganised flux of the physical and the psychical*". The semiotic is pre-linguistic, an embodied understanding, which the symbolic, or masculine, logical language and expression, attempts to master. Yet there is the possibility for the semiotic to subvert the symbolic order through ambivalence (Höpfl, 2000). This is in effect embodied knowing, but one that cannot be expressed through language and writing as that supposes a disembodied symbolic order.

Tyler (2011) introduces the concept of ‘abject labour’ in her study of sales work in sex shops in Soho. Drawing upon the concept of ‘dirty work’ (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Hughes 1951; Bolton, 2005; Simpson et al, 2012), Tyler explores how work in Soho that has a physical, social or moral taint, influencing how workers are perceived and perceive themselves. More importantly, they experience their work as simultaneously attractive and repulsive. Drawing upon Kristeva’s work, Tyler coins the term ‘abject labour’ to highlight how labour is embodied and to show the ambivalence that the workers included in her study feel: a simultaneous attraction and repulsion, dirty and clean, love and hate. Tyler’s concept of abject labour is fruitful in understanding embodied labour not only when the work is perceived as dirty, but also in other situations where the workers’ bodies become the site where contradictory notions are mediated and materialised through, where lived experience of work is an embodied abjection. Abject labour brings to the fore the precarious nature of work where suppressed and hidden norms threaten the embodied structures. The next section will look at how gendered cultural production of girls’ magazines might present femininity as leaky at different stages of gendered becoming.

### ***Girlhood in Magazines***

Girls’ magazines have received attention as symbolic sites for the production of meaning around childhood and femininity. As one of the well-known examples, McRobbie (1991/2000: 69) explores how the British magazine *Jackie* is an example of how teenage magazines provide ‘powerful ideological forces’ around girlhood. As such it encourages women to think of the magazine content as related to a shared common identity: “Jackie

asserts a class-less, race-less sameness, a kind of false unity which assumes a common experience of womanhood or girlhood” (p. 69). McRobbie’s early work on *Jackie* has been criticised for the assumption that girls absorbed the messages directly into their identity. While the material can still influence the identities of the teenage readers (Gauntlett, 2008), teenage girls may use the material as a constructed fiction, often laughing at the material rather than uncritically absorbing it (Frazer, 1987). However as subjectivity is derived from social norms outside of the self (see Kenny, 2010) and therefore while the girls in the study could critically reflect on the power relations, they could not stand outside of them.

Rarely does this literature address the perspectives of those who write, edit and produce the magazines. These magazines are aesthetic in that they have a distinct look and feel to them, a brand that is constructed and the cultural production feeds into the writing and the design of the product. McRobbie’s (1999) later work does highlight this lack by suggesting the writers and editors of women’s magazines might have feminist agendas (although an ambiguous one where feminism appears mostly in advice columns). However, we will argue that the standardised material and work practices leave little space for individual agendas. This is an important point because the discourses around femininity do not just exist, they need to be produced and reproduced by those working within the industry.

Particularly relevant for understanding abjectivity in cultural production of magazines are the changing meanings of childhood, girlhood and womanhood. Simone de Beauvoir (1949/1953: 335) argues that the girl in childhood does not yet know of the adult embodied experience and, therefore, tries to mimic the bodies of women: “Sometimes the girl does not yet feel ashamed of her body, in what may be called the stage of prepuberty, before the

appearance of the menses; she is proud of becoming a woman and watches the maturing of her body with satisfaction, padding her dress with handkerchiefs and taking pride in it before her elders...” Girls may feel pride, ambivalence or anxiety about the change when they do start menses, especially due to mixed messages given by adults about how to act during this time (Young, 2005).

The physical and social transformations of girls’ bodies in teenage years are particularly relevant, as the changing body shapes and is shaped by subjectivity. Young (2005: 78) discusses breasts in relation to the self, but that breasts become a fetishized object: ‘the potentially objectifying regard of the Other on her breasts.’ This fetishized objectification of breasts is a shared abject experience of lived pubescent bodies. Another significant development is that of menstruation, which as Simone de Beauvoir notes in the *Second Sex* “the menses inspire horror in the adolescent girl because they throw her into an inferior and defective category” (1949/2009: 315-316). Young articulates two points regarding menstruation for women and girls: firstly the feelings of shame and desire to conceal menstruation, and secondly the distance between the needs of women and public places such as schools or places of work.

In one of the few studies where the production of products for children is tied to employees’ identities, embodiment and performativity, Tyler (2009: 56) introduces the possibility of a ‘paediocular’ approach, bringing in “a critical perspective that sees through the analytical lens of childhood as a social construction, reflecting on the social world through the ways in which it is shaped by dominant social constructions on what it means to be a child.” In her study, she looks at sales-service workers in children’s culture industries and argues that

employees experience a bifurcation in the identity construction of the child consumer by performing an aspirational labour, the formation of enchantment with future consumption, and a proprietary labour, in-the-present notions of childhood which are channelled into the brands and designs of goods.

Girls' magazines, therefore, act as important texts through which meanings of childhood, girlhood and womanhood are mediated and constructed. However, they do not only work upon the bodies of readers, we argue, but also on those writing them. Tyler's (2009) study adds to the discussion of aesthetics and aesthetic labour around discourses of childhood, in various forms. Our study develops a paedicular approach by investigating the production of goods for girls, emphasising the gendered dimension of childhood and work. This leaves us with several questions. Firstly, Fotaki (2013) argues that in academia male norms are re-enacted through affect and the body disabling women's participation, but how does abjection take place in environments characterised by feminine discourses? Second, what is the role of the cultural production that is worked upon in experiences of abjectivity? And finally, how do women cope with abjectivity at work?

## **Methodology**

This article draws upon two separate studies using critical ethnographic methods (Kenny, 2010; Kondo, 1986; Rizq, 2013), reflecting especially on embodiment, gender and work practices (Bolton, 2005; Tyler, 2011; Fotaki, 2013), undertaken in children's magazine publishing. The first was a short study of humour and culture in a pre-teen magazine *Bestie*

within a multimedia corporation based in the UK; and the other a study of brand work through a nine-month ethnography of *Lizzie*, a teenage girl magazine in a Nordic country. Both names of the magazine and the employees used in this article are pseudonyms. We focused on all-female teams producing magazines, observing the everyday practices within the office spaces. *Lizzie* was described as a ‘feminist magazine for girls’ (interview with Cate, *Lizzie*, June 2011), while *Bestie* promoted the magazine as making a positive influence in young girls lives, with one employee describing it as ‘wholesome’, ‘aspirational’ and ‘helping girls figure out right and wrong’ (interview with Tina, *Bestie*, November 2008). Both magazines had a significant readership. The women we were observing were writing and editing texts about girls and in doing so struggling with how their writing related to their own experiences of being female.

In both our studies, the workplaces consisted of small teams of all-female permanent staff (6 full-time and 1 part-time persons in *Lizzie* and 7 full-time persons in *Bestie*), and while there were freelancers involved in the production of the magazine they were rarely seen in the offices. In the case of *Lizzie*, 24 days of observations and 14 interviews took place with various staff members within the magazine and in the publishing house. In *Bestie*, 10 days of observation was conducted with 4 formal interviews. The staff members in *Lizzie* were from their early 20s to their late 30s, while the staff at *Bestie* aged between 20 and 50. In our observations, we aimed to capture the everyday activities in the office with a focus on how an issue of the magazine was produced. The interviews included discussions about professional identity, relationship to the magazine, work practices and corporate cultures. There were differences between the offices, for example, *Lizzie’s* team worked in a small office, which they shared with one other magazine at a publishing house focusing on feature magazines; while *Bestie* was part of a large open plan office with different magazines managed under one

multimedia corporation. Likewise, the age of the readership differed and the material varied in its presentation of femininity, as will be discussed. Despite this, the processes of work held striking similarities, especially in the way in which employees needed to personally relate to the material in order to construct it.

Neither researcher undertook their study intending to look for abjectivity. It was in our conversations about our fieldwork that we realised that we had observed instances where something disturbed and unsettled the order in the workplaces. The gendered bodies of these media professionals emerged through these conversations between us, the researchers. It was as if the female bodies of those that we had studied had been observed and noted in our fieldwork and yet they had disappeared in our initial analysis, only to reappear through our conversations. It is probably not a coincidence that the struggles of the women working in the magazines that we studied resonated with our own gendered bodies at work and our own recollections of girlhood and womanhood. Employees on occasion would discuss where boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate were negotiated in the social order. In order to explore this, we turned to the concept of abjection.

Writing about women's experiences, even their abject ones, creates an interesting dilemma of how to represent the women without disembodiment. As Höpfl (2000: 103) argues: "Embodied reproduction is then replaced by the regulation of text and the fertility of the site is surrendered to the fertility of the words and regulation." The question of whether it is possible to *write the body* within a dominant disembodied symbolic order of language is central not only in the writing practices of media professionals but also of our practices as female academics (Kristeva, 1982; Höpfl, 2000; Fotaki, 2013). Kondo (1986) argues that

ethnographic writing can lead to a symbolic violence against participants, as we force narrative meaning through writing. We were therefore left with the aim to avoid the symbolic violence of excluding abject experience while accepting that we could only present partial accounts that would never fully capture embodiment and abjectivity. As Kondo (1986: 85) states we can never really bond with the other in ethnography, but that:

*“knowing involves the whole self (at least as we define it), and not simply what we think of as ‘the intellect’. Accordingly moments of identification, as well as moments of distancing, may occur during all phases of knowing, from the definition of the problem, to the experiences in the field, to the writing of the ethnography.”*

We hope that the fleeting moments we do discuss open up space for abjection in empirical data. We went back to our data to carefully examine moments where abjection poked and disturbed the order of things in the office, moments when the ordinary was questioned by our research subjects (cf. Kenny, 2010; Tyler, 2011; Rizq, 2013). By juxtaposing the everyday practices with the instances where a critical question emerged, was discussed and resolved, we aim to highlight the experiential nature of abjection; always present, but mostly controlled, ignored and silenced. The challenge is to narrate these moments not as spectacular and extraordinary, but as mundane leaks in the gendered and embodied experience of work.

### **Abject labour in magazines: constructing girlhood**

Each issue of *Lizzie* and *Bestie* had its own theme, a clear structure with subject areas such as Relationships or Fashion and a specific layout with placeholders for images and text, which

was rarely modified. For example, a new art director in *Lizzie* was explicitly asked to copy exactly the layout and style of the previous issue to ensure that the magazine would continue to feel 'Lizzie'-like. This standardisation, also seen in *Bestie*, ensured that the feel of the product would continue regardless of the individual employee. Both magazines worked on a cycle, where issues were being prepared well in advance of publication. An important practice at both the magazines was the continuous editing and re-editing of texts. Full-time staff and freelance writers were supervised and mentored into learning how to write in a 'Lizzie-like' style or 'Bestie' approach. A junior editor in *Lizzie* complained that being asked to edit a text nine times was indeed stressful and irritating: it would then also be read by at least three members of staff before going to print.

This editing could be seen as a 'ritual of purification' (Kristeva, 1982), as it disembodied the authors and replaced them with a collective voice. The interaction between members of staff expressed a shared concern and shared responsibility, but these routinised practices effectively hid the working subject. The individual writing subject became invisible as any text or image needed to fit the format, style and language of the magazine, regardless of who had written it. At times this caused resentment as employees' work was altered to fit with expectations. For example, Tina expressed her frustration with the process: "The worst thing is that you write something you're proud of and they change it out of all recognition that fits their *Bestie* brand agenda, and it is something that you hate. You feel like you have written something you hate" (Tina, *Bestie*, December 2008). She was referring to examples where she had written a feature, which had an educational or helpful message for the reader, but through the editing process, this message was removed. Tina's vision of a *Bestie* magazine aimed at educating young girls was edited into 'safer' messages around friendship, fashion and consumerism. The employees took different positions in relation to writing for the

magazine: broadly those who elected to go along with the content and process and those who became frustrated and attempted to change it.

One of the central components of the work at *Lizzie* and *Bestie* was finding a voice or perspective, which constructed their ideal readers and their wants. However it also obscured the employee as a female subject through the process of writing and editing. As the product format was standardised, the women became disembodied into routinized writing, which wrote out the subject in return for writing in the 'voice' of *Lizzie* or *Bestie*. This was particularly pronounced as the content of the magazine was concerned with teenage and pre-teenage girls: their interests, their values and frequently their bodies. However as the next sections will explore, the manner in which the readers' bodies were perceived and written into the text as a form of cultural production revealed abjection in the representations of girlhood.

### ***Constructing the 'voice' of the magazines***

At *Lizzie*, the construction of the 'voice of *Lizzie*' was at the heart of all work practices. This involved the careful consideration of subject matter, visual image and language in the magazine. "[Lizzie] encourages girls to respect themselves and each other", a former editor said when interviewed (Cate, June 2011). In another interview a junior editor described the philosophy of *Lizzie* as: "all girls can be exactly who they want to be, the important thing is to be yourself. And then there is a touch of feminism, and generally a positive attitude" (interview Penny, July 2011). The meanings of feminism naturally vary in different Nordic contexts, but it is a concept commonly used by both women and men. Here it was likely to imply an agenda to empower girls and support equality. "We kind of think, that we are truly a

big sister who speaks to the girl. The kind that, we might have a little more life experience, we are adults of course, and we give hints and ideas about how you can deal with things, but we don't place ourselves above the reader" (Eve, editor-in-chief of *Lizzie*, June 2011). The editors envisioned themselves in a position of power in relation to the readers and took this position very seriously. "[W]e have a huge responsibility, because when we say something in a certain way, well, this magazine is believed. [...] We have a huge responsibility is saying things right and in not giving too simple answers" (Interview with Eve, editor-in-chief). The staff aimed to give a multitude of meanings to girlhood so that every kind of girl could relate to the stories of the magazine. It was important to get the language, perspective and style of writing in the magazine right as the readers, as "they read it like the bible" (interview with Laura, October 2011). This was seen as particularly important when writing about "rough subjects" such as eating disorders, bullying and violence. The response from the readers was highly valued and feedback such as "[Lizzie] saved my life again" enforced the image that the staff were getting it "right" (Interview with Laura, October 2011).

While there was space for stories on fashion and celebrities, the "rough subjects" were at the centre of the magazine. However, there were subject areas that explicitly were not written about including dieting or losing weight and alcohol. As the magazine wanted to show that every girl was perfect exactly as she was, dieting was perhaps seen as an explicit shaping of the body towards an ideal teenage body. This was not something *Lizzie* wanted to support, although they were often struggling to find images of girls in the image banks that were not "thin as skeletons" (Mary, June 2011). Another topic *Lizzie* avoided was alcohol: even though underage drinking was an obvious part of local youth culture, *Lizzie* could not be seen as supporting illegal activities. Sexuality and contraception, on the other hand, were

frequently addressed in the magazine, but teen pregnancies were not referred to during the study.

“[Y]ou need to be young enough to remember your own youth, because while writing stories I do think a lot how I would have thought about the topic when I was 16.” (interview Anna, July 2011) The staff often referred to their own experience of being teenager, but as a subject position from which to speak *to* the girls rather than talk *with* them. Lizzie had an active web forum, however during the study staff rarely interacted on it, instead using it as a source of information. The ‘older sister’ came across as a compromise in finding the magazine’s voice. A junior editor commented on the style of writing: “it isn’t too big sister-like, and not too much like a mentor, and particularly not motherly or aunt-like. It should be like a friend.” (interview Hanna, junior editor, June 2011). Anna called Lizzie a “smart big sister” (interview Anna, editor, July 2011). The employees’ role was to empower the reader, giving a sense of order and control. This happened particularly through advice columns where experts from different fields answered readers’ questions, but also through the general discourse of the magazine. However, the staff also positioned themselves as different from and distant from teenagers. Seeing themselves as the older ‘sister’ to the reader allowed them to be the person who understood the difficulties through their own experiences, but at the same time, we would argue, this presented them as being in control over their bodies in ways in which they believed the teenagers were not.

Compared to *Lizzie*, *Bestie*’s readership was a much younger demographic with a focus on a ‘safe’ product, based on the themes of friendship, belonging, having fun, growing up and being happy. The magazine at all times was conscious of remaining wholesome and certain

topics were not permitted, such as boys, kissing, sex and toilet humour. One interview described *Bestie* as ‘bridging the gap’ between pre-school magazines and the teenage magazines such as *Lizzie* (Kay, *Bestie*, December 2008). As well as the theme of friendship, there was a corresponding ‘aspirational’ theme, focusing on celebrities, pre-teen TV shows and fashion. The editors were very aware of the constraints of writing for a pre-teen audience, and as such they aimed to create a sanitised, happy, conflict-free reality for their readership.

The employees described the process of pitching the magazine to the ideal reader, by balancing positive messages with the desire from the reader for fashion, celebrities and consumerism. As a result, some employees stated they identified with the messages of the magazine: “They are quite often related to confidence and just like, you know feeling like you can speak out and don’t be shy. If you want to say something, say something” (Betty, *Bestie*, December 2008). Despite this worthwhile goal, there was also an emphasis on presenting a happy conflict free childhood (Tina, *Bestie*, December 2008). *Bestie*’s strong core values were used as a guide for employees on the content. “I find it in some ways, it is quite helpful because you know what you can and can’t put in... doing the right thing... Because you can cause offence quite easily so you have to be really careful when you have such a young age group” (Betty, *Bestie*, December 2008). There was a perceived need to scrutinise the product to remove any suggestion of sexuality in the images and in the wording. ‘Leakiness’ of these adult themes was not allowed to slip into the magazines, as it might shatter the discourse of innocent childhood presented. There is a sanitization in the construction of childhood and the children’s body image (Grosz, 1994), and while girls were encouraged to speak out, the purification meant that issues were only dealt with at a surface level in order to maintain the image of happy childhood.

In *Bestie* a picture of the editor appeared in the magazine, however, the photograph mirrored the images of the girls in the magazine rather than her usual appearance in the workplace. The woman, who usually wore professional, fashionable attire, was instead dressed in teenage clothing, with bleached hair and a pink boa around her neck. Being the only image of the staff that the consumer saw, it was a contrived image to represent the editor as a fun big sister rather than a serious adult. Here the product and the body image of the employee become entangled, with a sanitised childlike representation of the employee overwriting the embodied 'lived' adult body. Unlike *Bestie*, in *Lizzie* the image of the editor-in-chief that accompanied the editorial in each issue would be a casual but professional image of a media professional.

The employees were often as concerned with pleasing the parents as the readers themselves, as parents often made the purchasing decision. The reader was envisioned within the frame of an idealistic childhood and like *Lizzie*, the producers of the magazine often referred to their own childhood. However they also explicitly drew on their identities as mothers (Observation of meeting at *Bestie*, 28 November 2008), and as such it is perhaps not surprising that an overriding focus was on creating a 'safe', positive and sometimes educational experience for the reader.

### ***Disrupting the body***

The body of the employees in the magazines was presented as ordered and controlled (Dale & Burrell, 2000), sanitized and wholesome, expert and without 'leaks'. Despite this, 'leaky' episodes demonstrated how the boundaries of the body were fluid, negotiated and social (Grosz, 1994). Specifically, we explored three examples in the magazines where the ideal body, whether that of the employee or of the reader, was disrupted, questioned and as a result presented as abject, gendered, sexed and 'messy'. In the first example, a staff member's pregnancy in *Lizzie* called into question the representation of the asexual body of the adult. In the second scenario, a team meeting in *Bestie* used humour to invert the ideal images of girlhood in the magazine. The third example involved conflict around writing about menstruation as it was represented in *Lizzie*.

### ***Pregnancy at Lizzie***

The staff at *Lizzie* presented themselves as experts through their adult representations in the magazine in contrast to the leaky teenage bodies in the magazine. The adult bodies of the staff at *Lizzie* were worked upon through healthy eating habits, fashion awareness and exercising. Yet this perceived controlled adult body could be disturbed. One example of this occurred during the course of the study when the pregnancy of the editor-in-chief at *Lizzie* became an issue a few days ahead of the so called *Lizzie*-day: an annual event organised for the teenage readers and advertisers. Traditionally this event was opened and closed by the editor-in-chief. This time, however, the editor-in-chief stated to her colleague that she felt that someone else should go. The reasons she gave was that she was only temporarily editor-in-chief (while the 'real' editor was on maternity leave), she would be unknown to the girls and she would soon be replaced. During the conversation, it quickly became apparent that she was concerned with how the readers would react to her pregnant body. She clearly felt that

she needed to hide her pregnancy from the girls, mirroring the way pregnancy as an issue was not discussed within the magazine. Her colleague seemed to agree with her concern and recommended that she could wear something, which would conceal her bump, while still insisting that she attended. The editor-in-chief did, in the end, attend the event as planned, concealing her pregnancy, as she was almost able to at that stage.

This episode illustrates how the employee experienced her own body as abject because of the pregnancy. Mirroring the problems with pregnancy that female academics have accounted (Fotaki, 2013) the pregnant body disrupted the representation of the writer as the big sister. Following Young (2005), the visibility of female sexuality and reproductive capacity disrupted, and social norms required it to be concealed where possible. In this case, as she was still able to conceal it, this conflict between how writers related to the girl readership and how she related to her own pregnancy could be downplayed, with the pregnancy being abject, removed but still present.

### *(De)sexualising plot lines*

In the second example, four of the staff members in *Bestie* booked a meeting room to discuss possible plot lines of a comic strip in the magazine. The comic featured a group of female friends facing minor problems and overcoming these together. The meeting began by reviewing and updating each of the characters. However as the meeting continued, employees began to joke about the fictional characters, presenting each in an undesirable light. One was said to be an only child from a council estate, listening to 'emo' music; another being a possible teenage mother. A third character was the leader and a bit of a 'diva' and whose

parents were yuppies, and the final a character that performed poorly in school, and was ‘stupid’. While these comments were made in jest to lighten the mood of the meeting, they also represented stereotypes of preteen girls, which contrasted with the ideal reader that they presented in the magazine. The plotlines which they discussed (some of which were conventional, others jokes such as walking in on their father having sex with his secretary) discounted the ‘safe’ world and the problems of writing a story for girls whose real worlds were much more messy.

The employees used humour to bring ambivalence into the symbolic order of the magazine (cf. Höpfl, 2007). The ambivalence played with the safe image by bringing in possible humorous but also messy, leaky, sexualised representations of the fictional characters. The spoken humour allowed this play to occur, while the written material produced from the meeting returned back to the safe messages of the magazine. As a result it allowed employees to articulate alternatives, which included the abject, however, this was then silenced again in the written form.

### ***Monthly questions***

The third example took place at *Lizzie* at a so-called ‘headline meeting’ (before an issue would go to print). One headline *Monthly questions* became the focus when someone enquired what the story was about. It was explained that the story was on menstruation: one of the topics that the medical experts for the magazine receive the most questions on. Because of the lack of clarity, it was agreed that the headline did not work for the story. The newest member of staff suggested half-jokingly, half seriously that the headline should be

changed to *The bloody truth*. At first, this suggestion was dismissed as being too frank, but soon voices were raised in support. It was argued that *Lizzie* ‘always tells things exactly as they are’, and as periods *are bloody*, this would work perfectly. Others proposed *The red truth* would fit better as it was less explicit. The editor-in-chief talked in support for the original headline, and in the end, they decided to put it to a vote between *The red truth* or *Monthly questions*. When the editor-in chief abstained from voting, the votes fell equally between the two suggestions. The editor-in-chief then decided that *Monthly questions* would stand.

In this case, the frankness of the menstrual questions being described as bloody was seen as too controversial and disruptive. The disembodied *Monthly questions* utilised neutral language– it removed the taint or stain associated with menstruation blood (Douglas, 1966). The teenage body in the magazine is a body with fluid boundaries (Grosz, 1994). Pimples break the skin, puberty changes the shape of the body and breasts are in focus (Young, 2005), and through the menstruation, blood and other bodily fluids leave the body, perhaps haphazardly and irregularly (Kristeva, 1982). The discussion about blood shows the female body again as abject. Some employees wanted to show the abject using playful language, but the editing acted as a ritual of purification, which concealed the abject without removing it.

## **Discussion**

Abjectivity emerged within these case studies where the body was problematic in lived experience. Abjection, as Kristeva (1982) has affirmed, cannot be removed but it is constantly poking and threatening order. Kristeva notes how abjection is both hidden and yet

near, and in fleeting moments visible and disturbing, presenting itself within the data at moments where cracks emerged in the disembodied symbolic order. In this sense it was two-fold, a multiple abjection, one where the work place and work practices marginalised feminine embodiment, but also through the cultural production of an aesthetic and symbolic product for girls. Therefore there is both abjection as the 'veiled infinity' (Kristeva, 1982: 8), as the disembodied symbolic order, and also as 'bursts of revelation' (ibid), the leaks and cracks, where for brief moments the interactions of employees with one another and the product is disruptive and embodied. Silencing of the abject featured where there was a process of containing the leaks that emerged. However, employees reacted differently to the ways in which the abject was silenced.

#### *Writing within a disembodied symbolic order*

The practice of writing an idealised childhood and a normative girlhood (Russell & Tyler, 2002; Tyler, 2009) excluded the abject experiences of being a child and a teenager, but it also constructed the gendered media professional. Employees positioned themselves as a contained, expert adult compared with the idealised girlhood represented in the magazines. This disembodiment took place within the routine and standardised work practices in the specific context of the cultural production of the magazine. It required employees to identify with the voice of the magazine through a disembodied symbolic order, represented as the older sister or mother figure (Kristeva, 1982; Höpfl, 2000). By positioning themselves as experts in their writing, the women can be seen as 'big sisters' in Lizzie or 'motherly' in Bestie. For Kristeva (1983/1986: 161) "we live in a civilization where the *consecrated* (religious or secular) representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood... this motherhood is the *fantasy* that is nurtured by the adult, man or woman." This representation

of women is both maternal but immaculate and asexual. Untainted, the role of the women who produce the magazine was to reinforce stability, security and safety in their writing. The lived body was restricted and wrapped up in discourses of girlhood friendship, security and happiness and conflicts or tensions around the taboo were silenced. The magazine could be seen as a tool for managing the teenage body and the teenage experience. The teenage body was perceived as a woman in the making, a stage of becoming (Schilling, 1993). In the teenage stage, the body and its leakages are feared: “there remains a broadly common coding of the female [pubescent] body as a body which leaks, which bleeds, which is at the mercy of hormonal and re-productive functions” (Grosz, 1994: 204). Containment or concealment of the leaky body was desirable, yet not always feasible, resulting in cracks, or the abject, emerging.

#### *Disrupting the disembodied symbolic order*

While there is a rationalised ordering of workplace interactions and the cultural production of childhood and girlhood in the magazines, abjection only becomes visible in the fleeting moments which provide disruption, ambiguity and unsettlement to the organisation of women’s and girls’ bodies. Tension arose between the biological, what Grosz (1994) would see as the materiality of the body, and the social and historical variation of sexual difference through inscription. The scenarios can be seen as a tension between the biological body, as “women’s corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage” (Grosz, 1994: 203), which has real material needs such as menstruation, pregnancy and has fluidity in its form, and the ideal ‘solid’, controlled and contained bodies which are proposed in the organisation (the employees) and the readers (in the magazine, as teenagers and pre-teens) (Dale and Burrell, 2000). Pregnancy and the pregnant body disrupted the idea that media professionals could

control their bodies (Gatrell, 2013). As Grosz points out, the female body is considered 'leaky' and it is in moments like pregnancy or pubescent menstruation where it appears disordered. Drawing on Grosz, Gatrell (2013) notes that it is the abject experience of attempting to control, hide and explain for the perceived contamination (blood, vomit, and the perceived liquidity) and taboo of pregnancy as a pollutant (see Douglas, 1966). Most prominently, Gatrell's proposition was that male colleagues would feel uncomfortable or critical, but there is a question on to what extent this would differ in female dominated workplaces. This research has demonstrated that even in female only workplaces there can be an abject experience for women when they are perceived as out of place in relation to their product. There was, however, a multiple abjection occurring, firstly in the abjection of women even in all female teams, but additionally in the abjection of girls in the production of the girls' magazine as a symbolic and aesthetic product on girls' childhood development. The next section will deal more directly with the multiple abjection by looking at the leaks and the silencing of those leaks that were observed.

### *Silencing the abject*

We argue that for the staff in the magazines the reconciliation of their own leaky bodies with their adult professional bodies seemed impossible. It is in the centre of this constant struggle that their labour took place: reflecting abject labour (Tyler, 2011). Employees appeared to be to some extent colluding in the abject, which was occurring. Fotaki (2013) found that some female academics colluded in the structure with male norms while others aimed to overcome the system. However in our study, the female employees had little space to offer alternative narratives in the magazines, especially ones that could be characterised by Kristeva's embodied writing. As Höpfl (2000: 100) noted when discussing Kristeva's *Stabat Mater*,

where the page is vertically split by embodied reflection on motherhood and academic writing on the Virgin Mary: “Writing which refuses to conform is extremely threatening to such a notion of order.” In the case of the magazines the notion of order is that of a regulated writing on girlhood, one where the contamination of the body is not allowed to enter into the writing. To do so would allow ambiguities to enter, meanings to become unstable and to question to authority of the voice (Höpfl, 2000).

Advice columns or features such as Monthly questions gave space to the containment of these leakages and emphasised the temporality of this stage of becoming, constructing a normative girlhood. The debate on the headline *The bloody truth* presented this abject as both desirable and repulsive (Kristeva, 1982), as it highlighted the shared wish to talk about the leaking female body in an honest and frank way, but at the same time this would have eroded the difference between the controlled adult female leakiness with the uncontrolled teenager. In this case, the editor would ensure that any leaks were silenced. The medical responses to menstruation questions and the language adopted ‘neutralised’ it into technical terms while in practice the lived realities of these experiences remained problematic. Similarly drawing on their own knowledge of childhood as ‘messy’ this abjection was expressed in the ambivalence of humour in a team meeting (Höpfl, 2007). These humorous accounts were presented in jest, in parallel to conversations on how they could never actually be written. The example of the pregnant employee demonstrated how employees instigated discussions about their own bodies through the symbolic order, forming a self-censorship (see for example Fotaki, 2013). Those who were happy to go along with the content and the working environment continued in the magazines, yet it was noticeable that a number of employees like Tina (Bestie) were less content. In the end, these employees left the magazine to take up other roles or occupations.

## **Conclusions**

In this article we investigated abjectivity in work practices in media, focusing on all female teams producing magazines for preteen and teenage girls. Previous research has also focused on abject experiences of women at work (Höpfl, 2000; Rizq, 2013; Tyler, 2011; Kenny 2010; Fotaki, 2013), but we argue that more attention needs to be paid to the relationship between work practices and the gendered product, which is produced. Our study shows how the abject was always both present and veiled in the lived experience of work with a gendered product, but also how the abject poked through and again was incorporated in the subject. Our study highlights three ways in which the specific workplace related to the abject labour, which took place. The first related to the process of writing and editing in a disembodied standardised 'voice'. Despite the all-female teams, the environment remained masculine where women disassociate parts of their embodiment in order to fit with the voice of the magazines. Secondly, while current studies highlight the abject (see e.g. Fotaki, 2013 and Tyler, 2011), this study has looked at how the abject intertwines into work practices with specific moments where the abject pokes through. We discuss moments where the idealised bodies of the ordered, controlled adult, the 'leaky' teenager and the safe, innocent pre-teenager were disrupted by embodied practices from employees. Finally, silencing the abject controls and contains the female body (Grosz, 1994). Standardised work practices became an attempt to control and exclude the abject in organisations as questionable aspects, such as conflict, body image and sexuality were managed through the editing process, but also through forms of self-censorship by the employees themselves. Abjectivity has been noted in many masculine work environments (Fotaki, 2013), but this article addresses how women themselves might

take part in this process rather than simply having it imposed upon them. Our study highlights the simultaneous multiplicity of abjection: the female body in relation to organisational male norms and the adult female body in relation to the girl body in cultural production.

We have stressed the relationship between work practices and the product worked on, as the nature of the written material produced has a significant relationship to the abjection experienced by the employees and the abjection in the magazine. However, to develop an understanding of the way that children's industries function (Russell & Tyler, 2002; Tyler, 2009), more attention should be paid to not only the cultural production of the product but also the employees' experiences of their work practices. We argue that the cultural construction of girlhood has a significant impact on the ethos of these workplaces, even without direct customer interaction, affecting the way that employees embodied and lived gender.

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