Session 1A
Post-Feminism & New Female Subjectivities
Organizers: Jessica Francombe-Webb, University of Bath; Kim Toffoletti, Deakin University & Holly Thorpe, University of Waikato
Presider: Kim Toffoletti, Deakin University

1A Jennifer McClearen, University of Washington
“Branding the Rebellion Against Postfeminist Body Discipline”

This paper interrogates the growing cultural discontent with representations of thin and underfed white feminine bodies in postfeminist media culture. More specifically, I examine the trending emphasis in girls and women’s strength, fitness, and athleticism in contemporary brand cultures such as sports organizations and fitness apparel. Sarah Banet-Weiser argued in the 2015 NASSS keynote that the nouveau ‘strong is the new skinny’ advertising mantra is indicative of ‘popular feminism’—a discourse that includes the investment in increasing the self-confidence of girls and women through the consumption of sports and fitness brands. In this paper, I further argue that the contemporary branding of women’s physical culture positions the audience as savvy consumers who can recognize the assumed contradictions between white femininity and physical power. These brands imagine themselves as rebelling against protracted postfeminist notions of white femininity as physically weak and fragile and instead celebrating self-discipline and individual empowerment through the strong female body. However, as image after image of physically attractive white women demonstrate, this brand of empowerment is limited to bodies that maintain hegemonic femininity. The ‘empowered’ white feminine body becomes a vehicle for supporting neoliberalism, ignoring structural and symbolic inequalities, and maintaining white supremacy.

1A Jessica Francombe-Webb, University of Bath & Laura Palmer, University of Exeter
“Footballing Femininities: The Lived Experiences of Young Females Negotiating the ‘Beautiful Game’”

Within an era shaped by postfeminist rhetoric, female bodies are more visible within sports and beyond and ‘girls’ are being celebrated or chastised for their determination, their drive to succeed and their ability to seize life chances—they are construed as powerful actors with freedom to choose (what to buy, what sports to play, where to work). Anita Harris (2004) and Angela McRobbie (2007) eloquently represent these new ‘celebrated’ postfeminist subjectivities in the image of the “Future Girls” and “Top Girls” who are thought to have successfully transgressed gender barriers. Based on research focused on girls’ lived experiences of football, we look to shed light on the complex discourses of young femininity and the way that footballing femininities are embodied and negotiated in postfeminist times. Participation in football by females is increasing globally, especially within England where it is considered to be the number one sport for females. Football thus offers a particularly illustrative research setting to explore new modes of female subjectivity within a sporting context. Drawing upon data generated by a range of participatory methods this presentation looks to better understand the tensions of the postfeminist era for young females and their ‘can do’ subjectivity.

1A Molly Cotner, University of Colorado
“She Likes the “D”!: A Critical Look at NFL Female Only Fan Clubs”

Women currently account for roughly 45% of the current National Football League (NFL) fan base, and in recent years the league has gone to great lengths to capitalize on this new and profitable consumer demographic. Attempts to exploit female fanship has led many NFL teams to create and promote spaces where women can feel like true, exclusive, and powerful fans. This effort has primarily taken on the form of female only fan clubs. The purpose of this research is to observe these spaces and more importantly the women that operate within them. Thorough examination of these fan clubs reveal a discourse of postfeminist language and action in which women are encouraged, and actively engage, in ways that are
highly gendered while simultaneously being drawn in and employing feminist ideals of empowerment and inclusion. These spaces, under the cover of including and recognizing the female fan, only help to expand the NFL’s consumer reach and profit margins while being fully supported by female members. This is despite the fact that the NFL has traditionally been a male-centered playground. With very little research done on this topic, this study helps to explore the ways in which women express themselves as fans and under what conditions they are allowed to do so.

1A Holly Thorpe, University of Waikato & Marianne Clark, University of Waikato
“'Good Mums take care of themselves': Examining the experiences of mothers who wearing activity-trackers within a digital community in New Zealand" 

This paper draws from Rosalind Gill’s (2007) conceptualization of postfeminism and Foucauldian thought to examine the experiences of mothers belonging to a digital community in New Zealand who wear activity-tracking devices. Analysis of interviews with 10 mothers suggest wearing the devices facilitated increased capacity for self-knowledge, which in turn prompted complex body projects requiring both practices of self-care and self-discipline. However, women actively challenged the ‘truth’ of information generated by the activity-trackers and negotiated this information alongside embodied meanings of ‘healthy’ motherhood. Women also described creating pleasurable connections with their bodies and social and physical environments, which were indirectly enabled by wearing the activity-trackers. As such, I argue that while activity-tracking technology acts to extend the workings of both disciplinary and bio-power, it does not produce total docility and may have unpredictable pleasurable effects that merit further theoretically informed investigation.