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Material girls and Material love: Consuming femininity and the contradictions of post-girl power among Kenyan schoolgirls

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Abstract

In this paper, I use qualitative data to explore the practices engaged in by Kenyan schoolgirls to participate in modern consuming womanhood, as well as the contradictory implications of these practices for thinking about globalized mediated femininities and their enactment in resource-poor settings. The paper examines the centrality of consumption to valued modern femininity among young women around the world, as well as the structural reality of gendered access to income. I show how the cooptation of the materiality of romantic love and normative expectations of male provision in romantic relationships bridge the gap between consumption desires and economic realities among Kenyan schoolgirls in both powerful and problematic ways. The paper ends with a reflection of the implications of these findings for post-girl power, the post-feminist age and the re-inscription of patriarchy.

Introduction

> "You know if you are a school girl, it is very hard to get money unless you are given by your parent, and let's say there is a very nice trouser you want to buy and you cannot ask your father or mother for money. Now it will force you to look for a boyfriend whose parents are a bit rich so that if you beg for something like Kshs1000 [$14.28], he can easily give you so that you can go and buy that trouser that you are really in need of, but if let's say you are working in somebody's house, it will force you to scrub that house every morning but at the end of the month, you only earn 100 shillings. [So] if you have a boyfriend, you can earn it very easily because you only go there, do it once, then he gives you."
>
> Jacqueline, Kenyan high-school girl

The opening quote is an excerpt from one of twelve focus group interviews I conducted among high-school going youth in Nyanza province, Kenya.[i] I was interested in how young people were navigating their transitions to adulthood and visited fourteen high schools

[i]Methodological note: The quote above is excerpted from Mojola 2014a where a fuller description of the study protocol, data, setting, methods and ethical approval can be found. The study protocol was approved by the University of Chicago's social sciences institutional review board, the Ministry of Education, Republic of Kenya, and the Nyanza district and school officials overseeing the sites of study. All names of respondents are pseudonyms to preserve privacy and anonymity. The study included individual, focus group and key informant interviews as well as ethnographic observations. Grounded theory was used in data collection and analysis. Key resources used in conducting interviews, writing field notes, coding and analyzing data include Weiss (1994), Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) and Charmaz 2001).

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throughout the province, talking with 56 girls and 18 boys about their relationships, educational and employment experiences and aspirations, and access to money. Sitting in a circle with a group of other girls on a grassy sports field, Jacqueline was frank about the challenges of being a schoolgirl who wanted to look fashionable despite economic limitations in the family. In doing this, Jacqueline is seeking to look like a modern woman; a young woman displaying modernity through the purchase and display of consumer goods which mark her as "modern" in this setting. Here, as elsewhere, multiple femininities are always on offer for young women. However, in this paper, I focus on a type of femininity that appears to be globally available – one that places consumption at its center. As such, the global export of images of what young modern consuming femininity looks like and how it is done and performed (West and Zimmerman 1987, Butler 1988) are powerful guides for schoolgirls like Jacqueline and her peers. These images of women appear in the Western soap operas such as the *Bold and the Beautiful* and *The Young and the Restless* that they gather around a television to watch, in the second-hand glossy magazines on display in local marketplaces, and in billboards they walk past everyday on their way to school. Billboards across the Kenyan landscape for example, pair beautiful, fashionably dressed, and made-up women with consumer products that purportedly make them so – *Fair and Lovely* skin lightening facial cream ads, *Vaseline Intensive Care Lotion* ads, *Imperial Leather* soap ads and so on. Indeed Jacqueline and her peers rarely if ever see images of young women performing "conventional" or valued femininities without the consumption of modern goods such as particular kinds of hygiene products, cosmetics and fashionable clothing. As I found in the course of fieldwork, these images were consequential in everyday conversations and perceptions about how modern femininity was done - when asking high school girls what things they considered *needs*, cosmetics and good clothing frequently topped the list – and consequential in the actions they undertook to fulfill these needs (Mojola 2014a). At the crux of the matter, is the fact that while these scripts and ideals are globalized and appealing for young women eager to look modern, the economic means to actualize them vary widely. In this paper, I explore the practices engaged in by Kenyan schoolgirls to participate in modern consuming womanhood, as well as the contradictory implications of these practices for thinking about globalized mediated femininities and their enactment in resource-poor settings.

I first begin by briefly discussing how consumption has become central to valued modern femininity among young women. I then discuss how these dynamics are occurring in the face of the continued structural reality of gendered access to income, where women continue to be dependent on providing men not only to survive, but also to engage in conspicuous consumption. I show how the cooptation of the materiality of romantic love and normative expectations of male provision in the context of relationships bridge the gap between consumption desires and economic realities among Kenyan schoolgirls in both powerful and problematic ways. The paper ends with reflections on the implications of these findings for the post-girl power and post-feminist age.

Material girls: Consumption and Modern Femininity

A key feature in accounts of the contemporary African landscape is the widespread nature of consumer culture, even as many modern consumption goods remain out of reach for many

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amidst conditions of extreme economic inequality (Cole and Durham 2007, Hansen 1999, Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, Nyamnjoh 2005). These developments are deeply gendered. Indeed the connection between the consumption of goods and modern femininity in particular is not accidental. A number of studies examining the early and middle part of the 20th century describe the packaging, export and uptake of consuming femininity in several parts of the world in and outside the West including India, China and South Africa (Weinbaum et al 2008). As Weinbaum et al (2008) describe, successful sale of beauty products was connected to the ideal of modern femininity that resulted in strikingly similar appearances of "modern girls" in the varied settings they studied. They note:

> a particular bundle of commodities including lipstick, nail polish, face creams and powders, skin lighteners, tanning lotions, shampoos, hair styling products, fancy soaps, perfumes, deodorants, toothpastes, cigarettes, high heeled shoes, cloche hats and fashionable, sexy clothes [which] was advertised globally… such commodities were linked in each local context to the expression of modern femininity. (Weinbaum et al 2008:18)

For example, in 1930s South Africa, "modern girls" consumed beauty products such as "store-bought soaps and creams and the wearing of 'smart' clothing" to display modern femininity (Thomas 2008:100). As the researchers found in different contexts, the girls were modern not just because of the consumption products they used, but because of the Western feminist ideals that their presentation embodied. Thus in a similar time period in India as South Africa, the Indian modern girl was an independent woman who "was coded and coded herself as a global and Indian modern through the hybrid fashioning of her body, her body language and her sartorial zest… was never photographed with her children or her husband and appropriated, rather than rejected, Western codes of modernity" (Ramamurthy 2008:158). In the 1950s and 60s, in both colonial Zimbabwe and South Africa, marketers recognized and cultivated women as central decision makers of household purchases; and engaged in strategies marking consumer goods as both "Western" and "modern" in contrast to "tribal" and "traditional" to get women to buy (Burke 1996). In Kenya, I have documented how the commodification of beauty over the early and mid-20th century, led to new desires among young women for skin lighteners, good clothing, and make-up which required purchase in order to look both beautiful and modern; to be women who met what 1950s "men of today" were looking for. I showed how these ideals persisted and became normative among contemporary 21st century men's perceptions of ideal beauty (Mojola 2014a). These brief examples highlight the ubiquity of consuming femininity, as well as its production (McRobbie 1997) in several settings, a production that has persisted over time. Indeed the association of women with consumption, shopping and "retail therapy" has arguably become a kind of feminized "common sense." What *has* shifted, however, are the scripts that are used to bind modern femininity and consumption together. Thus in both South Africa and Zimbabwe, pursuing racial respectability and Westernized sophistication in part underlay African women consumers' motivations. For white colonials and marketers, "civilizing" missions beginning in the household (a domain in which women were seen as key decision makers) underlay their drive to engage in and produce modern consuming women (Thomas 2008, Burke 1996).

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Increasingly and more recently, this production has been enabled and facilitated by the cooptation of feminist ideals to take advantage of young women's newfound economic ability to consume in their own right (Harris 2004). For increasing numbers of young women around the world, economic independence has resulted in a significant decoupling of consumption from relationships with providing men (whether fathers or intimate partners). For many other young women, and the schoolgirls discussed here in particular, consumption desires regularly outstrip their economic ability to satisfy them. Indeed the production of consuming women is occurring in contexts where access to income is gendered, and young women's access to their own income is limited. Sub-Saharan African women's labor force participation has been traditionally high, relative to other world regions, with over 60% participating in the labor force, and 50% among young women. However, in Kenya, the work gap among 15–19 year old youth is wide; 19% of teen girls and 60% of teen boys work for pay. The gap narrows with age; among 20–24 year olds, 50% of women and 86% of men work for pay (ILO 2012, KDHS 2010). The large gender differential partly reflects the fact that many young women engage in a substantial amount of unpaid work at home relative to their male counterparts, leaving little to no time for paid work. As such, girls like Jacqueline, whose words opened this paper, who want to consume outside of marriage and cannot depend on providing family, are confronted with gendered economic limitations that make it difficult to pursue consuming womanhood and fashionable modernity.

School girls and post-girl power

These developments are particularly challenging among young women in school. Mass education in Africa is now the norm with a near closing of the gap between men's and women's enrollment in a number of African countries (Lewin 2009, Lloyd et al 2000). School serves as a site in which another kind of global export occurs; it is a key mediator and arbiter of globalized cultural scripts and sub-scripts about modernity, women's empowerment, girl-power, and economic independence (Stambach 2000, Vavrus 2003, Switzer 2010). For example in typical responses to the question of when a good time to get married was, Kenyan schoolgirls in one focus group felt:

Helen: You find that there's time, if we will have the chance to be in the university, there is time to allow first university and [then] you search for something to do. So it's good when you become married after getting a job somewhere so that you don't depend on the man so much

Anyango: Some may even start beating you. If you don't even have a job where will you go to?

Miriam: You can provide your own things

The tasks of school are not only teaching literacy and numeracy, but also about inculcating in its subjects ways of being and doing modernity (Stambach 2000, Johnson-Hanks 2006, Mojola 2014a). And modern women are supposed to be economically independent. As such, Kenyan schoolgirls pursuing consuming femininity and declaring a desire for cosmetics and good clothing, along with their valuing of economic independence outside of marriage

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reproduce scripts that are consistent with post-feminist, neoliberal expectations of women. However, as I will show, the gendered economic reality they confronted led them to rely on economic dependencies that can be read in two opposing ways; as the anti-thesis of girl-power, where girls are *dependent* on providing men to consume, *or* a complex practice of post-girl power. In the latter case, educated girls – the embodiment of “girl-power” – are instead *agentic* in coopting normative expectations of male provision to meet the modern end of consuming femininity.

Material love: The power of romantic love, male provision, and the patriarchal bargain

A predominant focus in the empirical literature on young women’s intimate relationships in West, East and Southern Africa has been transactional sex relationships (See Luke and Kurz 2002, Luke 2003 and Chatterji et al 2004 for reviews). Distinct from commercial sex, these are sexual relationships in which money is exchanged, but in which issues of love and trust are considered at stake (Mojola 2014a). In making sense of these relationships, Africanist scholars focus on the idea that the presence of money underscores the fact that romantic love comes bundled with gendered expectations of men’s tangible and material demonstration of it through money and gifts (Hunter 2002, 2010, Poulin 2007, Cole 2009, Thomas and Cole 2009, Bhana and Pattman 2011). Among youth in Nyanza, for example, sex, love and provision were intertwined in gendered ways. For girls, having sex was proof of their love. In a clear elaboration of this, for example, in one focus group interview among schoolgirls, I asked:

Sanyu: So do you think most of the relationships that girls who have boyfriends have involve sex or not?

Lilian: Majority involves.

Harriet: Majority goes to sex in order to prove their love; the strength of that love and the satisfaction of that love.

Kathy: To show them their love, so if you don’t do it [have sex], there is no love.

Thus, girls saw providing sex as a way of showing or proving love. It was also clear to both genders, that in sexual relationships, men were expected to materially provide for their partners to demonstrate love (see also Poulin 2007, Cole 2009, Hunter 2002, 2010 and Bhana and Pattman 2011, Mojola 2014a). Boyfriends gave because love was evidenced not just through words, but through provision. “A lover”, Michelle noted, “is someone who can now take care of you.” The absence of provision from a working man suggested a lack of love or unfaithfulness on his part (as he was assumed to be providing for another woman). For example, in a focus group interview, I asked:

Sanyu: Do you expect your boyfriend to give you money?

Miriam: If he’s working-class [a man who worked]. If not, then you bear with him.

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Sanyu: What if he is working and he has money and he does not give money?

Jenny: Then he is unfaithful, he doesn't love you.

Young men agreed that provision was essential to a relationship, especially among urban young women (see also Bhana and Pattman 2011). As Michael noted:

> I think nowadays, those ladies living in the towns, they take themselves to be civilized. So befriending them without money, [not] buying them anything, that will be no love. And in fact that is their main intention. If you cannot provide that, there's no way. In fact, it cannot last for even a week.

In Michael's comment above, he makes the connection between love and money even more explicit, highlighting the importance of money for sustaining long-term relationships. Further, he suggests that the expectation of male provision is particularly acute among "civilized" or modern women. Such women were not only those based in towns, but also encapsulated schoolgirls in rural and urban areas pursuing consuming womanhood. In a focus group with schoolboys, I asked:

Sanyu: So in other words you can't have a relationship with a girl, even in this school unless you have money of some kind essentially because she will ask you for money?"

Thomas: Yes. And you find that every time you sit with the girl, there is no other story that you will make without that girl calling for money. She will just make for you stories and then tells you, "Can you help me with 5 bob [shillings]? I want to go and buy something with it."

Sanyu: So even a girlfriend that you call a partner will ask for money?

Thomas: She will ask. Especially like on Tuesdays and Fridays, the days we normally eat githeri [maize and beans] in this our school, your partner can ask you for even 20 shillings for you to aid her to go and buy soda and mandazi [doughnuts] there at the canteen and if you don't have, then immediately you come back from lunch she won't talk to you. She might even gossip [about] you."

In the quote above, consumption desires were also reflected in food choices, with the young woman wanting modern food and drink. Jacinta, a school girl noted, "You see, we youths if we don't have money, especially ladies, we run to men to get money for oils that we can use. Even [sanitary] pads, many things…" In a context where "traditional" girls used rags and cotton for menstruation, and modern girls used sanitary towels, providing boyfriends enabled women to menstruate in a modern way. Men's provision to schoolgirls was rarely for survival basics. Youth in school come from families or have support systems that can afford not only the basics of food and shelter, but also school fees and associated expenses (e.g. uniforms). Thus provision from romantic partners is typically for non-survival consumption of modern goods – things that are considered luxuries in this setting.

This "materiality of love" (Bhana and Pattman 2011) and its gendered nature in the context of intimate relationships is predicated on the notion that a "bargain with patriarchy"

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(Kandiyoti 1988) is at work. That is, men's financial provision is supposed to be matched by women's conjugal, reproductive and domestic provision. Often institutionalized in marriage, male breadwinner or provider ideologies and their intransigence reflect the historically gendered nature of access to money and resources not just in sub-Saharan Africa, but also in other parts of the world (Eisenstein 2009). When we connect the idea of a materiality of love with the idea of a patriarchal bargain, the implication is that men show love through provision of material resources and gifts, while women show love through provision of exclusive sex and different kinds of familial care within the home. When men do not meet their end of the patriarchal bargain, women resist and deviate from culturally sanctioned scripts in a multitude of ways (Kandiyoti 1988). Transactional sex arguably represents a form of deviation or resistance in contexts where young men cannot afford to contract bride-wealth based marriage (Ashforth 1999, Cole 2005, Mojola 2014b). Thus sex and male provision are decoupled from marriage, and money is given directly to young women (instead of to her father or male relatives in bride-wealth marriage) and is put toward individualized consumptive ends. Transactional relationships, then, allow young women to pursue, purchase and display modern femininity through consumption of goods (LeClerc-Madlala 2003, Mojola 2014a), not for the sake of enhancing a husband's (or future husband's) stature (Veblen 2006, Chan 2006), or to help out the family, but for themselves. In this sense, it is a bargain with patriarchy that enables young women to pursue modern femininity. This is exemplified in the case study of high school girl Jacqueline.

Jacqueline

If we return to Jacqueline's statement, we see her clear understanding of the predicament of a school girl with limited resources wanting to pursue consuming femininity, as well as her clear solution. In the capital city of Nyanza, 70% of men gave 9% (about $6) of their monthly income (about $69 on average) to their non-marital, non-commercial partners, suggesting that men's generous provision to girlfriends is the norm (Luke 2006). Provision is typically in the form of cash, meals, drinks, gifts, transportation and rent support. For Jacqueline's boyfriend, then, parting with $14, a lot even for someone rich, suggests that he views her with a measure of affection and offers the money as an elaborate gift. It is a gift that makes economic sense of her actions – a rich boyfriend versus a month of work - and makes her actions culturally intelligible to the focus group of her peers among whom she spoke. A cost benefit analysis was clearly at work. Having sex with a boyfriend who is willing to give you money is 'easier' than trying to earn it through difficult work, for very little money. Certainly measuring a wage of 100 shillings after a month of scrubbing someone's floor compared to sex with a rich boyfriend who gives a gift of 1000 shillings is little contest. In fact the girl who chooses to scrub floors – a job that does not require a high school education - would be looked down on more than the one who chooses the quick fling and is able to show off her new pair of trousers and her generous boyfriend to her friends. Jacqueline's motivation (reflected in many other interviews among schoolgirls) is strikingly illustrated in her language; specifically the language of "need" applied to consumption ("that trouser you are really in need of"), and therefore of compulsion to find resources to meet that need ("it will force you to look… it will force you to scrub"). The irony here is that work represents economic independence, while a relationship with a providing man represents dependence on male provision. Yet it is the latter that is ultimately empowering

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for Jacqueline to the extent that material love makes possible an immediate display of modern femininity, and the ability to be a young woman who keeps up with fashion trends. However, this cooptation of material love is not without cost.

The dangers of love and the post-girl power double bind

Much feminist scholarship views romantic love as a problematic emotion for girls and women. Despite its apparent pleasures, many feminists historically viewed love as being *disempowering* for women. A feminized emotion (Cancian 1986), women were seen to be situated or positioned in passive or helpless situations, waiting to be loved. Feminists argue that love is an emotion that draws women into subordinate positions in heterosexual marriage and relationships, and then keeps them there and complicit with patriarchal arrangements (Firestone 1971, de Beauvoir 1972, Jackson 1993, 1995, Gill and Herdieckerhoff 2006). Outside of marriage, romantic love ideologies clash with safe sex messages for young women. As many argue, condom use outside of birth control, implies infidelity and a lack of trust – the very anti-thesis of love. Thus *not* using condoms can in fact become a demonstration of love and trust (Warr 2001, Flood 2003, Tavory and Swidler 2009, Mojola 2014a). Additionally, as Wood and Jewkes (2005:43) show in the case of South Africa, in a more extreme example, romantic love ideologies are problematically used by young women to explain or account for the physical and sexual abuse they experience from boyfriends. Thus their informants reframed abuse as an expression of love, using "phrases such as 'he forced me to love him', and 'I fell in love with him because he beat me up' ".

In Nyanza, schoolgirls' deployment of material love was also viewed as problematic. Indeed love was portrayed as a destructive and life-derailing emotion by teachers and students alike; something which directly undermined the empowering properties of education. Boyfriends were not only seen to distract girls from school work, but also to lead girls to have sex, potentially get pregnant and have to leave school. Thus school teachers told girls, "[boys will] destroy your life." Schoolgirls were counselled to forget about relationships and focus on school instead. For example, in a focus group among girls, the following discussion unfolded:

Rosa: You will find that girls in Nyanza province, they are not performing well.

Sanyu: Why aren't they performing well?

Mary: Engaging in love.

Helen: That is the thing.

…..

Sanyu: So how does engaging in love prevent [girls] from performing well in school?

Grace: So I think that if you engage in love, you will not be able to concentrate in your education.

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Rosa: You know someone will just be reflecting [on] what they did last night and saying, "even today, I must go back, that thing [sex] was really enjoyable." Now it will force you to go back again. So that will really affect your education, and taking time in writing letters, you want to tell him how, you want to tell him all sorts of words, how you really love him.

Doing well in school, and even more, completing school, is particularly challenging in the Kenyan context. There is large scale attrition mainly because of the expense of school and lack of available places for students. While about 30% of primary school graduates begin high school, only 13% complete it. High stakes examinations often determine progress from high school to university, with only 5% succeeding (KDHS 2010). Despite the real structural barriers represented by these statistics, girls and their teachers individualized both the problem and the solution. Lack of success in school was attributed to the distractions of love, and it was therefore incompatible with education. Thus the logic for rejecting boyfriends was clear.

Christine: Because we want to learn. If a person loves you he may make you to leave school. They don't care, they just

Leila: They make you leave school.

Another key problem with love, as Margaret noted, was "pregnancy. You can get pregnant and leave school." This was a real fear for schoolgirls as limited access to the pill and condoms meant that having sex carried a substantial risk of pregnancy. Pregnant girls were sent away from school, as motherhood was seen as incompatible with school.

Schoolgirls are thus walking a tightrope; trying to attain one kind of valued femininity - consuming modernity – could come at the expense of another - educated modernity. They engage in a bargain with patriarchy that could end up with them staying home to take care of their child and engaging in substantial amounts of unpaid labor now that they are no longer in school. In this way, rather than manipulating patriarchy for their own ends, they could end up instead reinforcing and enacting traditional femininity and patriarchal expectations of women – the kind of femininity these schoolgirls are trying to escape.

Concluding Reflections: Post-Feminism, Post-Girl Power and the re-inscription of patriarchy

Post-feminism represents the illusory perception that old feminist questions are settled, and that the ideals of women's equality with men, sexual freedom and choice have been achieved and can now be taken for granted, thus resulting in a series of complex re-framings (McRobbie 2004; Gonick et al 2009). For example, in the age of sexual liberation, young women's sexualized clothing displays, which appear compulsory in some settings, or the appropriation of same-sex eroticism by heterosexual girls, are seen not as 21st century versions of women's continued subservience to the male gaze, but rather an exercise of their "right to be sexy" (Wilkins 2004, Hamilton 2007, Kilborne 2010; see also England et al 2007). These reframings, as these authors note, have consequences when post-feminist young women come to realize their own tightrope walk on the so-called Madonna/whore

complex, where the potential costs of exercising sexual freedom include dealing with sexual double standards that reflect the continued power of the "slut" label and the concomitant precariousness of their reputation.

In a similar light, for the Kenyan schoolgirls' described here, their display of consuming femininity is seen as a reflection of their display of a fashionable feminine modernity that is globally recognizable and validated. Yet it also masks both the patriarchal workings on which it depends – male provision of material love - as well as the fact that young women's conspicuous consumption in their own right is still limited to a handful in the face of continued gendered inequality in access to resources and money. Examining young Kenyan women's practices makes visible the contradictions of embodying consuming femininity in a setting where schoolgirls – the embodiment of "girl-power" - face gendered economic limitations. I have argued that in complex ways, girls' strategic deployment of traditional patriarchal norms to achieve modern feminine aims is one example of what post-girl power – in all its contradictions - might look like among young Kenyan women. More broadly, these findings highlight the limits of post-feminist, post-girl power thinking when examining how globalized, mediated femininities – and particularly those with consumption at their core - are enacted in resource-poor settings. Rather than post-girl power representing a state of taken for granted equality with men, it instead illustrates what is in fact a complex re-inscription of patriarchy in young women's lives.

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