

“Be Sleek, Be Stylish, Be Yourself”: Identity, Interactivity and *Mad Men*

Helen Warner

Despite being set in 1960s Manhattan, AMC’s prime time drama, *Mad Men*, has clearly enjoyed a significant cultural resonance with contemporary audiences across the globe. The show has gained a substantial online following, consisting of loyal viewers (known as “Maddicts”) who scrutinize mise-en-scene, analyse characters’ behaviour, and predict future narrative outcomes on fan forums, social networking sites and blogs. In July 2009, in anticipation for the season three premiere of *Mad Men*, AMC launched an interactive application, titled “Mad Men Yourself” on its official website which invited viewers to create their own avatar inspired by the iconic look of the show. The guidance given to participants before they embark on this process is “Be Sleek, Be Stylish, *Be Yourself*” [my emphasis].

In order to “Mad Men Yourself”, participants are required to choose a gender, skin colour, body type, face shape, hair style, eye shape, eyebrow shape, nose shape, outfit, accessories, and location in which to situate the avatar. In so doing, the application makes a series of assumptions about the way in which identity, in the contemporary period should be expressed through style. For example, the entire process suggests that identity is constructed primarily through image maintenance and thus to be “yourself” requires individuals to construct an identity based on, and expressed through, hairstyle and dress. Moreover, the limited amount of options available to the participant in terms of dress, accessories and location (there is only a choice of five outfits in total and six locations in which you can situate your avatar) suggests that there are only a finite set of identities to choose from. While the participant is able to create the avatar, s/he is not able to create the options available to them – these are created for the individual by an external influence. Finally, it is important to note that the process of choosing from a finite selection of identities requires the participant to create an identity this is informed by, and defines itself by what it is not. These principle features of identity construction within the “Mad Men Yourself” application are explored in the following discussion of *Mad Men* and its intertexts.

The aims of this article are twofold. First, I examine the ways in which discourses of identity construction and performance are articulated within *Mad Men* and its extra-textual material and argue that both the show and its online interactive applications provide viewers with the symbolic resources to consider, make and remake identity in the contemporary era. In particular, I focus on the construction and mediation of feminine identities as represented within the show and its intertexts. In so doing, I seek to contribute to the body of work which examines the relationship between identity and the media industries for it has been claimed that there remains a dearth of work which involves the ‘systematic and sustained examination of...actual texts and practices of media culture’ (Kellner, 1995: 234). Thus, I endeavour to intervene in this area by providing a discursive analysis of *Mad Men* and its extra-textual material. Second, I seek to demonstrate that this reading of *Mad Men* (and its extra-textual applications) supports a body of work which claims

that it is problematic to assume that the modern and postmodern era are easily distinguished periods. Rather, the contemporary cultural resonance clearly enjoyed by *Mad Men* – a show which is lauded by critics for its “authentic handling of time and place” (Hogan, 2009) says something of the similarities between both periods, particularly, as this article argues with regard to discourses of identity.

First, however it is important to note that there is some dispute within the cultural studies about precisely when society entered the postmodern age, and if as the term suggests, this resulted in a break or “rupture” from the modern era. While some theorists contend that it is problematic to periodise modernity and postmodernity as distinct historical epochs, the 1960s is continually cited as a significant period in which cultural changes in architecture, art, cinema, gender and identity politics were symptomatic of the so-called postmodern turn. With this in mind, *Mad Men*, a contemporary television show set in the early 1960s becomes a useful lens through which to examine discourses of identity in modernity and postmodernity precisely because it depicts a time, which Gary Edgerton has described as “the calm before the cultural storm” (Edgerton, 2009). That is, a period in which these cultural shifts are beginning to take place. Thus the following offers, albeit in broad strokes, some of the key academic discourses and debates surrounding identity in premodern, modern and postmodern society.

It is often claimed that identity in premodern society was completely fixed and stable. According to Kellner, identity was:

a function of predefined social roles and a traditional system of myths which provided orientation and religious sanction to define one’s place in the world...[i]n premodern societies identity was unproblematical and not subject to reflection or discussion... One was a hunter and a member of the tribe and gained one’s identity through these roles and functions (Kellner, 1995: 231).

Hence, identity was largely defined in relation to the work an individual was assigned in a particular community. Subsequently, it has been argued that in modern society identity was also relatively stable, and formed in relation to a series of persistent power structures; these include social phenomena such as race, class and gender. In so-called postmodern society, the “subject has disintegrated into a flux of euphoric intensities, fragmented...disconnected... and no longer possesses the depth, substantiality and coherence that was the ideal and occasional achievement of the modern self” (Kellner, 1992: 144). Moreover, the postmodern self is thought to be largely constructed and maintained through consumption practices, thus image and style have become extremely important. In his study of “Lifestyle and Consumer Culture”, Mike Featherstone suggests that “we are moving towards a society without fixed status groups” (Featherstone, 2007: 81). Thus, the postmodern model of selfhood suggests that traditional power structures (gender, race and class) no longer shape identity. To be sure, while shifts in social, political and cultural circumstances - which are thought to structure the boundaries of identity - have occurred, some sociology scholars have taken issue with the concept of a postmodern identity as demonstrably different from the modern self.

In his canonical book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman (1959)

suggests that identity relies upon elements of performance which correspond to specific social situations and thus has never been entirely fixed. In addition, Antony Giddens argues that in modern society, the “self is not a passive entity, determined by external forces” (Giddens, 1991: 2) but rather identity construction required, and continues to require individuals to engage in self reflexivity. Similarly, as Kellner has observed, identity in the modern era was also defined by its increasing flexibility. He writes “one could choose, make - and then remake - one’s identity as one’s life-possibilities change and expand or contract” (Kellner, 1995: 231). Equally, he suggests that identity in the modern era was, to some extent, defined by the market insofar as identity can be created/affirmed through consumption practices.

In addition, I would also argue that it is important to note that for women, identity has historically been associated with consumption, rather than productive labour. As Joanne Hollows observes “[t]he sphere of production – which is seen as the site of human identity and useful labour- is... identified as masculine and privileged over the sphere of consumption [which is identified as “feminine”]” (Hollows, 2000: 114). Despite, political and sociological changes, feminist critics argue that contemporary culture also naturalizes “a model of feminine identity and female power inseparable from consumption” (Roberts, 2007: 232). Thus, as Kellner observes, “[a]t stake is whether identity is fundamentally different in so-called postmodernity and whether a distinction between modernity and postmodernity, and modern and postmodern identities can be sustained” (Kellner, 1995: 233). That said, the common assumption within the literature outlined above is that the consumption practices of individuals are directly related to the construction of identity.

Indeed, it has been argued that, in particular, the consumption of goods offered by the media industries is central to the development of contemporary identity. With this in mind, television becomes an especially important and powerful tool in contemporary identity construction. As Brian L. Ott argues in his analysis of *The Simpsons*, “television furnishes consumers with explicit identity models, models not of who to be but *how* to be” (Ott, 2003: 58), by offering specific subject positions which viewers can adopt. It has long been argued that television fiction can serve a pedagogical function insofar as it allows audiences access to certain scenarios which may have a resonance in their own lives and offer them an insight into potential outcomes. Indeed, women have long since been encouraged to read popular culture as instructional; offering guidance on how to perform appropriate femininity. For example, in her study, *Women and Soap Opera*, Christine Geraghty argues that there is “pleasure for the female viewer in rehearsing the decision making process without the responsibility for its consequences” (Geraghty, 1991: 42). Similarly, Buckley and Ott argue that television narratives “and their characters are a way of rehearsing prominent cultural themes and anxieties as a way of coming to terms with them and working through them” (Buckley & Ott, 2008: 210). I adopt this perspective in the following reading of *Mad Men* insofar as I demonstrate the show’s potential to educate viewers in the practice of identity construction. That said, I also seek to stress how *Mad Men* performs an ideological critique of identity in both the modern and postmodern moment insofar as it suggests that traditionally identity is bound up with performance and also it suggests that power structures such as gender, class and race continue to be persistent forces in the formation of self identity.

With this in mind, the first major section demonstrates how the narrative works through some of these concerns before focussing specifically on the characters' performance of gendered identities. In the final section, I offer a context for this reading of the text by examining the ways in which the interactive applications, and the show's online presence, affords audiences an additional forum in which to "test", construct online identities which are directly connected to those offered within the text.

"A Man is Whatever Room He is in": Approaching Identity in *Mad Men*

Set in Manhattan in the early 1960s, *Mad Men* depicts the lives of the employees of the successful advertising agency, Sterling Cooper. The show is therefore preoccupied with the supposed shift toward an "image obsessed" culture and situates its melodramatic storylines against the backdrop of 1960s political and cultural events. It is important to note here that *Mad Men's* (re)presentation of important historical events is less concerned with documenting history, than it is foregrounding the social implications. Moreover, its depiction of the early 1960s is informed by the contemporary climate in which it is created and as such, the show fosters a proximity between the two periods. The historical events portrayed and the social issues and concerns raised within the show are (re)constructed in such a way as to engage with anxieties that preoccupy the contemporary cultural moment; in so doing the show provides audiences with a point of reference. This is perhaps most apparent in its construction of significant political events, for example, the portrayal of JFK's inauguration engaged with the similar notions of political unrest present during the 2008 presidential election. Given that socio-political, cultural and economic factors are thought to structure the boundaries of identity (as suggested above), the emphasis given to particular cultural events surely has implications, not only for the way in which models of identity are constructed within the show, but also for the ways in which viewers are invited to respond to them. This is perhaps best exemplified in season one, episode 12, titled "Kennedy v Nixon".

Discourses of identity and identity construction are central to the first season's major storyline within which it is revealed that the lead character, Don Draper (John Hamm), an advertising executive at Sterling Cooper, adopted the name and identity of a soldier killed in the Korean war. The build up to this reveal is slow and steady - it is not until the "Kennedy vs. Nixon" episode that this information is fully disclosed. As the title suggests, this episode situates its narrative against the backdrop of the 1960 presidential election. Parallels are then drawn between this political reference point and the episodes central narrative which depicts a power struggle between Draper and Pete Campbell (a young upstart at Sterling Cooper played by [Vincent Kartheiser](#)). Having discovered photographic evidence that Don Draper is not who he has previously claimed to be, Pete attempts to blackmail Don.

In a previous episode ("The Long Weekend" – season one, episode 10), Don compares himself to "self-made" man Nixon – he claims, "Kennedy, I see a silver spoon, Nixon, I see myself -

thus the comparisons between Draper and Campbell and Kennedy and Nixon are accentuated. Indeed, in the “Kennedy v Nixon” episode discourses of class and identity are central; Don, whose professional and financial success was achieved through hard work, is contrasted with Pete, whose privileged circumstances have offered him a wealth of opportunities. This, of course, mirrors the public personas of Kennedy and Nixon, who each represented different masculine identities which were informed by class.

Pete represents *nouvelle riche*. He is a member of the elite Dykeman family who, prior to the market crash in 1929 owned the majority of properties in Manhattan. Resultantly, Pete is primarily concerned with the acquisition of wealth and the performance of status. This is, to some extent, articulated through dress. Pete’s signature royal blue suit denotes youth and modernity and is starkly contrasted to Don’s wardrobe’s darker, more conservative colour palette. Don’s grey tailored suit is also the primary device used to communicate his current social status as a respected and affluent advertising executive. However, in contrast to Pete, Don’s suit signifies his maturity and experience. The oppositions set up between Pete and Don can be read as a comment upon the increasing fears over style (and the inherent depthlessness the term inescapably brings) and identity. Pete represents ‘style over substance’ insofar as he performs status without actually possessing economic or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Thus, his identity is unstable and speaks to contemporary concerns that postmodern identity is an entirely artificial (and unstable) construct.

On the surface, Don represents modernist principles of identity construction. He uses style to convey his affluent status but his socio-economic background informs his “core” identity which is in some ways more fixed and authentic than Pete’s. As previously mentioned, Don Draper adopted the name of soldier killed in the Korean War. Prior to this, Draper was known as Dick Whitman, the bastard son of a prostitute who died in childbirth. Using a series of non linear flashback scenes, the narrative reveals that Dick comes from a decidedly lower-working class background. This is also mostly conveyed through dress. In flashback sequences Dick as a child appears in tattered, stained, practical clothing, undertaking manual labour on his family’s small farmland. While these scenes drive the narrative forward they also can be understood as making a comment about notions of identity as they evolve through time. The rural setting of Dick Whitman’s childhood has the aesthetic of the pre-industrial era – a time within which it is often supposed that identities were constructed in relation to production rather than consumption and were thereby fixed and unchanging.

While identity in the premodern and modern era is often perceived as more “authentic” and “natural” than more contemporary models, within *Mad Men* this understanding is complicated by the fact that the image of Don Draper introduced to the audience in the pilot episode is a self constructed illusion. Indeed, creator of the show Matt Weiner explicitly commented on the dual nature of Draper’s character in a radio interview; he claims “Don is one thing on the inside and another thing on the outside” (KCRW). The “Kennedy v Nixon” episode then provides a commentary on the problems associated with identity in these terms and offers guidance on

how best to understand the concept of identity in modern (and postmodern) society. When it is revealed to Don's boss that he is living under an assumed identity, Bert Cooper responds by saying "The Japanese have a saying. A man is whatever room he is in." In other words, Don's model of identity is only defined by its opposition to Pete's. Therefore, the show seems to present a view of identity as that which can only be defined by what it is not; in other words, "identity must be defined not by its content, but always by its relation to, and differentiation from, other [identities]" (Morley & Robins, 1989: 10).

Mad Women: Performing Femininity in *Mad Men*

As demonstrated in the discussion of Pete and Don above, characters' identities in *Mad Men* are articulated via a series of oppositions. This is nowhere more explicit than in its depiction of female characters. The following section will therefore examine the ways in which three main female characters, Betty Draper (January Jones), Peggy Olsen (Elisabeth Moss) and Joan Harris nee Holloway (Christina Hendricks), embody oppositional feminine identities which can only be fully grasped when read in conjunction with one another. In so doing, the show provides cultural critique of the sexual politics of the early 1960s and the resultant constraints imposed upon female identity.

As previously discussed, the period in which *Mad Men* is set is best conceptualised as the "calm before the cultural storm". To be sure, the show endeavours to present an image of the early 1960s as a period of when conservative ideological values, most commonly associated with the 1950s have an extremely strong hold. Thus each of female characters serve to represent feminine identities which are emblematic of what is often remarked upon by feminist critics as an "all time low in feminist history" (Partington, 1995: 212). Perhaps most symptomatic of the time is Betty Draper, Don's (now estranged) wife. Betty embodies the disconsolate housewife. For the first three seasons of *Mad Men* (which span 1960-1963), Betty personifies Friedan's vision of a college-educated (Betty has a degree in Anthropology) suburban wife and mother.

Betty's costuming reflects the particular feminine identity she performs. She often appears in full skirted dresses inspired by Christian Dior's "New Look" design popularised in the late forties. The "New Look" famously drew inspiration from Victorian dress and was consequently associated with sexual and female oppression. Dior's New Look was held accountable by some feminist critics for contributing to the continued oppression and objectification of women by men in the post war period. As Valerie Steele notes; "critics have interpreted Dior's New Look as a sartorial expression of the feminine mystique: elegance as bondage" (Steele, 1997: 235). This perception of female dress as "bondage" is echoed in Janie Bryant's (costume designer for *Mad Men*) musings on Betty's character. She claims:

As I thought about Betty Draper, "perfectionist" came to mind, and I built a polished wardrobe of printed silks, petticoats and shirtwaist dresses around her need to always look feminine and flawless. Betty often wears white because in my opinion she's striving to be the perpetual bride.

(Bryant, 2010: 3)

Thus appearance is central to Betty's performance of feminine identity and it is important to note that this not limited to her physical appearance. In addition, the domestic setting is central to the characterisation of Betty, and most notably sets her apart from the other female characters discussed here.

Onscreen representations of the 1950s housewife have largely been "contained within the domestic space of the home" (Haralovich, 2003: 72). Indeed, Betty's spatial containment not only signifies her difference from Peggy and Joan, but also serves to reinforce her difference from Don who is permitted access to the public sphere. Betty's discontent with the domestic 1960s lifestyle is conveyed early on in season one. In the "Ladies Room" (season one, episode two), Betty loses sensation in her hands and it is suggested that she is suffering from conversion disorder (a psychological condition which involves the physical manifestation of psychological problems such as depression and anxiety). In this particular episode the power relations between Betty and Don are explored when he initially refuses to let her visit a psychiatrist. He suggests that Betty has no reason to be unhappy as he has provided her with all the consumer goods she could possible desire -thereby suggesting that the embodiment of "appropriate" domestic femininity is bound up with consumption practices.

Questions of gender and power in *Mad Men* are also played out within the workplace as both Joan and Peggy are employees at Sterling Cooper. In the first two seasons, Joan occupies the role of office manager. Single, and in her late twenties/early thirties, Joan marks a departure from Betty. Thus, if Betty is defined by her status as wife and mother, Joan is defined by her sexuality. In the first series she maintains a relationship with a married man (Roger Sterling played by John Slattery, the co-owner of Sterling Cooper) and it is also suggested that she was involved in a romantic relationship with Paul Kinsey (Michael Gladis). As with Betty, Joan's costume serves to draw attention to her feminine figure. Her flame-red hair and bold colour dresses suggest that Joan is designed "to-be-looked-at" (Mulvey, 1989) by her male counterparts, however it is also suggested that she commands her sexuality. It is no surprise then, that the show draws comparisons between Joan and Marilyn Monroe. This is most apparent in the episode "Maidenform" (season two, episode six). In the episode, Sterling Cooper are tasked with creating an advertising campaign for Playtex underwear. The concept for the Playtex campaign, which specifically addresses women, employs a now familiar rhetoric that women can perform a dual identity which can be both "sexual" and "innocent". Sterling Cooper design a layout for the print advertisement which depicts two images of the same model. On the left hand side she appears in dark underwear with a brunette wig styled to deliberately replicate Jackie Onassis' bouffant. On the right hand side, the model wears the same underwear set, this time in white, and has a blonde wig resembling Marilyn Monroe's hairstyle. The tagline for the advertisement reads "Nothing fits both sides of a woman better than Playtex".

In light of the campaign, the men in the office come to the conclusion that women are either a Jackie or a Marilyn. Joan, it is unanimously agreed, is a Marilyn. This comparison does not

only refer to her physical similarities but also her sexual disposition and her discontent with her position as a single working woman. In the “sixth Month Leave” (season two, episode nine), Joan is distressed when she learns of Monroe’s sudden death and it is suggested that her distress stems from a concern that, as a consequence of her lifestyle, she will find herself in a similar position to Monroe. As such, both Betty and Joan secretly desire alternative lifestyles, yet they are, to a certain extent, constrained by feminine identities assigned to them (by their male counterparts). Moreover, it is important to remember that the different incarnations of femininity adopted by Joan and Betty are equally informed by class. Betty performs an upper middle class version of domestic femininity which is not available to Joan as a working (class) woman. The Jackie/Marilyn comparisons are also imbricated with discourses of class insofar as First Lady Jackie Kennedy represents elegance and upper-class respectability and Marilyn Monroe was characterised by her sexual availability and working class background. Thus, when the male employees seek to categorise the women in the office in terms of their physicality and sexuality, equally they make an assumption about social class.

While it is suggested that women are afforded limited choices in terms of identity construction (Jackie or Marilyn), the male employees suggest that Peggy Olsen does not satisfactorily fit with these narrow archetypes. When discussing the female workers, the male employees of Sterling Cooper claim that Peggy “is not a Jackie or a Marilyn she’s a Gertrude Stein” (an American intellectual, most famous for her writing, art collection and romantic relationship with Alice B Toklas). In so doing, the show highlights a series of anxieties surrounding physical attractiveness, women and the workplace which continue to pervade contemporary culture. For example, in this episode it becomes clear precisely how Peggy’s promotion from Don’s secretary to junior copy writer has engendered a shift in how she is perceived by male employees. While in the “Ladies Room” episode it is revealed that the male workers have a sweep on who can sleep with her first, the comparison to Stein suggests that, in light of her professional success and intellect, she is no longer desired by her male counterparts.

Peggy’s decision to find lucrative and creative labour anticipates Friedan’s assertion that the solution to the American housewife’s discontent was to enter the public (masculine) sphere and find employment. While of course, Joan engages in paid employment outside of the home, her job is coded as suitably “feminine”. Moreover, Joan’s attempts to seek promotion as a script reader are rebuffed. While Peggy is successful in her attempt to secure creative labour, rather than wholeheartedly celebrating this decision, the show highlights the difficulties faced by working women. In so doing, the show adopts a somewhat postfeminist perspective on such issues. As Diane Negra notes postfeminist cinematic depictions of working women provide cautionary tales, insofar as they suggest that women “need to scale back their professionalism, lest they lose their femininity” (Negra, 2004). As demonstrated above, Peggy’s decision to enter the masculine field of employment affects her desirability. Thus, while Peggy negotiates a position in opposition to both Joan and Betty insofar as she is not constrained by the home, nor does she is she constrained by the workplace, she is nevertheless constrained by the boundaries of acceptable femininity. As such, Peggy’s performance of femininity is paradoxically informed by a more postfeminist

logic (in a pre-second wave feminist era). Thus, the show's presentation of feminine identity in the 1960s resonates with contemporary concerns pertaining to the performance of appropriate femininity in the contemporary (postfeminist) era.

Are you a suit or a skirt?: Issues of Online Gendered Identity Performance

"Are you a suit or a skirt?" is the first question asked of participants who enter the "Mad Men Yourself" process. It is, of course, a question related to gender and speaks to the rigid guidelines offered by the period regarding dress and gender performance. Another fundamental decision the participant is required to make is where the avatar will be situated. The locations include; dinner with Don, the Sterling Cooper offices, a bedroom and a kitchen. As the above section demonstrates, the depiction of gendered identities within the show is bound up with dress and place and it appears that the interactive applications, designed to allow viewers the opportunity to play with their online identity are subject to the same constraints. It is important to note here, that this did not deter viewers from engaging in the "Mad Men Yourself" process. According to Ian Schafar (CEO of Deep Focus, the marketing company responsible for the campaign), within the first week of its launch, the "Mad Men Yourself" campaign had 36 million views and an average of 38 avatars were created every minute. Thus, this section examines the phenomenal online culture surrounding *Mad Men* and suggests that it provides the symbolic resources for viewers to make, remake and enact the models of identity offered within the show.

The "Mad Men Yourself" application encourages participants to consider the way in which style can express facets of their identity. This requires participants to reflect upon their own situation and how best to express it using the limited tools provided. In so doing, participants are encouraged to become self-monitoring subjects. In "Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime", Angela McRobbie suggests that processes of self surveillance contribute to the construction of female identity in a postmodern (or late modern) society. She writes:

Young women are...disembedded from communities where gender roles were fixed. And, as the old structures of social class fade away and lose their grip in the context of "late" or second modernity, individuals are increasingly called upon to invent their own structures. They must do this internally and individualistically, so that self-monitoring practices...replace reliance on set ways and structured pathways. (McRobbie, 2007: 35)

Indeed, I wish to suggest that a similar process is at work within the "Mad Men Yourself" application and other extra-textual material. For example, the "Which Mad Men Character Are You" quiz requires the participant to consider their own behaviour, style, and morality and thereby encourages a form of self-monitoring (questions include: "You find a piece of incriminating evidence about a co-worker what do you do?" and "It's time to get dressed for work. What kind of outfit do you choose?"). Moreover, the quiz is multiple choice (i.e. participants are required to choose from a finite list of answers) and in so doing determines a set of specific standards which participants should conform to.

While the “Which Mad Men Character Are You?” application does not address a particular gendered audience, there are a number of unofficial online applications which encourage the governance of specific gendered identities. For example, one unofficial blog invites readers to take the “Are you a Peggy, a Betty or a Joan?” quiz. The kinds of questions posed relate to specifically “feminine” issues including style and romance (e.g. “What do you think of men? What’s sexy about you? What’s your take on marriage? If you had to guess, most people would probably find you...”). Thus, participants are encouraged to consider not only how they view themselves but also how they think they are viewed by others. Furthermore, this quiz is also multiple choice thereby offering a finite amount of choices. Indeed, the title of the quiz suggests that there are only three feminine identities available to women – Betty (“housewife”), Peggy (“career girl”), Joan (“sex kitten”). Moreover, while these three versions of feminine identity are presented within the show as a product of their cultural history, the personality quiz encourages a proximity between 1960 and contemporary models of feminine identity. Indeed, it is arguable then that these personality quizzes contribute to the policing of contemporary femininity insofar as they encourage self-surveillance. The current preoccupation with policing femininity, as Janet McCabe notes, can be read as a response to “the dilemmas of contemporary femininity”, which inform the current “obsess[ion] with “defining” identities (McCabe, 2006: 79). This, of course, speaks to those postmodern anxieties regarding the instability of identity in the contemporary era.

While the applications discussed above offer a very narrow view of gendered identity, viewers are invited to debate the complexities of identity drawn within the *Mad Men* narrative in other online forums. On the AMC’s official website, numerous blogs and forum threads offer participants the space to engage with and explore their identity in relation to those models offered by the show. A recent example is a discussion which began in the forum and was subsequently published on the show’s official blog. Users of the *Mad Men* official forum were asked “which female character do you most identify with?” The discussion begins by acknowledging the way in which 1960s models of femininity can be relevant in a contemporary postfeminist culture. It is claimed: “*Mad Men*’s female archetypes, while based on women in the “60s, are timeless too” (Anon, 2010). Indeed, the user comments suggest that the difficulties facing women in the 1960s persist in contemporary culture. For example several of the comments acknowledge the relationship between feminine identity, motherhood and work:

i would love to stay at home with [my children] and i think that there are a lot of difficulties in doing so, especially in trying to maintain some semblance of an identity. that’s probably why i’m drawn to betty most [sic].

I identify with most of the women in the office on Mad Men--the workplace was certainly NOT female friendly or family friendly in the 60s. Seeing all the misogyny again is sometimes painful

That said, it is clear that several of the comments suggest that female viewers are capable of resisting such constricted models of identity in favour of extracting particular facets and appropriating them to construct a different model of identity:

PREVIOUSLY ON

I am a little bit Joan, a little bit Peggy. Joan knows so much about humanity that Peggy is still learning (remember Joan has got 10 years on Peggy), but Peggy is game to see things in a new way that breaks through acceptable societal norms of the era.

As with the personality quizzes, this discussion engenders self reflection and self surveillance, however the forum provides an opportunity for numerous possibilities to be explored and in that respect is perhaps less constrictive; and less concerned with normalising/policing femininity. Indeed, this more resistive behaviour is apparent in other areas of online fan interactivity.

One of the most significant participatory activities which fans engage in has been examined in the popular press; that is, the construction of twitter accounts for characters within the show. In the UK quality newspaper *The Guardian*, journalist Anna Pickard notes:

Mad Men's obsession is quite remarkable for a bunch of analogue people – especially ones who don't actually exist. While the act of writing a Twitter update might not be remarkable at all, the fact that they're in 1962 makes it really quite impressive... These people loved Mad Men, and they wanted to drag characters they loved into their world. (Pickard, 2009)

Twitter accounts have been created for Don, Betty, Peggy, Roger, Joan, and the office photocopier. For the most part the accounts reveal anecdotes and mundane observations that pertain to everyday life in the 1960s. These twitter pages have gained substantial numbers of followers; Don has 12756 followers, Betty has 29594 and Peggy has 19643. While Joan has only 5,272 followers, she has over 15 different accounts. Indeed, several different accounts can be found for each character. Perhaps the most noteworthy are “BadPeggyOlson”, “BadJoanHolloway” and “BadBettyDraper”. The twitter feeds for these accounts reveal details of the characters’ sexual encounters. The explicit nature of these feeds, and the prefix of “bad” before the characters’ names suggest that this behaviour would be viewed (within the 1960s cultural landscape) as inappropriate and in some ways transgressive. Not only does this demonstrate how participants are in some cases resistant to the limited choice of female identity, but also demonstrates that some participants take it upon themselves to expand the models of feminine identities using the symbolic resources offered to them.

As numerous feminist analyses of popular culture can attest, this kind of resistive behaviour has a long tradition (Radway 1991, Geraghty 1991, Brown 1994). That is, female spectators/readers/consumers have long since resisted dominant patriarchal readings of texts in favour of negotiated, and in some ways more progressive, readings. The twitter feeds discussed above demonstrate the ways in which users subversively dismantle ideals of 1960s “appropriate” femininity by making public details of characters’ sexual behaviour which at the time would have proved scandalous and undermined their respectability.

Just as soap operas offer female viewers the chance to rehearse relevant decision making processes that pertain to everyday life, *Mad Men* has utilised its cult following and quality status to encourage viewers to engage with the broad social debates about identity and gender performance. While it would seem unlikely that a show set in the 1960s would engage with relevant social issues which pervade contemporary culture, the reading of *Mad Men* and its

extra-textual material offered here suggests that viewers are able to make connections between the show's content and their own lives. The distance in time and cultural context is carefully negotiated and in so doing the show demonstrates the relevance and timeliness of its subject matter. Indeed, the historical distance allows *Mad Men* to perform an ideological critique of the identity as it has been conceptualised over time. The above discussion demonstrates, both the text and its intertexts offer its viewers the opportunity to engage with, and interrogate, dominant ideas about identity and its relationship to power structures (particularly gender and class).

As suggested in the introduction of this article, this study seeks to contribute to existing work on identity and the media by offering a discursive analysis of both *Mad Men* and its intertexts for it has been claimed that there remains a lack of rigorous analysis of specific case studies. Thus, not only does this study attempt to demonstrate the ways in which *Mad Men* can be consumed by its audience, the adoption of a discursive approach demonstrates the way audiences have consumed (and in some cases) resisted meaning embedded within the text. Indeed, as the above discussion suggests *Mad Men* understands identity as definable by its difference— for example, all the female characters perform feminine identities which are constructed as a series of oppositions.

In other words, the representation of gender identities in *Mad Men* is, for the most part, prescriptive. The phenomenal online culture surrounding *Mad Men* allows viewers an additional space in which to work through these prescriptive representations of identity. In so doing, it provides viewers the opportunity to “test out” and in some cases, resist these prescriptive identities.

As the literature surveyed at the beginning of this article suggests, the concept of identity in the contemporary period is extremely complex; in particular the role of gender and other societal phenomena is a site of contention and as such, the common complaint about identity is that it is increasingly difficult to negotiate. Moreover there are no clear guidelines about how individuals should approach identity in the contemporary era. While *Mad Men* does not resolve these complex and contradictory issues surrounding identity in modern or postmodern society it does provide viewers language for articulating the problems of contemporary identity. In this manner, *Mad Men* demonstrates the value of fictional media for audiences in the contemporary era

Works cited

Anon (2010): “What You’re Saying About Identifying with the Show’s Female Characters”: <http://blogs.amctv.com/mad-men/2010/11/mad-men-female-characters.php> (accessed 2/12/10)

Bourdieu, Pierre (1984): *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press

PREVIOUSLY ON

- Buckley, Cara L. & Brian L. Ott, (2008): "Fashion(able/ing) Selves: Consumption, Identity and *Sex and the City*", in Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott & Cara Louise Buckley (eds) *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in a Post-Television Era*, New York: Routledge, pp. 209-227
- Brown, Mary Ellen (1994): *Soap Opera and Women's Talk: The Pleasure of Resistance*, London: Sage
- Bryant, Janie (2010): *The Fashion File: Advice, Tips and Inspiration from the Costume Designer of Mad Men*, London: Apple Press
- Edgerton, Gary (2009): "JFK, Don Draper and the New Sentimentality"
<http://www.criticalstudiesintelelevision.com/index.php?siid=12899> (accessed 2/12/10)
- Featherstone, Mike (2007): *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, London: Sage
- Friedan, Betty [1963] (2010): *The Feminine Mystique*, London: Penguin
- Geraghty, Christine (1991): *Women and Soap Opera: A Study of Prime Time Soaps*, Cambridge: Polity Press
- Giddens, Antony (1991): *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in Late Modern Age*, Cambridge: Polity Press
- Goffman, Irving (1999): *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, London: Penguin
- Haralovich, Mary Beth (2003): "sitcoms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950S Homemaker" in Lynn Spigel & Denise Mann (eds) *Private Screenings*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 111-142
- Hogan, Phil (2009): "The Interview: Elisabeth Moss"
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2009/jan/25/elisabeth-moss-interview-mad-men>
(accessed 2/12/10)
- Hollows, Joanne (2000): *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*, Manchester: Manchester University Press
- Kellner, Douglas (1992): *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and Postmodern*, London: Routledge
- McCabe, Janet (2006): "What is it With That Hair?: Bree Van Der Kamp and Policing Contemporary Femininity" in Janet McCabe & Kim Akass (eds) *Reading Desperate Housewives: Beyond the White Picket Fence*, London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 74-86
- McRobbie, Angela (2007): "Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime" in Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (eds) *Interrogating Postfeminism, Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 27-40

PREVIOUSLY ON

- Morley, David & Kevin Robins (1989): "spaces of Identity: Communications Technologies and the Reconfiguration of Europe", *Screen*, 30, pp. 10-34
- Mulvey, Laura (1989) [1975]: "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Mulvey, Laura (ed) *Visual and Other Pleasures* Basingstoke, Macmillan, pp. 14- 31
- Negra, Diane (2004): "Quality Postfeminism?: Sex and the Single Girl on HBO", http://www.genders.org/g39/g39_negra.html (accessed 2/12/10)
- Ott, Brian L. (2003): "I'm Bart Simpson, who the hell are you?": A Study in Postmodern Identity (Re)Construction, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 37:1, pp.56-82
- Partington, Angela (1995): "The Designer Housewife in the 1950s in J. Attfield and P. Kirkham (eds), *A View from the Interior: Women and Design*, London: Women's Press
- Pickard, Anne (2009): "I Wanna Be Your Blog"
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2009/feb/07/mad-men-twitter> (accessed 2/12/10)
- Radway, Janice (1991): *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press
- Roberts, Martin (2007): "The Fashion Police: Governing the Self in *What Not to Wear*", in Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (eds) *Interrogating Postfeminism, Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 227-249
- Steele, Valeria (1997): "Exhibition Review: Christian Dior: The Costume Institute, The Metropolitan Museum of Art", *Fashion Theory* 1:2, pp. 231-241

Web sources

- <http://dev.deep-focus.net/dfsites3/work/madmenyourself>
- <http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/MadMen?v=wall>
- <http://www.kcrw.com/events/matthew-weiner-live>

Broadcast Media

- Desperate Housewives* (2004-)
- Mad Men* (2007-)
- Sex and the City* (1998-2004)
- The Simpsons* (1989-)