

Flip-skirt fatales: on cheerleading, fetish and hate

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Flip-skirt fatales: on cheerleading, **fetish and hate**

**Emma Jane / School of the Arts and Media / the University of New
South Wales / 2012**

ORIGINALITY STATEMENT

'I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge it contains no materials previously published or written by another person, or substantial proportions of material which have been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at UNSW or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by others, with whom I have worked at UNSW or elsewhere, is explicitly acknowledged in the thesis. I also declare that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, except to the extent that assistance from others in the project's design and conception or in style, presentation and linguistic expression is acknowledged.'

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'R. Smith', written over a dotted line.

Date

2 / 11 / 2011

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Abstract

Cheerleading – an activity with origins in the elite, male-dominated domain of the late 19th century American university campus – is now a highly commodified and mass mediated feminised spectacle which attracts intense vitriol from a range of ostensibly disparate social groups. These include feminists, social conservatives, cultural elites, sports administrators and fans, mainstream media commentators and members of the general public. Complicating these negative framings is the fact that cheerleaders are simultaneously sexually fetishised in pornography, pop culture and the news media. That a relatively unremarkable feminine athletic endeavour provokes such intense cultural anxiety and sexual obsession makes cheerleading a singularly revealing object of study. Engaging with media, feminist, gender, sporting and cultural studies theory – under what I will unpack as a conceptual framework I nominate as fetish theory – this thesis conducts an extensive analysis of media texts framing cheerleading. It shows that cheerleading animates intense cultural anxieties because it is seen to threaten a broad spectrum of ideologies and ideals, which range across theory, practice and views as diverse as feminism, moral conservatism, sport, and cultural authenticity. As a result, cheerleaders: are the subject of intense desire and loathing; are used as multi-purpose, psycho-social scapegoats; and have come to occupy a provocative liminal space between the sex worker and the athlete (in part because they have been both stripped yet also hyper-invested with meaning via a range of fetishistic logics). This thesis examines the role of feminist discourse (particularly in relation to its convergence with social conservative rhetoric) in censoring young women involved in sexualised performances such as cheerleading. It interrogates the relevance of traditional media studies models such as moral panic; problematises orthodox understandings of the progressive/transgressive politics involved in active audienceship and self-publishing; explicates some of the dangers of celebratory rhetoric framing new media ecosystems; and probes the usefulness of new approaches to explicating power flows in media environments.

Key words: Cheerleading, fetish, scapegoating, antilocution, hate speech, new media, power, hegemony, feminism, sport.

DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For my daughter, Alice, who came into being at almost exactly the same time as this thesis. In different ways, this dissertation is the story of both our lives.

Engaging in any act of prolonged education – let alone a PhD thesis – while in the throes of biological reproduction can feel like an act of profound masochism. There were times over the past five years when juggling work, study and small human-care felt like an impossibility; when the relentless grind of research felt disproportionate to the euphoria of discovery. I was sustained, however, by the love and support of my friends and family (particularly those who cared for my daughter, Alice, while I retreated to a room of my own), as well as by the extraordinary generosity shown to me by my formal and informal academic mentors. Huge gratitude: to the lovely Chris Fleming (for sharing his staggering intellect and polymathic pom-pom-ing); to my mother, Helen Corben (for typing when I was no longer able); to my supervisor, Catharine Lumby (for the superlative support and academic orienteering); to my co-supervisor, Katherine Albury (for introducing me to the delights of antifandom and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick); to my initial co-supervisor, Kate Crawford (for suggesting that moral panic might require a rethink); to John Hartley (for inspiration and assistance above and beyond); to Alan McKee (for being so intellectually buff); and to Michael Pusey (for the generous read-through and delightfully illustrated margin notes). Special thanks also to: Marie-Pierre Cleret; Christy Collis; Nerine Cooper; Milissa Deitz; Kat Costigan; Penny Elliott; Clifton Evers; Anne Fawcett; Nina Funnell; Gerard Goggin; David McKnight; Brendon O'Connor; Ruth McCausland; Alan Ramsay; Rachael Swaine; Alanna Tabone; Brigitte Tabone; Justin Tabone; and Laura Tolton.

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section of this thesis in journal form in the 2010 ANZCA edition of *PLATFORM: Journal of Media and Communication* (Tom 2010a). I am enormously appreciative of the support provided by the University of Sydney – where I started this thesis, and the University of New South Wales – where I completed it. Much appreciation, also, to the Journalism and Media Research Centre (JMRC) at the University of New South Wales, and the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (CCI).

INTRODUCTION

Marty Beckerman is an American humour writer whose professions of an all-encompassing contempt for cheerleading have become a lynchpin of his career. Notorious for asking a 13-year-old female cheerleader how it felt to be 'a urine stain on the toilet seat of America' (cited in Traister 2002), he is the author of a collection of journalistic non-fiction called *Death to all Cheerleaders – One Adolescent Journalist's Cheerful Diatribe Against Teenage Plasticity* in which he dismisses cheerleaders as a 'race of loose bimbos with the brain capacity of squirrel faeces' (2000, p. 43). In 2006, he told the *Guardian* newspaper:

If a daughter of mine wanted to be a cheerleader I would boil her alive. But not 'till I killed her, just until I killed her dreams. But if it was my son I'd drag him behind my truck 'till he died (cited in Wells 2006).

It is telling that, despite deriding the female high school cheerleaders he interviews for his book, Beckerman still expresses an interest in having sexual relations with them. 'I wonder if I can nail that dumb bitch,' he ruminates about one (2000, p. 43).

Similar sexualised vitriol directed at cheerleaders exists on the *Nothing Toxic* web site – a cyber hub billing itself as specialising in 'funny', 'extreme' and 'cool' videos (*Nothing Toxic*). On January 14, 2008, *Nothing Toxic* posted a clip of what appears to be a high school cheerleader falling from a human pyramid during a public performance. The accompanying text reads: 'Cheerleader Falls on her Face in Front of the School. Watch the two girls in the audience give each other five when the slut falls on her face.' The clip: is brief (49 seconds including a slow-motion replay); is of poor visual quality; and depicts a relatively minor sporting mishap. It is, nevertheless, given an average rating of three-and-a-half out of five stars by the more than 65,000 visitors to the page who offer comments such as:

* 'Haha stupid cunt' (Pubikare commenting on 'Cheerleader Falls on her Face in Front of the School' 2008);

- * 'She's a cheerleader – don't feel sorry for her. I'm sure she got on her boyfriends [sic] motorbike and asked where the pedals are?' (sixsixsix commenting on 'Cheerleader Falls on her Face in Front of the School' 2008);
- * 'There should be a full investigation, followed by severe spankings. I'm free on Thursday' (nico99 commenting on 'Cheerleader Falls on her Face in Front of the School' 2008);
- * 'she's use [sic] to bouncing her face on Wood [sic]...so it's okay' (Killerdude commenting on 'Cheerleader Falls on her Face in Front of the School' 2008);
- * 'watching a cheerleader get owned is only topped by watching one get anal' (spazemunky commenting on 'Cheerleader Falls on her Face in Front of the School' 2008);
- * 'She gave great blowjobs before her fall, now imagine the pleasure she will bring with out [sic] her front teeth' (Yellaa_Fella commenting on 'Cheerleader Falls on her Face in Front of the School' 2008); and
- * 'Odd that she was splitting her minge lips for the audience one second then splitting her other lips on the floor the next' (markels65 commenting on 'Cheerleader Falls on her Face in Front of the School' 2008).

Explicit sexual commentary and *schadenfreude* abound. The latter is evident not only in the readers' comments but in the original posting of the clip, which includes a slow-motion repeat of the fall. Revelling at the mishap also occurs beyond the *Nothing Toxic* on-line community: in the clip, the cheerleader's fall prompts a 'high five' between two audience members and is greeted by loud laughter among the live crowd.

These two examples of sexualised, cheerleader-targeted vitriol are indicative of a much larger phenomena. While it is true that Beckerman's writing sits squarely within the genre of

hyperbolic 'shock' humour (Traister 2002), and the explicit nature of the *Nothing Toxic* comments is consistent with the site's overall theme – as well as with more general trends relating to anonymity and *schadenfreude* on the internet¹ – it is equally true that these two examples of sexualised, cheerleader-targeted vitriol are symptomatic of a much larger phenomenon. Both sets of discourse are indicative of a significant proportion of mainstream framings, particularly in their fetishisation of cheerleaders as depersonalised and interchangeable (or fungible²) sex objects which are simultaneously despised and desired. Beckerman's position is that cheerleaders are contemptible, unintelligent, promiscuous, trashy and inauthentic, yet are still: a) covetable as sex objects; and b) profoundly threatening figures. Such views are frequently expressed overtly in cheerleading-themed pornography, as well as proliferating in mainstream discourses³ in more subtle and sub-textual ways. Beneath the hyperbolic claim that it is preferable to maim or kill one's offspring rather than have them become cheerleaders, is the imputation that the activity is unsuitable or even dangerous for children – another common contention. *Nothing Toxic's* implication that cheerleaders have a deficit of intelligence and a surplus of sexual availability (which can be enjoyably derided as well as capitalised upon by male spectators) also reflects common themes in pornography and popular commentary.

The Beckerman and *Nothing Toxic* texts exemplify one of the key claims made by this thesis: namely, that a significant proportion of cheerleading-related discourse is constructed according to fetishistic logics and can best be understood by using what I denote as fetish

¹ There is a growing field of scholarly literature debating the ramifications of anonymity online (cf.: Hine 2000; Lambert et al 2005, pp. 10-12; Citron 2010, pp. 31, 33; Kozinets 2010; Lanier 2010; et al), as well as the influence of what is known as 'cyber-disinhibition' (Rosenbaum 2007). While relatively undocumented in academic work focussing on the internet, *schadenfreude* – the pleasure felt at others' misfortunes – is a common theme of popular web sites such as FAIL Blog (FAIL Blog). The latter captures 'unfortunate missteps by man and beast' (Zimmer 2009) and is partly credited for the transformation in popular discourse of the word 'fail' from a verb into an interjection (ibid).

² 'Economic anthropologist' James G. Carrier defines fungible as being capable of replacing or being replaced by another item meeting the requisite definition, noting that both objects and people can acquire this status in commodity relationships (1995, pp. 28-29).

³ My use of the plural here is in reflection of the heterogeneity of discourse and the circulation of minoritarian counter-discourse which, in the case of cheerleading, questions and contradicts dominant framings. The latter is addressed at length in Chapter Five of this thesis.

theory as an analytical lens. The term 'fetish' has appeared in religious, anthropological, economic, psycho-sexual and popular contexts⁴, and has legacies extending across numerous disciplines. While these concepts of fetish vary, they possess commonalities (such as fixation, ambivalence, disavowal and the reduction of wholes to parts⁵) which make a revamp of fetish theory apposite for an analysis of cheerleading. Beckerman, for instance, maintains he doesn't want his children to become cheerleaders because practitioners are vapid and trashy whores – characteristics presented as being intrinsic to cheerleaders rather than subjective observations. Yet, as this thesis will go on to argue, it is actually discourse such as Beckerman's which create the dominant, overwhelmingly negative meanings attached to cheerleading. Such disavowal, abdication of responsibility and transference is common in cheerleading-related representations and can be figured as fetishistic in nature.

Fetish theory is also germane for unpacking the sexualisation so often associated with cheerleading in discourse. As I will show, media texts routinely frame cheerleading's primary function not as sports-related but as geared towards sexual exhibitionism and the sexual gratification of men. As per Beckerman's framing, the 'problem' with cheerleading is framed as residing with the fetish object rather than the fetishiser. As such, excessively vitriolic and/or fetishistic discourse framing cheerleading cannot be explained solely by studying the constitutive elements of cheerleading practice or the characteristics of its practitioners. Instead, it is critical to examine the meanings made by creators and consumers of media representations, particularly those meanings constructed according to fetishistic logics. This approach reverses the usual onus of responsibility found in anti-cheerleading texts in that it interrogates those messages which insist the activity is unacceptable rather than demanding that *cheerleading* explain itself.

Over the course of this thesis, I will show that cheerleading is simultaneously marginalised yet fixated on in discourse. Marginalisation occurs via media texts which fetishistically hyper-

⁴ Cf.: Freud 1961, pp. 152-155; Marx 1961, pp. 88-89; Freud 1962, p. 19; Freud 1964, p. 277; Durkheim 1975, p. 80; Marx 1976, pp. 163-76; Budge 1988, p. 32; Taylor cited in Budge 1988, p. 57; Apter & Pietz 1993, p. x; Brown 1993, p. 938; Pels 1998, p. 92; Koerner & Rausing 2003, p. 433; et al.

⁵ These definitions are provisional and do not capture the nuances of the concept of fetish as it appears in various disciplines and historical contexts. These nuances will be unpacked later in this Introduction.

sexualise cheerleaders and/or which denigrate cheerleaders – sometimes in a manner which can be figured as hate speech. Fixation with cheerleaders is evident by the frequent appearance of cheerleaders in popular culture, media texts and pornography. Critical elements of this marginalisation/obsession paradox involve fetishistic disavowal in that cheerleaders are routinely described as being unworthy of attention yet are simultaneously paid a great deal of attention indeed. While acknowledging the existence of counter-discourse defending or promoting cheerleaders, this thesis will argue that dominant media discourse casts cheerleaders in a negative light. Cheerleaders are commonly depicted as any combination of frivolous, talentless, inane, vain, trashy, promiscuous, exhibitionist, overly commodified, agents of Americanisation, and disruptive to key feminist, sporting and religious ideals. Some minority discourse in popular culture depicts cheerleaders as having a coveted ‘alpha girl’ social status, although this is mostly only in texts originating in American contexts and is often accompanied by the explicit or implicit suggestion that such girls are also ‘alpha bitches’⁶.

Another key claim made in this thesis is that fetishistic and/or vitriolic discourse framing cheerleading is not limited to niche non-fiction or isolated pockets of the internet. While my research is qualitative rather than quantitative in nature, there is good evidence to show that multiple speakers from multiple social groups utilise multiple platforms on multiple occasions to accuse cheerleaders of a multitude of offences. Anti-cheerleading discourse is generated by an array of ostensibly disparate groups including feminists, social conservatives, cultural elites, sports administrators and fans, and mainstream media commentators. Members of the general public, expressing their opinions through both traditional and non-traditional platforms (such as the *Nothing Toxic* web site), also make energetic claims about cheerleaders’ numerous ‘sins’. As one journalist notes, ‘Nearly everybody has an opinion on cheerleaders’ (Papon 2010). Similar to Australian media studies scholar Catharine Lumby’s metaphor for the provocation caused by pornography, cheerleading is like a blister, ‘a tender spot on the social skin which marks a point of friction’ (1997a, p. 97).

⁶ Often used to describe the leaders of teenage girl groups, ‘alpha bitches’ are defined on the *First Love You* self-development web site as being girls who are aggressive rather than assertive (‘Alpha Female or Alpha Bitch’).

That a relatively unremarkable feminine athletic endeavour provokes such intense cultural anxiety, aggression and sexual obsession makes cheerleading a revealing object of study. As Australian cultural studies academic Graeme Turner says of Kylie Minogue, 'anyone who is so widely seen as *so* self-evidently bad', who is held to be '*more fabricated, less talented, more "produced"* and more of a brainless puppet than any other' deserves serious consideration (1991, p. 25, emphasis in original). The initial problematic for this research, therefore, is 'why is cheerleading seen as so self-evidently bad to so many?' The process of answering this question reveals that cheerleading parallels and provokes social anxieties relating to, among other things, raunch culture, trash culture, Americanisation and sport. Like pornography, its liminality, its sexuality and its aesthetics, also make it a crucible for anxieties about voyeurism, the spectacular, exhibitionism and exuberant female sexuality. As a result, cheerleaders are used as multi-purpose scapegoats, becoming socially sanctioned outlets for vitriol (such as explicit misogyny) that would normally be considered socially unacceptable in mainstream media contexts.

The discursive formations and gendered scapegoating associated with representations of cheerleading have significance far beyond the limited domain of sport. They have ramifications for *media studies* in that representations of cheerleading complicate one of the traditional approaches to mediated vitriol – moral panic theory – and call for a new approach. This thesis proposes fetish theory. They have ramifications for *feminism* because they reveal that feminists – usually the champions of women's causes – produce anti-cheerleading rhetoric with striking similarities to the oppressive discourses propagated by social conservatives, sports fans and male pornography consumers. (This offers insights into the complexities of the misogyny directed towards young women in general in 21st century culture, as well as providing broader cultural understandings of contemporary femininity as it is personified by young women and young women's bodies.) Finally, the fact that much cheerleading-related discourse is generated at a 'grassroots' level by new media user-producers complicates a scholarly tendency to frame active audienceship and pleasure as being in opposition to hegemonic power-blocs. This provides an opportunity to rethink the power dynamics involved in 21st century media ecosystems. My final conclusion, in fact, is that on-line vitriol – such as that targeting cheerleaders – has the power to inflict 'bottom-up'

oppression in a manner which has similarities with the 'top-down' oppression associated with hegemons.

There are many possible entry points to an analysis of cheerleading including empirical or ethnographic studies in sociology, or the moral panic model from cultural and media studies. This thesis probes the advantages and disadvantages of such approaches before exploring the usefulness of theories relating to feminism, anti-Americanism, antifandom and scapegoating, beneath an overarching analytical umbrella of recalibrated fetish theory. My interdisciplinary methodological approach is in line with what Paula Amad calls 'theory shopping' (1994, p. 13) which rejects blind 'brand-loyalty' (ibid) in favour of what Australian media studies scholar John Hartley has described as 'documentary, forensic, historical, argumentative, metaphorical and textual' methods (1996, p. 6). Such an approach is consonant with Foucault's notion of theory as a tool kit (1980, p. 145) and involves an emphasis on 'local, specific and reflective' knowledge (Ramazanoğlu 1993, p.159). Also following Hartley, this thesis draws on anthropology, philosophy, politics and history, as well as from media and cultural studies as occasion demands (1992, p. 7). Unlike much media studies literature, however, it also utilises psychoanalytic and psychological models to investigate the possible psycho-social processes involved in the production and reception of cheerleading-related representations. My prime engagement is with popular rather than scholarly debate on cheerleading. This is mostly because of the rarity of the latter, but is also because I concur with Hartley's claim that popular media production is the predominant 'sense-making' practice of modernity (1996, p. 31).

The goals of this research include a scrutiny of taken-for-granted assumptions, not merely in relation to cheerleading, but with respect to the generation, reception and study of media texts in general. Its textual analysis of dominant cheerleading-related discourses is a departure point for the discussion of more general questions such as: what is the usefulness of fetish theory, particularly in lieu of moral panic and/or hegemonic models, when analysing contemporary media phenomena? What are the manifestations and ramifications of mediated vitriol in the digital media era? And: has the transformation of media 'ecosystems' changed the power dynamic between what cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall has conceptualised in oppositional terms as the 'power-bloc' and 'the people' (1981, p. 238)?

My aims are to assist in the establishment of cheerleading as a site worthy of scholarly attention, and to lay the groundwork for the further consideration of topics such as the nature of mediated vitriol and the 'bottom-up' (in addition to the 'top-down') power plays associated with new media production and reception. Before expanding on these themes by locating my research theoretically, I will outline the journalistic origins of this thesis, and account for my methods of research and analysis.

FOUNDATIONS, APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

This thesis has its genesis in an assignment I was given while working as a full-time news, feature and column writer at the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1997⁷. I subsequently spent about a month training with the Cenovis Cheerleaders for Canterbury – a professional squad aligned with an Australian rugby league football team – before performing with this team on the sidelines of a seasonal match in Sydney. The 1997 Super League Cheerleading Squad audition form I was given seemed to confirm many dominant cheerleading tropes. These included stereotypes of cheerleading: as an auxiliary and subordinate activity; as needing few skills aside from a pleasing physical form and upbeat disposition; as requiring subservience to directions from higher authorities; and as carrying a risk (and therefore requiring a policing of) sexual contact with football players⁸. My short, participant-observation experience of cheerleading, however, confounded many of my pre-existing prejudices about the practice. It suggested that – despite constant reminders of the secondary status of

⁷ The story I wrote as a result of this assignment appeared in newspaper form in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on April 12, 1997, and was subsequently published in several book forms (Tom 1997, pp. 159-168; and Tom 1998, pp. 258-265).

⁸ The 1997 Super League Cheerleading audition form states that: 'Cheerleading is not the main event, nor is it a profession, it is a sport to complement a sport' (cited in Tom 1997, p. 159); that 'Besides having a good figure, an energetic disposition and a comprehensive knowledge of the sport, there are no qualifications required, therefore allowing any girl/boy to participate' (cited *ibid*); that 'Each squad member will be expected to have their hair fully groomed' (cited *ibid*, p. 163); that cheerleaders would 'be required to purchase a training outfit, a travel uniform, mesh tights, navy bag, make-up (and) hair rollers' (cited *ibid*); that 'A Cheerleader is one who follows directions willingly' (cited *ibid*, p. 162); and that 'A Cheerleader is one who has no contact with players while a member of the squad' (cited *ibid*).

cheerleading – many cheerleaders privileged their performance over the ‘main game’ of the rugby.

Many of the cheerleaders expressed an expectation of (as well as a great interest in) receiving televised media coverage, and a marked disinterest in the male-dominated sport they were supposedly there to support. As we waited between cheerleading performances on the sidelines, one woman described the football as ‘the worst part’ of cheerleading (cited in Tom 1997, p. 167). Another dismissed players as ‘boofmeisters’ (cited *ibid*, p. 162) after being reminded to give way to them in the tunnel leading onto football field. My strong impression was that football was not necessarily an activity these young women exalted or assigned a greater value than their own; instead it was the tedious price they had to pay in order to participate in their preferred activity. The meanings these cheerleaders made of their practice suggested a gap between discourses framing cheerleaders and the lived experience of practitioners. Among other things, this representational disjunct suggested a disruption to second-wave and popular feminist rhetoric about the limited possibilities for empowered feminine participation within patriarchal realms such as sport, and the supposedly inevitable internalising, by women, of structural discourses of subservience.

My initial contact with the Cenovis squad led to an ongoing fascination with cheerleading as a topic for both journalistic articles and scholarly investigation, and I began official research for this thesis in 2006. My initial academic aim was to compile a cultural history of Australian cheerleading which assessed its performance as a US cultural export and compared its development to the evolution of cheerleading in America. My interest in these avenues of inquiry, however, was soon eclipsed by my intrigue at the apparent vitriol and lasciviousness of so much media discourse framing cheerleading. I therefore recalibrated my research efforts to interrogate and explicate:

- 1) the extraordinary disconnect between the relatively unexceptional practice of cheerleading and the venom it inspires;
- 2) the frequent combination in these texts of themes of condemnation with themes of prurience;

3) the diversity of the social groups and individuals involved in the generation of this discourse; and

4) the issues of power flows, scapegoating and fetishism raised by points one to three.

This thesis is informed by representations of cheerleading which have circulated since the activity's inception in the late 1800s. At the core of my research, however, is an extensive media archive of cheerleading-related texts drawn from the Anglophone print, broadcast and on-line media, mostly over a five-year period from July 2006. These are sourced from newspapers, magazines, radio programs and films, as well as on-line resources such as chat forums, blogs and readers' comments that have been posted in response to various on-line texts. During the course of this thesis, I made use of the Google Alerts monitoring system ('What are Google Alerts?') to provide notifications of potentially relevant on-line sources. I programmed this to provide me with daily lists of up to 20 results for each of the three terms 'cheerleader', 'cheerleaders' or 'cheerleading'. While only the most pertinent and/or representative appear in my media archive, my conclusions have been informed by an examination of all the texts to which I was directed via Google Alerts. I acknowledge, of course, that the texts which have informed this work are merely representative of cheerleading-related discourse rather than being exhaustive or definitive.

My use of on-line resources raises a number of ethical issues relating to computer-mediated communication (CMC), and whether researchers should approach the internet as a private or public space. In his detailing of a methodology for 'netnography', American marketing scholar Robert V. Kozinets propounds a continuum of 'cloaking' to disguise the identity and participation of on-line research subjects (2010, pp. 154-5). This follows his argument that knowing an internet posting is public 'does not automatically lead to the conclusion that academics and other types of researchers can use the data in any way that they please' (ibid p. 137). My counter-position is that no-one who communicates or publishes a text can know the interpretations and uses to which this data may be put. Internet audiences, in particular,

are radically uncertain: unexpected spikes in audience numbers⁹, unanticipated readerships and inconvenient electronic footprints are all aspects of the realpolitik of cyberspace (Tom 2010c). I note the work of US communications academic Joseph Walther who writes that:

any person who uses publicly-available communication systems on the Internet must be aware that these systems are, at their foundation and by definition, mechanisms for the storage, transmission, and retrieval of comments. While some participants have an expectation of privacy, it is extremely misplaced (2002, p. 207; emphasis in original).

On the subject of the protection of human subjects in internet research, Walther's line of reasoning is that the analysis of internet archives is on par with 'research using old newspaper stories, broadcasts, the Congressional Record, or other archival data' (ibid) because it avails itself of existing records and does not constitute an interaction with a human subject.

While some sectors of cyberspace are undoubtedly more private than others, open-access communication and visible publication are more than just accidental characteristics of the internet: they are what constitute it in a basic sense, what make up its conditions of possibility. Insisting on elaborate camouflages and chaperones for those texts which are circulated beyond explicitly limited or closed groups seems patronising. The increasingly blurred lines between media channels also problematises cyber versus non-cyber distinctions. Texts whose primary source was, say, a magazine, radio broadcast or television program may subsequently or simultaneously appear on-line. In the other direction, blogs may be reproduced in print form, while internet videos may be incorporated in televised entertainment. Jenkins describes this 'convergence culture' as being marked by a collision between old and new media and the 'flow of content across multiple media platforms' (2006, p. 2). Similarly, Lumby and her fellow Australian media studies scholar Kate Crawford define convergence as a 'collapse of borders between various media silos, where content can easily

⁹ Consider 'viral videos' such as the footage of a seven-year-old boy coming home from the dentist called 'David After Dentist' (booba1234 2009). This clip was uploaded on YouTube in January 2009 for the benefit of 'friends and family' but was subsequently viewed more than 70 million times, ultimately earning the family \$US150,000 in licencing deals and revenue sales (Wei 2010).

move horizontally across platforms' (2011, p. 5). After consideration of these issues as well as the various ethical debates surrounding the use of on-line resources, I have elected only to use texts from those web sites which do not require special membership access such as passwords. I do, however, reproduce names as they appear on-line and quote verbatim from sources – as per my referencing of other media texts.

Another common critique of the study of CMC is that it is somehow separate from and therefore inapplicable to 'real life'. Here I note the disputed 'reduced social cues' argument which suggests that electronic communication and text-based mediums are associated with higher levels of aggression and disinhibition because of the absence of the social context of face-to-face interaction (Hine 2000, pp. 15-16). I acknowledge that on-line community characteristics such as anonymity and accessibility are likely to create unique and distinctive styles of interaction (Kozinets 2010, p. 25). I do, however, support Hine's case that 'arguing over whether online social formations map directly on to those that occur either ideally or actually in offline settings may be a distraction from the study of whatever develops online in its own terms' (2000, p. 19). Contrary to some arguments, my case is that vitriol generated and circulated in cyberspace *counts*.

Overall, my methodology is rooted in the media studies 'cornerstone' of textual analysis (Rayner et al 2004, p. 9)¹⁰. Recognising the drawbacks of formal audience research into the readings of texts (McKee 2003, pp. 83-91), I employ qualitative tools such as the analysis of interpretative texts, intertexts¹¹ and paratexts¹², to construct a case based on 'likely' readings

¹⁰ See also: Hartley 1992; and McKee 2003. My approach recognises that verbal textuality has been extended into 'visual, aural, and sequential' forms and that it is possible to perform 'textual exegesis' on non-written texts (Hartley 2002, p. 226). My research also reflects British media theorist David Gauntlett's suggestion of a 'Media Studies 2.0' which focuses on 'the everyday meanings produced by the diverse array of audience members' in response to traditional media as well as the massive and globalised "'long tail" of independent media projects such as those found on YouTube and many other websites, mobile devices, and other forms of DIY media' (2007).

¹¹ McKee describes intertexts as 'those texts that are explicitly linked to another text' (2003, p. 89). Examples include letters, internet posts, reviews or 'articles where viewers describe their own interpretations of the text; or other pieces of entertainment that reference the original text' (ibid, pp. 97-98).

¹² Of the work of Gerard Genette, Gray describes paratexts as 'those semi-textual fragments that surround and position the work' (2003, p. 72). Examples include covers, prefaces,

(ibid, p. 83). I acknowledge that, in this instance, a 'likely' exegesis does not mean the *only* exegesis: texts are polysemic and their production and reception involve complex conversations rather than broadcasts. While my case is that the changing nature of the media is vastly increasing the complexity of these conversations, I also accept Hartley's argument that the media has *always* involved 'radical producers' and 'unknowable consumers' (1996, p. 7).

My view that textual meanings are negotiated, unstable, contingent and sometimes radically chosen as part of a political project, is hinged to my claims about the sub-conscious, coalesced, fetishistic and/or vitriolic aspects of dominant cheerleading-related discourse. While my research did unearth discourse which framed cheerleading in a positive or neutral light, it proved impossible to ignore the multitude of texts whose likely readings were fetishistic and/or anti-cheerleading. The sheer number of these representations give them a macro logic which deserves consideration. In other words, at a certain threshold, the quantitative becomes qualitative¹³. My pessimistic conclusion is that the volume (in all senses) of fetishistic and/or vitriolic framings of cheerleaders is likely to be self-replicating. This feedback-loop creates commonsensical, self-evident 'truths' about cheerleading which may influence the opinions held about and the dealings people have with the activity and its participants.

My focus on the negative aspects of dominant cheerleading-related discourses is also one of the few areas in which I differ with Lumby – one of the key thinkers informing (and, indeed, formally supervising) this work. In *Bad Girls* (1997a), Lumby takes issue with 'simplistic, knee-jerk' feminist readings of media images as 'sexist' (ibid, p. xiv) and proposes alternative readings which enable women to forge identities as empowered, autonomous subjects:

Why teach women to read images in a way that makes them feel bad about themselves? ... Continually stressing the patriarchal reading of an image which can be read in other ways is hardly empowering for women. In fact, it's a

reviews, typeface, afterwords, introductory sequences, television 'spoilers' and merchandise (ibid).

¹³ The relation of qualitative change to quantitative change in the humanities is discussed in Galatzer-Levy's application of mathematical catastrophe theory to psychoanalysis (1978).

strategy which cedes awesome power to images and to the people who produce them... (ibid, pp. 8-9).

I agree that – as per Lumby's argument – it *is* possible to construct benign or even empowered readings of the cheerleading texts I conclude are fetishistic and/or vitriolic. Empowered readings are easiest with the more tonally 'mid-range' of the discourses under analysis. But even texts such as those produced by Beckerman and the *Nothing Toxic* readers could be constructed as less malign if, for instance, readers framed them as impotently marginal and their authors as motivated by infantile male insecurity in the face of an epic female sexuality. My ultimate contention, however, is that by far the most likely conclusion to be drawn about the vast bulk of cheerleading-related discourse is that it is fetishistic and/or vitriolic in tone and/or content. (That said, I do acknowledge that advocating the rejection of dominant readings of common representations, and the adoption of deliberately empowering interpretations *is* likely to be helpful to those cheerleaders wishing to disarm fetishistic and/or vitriolic discourse.)

I will now pre-emptively address two potential criticisms of this research, namely: my broad analysis of texts (and the generalisations flowing from my hermeneutics); and my limited use of ethnography. Cheerleading is a subject canvassed in a vast range of media contexts including pornographic films, mainstream print media sports reports and advertising for children's toys. Rather than confining myself to a detailed examination of a single text, a small number of texts or even a particular genre of texts, I have endeavored to carry out a broad survey and analysis. I am conscious this risks eliciting the criticism that I have failed to interrogate any individual text in sufficient detail. For that reason, I have included four case studies which permit analysis with a more narrow focus. I acknowledge also that working across an archive and looking for commonalities involves making generalisations with regard to textual content and context. Some of Chapter Two's exploration of the interplay between nationality and the generation of cheerleading-related discourses provides a tighter focus in this regard, while Chapter Five's discussion of cheerleading-related counter-discourse acknowledges that media representations of cheerleading are not homogenous. Overall, however, I have deliberately chosen to keep my analytic gaze wide-angled to address the broader issue of the role of discourse in the construction of cheerleaders as fetish objects

and their function as scapegoats. Here, I follow McKee who writes of tracking 'practices of sense-making in culture' rather than studying 'every element of every text for every question' (2003, p. 75). While this thesis analyses discourse according to theme rather than medium, where relevant I describe the sources and nation of origin of texts to acknowledge the influence of genre, geography and linguistic modality¹⁴ in reception. That said, the transnational nature of the 'convergent media environment' (Crawford & Lumby 2011, p. 34) crosses multiple borders, making nation state distinctions increasingly irrelevant when it comes to tracking the flows and reception of discourses.

Some may see ethnographic work as the natural entry point for an academic investigation into cheerleading. This position seems especially valid given that the voices of distant 'experts' are routinely privileged over those of cheerleaders themselves. In the opening pages of her ethnographic study of Western New York cheerleaders, student researcher Amy Lynn Moritz notes that academic efforts to discuss cheerleading usually 'privilege the perspective of the critic while ignoring the interpretation of the participants' (2006, p. 3). She argues that ethnographic study is required to take cheerleaders and cheerleading 'beyond a postmodern "reading of texts"' and to 'uncover the meanings of cheerleading for *the girls themselves*' (ibid, p. 33; emphasis in original). My survey of both scholarly and popular representations of cheerleading supports Moritz's claim that the points of view of cheerleading participants are marginal compared to those who interpret cheerleading from afar. But there is a danger of figuring ethnography and textual analysis as mutually exclusive, and of framing the former as offering 'a privileged representation of a given "reality"' – as UK sociologist Paul Atkinson puts it in *The Ethnographic Imagination* (1990, p. 3). The textual conventions of non-literary genres such as ethnography are in fact 'among the ways in which reality is *constructed*' (ibid, p. 2; emphasis in original). Further, Moritz's argument overlooks the simple fact that cheerleaders participate in textual representations of their activities and that their sense-

¹⁴ This term is used by McKee (2003, p. 97) to refer to what people might actually *do* with texts. It follows Hodge and Tripp's (1986) use of the term to discuss the way some genres are perceived to be strongly related to reality (such as news, current affairs and documentaries), while others are strongly distanced from it (cited in McKee 2003, p. 97). Texts with high modality are assumed to offer information and ideas that can be applied to other parts of life (ibid).

making is apparent through this means, and not just through traditional ethnographic investigation.

This thesis involves no formal ethnographic work in the classic social science understanding of participant observation or in the form of virtual ethnography (2000) or 'netnography' (Kozinets 2010). It does, however, include what could be classed as quasi-ethnographic elements, such as my contact and interviews with cheerleaders and cheerleading coaches and administrators, as well as my use of the ethnographic and autoethnographic work of others¹⁵. While I subscribe to the view that ethnography exists as a sub-set of, rather than a separate entity to, discourse (even a cheerleading performance can be assessed as a text), it does seem useful to distinguish between: a) those fields of textual production which have a close proximity to cheerleading in terms of direct participation – what might problematically be referred to as the 'lived reality' of cheerleading; and b) those fields of textual production which involve people who are not and who have never been cheerleaders and are therefore construing and deciphering the activity from a greater distance than practitioners. My research identifies and interrogates a disconnect between the former and the latter. It privileges, as Moritz puts it, the perspective of critics but does so deliberately in an attempt to address a profoundly neglected area of academic inquiry: namely the exploration of cheerleading's circulation as a sign.

My decision to pursue a textual analysis rather than an ethnographic approach also reflects ideas that reality and representation are inseverable, co-determinate and creative (as per the 'crisis of representation' [Ebert 1986, p. 894] posed by postmodernism). Of particular relevance to this thesis are contemporary cultural studies reworkings of the work of French philosophers Michel Foucault (1990) and Jean Baudrillard (1994). American-based media scholar McKenzie Wark writes of the impossibility of isolating the essence of the real from 'false' representation, contending that the 'dream of a place outside communication where a pure self resides is a fantasy' (1998, p. 87). Lumby, meanwhile, frames media discourse as a virus which infects everything it touches but is also changed by what it encounters (1997a, p. xxiii). This thesis is informed by theories which suggest that cheerleading representations are

¹⁵ See: Scholz et al 1991; Beben 2002; Adams & Bettis 2003a; Adams & Bettis 2003c; Moritz 2006; and Grindstaff & West 2006.

performative and constitutive rather than merely reflective of cheerleading 'realities'. My case, therefore, is that while ethnographic or quasi-ethnographic examinations of cheerleading offer potential insight, an analysis of mediated representation and discourse is essential for comprehending its broader semiotic constitution.

LOCATING CHEERLEADING IN THEORY

Despite its richness as a source of meaning and cultural diagnostics, there are only two significant, full-length texts on the subject: *Go! Fight! Win!* by American education scholar Mary Ellen Hanson (1995) and *Cheerleader! An American Icon* by US education academics Natalie Guice Adams and Pamela J Bettis (2003a). Both focus on social and cultural history rather than bringing a theoretical and interpretative lens to bear on the subject and – perhaps not surprisingly given their authors' backgrounds – privilege cheerleading's relationship with American educational establishments over other issues. Both also explore gender-related themes: a feature of the vast bulk of academic literature on this subject.

Go! Fight! Win! is an exhaustive social and cultural history of American cheerleading based on the author's PhD dissertation (Hanson 1993). It places particular focus on cheerleading's complex relationship with educational institutions as well as providing a brief précis of the 'variations in congruence and dissonance between the reality of cheerleading and the symbolism attached to it' (1995, p. 119). As the sole book-length text documenting cheerleading's origins, *Go! Fight! Win!* provided an invaluable starting point for my research. This thesis differs, however, in its Foucauldian¹⁶ emphasis on the way discourse is both constituted by and constitutes the practice of cheerleading.

Cheerleader! An American Icon (Adams & Bettis 2003a) builds on Hanson's predominately historical work by using cheerleading as a cultural lens for a range of subjects including gender, capitalism and American national identity. Mischievous, celebratory and optimistic in

¹⁶ I refer here to Foucault's case, in *The History of Sexuality*, that institutions and ideas, taxonomies and disciplines constitute the objects they claim to study or critique (1990) and that 'repression' may be generative (ibid).

tone, it has a particular focus on cheerleading-related agency and subversion, and an explicit aim to 'undo the simplicity in which cheerleading has been approached' (ibid p. 7). While I explore similar themes in Chapter Five of this thesis, my primary focus – and conclusions – are far gloomier in that I am concerned with cheerleading-related rhetoric and representations which converge into what I will argue is a form of collective fetishism and scapegoating. Of the small number of academic journal articles relating to cheerleading, only three are particularly relevant to this research. They are: 'Commanding the Room in Short Skirts: Cheering as the Embodiment of Ideal Girlhood' by Adams and Bettis (2003b), and two essays by American cultural and gender studies academic Laura Grindstaff and American communications scholar Emily West: 'Cheerleading and the Gendered Politics of Sport' (2006); and 'Hands on Hips, Smiles on Lips!' – Gender, Race, and the Performance of Spirit in Cheerleading' (2010). A number of (predominantly American) dissertations and theses focus on or involve cheerleading, but most of these are located in the fields of education and/or health and have a narrow, empirical focus. An example is Deanna Levenhagen's *Biomechanical Effects of Acute Fatigue to the Lower Extremity in Female Kentucky High School Cheerleaders* (1998).

Cheerleading's interplay with popularity, body image, eating disorders and oppressive gender norms is a recurring theme in extant academic work on cheerleading¹⁷. Also observable – but far less common – are investigations of the potential for but limitations on the emancipatory opportunities offered by cheerleading given dominant gender norms¹⁸. *Real Athletes Wear Glitter: Articulating A Third Wave Sensibility Through Cheerleading, Femininity and Athletics* by Amy Moritz (2006) is by far the most celebratory scholarly framing of cheerleading I have been able to locate. This unpublished MA thesis explores the 'exciting new areas of physical activity' cheerleading offer to girls who see it as blending 'an identity of femininity and athleticism' (2006, p. iii). Moritz's ethnographic-orientated research frames second-wave feminism – as well as the 'male-dominated sports center' – as contributing to the marginalisation of cheerleaders (ibid, p. 3). My research builds on this contention by exploring the nature and possible consequences of intersections between anti-cheerleading rhetoric produced by feminists and that produced by groups such as social conservatives.

¹⁷ See: Beben 2002; and Courrier 2002. This trend is also identified by Moritz (2006, p. 30).

¹⁸ Cf.: Adams & Bettis 2003a, 2003b; Moritz 2006; and Grindstaff and West 2006.

The dearth of academic literature on cheerleading is likely to be linked to a view among intellectuals that cheerleading is trivial and unworthy of serious consideration. A particularly extreme reaction from an academic can be found in a *Guardian Unlimited* feature story which reports that a British sport and gender sociologist nearly chokes on her popcorn before yelling 'Urk! What is this? What the fuck are they doing?' when confronted by the sight of cheerleaders at an American soccer game (cited in Wells 2006). Scholars conducting formal research into cheerleading also report a disdainful or otherwise negative reaction from peers. My experience accords with that of Adams and Bettis who write that:

As we began to present our cheerleading research to our colleagues, we did not necessarily receive a cheery reception... Typically... there would be silence after we announced the topic of our research; only when we wrapped the topic in academic jargon (i.e. 'the multiple gendered subjectivities of cheerleading') did the conversation begin (2003a, p. viii).

Cheerleading is a subject, they suggest, that may be deemed unworthy of scholarly analysis as an object of study in itself. It must be disguised within other, more reputable areas of scholarly inquiry such as gender studies or subjectivity theory in order to be deemed worthy of discussion. Adams and Bettis suggest that one academic prejudice against cheerleading may have its origins in the ideals of the women's movement in that it is seen as 'a pre-feminist relic' that positions girls and women as 'not-so-bright sex objects' yet inexplicably lingers on (ibid). Grindstaff and West theorise that cheerleading is assumed 'to exist on the margins of sport (and sport on the margins of 'real' life)' (2006, p. 500), while Moritz contends that scholars, researchers and general sport advocates would prefer it if 'the whole notion of cheerleading would just go away' (2006, p. 4).

The reactions these scholars report have striking similarities with the academy's reported dismissal of other highly commodified, mass-mediated feminised spectacles such as beauty pageants which are seen as overly obvious, both in their physical expression and their perceived transmission of dominant ideology. In her book on beauty pageants, for instance, American communications scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser notes that scholarly reactions to her

work fall into 'two or three equally troubled camps' (1999, p. 4). Beauty pageants, she writes, 'are often and easily dismissed as frivolous, meaningless, or carnivalesque and therefore unworthy of serious and sustained intellectual scrutiny' (ibid). At the other end of the spectrum, they are seen as simply reiterating and reproducing dominant ideology:

In general, beauty pageants are grouped with popular cultural forms that are regarded as either too 'low' to merit serious investigation or so obvious and opaque that vigorous interrogation would be both uninteresting and unnecessary (ibid).

It is fascinating that in an academic era in which 'low' cultural forms are often the subject of inquiry, the domain of cheerleading can still be regarded as untenably subterranean. Regardless of the reasons for this phenomenon, the scholarly neglect of such a popular pastime is enough to establish its worth as an object of analysis because it involves a vast tract of largely unexplored cultural territory. Adams and Bettis cite metrics, noting that cheerleading 'deserves the same kind of serious study that jazz and baseball have received' if only because of the sheer numbers of people involved (2003a, p. 3). They, and other thinkers, note that the complex history and nature of cheerleading provides a valuable lens for the examination of shifting beliefs about: sports; entertainment; sexual orientation; racial, ethnic identity and national identity; and capitalism and entrepreneurship¹⁹. Cheerleading also offers insights into gender and sexualised bodies. Grindstaff and West observe that the public ritual of cheerleading assists in illuminating the everyday performing, or 'doing' of gender, rendering 'the codes by which gendered identities and practices are constructed particularly visible' (2006, p. 514). They also note its negotiation and transgression of 'a series of gendered boundaries' between phenomenon such as sport and performance, athletics and aesthetics, and competitiveness and supportiveness (ibid, p. 501).

This thesis varies from existing cheerleading literature in that – as I have outlined previously – its central focus concerns the nature, explanation and ramifications of media representations of cheerleading rather than cheerleading itself. My extensive international literature review found no comprehensive survey of cheerleading-related discourses in

¹⁹ See: Hanson 1995; and Adams and Bettis 2003a.

Anglophone academic literature. Media representations are canvassed in other scholarly research, but there is a tendency to frame such discourse as a relatively unproblematic representation of a problematic or paradoxical cheerleading reality. My work differs in that my primary focus is the nature and force of cheerleading signs, and the way certain types of representational patterns can be construed as an *en masse* fetish whose object functions as a scapegoat.

The moral panic model²⁰ is something of a 'go-to' analytical approach when investigating the mediated vilification of provocative or controversial sub-cultures and outgroups. Dominant fetishistic and/or vitriolic discourses framing cheerleading, however, confound many of the specifics of the moral panic model, as well as testing far broader cultural and media studies assumptions about the contemporary interplays between power and the media. As I will explain, many of the most blatantly fetishistic and/or vitriolic of these texts: a) are generated at a grassroots level by individual media user-producers (rather than by media conglomerates); and b) cannot be framed as unproblematically representing the interests of power-blocs, dominant ideologies or influential social groups. I have decided, therefore, to embrace a strategy of reversal similar to that outlined earlier in this chapter: instead of asking why dominant discourses framing cheerleading are not quite sufficient to be explained as a moral panic, I will ask why moral panic is not quite sufficient to explain dominant discourses framing cheerleading. Over the course of this thesis I will build on this discussion by showing how the lateral and bottom-up power-plays involved in anti-cheerleading discourse complicate common understandings about the relationship between media texts and hegemony, power-blocs and dominant ideology.

At first glance, the dominant moral panic theory explication of the social construction of deviancy and the collective action which can flow from certain types of media representation seems an apt theoretical model for studying cheerleading. Closer investigation, however, reveals that this analytical approach is ill-suited not only for this topic, but for the contemporary media environment in general. My assertion is that the moral panic model

²⁰ Cf: Hall et al 1978; Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994; and Cohen 2002.

overplays the influence of the mass media and underplays the agency of 'folk devils'²¹ and media audiences. These limitations are likely to have been extant in the theory's heyday but are greatly exacerbated by the momentous changes that have occurred in media ecosystems since the ascendance of the internet. Moral panic theory also overlooks the complex and nuanced psychological dimensions of audience reception: its psychological reach is limited to 'panic' – a term whose 'anthropomorphism and totalization' mystifies more than it reveals (McRobbie & Thornton 1995, p. 567). While the pejorative label 'panic' has been defended as an 'extended metaphor' (Cohen 2002, p. xxvi), it still implies a feminised irrationality on the part of panickers, and an elevated and removed objectivity in those who diagnose them. As Lumby writes, 'To claim someone else is panicking is to make a claim to the high rational ground... [t]o state: "They're panicking. I'm *concerned*"' (1997b, p. 40, emphasis in original).

The term 'moral panic' was coined by Jock Young in 1971 (Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994, p. 12). It was popularised by UK sociologist Stanley Cohen in 1972's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (2002) and extended by Hall and his Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies colleagues in *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (1978). From radical beginnings in 'the emergent sociology of mass media' (McRobbie & Thornton 1995, p. 559), references to moral panic now proliferate in the mainstream media. The term is used interchangeably with the notion of a 'beat-up' and has been appropriated by that arch moral panic agent the mass media 'as first-order description, reflexive comment or criticism' (Cohen, 2002, p. vii). Cries of moral panic have become so shrill and frequent that it is tempting to suggest there is or has been a moral panic over moral panic. This, however, would replicate the ignorance of/disregard for the relatively rigid specifications required for moral panics which is one of the reasons the model has arguably become more of an empty barb rather than offering meaningful theoretical traction.

²¹ 'Folk devil' is the term used by Cohen in reference to media framings of Mods and Rockers in the UK in the 1960s. In his introduction to the Third Edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (2002), he argues that the objects of moral panic belong to 'familiar clusters of social identity', offering contemporary examples such as: young, working-class violent males; drug users; paedophiles; welfare cheats and single mothers; and refugees and asylum seekers (ibid, pp. viii –xxi).

Sociologists Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda offer five crucial criteria for a moral panic: concern, increased hostility, substantial consensus, disproportionality, and volatility (1994, pp. 33-41). Media representations of cheerleading meet some aspects of these benchmarks. Both moral panics and cheerleading-related texts are characterised by stereotyping, liminality, moral indignation, 'vocabularies of blame' (Poynting & Morgan 2007, p. 2) and discursive legacies (Cricher 2006, p. 12). Further, much media discourse devoted to discussing the 'problem' of cheerleading involves: scrabbles for causal theories (Cohen 2002, p. viii); depictions of cheerleaders as 'wounding to the substance and fabric of the body social' (Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994, p. 31); and calls for corrective and/or punitive measures. As per moral panics, there are assertions that the specific transgression of cheerleading reflects broader problems (such as rampant immorality, wayward youth and vapid sporting spectacles), and that the only solution is a return to a past, golden age²². It could also be argued that dominant discourses about cheerleading are an adjunct to other moral panics such as those linked to the perceived 'sexualisation of children'²³ and the so-called 'pornification' of popular culture²⁴.

Media discourse framing cheerleading, however, varies significantly from a moral panic in that it:

²² In cheerleading-related discourse, this golden age relates to nostalgic ideals relating to gender roles, adolescent endeavour and sports, rather than a golden age of cheerleading practice.

²³ This contested term is used in reference to perceptions of a commercial and popular culture which, as Australian writer Julie Gale claims, forces children to 'psychologically and cognitively deal with sex and sexuality, long before they are developmentally ready' (2008).

²⁴ In *Pornland – How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*, Gail Dines – a founder of the group Stop Porn Culture – argues that 'porn has seeped into our everyday world and is fast becoming such a normal part of our lives that it barely warrants a mention' (2010, p. ix). It is ironic (and representative of a certain level of self-serving denial) that the popularity and pervasiveness of pornography has resulted not only in Dines' book but in a multitude of others which investigate and debate this phenomena (cf.: McNair 2002; Sarracino & Scott 2008; McKee, Albury & Lumby 2008; Maguire 2008; Tankard Reist 2009; Hamilton 2009; and Walter 2010).

* relates to gender, sex and sport as opposed to the classic moral panic concerns of law and order²⁵;

* is sustained, routinised and relatively monophonic rather than climaxing in a pique of 'drama, emergency and crisis' (Cohen 2002, p. xxvii) before fizzling out²⁶;

* suggests pleasurable idolisation as well as villainisation (making 'fixation' and 'fetishisation' more appropriate descriptors than 'panic' and 'demonisation');

* involves folk devils who 'talk back', whose sheer numbers confound their neat positionings as marginalised and dispossessed underdogs, and who do not enjoy the sympathy of commentators from the Left²⁷; and

* includes counter claims-making not only by cheerleading participants but by members of the mass media and business (sectors traditionally framed as being aligned in monolithic blocks *against* folk devils).

Even the most elastic interpretations of moral panic theory are therefore untenable in this instance.

Moral panic's poor fit with dominant cheerleading-related discourses reflects a broader mismatch between moral panic theory and 21st century media ecosystems. Hallmarks of the

²⁵ While moral panics *can* relate to sex and gender, these still tend to have a substantial criminal component. Thompson, for instance, discusses moral panics in which the 'source of an increased sense of risk was that of changes in gender roles and their impact on the family, giving rise to a struggle over values and ideologies as encoded in discourses concerning what is "natural" or essential to social order' (1998 p. 111). These moral panics, however, relate to female violence and girl gangs.

²⁶ This point is particularly cogent given Cohen's insistence, in the 2002 introduction to the Third Edition of his book, that the notion of a 'permanent moral panic' is 'less an exaggeration than oxymoron' (p. xxx).

²⁷ While this is not an official moral panic criteria, many folk devils *are* framed as disadvantaged underdogs and defended by Left-leaning commentators, even if this defence consists only of the claim that they are less evil than other media portrayals might suggest.

contemporary, internet-dominated era include fragmentation, 'niche-ification' and a DIY sensibility. This has resulted in a broadening of media audiences and participants, a proliferation of dissenting voices, a rise in media literacy²⁸, and a blurring (if not an out-and-out collapse) of the categories of media sender versus media receiver. The interactive, self-publishing and relatively inexpensive nature of the cyber-sphere means that mass media consumers are frequently also mass media producers. (In fact, in recognition of this phenomenon, I shall henceforth use the term user-producer to refer to those media participants who produce texts but are not employed by mass media organisations²⁹.) Among other issues, this problematises traditional moral panic conceptualisations of the mass media as a master manipulator and primary producer of 'concern, anxiety, indignation or panic' (Cohen 2002, p. 7), and of 'the public' as naïve, gullible and consensus-orientated³⁰. An indicator of the perceived power of the media and the powerlessness of the public in moral panic theory can be found in the work of UK communications scholar Chas Critcher. He asserts that 'moral panics do not require public support to be successful... it does not matter very much just how interested the public really are', yet goes on to claim that moral panics are still likely to 'invite fear of evil as a reflex response to any group or activity regarded as deviant' (2006a, p. 13). In other words, malleable members of the public can be triggered into an ugly and potentially dangerous reaction by the mass media even if they aren't particularly engaged with a media topic.

Moral panic models have been critiqued and revised by a number of key scholars including British cultural theorists Angela McRobbie and Sarah L. Thornton who, in their extraordinarily prescient essay from 1995, argue that even revised models of manic panic 'are outdated in so far as they could not possibly take account of the labyrinthine web of determining relations which now exist between social groups and the media, "reality" and representation' (1995, p. 560)³¹. Much academic literature, however, continues to defend this

²⁸ Cf.: Lumby 1997a, p. 72; Dietz 2003, p. 231; Hartley 2003, p. xvii; and Hartley 2010.

²⁹ Crawford and Lumby note the shift away from the terminology of 'the consumer' (which suggests passivity) towards names such as 'users' and 'digital citizens' to more accurately reflect the fact that users are 'active agents within a participatory culture' (2011, p. 43).

³⁰ Also relevant here is Foucault's case that 'where there is power, there is resistance' (1990, p. 95), as well as his positing of pleasure that comes not just from exercising power, but from evading, fleeing, fooling and resisting it (ibid, p. 45).

³¹ See also: Watney 1987; de Young 2006; Ungar 2006; and Hier 2006.

conceptual apparatus as workable and relevant³². In contemporary media studies, tensions seem to exist between the framing of 21st century media landscapes as transformed and lacking many of the key elements previously identified as essential for moral panics, yet as still being capable of sustaining the phenomena.

Changes to the media terrain also complicate the creation of folk devils – the demonised objects of moral panic. Cohen stipulates that the most suitable ‘enemy’ in a successful moral panic is one ‘with little power and preferably without even access to the battlefields of cultural politics’ (2002, p. xi). But the pluralistic and participatory nature of the new media has given unprecedented numbers of people unprecedented access to an expanded public sphere. Crawford and Lumby note that – despite persistent models of media audiences as the passive recipients of ‘one-to-many’ media broadcasts – contemporary media users ‘have unprecedented agency’ in consumption, production and distribution (2011 pp. 5, 9, 10). The increasing influence of media user-producers is also reflected in popular media discourse. An example is a *Sydney Morning Herald* feature on the five ‘most powerful people in media’. Ahead of Google, Australian Communications minister Stephen Conroy, and media entrepreneurs Rupert Murdoch and Kerry Stokes, it nominates the consumer as ‘the most powerful person in the media today’ (Dick 2011, p. 6).

This new tolerance for/fostering of mediated counter-discourse also defeats the task of constructing folk devils as ‘unambiguously unfavorable symbols’ (Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994, p. 28). Other significant developments in this regard include the rise of various lobbies and interest groups who intervene in moral panics, as well as the deliberate seeking of moral panics by folk devils or their representatives in a quest for commercial and/or sub-cultural capital³³. It is telling that even the words ‘deviant’ and ‘delinquent’ have become outdated terms to describe those who vary from dominant societal norms. As Lull and Hinerman note, ‘the traditional standoff between convention and deviance is upset in a world where... deviance itself has become normative and desirable for certain segments of the public’ (1997, pp. 5-6).

³² See Cohen 2002; Critcher 2006a; Critcher 2006b; Welch & Schuster 2006; and Poynting & Morgan 2007.

³³ See: McRobbie & Thornton 1995, p. 566; and Thornton 1996.

In addition to overlooking the advantages which may accrue to folk devils (or folk devil proxies) who deliberately seek negative mainstream media coverage, the moral panic model overlooks the pleasures and benefits available to those who consume moral panic-style media discourse, or who produce it yet who are not employed by or aligned with a mass media corporation. The primary beneficiary of moral panics in the classic model is the dominant social order. Gramscian concepts of hegemony³⁴ are also used in post-Cohen moral panic theorisations³⁵ to frame moral panic as ‘an envoy for dominant ideology’ (McRobbie and Thornton 1995, p. 562). However, as this research will show, engaging in and with vitriolic discourse also offers benefits and pleasures for unaligned individuals and minority groups³⁶. Political parties, moral entrepreneurs and media organisations *do* stand to benefit from generating vitriol and targetting certain members of a society as scapegoats via moral panics. But it is simplistic and erroneous to present the ‘the masses’ as nothing but automatons in such processes given evidence that – at least in some ways – they participate as self-interested agents.

Here, I point to McRobbie and Thornton’s case that the audience in traditional models of moral panic is relatively untheorised. They articulate the need to embrace ‘the complex realm of reception’ (1995, p. 572) as well as reiterating UK communications academic Simon Watney’s suggestion that understandings of moral panics ‘might be fruitfully informed by psychological models which seek to understand the ambivalence, excessive interest and even fascination displayed by moral guardians for the objects of their distaste’:

...these kinds of story have the advantage of allowing their readers to have their cake and eat it too; they can vicariously enjoy and/or secretly admire the transgression one moment, then be shocked and offended the next (ibid, pp. 572, 569).

³⁴ ‘Hegemony’ is the term Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci used to refer to the persuasive and dominant ideology used by the capitalist class to persuade proletariats to consent to the inequitable status quo (Clayton 2006, p. 5). This ‘Gramscian matrix’ has informed subsequent theoretical perspectives coming out of what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argue is the theoretical ‘impasse’ reached by Marxism (2001, p. viii).

³⁵ See: Hall et al 1978.

³⁶ This topic is discussed at length in Chapter Four of this thesis.

The premiums available for audiences of moral panics are also likely to disrupt the key moral panic concept that escalating concern culminates in the conviction that 'something must be done'. In the case of cheerleading, for instance, the substantial individual and group interests served by generating and consuming anti-cheerleading discourse would evaporate or be reduced if the status quo was to change. Theoretical interventions with psychological dimensions, on the other hand, assist in identifying and explicating the denial, contradiction and paradox surrounding fixations on contemporary folk devils. Cheerleaders, for example, are frequently framed as a moral threat, yet are also the site of fetishisation: explicitly in the form of the high volume of cheerleading-themed pornography, and more subtly in terms of fetishised mainstream media attention. My case, therefore, is that media eruptions over cheerleading do not only involve what Cohen calls 'the microphysics of outrage' (2002, p. xxxi), but also the microphysics of amusement, the microphysics of ridicule, the microphysics of arousal and the microphysics of ambivalence.

One of the most fascinating aspects of dominant cheerleading-related discourses is that there is such significant collective agreement about the threats posed by and the degraded nature of cheerleaders *despite* the heterogeneity of modern media audiences, the existence of counter-claims and all the other interruptions to the classic moral panic model outlined above. A new, interdisciplinary analytical architecture would assist in the understanding not only of cheerleading-related media representations but of similar discursive phenomena. Such an approach needs to recognise that: representation is the site of a constant struggle over the meaning of signs (rather than falling neatly into easy-to-track arcs); that ambivalence, fixation and disavowal are critical factors in the mediated framings of and responses to those members of society who are simplistically referred to as folk devils; and that power flows in contemporary social formations are complex, de-centralised and lateral, rather than being only or primarily imposed from above by towering monoliths. I expand on the problem dominant anti-cheerleading discourses pose to accepted notions of media power later in this thesis. Here I will outline a rethink and layering of fetish theory which may be more apt for explicating new media phenomena which involve sexual fixation and/or vitriol.

This thesis proposes ‘fetish’ as an analytical lens because the semiotic history of the term – which spans religious, anthropological, economic, psycho-sexual and popular contexts – has a kaleidoscopic resonance well-suited to exploring the nature and function of much cheerleading-related discourse. A layered and historically promiscuous understanding of fetish theory assists in making sense of the ambivalence, obsession, contradiction, sexualisation and disavowal so often associated with cheerleading. It helps explain the complex relationship between the media’s obsessive fixation with cheerleaders and its repeated, strident claims that cheerleading is meaningless and unworthy of attention. Fetish theory shows that cheerleading occupies a provocative cultural status in so far as it has been both stripped yet also hyper-invested with meaning via a range of fetishistic logics. Relegated to a liminal space between the athlete and the sex worker, cheerleaders function as a stand-in for other concerns. Critically, fetish theory also accommodates and explicates the way disorganised and disparate voices can unite to produce a convergence of negative discourse – which may not have the unequivocal support of power-blocs. As such, it provides an excellent tool for unpacking the power relations flowing from discourses which involve disparate socio-psychological interests rather than the large-scale mechanics of the state or other hegemon. I will now detail the four major contexts in which the concept of fetish has been used: anthropology and religion; economics; psychoanalysis and pop culture – as well as the interplay of these approaches with feminist thought. I will also explain how these historical conceptions of fetish can be utilised – both in isolation and in synthesis – to unpack dominant discourses framing cheerleading.

Emerging from the cultural tangle of West African trade (Pels 1998, p. 92), the noun fetish originally referred to ‘an object used by peoples of West Africa as an amulet or means of enchantment’ (Brown 1993, p. 938), before being employed more widely in reference to ‘an inanimate object revered as having magical powers or as being animated by a spirit’ (ibid). A commonly quoted definition of fetish in the religious sense comes from English anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor who, in 1871, wrote that a fetish object ‘is treated as having personal consciousness and power, is talked with, worshipped, prayed to, sacrificed to, petted or ill-treated with references to its past or present behavior to its votaries’ (1871 p. 133). French sociologist Émile Durkheim also writes of the ‘contractual’ nature of the relationship between fetish object and fetishist; a relationship which may result in the

punishment of the former if the latter is displeased (1975, p. 80). These conceptualisations make a good fit with the discourse under analysis because of the frequent framing of cheerleading as a base activity which trades on the primitive currency of male sexual gratification (themes examined in chapters Two and Three). But they also assist in comprehending: the preternatural powers cheerleading seems to possess as a social and cultural provocateur; the ambivalent themes that occur in cheerleading-related discourse; and the 'punishment' meted out to cheerleaders in vitriol.

Explicit statements vis a vis cheerleaders and the occult are usually found only in pop cultural genres dealing with the supernatural: it is rare for cheerleaders to be literally depicted as supernatural forces³⁷ (just as it is rare to hear cheerleaders described overtly as fetish objects). Yet Tylor's definition is still relevant on a metaphorical level. Media discourses often frame cheerleaders as embodying the spirit of modern 'evils' such as commercialism, Americanism, sexualisation, exhibitionism and spectacles. Additionally, cheerleaders are the subject – either literally or metaphorically – of worship and petting *as well as* sacrifice and ill-treatment. Again consistent with Tylor's love/hate thematic, the cult of cheerleading includes votaries of the activity as well as votaries of its castigation. In this sense, cheerleading also displays the characteristics of a taboo as described by anthropologist Edmund Leach (1962) in that – as Hartley puts it in relation to 'juvenation' in the news media – it 'attracts compulsive attention, simultaneous attraction and repulsion, alternate over-valuation and under-valuation, ritualization and denial, and (compulsively repeated) responses ranging from sacralization to attempted extirpation: "revelling" to "scandalizing" ...' (1998, p. 17).

The use of the term fetish in 19th and early 20th century anthropological discourse was closely associated with the irrationality and superstitions of 'the primitive savage' (Budge, 1988 p. 32). This explains the irony inherent in Karl Marx's use of the term in relation to the "'supernatural" power that the social order of capital exercises over human subjectivity' (Apter & Pietz 1993, p. x) in the supposedly scientific and rational realm of industrial capitalism. In 1867, Marx drew parallels with the mystical thinking of the 'mist-enveloped

³⁷ Exceptions include: the film *Satan's Cheerleaders* (1997); the film *Jennifer's Body* (2009); the episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* entitled 'The Witch' (1997); and the music video clip for the pop song *The Creeps (Get on the Dancefloor)* (Freaks 2007).

regions of the religious world' (1867) when he used commodity fetishism to describe industrial capitalism's divorcing of (and subsequent forgetting of the divorcing of) human contributions from the value-form of commodities. This, he argued, rendered the latter as 'queer' things 'abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties':

...so soon as [a table] steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent... and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than 'table-turning' ever was (ibid).

Marx's notion of commodity fetishism is equally germane to one of the central arguments of this thesis: that women athletes are changed into 'queer'³⁸, social hieroglyphs as soon as they step forth as cheerleaders. Reduced to the sum of their parts, competitive female cheerleaders seem unremarkable in sporting contexts. Their uniforms are not unlike those worn in relatively controversy-free sports such as Australian netball and are often more substantial than those donned by competitors of either gender in triathlons, while the routines they perform and the athletic skills they require bear many similarities to those of Olympic gymnasts. Professional sideline cheerleaders, parsed to their aesthetic and athletic ones and zeros, seem similarly commonplace. Their apparel, dance steps and conspicuous smiles mirror those of countless musical chorus-lines. Yet the heat and nature of the discursive ejaculations accompanying both competitive and professional cheerleaders suggests that cheerleading wholes transcend the sum of cheerleading parts in ways which, as this thesis will show, are regarded by consumers of cheerleading and dominant cheerleading-related discourses as both wonderful *and* grotesque.

To achieve Marx's 'transcendent' transformations, commodity fetishism involves – at the most pessimistic reading – a deliberately exploitative and manipulative enshrouding and/or – more sanguinely – an involuntary forgetting or overlooking. Either way, the result is that the relationship between workers and the products of their labour remains 'merely a relationship between things' while the real social relationships of production are concealed (Fine & Saad-Filho 2004, pp. 25-26). 'Magical thinking' – the term Baudrillard uses in relation to fetish

³⁸ In this context I am using 'queer' not in the contemporary politicised sense but, as Marx does, to refer to something that is odd.

(1981, p. 90)³⁹ – is an apt phrase for the forgetting, overlooking or ignorance (willful or otherwise) of both: a) the ordinariness of the individual elements which together constitute the activity of cheerleading; and b) the role of discourse producers play in constituting cheerleading. These fetishistic amnesias and/or disavowals are cogent in explaining cheerleading's powerful and provocative cultural status. As American anthropologist David Graeber writes in relation to fetish:

We create things, and then, because we don't understand how we did it, we end up treating our own creations as if they had power over us. We fall down and worship that which we ourselves have made (2007, p. 117).

An influential strand of feminist theory – particularly Marxist feminist theory⁴⁰ – is that a Marx-*esque* alienation is evident in the commodification and objectification of women in relation to their sexual value and usefulness to men. Similar arguments are made by anti-pornography feminists such as Catharine MacKinnon who writes that 'women's sexuality as object for men is valued as objects are under capitalism' (1982, p. 538):

Like the value of a commodity, women's sexual desirability is fetishized: it is made to appear a quality of the object itself, spontaneous and inherent, independent of the social relation which creates it, uncontrolled by the force that requires it... (ibid pp. 539-540).

While the views of early second wave Marxist feminists such as Shulamith Firestone (1970) and Juliet Mitchell (1971, 1974) once clashed with the ideals of liberal feminism, Lumby notes that these sharp divisions have effectively dissolved as the 'pseudo-Marxist critique of commodification' becomes an 'item of faith in popular feminist debate' (1997, p. 10, 9).

³⁹ Here, Baudrillard is referring to the *use* of the term fetishism (which he says almost has 'a life of its own' (1981, p. 90) rather than the term itself: 'Instead of functioning as a metalanguage for the magical thinking of others, it turns against those who use it, and surreptitiously exposes their own magical thinking' (ibid).

⁴⁰ Interpretations of the Marxist feminist position vary. Roughly speaking, however, it encapsulates the view that while capitalism is 'both sexually and economically exploitative' (Madsen 2000, p. 65), the prime source of women's oppression is caused by the 'stratification of society into classes' (Kramarae & Spender 2000, pp. 184-5).

Feminist notions of objectification and exploitation have certainly become a common sense way of understanding cheerleaders as prime examples of the commodity fetishism of the female body.

While this thesis disputes some feminist claims about objectification⁴¹, my research does suggest that fetishisation and alienation are evident in the packaging and selling of pornography-related representations of cheerleading. After all, if the model for a cheerleading-themed pornographic image is an unnamed (and possibly headless) non-cheerleader who feigns sexual pleasure and does not engage in cheerleading activities beyond the wearing of a short, pleated skirt, a viewer's relationship with that image could readily be interpreted as something other than a relationship with a 'real' woman, 'real' female desire and 'real' cheerleading⁴². Furthermore, representations of cheerleaders often involve the substitution of 'objects for subjects' (as historians Joseph Leo Koerner and Lisbet Rausing describe Marx's concept of commodity fetishism [2003, p. 433]). In the five years spent tracking discourse framing cheerleading, I was able to locate only a handful of photographic depictions of cheerleaders captioned with their names, and this was usually only when these women appeared outside of contexts involving actual cheerleading practice⁴³. I also identified a large number of photographic depictions of 'headless' cheerleaders – images which had been cropped from the neck down to show only these women's torsos⁴⁴. The latter conjures spectres of what MacKinnon calls the fetishistic 'fixation on dismembered body parts' arising from female gender stereotyping (1982, p. 530), as well as the dismemberments associated with psychoanalytic concepts of fetish (Bernheimer 1993, pp. 62-83).

Other aspects of cheerleading frequently excised in what can be framed as a fetishistic manner include: its history as an elite, masculine activity (it is unlikely, for instance, that the male, heterosexual pornographic film reviewer who claims that 'cheerleaders have always been the object of sexual fantasy' had the male-only cheerleading era in mind [Garfield]); and

⁴¹ See Part One of Chapter Two.

⁴² This is not to ignore the difficulty – and frequently the impossibility – of untangling the complex, constituting relationships between signs and referents.

⁴³ A rare example of a cheerleader being named in a media context, for instance, was former Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader Starr Spangler's appearance in the 13th series of the American reality TV show *The Amazing Race* (Ryan 2008).

⁴⁴ Examples include the photos accompanying Cantor 2008 and DAULERIO 2009.

the fact that the broad sport of cheerleading covers significantly different genres (problematising the common practice of generalising about cheerleading in discourse). My case, however, is that feminist discourse also objectifies cheerleading via similar depersonalisations, generalisations and sexualisations. The last of these may seem counterintuitive – and is geared more towards the advancement of ideological rather than lascivious urges⁴⁵. But, over the course of this thesis, I will argue that there are numerous pleasures and strategic advantages to be gained from positioning oneself or one's social movement in opposition to scapegoats such as cheerleaders. My case – and this is particularly relevant to the majoritarian feminist stance on cheerleading – is that emphasising, exaggerating or inventing the sexual character or quality of cheerleaders offers benefits regardless of whether the aim of the exercise is to enjoy, exploit and/or condemn. My problematisation of dominant feminist framings of cheerleaders can be found in Part One of Chapter Two. For now, I will return to my short history of fetish theory and the appearance of fetish in psychoanalysis.

While the concept of fetishism had existed in anthropology, philosophy and economics, it was not until the *fin de siècle* that it became 'an object of the medical "gaze" and therefore "real"' (Nye 1993, p. 13). First used by French psychologist Alfred Binet (Melman 1993, p. 84), the term was popularised in a psycho-sexual context in the late 1880s by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, the sexologist who described it as a perversion involving erotic attachments to and sexual gratification from objects rather than people (Wray 1998). Foucault's argument in *The History of Sexuality – Volume I: An Introduction* is that the 19th and 20th centuries witnessed a 'multiple implantation of perversions' through discourse (1990, p. 37), with fetishism constructed as the 'model' perversion which, from at least 1877, 'served as the guiding thread for analysing all the other deviations' (ibid, p. 154).

Sigmund Freud addresses the subject in a number of texts from the early to mid 20th century⁴⁶, in which he links the formation of fetishes to the traumatised response of the boy

⁴⁵ This is not to say that the sexualisation of women by men for the purposes of sexual release is non-ideological.

⁴⁶ The relevant works are: *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1962) – first published in 1905; 'Fetishism' (1961) – originally published in 1927; and 'Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defense' (1964) – first published posthumously in 1938.

child's prerational consciousness to his mother's lack of a penis – a loss perceived as both the 'fact' of maternal castration and the threat of his own (1961, pp. 152-3). A fetish substitute in the form of an organ or object then takes the place of the missing maternal phallus via the psychic defense mechanism of disavowal (ibid, pp. 153-5). Thus Freud figures the fetish object as a substitute for the mother's penis, an avenue by which a boy can avoid the psychic trauma of imagining that his own penis may be under threat because his mother has lost her own. Freud describes this method of dealing with an unwanted reality 'almost... artful' (1964, p. 277), noting that it has the added bonus of saving the fetishist from homosexuality (1961, p.154).

Fetishism, in the psychoanalytic context, therefore can be seen as a self-serving move indicative of narcissistic vulnerabilities, and involving symbolism, substitution, sexual overvaluation, depersonalisation, thaumaturgic thought, forgetfulness, idealised (yet degraded) objects and the psychosocial reinvention and repositioning of threats. All these concepts are apposite to the understanding of discursive framings of cheerleading – as are other aspects of the psychological mechanisms Freud constructs in relation to fetishisation. While this thesis does not argue that agitations provoked by cheerleading are because cheerleaders symbolise castration, my case is that they *are* likely to symbolise other threats (such as those relating to female sexuality and consumer culture) and that the anxieties and values attached to these things is displaced – as Freud puts it in relation to fetish (1964, p. 277). Interestingly, Freud writes that the boy child has 'retained the belief' that a woman has a penis but 'has also given it up' (1961, p. 155). Ergo, the fetish is a psychic mechanism par excellence for keeping incompatible ideas alive. This has relevance to the inherently contradictory – and politically diffuse – nature of the charges levelled at cheerleaders. At the cultural level, fetishisation may allow for different messages (imperatives, propositions etcetera) to stand apparently without contradiction in that, like Freud's concept of the fetish, it functions to sustain different and opposed currents in mental life. The fetish is a kind of fantasy object, constituted by acts of personal and cultural imagination, that sustains contradictions; it both partitions and links otherwise disparate discourses.

Despite originally being critiqued by feminists (Buikema 1995, p.9), the work of Freud (and also French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan) on desire, subjectivity formation and the unconscious, have been taken up by writers such as Juliet Mitchell, Jacqueline Rose, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Nancy Chodorow, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva in support of the general argument that gender is not biological but based on individuals' psychosexual development (Code 2000, pp. 403-5). The work of British film theorist Laura Mulvey is relevant here, not only because of her rethinking of psychoanalysis and fetish in relation to contemporary visual culture (1975, 1989/2009, 1991), but because of her influential ideas on the visual representation of women. In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Mulvey argues that women are trapped in the realm of the Symbolic as bearers not makers of meaning (1975). Other key concepts in this essay include Mulvey's reconfiguration of Freud's concept of scopophilia which involves the erotic, voyeuristic, narcissistic and controlling pleasures involved in 'looking at another person as object' (ibid). Mulvey constructs woman as a blank slate upon which man lives 'out his phantasies and obsessions', quoting director Budd Boetticher who says, 'What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents... In herself the woman has not the slightest importance' (cited ibid). This – in addition to Mulvey's ideas on the 'overvaluation' of the threatening woman via fetishistic scopophilia (ibid) – is relevant to my case that cheerleaders are also used as blank slates to exercise a variety of social and sexual obsessions and anxieties.

While fetish was initially tied to a set of explicit connotations in Marxist analysis of culture and as a key term in Freudian discourse, it has since passed into everyday language and popular discourse where it has become vague and non-specific, though still resonant with its historical applications. References to fetish in contemporary popular discourse are used to signify many things and states, ranging from the playful to, less commonly, the pathological. The *Macquarie Concise Dictionary* defines fetish as 'an obsession or fixation, usually expressed in ritualistic behaviour' (1998 p. 409), while the on-line version of the *Webster's New World College Dictionary* defines it as 'any thing or activity to which one is irrationally devoted' ('Fetish'). For the most part, fetish has lost its pathological charge (Albury 2002, p. 42), yet is still used occasionally in a more pathological sense to refer to 'peculiar' sexual obsessions such as coprophilia and coprophagia (ilpadrino 2003) which involve seeking sexual pleasure from faeces. Chapter Three will unpack popular references to fetish in greater detail.

A common approach to fetish across a range of disciplines in scholarship is to synthesise or reconcile some or all of the term's historical uses and applications. Examples include the work of Freudo-Marxist critical theorists connected with institutions such as the Frankfurt School⁴⁷, as well as the Marxist feminist and psychoanalytic feminist approaches outlined above. Contemporary conceptualisations of fetish in scholarly and popular domains are associated with images of salaciousness, alienation, reification, supernatural powers, pathologisation, displaced value, manipulation and/or a sense that the focus of a fetish may not deliver its promised bliss and is not to be trusted. There is a suggestion that those in the grip of a fetish have an unjustified and irrational fixation or preoccupation, and a blindness to an object or subject's 'real' nature. American literary theorist Emily Apter – who links fetishism to repetition compulsion, degraded simulations and 'the self-consciousness of absent value' (1993, pp. 4, 2) – suggests fetish theory's appeal to disparate fields and sensibilities lies in its provision of a 'vehicle for resisting confining essentialisms' (ibid, p. 4) and because its:

etymological origins and philosophical history... point to the artifice (*facticus*) present in virtually all forms of cultural representation... [F]etishism as a discourse weds its own negative history as a synonym for sorcery and witchcraft (*feitiçaria*) to an outlaw strategy of dereification' (ibid, p. 3).

Fetishism's 'clash between fierce individual attachments and the adherence to collectively valued social objects' (ibid, pp. 2, 4), helps explain the disavowed obsessions associated with cheerleading: the disconnect between the fixation on cheerleading and the shrill cries that it is unworthy of attention. Another irony of fetishism is that the construction of a human or part of a human as a fetish involves objectification yet evokes a highly personal response in the fetishist (ibid, p. 13). Dutch political scholar Peter Pels writes of the paradox that a fetish

⁴⁷ Here I note the Frankfurt School's early, Erich Fromm-influenced attempts 'to expose determinate mediations between the psychological and the sociological in order to overcome economic reductionism, and explore the manner in which revolutionary change was being hindered', as well as its later, Theodor W. Adorno-driven desire 'to secure an anthropological foundation for critical theory by employing the instinct [sic] theory and metapsychology of Freud' (Bronner 1994, p. 211).

is commonly regarded as 'a denial of an accepted reality or "normal" hierarchy of values, yet also is made to function within this normality' (1998 p. 92). William Pietz, a scholar who has written at length on fetish, also notes that an individual's impassioned response to a fetish object 'is always incommensurable with (whether in a way that reinforces or undercuts) the social value codes within which the fetish holds the status of a material signifier' (1985, pp. 12-13):

It is in these 'disavowals' and 'perspectives of flight'... that the fetish might be identified as the site of both the formation and the revelation of ideology and value-consciousness (ibid).

Despite its extensive interdisciplinary curriculum vitae, fetish theory has rarely been used as an analytical tool in 21st century media studies. A thorough investigation of the reasons for this is beyond the scope of this thesis. It is pertinent, however, to note Gauntlett's view of semiotic analysis and psychoanalytic approaches in media studies as 'embarrassing' because they can not be proved (2000). Notions of the unconscious and/or false consciousness may also be regarded as unfashionable in an era and discipline with a focus on celebrating notions of individual agency. According to a certain theoretical orthodoxy, the imputation that a contemporary, media-savvy consumer could be influenced or manipulated by unconscious forces that lead to *en masse* actions may be regarded as offensive and patronising (an antiquated caricature on par, perhaps, with the framing of indigenous cultures as 'primitive' for engaging in the idol worship of fetish objects). An unexamined attachment to notions of radical autonomy, however, risks excising the unconscious entirely and constructing media producer/consumers whose thoughts, feelings, and attachments are wholly transparent to themselves. It is necessary, here, to differentiate my figuration of unconsciously-motivated collective action with that posed by the moral panic model⁴⁸. A key difference is that the latter echoes the 1950s 'stimulus-response' or 'injection' model of media effects⁴⁹ in that a controlling puppet master (in the form of the mass media and the dominant social forces it represents) has a clear directional aim and is able to manipulate people's responses from

⁴⁸ See, in particular, Critcher 2006a, p. 13.

⁴⁹ This media model involves the idea that members of the public are passive recipients for whatever message is provided for them, and that such a process acts 'like the injection of a drug' (Badsey 1996, p. 8).

above. The collective antagonism towards and/or fetishisation of cheerleaders, on the other hand, is a disorganised and emergent phenomenon which does not involve any monolithic industrial or institutional structure or any single malevolent agent.

The new calibrations of fetish theory I propose in media studies are apt for recognising and tracking the complex psychological processes and subjectivities involved in 21st century media production and consumption. This type of 'fetish theory 2.0' is particularly useful to new media environment analysis because it helps chart the lateral and 'bottom-up' power flows which result from a labyrinth of interactions and intersections (a characteristic of new media forms) rather than top-down pressures from a hegemon (a characteristic – or at least seen as a characteristic – of old media models)⁵⁰. In cases such as the large volume of anti-cheerleading discourse, what emerges is not the traditional moral panic lens of a power-bloc oppressing innocent citizens. Instead, it is an oppressive phenomenon with egalitarian aspects; one which involves complex collaborations and intersections between groups and individuals, as well as convergences between old ideas and new media genres. As such, fetish theory is helpful for comprehending ideological intersections such as the overlaps between feminist and social conservative discourse on cheerleading⁵¹, as well as the power of textual user-producers to subjugate each other. As this thesis will go on to argue, this can be framed as an oppressive doppelganger to Gramsci's concept of progressive hegemony⁵².

Fetish and scapegoating theory also assist in the subaudition of individual and mass media subtextual narratives that are unstated or disavowed. In this way, the unconscious is imagined not in the strict Freudian sense but more generically as acts of mentation which are unmediated – in whole or in part – by conscious awareness. Such an approach disrupts established patterns of discursive blaming by shifting the focus from the fetish object/subject (in this case, cheerleaders) to the fetishisers (in this case

⁵⁰ Cogent here is Crawford and Lumby's observation that the contemporary convergent media environment should be conceived in horizontal rather than vertical terms (2011, p. 39).

⁵¹ Particularly relevant here is the fetishistic nature of vitriol – a concept and phenomenon explored in Chapter Four.

⁵² In *Rethinking Hegemony*, Thomas Clayton notes Gramsci's idea that a bottom-up progressive hegemony could establish a new proletariat class and eliminate 'ideas that reinforce exploitative structures in society, leaving in their place new and more equitable ways of thinking and acting' (2006, p. 9).

producers/consumers/users of cheerleading-related discourse). One of my aims is to avoid the imputation – rife in cultural discourse – that there is something intrinsically fetish-worthy about cheerleading and that cheerleaders are somehow to blame for the discourses surrounding them. This reversal of explanatory priorities contains more than a much-needed epistemological corrective; there is, in addition, a correlative ethico-political reversal at stake, one which inverts the usual ethical focus, from mass media corporations to the masses.

Beyond cheerleading, fetish theory is also likely to be useful for other media studies-related research such as the analysis of discourse: 1) where sex and/or sexualisation are key themes; 2) where there is an obvious disconnect between what media discourse says and what it does (for example, imploring audiences not to look at something while showing the forbidden image); and/or 3) where there is a blurring of the desire to watch over and the desire to watch (which includes elements of points one and two). Hartley and Lumby refer to the latter – in relation to popular discourse about teenage girls – as the ‘latent sexual component of the caretaking gaze’, noting ‘the pervasive denial of such desire’ (2003, p. 54). Also cogent is the work of American historian Robert Allen who – in reference to burlesque – writes of the ‘battle between the felt need to uphold the inviolability of pure womanhood and the libidinous pleasurability of watching women... whose costumes and demeanor [are] sure signs of their impurity’ (1991, p. 95). Parodying media disavowal and performative contradiction in relation to the showing of things that must not be shown, McKee says:

These photos of Miley Cyrus are child pornography! It’s disgusting! Look at them! Look! Here they are! In full colour! On our front page! It’s disgusting! They mustn’t be allowed to exist! (2009, pers. comm., 22 April).

As such, fetish theory would be well-suited to the analysis of debates about topics such as the so-called sexualisation of children and ‘pornification’ of popular culture.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The chapters of this thesis overlap and intersect like circles in a Venn diagram. Such an approach helps illustrate the way similar themes and arguments emerge in cheerleading-related discourse generated by very different groups, serving very different interests, articulated in a variety of different genres⁵³. Unless stated otherwise, I use the terms 'cheerleader' and 'cheerleading' to refer to female practitioners of all manifestations of the sport. While this risks replicating misleading generalisations arising from other framings of cheerleading, it is necessary because the primary focus of this analysis concerns media discourse and cultural representations of cheerleading rather than the putative activity these terms describe. My use of the descriptor 'sport' in relation to cheerleading sidesteps debate and legal battles on the classification of cheerleading in the US, as well as broader disputes about what is or is not a sport (Rowe 1995; 1999). Instead, I think it more useful to follow Pierre Bourdieu and consider a 'space of sports' (1988, p. 153) which is constituted through social relationships (Rowe 1995, p. 146) and practices of self-naming, rather than figuring sport as a discrete activity amenable to strict formal specification and legislative or administrative control.

Chapter One of this thesis is dedicated to outlining the history and physical manifestations of cheerleading. This is to provide a context for the types of discourse which are my main concern rather than to offer a 'reality' against which to judge the faithfulness of their representations. That said, it does focus on historical junctures which confound modern assumptions about cheerleading. In this chapter, I show that, since its genesis in the elite male-only domain of US college sports in the mid to late 1800s, cheerleading has undergone momentous transformations in its structure, style and content, as well as in the socio-economic status, race and gender of its participants. The two most dramatic and significant historical changes have involved cheerleading's metamorphosis from an elite and exclusively masculine to an overwhelmingly feminine practice, and its split, in the 1990s, into professional dance-orientated and competitive athletic streams.

⁵³ Lumby writes of using a similar approach for similar reasons in *Bad Girls* (1997, p. xxvii).

Chapter Two surveys cheerleading-related discourse which can be linked to feminist-, gender-, sports-, class-, and taste distinction-related anxieties, as well as what has been dubbed anti-Americanism. It shows that anti-cheerleading discourse sometimes calls for the banning of cheerleading, and may contribute to making cheerleading more dangerous because of a dearth of safety regulations. The fact that feminist anti-cheerleading rhetoric shares so many similarities with discourse produced by social conservatives, sports fans and male pornography consumers speaks to the extraordinary provocation posed by cheerleading, as well as to the ramifications of the mainstreaming of feminist theory; it suggests there may be aspects of feminist discourse which are limiting rather than liberatory for women. The texts canvassed in Chapter Two illustrate a fetishistic obsession with cheerleading as a topic for debate and with cheerleaders as a focus for vitriol. They indicate a mostly unquestioning acceptance of fetishised constructions of cheerleaders as hyper-sexed and hyper-sexual.

In Chapter Three, I explore the fetishised fixation on and sexualisation of cheerleaders in pornography, popular culture and the news media. The news media's obsession (and fetishistic disavowals of its obsession) with cheerleaders is particularly significant. It reveals the oppressive and disempowering ramifications of contemporary cultural responses to young women whose sexualities are both coveted and despised. This includes the use of anti-cheerleading (and, as established in Chapter Two, feminism-friendly) rhetoric to insinuate that cheerleaders may be partly to blame when they are involved in scandals, or are the victims of accidents and violent crime.

Chapter Four explores the fetishistic dimensions of vitriol. It suggests that engaging in vitriolic cheerleading-related discourse offers 'benefits' such as: the experiencing of a range of pleasures; the accruing of intellectual, comic, cultural, sub-cultural and financial capitals; and the accessing of advantages associated with the construction of the cheerleader as a multi-purpose scapegoat. (As one reader writes in response to a sports web site's calling for the removal of cheerleaders from sport: 'Instead of the "bogeyman" being responsible for all of society's ills, we now have the "bogey-cheerleader"' [sheek commenting on Musolino 2009]). This chapter also explores the way cheerleading and dominant cheerleading-related discourses provoke and resolve a range of individual and group anxieties. It lays the groundwork for my concluding argument that people-powered vitriol (especially in the form

of the recreational nastiness increasingly evident in new media environments) problematises orthodox understandings of hegemony and mediated power flows.

In Chapter Five, I address cheerleader resistance, agency and subversions to show that discourse framing cheerleading is not homogenous. Among other things, minority discourse portrays cheerleading as a legitimate sport providing a range of gains to its practitioners, and offers insights into what cheerleading means to cheerleaders. Chapter Five also includes discussions of alternative appreciators of cheerleaders, the return of men to cheerleading, and the emergence of cheersquads made up of gays and lesbians, senior citizens, and radical protestors. It discusses the limitations of defensive counter-discourse which privileges the negative framings purportedly rejected, and explores – via the Hegelian notion of *Aufhebung*⁵⁴ – emerging sectors of competing cheerleading representations which offer more complex resolutions of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ signifiers. My argument is that the latter are likely to be more successful at advancing less fetishised and less vitriolic imaginings of the cheerleader.

In the Conclusion, I expand on my study of cheerleading-related discourse to question broader understandings of the way discourse circulates and power flows in dramatically altered media environments. This section: posits a hegemony of hegemonic theory; explicates some of the dangers of hyper-celebratory rhetoric framing new media ecosystems; and problematises orthodox understandings of the progressive/transgressive politics involved in active audienceship and self-publishing. It suggests there is a tendency for theorists to adopt either a dystopian or utopian paradigm of agency: the helplessly manipulated automaton versus their all-powerful, radically-autonomous twin. My broader case is that fragmentation, intersection, contradiction and divided loyalties are hallmarks not just of modern media audiences, but of modern media institutions and ideological institutions in general. I argue that, like moral panic theory, hegemonic approaches to theorising the power flows involved in media textual production and reception are enormously influential and are often invoked commonsensically. But while they may have been fruitful in the past

⁵⁴ Translated as both ‘sublate’ and ‘supersede’, *Aufheben* is a term which refers to the dialectical interplay of ideational content which concomitantly negates, preserves, and transforms. Cf.: Taylor 1979, p. 49; Hegel 1991a, p. 154; Hegel 1991b pp. 47, 87, 123; Hegel 1994, p. 57; McCarney 2000, pp. 86-7; Beiser 2008, pp. 103, 130; Hegel 2010 pp. 81-82.

and may still prove useful in some contemporary scenarios, they do not provide a one-size-fits-all theoretical solution to understanding power flows and textual phenomena in new media environments. My overall goal, therefore, is to lay the groundwork for: further re-examination of theoretical architectures which rely on conceptualisations of 'top-down' muscle; and for further investigations into the notion of lateral or 'bottom-up' power plays.

CHAPTER ONE: FAMILY TREES AND FEMINISATIONS

Cheerleading is an American invention which emerged as an elite, exclusively masculine endeavour from the mid 1800s but has since become an overwhelmingly feminised activity which is rapidly establishing itself as a competitive sport in its own right rather than as an adjunct to competitive sports. This chapter illustrates the dramatic changes that have occurred in the structure, style and content of cheerleading, as well as in the socio-economic status, race and gender of its participants. It is divided into three sections: the first is a social and cultural history of cheerleading in the US; the second discusses different types of cheerleading and establishes the importance of these distinctions; and the third covers cheerleading as a cultural export. This overview of cheerleading's origins and development both inside and outside the US provides essential context for the discourse under examination in later chapters of this thesis.

Cheerleading is most commonly associated with American football and basketball, but can now be found alongside other sports such as soccer, ice hockey, volleyball, baseball, and wrestling. In contrast to the stagnating participation rates of pursuits such as football and basketball, cheerleading currently stands as one of America's fastest growing sports, with the number of US cheerleaders reaching four million in 2007 and the US cheerleading industry doubling in value between 2003 and 2008 to become a \$2 billion empire (Torgovnick 2008a, p. xiv). In 2008, more than 2000 American gyms focused exclusively on stunting and tumbling skills for cheerleaders, and more than 75 organisations regulated the sport, many holding their own national competitions (ibid pp. xiv, xix). Hundreds of colleges and junior colleges offer fiercely contested full and partial cheerleading scholarships⁵⁵; plans are underway for a World Cheerleading Hall of Fame (*World Cheerleading Hall of Fame*); and thousands of women compete each year for one of 36 places on the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader squad – a process that has been captured in a popular reality TV series (*Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders – Making the Team* [2006]). After a listless start as a cultural export, competitive cheerleading programs now exist in at least 60 countries ('International Cheer

⁵⁵ See: Brady 2002; and Karp 2009.

Union') and there is a growing interest in subversive cheerleading practices such as gay and lesbian squads, radical activist squads, and senior citizen squads (Adams & Bettis 2003a, pp. 4, 27-28).

Cheerleading as it exists in the early 21st century is extraordinarily different to the activity which first emerged in the elite domain of US collegiate football fields in the late 1800s. According to Adams and Bettis, cheerleading was born on November 6, 1869, at a Princeton and Rutgers intercollegiate football game when a group of spectators spontaneously broke into a 'rocket cheer' borrowed from a civil war regiment (2003a, p. 11). Cheering during games continued as an informal, sporadic activity but, as intercollegiate football became increasingly popular, so too did the need for organised displays of institutional identity and loyalty. By the 1890s, some colleges had a formally designated 'cheer leader', also known as a 'rooter king', 'yell leader', 'yell king', 'yell master' or 'yell marshall' (Hanson 1995, p.11). As an idealised activity for privileged males, early cheerleading practices epitomised attributes representing normative masculinity such as athleticism and leadership (Adams & Bettis 2003b, p. 76). As such, male cheerleaders during the late 1800s and early 1900s were depicted in discourse as a respected and respectable breed – influential student leaders who could set good social and academic examples. A 1924 *Literary Digest* quotes Chicago baseball celebrity 'Hughie' Fullerton observing that the position of cheerleaders is 'fraught with great responsibility and rated as a high honor' (cited in Hanson 1995, p. 13). That said, discourses of ambivalence about cheerleading also began early. In a 1911 edition of the *Nation*, Harvard's President A. Lawrence Lowell criticises organised cheering as being 'nearly the worst means of expressing emotion ever invented' (cited in Adams & Bettis 2003a, p.13). In the same issue, the *Nation's* editors counter with:

The reputation of having been a valiant 'cheer-leader' is one of the most valuable things a boy can take away from college. As a title to promotion in professional or public life, it ranks hardly second to that of having been a quarter-back (cited in Hanson 1995, p. 12).

During the early 20th century, cheerleading spread into elementary and secondary schools and community-based youth sports programs. Girls began participating in collegiate cheering in

small numbers in the late 1920s and early 1930s in tandem with what Adams and Bettis refer to as the 'mass commercialization... of feminine beauty' (2003a, p. 4). Resistance to female cheerleaders at this time included concerns that schoolgirls were incapable of performing the requisite acrobatic stunts and might develop harsh voices, unladylike 'smart alecky' conduct, and excessive conceit (Hanson 1995, pp. 16, 21). By the 1940s, however, co-educational cheer squads could be found in universities and high schools, with women becoming cheerleaders closely paralleling the story of women becoming workers during World War II:

In both cases, men left their jobs to become soldiers and inadvertently opened doors that previously had been closed to women. When men returned from the war, they fought to regain their 'rightful' place in the worksite and on the cheerleading squads (Adams & Bettis 2003b, pp. 76-77).

Despite the post-war banning of girls from teams in several colleges and high schools, cheerleading became increasingly feminised in the 1950s. It was eventually seen as an approved athletic outlet for 'respectable' young ladies and used by school administrators in attempts to reinforce desirable social traits among female students (Moritz 2006, p.10). The continuing feminisation of cheerleading led to concerns in the '60s that the dominance of girls was at the expense of 'athletically inclined boys, who would be a real asset' (Hatton & Hatton cited in Hanson 1995, p. 27).

Adams and Bettis note that the early history of cheerleading provides a valuable lens through which to view not only changes in gender roles, but the 'contradictory and inconsistent' nature of racial and ethnic integration in the US education system (2003a, p. 5). Despite 1954's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* Supreme Court decision⁵⁶, African American and Hispanic representation on high school cheering squads remained a source of sometimes violent tension throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. In 1967, a youth was killed during two nights of social unrest in North Carolina after a school election in which

⁵⁶ *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruled that the segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race deprived 'children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities'. As a result, *de jure* racial segregation was ruled to be a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the US Constitution ('Brown v. Board of Education 347 U.S. 483 1954').

no black cheerleaders were chosen (Hanson 1995, p. 34). Sports historian Pamela Grundy also argues that the selection of cheerleading squads was one of the most volatile issues of school de-segregation issues around the South because, in the 1960s, 'cheerleading offered by far the highest status available to young women at many North Carolina high schools' (2001, pp. 285-6). Now, in the early 21st century, most US professional cheerleading squads are racially diverse (Hanson 1995, p. 57), while competitive American cheerleading squads remain predominantly white. Adams and Bettis link the sidelining of African American and Hispanic cheerleaders to narrow and exclusive ideas about the constitution of ideal femininity (2003a, p. 6). Despite this, my research suggests that racial issues are rarely canvassed in current popular and media discourse concerning cheerleading. A significant exception is the popular cheerleading film *Bring It On* (2000) and, to a lesser extent, the fourth film in the *Bring It On* franchise (*Bring It On: Fight to the Finish* 2009)⁵⁷. Two other rare exceptions include: 1) media reports of an incident in India in 2008 during which two UK cheerleaders claimed they'd been asked to leave a Mohali cricket ground because a local event management company thought their skin was unacceptably dark for Indian audiences (Banerjee 2008); and 2) a sex web site devoted to 'the beauty and splendor of the White Woman' which claims something doesn't 'look right' about black cheerleaders (kevin4whitemeat 2009).

As cheerleading evolved from spontaneous spectator demonstrations to a formal extracurricular activity, educational institutions began using it as a pedagogical device, structuring all aspects of selection, conduct, training and supervision. From the 1920s to the present, prescriptive literature has stressed character as well as physical attributes, with participants being expected to exemplify good sportsmanship (for want of a gender-neutral expression), discipline, cooperation, leadership, academic success and appropriate gender behaviour (Hanson 1995, pp. 29-30, 32, 37). Administrative issues which have arisen as a result of cheerleading's formalisation include: developing and enforcing regulations relating

⁵⁷ The original *Bring It On* (2000) film focuses on the competition between a white cheerleading team and a black cheerleading team after the new captain of the former discovers her predecessor has been stealing routines from the latter. Part of the film's 'feel good' factor involves the white team recognising the ethical breaches of the theft and the black team's eventual victory at a national championship. In the fourth film, *Bring It On: Fight to the Finish* 2009, a shallow white cheerleader redeems herself after her family moves to a working class area and she joins a predominately black and Hispanic squad.

to cheerleader conduct; budgeting and securing funding; addressing legal issues such as organisational liability, drug testing and Title IX⁵⁸ adherence; and resolving conflicts over cheerleading's status within America's broader sporting and educational regulatory frameworks.

Particularly significant in the history of cheerleading's institutionalisation was the formation of companies which began staging competitions, holding instructional clinics for cheerleaders and coaches, and selling cheerleading supplies. Lawrence Herkimer, referred to in the media as 'The Father of Cheerleading'⁵⁹, offered cheerleading camps from the late 1940s and formed the Dallas-based National Cheerleading Association (NCA) in 1953. Cheer camps run by Herkimer and others barely broke even, but proved to be effective marketing vehicles for the sale of uniforms and equipment which became thriving, multi-million dollar enterprises (Steptoe 1991). Herkimer, himself a former cheerleader, patented the pom pom in 1971 after deciding that 'color television begged for something quaking and colorful' (Branch 2009). He then tried unsuccessfully to rename the accessory 'pom pons' after discovering the original term was military slang for sexual intercourse (Adams & Bettis 2003a, p. 113). These last two historical details, while minor, prefigure two key contemporary criticisms levelled at cheerleading: that it has excessively sexualised connotations and that it is a debased mass media spectacle – themes explored at length in Chapters Two and Three.

Cheerleading was reinvented as a more athletic endeavour by one of Herkimer's *protégées*, Jeff Webb, in the 1970s. While the athleticisation of cheerleading fitted neatly with the second wave of feminist activism and theorisation in the 1960s, the relationship between the two is ambiguous. Webb's primary motivations were widely interpreted to have been primarily commercial and pragmatic rather than ideological⁶⁰. He formed the Universal Cheerleading

⁵⁸ During the 1960s and 1970s, perceptions that women were being unjustly marginalised in sport resulted in women's sports advocates taking up the cause as part of the second-wave feminist movement, culminating in the passage of Title IX in the US in 1972 (Moritz 2006, p. 7). This legislation prohibits schools and colleges in receipt of federal money from gender discrimination in any area, essentially requiring government-funded educational institutions to spend equivalent amounts on men's and women's sports programs (Hu 2007).

⁵⁹ See: Steptoe 1991; Hanson 1995, p. 44; and Adams & Bettis 2003, p. 7.

⁶⁰ See: Adams & Bettis 2003b, p. 77; Woodmansee cited in Adams & Bettis 2003b, p. 77; and Moritz 2006, pp. 46-47.

Association (UCA) in 1974 and eventually eclipsed Herkimer: by selling cheerleader outfits more suited to athletic performance; by creating competitions specifically designed to result in television exposure (Greene 2009a); and by making cheerleading more suited to a post Title-IX era (Adams & Bettis 2003b, pp. 77-78). Webb's recasting of cheerleading as the main event rather than a sideline attraction generated radically different images of cheerleading and is frequently credited with preventing the activity's extinction⁶¹. Both the NCA and UCA now fall under the umbrella of Webb's Varsity Brands Inc. which is the dominant entrepreneurial body in American cheerleading. In 2004, Varsity Brands had an annual revenue of more than \$US150 million, controlled 90 per cent of the cheerleader outfitting market, and ran – through subsidiaries – the largest camps and most prestigious competitions for both scholastic and all-star cheerleaders (Williams 2004).

Despite leading the world in cheerleading participation rates and skill levels, the US has been slower than other nations to standardise coaching and safety regulations, and to establish an overall governing body⁶². It wasn't until 2008 that a number of American cheerleading groups, including Varsity, joined to form a new, non-profit cheerleading organisation called the USA Federation for Sports Cheering (marketed as USA Cheer). This organisation currently serves as the official governing body of both scholastic and all-star 'sport' cheerleading in the US and has become the officially recognised US representative at international competitions. Given cheerleading's uncertain legal and institutional status⁶³ and ongoing rises in popularity (likely to continue generating heated corporate competition), it remains to be seen whether this new organisation will be able to fulfill its promise of uniting the many disparate streams of competitive cheerleading in America.

⁶¹ See: Adams & Bettis 2003a, p. 6; Adams & Bettis 2003b, p. 77; Woodmansee cited in Adams & Bettis 2003b; Moritz 2006, pp. 46-47; and Branch 2009.

⁶² The British Cheerleading Association, for example, was founded in 1984, while the Swedish Cheerleader Federation was formed in 1995. In Australia, Gymnastics Australia has been the official governing body for cheerleading since 2000.

⁶³ The ongoing debate about whether or not cheerleading is officially a sport or a recreational activity – discussed in Chapter Two – has ramifications for legal issues such as Title IX adherence (Hu 2007), drug-testing (Torgovnick 2008a), safety regulations (Pratt 2002) and adherence to the strict rules of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) which currently does not cover cheerleading (Torgovnick 2008a).

CHEERLEADING DISTINCTIONS

The term cheerleading as it appears in media and popular discourse is generally used as a collapsible catch-all for several very different activities. The resulting definitional confusion contributes to the many conflicting representations of and meanings associated with the sport. Discourse about cheerleading in which outsiders criticise or ridicule the activity is rarely sensitive to the different practices, rationales and organisational structures that define cheerleading. Those involved in cheerleading, however, are far more likely to reference these differences, to correct what they perceive as damaging misconceptions⁶⁴, and to privilege their own genre of cheerleading above others. For example, a 2009 media report quotes the head cheerleading coach at an American high school explaining that her competitive cheerleaders do not engage in flashy dance moves or use glitter or curly ponytails: 'We wear our hair low and straight. It's a more serious, athletic image. We are not rah-rah's' (cited in Weaver 2009). A managing director connected with all-star cheerleading (the type of competitive cheerleading which *is* known for flashiness and glitter) makes a similar effort to distinguish all-star from scholastic cheerleading when he claims, in a 2004 issue of the *New York Times*, that calling all-star cheerleading cheerleading is 'almost insulting' (cited in Williams 2004). Professional sideline cheerleaders also go to great lengths to distance themselves from other cheerleading genres. In a 1991 book written about being a Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader, Stephanie Scholz is emphatic in her rejection of perceptions that the squad leads cheers:

We'd sometimes yell 'Yaaaaaaaaa! Go Cowboys!' or flip a few cartwheels after a big play, and we'd generally go nuts after a touchdown, but organized cheers? Never! We were dancers (Scholz et al 1991, p. 5).

Cheerleading has two main streams – competitive and professional – though discreet categorisation is complicated by overlaps in appearance, practice and organisation⁶⁵, as well

⁶⁴ See: Chadwick 2008.

⁶⁵ In addition to a similarity in uniform and presentation (at least to the lay gaze), both professional and competitive cheerleaders perform on the sidelines of sporting events. Scholastic competitive cheerleaders are also known to seek specialist training at All-Star gyms and to cheer concurrently in scholastic and All-Star squads (Williams 2004).

as competitive cheering's split into scholastic cheering (in which a squad is attached to an educational institution) and all-star cheering (in which squads are associated with independent organisations or gymnasiums). From an outside perspective, confusion may also result from the counter-intuitive demarcation of a number of archetypal cheerleader practices. Competitive school squads uphold the sideline tradition by cheering at sports events, appearing at pep rallies, and performing at school or community functions (Grindstaff & West 2006, p. 507). Organised vocal cheers are a hallmark of competitive cheering contests, and a substantial portion of UCA national competitive cheering routines are judged on the cheer or pep section of a squad's routine, combined with tapes of the competitors leading crowds at football games (Torgovnick 2008a, p. 227). Professional cheerleaders, on the other hand, eschew 'cheers and chants' in favour of 'grand jetes and pirouettes' despite their traditional sideline role as support for a sports team ('Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders History'). These definitional problems are compounded by international variations in nations such as Australia where professional NRL (National Rugby League) sideline cheer squads are incorporating gymnastic stunts and recruiting male members – elements usually only associated with competitive cheerleading.

The activity known as competitive cheerleading has its roots in early male cheer squads which led crowds in cheers and performed simple stunts. Its modern form evolved from Webb's 1970s reinvention of cheerleading as an athletic activity involving 'men lifting women, women sailing to extreme heights, and big, multiple-person pyramids' (Torgovnick 2008a, p. xviii). Contemporary competitive cheerleading can be either all-girl or co-ed and is an elite athletic activity involving high-level tumbling, stunting, and gymnastics. Squads compete against each other at a range of local, state, national, and international championships which are run by rival sanctioning bodies and receive a degree of media coverage. ESPN had established collegiate competitions as a television staple by the early 1980s (Williams 2004), while the progress of local teams is often covered in America's state and regional media. A 2009 survey by the National Federation of State High Schools Associations identified 113,980 competitive cheerleaders in high schools in 2007-08 ('Survey shows almost 400K high school cheerleaders' 2009). Among all sports, only football,

basketball, track and field, baseball/softball, soccer, and cross country had more participants (ibid).

Kate Torgovnick, the journalist author of a book which follows three collegiate squads through the 2006-2007 season, ranks competitive cheerleading as an extreme sport on par with motocross, skateboarding and skydiving (cited in Steelman 2008; 2008a). This helps explain dramatic rises in the number of severe injuries associated with cheerleading. A 2008 study by the University of North Carolina's National Centre for Catastrophic Sports Injury Research states that cheerleading accounted for approximately two-thirds of the catastrophic injuries to high school and college girls from 1982 to 2007 (Muellar & Cantu 2008, pp. 53-54). There were 103 fatal, disabling, or serious injuries recorded among female high school athletes, with 67 occurring in cheerleading and only nine occurring in gymnastics, the next most dangerous sport ('The Most Dangerous Sport: Cheerleading' 2009). One of the report's authors attributes these results to cheerleading's increasingly complex gymnastics stunts (Muellar cited in 'Cheerleading: it's extreme' 2008). The report also links cheerleading's high injury rates to safety and regulatory inconsistencies resulting from confusion and disagreement over the definition of cheerleading, namely whether it is an activity to lead cheers or a sport (Muellar & Cantu 2008, p. 44).

Complicating definitions of cheerleading is the fact that American competitive cheerleading has two sub sets: scholastic and all-star. Scholastic squads are attached to educational institutions and perform on the sidelines in support of associated sports teams, as well as competing independently. All-star squads are not affiliated with either educational establishments or professional sports teams and are cheerleading's fastest growing sector both in the US (Adams & Bettis 2003a, p. 4) and internationally. These private, for-profit squads first appeared in America in the early 1980s, partly because of a shortage of places available on scholastic squads (Smith 2007). The number of all-star gyms in the US has since increased from about 200 in 1999 to about 2,500 in 2004 (Williams 2004). In a *New York Times* piece on the phenomenon in 2004, journalist Alex Williams attributes the popularity of all-star squads to televised cheer competitions' framings of cheerleaders as headliners rather than support acts.

All-star cheerleaders – who compete in separate divisions from scholastic squads at competitions – are known for their ‘glitzy uniforms, outrageous makeup [and] elite tumbling passes’ (Smith 2007) as well as an ‘aggressively showy’ style which leaves purists ‘aghast’ (Williams 2004). Williams says all-star ‘razzle’ obscures an ‘intense, almost Soviet, approach to training’ with children joining at kindergarten age and continuing step by step up the competition ladder through college and beyond (ibid). The increasing popularity of all-star cheerleading has seen the former maverick Webb re-framed as a traditionalist and led to fierce debate about the future of cheerleading. Williams quotes cheerleading identities (both inside and outside the all-star cheering industry) who suggest that this ‘rogue’ style adopt a new name such as ‘acroperformance’, ‘acrocheer’, ‘cheer stunt’ or ‘team stunt’ (ibid). The rise of all-star cheerleading has also been accompanied by pressure on scholastic cheerleaders to renew their focus on the traditional activity of supporting teams⁶⁶, with some universities discontinuing cheerleading programs in favour of ‘pom squads’ or ‘spirit squads’ which focus on crowd interaction and involvement⁶⁷ and do not include stunting (Blight 2009). These ‘retro’ moves, however, are controversial (ibid). Many scholastic cheerleaders also express ambivalence about cheering for others. The latter is illustrated in *Bring It On* – a film capturing many cheerleading zeitgeists – when the captain of a college squad says cheering at football games is mere practice for the main event of independent competition at national cheerleading events (2000). Commentators such as Torgovnick, meanwhile, predict a split in American varsity cheerleading into the ‘intense, die-hard athletic side’ and ‘the cheering at games, the makeup, the big hair’ (cited in Lynn 2008).

Starkly different (at least in the eyes of cheerleading practitioners) to both scholastic and all-star competitive cheerleaders are professional cheerleaders who dance on the sidelines of professional sporting events and have their origins in the song girl phenomenon of the 1940s, and the football dance and drill teams of the 1960s. Hanson notes that there are parallels in the history of scholastic and professional cheerleading in that both originated to support football and both added entertainment and pageantry to the evolving phenomenon of spectator sport (1995, p. 49). But while school and college cheerleading eventually fostered a supporting commercial industry, professional cheerleading was designed from the outset as a

⁶⁶ See: Branch 2009; and Torgovnick 2008a, p. xx.

⁶⁷ See: Harris 2009; and Ball 2009.

subsidiary of the professional sports industry and was shaped by the mass entertainment and promotional demands of professional sport (ibid).

American football teams began using professional cheerleaders as early as the 1950s and 1960s, but it was the Dallas Cowboys who received the most attention for using attractive female dancers to foster fan support for new football teams. At the start of the 1972 season, the team's general manager, Tex Schramm, introduced a squad of dancing 'atmosphere producers' (cited in Hanson 1995, p. 52) who'd been trained by a Broadway choreographer. These women were billed as America's Sweethearts and came to symbolise the essence of professional cheerleading: 'glamour, sex appeal, celebrity and merchandising success' (ibid). The break-through moment for the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders came in January 1976, when a cheerleader standing on the sidelines of Miami's Orange Bowl winked at a network television camera. According to squad publicity: '75 million viewers – a full one third of the nation – were watching. And they didn't take their eyes off what they saw' ('Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders History'). 'Honey shots' like this rapidly became a staple of television sports broadcasting (Hanson 1995, p. 53), as demand for appearances by the Dallas cheerleaders soared and sideline dancers were established throughout the NFL. By 1981, seventeen NFL clubs had cheerleading squads totalling 580 members and the trend was spreading to professional basketball and soccer.

This sudden proliferation of professional cheerleaders was controversial and raised concerns about the dancers being too sexy and usurping the role of footballers (ibid, p. 54).

Cheerleaders outside the professional realm also expressed concerns. Alyssa Roenigk, a former varsity cheerleader and one-time managing editor of *American Cheerleader*, says the Dallas Cowboy dancers should never have been called cheerleaders:

They're... dressed extremely provocatively and they don't cheer, they're just dancing... For people who really didn't know any better and who maybe had never seen a college or high school team, that became the image of cheerleading. And it was a detrimental image (cited in Pratt 2002).

Professional cheerleaders – who remain a significant part of American sports entertainment – are still selected according to the 1970s criteria of visual sex appeal and dancing ability (Hanson 1995, p. 57). Concerns about their disruptions to sport, and to both feminist and social conservative principles are common themes of cheerleader-related media controversy and will be discussed at length in Chapter Two.

CHEERLEADING AS A CULTURAL EXPORT

Providing broad histories of cheerleading in nations outside the US goes beyond the frame of reference for this project. In concordance with this thesis' overall aims, however, I will instead provide a brief overview of the history and current state of cheerleading in a small selection of nations which are the source of or inspiration for cheerleader-themed discourse in Anglophone media. The purpose is to provide context for these discourses as well as to begin exploring the reasons that, despite recent rises in international participation, cheerleading has not been as successful a cultural export as other US cultural and corporate institutions such as jazz and McDonalds (Adams & Bettis 2003a, p. 10).

Significant increases in the popularity of cheerleading internationally are a relatively recent phenomenon and follow a long period of resistance. In recent years, however, it has achieved global status and is regarded as one of the world's fastest growing sports (Torgovnick 2008a, pp. xix). Hanson attributes the initial spread of cheerleading in 'the Dallas mode' to the expansion of professional football in Canada in the late 1970s and in England and Europe in the 1980s (1995, p. 55). This trend continued with the formation, in 1991, of the World League of American Football (WLAF), characterised as a 'made-for-television league' and featuring 'the tried and true device of cheerleader dance groups' (ibid, p. 56). Professional cheerleaders now perform on the sidelines of sporting events in a large range of nations, including South Africa, Poland, Australia, Japan, Sweden, Britain, China, and India⁶⁸. As with the US, however, the fastest growing sector of international

⁶⁸ See: 'About South Africa National Rugby'; 'American football – arguably the fastest growing sport in Poland'; Gibson & Maley 2007; Adams & Bettis 2003a, pp. 41-43; Kent 2008; and Sengupta 2008.

cheerleading is competitive, with increasing numbers of young women and men participating in regional, national, and international competitions (Adams & Bettis 2003a, p. 41). By 2002, competitive cheerleading programs existed in approximately 50 countries (Roenigk 2002). By 2009, this number had reached 60 and was rising ('International Cheer Union'). Many competitive cheerleaders outside the US cannot be classified as either 'scholastic' or 'all-star' (as they are in the US), as it is rare for squads outside America to be associated with or sponsored by schools and universities. In Great Britain, for instance, most cheerleaders belong to self-funded independent groups which support community organisations and sports teams ('Cheerleading in Britain'). While US coaches have frequently travelled to other nations in a bid to improve and standardise global cheerleading (Chadwick 2008), the sport has not developed uniformly in non-American markets:

Because of their proximity to the United States, Canada and Mexico have been producing topnotch teams for years. In other countries, like Australia, the sport has grown largely because of the efforts of a few relentless boosters. In France, on the other hand, cheer is just getting started. The country sent a team, Condors St. Etienne, to the Worlds for the first time (in 2007), but the crowd cringed at its rudimentary routine (Campo-Flores 2007).

Reliable figures on the exact number of people currently involved in international cheerleading are difficult to determine due both to conflicting estimates⁶⁹ and a lack of definitional distinctions in popular and media discourse. Despite inconsistent statistics, however, there is enough objective evidence to conclude that interest in competitive cheerleading in nations other than America is rising dramatically. This is exemplified by the experiences of Great Britain and Australia. In 2008, the British Cheerleading Association (BCA) represented 405 clubs with more than 16,000 participants through the UK ('Sport spotlight: Cheerleading in schools' 2008). It claims BCA events are growing by an average of

⁶⁹ In 2007, publicity material for America's proposed World Cheerleading Hall of Fame stated that there were approximately eight million active cheerleaders worldwide and that this figure was growing by one million additional cheerleaders a year ('World Cheerleading Hall of Fame Seeks Permanent Home' 2007). In the same year, the United States All Star Federation (USASF), which hosts the Cheerleading Worlds, told the media there were 100,000 cheerleaders outside the US (Campo-Flores 2007).

26 per cent per year ('Sport spotlight: Cheerleading in schools' 2008). In Australia, Gymnastics Australia became the official governing body for cheerleading in 2000 and cheerleading was officially recognised as a sport by the Australian Sports Commission in 2002 ('About Us' 2008). Recognised competitive cheerleading teams in Australia have increased from three in 2000, to more than 200 in 2004 (Miletic 2004).

The rising popularity of competitive cheerleading in global terms is reflected in increased participation in international cheerleading events as well as in an increase in international organisational activities⁷⁰. In 2008, a new international governing entity, the not-for-profit Tennessee-based International Cheer Union (ICU), was formed to: foster competition and rule development for club teams at the international level; communicate with and support the formation of new national cheer federations; and represent cheerleading as a sport to the IOC (International Olympic Committee) ('What is the ICU?' 2008). By April 2009, 60 nations had joined the ICU, which held its first World Cup in April 2009 at Disney World in Orlando, Florida ('International Cheer Union'). This competition involved 50 competing countries and more than 100 national teams ('First Ever International Cheerleading Competition Brings World's best to Disney' 2009). While the ICU stresses that its role is complementary to that of two extant international bodies, its right to represent the sport of cheerleading to the IOC ('What is the ICU?' 2008) is exclusive; in August 2008, ICU representatives travelled to Beijing to make a formal submission to the IOC arguing that cheerleading be granted entry to the Olympics. Coaches and officials are lobbying for cheering to become a demonstration event at the 2012 Summer Games, with the hope that it will be sanctioned as a medal sport by 2016 (Oakes 2009).

Key factors explaining the increasing popularity of cheerleading outside the US include the increasing globalisation of sport, exemplified by events such as the staging of international exhibition games featuring American NFL teams and their accompanying cheerleading squads, and the increasing globalisation of sports media coverage – particularly ESPN International's 1997 decision to begin broadcasting US cheerleading competitions (Kessel

⁷⁰ When the Cheerleading Worlds first opened to foreign competitors in 2005, only three teams competed, compared to 38 foreign teams from 15 countries in 2007 (Campo-Flores 2007). This led to the creation, in 2006, of the International All Star Federation (IASF) which had connections to groups in 52 countries (Campo-Flores 2007).

2009). Many media commentators and cheerleading participants also point to the popularity of the cheerleading film *Bring It On* (2000) in attracting increasing numbers of international participants to competitive cheerleading. One British cheerleader, for instance, tells the *Observer Sports Magazine* that until she saw this film she thought cheerleading was 'just some poxy dance thing' (Kessel 2009)⁷¹. It is clear from my research, however, that American cultural reach and perceptions of American cultural imperialism have also worked *against* the uptake of cheerleading in nations outside the US. This issue is discussed at greater length in Part Four of Chapter Two which deals with cheerleading-related discourse which can be classed as anti-American.

My research indicates that one of the primary modes of international resistance to cheerleading is not to shun the activity absolutely, but to produce glocalised⁷² forms which are framed as forms of resistance and indigenous expression. Non-American cheerleading participants frequently describe their form of practice as involving the reinvention of cheerleading to fit their own cultural contexts, needs and values. Further, 'cheerleader associations overseas believe that American cheerleading has something to learn from them, particularly in the area of governance and regulations'⁷³ (Adams & Bettis 2003a, pp. 42-43). International cheerleading hybrids are particularly evident in India and China, as discussed in the case study in Chapter Two. These variations are apparent elsewhere. During the 2002 soccer World Cup, for instance, South Koreans participated in 'organised street cheering' to encourage the national team. This led to similar activities on a larger scale during the 2006 German World Cup ('Korean-style street cheering becomes globalized' 2006). In Japan, professional cheerleaders are attached to corporations which perform public relations duties for their parent company as well as cheering at athletic competitions (Adams & Bettis 2003a, p. 43). In Australia, professional and competitive cheerleading looks similar to American

⁷¹ For the influence of *Bring It On*, see also: Miletic 2004; Gold 2007; Lane 2007; and Diamond 2009.

⁷² UK sociology and communications scholar Mike Featherstone defines this term as being the way 'globalization – in the broadest sense, the compression of the world — has involved and increasingly involves the creation and the incorporation of locality, processes which themselves largely shape, in turn, the compression of the world as a whole' (1995, p. 40).

⁷³ An example of this occurred in 2002 when a high-level British cheerleading administrator chastised America for its 'free market of competing commercial cheer companies who seem unable to work together' (cited in Adams & Bettis 2003a, p. 43).

versions, but participants still claim local distinctiveness: 'In Australian cheerleading, we try not to be as ditsy as the American cheerleaders,' one Melbourne coach tells the media. 'We try to be a bit more Australian about it' (cited in Miletic 2004).

The response of American vested interests to foreign cheerleading hybrids include the concern that they threaten global cheerleading homogeneity (often conflated with global cheerleading success)⁷⁴, as well as ridicule. An example of the latter is *Newsweek's* mocking of a Chinese cheerleading team's performance at the 2006 Cheerleading World competition in America: '[T]he team performed a bizarre routine, waving Chinese flags and streamers. The judges were stupefied, and [the squad] didn't advance beyond the preliminary round' (Campo-Flores 2007). These tensions between 'cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization' (Appadurai 2001, p. 221) can be understood within the context of transnational cultural studies and theorisations about glocalisation which reveal complex and paradoxical reactions to the construction of a 'syncretic, postmodern brand of cultural identity through consumption of the global' (Ang 2002, p. 160). They show that local variations of an outside cultural form have the potential to be framed within that culture both negatively (as cultural invasion by stealth) or positively (as representing empowering 'difference hybridicity and subversion' [During 1997, p. 809]). But, as this thesis will go on to show, ambivalence, ridicule and vitriol are not unique to discourse framing glocalised version of cheerleading: they are a distinguishing characteristic of discourse framing cheerleading in total.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have shown that the two most significant historical changes to US cheerleading involve: 1) its metamorphosis from an exclusively masculine to an overwhelmingly feminine practice; and 2) its split into competitive athletic and professional dance-orientated streams. Cheerleading's original *raison d'être* was to provide 'emotional support to an athletic team during competition' and 'intensify spectator involvement'

⁷⁴ See Adams & Bettis 2003a, p. 42.

(Hanson 1995, pp. 120, 10). Both competitive and professional cheerleaders now occupy increasingly autonomous roles: competitive cheerleaders as unaligned athletes who face off at cheerleading competitions, and professional cheerleaders as stand-alone entertainers who appear independently in a range of contexts as well as on the sideline of sporting events. Changes in cheerleading's demographic and content, as well as its growth as a cultural export, have contributed to its current 'mass culture status' (Hanson 1995, p. 2), as well as to the constellation of contradictory cheerleading-related representations and meanings which proliferate in popular culture and the media.

Cheerleading's dramatic alterations over time help shed light on the cultural provocations it poses, and the reasons it is the focus for so much negative discourse. With respect to its history, cheerleading is regarded as having both changed too much (in the marginalisation of its role as a crowd motivator) and simultaneously not having changed *enough* (the charge that cheerleading is offensively outmoded is a common one, particularly in feminist discourse). Furthermore, a significant strand of cheerleading is in transition and on the verge of becoming something else: an Olympic sport or at least a sport whose predominant role is that of protagonist rather than supporting cast member. This athletic ambiguity parallels cheerleading's liminality in other arenas. As Chapter Two will explain, cheerleading confounds binaries such as those which putatively divide sport and entertainment, female empowerment and pornography, athleticism and eroticism, childlike innocence and adult knowing.

The dynamic histories outlined in this chapter are also relevant because, as this thesis will show, a substantial set of discourses present a reified image of cheerleading – one which contends that only one type of cheerleading has ever and will ever exist. A similarly rigid and questionable approach is frequently adopted in discourse which attributes meaning to cheerleading and motives to its participants. The reduction of cheerleading's many forms into a set of congealed stereotypes is both a product and producer of cheerleading's liminal status, its positioning as something that sits between sports and sex-work. After all, if historical changes and/or distinctions between different types of cheerleading practice are ignored or glossed over in cheerleading-related discourse, it is uncertain whether an author is referring to a death-defying extreme sport or a sexy dance whose distinguishing features are

the short skirt and the high kick. While caution must be exercised not to blame cheerleaders for the discourses associated with them, it seems fair to conclude that the indeterminacy of reference to which the term cheerleading corresponds may help account for the nature of the surrounding signs. In other words, the very lability of the referents make them especially amenable to projection. Thus 'cheerleading' names not just a series of athletic endeavours, but a disparate assortment of cultural anxieties and fixations.

CHAPTER TWO: FEAR AND LOATHING IN DISCOURSE

This chapter is divided into four parts and organises anti-cheerleading discourse into texts with themes relating to: feminism and gender (part one); sport (part two); class and cultural distinction (part three); and anti-Americanism (part four). The thematic intersections between these four domains are vital to one of the key tenets of this thesis: namely, that counterintuitive and/or strategic intersections in discursive practices between individuals and groups produces the collective force of anti-cheerleading rhetoric. Surveying a multitude of cheerleading-related texts from a range of different contexts also advances my case that discourse framing cheerleading proliferates in the media, and is often sexualised and/or derogatory in nature. Over the course of this chapter, I will explore the way cheerleading is predominately attacked rather than defended by feminists – thereby offering social sanction for other producers of anti-cheerleading vitriol. In this sense, the derogation of cheerleaders is likely to be a microcosm of the derogation of many other young women, particularly those who are associated with (or who are seen as being associated with) what is known as ‘raunch culture’⁷⁵. In this chapter, I will also show that cheerleading: is seen as an inappropriate way to discipline the body (in sporting or other contexts); is positioned in opposition to masculine sporting ideals; is criticised for its emphasis on commercialism, mass-production and ‘tacky’ aesthetics; and is rejected for being an exemplar of American cultural imperialism. These themes are explored in greater depth in a case study comparing cheerleading and roller derby, and in a case study investigating the popular media response to cheerleading in India and China.

A preliminary note concerning register: many of the media texts analysed in this and subsequent chapters use humour, raising the question of how seriously their criticisms of cheerleading should be taken. My case is that while genre and modality are relevant

⁷⁵ ‘Raunch culture’ is the term used by Ariel Levy in *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, her critique of the conspicuous female sexuality involved in modern popular culture (Levy 2005).

considerations⁷⁶, the comic register of most texts framing cheerleading is tightly delimited: utterances play along an axis in which cheerleaders are repeatedly sexualised and/or denigrated. As I will show, this occurs with startling inter-genre regularity, in that the anti-cheerleading 'jokes' in mainstream broadsheet newspaper editorials have striking similarities with those published, for instance, in niche web site chat rooms. Also significant is the fact that the vast bulk of cheerleading-related media texts rely on derogatory humour, to the point where, once again, the quantitative becomes qualitative. (As US-based political scholar Andrei S. Markovits puts it in relation to anti-Americanisms, 'prima facie innocuous put-downs... do cumulatively constitute a palpably negative whole' [2007, p. 6].) In this way, humour does not mitigate the fetishisation and/or denigration of cheerleaders but provides a key vehicle for these discursive moves. When considering the less serious sector of anti-cheerleading discourse, it is worth noting that the combined effect of even mild, supposedly humorous remarks may still be significant. Here I also note computer scientist and philosopher Jaron Lanier's observations that while anonymous blog comments, 'vapid video pranks, and lightweight mashups may seem trivial and harmless', as a whole, they can depersonalise and demean (2010, p. 4).

PART ONE: FEMINISM, GENDER AND SEX – 'A BARBIE WHO PUTS OUT'

Part One of this chapter will provide a survey of discourse which can be linked to second-wave feminist concerns and rhetoric. To begin, I will outline the objections many feminists have articulated with respect to sport in order to provide a context for some of the objections many feminists have to cheerleading. I will then unpack a range of texts which are critical of cheerleading as an activity as well as texts which are critical of cheerleaders more personally. While much of this discourse is not generated by producers who identify as feminist (or who could unproblematically be framed as feminist), my argument is that much of this discourse appropriates aspects of feminist rhetoric. An example is the frequent claim

⁷⁶ Given that Chapters Two and Three of this thesis analyse discourse according to textual theme rather than genre, the sources of media texts are frequently described in recognition of the role genre and linguistic modality play in reception and textual influence.

that cheerleading is sexist⁷⁷ – a claim often occurring in contexts which otherwise seem misogynistic or oppressive to women. The fact that feminist anti-cheerleading discourse shares so many similarities with discourse produced by social conservatives, sports fans and male pornography consumers, speaks to the extraordinary provocation posed by cheerleading, as well as to the mainstreaming and influence of feminism. Cheerleading also exposes the feminist schism on sex, suggesting there may be aspects of feminist discourse which are limiting rather than liberatory for women.

Modern sports arose in Britain during the Victorian period and involved the biologically deterministic characterisation of men as 'naturally aggressive, competitive and incisive' in contrast to women who were 'inherently emotional, co-operative and passive and therefore unsuited to take part in strenuous physical activities and competitive sports' (Hargreaves 1994, p. 43). Biological determinism persists as a key feature of contemporary arguments about women's participation in sports, with many scholars arguing that, despite recent gains by women, this historically masculine institution remains dominated by men⁷⁸. Sports academic Jeffrey O. Segrave links the subordination of women in sporting contexts to the language of sports which rely on metaphorical conventions of violence, sex, and the machine (1994; 1997). Australian sports media theorist David Rowe also notes a media climate where mostly male sports are covered by mostly male reporters (1999, p. 86). Rowe points to an interplay of commodity logic and cultural politics in which the media sports complex has realised it is 'economically and otherwise senseless' to continue alienating the female market sector (ibid, p. 87). His case, however, is that this pitch for consumers has not resulted in equal media coverage for professional sportswomen but rather a 'strategic spectacularization and sexualisation' (1995, p. 151).

Many commentators regard the sexualisation of female athletes as contrary to the ideals of feminism and a setback to 'the cause of women's rights' (Hinds 2010). US feminist writer and former professional basketball player Mariah Burton Nelson links this to a patriarchal strategy that redefined female athleticism as sexy, romantic, and for male pleasure because

⁷⁷ See: Marblehead; Pumilia 2007; Minor, D commenting on Pumilia 2007; Tami commenting on Pumilia 2007; Sirigina 2009; and Musolino 2009.

⁷⁸ Cf.: Hargreaves 1994; Birrell & Cole 1994; Cahn 1994; Rowe 1999; Hargreaves 2000; Messner 2002; Grindstaff & West 2006; and O'Reilly & Cahn 2007.

men sensed sports were 'greasing the wheels of liberation' (1998 p. x). Jennifer Hargreaves, a sociological authority on women's sports, argues that sports photography has become a significant sector of the mass market in pornography, with such representations offering the 'provocative sexual message: that "real" sports are for men, and women are there to provide excitement and arousal' (1994, p. 167).

Related to these issues is what has been theorised as 'apologetic' behaviour – a term referring to adaptive, media-genic strategies which may include self-sexualisation and which may be utilised by female athletes wishing to infiltrate the male-dominated realm of sports. First used by Jan Felshin (1974) in the early 1970s, the concept describes the perception that some sportswomen adopt an emphasised femininity⁷⁹ to compensate or 'apologise' for engaging in activity associated with masculinity. Scholars maintain that apologetic behaviour remains prevalent in the 21st century in a number of forms such as: participating in 'feminine' sports; emphasising the superiority of male athletes; wearing 'sexy' clothing; moving in feminine ways; and excluding players who do not fit feminine beauty ideals (Davis-Delano et al 2009, pp. 144, 132). 'Beautiful sports' such as figure skating, gymnastics and cheerleading are seen as exemplars of sporting apologetics and attract recurrent criticism and mocking from many quarters. The censure of such sports can be viewed in the context of second-wave feminists such as American historian Susan K. Cahn who argues that when women's sport 'is limited to aesthetically pleasing "feminine" activities, it perpetuates the deceptive emphasis on femininity as beauty, masking its ties to female subordination' (1994, p. 224).

As with broader debates relating to whether emancipation lies in equality or difference⁸⁰, feminists disagree on what constitutes a liberatory sports practice for women. There is broad consensus that sports is an arena where gender meanings can be resisted and transformed⁸¹, but there is much disagreement over which sports and types of sporting participation are transgressive and which are not. For some commentators, separatism is key: a sporting

⁷⁹ 'Emphasised femininity' is the term R. W. Connell uses in *Gender and Power* (1987). He argues that there is a 'fit' between emphasised femininity and hegemonic masculinity in that the subordinated former is orientated to accommodating the interests and desires of the dominant latter (ibid, p. 185, 183).

⁸⁰ See: Buikema & Smelik 1995; and Lumby 1997a, p. 168-171.

⁸¹ Hargreaves, for instance, notes that gender relations in sports are part of 'a constant process of negotiation, struggle and change' (1993, p. 208).

endeavour is not regarded as empowering for women if men are involved as participants or visual beneficiaries. While the most obvious visual beneficiaries are seen as male spectators at women's sports events, feminist objections are also raised to the scopophilic appreciation of female bodies that have achieved 'ideal' aesthetics as a result of athletic participation (Hargreaves 1994, pp. 160-2). Additional concerns relate to aesthetics, gender-norms and commercialisation. Nelson applauds those female athletes who 'do not worry if their hair looks attractive' and who 'do not smile and wave' (1998, p. x). Hargreaves, meanwhile, writes of commercial aerobics classes as 'settings for female narcissism and competition', arguing that 'fashionableness, sexiness, self-consciousness, youthfulness and fighting fitness have combined to produce a distinct image of commercialized and aggressive femininity' (1994, p. 247).

There is simultaneously a subjectivism that stalks many feminist arguments about which sports are empowering and which are not. It is reminiscent of the adage – originally used by an American judge in relation to pornography⁸² – that while one may struggle to define a liberatory female sporting practice, one knows it when one sees it. The subjectivism inherent in these sort of gut-instinct taxonomies, however, results in tensions, inconsistencies and ironies. Hargreaves writes approvingly of women who are 'constructing and controlling their own authentic female sports cultures' (1993, pp. 242-3), begging the question of the meaning of authenticity and the ideological agendas of those who define it. Her take on female sporting authenticity privileges all-women sports groups such as the 'women-friendly' community program Running Sisters, which creates a 'network of runners *for themselves*' (1993, p. 244, emphasis in original). But is it really possible to distinguish between those activities done solely for oneself and those done for others? And how 'women-friendly' is the implication that women's sports with male or commercial connections are inferior to other, more 'progressive' kinds? As I will go on to illustrate via an analysis of feminist-related

⁸² In 1964, the US Supreme Court was asked to determine whether the French film *The Lovers* was obscene. Of hard-core pornography, one of the judges hearing the case said: 'I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that' (U.S. Supreme Court).

discourse framing cheerleading, such judgment and prescriptiveness may unwittingly reproduce what it ostensibly aims to oppose.

Much discourse framing cheerleading as sexist centres on the emphasised femininity and apologeticism⁸³ associated with the activity, notably its supportive function, theatrical enthusiasm, and sexual appeal. Grindstaff and West attest that 'apologia' is built into the activity itself: 'in the grace and flexibility of [cheerleaders'] athleticism, and in the premium placed on adornment and (hetero)sexual display' (2006, p. 515). This, writes Moritz, is the crux of the problem women's sports advocates have with cheerleading, in that it is seen as a 'stereotypical feminine activity with an emphasis on "femininity" and not on athleticism' (2006, p. 8). Her case is that the contemporary feminist rejection of cheerleading can be viewed as being part of a broader, second-wave repudiation of third-wave sensibilities such as 'girliness'. Third-wave writers such as Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, for instance, note that much second-wave rhetoric assumes that empowerment requires rejecting femininity and mastering 'boy things':

Go to work, play sports, be tough, but don't do it while wearing nail polish, pink uniforms or crying... Second-wave feminists fought so hard for all women not to be reduced to a 'girl' – they didn't lay claim to the good in being a girl (2004, pp. 59-60, emphasis in original).

It is noteworthy that cheerleading's reinvention in the 1970s confounds classic apologetic formations in that a highly feminised activity was recast with highly athletic dimensions – partly in response to second-wave feminist activism and theorising (Adams & Bettis 2003b, p. 77). My research also suggests a kind of reverse apologeticism in discourse which emphasises the engagement of cheerleaders or former cheerleaders in non-cheerleading activities which are framed as redeeming (or at least confounding) their cheerleading. Examples include stories about former or current cheerleaders who have joined the army (Reid 2009) or taken up activities such as basketball (Lopez 2009), body building (Covert 2009), bass fishing (Barber 2009), deer hunting (Jensen 2009), and midget car racing (Haddock 2009). While some feminist writers acknowledge the increasing athleticism of

⁸³ Cf: Adams & Bettis 2003b; Moritz 2006; and Ezzell 2011, p. 213.

competitive cheerleading, much discourse still frames competitive cheerleading as unacceptable on ideological grounds. Nelson, for instance, argues that coed stunt squads are 'simply reinforcing gender stereotypes' because: 'It's the men who lift the women and throw them around as if they are purely decorative objects' (cited in Pratt 2002). It seems that, in the eyes of many feminists, cheerleading is inherently unacceptable, whatever its particular form⁸⁴.

In popular feminist domains⁸⁵ there is near universal agreement that cheerleading is objectionable and incompatible with and/or dangerous to feminist ideals⁸⁶. This view is rarely presented as anything other than commonsensical fact. A comment on the Happy Feminist web site calls cheerleading 'a contrived, fetishistic [exercise] in applied patriarchy' (will commenting on 'Two Sides of the Same Old Coin' 2009)⁸⁷, while an American feminist PhD student writing on the Girl Revolution web site says she is unable to stop crying after seeing cheerleaders at the halftime of a football game:

It seemed clear to me that for many of those cheerleaders, this moment might be the pinnacle of their youth. I looked on the field and saw a bleak future of young women battling disordered eating, struggling to form an identity that wasn't centered on their sexuality, growing up in an environment that encouraged them to be pleasers – of others – rather than themselves (Dublin 2009).

⁸⁴ This echoes Moritz's suggestion that historically, the athletic female has been in a 'no-win situation' because her identity as a woman was marginalised if she played a traditional 'male' sport (because this made her freakish, mannish and less than a real woman) and also if she played a traditional 'female' sport (because participating in a 'beautiful' sport did not require the same valued athletic ability as masculine sports) (2006, pp. 88-89).

⁸⁵ My use of the term 'popular feminist domains' refers to discourse outside of academic contexts involving producers who identify as feminists or who are speaking within a context explicitly identified as feminist. This varies from Australian media studies scholar Megan Le Masurier who defines popular feminism as a 'feminist femininity' which packages politics with pleasure and does not require participants to "'sign up" as activists, or to take the adjective of feminist as a descriptor of their identities' (2009, p. 108).

⁸⁶ One of the rare exceptions to framings of cheerleading as incompatible with feminism is from Lauren Curatolo, the president of Feminist Action at Middlebury, who says she is asked how it is possible for her to be a cheerleader and a feminist 'too often for it to be funny anymore' (2005).

⁸⁷ For similar discourse, see: cheryl commenting on Fisher 2008.

Outside feminist domains, cheerleading is frequently framed as inherently or intrinsically sexist. One senior sports reporter describes it as a 'sexist cult' and says it has 'deep origins in sexist objectives' (Sirigina 2009). Other writers refer to cheerleaders as 'rah-rahing female eunuchs' (Wells 2006), and suggest cheerleading 'endangers the equal rights of women' (Marblehead).

A common framing in discourse is that cheerleading is an anachronism harking back to an era of female repression and non-participation in sports. Blogger Maddy Pumilia describes it as 'medieval' (2007), while one of her readers says 'the concept should have gone the way of the dinosaur' (AJ commenting on Pumilia 2007). The *Guardian* in the UK claims that: 'Like the soda fountain and the letter sweater, as an icon the cheerleader is well past her sell-by date' (Wells 2006)⁸⁸. Frequently framed as a 'substitute sport' which has evolved because of 'a dearth of athletic activities for women' (Overdorf 2008), cheerleading is often placed in opposition to sports participation. An American sports reporter says her daughters 'play rather than cheer', claiming that 'the decline of sideline cheer indicates progress, that girls can be the team, not just spectators' (Flemming cited in Lloyd 2009). Another critic describes cheerleading's 'basic flawed premise' as 'boys do and girls cheer and fawn' (JeremyinOz commenting on Tharoor 2010). Other discourse frames cheerleaders as exploited victims in need of rescuing or protection because they are economically, institutionally, sexually or otherwise exploited⁸⁹.

Cheerleading is frequently dismissed as unacceptable because it is framed as an auxiliary, sideline activity which supports not only male athletes and male sports models but oppressive gender norms overall. *Teen Ink* magazine, for example, says cheerleading 'sends subliminal message that girls should play second fiddle to boys and be appreciated only for

⁸⁸ Other framings of cheerleading as anachronistic include: Coakley cited in Hanson 1995 p. 121; Wells 2006; Minor, D commenting on Pumilia 2007; Flemming cited in Lloyd 2009; Sirigina 2009; Musolino 2009; Me...Again' 2009; and Mulkey cited in Thomas 2010.

⁸⁹ See: Scholz et al 1991, pp. 190-1; Hanson 1995, p. 59; Ciren 2007; Polutele 2007; Cantor 2008; 'The NF's Most Babelicious Cheerleaders' 2009; 'East Texan's vision created phenomenon known as the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders' 2009; Courtney 2009; and 'The NFL's Most Babelicious Cheerleaders' 2009.

their appearance' (Marblehead)⁹⁰. In the academic domain, Grindstaff and West write that 'the sideline paradigm suggests that cheerleading is central to doing gender in ways that conflate femininity with emotional supportiveness':

Insofar as the role of cheerleaders is to express through ritualized performance support for other athletes, they are doing the same kind of 'emotion work' in the context of organized sport that middle class women have traditionally done in the interpersonal context of heterosexual marriage (2006, p. 507).

Relevant to this observation is the fact that one of the 'traditional' activities of female cheerleaders was to bake cakes and biscuits for players, and decorate the lockers of male athletes on game day⁹¹. I also note here that the emotional dimensions of cheerleading are framed as objectionable by many commentators. Cheerleaders are described as: too optimistic (Cantor 2008, p. 56); too aggressive (Rosenfield 2009); too excited ('Cheerleading – it's not just pompoms and squealing girls' 2009); and too inclined towards screaming and/or squealing⁹². A writer for the *Guardian* ridicules 'bright-as-a-button' cheerleaders for 'perma-grinning' (Wells 2006), while the *Daily Mail* criticises pre-teen cheerleaders for 'screaming, clutching each other and weeping' and bursting into 'synchronised blubbing' (Gold 2009). Cheerleading emotion is framed as not only unacceptably excessive, but objectionably inauthentic. The *Australian* newspaper describes fake smiles as cheerleading's 'golden rule' (Pratt 2002)⁹³, while Hanson notes that cheerleaders have come to symbolise 'mindless enthusiasm' and 'shallow boosterism' (1995, p. 2). As such, the word 'cheerleader' has been appropriated in non-sporting contexts to describe a 'noisy, but impotent, bystander, a flak, or hired hand mouthpiece' (Hanson 1995, p. 103). As Hanson puts it:

⁹⁰ For other complaints about the support function of cheerleading, see: Pumilia 2007; and Anna commenting on Pumilia 2007.

⁹¹ See: Moritz 2006, p. 48; Liepa 2009; and Mylo 2009.

⁹² For other criticisms of the emotional elements of cheerleading see: Tartt 1994; Lowell cited in Adams & Bettis 2003a, p.13; Gold 2007; and Rosenfield 2009.

⁹³ See also: Tartt 1994; and Gold 2007.

This image is often used in cartoons and editorials to satirize male political figures. Because cheerleading is considered to be a feminine role, this variation is doubly insulting when applied to males (ibid, pp. 103-4).

In addition to being overly supportive of male sports, cheerleaders are also framed as being inadequately supportive of women's sports. Of the unwelcome duty of having to cheer at a women's basketball game, Torgovnick notes that the cheerleaders 'step-touch mechanically to the music, shaking their pom-poms with less enthusiasm than normal' (2008a, p. 204). Cheerleaders are also framed in media stories as objecting to a 2007 ruling from US federal education officials requiring that cheerleaders in the Binghamton area support girls' as well as boys' high school basketball teams⁹⁴.

One of the largest sub-sections of feminism-related anti-cheerleading discourse involves criticisms relating to what is framed as the hyper-sexiness (and therefore ideologically abhorrent nature) of cheerleaders' uniforms and aesthetics. *Teen Ink* magazine claims the traditional cheerleading outfit 'is designed to promote sexism' (Marblehead), while, in other discourse, there is much agitation about the shortness of cheerleading skirts, the exposure of cheerleaders' bared midriffs, the tightness of cheerleading sweaters and the frivolous or ridiculous nature of cheerleading pom poms⁹⁵. 'Skimpy' and 'scantily clad' are extremely common descriptors⁹⁶. Many comments about cheerleaders' uniforms often combine derogation and prurience. The feminist *Girl Revolution* web site refers to cheerleaders 'flitting' about in their 'short skirts and tight sweaters' (Dublin 2009), while the sports *Bleacher Report* site compares cheerleader outfits to those worn by waitresses at the Hooters restaurant chain (McD 2009a)⁹⁷. Cheerleaders are accused of dressing 'like hookers' (Augustin commenting on 'Seeding the NBA Playoffs by What Really Counts: Cheerleaders' 2009), and for looking 'skanky' (cited in Moritz 2006, p. 69) and 'indecent' ('Cheerleaders "covered" after threat' 2008). In literature, Margaret Atwood's feminist novel *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a futuristic

⁹⁴ See: Hu 2007; and Delaney 2008.

⁹⁵ See: Marblehead; Wells 2006; Ono & Monji 2009; and Bubin 2009.

⁹⁶ See: Polutele 2007; 'Cheergirl ban splits the sexes' 2007; Blakely 2008; Musolino 2009; HandandShrimp commenting on Tharoor 2010; and Cattanaach 2010.

⁹⁷ This American restaurant chain is known for waitresses wearing tight clothing and notes that its 'essence' is 'entertainment through female sex appeal, of which the LOOK is a key part' ('So You Wanna Be A "Hooters" Girl?' 2005, emphasis in original).

dystopia in which a brothel run by the patriarchal regime has sex workers wearing cheerleader outfits – ‘little pleated skirts, outsized letters across the chests’ – alongside the ‘feathers and glister’ (1996, pp. 246-247). The condemnation of cheerleaders’ uniforms in feminist discourse has ironic aspects given that dress reform permitting ‘the sensuous joy of movement’ was a primary issue facing women wishing to participate in sports in the Victorian era (Hargreaves 1994, p. 92)⁹⁸. In this case, the sensuous joy of movement permitted by cheerleading’s minimal and snugly-fitting uniforms is not regarded as emancipatory but oppressive and offensive by feminists.

Counter-discourse from cheerleaders claims that cheerleading uniforms serve two purposes: freedom of movement and, for want of a less clunky (yet still gender-neutral) expression, *showpersonship*⁹⁹. Others claim it is hypocritical to criticise cheerleaders given the similarly ‘revealing’ nature of other sporting attire such as that connected with ballet, volleyball, tennis, field hockey, ballet, gymnastics, and men’s swimming and pro-wrestling¹⁰⁰. Some cheerleaders make uniform-related distinctions, claiming their particular attire is more modest or tasteful than the maligned, hyper-sexy cheerleading look. One competitive cheerleading coach explains that her charges ‘don’t do knee-high boots and bare tummies... or use glitter’ (Holmes cited in Sheedy 2008), while another says her cheerleaders reject glitter as well as curly ponytails and flashy dance moves (Sundermann cited in Weaver 2009). An American cheerleading captain states that a ‘classy’ school has ‘nice’ cheerleading uniforms’ (Megan commenting on Pumilia 2010).

⁹⁸ Hargreaves also notes that the clothes and uniforms worn by sportswomen have long been sites of resistance, oppression, scandal and moral approbation (1994), with dress reform, suffrage and liberty the most common demands of early British and American feminism (ibid, p. 92).

⁹⁹ For references to cheerleading and ‘showmanship’ see: Roenigk cited in Pratt 2002; and Moritz 2006, p. 70.

¹⁰⁰ See: Moritz 2006, p. 70; Anonymous[a] commenting on Vengeance 2006; Staci commenting on ‘Cheerleading: Limiting or Empowering?’ 2009; Anonymous[b] commenting on ‘Cheerleading: Limiting or Empowering?’ 2009; Anonymous [c] commenting on ‘Cheerleading: Limiting or Empowering?’ 2009; and Millster commenting on Musolino 2009. Moritz also makes a point of male athletic adornments such as ‘the fingernail polish of pro basketball player Dennis Rodman’, ‘the pervasiveness of tattoos’ and ‘the overuse of “eye black” under the eyes of baseball and football players’ (2006, p. 76).

Grindstaff and West's research suggests that while cheerleaders are well aware of their trivialisation, they attribute this not to their short skirts and makeup, but to an 'over-valuation of these elements when assessing the "worth" of cheerleading' (2006, p. 510). 'All sports have kinky outfits,' one cheerleader reports, 'why pick on cheerleading?' (cited *ibid*, pp. 509-10). Grindstaff and West's observation is that many of the cheerleaders they interview enjoy the 'girly' aspects of cheerleading and have 'little interest in trading their short skirts, hair ribbons, and makeup for more gender neutral attire' (2006, p. 509). On the subject of gender neutral sporting attire, it is revealing that uniforms emphasising 'femininity' (such as those worn by cheerleaders) are regarded as singularly problematic, whereas those emphasising masculinity (such as those worn by American gridiron football players¹⁰¹) are not.

Media texts frequently claim that the sexiness and/or skimpiness of cheerleading uniforms are associated with eating disorders in those who wear them, as well as in those girls and women who view them. There are also claims that cheerleaders abuse diet pills, laxatives, diuretics and cocaine for weight-loss purposes¹⁰². As with so much discourse framing cheerleading, similar themes appear in very different discursive contexts. An Australian counsellor who runs an association for sufferers of eating disorders, tells the *Advertiser* newspaper that: 'Scantily-dressed cheerleaders do contribute to some girls developing anorexia' (Spencer cited in Davies 2006)¹⁰³. A commentator on the *Deadspin* sports web site offers a similar remark – albeit in a baser form – when they say: 'I thought the basic point of cheerleaders was to taunt girls unworthy of being cheerleaders until they develop anorexia' (Canada, K commenting on Chandler 2008a). A blatantly self-interested take on the issue of

¹⁰¹ Here I note Guttman's point that: 'In... sports strongly associated with masculinity, uniforms and equipment are used to enhance the erotic effect (as clothes and cosmetics have been used, conventionally, to heighten a woman's sexual allure. In American football, for instance, the visual emphasis on masculinity approaches parody' (1996, p. 72).

¹⁰² See: Scholz et al 1991, pp. 154, 157-8, 160; Hanson 1994, p. 69; and Torgovnick 2008a, p. xxiii. Other health-related discourse describes cheerleaders' reliance on tanning (Torgovnick 2008a, p. 303) and male cheerleaders' abuse of steroids. Torgovnick, for instance, asks male cheerleaders to estimate the percentage of their peers who take performance enhancer or steroids to fuel their heavy lifting, with the guesses ranging from 50 to 90 per cent (*ibid*, p. xxiv).

¹⁰³ See also: Dublin 2009; 'Cheerleading: Limiting or Empowering?' 2009; and 'And the TOADY goes to...' 2009.

cheerleaders and eating disorders can be found in a reader's comment on the web site for the *Daily Iowan* which reads: 'I love cheerleaders - they encourage women to be skinny, and good christ do we need some more skinny chics [sic] around here' (Guest replies commenting on Hanson 2009).

Torgovnick's view is that the pressure on cheerleaders to stay thin is partly attributable to the fact that 'their bodies are constantly on display for public critique', and partly because 'cheerleading is a sport where human beings lift others in the air, which means there is intense pressure on flyers to stay light and tossable' (2006, p. xxi). The latter is echoed in the film *Bring It On*, in which an obstreperous choreographer orders his squad to either halve their food intake or stop eating altogether because, 'fat people don't go as high' (2000). Hanson, meanwhile, notes that weight restrictions for some professional cheerleaders are outlined in written rules, and enforced with 'weekly weigh-ins and public reprimands': 'Redskinettes were allowed a three-pound fluctuation for menstrual bloating over their individually assigned weights, but were benched after two warnings if they exceeded that limit' (1995, p. 69). While a number of academic studies have investigated the connections between cheerleading and eating disorders¹⁰⁴, most claims relating the two are speculative and unsourced. An example is Torgovnick's statement that: 'In the general population 5 percent of women are currently suffering from an eating disorder, but the rate is unquestionably higher for cheerleaders' (2008a, p. xxiii). A common cheerleader counter-claim to such discourse is that competitive all-girl squads actually require a range of body sizes because girls must lift and throw each other.

Feminism-related criticisms of the perceived hyper-sexiness of cheerleading extend beyond cheerleading aesthetics, to cheerleading practice and the behaviour (both on and off field) of cheerleading participants. One internet poster suggests, for instance, that cheerleaders 'flash[ing] their knickers at saddo blokes' has turned IPL cricket into 'the equivalent of some shite stag night' (bettybugbear commenting on Tharoor 2010). A context for critiques of cheerleaders as being too sexy can be found in the history of women's sports participation

¹⁰⁴ A 2010 University of South Carolina study suggests a higher risk of eating disorders among college cheerleaders, particular those required to wear uniforms that bare the midriff ('Belly-Baring Cheerleaders at Raised Risk of Eating Disorders' 2010). See also: Lundholm and Littrell cited in Hanson 1995, p. 41.

and the history of feminism (particularly with regards to feminist divisions over women's sexualisation and sexual expression). In the early 20th century, sporting activities 'sought to desensualize sportswomen and it was not infrequently argued that sports should be used to reduce sexual desire' (Hargreaves 1994, p. 94). Such views were consistent with the 'high moral rhetoric' and 'social purity agenda' of the early women's movement in nations such as Australia (Lumby 1997, p. 34). Feminist arguments about sex and sexualised representations were a hallmark of second-wave theory and activism, and have peaked again in relation to the 'pornification' debate discussed in the Introduction to this thesis. A continuing feature of public feminist debate is, as Lumby puts it, the effacing of 'complex questions about the relationship between sexuality and sexism' whereby 'sex is used as a shorthand for sexist' (pp. 15-16). An additional complication when considering this conflating of 'sex' and 'sexist' in relation to cheerleading, is that (as Chapter Three of this thesis will show) many of the sexual connotations of cheerleading are not intrinsic to the activity or to the participants, but are the result of hyper-fetishised constructions.

Perceptions about the sexually charged nature of cheerleading and its participants can be linked to the common requirement that cheerleaders not 'fraternise' with male members of football teams (Hanson 1995, p. 70). Australia's *Sunday Magazine* suggests that such rules are because cheerleaders and sex are 'inextricably linked', with becoming a cheerleader perceived as 'just another step on the rocky path to becoming a footballer's wife' (Polutele 2007). An Australian squad manager says rules banning cheerleaders from dating football players is for 'their own protection' (Harrison cited in Polutele 2007), adding that: 'If fans go to the club and see the cheer squad hanging out with the players, it doesn't create a nice impression' (ibid). There are many cases of cheerleaders being disciplined or sacked for breaking the fraternisation rule. In 1985, the Houston Oilers dismissed three Derrick Dolls for fraternisation when they inadvertently attended a party where some players were present (Hanson 1995, pp. 70-1). Further, in 2006, three members of Australia's Wests Tigers Kittens cheersquad were sacked for attending a player's 21st birthday even though they had received invitations (Toohey 2006a).

Related to the issue of cheerleading's alleged hyper-sexuality is the significant sub-section of discourse framing cheerleading as posing a threat to children. This can be best understood in

relation to broader concerns about the perceived sexualisation of children in contemporary popular culture. In the second of two editorials against cheerleading on *Girl Revolution*, Dublin criticises the ‘highly sexualized dance routines done by very young girls’, saying they are not appropriate for the performers or their audience, as they involve moves she ‘would be embarrassed to do in public – as an adult woman’ (‘Cheerleading: Limiting or Empowering?’ 2009). Of a British cheerleading convention, the *Daily Mail* criticises the make-up, big hair and man-pleasing submissiveness of the young participants, saying they look like Bratz dolls and ‘sexed-up’ Brownies (Gold 2009). The *Guardian* compares cheerleading to child beauty pageants – ‘dog shows for paedophiles’ – noting the way ‘the erotic dancers known as cheerleaders get little girls down on the field to teach them how to hip thrust like a pro’ (Wells 2008). Elsewhere, cheerleading is described as ‘a free stripshow for kids too young to go to strip clubs’ (brandon commenting on Pumilia 2007) and cheerleaders are dismissed as ‘contortionist Lolitas in tiny skirts’ (Overdorf 2008).

Cheerleading-related products are also framed in discourse as being dangerous to children. The Bratz Halloween cheerleader costume for girls under seven, for example, is described by one US television network as being too ‘risque’ and part of a trend in which young girls’ dress-up outfits are becoming ‘sexier and sexier’ (‘Girls’ Halloween Costumes Getting Sexy’ 2008). In 2009, the American Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC) awarded its inaugural TOADY (Toys Oppressive And Destructive to Young Children) Award for the worst toy of the year to Mattel’s Barbie Dallas Cowboy Cheerleader doll (‘And the TOADY goes to...’ 2009). When announcing this anti-award, CCFC director Susan Linn said no-one who cared about children’s wellbeing could produce a toy such as the Barbie Dallas Cowboy Cheerleader doll (cited *ibid*). Another CCFC spokeswoman claimed Mattel was contributing to the sexualisation of young children by teaching girls ‘to play at being sexy before they’re even capable of understanding what sexy means’ (Levin cited *ibid*). On the subject of cheerleading and Barbie, I note that there are, indeed, many parallels between the feminist critiques of cheerleaders and those of Barbie. (For example, one American feminist student researcher calls her Masters thesis on cheerleaders, ‘A Barbie who puts out’ [Beben 2002].)

The ostensible sexiness of cheerleading and the danger this poses to supposedly vulnerable groups such as girls is a sphere where feminist and social conservative rhetoric often

intersect. Particularly common are texts with a 'don't let your daughters grow up to be cheerleaders' theme. An American Presbyterian pastor writes that it's beyond him how any 'Christian father can allow his daughter to be a cheerleader', warning mothers against allowing their daughters to put their bodies 'on display to lechers' (Bayly 2009). This has striking similarities with a feminist blogger who rejects her daughter's wish to be a cheerleader, writing that she does not want her child to be part of a legion of women 'whose main attributes to most men are their ability to jiggle' (Fisher 2008). There is also this, from a participant in the *Girl Revolution* cheerleading debate:

My husband went to a college bowl reception in which the high school cheerleaders were provided as 'the entertainment.' They did their provocative dance in their tush showing skirts and then posed with all the college players like they were Hugh Hefner and his Harem. He came home he said, 'Ainsley is never, ever being a cheerleader' (Tracee commenting on 'Cheerleading: Limiting or Empowering?' 2009)¹⁰⁵.

Feminist and social conservative rhetoric also intersects on the subject of cheerleading's alleged affront to 'family values' and/or lack of 'family friendliness'. Feminist-styled blogger Maddy Pumilia condemns cheerleading as 'sexist', 'degrading' and as involving outfits that 'aren't exactly family-friendly' (2007), while a recipient of the first Women in League achievement award in Australia describes cheerleaders as 'just something for men with their mouths open' rather than 'family entertainment' (O'Neill cited in Pakula 2008)¹⁰⁶. This is similar to discourse generated by social conservatives such as that which circulated in India after the introduction of cheerleaders to cricket. High-profile commentators and politicians

¹⁰⁵ For other discourse which frames cheerleading as dangerous to daughters, see: Adams & Bettis 2003a, p. viii; Fitzsimons 2007; Tami commenting on Pumilia 2007; 'Girls' Halloween Costumes Getting Sexy' 2008; DP Mom commenting on Fisher 2008; Gus commenting on Fisher; Cheryl commenting on Fisher; Hughes 2009; Flemming cited in Lloyd 2009; Dublin 2009; Omie commenting on Dublin 2009; Ellen G commenting on 'Cheerleading: Limiting or Empowering?' 2009; Tracee commenting on 'Cheerleading: Limiting or Empowering?' 2009; Augustin commenting on Musolino 2009; Ono & Monji 2009; McMillan, M commenting on Bayly 2009; The Happy Feminist commenting on 'Two Sides of the Same Old Coin' 2009; 'Nice outfit' 2009; and JeremyInOz commenting on Tharoor 2010.

¹⁰⁶ For other discourse claiming that cheerleading is not 'family-friendly' or similar, see: Musolino 2009; and Gibson & Maley 2007.

in this nation describe cheerleading: as being 'indecent' ('Cheerleaders "covered" after threat' 2008) and 'absolutely obscene' (Mehetre cited in 'India warns cricket cheerleaders' 2008); as threatening 'moral degradation and depravity' (Sharma 2008); and as being 'ten times more vulgar than what used to happen in dance bars of Mumbai' (Gadkari cited in Scrutoon 2008). In the US in 2005, meanwhile, Texan Democrat Al Edwards proposed a bill to ban 'sexually suggestive' cheerleading ('Texas Lawmaker Wants End to "Sexy Cheerleading"' 2005), claiming cheerleading led to teen pregnancies, school drop-out and the spread of STDs: 'We are telling teenagers not to have sex, but are teaching them how to do it on the football field' (cited in Wells 2006)¹⁰⁷. Direct, punitive action has also been taken against cheerleaders in this respect. In Canada, members of a sideline squad who had 'shocked' fans by wearing 'only bootie shorts and strategically placed tape and paint' were required to write apologies as part of being 'taught how to portray a better, more wholesome image' ('Near-naked B.C. cheerleaders told to cover up' 2008).

The discursive intersections between feminists and social conservatives on cheerleading shares many similarities with the intersections of these groups on the subject of censorship and pornography. Here I point to Lumby's case that some feminist theorists and activists want to 'preserve women's bodies from profanation', relying on language often used by social conservatives – language such as 'disrespect', 'degradation' and the 'demeaning' of women's bodies (1997, p. 19). Lumby expresses concern that:

secular liberal feminist arguments now often share a narrowly normative and limiting idea of what it means to be female with traditional Christian moralists. The tragedy is that feminism is becoming complicit with an ideology that wants to deny women the right to control their own bodies (ibid, pp. 17-18)

The conflicted position of social conservatives on the subject of cheerleading is revealed in minority discourse applauding what the *Guardian* calls the '1950s gender stereotypes' of men playing football while 'girls stand on the sidelines, cheer and look pretty' (Wells 2006). In a comment on a religious blog, a reader says that while he dislikes the 'slutty, half-naked

¹⁰⁷ For further coverage of Edwards' campaigns against cheerleading see: Mack & Turner 2005; Reid 2008; and London 2009.

cheerleaders', at least '[s]omething actually remains as it should be', in that 'the men are on the field doing battle' and 'the women are cheering them on' rather than 'trying to be men' (McMillan, M commenting on Bayly 2009).

Related to the topic of discursive intersections is the appropriation of feminist rhetoric by groups wishing to both censure and censor cheerleaders. It is significant to note that many institutional changes made to cheerleading have been couched in the language of female empowerment. In many nations, cheerleaders have had their uniforms, dance moves and music modified because of claims these measures would reduce sexualisation and/or the risk of eating disorders¹⁰⁸. In Australia in 2007, the actor Russell Crowe presented the axing of the cheerleading squad attached to the NRL team he owns (the South Sydney Rabbitohs) as 'progressive' (Ritchie & Charnock 2007) because cheerleaders made 'women feel uncomfortable' (Ham 2007). Sports fans reacting negatively to the move frequently framed their responses in gendered terms. Commentators accused Crowe of bowing to pressure from his wife (Ham 2007) and of being a 'politically correct crybaby' who might also require his players not to use expletives, fart, or date women (Gunsmith 2007).

In other instances, feminist-style rhetoric is used aggressively against cheerleaders. In 2008 in Australia, a text message media campaign against cheerleading accused participants of being 'anorexic blonde bimbos' ('Cheergirls under fire' 2008). While this echoes feminist claims about the 'tyranny of slenderness' (Chernin 1983) and the feminist dimensions of body image¹⁰⁹, the accusation is vitriolic and misogynistic. Claims that cheerleading is sexist are also often presented in discourse which *itself* seems sexist. One sports blogger complains about the sexual objectification of cheerleaders, saying women should be 'respected for their unique gifts, their beauty, and their talents' (Augustin 2009). He then condemns cheerleaders for looking and acting like 'hookers' (ibid). The appropriation of feminist rhetoric and use of it against groups such as cheerleaders raises the possibility that the everyday 'poaching'

¹⁰⁸ See also: Clevenger cited in Beckerman 2000; Ward cited in Beckerman 2000; 'Dressing down for cheerleader outfit' 2002; Amos cited in 'Taking big steps for sideline star roles' 2004; Lashley 2006; Davies & Hoyle 2006; Davies 2006; 'Indian cricket in cheerleader cover-up' 2008; 'Near-naked B.C. cheerleaders told to cover up' 2008; Cherner & Weir 2008; Edwards 2008; and Mylo 2009.

¹⁰⁹ See also: Orbach 1978; and Wolf 1990.

practices postulated by Michel de Certeau (1984) may have oppressive as well as emancipatory ramifications. Additionally, there are aspects of feminist rhetoric which seem to lend themselves to re-use (and arguably abuse) in such contexts. Lumby, for instance, notes 'the ease with which feminist rhetoric is often grafted onto traditional conservative concerns', pointing to the tendency for some older feminists to use unhelpful universalising rhetoric in their insistence they know what is best for younger women (1997, p. 16).

Another common feminist claim – usually presented as commonsensical matter-of-fact – is that cheerleading objectifies women solely for the benefit of men. An example is an American Masters student who begins her dissertation with the unquestioned statement that the 'focus on the physical appearance of cheerleaders leads to their objectification, a belief in their overt sexuality, and the encouragement of heterosexual male voyeurism' (Beben 2002, p. 5). An Australian national newspaper also claims, in a feature on cheerleading, that 'there's no doubt that they are viewed by most players and fans as mere sex objects' (Pratt 2002)¹¹⁰. Some feminists argue that the objectification of cheerleaders is part of a 'backlash' to women's movement gains (Anna commenting on Pumilia 2007); other media texts compare it to sexual abuse (Carvajal 2010). Related discourse frames cheerleading as reducing women to the status of commodities¹¹¹, with discourse suggesting that the commercialised aspects of cheerleading are provocative to many feminists. This fits with Lumby's conclusion that it has become an 'item of faith' in popular feminist debate that sexualising women's bodies in representation or using them to sell things is 'abhorrent' (1997, pp. 9-11, xxi). Here, it is interesting to note changes in public attitude towards Jennifer Hawkins, a former cheerleader for an Australian rugby league team who won the Miss Universe competition in 2004 and has since become the respectable and well-liked¹¹² public face of the Australian department store chain Myer ('Jennifer Hawkins'). While there is broad, mainstream agreement that it is wrong for cheerleaders to use their bodies to 'sell' football teams, discourse suggests that Hawkins' use of her body to 'sell' a large corporation is relatively uncontroversial.

¹¹⁰ For other media texts referring to cheerleaders and objectification, see: Marblehead; Sirigina 2009; Samara commenting on 'Two Sides of the Same Old Coin' 2009; and Pumilia 2010.

¹¹¹ For examples of media texts with this theme, see: Giroday 2008; and Alam commenting on Tharoor 2010.

¹¹² The *Sydney Morning Herald* writes that Australians 'have a special place for Hawkins' (Traill-Nash 2006).

As previously mentioned, much discourse frames cheerleaders as being solely for the viewing pleasure of males – a ‘fact’ applauded by many male sports fans and condemned by many feminists. ‘Cheerleaders exist, in theory, to help guide us fans into cheering on the team,’ writes one male sportswriter. ‘In reality, they are for our visual pleasure alone’ (McD). Another describes them as ‘Gods [sic] Gift to Men’ (‘Cheerleaders, Gods Gift to Men’ 2009)¹¹³. A feminist critique of this sort of sports-related male ‘voyeurism’ (Guttmann 1996, p. 158) is that it ‘objectifies and victimises women’ (ibid) and that it strips female athletes of power because they are ‘still presented and positioned for the male gaze’ (Moritz 2006 p. 14). Other feminist-related discourse suggests women whose aesthetics or acts include blatantly erotic elements should shoulder some of the responsibility for encouraging lascivious male attention. Here I note Donald Sabo and Michael Messner’s essay criticising the sexualisation of female athletes in sport media and arguing that real women:

athletes are too busy competing to pose; too caught up in the physical and mental demands of the game to engage in sexual innuendo; too independent, animated, and obviously three-dimensional for men to reduce them readily to sex objects. It is simple brain work for a traditional male to sexually objectify a wiggling cheerleader; a fully extended female smashing a volleyball does not erotically compute (cited in Guttmann 1996, p. 4).

To Sabo and Messner, the problem is not only the male gaze but the female athletic target of the male gaze who makes herself too inviting and ‘computable’ to masculine viewers. My argument is that such theorisations exculpate the sort of hyper-fetishisations documented in Chapter Three and – like the widely condemned notion that the victims of sexual assault ‘ask for it’ in some way – represent a shifting of the locus of responsibility from perpetrator to target; from fetishiser to fetish object.

¹¹³ For other framings of cheerleading as being only for the benefits of male visual pleasure, see: Marblehead; Me...Again; Nelson cited in Pratt 2002; dolomite commenting on ‘Teacher Cristina Mallon resigns after cheerleading routine on YouTube’ 2007; MJD 2009; and Sirigina 2009.

Contrary to many claims made in cheerleading-related discourse, my research suggests cheerleaders are appreciated visually and/or sexually by females as well as males – a subject addressed in Chapter Five. Also pertinent here are Moritz's findings that while competitive cheerleaders may 'be interested in attracting male attention via their cheerleading identity' they also dress for their coaches, their parents and their teammates (2006, p. 72). The gaze of which they are most aware, Moritz argues, is that of the judges, 'an amorphous, gender-less group in the eyes of the girls' (ibid). This disruption of the assumption that cheerleading is performed solely for gratification of the male gaze is of a piece of broader critiques of traditional feminist views about objectification and the male gaze. Hartley and Lumby, for instance, write that the most pessimistic (and simplistic) constructions of the male gaze portray it 'as a force that strips women of all agency and condemns them to perpetual objecthood' (2003, p. 54). Yet, as Lumby asks, is desire or indeed any kind of human interaction possible without objectifying others? (1997, p. 15). Also: how is one to judge whether an interaction – sexual or otherwise – involves, as feminist Janice Raymond puts it, 'the presence of a whole human life' (cited ibid)? Once again, one might think one knows an entirely humanised encounter when one sees it but the subjectivity of such 'gut instinct' judgments is problematic. The question I pose in this thesis, therefore, is not 'do we objectify and exploit cheerleaders?' (because my position is that we are doing these things always already). Instead, I ask 'what are the consequences of these objectifications and exploitations?'. My case is that objectification and a degree of selfishness in dealings with others are not intrinsically damaging, but do have the potential to cause harm. Cheerleaders, for example, are often objectified and exploited via disavowed fetishistic and vitriolic discourse which, I will show, *is* problematic for a number of reasons.

Ironically, feminist discourse – the sort associated with grave warnings against the dangers of the objectifying male gaze – itself risks objectifying and/or sexualising cheerleaders via depersonalisations, unwarranted generalisations and so on¹¹⁴. As such, feminists might also be accused of fetishistically reducing cheerleaders to their utility-value, in terms of their usefulness in furthering feminist political objectives and/or, as discussed in Chapter Four,

¹¹⁴ Here I also note post-structural feminist scholar Jennifer Eisenhauer's case that the 'girl' has traditionally been an object for feminism rather than a subject in her own right (2004, pp. 79-90).

their usefulness as objects which can be creatively and pleasurably denigrated. Consider the journalist for the *Times* who writes, almost gleefully, that cheerleaders' 'bimbo perkiness, crimped ponytails and Prom Queen crowns' irritate 'every feminist fibre' in her body (Lamé 2010). Then there is Dublin's dystopic view of cheerleaders as an indistinguishable, 'suggestively' dancing mass whose presence at a university football game is a 'mystery', but whose psyches and futures are entirely divivable (2009). In such discourse, cheerleaders are conjured as both the ultimate patriarchal victims as well as anti-feminist villains; they are the perfect feminine 'other' against which feminism can oppose and define itself. The paradox is that while an 'objectionable' practice such as cheerleading is framed as a problem feminism needs to solve, its existence ultimately serves to strengthen the feminist movement.

Here I note Hargreaves' case that, for women's rights activists, 'the female body has been a locus of struggle to control and resist dominant images of sports and femininity' (1993, p. 44). In this sense, feminists can be framed as objectifying women's bodies for use as tools of battle. Some feminine sporting bodies, such as those praised by Nelson, are held up as shining exemplars; others, such as the primed and perky bodies of cheerleaders, are their antithesis. Either way (and regardless of the worthiness of the cause) they certainly seem more like objects or symbols than whole human lives. Cogent is Lumby's point, in relation to debates about pornography, that:

Feminists have often observed that pornography is designed to give pleasure and a sense of power to an implicitly male viewer. But it's equally important to ask what kind of power and pleasure pro-censorship feminism derives from attacking pornography (1997, p. xx).

The response of cheerleaders to feminist critiques will be discussed at length in Chapter Five. Here, I will only say that there is evidence that some cheerleaders are aware of and object to being used in this way. One cheerleader commenting on Dublin's vehemently anti-cheerleading editorial, for instance, protests that: 'None of us appreciate being used as an example of girls in forced gender roles with bleak futures' (Emily commenting on Dublin 2009).

Much feminist debate about cheerleading is implicitly framed by feminist interpretations of the notion of false consciousness¹¹⁵. While a common defence of cheerleading is that nobody 'forces' girls to join squads (RedRocPhilosophy commenting on Pumilia 2007), the feminist rebuttal is that women who 'choose' to become cheerleaders are not exercising a genuine choice because of the patriarchal domination of sports specifically and society in general. As one participant in an on-line debate about cheerleading puts it:

The 'choice' for women if they want to be a part of the game appears to be to dress up in pom poms, skimpy shorts and a push up bra or watch from the stands (Tom commenting on Musolino 2009).

Such views explain the description of cheerleading in discourse as involving 'brainwashing'¹¹⁶, and are similar to broader critiques of raunch culture. 'There was a time when feminism was about women being smart and assertive, and building inner strength,' reads one American newspaper. 'Somewhere along the line, though, it morphed into slut culture. Girls tell themselves they're in charge. But they're still just strutting it for the boys' (Lubrano 2007).

One of the problems with the false consciousness argument is that it implies a speaking position of higher, objective consciousness, conveniently allowing for the *a priori* dismissal of dissenting positions as the product of manipulation or delusion. As blogger Dana Pico puts it, women who 'don't toe the Established Feminist Line' are both depicted as being 'controlled', as well as having 'betrayed their sisters' (2008). This theme of 'betrayal' extends the false consciousness argument in that women such as cheerleaders are accused of *knowingly* participating in their own oppression – and ultimately, the overall oppression of their gender. One woman engaged in an on-line debate argues that if cheerleading was truly a sport, its participants would not be 'rah-rah-ing at male games in skimpy outfits':

¹¹⁵ In Marxism, false consciousness is figured as an effect of capitalist ideology which prevents proletariats from perceiving 'the exploitative nature of capitalist relations' (Weedon 2003, pp. 114-5). In feminism, it is constructed as 'an effect of patriarchal social relations' (ibid).

¹¹⁶ See: Babbit cited in Brady 2009; and Sirigina 2009.

Unfortunately, it's why women will never gain full societal respectability/credibility [sic]. Women should avoid anything that depicts them as objects of sexuality/desire i.e. movies, modeling, beauty pageants, porn, cheerleading, stripping and prostitution to name a few (Lilith commenting on Pumilia 2007).

Similar rhetoric comes from the *Mean Feminism* web site in a discussion about women's sports such as cheerleading, which suggests that individual 'choices' affect other women (Vengeance 2006, quotation marks in original). As one debater writes:

You may think it's ok to use T&A¹¹⁷ to get yourself in the door, but where does that leave everyone else? The same old system is reinforced, and other women who DON'T choose it have to live in it (Kate the Great commenting *ibid*).

A commentator on the American feminist web site *Equal Writes* suggests professional cheerleading exists because of women's 'idiotic inertia' (Bubin 2009), wondering whether cheerleading is proof that feminism is 'screwed, since women voluntarily choose to do such things for adoration and minimum wage' (*ibid*). Such texts represent the ease with which feminist discourse can slip between a condemnation of the patriarchy and a condemnation of other women. As Kate Taylor writes of 'lecturing' feminists in the *Guardian*:

Men, you can relax. You are no longer the enemy. Instead... modern feminists have a much shapelier target in their sights – other women. Specifically, scantily clad women who use their sexuality to get ahead (2006).

To conclude Part One of this chapter, I will argue that the discourse discussed thus far has ramifications beyond cheerleading. As I have shown, many dominant views on and assumptions about cheerleaders are based on or are influenced by feminist arguments that have become mainstream and commonsensical. Appropriations of feminist rhetoric outside the context of the women's movement speak to the success of feminist ideals, while the circulation of such discourse in mass media texts confounds framings of feminism as

¹¹⁷ I understand 'T&A' to refer to 'tits and ass' or 'tits and arse', here.

existing in opposition to or outside of 'the global megaculture of modern mass communication' (Felski 1989, p. 166)¹¹⁸. As such my case is that feminism has achieved significant mainstream power and influence¹¹⁹, and that, by continuing to frame themselves as underdogs, feminists are disavowing the success of their movement, as well as their and its potential for oppression. Here, there are parallels with Lanier's suggestion that there is a temptation for previously marginalised sectors to continue conceiving of themselves (and to be treated by others) as if they are oppressed groups, when they have actually achieved significant influence (Lanier & Saunders 2011). He notes the unwillingness of such groups to see 'imperfections' in their grand visions, or to acknowledge they may have similarities with the forces they are supposedly reacting against (ibid). Once again, this resonates with Lumby's proposition that 'old guard' feminists can look 'an awful lot like the patriarch':

Like patriarchs, some senior feminists are inclined to think they represent, and speak for, women as a whole. And like patriarchs, they legitimise their claim to power by arguing they are only holding on to it for the benefit of womankind (1997, p. 156).

Feminist anti-cheerleading discourse is illustrative of the tension between what feminists think is good for women and what women may think is good for themselves and, as previously discussed, is reminiscent of broader feminist debates about raunch culture. Critiquing Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2005) in the *Guardian*, Kate Taylor writes:

[Levy] proclaims that boob jobs and crop tops 'don't bring us any closer to the fundamental feminist project of allowing every woman to be her own, specific self'. But what if a woman's 'own, specific self' is a thong-wearing, Playboy-T-

¹¹⁸ As Hartley puts it, Felski's formulation strains to breaking point the critical-outsider approach to the mass media (1996, p. 69), especially given that the 'debased pseudopublic sphere' (Felski 1989, p. 166) of global megaculture is also the vehicle used by feminism to communicate with other women, and to engage in critical discussion with 'male defined cultural and discursive frameworks' (Hartley 1996, p. 69).

¹¹⁹ As Lumby writes, the women's movement of the 1970s has spawned 'a highly influential political network' with second-wave feminism and its representatives now holding 'immense authority' (1997, p. 155).

shirted specific self who thinks lap-dancing is a laugh and likes getting wolf-whistled at by builders? (2006).

As Chapter Five of this thesis will go on to illustrate, discourse suggests that, for many participants, cheerleading *is* a place where they feel they can be their own, specific selves. This thesis, therefore, supports Moritz's case that, in the domain of sports, second-wave feminist binaries continue privileging the masculine over the feminine, and are precluding the search for 'third places and spaces' (2006, pp. 12-13). It concurs with her argument that while women's sports advocates have helped normalise women's participation in traditionally masculine sports, they are failing to fully address the other side of the coin: the marginalisation of the identity of woman as athlete: 'the space where the beautiful sports live, where women who embrace the girly-girl image like to hang out while being athletic at the same time' (ibid, pp. 88-89).

CASE STUDY: CHEERLEADING VERSUS ROLLER DERBY

The reinvention of roller derby as a predominantly women-only contact sport which combines the feminine norm of sexualisation and the masculine norms of aggression and violence offers a useful comparison to cheerleading and assists in explicating the themes of this chapter. Like cheerleading, roller derby was a male-only activity at the start of the 20th century (Carvajal 2010), but is now dominated by women. Both activities have an element of 'showbiz razzle-dazzle' (ibid), resulting in arguments about whether they are sport or spectacle, and whether they privilege aesthetics over athletics. Participants of both cheerleading and roller derby cite the risks of their activity and the injuries they suffer as a source of pride and as proof they are engaged in a 'real' sport¹²⁰. And, most significantly, both derby 'girls'¹²¹ and cheerleaders have been accused of betraying feminist principles by wearing 'brazenly provocative'¹²² uniforms and engaging in sexualised public performance.

¹²⁰ For roller derby-related texts of this type see: 'Elbows, Body Checking and No, It's Not Hockey' 2006; Vengeance 2006 (and multiple comments on Vengeance 2006); and Carvajal 2010.

¹²¹ Carvajal notes that 'girl' is a label used – 'call it reclaimed' – by skaters (2010).

¹²² This is Carvajal's view of some roller derby uniforms (2010).

The arguments raised by feminists in roller derby's defence offer key insights into the feminist rejection of cheerleading, partly because (unlike cheerleading) a strong and organised feminist defence of this sport actually exists. They also illuminate the types of feminine sporting involvement, sexual displays and self objectifications that may be regarded as 'acceptable' by feminist standards.

The term 'roller derby' first appeared in the 1920s and referred to an American style of skater racing which evolved to emphasise collisions, falls and the mock combat of professional wrestling (Tom 2010b). Neo-roller derby emerged in Texas early in the 21st century and is known for its DIY feminist principles and rejection of the 'male puppetmaster model' of corporatised sport (ibid). Organisers of and participants in contemporary manifestations of roller derby highlight its danger for both participants and spectators. A poster promoting a Chicago league depicts an attractive blonde licking blood from her haemorrhaging nostrils beside the slogan: 'Blood. The New Pink' ('blood the new pink poster' 2010). Trackside seating is known as the 'suicide circle' (Tom 2010b) and the names of skaters and leagues often involve violence-related puns. Members of the Australian leagues The D'Viants and the Screamin' Assault Sirens, for instance, include Deb-O-Lition, Lulu LeBrawl, Fi Fi La Gore and Miss Biff (ibid).

Much media and intra-feminism discourse focuses on the sexualised aesthetics of roller derby, debating whether 'the titillation factor threatens to undermine the legitimacy of the game' (Oler 2009). *Bitch* magazine notes the way media coverage of the sport has focused on 'the novelty of sexy girls in fishnets on four wheels':

Spin called the sport 'the best catfight on earth,' while the *Tucson Citizen* quoted a male fan who opined, 'For some spectators, the chance of getting a roller derby girl in their lap is a part of the attraction' (ibid).

Feminists debating the emancipatory potential of roller derby often compare the sport with cheerleading, with both advocates and detractors of the former agreeing about the objectionable nature of the latter. In a 'rant against roller derby' on the *Mean Feminism* web site, Vicky Vengeance dismisses roller derby as being no more feminist than cheerleading,

mudwrestling or pole-dancing (2006). This, she says, is because participants' commodification of their sexuality 'feeds back into the commodification of women's sexuality in general' regardless of whether they gain enjoyment and/or a sense of empowerment from the activity (ibid).

Feminist defenders of roller derby claim it is more 'empowering' than cheerleading because: it is not-for-profit (Stortion, D commenting on Vengeance 2006); it is participant owned and operated (ibid); it rejects 'narrowly defined' body types (Heather cited in Carvajal 2010); and its high number of lesbian participants and fans indicate that it is not tailored for the male gaze (Anonymous[d] commenting on Vengeance 2006). Roller derby is framed as allowing women to be in control of their images, their sexualities and their sport (Rems cited in 'Elbows, Body Checking and No, It's Not Hockey' 2006) in contrast to cheerleading which, as discussed elsewhere in this thesis, is frequently framed as being orchestrated by the patriarchy and/or capitalism.

As previously mentioned, one of the most significant differences between roller derby and cheerleading is that the former is considered worthy of feminist debate and is framed in feminist discourse as having the potential for liberation. Cheerleading, in contrast, is rarely debated in feminist discourse and is usually only invoked commonsensically as an example of oppression or as the antithesis of 'empowered' activities such as roller derby. Such claims obscure the fact that roller derby and cheerleading actually have many commonalities. Journalist and roller derby fan Christian Carvajal writes that, 'One of the attributes that make modern-day roller derby so thrillingly singular is that it's not the less popular, "kid sister" distaff version of any predominantly male sport' (2010). Yet cheerleading is not the 'kid sister' of a male sport, either. Further, as Chapter Five of this thesis reveals, cheerleaders are also able to make individual and sometimes subversive meanings of their aesthetics and performances in much the same way as roller derby participants. Like roller derby participants¹²³, cheerleaders frequently defend their uniforms as comfortable and geared

¹²³ For roller derby participant views on roller derby uniforms, see: Arthur, M commenting on Vengeance 2006; Anonymous [c] commenting on Vengeance 2006; Anonymous[e] commenting on Vengeance 2006; Anonymous [f] commenting on Vengeance 2006; Anonymous[h] commenting on Vengeance 2006; and Shortkick, S commenting on Vengeance 2006.

towards the practicalities of their sport. And while the cheerleading 'look' is dismissed as restrictive and homogenised, a survey of images from roller derby indicates that its 'punk' or 'aggro' dress-style is no less conventional and conformist – although the 'punk' aesthetics of roller derby help explain why, unlike cheerleading, it has received metaphorical clearance from significant sectors of what Carvajal calls 'feminist Defcon Five' (Carvajal 2010).

While it is rarely expressed explicitly, it is also likely that cheerleading participants, as with those in roller derby, enjoy the sport because it offers a structured and safe outlet for sexual display. Although conjectural, such a claim is based on discourse produced by cheerleaders which discusses the many pleasures they gain from the activity (see Chapter Five). Contrary to roller derby participants who often say outright that they enjoy the sexualised aesthetics of their sport, the standard, discursive move for cheerleaders is to distance themselves from any association with sex. This defensive tactic is likely to be a result of the overwhelming vitriol and sexual fetishisation cheerleaders face in discourse, and shares similarities with beauty pageants' conspicuous appeals to respectability¹²⁴. Here I note Hargreaves' observation that the 'essence of sports feminism is the belief that sports can be an enriching, sensuous experience with the potential for women to gain physical confidence and a sense of enjoyment and fulfillment' (1994, p. 40). Yet, as cheerleading-related discourse reveals, some sensualities and enjoyments are – with apologies to Orwell – regarded by feminists as being more equal than others¹²⁵.

Relevant to this chapter's discussion of feminism's influence, is the fact that both cheerleaders and roller derby participants may find themselves having to resist both the patriarchy *and* feminism. While my research suggests that cheerleaders rarely engage in explicit, intra-feminist debates such as those focussing on roller derby, the impassioned feminist defence of the latter is as cogent as that made of the former. Women, writes one roller derby fan, 'should be able to kick ass in a miniskirt and fishnets or what ever else she

¹²⁴ Banet-Weiser's observation of beauty pageants is that they work hard to prove their difference from 'other public spectacles of femininity', often by emphasising pageant contestants' 'wholesome typicality and respectable femininity' (1999, p. 40-1).

¹²⁵ 'All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others' is a quote from *Animal Farm*, George Orwell's dystopian, allegorical novella about the corruptions associated with power (1996, p. 133).

wants to wear without men expecting sex or feminists expecting an apology' (Anonymous[g] commenting on Vengeance 2006). Another says: 'I'm really tired of being told what I should be wearing, by men and women who think they have the moral highground just because they slap the label "feminist" on themselves' (Highlander commenting on Vengeance 2006). One derby participant suggests feminists 'quit fussing' about her skirt and put on some skates (Anonymous[f] commenting on Vengeance 2006), while another asks: 'Can't a girl just skate for the fun of it and for the exercise? Why make it so complicated?' (Mrs. Manners Classic City Roller Girls commenting on Vengeance 2006). Similarly themed comments reject the idea that roller derby should have to 'have anything to do with feminism at all' (Anonymous[a] commenting on Vengeance 2006). As one writer puts it: 'Wasn't the whole idea of feminism [sic] that we should be able to do whatever we want to do without being judged?' (ibid). The same questions can be posed in relation to feminist criticisms of cheerleading.

Majoritarian feminism's disdain for cheerleading is at historical odds with the fact that cheerleading was originally a site for equality-oriented feminist activism: women's eventual infiltration into American cheerleading in the 1940s was a victory in the liberal feminist sense in that it involved women gaining access to an activity originally available only to men. It is intriguing that once women dominated cheerleading rather than simply being equal participants, the activity lost status. Feminist theory helps explain this phenomenon in the wider culture (where feminised, sexualised endeavours are often denigrated) but it does not explain cheerleading's lack of repute within the women's movement. This raises a number of questions such as: is there an unacknowledged chauvinism within feminism that means it also looks down on pursuits with aspects that align with norms relating to femininity? Does the oppositional nature of feminism mean it can only function in battle rather than victory? And: is feminism foundering because it is no longer on the margins? Answering these queries – which have a much broader political purview – goes beyond the scope of this thesis but my hope is to lay the groundwork for future research.

PART TWO: SPORT – ‘HOOLIGANISM... IN THE ABSENCE OF ANY SOCCER’

Part Two of this chapter is devoted to discourse which can be classed as having sports-related themes. To begin, I will provide a brief introduction to the development of the contemporary Anglo sporting ideal which is regarded as emerging in a particular location (Britain) at a particular time (the industrial revolution) rather than being the result of a steady evolutionary process from the ancient Olympic Games in Greece (Rowe 1999, p. 13). Cultural histories of sport locate the origins of its contemporary form in early industrial Britain (ibid) where compulsory physical education and sport in schools were used to discipline young men, partly in the service of colonialisation and empire-related ambitions (Guttmann 1996, pp. 2-6). The revival of the Olympic Games by the French aristocrat Baron Pierre de Coubertin in 1896 reflected the sporting ideal of ‘healthy body, healthy mind’, as well as exemplifying the conflicting idea that sport could assist in resolving conflict between nations (Hill 1996, pp. 5 -29) *as well as* making the citizenry more able to wage war effectively (Rowe 1999, p 16). Tension also existed between the ‘improving’ role assigned to sport and its function as a ‘channel for perceived baser, animal instincts’ (Lumby 2011, pers. comm. 30 August). Also critical to the development and promotion of organised sport was anxiety over the increasing difficulty of engaging in control and surveillance of a growing urbanised working class (Rowe 1999, p. 15).

Cheerleading exercises a wide range of cultural anxieties, many of which exemplify broader sports-related tensions and anxieties. These include conflict about how sport is defined, as well as concerns relating to the links between: sport and commerce; sport and sex; sport and gender; sport and social control; and sport and the entertainment industry. As acknowledged earlier, texts framing cheerleading in sports-related contexts frequently dovetail with those whose central themes concern feminism and gender. Sports-related media coverage of cheerleading supports broader sports media subtexts such as ‘sports is a man’s world’ and ‘women are sexy props’ (Moritz 2006, p. 9). It feeds into gendered assumptions about the ‘sycophantic culture of celebrity in masculine sport’, where, as Rowe writes, ‘women are routinely regarded as “groupies” and “hangers-on” with nothing to “trade” but their sexuality’ (1995, p. 116). Discourse frequently frames cheerleaders as being both overly

intrusive on the 'main game', as well as having too little to do with it. Patronising comments and denigrations abound. 'Cheerleaders have no more impact on the game than the night janitorial staff,' reads *Sports Illustrated* (Reilly cited in Adams & Bettis 2003a, p. 2). 'They don't even face the game.' Another American writer dismisses cheerleading as 'a side salad to the main course of tackling and touchdowns' (Busch 2009) while the *Guardian* suggests competitive cheerleading is 'analogous to English soccer hooliganism carrying on in the absence of any soccer' (Wells 2006).

The largest sector of sports-related media texts devoted to cheerleading concerns debates about whether this activity is a sport or something else, such as a 'support for sport' (Moritz 2006, p. 48). Media commentators who argue that cheerleading is not a sport often describe it as an activity (Ponsi commenting on Fisher 2008), hobby, or pastime: 'A more desirable pastime than, say, shooting methamphetamine,' writes one blogger, 'but a pastime nonetheless' (Fisher 2008). *Salon* magazine's satirical contribution to this topic is: 'Surely you've heard that "cheerleading is a sport!" – yeah, just like you've heard that "Miss America is a scholarship competition!"' (Lynn 2008). Other commentators claim that cheerleading's focus on entertainment disqualifies it from sporting status (jrod643 commenting on Sander 2010). Nelson is representative of the view of many feminists on this issue when she insists cheerleaders do not even warrant the descriptor 'athlete':

Cheerleaders are not athletes as long as their primary position is along the sidelines. Cheerleaders are not athletes as long as they wear short skirts outside in the winter – hardly appropriate athletic attire (cited in Moritz 2006, p. 19).

Related, here, is the frequent assertion in sports-themed discourse that cheerleading is not a 'real' sport because of its emphasis on feminised aesthetics. A journalist for the *Observer Sports Magazine* asks whether 'an activity that features fake tan and hair curlers' can be a sport (Kessel 2009), while another commentator says, 'Anything where smiling and wearing makeup gives you an edge seems more like a beauty contest' (Joe commenting on Fisher 2008).

Much sports-related debate about cheerleading revolves around the contention that this activity involves too much sex to be classed as or even associated with sport. '[M]uch as I love looking at near-naked women,' writes one participant in an internet debate on cheerleading, 'there's a time and a place (it's called the internet)... [cheerleaders] don't belong at sports events' (elflojo84 commenting on Tharoor 2010). Another commentator criticises a viewing device for premium seat holders at US football games which includes a camera dedicated exclusively to cheerleaders (MJD 2009). He writes:

I respect a man's right to ogle cheerleaders. That's what they're there for... But you can't sit next to me and stare at a little computer screen featuring jiggling young ladies for hours at a time. No thank you. That will creep me out... That's for private time (ibid).

Critics claim cheerleading is disingenuous – a Trojan horse for lasciviousness. 'If you want to get off on flesh, then just do it,' writes one commentator, 'don't bury it within a... hit&run ball game' (EntropyIsHere commenting on Tharoor 2010). There is also the intriguing proposition that cheerleading is too sexually-orientated to be a sport yet not sexually-orientated enough to be sex: 'If I want to see tumbling and flipping, I'll go watch real gymnastics performed by real gymnasts... If I want something sexy, I prefer the real thing' (AJ commenting on Pumilia 2007).

Comments such as the above adumbrate disquietude about eroticism and aesthetics in sport more generally. In this domain there is often tension between ascetic sporting ideals and sensual sporting practice. Guttmann, for instance, notes that:

The historical record, the evidence of literature and the visual arts, the results of sociological and psychological investigations, the blatant manifestations of European and American pop culture, and the instinctive testimony of our senses all agree that men's and women's sports experiences can be and often have been suffused with a sense of erotic pleasure (1996, p. 172).

Guttmann's hypothesis is that, contrary to the ancients' acknowledgment and appreciation of athletic eroticism, the predominant public position is now one of hostility, erasure, confused obfuscation and taboo (ibid, p. 6). These modern trends can be constructed as something akin to an *en masse* neurosis. As Rowe writes, there is 'something improbable about paying massive attention to the sporting body as an athletic instrument but then rigorously suppressing any notion that it might be or do something else' (1999, p. 125). It is worth noting here that anxieties about sport and sex do not just concern cheerleaders or women. Multiple media texts are now devoted to debates about the sexualised appeal of male athletes. In 2006 in Australia, for instance, controversy erupted over a calendar featuring naked rugby league players which was released to raise money for a breast cancer foundation. One of the men posed showing the top part of his penis – described by one Sydney newspaper as 'man cleavage' (Sharp 2006) – and the NRL distanced itself from the calendar (ibid).

Many cheerleaders, meanwhile, reject suggestions that their primary role concerns sexual gratification, arguing vociferously that they are engaged in a sport. In such counter-discourse, competitive cheerleaders call themselves 'cheer athletes' and use the term 'team' interchangeably with 'squad' (Grindstaff & West 2006, p. 505). Humorous, cheerleading-related T-shirts also reflect these views. Slogans on the latter include 'Girl + Athlete = Cheerleader' and 'Hold my weights while I stunt with your girlfriend' (ibid). Grindstaff and West suggest that, for cheerleaders, 'the issue of whether or not cheerleading is a "real" sport is a proxy for the issue of respect' (2006, p. 505). While these ideas will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Five, here I will note sociologist Richard Sennett's argument that lack of respect, 'though less aggressive than an outright insult, can take an equally wounding form' in that another person is not recognised, 'not *seen* – as a full human being whose presence matters' (2003, p. 3, emphasis in original).

The distinction between whether cheerleading is officially recognised as a 'sport' or an 'activity' has significant institutional ramifications. As Hanson writes, sports in the US 'are typically funded by the sponsoring institution, while activities are funded by their participants' (1995, p. 93). Competitive cheerleading is not recognised by the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the federal Department of Education (Thomas 2010) or the Office for Civil Rights, the federal agency charged with enforcing Title IX (Sander 2010). In 2010, a Title IX

lawsuit against Quinnipiac University resulted in a US Federal judge ruling that while competitive cheer might qualify as a sport under Title IX in future, 'today... the activity is still too underdeveloped and disorganized to be treated as offering genuine varsity athletic participation opportunities for students' (Underhill cited *ibid*). Some commentators suggest that the big American companies behind competitive cheerleading are lobbying against its recognition as a sport because they gain substantial financial advantage from the status quo (Papon 2010).

A sector of discourse relating to cheerleading and Title IX maintains it is sexist to suggest cheerleading is evidence of compliance with this law. Nelson, for instance, claims that if cheerleading were accepted as a sport it would allow the artificial inflation of participation figures for women's athletics (cited in Pratt 2002)¹²⁶. The *New York Times* also notes feminist resistance to 'high-kicking coeds in tight sweaters' receiving full sport recognition (Williams 2004). Another writer says cheerleading presents a dilemma for feminists because while recognising it as a sport would make it safer, 'recognition of the inclusion of cheerleading with other sports will almost certainly lead to the evaporation of women's sports at universities across the country' (Papon 2010). Minority discourse claims it is sexist *not* to recognise cheerleading as a sport (and to therefore recognise it as fulfilling high schools' Title IX obligations)¹²⁷.

While the bulk of feminist discourse continues to reject the idea that cheerleading is a sport, my research suggests an emerging support for the activity among women's sports advocates. In 2010, the US Women's Sports Foundation announced it would incorporate cheerleading 'into the women's sports family, along with other aesthetic sports like diving, mogul skiing and gymnastics' (Makar 2010). As one of its directors writes in the *New York Daily News*, the Foundation is 'eager to recognize the athleticism, the talent, and the risks cheerleaders all over the country make to participate – whether sideline cheerleaders or competitive cheerleaders' (*ibid*). In response to the Quinnipiac University Title IX case, a high-profile advocate of women's sports says the ruling has 'galvanized the cheer community', given the

¹²⁶ For similar discourse, see: Kaplan cited in Hanson 1995, p. 95; Wells 2006; Eaton-Pobb 2009; and Collings 2009.

¹²⁷ See: providencepocket commenting on Sander 2010.

issue unprecedented publicity and prompted administrators to eliminate ‘the identified deficiencies’ (Makar 2010). She said the legal opinion had ‘electrified the cheer community and given the issue unprecedented publicity’ (ibid).

Some representations of cheerleading in sports-related discourse acknowledge that the failure to recognise cheerleading as a sport is making it more dangerous for participants¹²⁸. One newspaper article headlined ‘Suffering in a short skirt’ points out that cheerleaders are more likely to be injured than the footballers they cheer on, yet are ‘lightly dressed’ rather than being ‘protected by helmets and safety regulations’ (Harlow 2004). Another quotes a sports injury specialist who says cheerleading lacks the safeguards involved in official sports: ‘Very often, these girls are doing the equivalent of gymnastics without any of the cover in terms of rules, medical support and so on’ (Harris cited in Coman 2002). While injuries have led to the implementation of regulations governing stunts within some quarters in the US, the disparate nature and governance of cheerleading means these are still relatively *ad hoc* in comparison to other sports organisations. Moritz describes them as a ‘hodgepodge’ (2006, p. 26), while the executive director of America’s National Cheer Safety Foundation calls them a ‘joke’ (Archie cited in Kingsbury 2008).

Torgnovnick adds that not being considered a sport ‘hurts’ college cheerleaders because participants are not subject to drug screening (2008a, p. xxiv). As one high school cheerleading coach puts it: ‘You don’t want your daughter being thrown into the air by anyone on drugs’ (Carnahan cited in Griswold 2009). Other discourse argues that restrictions on cheerleading restricts girls’ sporting participation generally. One school sports co-ordinator tells the UK’s *Sunday Times* that, ‘There are a lot of girls who don’t take to traditional sports who are really keen on the cheerleading’ (White cited in Woolf 2008). *Newsweek* suggests the risks of contemporary competitive cheerleading are a strong motivation for schools to ditch the gymnastics component of cheering and concentrate on the ‘spirit’ aspects of squads (Ball 2009).

¹²⁸ As discussed in Chapter One, researchers have linked the increasing number of fatalities and serious injuries associated with cheerleading to safety and regulatory inconsistencies resulting from confusion and disagreement over whether it is an activity to lead cheers or a sport (Muellar & Cantu 2008, p. 44).

Increased media coverage of cheerleading-related injuries and deaths has been accompanied by an increase in the volume of discourse accusing cheerleading of being unacceptably dangerous¹²⁹. As discussed in Chapter One, cheerleading has been associated with a dramatic rise in severe injuries due in part to the activity's increasingly complex gymnastics stunts¹³⁰. Despite the fact of these risks, Moritz suggests there exists a type of 'New Victorianism' implicit in the medical warnings about the dangers cheerleading poses to girls (2006, p. 55). She argues that athleticism and risk, though present in other sports, do not draw the same type of response from the mainstream media as cheerleading: 'The headlines would never read: This just in, boys get hurt playing ice hockey' (ibid, p. 56). Moritz's diagnosis of media attitudes is supported by a newspaper article which describes injuries as the 'unspoken evil' of cheerleading and as constituting a 'national crisis' (Parks and Archie cited in Stein 2008). The flipside of such alarmist discourse is media coverage which ridicules, often using sexualised humour, the idea that cheerleading could be dangerous. One blogger, for instance, writes:

A recent study showed that female cheerleading is the most dangerous female sport. Really? Do they pull a hamstring from kicking so high? Are those heavy pom-poms pulling shoulders out of their sockets? Or throwing out their backs from the backseat gymnastics after the big game? (Kowalski 2009)¹³¹.

Another syndicated newspaper report from the *Telegraph* notes the death or paralysis of 42 cheerleaders in the US over a 20-year period, but points out that the hazards of supporting the college team does bring the much sought-after reward of dating football players (Coman 2002).

¹²⁹ See: Steptoe 1991.

¹³⁰ In 2007, the rate for catastrophic injuries in cheerleading was 2.0 injuries out of 100,000 athletes compared to 3.2 injuries out of 100,000 athletes for football ('Cheerleading: it's extreme' 2008). Even cheerleaders who do not perform risky athletic stunts, are susceptible to severe vocal injuries and injuries to the hand and wrist, such as nerve compression, ganglion cysts, and torn cartilage (Hanson 1995, pp. 90-91).

¹³¹ See also: Baird 1986; Coman 2002; Pennington 2007; and Steelman 2008.

Counter-discourse often involves cheerleaders citing the frequency or severity of their injuries with pride and as proof of their athleticism¹³². A cheerleading coach from a Californian cheer gym whose motto is 'Motrin¹³³ and ice, ladies, let's go', tells the *Wall Street Journal* that the sport isn't for babies: 'If you don't like it do ballet' (Allen cited in Karp 2009). Another cheerleader describes injury and pain as 'badges of honour' (iCheer[rip mj] 2009). Moritz observes that the value embedded in 'playing hurt' has been readily adopted by cheerleaders:

For them, it seems the more injuries you sustain, the closer you get to legitimizing your activity as a sport... Since the stereotypes of cheerleaders include variations of ditsy, dumb and passive girls in skirts, this emphasis on working so hard physically you suffer numerous injuries is one strategy the girls take to undermine the negative image and gain credibility (2006, p. 54-55).

This fits with Moritz's broader hypothesis that female athletes who want to be taken seriously have had to fit into the established masculinist model of sports which includes 'privileging winning' and 'playing through injury and illness' (ibid, p. 42). Consider the case of Kristi Yamaoka, a cheerleader for Southern Illinois University, who gained national American media attention after continuing cheering from a gurney after falling from a human pyramid in 2006 and suffering concussion, a spinal fracture and a bruised lung ('Cheerleader worried for team, not herself'). As medics wheeled her out of the arena in head and neck braces, Yamaoka twirled her hand and 'performed her fight song from her stretcher' (Torgovnick 2008a, p. xx):

Kristi's fall was replayed on every major news channel. In the hospital, Kristi received calls from Diane Sawyer and President Bush... The country was fascinated by this girl who'd shown such determination to keep on cheering (ibid, pp. xx-xxi).

¹³² See: kayla commenting on Pumilia 2007; Taylor commenting on Fisher 2008; and Chelsea commenting on Fisher.

¹³³ 'Motrin' is a brand name for ibuprofen, an anti-inflammatory analgesic.

A positive interpretation of such events and imagery is that cheerleaders are successfully resisting negative stereotypes by incarnating classical virtues such as courage and selflessness. A more pessimistic framing is that young women are putting themselves at unnecessary risk in order to prove themselves in the face of overwhelming bad press.

Another sector of anti-cheerleading discourse in sports media texts frames cheerleaders as being too distracting to both players and audience members¹³⁴. In his autobiography, former New York Giants football player Michael Strahan says: 'The cheerleaders are a huge, huge distraction. They aren't there just to distract the fans, they're used as a weapon against us, too' (2007, p. 96). The *Seattle Times* notes a 2007 US NFL memo sent to the league's 32 teams, warning them to control their cheerleaders:

There's growing concern that some home teams are using these ladies for a competitive advantage, telling them to warm up in front of the opponents, hoping their beauty will steer players away from their pregame preparation (Bates 2007).

Another writer suggests cheerleading has become overly concerned with encouraging fans to marvel at its difficulty, thus creating 'an odd conflict as to where one's attention should go' (Hollis 2009). Comments such as these point to a signal, characteristic tension inhabiting much cheerleading-related discourse: that while it is frequently derided as being little more than a garnish, it is also regarded as wielding great power.

Cheerleading is both praised *and* criticised in sports-related discourse as being a 'spectacle'. In India, the presence of cheerleaders is described as being 'one spectacle too far' ('Indian cricket in cheerleader cover-up' 2008)¹³⁵. Another writer asks whether cheerleading is a sport *or* a spectacle, a dilemma predicated on the contention that these are mutually exclusive phenomena (Papon 2010). Such discourse can be seen as characteristic of a broader

¹³⁴ See: Hutchinson 2007; Afridi cited in 'Cheerleaders "covered" after threat' 2008; McD 2009; Meep commenting on Pumilia 2010; and joe5000 commenting on Tharoor 2010.

¹³⁵ See also: Sengupta 2008.

ambivalence and/or anxiety about mediated visual spectacles¹³⁶ and the rise of what critical theorist Douglas Kellner refers to as megaspectacles and technospectacles (2003). In the domain of sports – as elsewhere – spectacle (along with superficiality and excess) is invoked as evidence of a postmodern shift away from ‘rationalism, depth, order and constraint’ (Harriss cited in Rowe 1995, p. 150). Rowe, for instance, describes the media’s transformation of ‘what could be the “spartan” act of sports viewing into a luxurious wallowing in spectacle’ (1999, p. 158) and notes the subsequent pressure on sports to be telegenic (1995, p. 50). Distancing himself from this chorus of sporting requiems, Hartley welcomes these as democratic developments, celebrating, for instance, the sport of synchronised swimming (which has many parallels with cheerleading¹³⁷) as a ‘spectacle of post-modern global culture’ (1992, p. 138).

Also relevant here is what Hartley refers to more generally as the feminisation of sporting values and the drift to more democratic, aesthetic, ‘consumer-integrated’¹³⁸ sporting models (2006). Unlike ‘ball-assisted male combat’, such sports tend to involve: smiling; flamboyant costumes; synchronisation; and participants who make the strenuous look easy (ibid, p. 409). Hartley’s argument is that a big part of these new sporting ideals is a plebiscitary approach which celebrates spectator-oriented teamwork rather than individual heroics: ‘Instead of objective measurements – “faster, higher, stronger,” as the Olympic motto puts it – winners are picked by how they look to a panel of judges; by consumer choice, as it were’ (ibid, p. 409). Such subjective modes of evaluation are frequently used to criticise cheerleading and support the activity’s continued classification as a ‘non-sport’ (Grindstaff and West 2006, p. 510). One participant in an on-line debate about cheerleading says activities involving ‘choreography for aesthetic effect, and subjective scoring... rather than active adaptation to

¹³⁶ In the academic domain, the ‘society of the spectacle’ was a term developed in the 1960s by French theorist Guy Debord and the Situationist International (Kellner 2003, p. 2). For Debord, the spectacle is a tool of pacification and depoliticisation; a ‘permanent opium war’ – and the moment when ‘consumption has attained the *total occupation* of social life’ (cited ibid, pp. 2-3, emphasis in original).

¹³⁷ Both synchronised swimming and cheerleading are exemplars of Hartley’s ‘smiling professions’ and are emergent sporting forms which suffer a ‘reputation deficit’ at ‘the hands of those whose values they may be supplanting’ (2006, p. 410-11).

¹³⁸ Hartley applies this term to sports where ‘fashion (the costume) is integral – as in ballroom dancing and synchronised swimming of course, but also and increasingly in tennis, women’s beach volleyball, surfing etc’ (2006, p. 417).

the efforts of an opponent' cannot be regarded as sports (willismg commenting on Sander 2010).

Cheerleading is often condemned for being overly commercial and consumption-orientated, with a common negative stereotype of cheerleading being that it 'breeds materialism' (Moritz 2006, p. 28). *Sports Illustrated* journalist Sonja Steptoe criticises cheerleading as 'a capitalist tool', writing that 'some companies have taken the concept of school spirit and turned it into a cash cow' (1991). Even some within the cheerleading community level similar charges: Sheila Noone, the editorial director at *American Cheerleading* magazine opines that, 'Cheer is capitalism run amok' (cited in Moritz 2006, p. 26). These comments can be seen within the broader context of concerns about the commercialisation of sport and the commodification of athletes. Rowe writes that these issues have 'opened up a deep schism within the institutional **ideology** of sport' (1999, p. 17, emphasis in original) and notes the frequent tendency to 'romanticize a golden age of pre-capitalist sport' (1995, p. 102). Also apposite here is feminist apprehension about the 'commercialization of the female body and the commercialization of sexuality' linked to the growth of female sports (Hargreaves 1994, p. 158). As with criticisms relating to cheerleading and sex, it is important to bear in mind that commercialisation is a factor in many sports, not only cheerleading. Hartley, for instance, suggests that merchandising and mediation are pivotal, possibly primary, to all contemporary sports (2006, p. 417).

Related to accusations of cheerleading as over-commercialised are media texts which frame cheerleading as a debased promotional lure. One Australian sports writer says the use of 'scantily clad [sic]' women such as cheerleaders is a 'sexist', 'cheap', and 'degrading' way to promote sport (Musolino 2009). A reader agreeing with this editorial writes that, 'If a sport needs cheerleaders then that sport should be examining itself' (fasil commenting on Musolino 2009). Another commentator claims cheerleaders are a sign of desperation because sport in its 'pure' form is struggling as a commercial venture: 'It must be gussied up. It must include appeals to the average person's vulgarity' (Fred 2008). Such rhetorical leads will be taken up in the discussion of cheerleading and class and taste distinctions addressed in Part Three of this chapter.

Other negative framings of cheerleaders in sports-related contexts include claims that participants do not know much or enough about the sports or teams they support¹³⁹. There is a degree of irony in such claims given the widespread ignorance about cheerleading practice discussed in Chapter One. 'People have no idea what we do,' one competitive cheerleader tells Torgovnick (Kristen cited 2008a, p. 249). 'I know,' another agrees. 'I was telling my boyfriend that my wrists hurt, and he was like, "Did you clap too hard?"' (cited *ibid*)¹⁴⁰. As previously mentioned, many sports-related media texts call for the eradication of cheerleaders in order to broaden sports' audiences; primarily to make them more 'family-friendly'¹⁴¹. Another sector of texts reject – as unnecessary and insulting – the idea that sports fans need assistance mustering enthusiasm. 'Passionate sports fans that possess high sports IQs do not need to be led by archaic chants,' reads one university newspaper article (LeMay 2008). Another sports commentator claims that, 'Prefabricated enthusiasm is like an arranged marriage; in each case, the modifier robs the noun of all consequential meaning' (King 2009).

To conclude, sports-related media texts commonly reproach cheerleading for: detracting from the purity of sport; encouraging the decline of sporting values; and/or posing a danger to sport in some other way. An American commentator elicits imagery of contagion when she or he asks, in relation to cheerleading, 'why infect football with it?' (brandon commenting on Pumilia 2010). Another sports writer endorses the common view that 'it's terrible to sully the panorama of a wonderful game with nearly naked girls dancing on the sideline' (Begel 2007). In relation to the 'glitzy baggage' (Sharma 2008) of cheerleading at the controversial Indian Premier League (IPL), a far-right Hindu politician accuses cheerleaders of violating the 'sanctity of cricket' (cited in 'Sanctity of cricket is lost because of cheerleaders: Thackeray' 2008). Once again, it is interesting to note that the feminised activity of cheerleading in this instance is perceived as strong and threatening. In contrast,

¹³⁹ See: Pumilia 2007; and KevinE 2009.

¹⁴⁰ Here I also note a sports journalist's comment that: 'Missing from the dialogue, however, is the explanation of what competitive cheerleading really entails. Somehow the details get lost in all the shouting and insults that pass back and forth' (Hicklin 2008).

¹⁴¹ See: Gibson & Maley 2007; Crowe cited in Halloran 2007; and other media texts discussed in Part One of this chapter.

the traditional masculine sports sphere (as represented by the IPL and cricket) is framed as fragile and vulnerable.

PART THREE: CLASS – DOING ‘FOR THE BALLERINA WHAT VELVEETA CHEESE SPREAD DID FOR BRIE’

Part Three of this chapter analyses cheerleading-related discourse characterised by motifs relating to class and the type of taste distinctions theorised by Pierre Bourdieu (1984). It shows that while contemporary cheerleading is simultaneously lucrative for business and expensive for participants (Hanson 1995, p. 47), it is a mass cultural form seen as being at the low end of the hierarchy of taste and value. As is the case with popular culture more generally, it has high socio-economic power, but low cultural status. As discussed in the sections of this chapter dealing with the relationship between feminism and capitalism and sport and capitalism, it seems likely that commercial success renders cheerleading more susceptible to various forms of condemnation. And inversely, these attacks may then enhance the sport’s commercial potential. Constant media coverage – even if it is negative – establishes the visibility of cheerleading and may even give it a certain kind of outlaw appeal¹⁴². On the subject of the economics of cheerleading, it is worth noting that consumers of cheerleading are not only those who respond positively. The market includes those who claim to dislike cheerleaders and who participate in the circulation of representations in order to access the advantages associated with the kinds of vitriol discussed in Chapter Four. Cheerleading can also be framed as assisting in the ‘selling’ of ideals relating to feminism, sports and class. This fits with my broader case that fetishistically inventing or emphasising the sexual nature of cheerleaders offers a number of pleasures, benefits and strategic advantages to a vast range of groups and individuals.

¹⁴² As British cultural theorists Angela McRobbie and Sarah Thornton argue, culture industries can benefit from a threat of censorship, sexual scandal, or subversive activity: ‘The promotional logic is twofold: first, the cultural good will receive a lot of free, if negative publicity... second, rather than alienating everyone, it will be attractive to a contingent of consumers who see themselves as alternative, avant-garde, radical, rebellious or simply young’ (1997, p. 572).

Discourse criticising cheerleading for class-related distinctions includes journalist Jason Overdorf's suggestion that the cheerleader is doing 'for the ballerina what Velveeta cheese spread did for brie' (2008), as well as a web site's ridiculing of cheerleaders' 'terribly unsophisticated' names such as 'Madasyn', 'Mackenzi' and 'Kaylee'¹⁴³ ('Spotted: Cheerleader Names' 2008). In the *Daily Mail*, Tanya Gold refers to participants of a British cheerleading competition as 'Vicky Pollard-esque monsters',¹⁴⁴ condemning the spectacle as making 'a Liberace concert look like a meeting of management consultants' and providing 'a superb impersonation of the St Trinian's day massacre, spliced with *Make Me A Supermodel*' (2007). Cheerleaders are routinely described as being 'tacky',¹⁴⁵ 'tasteless'¹⁴⁶ and 'trashy' (Rundle 2009). A literal example of the framing of cheerleading as trashy can be found in a media interview with a Beijing resident who says he is disappointed by the inclusion of cheerleading in the Olympics because it is American 'garbage' (cited in 'China still warming to concept of cheerleaders' 2008). Lumby links the rejection of cheerleading in discourse to hierarchies of taste ('Some people would prefer to see women in short skirts at the ballet' [cited in Gibson & Maley 2007]), while Australian journalist Karen Pakula writes, analogously, of 'women in Armani suits' viewing 'women in skimpy rayon cowgirl costumes with contempt' (2008).

When considering issues of cultural distinction, it is worth noting that cheerleading inhabits two intersecting domains already viewed as being 'lowbrow': sport and popular culture. Rowe notes that organised sport has been widely regarded, especially among women, as 'an "uncool" product of competitive individualism, masculine aggressiveness and rule-bound behavioural patterns' (1995, p. 10). He also points out the 'historical illegitimacy' of popular culture which was 'largely seen as the domain of simple, bodily pleasure which could – indeed, must – be readily differentiated from the complex, cerebral forms of culture' (1995, p. 2). As such, he notes frequent pronouncements of popular culture's 'absolute debauchery, commercialization, manipulateness and triviality' (ibid, p. 11). Hartley, too, writes of

¹⁴³ 'Oddly spelled' names such as 'Kylee', 'Kyleigh' and 'Keighleigh' are often framed in popular discourse as 'white trash names' and 'trailer trash names' (Czervik 2004).

¹⁴⁴ Vicky Pollard, played by comedian Matt Lucas, is a white trash character from the TV series *Little Britain* – 'your common-or-garden teenage delinquent' ('Little Britain character guide – Vicky Pollard').

¹⁴⁵ See: Cpaaa commenting on Musolino 2009; Tifosi commenting on Musolino 2009; and Cattanaach 2010.

¹⁴⁶ See: Bear commenting on Musolino 2009; and fasil commenting on Musolino 2009.

popular culture's provocation of fears relating to cultural debasement, moral decline, political manipulation, aesthetic banality, psychological influence and social disintegration, and competition (1992, p. 120). This scholarly work provides a broader context for opinions such as that of American academic Herbert London, who cites contemporary cheerleading as an example of the way 'the vulgar has colonized every aspect of popular culture' (2009).

Again, the success of cheerleading (in terms of its large number of participants) is likely to be part of what works against it. As Hartley writes, 'popularity seems to bring with it a poor rather than a high reputation, at least among those in the "knowledge class" whose cultural function it is to dispense repute' (1996, p. 177). Paraphrasing Australian media scholar P. David Marshall's exposition of common views of popular celebrities, I note that cheerleaders are seen as appealing as 'to base and undeveloped tastes' rather than 'some level of abstraction or an aesthetic' (1997, p. 225). They are framed as unsophisticated and inauthentic – as (and again I follow Hartley) 'aesthetically, educationally, politically and/or morally deficient'¹⁴⁷. According to the *Guardian*, they are 'a reminder of the ocean of inanities that commercial modernity promises our lives, drowning all occasions in froth' (Tharoor 2010). This reference to modernity is revealing, and can be further explicated with reference to the work of Rita Felski. In *The Gender of Modernity*, she notes the emblematic status of 19th century prostitutes 'as the ultimate symbol of the commodification of eros, a disturbing example of the ambiguous boundaries separating economics and sexuality the rational and irrational, the instrumental and the aesthetic' (1995, p. 19). Similarly, cheerleaders are regularly framed as figures 'of public pleasure', whose 'deployment of cosmetics and costume' are seen as bearing witness to 'the artificial and commodified forms of contemporary female sexuality' (ibid, pp. 19-20).

The apparent 'sameness' of cheerleaders' appearance and branding is also likely to feed into anxieties and judgments about assembly-line capitalism. Part of the provocation of

¹⁴⁷ The original quote from Hartley is: 'Since Hobbes's time and especially since the nineteenth century when the press became fully industrialised, the media themselves have grown, prospered and some of them have become an accepted part of the governmental administration of life. The "deficit" model also operates here to distinguish the sheep from the goats – invidious comparisons that are designed to accord "official" status to serious outlets and approved modes of address, and to label *disapproved* versions (often the most popular) as aesthetically, educationally, politically and/or morally deficient' (2006, p. 415).

cheerleading is likely to be its Campbell soup can nature¹⁴⁸: its mass-produced aesthetics and pre-fab stylings. As Hartley says of the success of Kylie Minogue, this precarious kind of success is almost incomprehensible within the conceptual coordinates provided by current ideologies of artistic authenticity in that 'it's not based on authorship, originality or uniqueness, but precisely on repeatability... on distribution not copyright' (1996, pp. 183-4). The Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders are known as a single entity rather than as individual personas in much the same way that Mattel's Barbie comes with a range of different eye and hair colours yet is still marketed as Barbie ('Barbie Collector'). Parodies of cheerleaders refer to them as being 'fiendishly hard to tell apart' (Rosenfield 2009), while Stephanie Scholz writes that Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader director Suzanne Mitchell selected new cheerleaders on the basis of their archetypal resonance rather than their disruptive individualism, replacing 'girls with other girls as if she were replacing parts in a machine' (Scholz et al 1991, pp. 140-141). Another example of this fungibility is the way cheerleaders are rarely named but are more likely to be identified by their teams. The fact that cheerleaders can usually only be 'bought' in bulk helps explain the common criticism that they are crass, over-commodified and culturally inauthentic.

PART FOUR: ANTI-AMERICANISM – CHEERLEADERS AND OXYMORONS

Part Four of this chapter will unpack cheerleading-related discourse in the context of anti-Americanism¹⁴⁹, which has historically framed the US and its inhabitants as any combination of vulgar, mediocre, uncouth, vain, stupid, superficial, self-centred, hyper-emotional, shallow, ignorant, and uncultured¹⁵⁰. The concerns of the discussion below overlap with those

¹⁴⁸ American pop artist Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup Can series from 1961 and 1962 makes a wry comment on the uniformity and repetition involved in mass production, utilising, as art historian Sidra Stich puts it, a 'duplication aesthetic' to propose 'conformity as *the* modern American theme' (1987, pp. 91-92, emphasis in original).

¹⁴⁹ Australian political scholar Brendan O'Connor's case is that anti-Americanism 'is not a comprehensive or coherent belief system or ideology, but rather a series of criticisms and prejudices regarding America that have haphazardly been labelled anti-Americanism' (2004, p. 77). He charts a long history of 'cultural laments about American manners and uncouthness', beginning with the inception of America as a European settlement and continuing through to the present day (ibid).

¹⁵⁰ Cf.: Markovits 2007; O'Connor 2004; Ceaser 2003; Rubin & Rubin 2004; and Revel 2003.

sections of this chapter discussing commerce, class and taste, as anti-American discourse often portrays the US as inauthentic, crass, overly-commercialised, and conformist, owing to the influence of phenomena such as corporatisation, marketing, and mass-production¹⁵¹.

Cheerleading is frequently framed (both inside and outside the US) with reference to its American-ness. UK journalist Steven Wells refers to the activity as being 'central to the Reaganite small-town wet-dream' (2006), while more common framings include descriptions of cheerleading as 'quintessentially' American¹⁵² and 'as American as apple pie'¹⁵³. When pondering cheerleading's relatively poor standing as a cultural export, some discourse generated outside the US specifically points to the activity's flamboyance, spectacle, crassness, indefatigable boosterism and/or hyper-sexuality as examples of its archetypal and objectionable American-ness¹⁵⁴. In most cases, however, the criticism implied in language such as 'too American' is presented as being self-explanatory¹⁵⁵.

Markovits notes that French writers have particularly disliked the behaviour of spectators at American sporting events, claiming that 'the collective bellowing, the symptoms of mass

¹⁵¹ US political scholar James Ceaser, for instance, points to criticisms of America's 'dull materialism' and 'deadening conformity' by Romantic thinkers such as the Hungarian-Austrian poet Nikolaus Lenau (2003). Rubin and Rubin, meanwhile, note that, by the 1880s, the US 'represented the forces of mass production, an assault on tradition, capitalism and advertising, the destruction of the individual and the downfall of cultural standards' (2004, p. 20). In 1935, German philosopher Martin Heidegger made his infamous comment that the rise of conformity and routine in America had developed 'into a boundless et cetera of indifference and always the sameness' (cited in Mathy 1993, p. 53). Ceaser writes of Heidegger's framing of America in the early 20th Century as 'the very embodiment of the reign of the ersatz, encouraging the absorption of the unique and authentic into the uniform and the standard' and reducing culture to a commodity for consumption (2003). Related concerns about the inauthenticity of US mass culture are expressed by German poet Rainer Maria Rilke who writes of an American way of life in which products have lost their connection with the real and the human; of the emergence of 'pure undifferentiated things, mere things of appearance, sham articles' (cited in Hollander, 2002).

¹⁵² See: Hanson 1995, p. 100; Coman 2002; Williams 2004; Wells 2006; Campo-Flores 2007; Kent 2008; and Cantor 2008.

¹⁵³ For examples of texts which demonstrate this phenomenon, see: Adams & Bettis 2003a, p. 9; Pratt 2002; Moritz 2006, p. 30; and Storey 2007.

¹⁵⁴ See: Miletic 2004; Gold 2007; and Overdorf 2008.

¹⁵⁵ See: Adams & Bettis 2003a, p. 42; Pippinu commenting on Musolino 2009; and Turk, N commenting on Musolino 2009.

hysteria...[and] the riotous assembly of the fans into tribal-like formations' are regarded as giving these events a primitive air:

For many shocked French male observers, even worse than the brutish athletes were the cheerleaders whom [early 20th Century French writer Urbain] Gohier satirized as 'amazons'. On the one hand, they were the most unfeminine creatures a French man could possibly imagine. On the other hand they reminded him 'of the prostitutes in the Mediterranean ports,' performing a suggestive and furious *danse du ventre* (1997, p. 76).

A significant strand of anti-American discourse involves the framing of US cultural practices and artifacts as exemplars of 'low' culture in the construction of low versus high cultural binaries, and has many overlaps with the texts discussed in Part Three of this chapter. In *Uncouth Nation*, Markovits writes that many Europeans regard the term 'American culture' as oxymoronic (2007, p. 53). In nations such as Australia, where anxieties relating to US influence have often been particularly acute, the threat of American 'low' and/or popular culture has been framed as dangerous on both psychic and physical levels¹⁵⁶.

Accusations of a brash nationalistic confidence in the face of alleged deficits in taste, grace and civility is another significant motif of anti-Americanism (on the macro level)¹⁵⁷ and cheerleading (on the micro). This may help explain discursive condemnations of the peppy, never-say-die cheerleader who continues shaking her pom-poms and shouting encouragement regardless of her team's status during a game. Of the argument that cheerleading may be seen as epitomising American nationalism and identity, Adams and Bettis write that:

¹⁵⁶ Australian historian Raymond Evans notes that, in Australia after World War II, a rough equation was drawn between high culture and respectability on one hand, and 'Americanisation, low (i.e. popular) culture and unacceptable social behaviour on the other', as 'nuclear family values, clean living and decent British restraint' was pitted against 'questionable American excess' (2007, p. 69). This followed a campaign in Australia in the 1930s in which parents groups, women's groups, churches and unions lobbied successfully to have North American comics banned on the grounds that they carried foreign diseases (Lumby & Fine 2006, p. 58).

¹⁵⁷ See: Trollope 1832, p. 21; and O'Connor 2004, p. 79.

The role of the cheerleader as the eternally optimistic all-American girl, who leads the fans to cheer for team members even when they have obviously been beaten, represents the essence of traditional American patriotism (2003, p. 3)¹⁵⁸.

Patriotic concerns also help explain the resistance to cheerleading outside the US. As Rowe puts it, nowhere is the ideological role of sport more evident than in the generation of nationalist sentiment. '[T]he flow of sporting culture across the boundaries of nation states and into their institutions and meaning systems,' he writes, inevitably provokes questions about 'national, regional and local cultural sovereignty' (1995, pp. 135, 122).

This helps explain the framing of cheerleading as being representative of US ideas and culture which have the potential to infect and destroy. 'Long in advance of Hollywood movies or rap music,' writes US political scholar James Ceaser, 'the spread of American culture was likened to a form of disease' (2003). UK sociologist Dominic Strinati tracks the belief that consumption of even a single item of popular culture may leave one 'Americanized' and place one 'under the influence of American culture and the massive commercial industries behind it' (1992, p. 46). In the context of cheerleading, British journalist Tanya Gold writes critically of the arrival of UK-style cheerleading in the UK as being part of a debased cultural onslaught of seismic proportions :

In 1982, there were just six British cheerleading squads, bombing at Blackpool once a year as the crowd yawned at the pointlessness of it all. Today, the tectonic plates of culture have shifted – America has occupied our children's bedrooms, hearts and ears – and there are hundreds of cheerleading squads all over Britain, from Glasgow to Penzance (2007).

Local resistance is framed as the antithesis of this sort of cultural capitulation. In a 2007 Australian newspaper column, for instance, media commentator and former rugby union

¹⁵⁸ For theorisations on themes of US arrogance and political unilateralism in relation to anti-Americanism, see: Ceaser 2003; Rubin & Rubin 2004; O'Connor 2004; and Markovits 2007.

player Peter Fitzsimons heralds Crowe's decision to replace the cheerleaders attached to his NRL team with drummers as a home team victory:

How refreshing to see the rugby league club, with roots that go the deepest into Sydney soil, peel back a couple of layers of American glitz by announcing that this year they won't have cheerleaders! ...the whole cheerleading thing is antiquated American clap-trap, unfit for the 21st Century (2007).

In this context, cheerleading is seen as a form of 'ethnic drag'¹⁵⁹ – an inauthentic, flashy and shallow masquerade of Americana which can be peeled away, in comparison with deeply rooted indigenous (though in this case, strictly white) sport. Cheerleaders 'aren't really a natural thing', agrees one Australian sports fan; they seem 'so fake and american [sic] and awkward' (thermite 2009). As with drag in the cross-dressing sense, however, such criticisms overlook the pleasures that these sort of performative guises offer participants.

Close examination of the discourse here suggests a 'love hate' relationship with America that has many similarities with the fetishistic ambivalence towards cheerleaders discussed elsewhere in this thesis. O'Connor notes that an aversion to America often coexists with a paradoxical kind of cultural embrace (2004, p. 78), while Markovits writes that:

... anti-Americanism in Europe has always been accompanied by an equally discernable pro-Americanism... From America's 'discovery' by Europeans, it has consistently embodied for them simultaneous opposites: heaven and hell; a desired panacea and a despised abomination; utopia and dystopia; dream and nightmare (2007, p. 8).

In the case of cheerleading, this love/hate axis is evidenced by the proliferation of texts which both marvel at and ridicule the popularity, skill, and levels of institutionalisation of cheerleading in the US (Lane 2007), as well as discourse describing the guilty pleasure of consuming the exotic but taboo. UK blogger Rik Ravado, for instance, writes that

¹⁵⁹ In *Ethnic Drag*, cultural theorist Katrin Sieg uses this term to describe cross-racial casting on the stage, as well as, more generally, 'the performance of "race" as a masquerade' (2002).

cheerleaders exert a strange pull on Europeans because 'equivalent creatures' such as old-fashioned beauty pageant contestants were 'banned from our TV screen years ago for being "politically incorrect"' (2009).

Admittedly, there *are* rare examples of counter-discourse which frame the cultural export of US cheerleading in positive or neutral terms. These include: presentations of the US's dominant position vis a vis cheerleading as a competitive challenge (and potential source of patriotic pride if this dominance can be matched or overthrown)¹⁶⁰; human interest stories tracking cheerleading's development as an emerging sport¹⁶¹; reports about the advantages local cheerleaders can gain by attending workshops run by visiting American coaches¹⁶²; and articles about the potential of cheerleading to reverse declines in children's health by attracting children and youths who would not normally participate in competitive sport (Campo-Flores 2007). These discourses often frame cheerleading as respectable, as being increasingly recognised as a legitimate sporting discipline, and as having the ability to foster friendship and goodwill in internationally competitive sporting contexts¹⁶³. A minority welcome the arrival not only of cheerleading but of the US cultural values it is perceived as bringing with it¹⁶⁴.

CASE STUDY: CHEERLEADING IN INDIA AND CHINA IN 2008

This case study examines international discourse generated in response to the inclusion of cheerleading in the Indian Premier League (IPL) in 2008 and at the Olympics in China in the same year. The crucible of the IPL sparked strident media and political debate which made explicit many of the concerns that much mainstream media cheerleading discourse usually

¹⁶⁰ See: Campo-Flores 2007; and 'Cheerleaders dressed to impress in role swap' 2008.

¹⁶¹ See: 'Cheerleaders dressed to impress in role swap' 2008; Douglas 2008.

¹⁶² See: 'Want to be a cheerleader' 2002; Green 2007.

¹⁶³ See: '2009 Downunder Spirit Championships'; Balym 2004; Dillaway 2007; Chanitnun 2008; 'Cheerleaders dressed to impress in role swap' 2008.

¹⁶⁴ For example, a reader commenting on a newspaper story about the rising popularity of cheerleading in the UK writes that: '[Cheerleading] may go some way to introducing some form of school spirit into schools. Much as it is easy to mock pep and the stereotype enthusiasm - cohesion is sorely lacking in general youth culture. A bit of glue can't hurt' (cited in Woolf 2004).

only implies, namely: that cheerleading represents an abuse of women; that it cheapens and distracts from the purity of sport; and that it is a trashy American cultural and moral contaminant. The feminist contention that cheerleading constitutes a form of social control over women was also played out in a spectacularly literal fashion in India, where law enforcement officers policed cheerleader outfits and dancing moves to ensure they did not violate laws relating to indecency ('India warns cricket cheerleaders' 2008). The use of cheerleaders at the 2008 Beijing Olympics – which also generated much local and international media interest – is a revealing counterpoint to the Indian experience. Of particular interest is the way the sexualised appearance and performance of cheerleaders was heralded as a sign of political progressiveness.

India

The IPL is a Twenty20 cricket competition created by India's Board of Control for Cricket (BCCI) in which eight, highly-paid teams play a limited-over version of cricket. Media discourse often refers to its focus on gaudy entertainment as opposed to 'genteel spectators sipping tea while politely applauding their team' (Scrutton 2008). While cheerleaders were hired from around the world to perform during the first season in 2008, media coverage focused on American involvement, particularly the arrival of cheerleaders from the Washington Redskins who conducted a national audition of Indian women to help set up a squad of indigenous cheerleaders for one of the IPL teams (Varadarajan 2008).

Indian opponents of the IPL cheerleaders often made claims that Indian tradition was being contravened by sexually explicit American cultural imperialism¹⁶⁵. An Indian historian, Ramchandra Guha, told the media that US-style cheerleading risked 'stoking the base, voyeuristic and sexual insecurities of the Indian male' and asked why the nation always has to 'borrow the worst of the Western world' (cited in Blakely 2008). Guha's concerns seemed to be supported by media articles which reported that some spectators greeted the cheerleaders with leering and harassment¹⁶⁶. In an on-line debate, one commentator called the inclusion of cheerleaders in the IPL a tragic exploitation and humiliation of women:

¹⁶⁵ See also: Sengupta 2008; and Scrutton 2008.

¹⁶⁶ See: Sengupta 2008; and Sharma 2008.

This disgusting development yet again confirms the corrupt, decaying state of western 'culture'. It's clear that the West has no respect for women, who are basically treated like commodities... [I]t is unthinkable that basically nude women would be allowed to be seen in public in Afghanistan or Iran (Alam commenting on Tharoor 2010).

Among other things, such comments illustrate the ease with which feminist rhetoric converges with extreme moral conservatism – where the 'protection' of women is used to justify their oppression. Similar themes emerged in a media statement by an Indian minister who said:

We live in India where womanhood is worshipped. How can anything obscene like this be allowed. This thing is meant for foreigners and not for us. Mothers and daughters watch these matches on television. It does not look nice (cited in 'India warns cricket cheerleaders' 2008).

The protests and debate over the presence and performances of cheerleaders at the IPL led to a number of tangible changes in the involvement of cheerleaders during the 2008 season. Cheerleaders for the Deccan Chargers who had worn tartan miniskirts, fishnet stockings and halter tops, were covered in short-sleeve T-shirts and black tights while other teams ceased using cheerleaders altogether¹⁶⁷. Despite these controversies and the changes that followed, however, local and international cheerleaders were associated with at least six of the eight IPL in the second season of the IPL which began in South Africa in April, 2009¹⁶⁸. Cheerleaders also began appearing in other Indian cricket leagues – though many involved distinctly Indian variations. In November 2008, the Orissa Cricket Association (OCA) announced that cheerleaders dressed in saris would support the national cricket team at a one-day international match with England (Blakely 2008). An indigenous cheerleading squad choreographed by a Mumbai-based choreographer and led by Bollywood star Rakhi Sawant

¹⁶⁷ See: 'Cheerleaders "covered" after threat' 2008; and Sengupta 2008.

¹⁶⁸ See: 'New cheerleaders for Royal Challengers Bangalore' 2009; and 'IPL cheerleaders get their Bollywood touch' 2009.

as 'Queen Cheerleader' was also introduced to the Indian Cricket League's (ICL's) private version of the Indian Premier League ('Rakhi Sawant is "Queen cheerleader"' 2008). In this sense, it is possible that the 'indigenisation' of cheerleading made it more acceptable because it was de-Americanised.

China

Two distinct groups of cheerleaders appeared during the 2008 Beijing Olympic and Paralympic games. The first involved 800,000 volunteers who did not dance but sat among other audience members in yellow and red uniforms performing an official Olympics chant devised by the Communist Party's spiritual civilisation bureau, the ministry of education and the Beijing Olympic Organising Committee. These were said to have been inspired by South Korea's 'Red Devil' street cheerers during the 2002 soccer World Cup (Adams & Foster 2008) and played a central role in Chinese government Olympic propaganda. In identical official statements from a large number of Chinese embassies, for example, the Beijing Olympics organising committee said these cheerleaders demonstrated the 'charisma' and 'enthusiasm' of the Chinese people to the world. The Chinese government was upfront about the fact that cheerleader instruction was one measure in the official 'civilization campaign' to educate Chinese people on the public behaviour required for the Olympics¹⁶⁹.

The official Chinese cheer squad chanted in support of both Chinese and foreign athletes and was mocked in outside media discourse for missing 'the point' of cheering only for one's own country (Adams & Foster 2008), as well as for its stylised, rehearsed, and conformist nature. In the UK, the *Telegraph*, wrote that:

there is nothing spontaneous about the clapping, cheering and drumming they have been instructed to carry out. Nothing has been left to chance: hundreds of these 'fans' were drilled months before the Olympics began. Just as the shirts and batons are a uniform, so making a noise is a duty (Adams & Foster 2008).

¹⁶⁹ See: Chen 2008; and 'Olympic Cheerleaders Point New Direction for China's Diplomacy' 2008.

Criticisms of these cheerleaders contributed to broader framings of the Beijing Olympics as inauthentic and overly controlled by the Chinese government¹⁷⁰, particularly when it was revealed that the cheerleaders were used to fill empty seats to cover the 'embarrassment' of flagging ticket sales (O'Connor 2008)¹⁷¹. The Chinese government-trained squads were criticised: as deceptive (in that their cheerleaders were presented as genuine spectators rather than official seat fillers); as spurious (in that the cheerleaders were not expressing spontaneous displays of emotion, support and patriotism); and as evidence of oppression (in that the cheerleaders were controlled from above). Once again, these specific texts reflect broader framings of cheerleading as a form of manipulation, social control, and oppressive standardisation.

The second group of cheerleaders at the Beijing games were modelled on professional American cheerleaders. As with the IPL, professional American cheerleaders were brought in to train the 600 Chinese volunteers who were to cheer on the sidelines of a number of Olympic events (Kent 2008). Unlike discourse framing cheerleading in India, however, media texts produced both inside and outside China portrayed this as a largely positive development. 'Some of them are wearing a bit too little maybe, but I can accept it,' a 53-year-old Beijing accountant told the Reuters news service. 'I think we're quite open now' ('Cheerleaders – the once unthinkable hot ticket 2008). In China in this instance, discourses of national pride often revolved around an embracing – or at least an acceptance – of US-style sexuality and glamour norms. This contrasts with India during the IPL, where discourses of national pride rejected what was seen as American sexualisation. 'All of us in China have paid a lot to stage these Olympics...' one Chinese cheerleader told the Western media, 'tanning my skin brown is part of that effort' (cited in Eckert 2008). An exception

¹⁷⁰ Media coverage of the games included criticism of the government for: restricting media access (Yardley 2008); incorporating lip-synching in the opening ceremony (Sullivan 2008); digitally enhancing the fireworks seen in television coverage of the opening ceremony (Claburn 2008); and attempting to manipulate the weather by firing 'rain dispersal rockets' at clouds (Tom 2008).

¹⁷¹ See also Bristow 2008; and 'Beijing to deploy 350,000 cheerleaders for Paralympics: report' 2008.

was a report in the *Taipei Times*¹⁷² which quoted an angry Beijing resident suggesting Western visitors would say:

'This is garbage from home, why did we come all the way to see this?' We don't want garbage! We want China's best and most exciting (cited in 'China still warming to concept of cheerleaders' 2008).

While distinct local variations of cheerleading in India appeared only after controversy and protests, China's professional-style Olympic cheerleaders incorporated a number of local cultural themes from the outset. These included silk fans, nunchaku, terracotta warriors, Chinese rattle drums and elements from traditional Peking opera (Kent 2008). The Chinese media framed these indigenisations as progressive, exciting and impressive to outsiders (though it is important, here, to remember that media restrictions in play in China often result in automatically celebratory coverage of official decisions).

Foreign media coverage of China's use of professional-style cheerleaders at the Olympic Games was ambivalent. Critical discourse mocked what was seen as an idiosyncratic and inferior take on American cheerleading¹⁷³. Positive reviews approved of the Chinese cheerleaders' ability to mimic American styles¹⁷⁴ and heralded the sexual appeal of Chinese cheerleaders as a sign of China's progressive nature. One journalist wrote favourably of the Chinese cheerleaders' decision to tan so they looked realistic and believable as 'beach babes' (Ally 2008). Another noted approvingly that the women were writhing and jiggling to 'blaring rock and disco music in bathing suits that would make their prudish Communist elders roll in their graves' (Eckert 2008). Coverage often included picture galleries and video footage emphasising the cheerleaders' bodies, minimal costumes, and sexual poses¹⁷⁵ – as per the fetishisation of cheerleaders addressed in Chapter Three.

¹⁷² It should be noted that the *Taipei Times* is regarded as having an anti-China bias in that it favours Taiwanese political parties who support Taiwanese independence over reunification (Rawnsley & Rawnsley 2004).

¹⁷³ See: 'Chinese Cheerleaders Resemble "I Dream Of Jeannie"' 2008; 'China still warming to concept of cheerleaders' 2008; and Bramham 2008.

¹⁷⁴ See: 'Cheerleaders prep for Beijing Games' 2008; and Kent 2008.

¹⁷⁵ See: Ally 2008; Millieunet 2008; Shinujohn 2008; and 'Olympic Beach Volleyball Cheerleaders Fan Dance' 2008.

In conclusion, these case studies of cheerleading-related discourse in India and China exemplify many of the broader anxieties piqued by cheerleading. These include claims relating to: the hyper-sexualised nature of cheerleading; the influence of cheerleading on wider social morality; and the association of cheerleading with 'lowbrow' culture and American cultural imperialism. They show the similarities between feminist and morally conservative rhetorics, as well as revealing the combination of sexual fetishisation and vitriol which is frequently directed at cheerleaders, and which will be examined at length in Chapters Three and Four.

CONCLUSION

The four sections and two case studies which comprise this chapter illustrate a number of key tenets of this thesis. In addition to demonstrating the fetishistic fixation with cheerleading as a subject in discourse, they reveal the way hyper-sexualised and fetishistic constructions of cheerleading influence subsequent discourse. It is clear from the texts analysed above, for instance, that discourse circulating in domains such as feminism and sport involve an unquestioning acceptance of the fetishised, hyper-sexual constructions of cheerleaders which proliferate in pornography¹⁷⁶. Fetishism is also evident in the disavowal of discursive convergences between groups such as feminist and social conservatives: there is a seeing but not seeing which allows these movements to exploit the strategic advantages of informal coalitions. As Lumby writes of 'the mushrooming alliances' between pro-censorship feminists and social conservatives: 'It would be both foolish and arrogant to suggest the benefits of this relationship only flow one way or that the fit is entirely coincidental' (1997, p. 17). My case is that such convergences also come at a cost to scapegoats such as cheerleaders.

The many variations of anti-cheerleading discourse converge to create effects which are extra-discursive, and which result in a number of significant disadvantages for the activity and its participants. The most obvious of these is the frequent call for cheerleading to be

¹⁷⁶ These fetishised constructions are discussed in Chapter Three.

banned or restricted. One media commentator says cheerleading should 'G-O A-W-A-Y' (Pumilia 2010) while another suggests it only be performed by girls over 17 (hippie commenting on 'Two Sides of the Same Old Coin' 2009). A participant in an on-line debate about cheerleading expresses amazement that there is any disagreement about the 'obvious point, that Cheerleaders are a misogynist [sic] archaic part of sport that needs to go' (Newie commenting on Musolino 2009)¹⁷⁷. Negative discourse framing cheerleading is also likely to be a factor in the ongoing refusal of the US to officially recognise it as a sport, thereby making it less regulated and more risky – sometimes even life-threatening – for participants.

It is significant that the condemnation (and in one case in Australia, the extinguishment¹⁷⁸) of cheer squads is frequently couched in the rhetoric of feminine empowerment – even if this discourse is produced by groups or individuals which seem conspicuously non-feminist or even blatantly misogynistic in nature. My conclusion is that the feminist condemnation of women such as cheerleaders assists in providing social sanction for discursive and extra-discursive attacks because it gives antagonists a sense of legitimacy – possibly even elevating them to the moral high ground¹⁷⁹. As such, feminist vitriol targeting cheerleaders provides exculpatory possibilities for misogynist discourse that would be deemed unacceptable if directed at other targets. While the blatant derogation of sex workers is regarded as socially unacceptable in the mainstream media, for example, discourse with 'slut-shaming'¹⁸⁰ themes is often applauded if aimed at cheerleaders. Thus critics of cheerleading produce – with impunity – vitriol equating cheerleading with aspects of the sex industry such as: pornography¹⁸¹; prostitution¹⁸²; 'adult clubs' (Deshotel cited in Reid 2005); and 'exotic'

¹⁷⁷ For other media texts calling for the banning of cheerleading, see: Musolino 2009; and Markson cited in Benns 2009.

¹⁷⁸ I am referring here to discourse framing Russell Crowe's axing of the cheerleading squad attached to the Rabbitohs (Ritchie & Charnock 2007; and Ham 2007).

¹⁷⁹ Relevant here is Lumby's observation that high-profile feminists are 'more or less guaranteed the moral high ground in mainstream media coverage' (1997 p. 156).

¹⁸⁰ The *Finally, A Feminism 101 Blog* defines 'slut-shaming' as the 'shaming and/or attacking a woman or a girl for being sexual, having one or more sexual partners, acknowledging sexual feelings, and/or acting on sexual feelings' (Tekanji 2004). The site argues that this 'is damaging not only to the girls and women targeted, but to women in general an [sic] society as a whole', noting that 'slut-shaming can occur even if the term "slut" itself is not used' (ibid).

¹⁸¹ See: O'Connor 2000; and Lilith commenting on Pumilia 2007.

¹⁸² See: Lilith commenting on Pumilia 2007; and Catherine 2008.

dancing such as stripping, lap dancing and pole dancing¹⁸³. 'I'm not saying all cheerleaders are whores,' writes one commentator on the *Deadspin* sports web site, 'I'm saying most of them are' (McSteez 2008). Such comments speak to the tenacity and adaptability of discourses which lasciviously derogate women for alleged promiscuity. Feminism may have influenced mainstream norms to the point where it is no longer socially acceptable to call a practicing sex worker a 'slut', but the term – and its multiple synonyms – is still used aggressively against other groups of young women, particularly those whose lives and concerns do not align neatly with second wave feminist principles. These discursive patterns therefore have relevance beyond cheerleading because they are a microcosm of the way old forms of misogyny are being recast and redirected to target new generations of young women.

¹⁸³ See: Ravado; Fox; British Cheerleaders' Association cited in Lashley 2006; Lilith commenting on Pumilia 2007; brandon commenting on Pumilia 2007; Fisher 2008; McD 2009; Parker 2009; Perkins commenting on Chandler 2009c; and InspectorCallahan commenting on Tharoor 2010.

CHAPTER THREE: A FETISH FOR CHEERLEADERS

Chapter Two of this thesis maps the way anti-cheerleading discourse involves convergences across disparate ideological lines. As such, standard ideological explanations no longer apply: anti-cheerleading discourse cannot be explained *solely* in terms of gender, class, political orientation and so on. Clearly, therefore, the field of inquiry requires a will to resist the habitual theoretical reflexes that are typically triggered by exposure to the kinds of cultural phenomena I have been discussing. Although any attempt to supply a general normative account of explanatory adequacy will run aground on a range of cultural and historical specificities¹⁸⁴, a decent theoretical architecture is normally expected to evince at least some of the following features: that it collects disparate social or cultural phenomena and is able to furnish an account of these that is relatively parsimonious; that it is able to reconcile epistemological anomalies that arise on account of using rival theoretical frames¹⁸⁵; and that it has the potential for theoretical extrapolation in other contexts – including what analytic philosophers of science once called ‘predictive power’¹⁸⁶. In this chapter I argue that a revamped fetish theory is the most useful hermeneutic lens for cheerleading-related discourse.

My use of the term fetish draws upon a rich, cross-disciplinary tradition of cultural inquiry, and spans anthropological, economic, psycho-sexual, and popular contexts. While a circumscribed investigation of all of these historical milieu inform my recalibrations of fetish theory, it is the degraded (yet irresistible) objects and disavowals associated with fetish in psychoanalysis – and lay interpretations of fetish in psychoanalysis – that are particularly useful for explicating media framings of cheerleading. Among a range of theoretical advantages, fetish theory allows for ideological differences, and helps makes sense of the ambivalence, obsession, and contradiction evident in media framings of cheerleading. Further, it captures the sexual connotations overtly and covertly accompanying cheerleading-related discourse. Over the course of this chapter, I will address the characteristics and

¹⁸⁴ Cf.: Feyerabend 1975; Laudan 1977; and Kuhn 1977.

¹⁸⁵ For example, as discussed in Chapter Two, the convergence of feminist and social conservative anti-cheerleading discourse generates anomalies that confound standard feminist hermeneutics.

¹⁸⁶ See: Swinburne 1973.

significance of what I will show is an intense fixation with cheerleading and cheerleaders in pornography, popular culture, and news media discourse¹⁸⁷. The fixation on cheerleading in these discursive sites can be framed as fetishistic, as can the frequent and paradoxical combination of denouncement and obsessive fascination found in the texts themselves. As such, fetish captures the nature of the fixation as well as the fixation itself.

Since the 1890s, psychologists have accepted sexual fetishism as the privileged model for conceptions of sexual perversion, with the fetishist reigning as 'the exemplary pervert' because they fix on 'the most degradingly inappropriate object of love: an impersonal object or a depersonalized quality' (Pietz 2003, p. 314). American cultural theorist Matt Wray's observation is that (Freudian) fetish involves a kind of 'creative denial... that helps the fetishist ward off anxiety and restore a sense of well-being, all the while producing a kind of amnesia' (1998). Fetish-related discourse in popular culture suggests rarity is regarded as a necessary element for a sexual practice to be classed as a fetish in lay discourse. 'Since when is spanking a fetish?' writes one contributor to *Yahoo! Answers*. 'Everyone does it' (dancingz 2008). Relevant here is the work of feminist writer and 'sex radical' Pat Califia who argues that much fetishism is likely to pass as 'normal' sexuality because 'the required cues' are so readily available (1994, p. 172). The ubiquity of large breasts in erotic and pornographic imagery is a popularly cited example. Australian media studies academic Katherine Albury suggests a fetish is constituted in part by its unspeakability *as* fetish: 'not nice to talk about in public' (2002, p. 45). Her argument is that Freud's theories 'have been so completely absorbed into our public cultural understanding of sexuality that they are part of the furniture' and have been accepted as commonsense (ibid).

While fetish was initially tied to a set of explicit connotations in Freudian discourse, contemporary academic work can refer to any, some or all of the term's historical reference points. An example is US cultural theorist Mario Wenning who says to fetishise is to 'invest something with powers it does not intrinsically possess' (2002) – a usage which resonates with religious, anthropological, economic and psycho-sexual meanings. There is also a definitional slipperiness to popular references. In *Growth Fetish*, Australian author Clive

¹⁸⁷ My organisation of this chapter into these three sections is not to suggest that these categories are discrete.

Hamilton collapses anthropological, economic, and psycho-sexual meanings when he describes the 'promise of bliss' and consequent 'excitation' produced by a belief that economic growth has 'magical powers' (2003, pp. 3-4). The subjectivism inherent in many contemporary references to fetish is evident in legal contexts such as Australia's Federal *Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995* which defines fetish – with astounding elasticity – in its guidelines as 'an object, an action or a non-sexual part of the body which gives sexual gratification' (*Guidelines for the Classification of Films and Computer Games*, p. 21).

Given that the term 'fetish' currently appears in such a vast range of lay contexts, a definitional sliding scale may assist in unpacking the breadth of meanings conveyed by popular references. This is reminiscent of Kinsey Institute sex researcher Paul Gebhard's 'continuum of intensities' demonstrating the way therapists might distinguish between 'normal' and 'pathological' behaviours (Albury 2002, p. 54). At one end – I shall call it Level One (as Gebhard does) – are references which imply intense interest but where any sexual connotations are humorous rather than literal. Examples include: American writer and cartoonist Alison Bechdel's statement that she has 'a fetish for the truth, for detailed authenticity' (cited in Mautner 2008); a gossip columnist's breathless revelation that American actress Debra Messing has a fetish for fountain pens based on the fact that Messing likes and collects them (Cars 2010); and a computer writer's confession that he has a fetish for saving PDF copies in an article about keyboard shortcuts (Sparks 2008). At a central point – Level Two – are references which imply a sexual interest but one which is playful and generic rather than specific. Examples include: an internet headline announcing that American rock performer Josh Homme has a 'fetish for Kylie Minogue' simply because he finds her attractive and likes her music ('QOTSA Frontman Has A Fetish For Kylie Minogue' 2003); and a New York City tourism site which refers to 'the shops at the center of Carrie Bradshaw's shoe fetish' (Whitman 2008). At the other extreme – Level Three – are references which imply a sexual interest which is intense and often highly specific. Examples include: a reader of AskMen.com who owns up to having 'a fetish for wearing womens [sic] lingerie and masturbating' (royboy 2009); the genitally explicit photos of bondage and discipline posted on web sites such as Fetish Nation (*Fetish Nation*); and the section of a

'Sneeze Fetish Forum' devoted to debate about whether sniffing¹⁸⁸ should be classified as a 'related fetish' on the site ('Sniffing fetish?' 2005).

It is clear that the amorphous and idiosyncratic nature of contemporary popular and academic allusions to fetish gain potency from the highly specific definitions found in the term's dynamic semiotic genealogy. Ironically, these capitalisations on the linguistic power generated by the term's history can also be framed as fetishistic, given that the processes leading to the creation of this power often seem to have been overlooked, forgotten or ignored. I also acknowledge the charge of Wray who argues that fetish theory has enjoyed such great favour among cultural theorists that they may have developed a fetish for fetishism itself:

Clearly, we derive a certain perverse pleasure from using the term, enjoying its cachet and the way it wryly suggests a sexual, libidinal energy at work in everything from shopping to sport, from celebrity worship to public humiliations... It is generally understood as a potent – I'm tempted to say magical – weapon of analysis... (1998).

While my decision to use fetish as an analytical and organisational tool in this thesis relies primarily on the broad, popular definition of 'an obsession or fixation' ('Fetish'), it also makes theoretical use of the term's more specific historical deployments. There is a suggestion that those in the grip of a fetish have an unjustified and irrational fixation or preoccupation, and a blindness to an object or subject's 'real' nature. Current references to fetish can evoke images of salaciousness, alienation, reification, supernatural powers, pathologisation, manipulation and/or a sense that the focus of a fetish may not deliver its promised bliss and is not to be trusted – resonances all cogent to explicating textual references to cheerleading in pornography, popular culture and the news media.

¹⁸⁸ The verb 'to sniffle' is defined by *The Free Dictionary* as 'to breathe audibly through a runny or congested nose' ('sniffle').

PART ONE: PORNOGRAPHY

Frequently framed as universal objects of male desire, cheerleaders are a staple of heterosexual Western pornography which can include films and DVDs, erotic stories, magazines, photographs, downloadable internet content, and DIY gonzo material¹⁸⁹. While this thesis does not offer an exhaustive or quantitative survey of cheerleading-themed pornography, there is good evidence to suggest that cheerleaders are sexualised and sexually commodified at dramatically higher rates than girls and women involved in other sporting pursuits. A possible explanation is that cheerleading-themed pornography provides access to taboos such as those relating to exploitation and coercion, and to pedophilia and hebephilia¹⁹⁰. This section deals with representations of cheerleaders in Western pornography since the early 1970s¹⁹¹, mostly in the form of films and internet content. It is rare for discourse in these contexts to refer explicitly to a sexual interest in cheerleading as being a fetish¹⁹². It seems reasonable to conclude that this is because: 1) cheerleading-themed pornography is so prolific; and 2) a sexual interest in cheerleaders is regarded as commonsensical. By this logic, a reference to a 'cheerleading fetish' would be regarded by many consumers of pornography as tautological.

The Cheerleaders (1972) – described by one contemporary viewer as 'a sexploitation classic' (Rogers 2000) – was the first of a series of cheerleader-themed pornographic films made in the US in the 1970s. According to a reviewer for the 'cult, horror and exploitation' film website Wildside Cinema, 'using cheerleaders as fodder for sexploitation movies was the

¹⁸⁹ It is important to acknowledge that definitions of what is and is not pornography are contested and contextual, and that consumers of pornography may include women – a group traditionally seen as requiring 'protection' from pornography (McKee, Albury & Lumby 2008, pp. 3-20, 23, 46). To put it another way: both the content of and audience for pornography are heterogeneous.

¹⁹⁰ Blanchard et al define hebephilia as 'the erotic preference for pubescent children (roughly, ages 11 or 12-14)' as opposed to pedophilia which denotes 'the erotic preference for prepubescent children' (2008, p. 335).

¹⁹¹ Nineteen seventy-two was the date of the earliest example of cheerleading pornography I was able to locate. Earlier films might exist, but charting the history of cheerleader pornography would be a research project in itself and the broad nature of this PhD made further investigation impractical.

¹⁹² Examples of internet pornography sites which *do* classify cheerleading-themed material as a fetish include *Fetish Pie*, *Cute Cheerleaders* and *Lightspeed University Cheerleaders*.

logical next step after films devoted to nurses and stewardesses' (Garfield). In *The Cheerleaders*, a group of high-school cheerleaders inadvertently tire their team by having sex with them. They then feel it is their duty to sexually exhaust the opposing team's players, as well. In 2003, the film was re-released as a box set along with two sequels: *The Swinging Cheerleaders* (1974) and *Revenge of the Cheerleaders* (1975). Many contemporary reviewers note the films' depictions of what are now regarded as politically incorrect taboos. Examples include sex between students and teachers (West), high school drug use (Garfield) and 'date rape, teenage nudity, statutory rape [and] borderline incest' (Parry). That said, the films' soft core content¹⁹³, slapstick humour, and 1970s aesthetics and production values mean they are now more likely to be traded in mainstream, cult and kitsch markets rather than those specialising in pornography. (A search of on-line catalogues on 27 May 2009, for instance, revealed that *The Cheerleaders* box set was available from the official *Turner Classic Movies* site ['The Cheerleaders Collection'] but not from mail-order companies specialising in pornography such as Adultshop.com [*Adultshop.com*] and Uncutdvds [*Uncutdvds*].) I note that *The Cheerleaders*' lengthy but relatively tame 'up-skirt' shots of clothed bottoms and high-kicking legs are restrained in comparison with the genitally explicit nature of much 21st century pornography. As such, contemporary fans of *The Cheerleaders* might be accused of having more boutique and fetishistic (as per Level Three of the scale outlined above) predilections than those who consume more 'hard core' cheerleading-themed pornography.

Also infamous in Western pornographic film culture is 1978's *Debbie Does Dallas* – an X-rated¹⁹⁴ movie which remains a bestseller and is considered by many consumers as 'classic' pornography (McKee et al 2008, pp. 53, 35). The film focuses on a team of high school cheerleaders who begin charging money in exchange for sexual relations in an attempt to

¹⁹³ While 'soft core' is a subjective expression, it is often reflected in legal frameworks governing the distribution of pornography. The *Cheerleaders* film trilogy, for instance, has no explicit genital or sexual detail which means that in Australia these films are rated R 18+ – Restricted, placing them below the more explicit X 18+ – Restricted category under Australia's film classification system (*Guidelines for the Classification of Films and Computer Games* 2008, pp. 15-17). For the purposes of this thesis, my definition of 'soft-core' is pornographic material which does not extend beyond discreet genital detail and implied sex. My definition of 'hard-core' is pornography which includes explicit genital detail and/or explicit or actual sex.

¹⁹⁴ In Australia, *Debbie Does Dallas* is rated X 18+ – Restricted which, as previously mentioned, is the most extreme category for pornographic films in Australia.

fund the title character's journey to Dallas to join the 'Texas Cowgirls'. This implied reference to the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders resulted in a successful lawsuit for trademark infringement (Farmany 1988): in 1979, the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders successfully stopped a New York theatre from screening *Debbie Does Dallas* (Farmany 1988) after a judge agreed there could be confusion between the squad and what he described as a 'gross and revolting sex film' (Miller 2002, p. 152). *Debbie does Dallas* is described one of the five top-grossing adult movies in history (Scaramouch 2007) and 'the Citizen Kane of porn movies' ('Thingo of the week'). It has led to a plethora of parodies and spin-offs both inside and outside the adult industry. Wikipedia¹⁹⁵ lists four sequels and nearly 50 pornographic film spin-offs including *Debbie Does Spanking 1*, *Debbie Does Dallas the Next Generation*, *Debbie Does Whip-ass 3* and *Debbie Duz Dishes 2: Blazing Mattresses* ('Debbie Does Dallas') – though many of these seem to be cheerleading-free; they cash in on the notoriety and connotations of the 'Debbie' name rather than the original film's cheerleading content. There are, however, a multitude of contemporary pornographic film takes on cheerleading including titles such as *Cheerleaders* ('let this sexy cheer squad take you with them on their slutty adventures!' ['Cheerleaders' {a}]), *Cheerleader Nurses* ('ambitious young women train to become student nurses while they nurture alternative vocations like car wash management, exotic dancing, and... cheerleading' ['Cheerleader Nurses']), and *Dirtiest Cheerleader on the Planet* ('These varsity vaginas' [sic] got the nastiest cheer in town!' ['Dirtiest Cheerleader on the Planet']).

The cybersphere offers an extraordinarily high volume of cheerleading-related amateur and professional pornography in the form of still photographs and short video clips. While exact statistics are impossible to obtain, Google searches do provide some useful insights. In 2009, I conducted a number of searches using the word 'porn' combined with the words 'cheerleader', 'cheerleaders' and/or 'cheerleading'¹⁹⁶. The latter yielded an average of 5 million results – compared to a search for 'porn' alone which yielded an average of 220

¹⁹⁵ While I acknowledge the limitations of using Wikipedia for academic research, my case is that it has its place when discussing a subject such as internet pornography, where reputable research is limited and the field is vast.

¹⁹⁶ The exact search entered over a number of days in May, June, July and August 2009 was 'cheerleader OR cheerleaders OR cheerleading and porn' (without the single quotation marks) which had a Google URL of <http://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en-us&q=cheerleader+OR+cheerleaders+OR+cheerleading+and+porn&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>.

million results¹⁹⁷. The vast bulk of sites featuring cheerleading-related material offer 'hard-core' pornography in that close-ups of genitals and explicit sexual activity are shown. While cheerleading material is a frequent feature of general pornographic sites, many specialise in cheerleading alone. These include sites such as *Cheer Chix* (*Cheer Chix*), *Phat Booty Cheerleaders* (*Phat Booty Cheerleaders*), *Cum Swapping Cheerleaders* (*Cum Swapping Cheerleaders*), *Cheerleader Auditions* (*Cheerleader Auditions*), *Cheerleaders Sex Clips* (*Cheerleader Sex Clips*) and *Lightspeed University Cheerleaders* which describes itself as 'the best cheerleader fetish site on the entire planet' (*Lightspeed University Cheerleaders*).

The cheerleading component of much cheerleading-related internet pornography rarely extends beyond the inclusion of generic, cheerleading-style uniforms. (As one on-line writer puts it: 'You can make an average girl into a hottie just by adding a cheerleader costume. Even someone as ugly as Kirsten Dunst looked good as a cheerleader' [Delatte 2010].) Most of this material does, however, include generic visual references to female youth or educational institutions such as buses, pigtails, school principals and/or drunken parties. Examples include: 'Free Porn – Cheerleader'; 'Cute cheerleader celebratin [sic]18 [sic] birthday with cock in mouth'; 'Sexy cheerleader banged by principal' 2008; 'Big Cheerleader Tits Jiggle'; and others. Sporting references are also common in the form of locker rooms, coaches and plot-lines such as cheerleaders having sexual relations in order to achieve a place on a team or in exchange for money in the context of educational or sporting fund-raising efforts. Examples include: 'Cheerleader fucks in locker room' 2009; 'Hot cheerleader fucks her coach' 2009; 'Cheerleader Auditions' 2006; 'Horny cheerleaders fucks [sic] for cash' 2008; and others.

Cheerleader-themed pornography is often teamed with other common pornographic themes such as lesbianism¹⁹⁸, group sex, anal sex and spanking (examples include: 'Lesbian Cheerleaders Links'; 'Cheergirl Group Sex'; 'Cheerleader Anal Sex'; and numerous others) as well as with more obscure practices such as sexual activity focussing on nylon pantyhose,

¹⁹⁷ The exact search entered over a number of days in May, June, July and August 2009 was 'porn' (without the single quotation marks) which had a Google URL of <http://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en-us&q=porn&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>.

¹⁹⁸ As Bright writes: 'Do you have any idea how many "lesbian cheerleader porn sites" there are? I gave up flipping the Google pages' (2005).

latex, coprophilia and transexualism (examples include: 'Cheerleader with sexy feet in pantyhose' 2007; 'Filthy Cheerleader'; 'Cheerleader Enemas'; 'Transexual Cheerleaders'; and numerous others). A not insubstantial sub-genre of cheerleading-themed pornography centres on cheerleaders who are sleeping or unconscious because they have passed out after an intense gym work out or following 'a big game' (see: 'Sleepin [sic] Cheerleader woke up with cumshot all over her face' 2007; 'Sleeping Cheerleader Fuck' 2008; 'Passed out cheerleader fucked and taped by her Ex' 2009; and numerous others).

In addition to the films and internet sites discussed above, cheerleading appears in a variety of print contexts. When *Playboy* magazine released its first annual hierarchisation of America's 'top party schools', for instance, it factored 'cheerleader ranking' in what it claimed was a scientific approach ('Playboy Releases List of the Top Party Schools in America' 2009). Also available are erotic cheerleader-related stories (Anonymous) and cheerleading sexual novelties. Examples of the latter include an 'Erotic Cheerleader Costume with Mini Pleated Skirt, Crop Top and Pom Poms' ('Erotic Cheerleader Costume with Mini Pleated Skirt, Crop Top and Pom Poms'), as well as cheerleader blow-up sex dolls ('Kirsten Price Cheerleader Doll'). Since 2001, an expurgated, theatrical version of *Debbie Does Dallas* called *Debbie Does Dallas: The Musical* has also offered mainstream theatrical audiences access to a socially sanctioned version of the pornographic cheerleader¹⁹⁹. Other, significant fetishised representations of cheerleading surface in folklore; for example, 'The Promiscuous Cheerleader' legend, which proliferates on American university campuses (Fine and Johnson 1980). This story involves a cheerleader who has sexual relations with an athletic team before having to have a biologically infeasible amount of semen pumped from her stomach in hospital.

The sexual fascination with cheerleaders is rarely acknowledged explicitly in mainstream news reports²⁰⁰. Rare exceptions include news reports concerning allegations that, in 2007,

¹⁹⁹ As the lead actress in the Australian production of *Debbie Does Dallas* tells a journalist: 'The plot is exactly the same, expect [sic] that where there's a sex scene in the movie we have a musical number. There's an orgy scene in the movie and that becomes a tango. And *The Dildo Rag*, that's a rag, it's a tap number' (Adam cited in Purcell 2004).

²⁰⁰ News media *constructions* which can be framed as fetishistic are dealt with later in this chapter. Here, I am addressing content.

actor Charlie Sheen spent \$US6000 on an anatomically-correct latex doll dressed in a cheerleader's outfit which he dismembered after two women declined his suggestion of a foursome with the figurine (Rush & Molloy 2007). Sheen was also reported to have paid two sex workers to dress as cheerleaders and to shout his name in cheerleader-style chants during a group sexual encounter ('Ashley Alexandra Dupre dressed as a cheerleader during threesomes with Charlie Sheen' 2008). Sheen's predilections were described as a 'cheerleader fetish' in some reports (Farris 2008). Other mainstream media texts referring to cheerleader-related sexual fetishes include stories about attempts to bring a 'Cheerleaders Gentleman's Club' to the New Jersey strip district ('New strip club planned for Strip District' 2008), and a poll in which men were asked to name the celebrity 'they most like to fantasise about jumping up and down in a cheerleader outfit waving pom-poms' ('Cheryl Cole top fantasy cheerleader' 2009).

While the quantitative dimensions of pornographic themes are impossible to measure accurately, my research does suggest that while sportswomen of all persuasions are frequently 'trivialized, infantilized and sexualized' (O'Reilly & Cahn 2007, p. 266), cheerleading appears in hard-core heterosexual pornography far more frequently than any other female sporting endeavour. This is supported by the research of McKee, Albury and Lumby whose list of 50 bestselling X-rated videos and DVDs in Australia in 2003 includes two cheerleading-related titles (2008, p. 50). None of the other 48 films in this list involve women's sport (McKee 2009, pers. comm. 4 June). Once again, Google searches are revealing. As previously mentioned, a search for cheerleading pornography yielded about 5 million relevant results. This figure was dramatically higher than the results obtained from two similar searches. 'Porn' combined with the words 'synchronized swimming', 'synchronised swimming', 'synchronized swimmer', 'synchronised swimmer', 'synchronized swimmers' and/or 'synchronised swimmers' yielded an average of 48,000 results²⁰¹ (the vast

²⁰¹ The exact search entered over a number of days in May and June 2009 was 'porn "synchronized swimming" OR "synchronised swimming" OR "synchronized swimmer" OR synchronised swimmer" OR "synchronized swimmers" OR "synchronised swimmers"' (without the single quotation marks) which had a Google URL of <http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&client=safari&rls=en-us&q=porn+%22synchronized+swimming%22+OR+%22synchronised+swimming%22+OR+%22synchronized+swimmer%22+OR+synchronised+swimmer%22+OR+%22synchr>

bulk of which involved textual coincidences rather than actual pornography). 'Porn' combined with the words 'gymnast', 'gymnasts' and/or 'gymnastics' yielded an average of 800,000 results²⁰². Much of the latter *was* pornographic in nature but differed from cheerleading-related pornography in that the focus was on women with obvious gymnastic skills performing their sport partially clad or nude. The cheerleaders depicted in cheerleading-themed pornography rarely demonstrate any actual cheerleading skills. American 'sexpert' Susie Bright's conclusion about the large volume of lesbian-themed cheerleading pornography is that its female stars are rarely 'real' cheerleaders or 'real dyke[s]' (2005).

My research suggests that cheerleaders in pornography are rarely framed as being intended for heterosexual female or queer consumption. This is not to say that such material does not exist – just that it is difficult to locate among the huge quantity of lesbian-themed pornography explicitly framed as being intended for heterosexual male consumers. (I also acknowledge that consumers of pornography do not always align with the audience identified by producers via marketing and commodity contexts. As Chapter Five of this thesis discusses, there is evidence to suggest that images of cheerleaders in various domains have an erotic appeal for both men and women of heterosexual and queer sexual preferences.) One exception to the dominant framing of cheerleading-themed pornography as being exclusively for men is *HotmoviesForHer* – a site billing itself as 'the ultimate porn site for women'. This recommends two pornographic titles featuring cheerleading, and suggests cheerleader-related role play in the bedroom to make sex more fun and exciting²⁰³. As previously discussed, it is rare for female cheerleaders to explicitly encourage their depiction as sexual beings – or to depict themselves in this way. A rare exception is a My Space blog called 'TOP TEN REASONS TO DATE A CHEERLEADER!!!!', in which someone who

onized+swimmers%22+OR+%22synchronised+swimmers%22&btnG=Search&aq=f&oq=&aqi=.

²⁰² The exact search entered over a number of days in May and June 2009 was 'porn gymnastics OR gymnast OR gymnasts' (without the quotation marks) which had a Google URL of <http://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en-us&q=porn+gymnastics+OR+gymnast+OR+gymnasts&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>.

²⁰³ See: Librarian; Em (a); and Em (b).

says she is a cheerleader boasts that she and her peers 'can bend into any position', 'like to ride it to the top' and 'can get you excited in less than 2 min and 20 sec [sic]'²⁰⁴ (Ashley 2007).

An examination of the content and themes of cheerleading-related pornography offers a number of explanations for the popularity of such material. Contiguity, exposure and opportunity may be relevant issues. Given professional cheerleading's proximity to high-profile men's sports, many male sports fans may see more cheerleading than other female sports, and may therefore be more inclined to seek it in pornographic representations – especially given that the look and performance moves of professionals cheerleaders are regarded by many as titillating ('All Guys Want Cheerleaders'). That said, the popularity of the two *Debbie* pornographic titles in Australia – a country without a widespread cheerleading culture – suggests that cheerleaders possess broader pornographic appeal.

The vast bulk of cheerleading-related discourse in both pornography and the mainstream media certainly operates from the assumption that cheerleaders are a universal object of heterosexual male desire, with one sports web site writing that 'guys' No. 1 fantasy is having their girlfriend dress up like a cheerleader' (McD 2009)²⁰⁵. Aspersions relating to sexual preference and manliness are cast on men who are not perceived as having sufficient appreciation for the sexual appeal of cheerleaders. Comments on one web site accuse a reader who says he isn't attracted to images of professional cheerleaders of being a homosexual ('25 Hot NFL Cheerleaders' 2009), while remarks on another claim Australian actor Russell Crowe is a 'fag' and needs to 'grow a dick' because he replaced his Australian football team's cheerleaders with drummers (uplook01 commenting on radicalbunnies 2007). It is worth noting, however, that a small sub-section of internet discourse is devoted to arguing against the universality of cheerleaders' sexual appeal. In a piece comparing sex with female athletes of various persuasions, a blogger says that while 'the cheerleading outfit fantasy is cool the first 3 times', the sex is 'a little over hyped' ('Athletic Girls know how to twork [sic] it' 2007).

²⁰⁴ I understand this to be a reference to the length of cheerleading routines.

²⁰⁵ Other examples of discourse framing cheerleaders as objects of universal male desire include: 'All Guys Want Cheerleaders'; 'Naked Cheerleaders'; Halloran 2005; Storey 2007; IGN stars 2009; Brown 2009; Johnson 2009; and Delatte 2010.

In both mainstream media and pornographic discourse, cheerleaders are frequently framed as being an intrinsically sexually charged, sexually willing, and sexually experimental group. In *The Cheerleaders*, the 'logical' solution for a girl unhappy about being the only virgin at school is to join the cheerleading squad (*The Cheerleaders*). Images of cheerleading also play into the popular pornographic theme of female youth²⁰⁶. They provide the opportunity to depict common pornographic motifs such as: schools, colleges and other educational settings; short skirts and uniforms; braids, ponytails and pigtails²⁰⁷; female physical fitness and flexibility; the female body in motion; lesbianism; group sex; and voyeurism and exhibition (common representations of cheerleaders involve them being observed through locker room peepholes while undressing or showering). A study of discourse in pornographic contexts suggest that these elements of cheerleader-themed pornography are appreciated both in isolation and in combination with each other. As one porn site reviewer writes:

Cheerleader Porn...raises team spirit with sexy babes in tiny pleated skirts. Doing cartwheels, we spy panties or glimpse up skirt cheerleader pussy on chicks wearing nothing under their uniforms. After the big game, the girl's locker-room brims with nude cheerleaders all in a simultaneously naked state. Imagine them all piled on top of one another in some sort of stripped raw pyramid of cheering ('Cheerleader Porn featuring sexy nude cheerleaders with pom poms').

The pornographic depiction of young women dressed as cheerleaders – or young-looking women dressed as cheerleaders – is often accompanied by text stressing that they are virginal, innocent, vulnerable and/or non-professional (in the sex industry sense) which many pornographic consumers regard as desirable attributes. A review of a cheerleading porn film, for instance, notes approvingly that the actresses look 'like high schoolers, not strippers [sic]' (A Customer 2003), while comment on a cheerleading-themed pornographic web site says it 'features extremely tasty looking teens in vulnerable situations' ('Cheerleaders Auditions Review' 2007). Sexual taboos relating to exploitation and coercion are also common in

²⁰⁶ One pornographic site refers to the theme of female youth in pornography as 'standard hardcore teen content' ('Cheer Chix review' 2008').

²⁰⁷ The *AskMen* web site lists these hairstyles as a 'very big fetish among guys', linking it to men's interest in younger women (Burton V 2009).

cheerleading-themed pornography. This mainly involves sex between cheerleaders and older men such as coaches or teachers, often in exchange for positions on cheerleading squads. Cheerleaders who '[take] one for the team' ('Cheerleaders' [a]) by having sex with home team members to inspire them or with rival team members to tire or distract them are also common. Such texts convey the impression that cheerleaders are willing to go to extreme lengths to support men in both sporting and sexual contexts.

Sexual interest in cheerleaders may also arise from the tension between two conflicting representations of cheerleading in mainstream media and pornographic discourse – namely that they are: worshipped as highly prized erotic icons who date only alpha male figures²⁰⁸ or are otherwise inaccessible; *and* derided as 'loose' sluts sexually available to anyone²⁰⁹. They are framed, in other words, as possessing both a deficit and a surplus of sexual availability. Hanson notes that the cheerleader in popular culture is often depicted stereotypically as 'a prize unavailable to ordinary suitors' or as the female component of an 'ideal couple motif' (1995, pp. 101-2). The availability status of high-profile professional cheerleaders such as those attached to the Dallas Cowboys team has a logistical dimension in that they are contractually banned from fraternising with players and must adhere to 'lengthy and explicit' moral conduct requirements ('Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders History'). Hanson refers to the 'look but don't touch' subtext of professional cheerleading (1995, p. 68), as well as cheerleaders' exemplification of the 'virgin/whore dichotomy' (cited in Wells 2006). As Bright observes, professional cheerleaders 'must inspire hysterical sexual fantasy, yet remain entirely chaste' (2009). Of the 'big tease' of professional cheerleading, the Scholz sisters write that fans are told 'they're not seeing what they're seeing', describing it as 'the stuff obsessions are forged from' (1991, p. 143). *Bring It On* refers to this dynamic in more base terms in a satirical cheer which opens the film and which includes the lines:

I'm flyin', I jump
You can look but
Don't you hump (2000)

²⁰⁸ Framings of cheerleaders as unattainable fantasy figures can be found in: Lynn 2008; Giroday 2008; and 'All Guys Want Cheerleaders'.

²⁰⁹ Mainstream discourse which explicitly describes cheerleaders as 'sluts' or 'slutty' includes: 'Cheerleader Falls on her Face in Front of the School' 2008; Hogfather 2009; and Bayly 2009.

In pornography, it is common for cheerleaders in scholastic settings to be depicted as being interested in only a 'lucky few' alpha males ('Naked Cheerleaders') – though this is contradicted at another level, given that such images are accessible by anyone with a credit card. The cheerleader-as-sexual-trophy theme is reflected in an on-line list of 'Top 10 Reasons To Date a Cheerleader' which, after extolling the virtues of physical flexibility, accessible skirts and stamina, notes the 'extra bonus' to be gained from being able to say 'Yeah... I'm dating a cheerleader' ('Top 10 Reasons To Date a Cheerleader'). Framing cheerleaders as relatively unavailable echoes the common advertising ploy of emphasising a product's scarcity, and offers men a chance to make up for 'missing out' at high school: '[F]ulfill your high school fantasies that have yet to come true!' reads the advertising copy for an inflatable cheerleading sex doll ('Kirsten Price Cheerleader Doll'). And from an (almost poignant) review of a cheerleader-themed porn site:

I don't remember the cheerleaders at my school being as slutty as the ones at CheerChix.com. I guess if I were the most popular guy in school or the quarterback or just some well hung thug, I'd have a better chance with these uniform-clad hunnies ('Cheer Chix Review').

Cheerleading-themed pornography may therefore appeal because it facilitates fantasy scenarios which break the usual 'rules' about sexual pecking orders in high schools: 'Max knelt in front of Wendy, leaning over her and kissing her,' reads one cheerleader-themed erotic story. 'He had never had sex before in his life, never even kissed a girl, and here he was making it with the head cheerleader!' (Anonymous).

It is possible that the antithetic framing of cheerleaders as 'loose' and 'slutty' is motivated partly by a defensive reaction to the perception that they are unavailable. This, in turn, can be framed in terms of the psychological phenomenon of threats to self-image leading to prejudiced evaluations of others (Fein & Spencer 2000, p. 173). The 'frustration-aggression' (ibid) cycle described by this psychological model may, in the case of cheerleading-themed pornography, manifest in a vicious circle. Thus, framings of cheerleaders as 'whores' could make any actual or perceived lack of availability even more of a threat to self-image; this, in

turn, increases the likelihood of vitriolic framings of cheerleaders, very often – paradoxically enough – as ‘whores’.

PART TWO: POPULAR CULTURE

An intense fascination for cheerleaders is evident in popular cultural forms such as film, television, literature, music and art, as well as in commodities such as computer games, toys and exercise classes. Popular culture – particularly popular culture originating in America – is suffused with representations of cheerleading and cheerleaders which create ‘vivid, accessible symbols’, offering a variety of conflicting messages (Hanson 1995, p. 100). In this chapter I am framing representations of cheerleading as fetishistic in the sense of obsessive preoccupation, as well as in terms of the sexual frisson so often associated with cheerleading representations. Fetishistic disavowal is also evident in that popular culture frequently denies the worth of cheerleading while showing it ceaselessly.

Cheerleaders can be found in major and minor roles in most contemporary popular culture genres including: fictional television series (examples include *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [1997], *Heroes* [2006] and *Ugly Betty* [2006]); reality television series (examples include *Cheerleader U* [2007], *Cheerleader Nation* [2006] and *Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making the Team* [2006]), fictional feature films (examples include *Sugar & Spice* [2000], *But I’m a Cheerleader* [1999] and the *Bring It On* franchise [2000 et al]); feature films dramatising real-life cheerleading scandals (examples include *Willing To Kill: The Texas Cheerleader Story* [1992], *The Positively True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader-Murdering Mom* [1993] and *Fab Five: The Texas Cheerleader Scandal* [2008]); teen romance and horror fiction (examples include Charity Tahmaseb and Darcy Vance’s *The Geek Girl’s Guide to Cheerleading* [2009], Caroline B Cooney’s *The Cheerleader* [2000] and a title in the Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen twins franchise called *The Case of the Cheerleading Camp Mystery [New Adventures of Mary-Kate & Ashley, #17]*); music videos (examples include Nirvana’s ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’ [1991], Robbie Williams’ ‘Radio’ [2004] and Freaks’ ‘The Creeps (Get on the Dancefloor)’ [2007]; song lyrics (examples include ‘Cheerleader’ by Deirdre Flint [Flint] and ‘Cheerleader’ by Nazareth [‘Cheerleader Lyrics’]); popular music composition (cheerleader chants appear in music by

English sextet The Go! Team); computer games (examples include *Wii Cheer*, *Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan* and the cheerleading management game *Spirit Fever*) and cartoons (examples include the *Doonesbury* and the *Archie* comic strips). Other appearances of cheerleaders in popular culture include: a five-man World Wrestling Entertainment team called Spirit Squad; a mobile phone game in which women dressed as cheerleaders pillow fight in a boxing ring (Arendt 2007); the 'new keep fit craze' of 'cheeracise' and 'cardio-cheer' fitness classes and DVDs²¹⁰; cheerleader toys and Halloween costumes²¹¹; and cheerleading outfits for dogs ('Cheerleader costume for dogs'). While it is rare to find cheerleaders in 'high' cultural forms, exceptions include a Washington art gallery exhibit in which a sculptor made a crucifix of 'a perky statuette from a cheerleading trophy' (cited in Hanson 1995, p. 107), as well as the appearance of 'cheerleader-inspired looks' in high fashion collections ('loveit, loatheit' 2001).

A plethora of contradictory meanings coalesce around these pop cultural representations. High school cheerleaders such as Olivia Newton John's character in *Grease* (1978) or more recently the character played by Mena Suvari in *American Beauty* (1999) are simultaneously 'iconic representations of America's youthful exuberance' and 'contortionist Lolitas in tiny skirts' (Overdorf 2008). Cheerleaders with superpowers such as Buffy from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1992; 1997) and the indestructible Claire Bennet from *Heroes* (2006), meanwhile, disrupt the stereotype of cheerleaders as marginal figures lacking agency at the same time as gaining mileage from the physical attractiveness associated with this stereotype. The complex nature of representations of cheerleading in popular culture can produce ironic results. An example is a successful American cheerleading squad's decision to use Nirvana's *Smells Like Teen Spirit* – a song whose video clip satirises the norms epitomised by representations of cheerleaders as 'wholesome, extroverted [and] enthusiastic' (Hanson 1995, p. 100) – in a competitive routine²¹².

²¹⁰ See Lazzeri 2009; *Cheeracise*, and *Cardio Cheer*.

²¹¹ Mattel's Barbie, Hasbro's Maxie and MGA's Bratz lines have all included cheerleader characters (Hanson 1995, p. 109; 'Bratz Play Sportz Doll - Cheerleading Yasmin' 2008).

²¹² *Smells Like Teen Spirit* – regarded as a Generation X slacker anthem – features tattooed cheerleaders wearing black clothing and the 'Circle-A' anarchist symbol in its video clip. The use of this song in a competitive cheerleading performance can be seen in the reality TV series *Cheerleader U* (2007).

Framings of cheerleaders as being indistinguishable from each other and belonging to a homogenous mass are common in popular cultural forms. An example is the 2008 movie *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* in which a character says he used to videotape varsity basketball games in high school because he wanted to 'fuck a cheerleader'. 'Which one?' a friend asks. 'Whichever one wanted to fuck the guy who taped the varsity games,' the first character replies (2008). Another example is pointed out by blogger Karen Healey who critiques a collection of teen fiction which depicts cheerleaders as 'totally undifferentiated as actual people, to the point where there are two Madisons and three Ambers' (2009). Some commentators are critical of pop cultural artifacts purely because they contain cheerleading themes – as if this content alone has the power to fatally contaminate its host organism. An example is a gaming site's report on the release of a new cheerleading videogame. Under a headline which assures readers that the story is not a joke, a reporter who has neither seen nor played the game writes sarcastically that, 'The unveiling begs the question "do you think there [is] a *reason* nobody has made a cheerleading game before?"' ('World's First Cheerleading Game Announced... Seriously' 2008).

Cheerleaders in popular culture are frequently parodied and framed as frivolous, unintelligent, inane, vain, trashy, promiscuous, exhibitionist, and hyper-competitive. In an episode of the cult television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, for instance, a nascent high school witch – possessed by her cheerleading-obsessed demonic mother – goes to extraordinarily violent lengths to become a high school cheerleader ('The Witch' 1997). Then, after failing to make the squad, she says sarcastically, 'Well, I know that I'll miss the intellectual thrill of spelling out words with my arms' (ibid). There are, however, an increasing number of television series and films which both uphold and subvert cheerleading stereotypes and which can be framed as exemplifying the Hegelian concept of *Aufhebung* – a topic discussed at length in Chapter Five. Films which can be classed as having a postmodern sensibility – including *But I'm A Cheerleader* (1999), *Sugar & Spice* (2000) and the first feature in the *Bring It On* franchise (2000) – simultaneously ridicule cheerleading as well as framing it as a desirable, admirable and high-status activity. While *Sugar & Spice* (2000) parodies cheerleading, for instance, the secret to its protagonists' success (both socially and criminally) relies on their utilisation of ideals – such as teamwork – that they learned while cheerleading.

As with cheerleading itself, the ambivalence directed towards popular cultural products with cheerleading themes comes despite – and also because of – their proliferation and success. Cheerleading-themed pop cultural commodities circulate widely and are popular with the public²¹³ yet rarely possess high cultural status. Films within the emerging genre of what one reviewer calls ‘cheerinema’ (Villalobos 2009) are frequently framed as being one and the same – an indistinguishable, equally intolerable cinematic mass appealing only to base, voyeuristic desires. ‘Although the deeper reasons for this sub-genre’s new popularity remain obscure,’ Manohla Dargis writes of cheerleader movies in the *New York Times*, ‘it’s clear that the spectacle of flexible and lithe young female hardbodies stretching and jumping and bending over to salute the camera with their derrières constitutes its own rationale, particularly when a studio is in the stupid business’ (2009).

In conclusion, this section shows that popular cultural references to cheerleading are diverse and contradictory, producing impressions of cheerleaders which are positive and negative, as well as an ambivalent combination of both. Despite the heterogeneity of these discourses, however, framings of cheerleading in popular culture have many similarities in that they indicate a fetishistic fixation with the activity and its participants. This fixation often involves the sexualisation of cheerleaders and the use of cheerleaders as semiotic shorthand (for sluts, bimbos, alpha teenaged girls and so on). Disavowal is also evident in the abundance of attention given to deriding cheerleaders as *unworthy* of attention.

²¹³ Exemplifying the popularity of cheerleading-themed pop cultural commodities is: the film *Bring It On* (2000) (which topped the American box office grosses for two weeks running when it was released in 2000 [‘Blaque Helps “Bring It On” For Second Consecutive Week’ 2000]); the made-for-television movie *Fab Five: The Texas Cheerleader Scandal* (2008) (which was the Lifetime network’s most popular film of 2008 for viewers aged between 12 and 34 [‘Lifetime Original Movie “Fab Five: The Texas Cheerleader Scandal” Builds Pyramid to Become Network’s Top W18-34 and W12-17 Movie of the Year’ 2008]); and the reality TV program *Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making the Team* (2006) (which attracted sufficient audience numbers to be screened for three seasons [‘Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making the Team’]).

PART THREE: THE NEWS MEDIA

Part Three of this chapter will show that news media texts are particularly fetishistic (in the terms I have scoped above) with respect to cheerleaders. In both mainstream and marginal coverage, cheerleaders are depicted as possessing special powers of seduction and/or corruption. Individual cheerleaders and individual cheerleading incidents, meanwhile, are frequently depicted as embodying universal 'truths' about cheerleading such as 'cheerleaders are sexually irresistible' or 'cheerleaders can't be trusted'. As a result, cheerleading appears as intrinsically salacious and/or delinquent, with all cheerleaders guilty by association. As one US journalist observes:

When athletes get in trouble or become entangled in weird stories, we still see them as athletes, and for the most part, we're still able to separate the good and bad among them. When controversy finds cheerleaders, we return to typecasting them all... (Brewer 2007)²¹⁴.

Cheerleading motifs proliferate in all aspects of the news media texts, with the activity and its participants so routinely impugned that cheerleading is construed – via the 'logic' of commonsense – as a disreputable cultural site. This section divides and addresses cheerleading-related news media texts into two subsets: 1) what I will define as quotidian sports coverage; and 2) news stories involving sex scandals, crimes, lists, debates, and accidents and injuries. My central argument is that the news media's treatment of cheerleading differs markedly from its coverage of other sports (particularly in its frequent disavowals of being preoccupied with the activity), and that there is evidence to suggest fetishism at work. Of particular ethico-political concern is the explicit or implicit insinuation in news media texts that female cheerleaders are partly or wholly to blame if they are the victims of sexual and/or violent crimes.

²¹⁴ It is extremely rare for journalists to reflect on media coverage of cheerleading in this way.

The term 'news media' in this section is used to refer to media texts which claim – either implicitly or explicitly – to be concerned with current events classed as 'hard news'²¹⁵ or as regarded as having a high degree of 'news value' or 'newsworthiness'²¹⁶. I acknowledge that the popularly accepted division of 'news' and 'entertainment'²¹⁷ is problematic given, among other issues, the complex issues of reception²¹⁸. Further, the term 'news' reflects a subjective²¹⁹ and contextual judgment which does not represent the intrinsic qualities of an event so much as signifiers of facticity, prestige, sincerity, timeliness and immediacy (Allan 1999, pp. 98-102) and the utilisation of conventions such as recourse to official sources, 'balance', and inverted pyramid style constructions (Harp 2007, p. 109). My decision to establish a 'news media' section of this chapter does not, therefore, represent an endorsement of binaries such as soft versus hard news or news versus entertainment, but merely reflects such endorsements by sections of the community. This taxonomic decision also reflects a recognition of the fact that mainstream opinion makers are likely to apportion more credibility and influence to a front page report in a broadsheet newspaper than a fictional feature-film.

While much of this section focuses on what could be classed as news media maltreatment of cheerleading, the relationship between cheerleaders and the media is not a one-way street, in which a hegemonic predator preys on a powerless victim. 'Media-genic' (Hanson 1995, p. 62) cheerleaders often court mass media interest for their own benefit and make use of both traditional and new media platforms to assert agency and contest what they perceive as negative or inaccurate coverage of their sport (see Chapter Five). Regardless of its positive or negative editorial slant, media discourse *does* assist in establishing and maintaining

²¹⁵ Of the subjective soft news/hard news division, Dustin Harp writes that reporters and editors most often define 'soft' news as dealing with the lives of human beings, and 'hard' news as being 'important' (2007, p. 6).

²¹⁶ Stuart Allan notes the influence of factors such as conflict, relevance, timeliness, unexpectedness, continuity, reference to elite nations and persons, cultural specificity and negativity in determining an event's news values or newsworthiness (1999 pp. 62-3).

²¹⁷ Here, I note Rayner, Wall and Kruger's argument that 'news bulletins have increasingly had to adopt many of the characteristics of other television codes and conventions whilst at the same time trying to remain distinctive and somehow more serious' (2004, p. 171).

²¹⁸ See: Staiger 2005; and Lull & Hinerman 1997, p. 3.

²¹⁹ As Tony Harcup notes, like air, news values 'tend to be invisible, taken for granted' (cited in Rayner et al 2004, p. 181).

cheerleading's high cultural visibility, partly because of its implicit endorsement of the fact that cheerleading somehow requires or warrants such extensive media attention. The symbiotic relationship between cheerleading and the media parallels the deeply imbricated development of sport and the media more generally. As Rowe writes, each institution has had something the other wants and with increasing urgency (1999, p. 66).

That said, as with all symbiotic relationships involving the media and publicity-seeking individuals, groups, or institutions, coverage is unpredictable, uncontrollable and does not always serve subjects' interests. Cultural studies scholars Graeme Turner, Frances Bonner, and P. David Marshall refer to media exposure as volatile and resisting containment (2000 p. 93), while US-based journalist Julia Baird describes the phenomenon in genie and bottle terms, noting that once information is out, it's well nigh impossible to repackage it or 'cram it back in' (2004, p. 137). The impossibility of both courting *and* controlling media coverage has been problematic for the management of professional cheerleading teams since the 1970s, particularly with regard to sexualised representations which are not generated – and therefore 'authorised' – by cheerleading team owners and managers (Hanson 1995, p. 64).

Cheerleading-related coverage in the news media (including audience responses to this coverage) is most widespread in the US, but also originates elsewhere and has the potential for global internet readerships. My research shows that stories about cheerleading are most likely to appear in the general rather than the sports sections of the news media and often take the form of 'colour' or human interest articles where (so-called) 'soft' rather than 'hard' news values are at play. This reflects Lumby's argument that 'traditional news values split both format and content along traditional masculine and feminine lines' (cited in Hartley 1996, p. 32), and suggests that the feminised pursuit of cheerleading is lowly ranked even within the already low-status realm of women's sport. It is likely that the news media's coverage of cheerleading is influenced by the activity's perceived unworthiness as a pursuit and consequent perceived unworthiness as an object of serious journalistic attention (though, as explained earlier, such disdainful attitudes towards cheerleading manifest in terms of fetishistic fixation rather than omission). When considering news media framings of cheerleading it is also significant to note that – beyond its manifestations as a series of physical activities – cheerleading can emerge as a *symbol*, one figured as the antithesis of

'quality' journalism, where the blind championing of causes holds sway over the virtues of cool-headed skepticism and objectivity. A particularly apt example of this is Rowe's critique of sports journalists in which he refers to the 'perils of becoming too much of a "cheerleader" for sports teams... rather than an independent journalist' (1999, p. 50).

For the purposes of this thesis, my definition of quotidian sports media coverage is material whose primary focus is: team preparation (such as the details of training, fundraising efforts and so on); the progress or outcome of competitions (including live coverage); the movement of competitors, coaches, administrators or similar within or between teams or sports; 'profile' stories in which the primary focus is an individual's sporting involvement or achievement; the provision of logistical information such as try-out times for competitors or competition details for spectators; and advice-orientated material for athletes covering subjects such as rules, techniques and clothing purchases. Such a definition excludes texts whose main focus concerns: scandals; crimes; debates about contentious issues; the sexual attractiveness (or otherwise) of competitors²²⁰; and text accompanying photographs of athletes engaged in something other than training or competition. To return, albeit playfully, to psycho-sexual definitions of fetish, the main purpose of quotidian sports coverage is reproductive²²¹ in that it involves relatively straightforward representations of athletic facts, events, and logistics. This is not to suggest such texts are entirely non-fetishistic (either in their production or reception), merely that – compared to other sports coverage – their subjects are not so obviously fetishised and/or denigrated.

It is difficult if not impossible to proffer definitive conclusions about the quantity and quality of cheerleading-related media coverage compared to that of other sports. That said, my observations are: 1) that quotidian sports reports make up the majority of coverage in the designated sports sections of the mainstream news media; and 2) that it is uncommon for such coverage to focus on cheerleading²²². It is certainly extremely rare to find news media

²²⁰ This refers to blatant commentary on the sexual appeal (or otherwise) of athletes rather than the publication of athletic images that some viewers may perceive as attractive.

²²¹ Here I note Albury's point that sexual interests and activities may be regarded as fetishistic or perverse if they are non-reproductive (2002, p. 54).

²²² The vast bulk of quotidian sports coverage of cheerleading I identified was: generated in America; situated in comparatively minor media outlets serving small communities; directed

coverage which details the performance and results of a competitive cheerleading competition in the same manner as coverage of a football match or car race. The dearth of quotidian sports coverage of cheerleading accords with those content analyses that suggest that 'the mass media still spend a grossly disproportionate amount of their time covering men's sports while ignoring, marginalizing, or trivializing women's sports' (Messner 2002, p. XII)²²³. Yet while other women's sports may be overlooked in the media, cheerleading is repeatedly – even obsessively – returned to as a subject.

The unspoken criterion for inclusion of cheerleading in most mainstream sports media is the visual appeal of participants. Consider the 25 pages dedicated to sport (excluding full-page advertisements and racing form guides) in the Sydney Sunday newspaper the *Sun Herald* on 28 June 2009. In this section, the overwhelming majority of articles comport with my description of quotidian sports coverage. One of the only exceptions is a quarter-page photograph featuring Australian Miss Universe contestant Rachael Finch posing with National Rugby League (NRL) cheerleader Carissa Walford (Weidler 2009, p. 103). The justification for the story – contained in a two-sentence extended caption – is that Finch had recently attended an NRL game and dinner, and that Walford had unsuccessfully competed against Finch in the Australian leg of the Miss Universe competition (ibid).

While cheerleading is rarely a component in quotidian sports media coverage, cheerleading is a recurring theme in *non*-sports sections of the news media. Such texts are often devoted to cheerleading-related: sex scandals; crimes; lists; debates about contentious issues; and accidents and injuries. Scandals that are connected (or can be framed as being connected) to cheerleading are so popular that a number of internet news portals – such as the 'Cheerleading Scandals' section of the *Pegasus News* site (an on-line, mainstream news source for the Dallas Fort-Worth region) – devote exclusive sections to the theme. Further, scandals involving visuals or video footage frequently achieve 'viral' status on the internet²²⁴. As Torgovnick puts it:

towards cheerleading at an elementary school level or lower; and/or generated by cheerleading-specific media outlets targetting a cheerleading readership.

²²³ Also cf.: Rowe 1995, p. 134; O'Reilly et al 2007, p. 262-5; and Greenwood et al 2010.

²²⁴ See: Cherner & Weir 2008b; Chandler 2009d; and Torgovnick 2009.

Catching politicians in a scandal is fun. A Hollywood starlet losing it is better. But there's nothing quite like a story involving cheerleaders gone wild to capture the American cultural imagination (2009).

Media coverage of cheerleading-related sex scandals has been common since the rise of professional cheerleading in the 1970s. In 1979, two Denver Pony Express cheerleaders were dismissed for appearing in *Playboy* (Hanson 1995, p. 54). More recent cheerleading-related sex scandals involve the disciplining of cheerleaders – often via expulsion from educational institutional or squads – after the posting of semi-nude, nude or sexually suggestive photographs on the internet, particularly on social-networking sites such as MySpace or Facebook. These photos have depicted lesbianism, intimate body piercings, 'mooning' from vehicles, alcohol consumption, masturbation, and sexual simulation²²⁵, and are often linked in media and institutional discourse to broader social anxieties about bullying and insubordination at school (Kovach & Campo-Flores 2007), and the moral degeneration of youth. Other sex-related scandals involve cheerleaders – and cheerleading coaches – who have been caught posing for pornographic magazines or appearing in pornographic films, sometimes in their official cheerleading uniforms²²⁶. The construction of such events as scandals – as well as the high media interest they attract – exemplify the double standard operating for professional cheerleaders in that, while 'the sexual sell is permissible when sanctioned by team management... individual free-lancing is discouraged' (Hanson 1995, p 65).

'Fraternisation' scandals, in which professional cheerleaders associate with footballers in defiance of their contracts, are another common cheerleading-related controversy (G 2008); these are framed as sex scandals even though a more accurate description would often be 'social contact scandals'. Some of these cases have involved sexual relationships between cheerleaders and footballers and have resulted in marriages and paternity cases²²⁷. Others have resulted in the dismissal of cheerleaders for simply attending social functions at which footballers are present (Toohey 2006). Another type of cheerleading-related sex scandal

²²⁵ See: Hurd 2009; Kovach & Campo-Flores 2007; and Torgovnick 2008b.

²²⁶ See: G 2008; and Marquis 2009.

²²⁷ See: G 2008; and 'Paternity Madness: Raiderette Cheerleader Files Suit Against Larry Fitzgerald' 2007.

involves routines by high school or university squads which are deemed sexually inappropriate. Examples include a Texan cheer squad whose members were suspended because they performed a routine to a pop song whose lyrics contained mild lesbian themes ('Cheerleaders Suspended Over Katy Perry Dance Routine' 2008), and a high school dance team criticised for incorporating into a routine costumes and moves viewed as reminiscent of stripping (Matteucci 2009). A widely-covered cheerleading-related scandal occurred in 2005 when two intoxicated American cheerleaders engaged in sexual relations in a bar toilet cubicle after a game and eventually became involved in a brawl with other women waiting to use the facilities (Colavecchio-Van Sickler 2005). While the criminal charges laid in relation to this case appertain to violence, the sex act between the women was the angle most consistently emphasised in media coverage.

News media reports of crimes framed as having cheerleading connections involve infractions relating to sex, violence, drugs, gambling, theft, and impersonations. Sex crimes linked to cheerleading receive extensive coverage by the mainstream media and represent the biggest subset in the 'cheerleading crimes' category. A number of these involve the sexual harassment or assault of cheerleaders, or the sexual assault of non-cheerleaders by adults connected with cheerleading²²⁸. Most reports, however, relate to less criminally serious incidents such as men being arrested for photographing under cheerleaders' skirts in shopping centres or at sporting events²²⁹. Other cases include: a 25-year-old man who exposed himself and masturbated in front of a bus full of cheerleaders (Fargen 2008); a bus driver who offered a cheerleading team \$40 to raise their shirts ('Cheerleaders Offered Money To Raise Shirts' 2008); and a 36-year-old father who supplied alcohol to underaged cheerleaders from his son's school and encouraged them to dance on a pole at a party ('Dad accused of hosting teen party with alcohol, pole dancing' 2009).

²²⁸ See: Garcia 2007; 'Neil Finger' 2007; Houston 2007; Simon 2007; Hupp 2007; 'Police: Cheerleading Coach Has Sex With Teen, Fondles 2 Others' 2008; 'Cheerleader Rape Charges Rock Texas HS' 2008; and Melago 2008.

²²⁹ See: 'Man Arrested for Photographing Under Cheerleader's Skirt' 2008; and 'Teacher Arrested After Taking Photographs Up Cheerleaders' Skirts' 2009.

While news media coverage of violent crimes with cheerleading connections includes grave incidents such as the physical assault or murder of cheerleaders or former cheerleaders²³⁰, most of this category of reports focuses on more criminally marginal incidents such as hazing²³¹ which, in relation to cheerleaders, have included allegations of mock drownings, faecal smearing, breast 'flicking', food 'smashing', and the forcing of team members to wear dog collars and leads²³². Other common themes found in the media coverage of cheerleading-related violent crime include: inter- and intra-team cheerleader clashes²³³; brawls involving the parents of cheerleaders, cheerleading coaches, and/or cheerleading sponsors²³⁴; and the verbal, textual and/or physical assault of cheerleaders. Specific coverage includes cases in which: members of a cheerleading team attempted to lace their rivals' food with laxatives, bleach, and poison²³⁵; a cheerleader was injured after being grabbed by a football mascot dressed as a giant chicken (Halloran 2005); a Kentucky father wrote threatening letters to school officials in an attempt to frighten his daughter off her high school cheering squad because he could not afford the expenses (Hanson 1995, p. 47); members of a high school cheerleading squad dressed as rival cheerleaders were 'executed' with toy pistols (Casey 2008); and threatening letters – including some containing a potentially harmful insecticide – were mailed in protest at the alleged exploitation of cheerleaders by television camera operators ('FBI Seeks Author of Threatening Letters About Cheerleaders, Female Athletes on TV' 2007).

Media coverage is also devoted to cheerleading-related crimes connected with drugs, gambling, theft and impersonation. Stealing-themed stories generally concern cheerleading-connected perpetrators who thief from squads or victims framed as being particularly

²³⁰ See: Fargen & Sweet 2008; 'Couple accused of killing cheerleader' 2008; and Torgovnick 2009.

²³¹ A hazing is a ritual, often involving humiliation, which is used to initiate new members into a group.

²³² See: 'Mom: Cheerleader Was Led Around By Dog Collar' 2006; 'Freshman's Father: Cheerleading Initiation Crossed Line' 2006; Connelly 2008; Pape 2008; and 'Cheerleaders' disgusting "prank"' 2009.

²³³ See: Vox 2007; Smith M 2007; and Torgovnick 2008b.

²³⁴ See: Smith M 2007; Felkins 2007; Erskine 2007; 'Mother punches woman during cheerleading fracas' 2008; and Clay 2009.

²³⁵ See: Casey 2008; and 'Girls allegedly poisoned rivals' treats' 2008.

vulnerable²³⁶. Crime stories linking cheerleading to illicit drugs are rare, though substantial media attention was given to a 2008 book (Torgovnick 2008a) claiming that male cheerleaders use steroids so they can 'heft more weight' and that female cheerleaders take a plethora of drugs, including cocaine, to maintain 'unrealistic "Barbie" standards of beauty' (Steelman 2008). Several cheerleading-related criminal cases have involved the impersonation of cheerleaders for what the media has framed as emotional rather than financial gain. One example is that of a 33-year-old Wisconsin mother who was arrested after allegedly using her 15-year-old daughter's ID to enrol in high school and join the cheerleading squad. She reportedly said she had 'no childhood and was trying to regain a part of her life she missed' ('Mom allegedly uses daughter's ID to be cheerleader' 2008). Another highly-publicised criminal case concerns Charles Daugherty, a 26-year-old man charged with forgery of school transcripts and criminal impersonation after successfully posing as a high school girl and joining a cheer squad in 1990 (Hanson 1995, p. 110).

Taxonomies in the form of 'top 10'-style lists are a staple of cheerleading-related coverage in both old and new media genres. These address topics such as: the top 10 reasons to date a cheerleader ('Top 10 Reasons To Date a Cheerleader'); the 10 hottest on-screen cheerleaders ('The 10 Hottest On-Screen Cheerleaders'); and the top 10 cheerleading scandals (G 2008)²³⁷. Such lists often accompany news stories about cheerleading scandals. Another frequent theme in the news media concerns the number of cheerleaders injured or killed while performing, as well as the overall danger of the activity²³⁸. While sports-related accident and injury reports could readily be classified as quotidian sports coverage, this is rarely true in news media representations of accidents and injuries involving cheerleading. My research shows that: 1) injuries and accidents which are not intrinsically related to cheerleading are frequently reported in a manner which emphasises tenuous connections with cheerleading (a media practice far less likely to occur in relation to other athletic endeavours); and 2) injuries and accidents which *are* related to cheerleading practice are not presented as the unfortunate

²³⁶ See: Peterson 2007; Evans 2009a; Edge 2009; and 'Mum admits stealing from cheerleaders' 2009.

²³⁷ See also: Ashely 2007; Attu 2008; McD 2009b; and Man 2010.

²³⁸ See: Coman 2002; Harlow 2004; Pennington 2007; 'Cheerleading: it's extreme' 2008; Kingsbury 2008; 'Lawsuit Filed Over Cheerleader's Death' 2008; Lazzaro 2008; and Weber 2010.

but inevitable side-effect of a highly athletic activity (as is usually the case with accidents or injuries involving other sports) but are used as an excuse to question whether cheerleading should be abolished entirely²³⁹. An example of the former is a media report on the death of an American high school student headlined '14-Year-Old High School Cheerleader Dies' (Weber 2010). The use of 'cheerleader' in this instance may encourage readers to link the activity and the death, though the body of the text reveals that the cardiac arrest was 'apparently related to an undisclosed illness' and that there were 'no indications her death was connected with school activities'. The news media's fixation with cheerleading is also evident in the fact that this victim is framed first and foremost as a cheerleader despite the fact that she took part in numerous campus sports as well as other extracurricular programs (ibid).

While many sports inspire media controversy, my research suggests that news media texts presenting debates relating to cheerleading differ from those associated with other sports in terms of: the frequency of their occurrence; the heated nature of their tone; and the breadth of their ambit (in that single issues are often used to condemn or call for the eradication of cheerleading altogether). The number of news media texts which are positioned as factual reports rather than editorials yet which include blatant statements of (usually adverse) opinion about cheerleading is also significant. This is reminiscent of Markovits' view of European texts framing the US in which he observes that almost nothing associated with America is reported, 'in a neutral, matter-of-fact manner. Most things engender a palpable tone of irritation, derision, annoyance [and] dismissal' (2007, p. 6). The same is true of most news media reports of cheerleading, where negative stereotypes have become received wisdom and accepted as self-evident.

Cheerleading's appeal as a focus for news media texts can be linked to its possession of what American communication studies academics James Lull and Stephen Hinerman refer to as 'scandal susceptibility' (1997, p. 3). This is likely to increase cheerleaders' appearance as protagonists in a range of scandal narratives in popular media formats. Also, as discussed in Chapter Two, the very *existence* of 21st century cheerleading is widely regarded as being itself scandalous. Some scandals and crimes framed as being linked to cheerleading are

²³⁹ See: Parks 2007; Fitzsimons 2007; Boteach 2009; Musolino 2009; and Me...Again 2009.

representative of broader, often technology-related, news and social trends which may increase their newsworthiness to journalists and their overall interest to media audiences. Examples include 'upskirting' (in which pen cameras or mobile phones are used to capture images under a person's clothing without their authorisation) (O'Hagan 2002) and the publication and distribution of *risqué* content via the internet or mobile phones ('Caslon Analytics – Social Network Services'). Even a cursory examination of the available evidence supports Torgovnick's argument that stories involving the posting of salacious photographs on the internet would have far less media appeal if they involved 'women in the math club or student council' rather than cheerleaders (2008b)²⁴⁰. Cheerleading-related sex scandals can plausibly be figured as belonging to a broader category of popular media scandals involving women in glamour industries such as beauty pageants²⁴¹. In all the contexts outlined above, the generic newsworthiness of a type of scandal or crime, and the specific news media fetish for cheerleading converge to create a higher media interest quotient than either of these factors in isolation.

The dramatic appeal of events involving cheerleaders is corroborated by the number of non-fictional cheerleading scandals and/or crimes that have been converted into feature films. Examples include *Fab Five: The Texas Cheerleader Scandal* (2008), a telemovie about the exploits of five 'out of control teenage cheerleaders' led by the daughter of a Texan school principal (West 2008), as well as *The Positively True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader-Murdering Mom* (1993) and *Willing to Kill: the Texas Cheerleader Story* (1992), both about a woman who asked her brother-in-law to hire a hit man to kill the mother of a girl who was competing with her 13-year-old daughter for a spot on the same Texas cheerleading squad. The

²⁴⁰ For other examples of scandal and crime coverage which would read as odd or unlikely if 'cheerleader' is replaced with 'math club' or 'student council' member (as per semiotic commutation tests [McKee 2003, p. 107]), see: 'Cheerleading coach on trial for illegal gambling' 2007; Cook 2009; 'Cheerleader charged in charity fund theft' 2009; Lewis 2009; and Cook & Provano 2009.

²⁴¹ The news media view that cheerleaders and beauty pageants are closely associated is evident in an on-line, print version of a *Today* show story about the firing of a cheerleading coach for posing nude for a magazine which directs readers to 'MORE COLORFUL STORIES ABOUT PEOPLE' (Inbar 2009). Headlines for these include: 'Miss Universe to keep crown despite photos', 'Miss Washington's racy photos stir controversy', 'Beauty queen wins case over bogus sex videos', 'Miss Montana pleads not guilty to DUI charge' and 'Parents defend beauty pageants for kids' (ibid).

popularity of non-fictional cheerleader incidents in news media domains may be linked to the former's similarities with the fictitious plot lines in cheerleading-related pornography – or at least a hope or expectation that similarities may be involved. A blogger attached to a mainstream newspaper responds to a story about the indictment of seven high school cheerleaders for hazing with: 'What kind of naughty fun did theseimps get into? And did it lead to, you know, the kind of things these always lead to in the minds of men?' (Connelly 2008). He then expresses disappointment at the discovery that the hazing was of a violent rather than sexual nature (ibid).

The 'evil' cheerleader stereotype proliferating in news media texts also has many fictional counterparts in popular culture²⁴². This arguably reflects a 'reality is better than fiction' effect which contributes to a scandal's 'hit' potential with audiences and its circulation through various media forms (Lull and Hinerman 1997, p. 24). News media texts about cheerleading crimes and scandals feed into anxieties associated with broader social issues such as: raunch and youth culture²⁴³; poor parenting ('Riding in cars with beers' 2007); the behaviour and control of teenagers²⁴⁴; the behaviour of parents at children's sporting events²⁴⁵; and displays of bad sportswoman- and sportsmanship (Vox 2007). Another explanation for the widespread appeal of cheerleading-related crime and scandal narratives is the fact that many of these incidents epitomise potent themes such as: the abuse of the vulnerable by authority figures²⁴⁶; fierce competition (both in sporting and other contexts)²⁴⁷; and the contrast between an attractive appearance and unattractive behaviour. The latter is illustrated in stories on hazing in which the dangerous and/or disgusting nature of the activities involved are contrasted with idealised imaginings of the nature of cheerleaders. As the father of a victim of one hazing incident involving the smearing of faeces tells a journalist, 'Cheerleading is supposed to be a wholesome thing' (Pape 2008). Non-fictional cheerleading-

²⁴² See: 'The Witch' 1997; *Bring It On* 2000; and *Jennifer's Body* 2009.

²⁴³ See: Kovach & Campo-Flores 2007; Kovach 2008; and Lewis 2009.

²⁴⁴ See: Ayres 2007; West 2008; Petty 2009; and Inbar 2009.

²⁴⁵ See: Erskine 2007; and 'Mother punches woman during cheerleading fracas' 2008.

²⁴⁶ See: 'Neil Finger' 2007; 'Police: Cheerleading Coach Has Sex With Teen, Fondles 2 Others' 2008; and 'Ex-cheerleader coach sentenced to 90 days, 4 years probation' 2008.

²⁴⁷ Reality television programs which focus on the fierce contests involved in competing for a place on a cheerleading squad or in winning a cheerleading competition have been made in the US (*Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders – Making the Team*; *Cheerleader U*) and New Zealand (Hunkin 2006).

related scandals and crimes are also convenient vehicles for morality tales²⁴⁸, often involving the discursive condemnation and punishment of 'evil' cheerleader figures (which may contribute to the disciplinary measures taken against them in practice)²⁴⁹.

Cheerleading-related material in news media texts provides entertainment and titillation. It offers media audiences and 'moral entrepreneurs' (Rowe 1999, p. 92) the opportunity to explore and debate a range of significant contemporary social issues and ethical issues. The on-line text version of a *Today* show story about a cheerleading coach sacked for posing nude for *Playboy*, for instance, resulted in nearly 800 readers commenting about a range of issues including morality, teachers' ethics, parental discipline, pornography, and nudity ('Should coach who posed nude get her job back?' 2009). Lull and Hinerman's case is that one function of such scandals is to allow subjects to displace the shame of their own transgressions by observing and talking about the misdeeds of others, thereby offering a release of 'psychic tension' (1997, pp. 27, 23). My case is that vitriolic ruminations by media consumers do not merely reflect a state of affairs that exists independently of them but, as UK sociologist John B. Thompson puts it, are performative actions which are 'partly constitutive of the state of the affairs' (1997, p. 44). In this case, the constitution and maintenance of cheerleading as a site of fetishistic and/or vitriolic discourse is likely to influence institutional responses regarding the sport.

A common theme in reality television representations of cheerleading – and one increasingly present in news media coverage – concerns 'makeovers': the transformation of losers into winners, fat women into thinner ones, the unpopular into the popular, and so on²⁵⁰. The reverse of this phenomenon – in which previously high status or successful figures fall from grace – is another common feature of cheerleading-related news media texts. As Hanson writes:

²⁴⁸ In one media interview, a coach involved in the making of a television version of a cheerleading scandal concludes that the movie conveys her message that parents and educators need to set limits for children (Ward cited in Kovach 2008).

²⁴⁹ Examples of this in the news media include: Ayres 2007; and Hupp 2007; 'Girls allegedly poisoned rivals' treats' 2008. There are also numerous examples in popular culture including: 'The Witch' 1997; *Bring It On* 2000; and *Jennifer's Body* 2009.

²⁵⁰ See: 'CMT Rehabs Out-of-Shape Cheerleaders' 2007; and fanscapevideos 2009.

The image of the cheerleader as an epitome of youthful success is offset by images of decline in adult life. News stories about female criminals and crime victims invariably note any cheerleading in the woman's background. In the first instance, the assumption of a good girl gone bad adds color; in the second, there is added fascination that someone once idolized has been victimized. Such reports serve as cautionary tales that the mighty can fall or, at least, struggle (1995, p. 109).

The strong appeal of the 'fallen cheerleader' to media producers and audiences reflects the contradictory symbolism attached to the activity and its participants. Despite numerous negative traits assigned to cheerleaders, the positive stereotype of cheerleaders as wholesome, 'girl-next-door' types suggests they are held to higher standards than other members of society and are therefore especially susceptible to being framed as more guilty when they fall short. While cheerleaders rarely achieve celebrity status as individuals, the activity *itself* possesses a kind of collective celebrity status, particularly in regard to perceptions that cheerleaders' high profile is 'disconnected from merit, skill, and what are perceived to be traits of individual value' (Marshall 1997, p. 225). As such, seeing a cheerleader fall from grace may offer a gratifying sense of *schadenfreude*²⁵¹. As Markovits puts it in relation to anti-Americanism: 'All of us are happy when the big guy – regardless of the context – gets hit on the head' (2007, p. 132).

Another important explanation of the intense news media interest in cheerleading relates to the activity's high 'pictoriality'²⁵² as well as the 'beauty quotient'²⁵³ of its practitioners.

²⁵¹ *Schadenfreude* is evident in the response to footage of accidents which occur during cheerleading practice. Examples of this include: 'Cheerleader Falls on her Face in Front of the School' 2008; 'Cheerleader Faceplant Fail Video' 2009; 'Horribly Funny Dumb Cheerleading And Band Bloopers' 2009; prawn1 2009; and 'NEW YORK KNICKS CHEERLEADER FAILS DURING HALF-TIME ROUTINE!' 2010. The desire for cheerleaders to be 'punished' is evident in the comments of one American journalist who, responding to the indictment of seven varsity cheerleaders for hazing, writes that, 'It's about time some cheerleaders got themselves indicted' (Casey 2008). The headline of this report is '3 cheers for cheerleader indictments' (ibid).

²⁵² In *The Politics of Pictures*, Hartley argues that, given the pictorialisation of the popular medium, 'increasing pictoriality is a precondition for the popularity of every medium; success and survival depend on popularity and that depends on pictures' (1992, p. 6).

Running stories in which a cheerleading connection can be established gives media outlets an excuse to run photographs of cheerleaders, the vast bulk of which are uncaptioned and commonly highlight the breast, bare midriff and/or buttock areas of unnamed cheerleaders. A typical example of the photographic treatment of cheerleaders is a six-page special on the Miami Dolphin cheerleaders in the upmarket American men's magazine *VMA/V* which comprises five pages of photos and barely a page of text (Cantor 2008). Cheerleaders in the photos are unnamed (unlike the shoot's two make-up artists, two hair stylists, and production and post-production team members) and many are depicted faceless or headless in that they are shot from behind or from the waist down (ibid, pp. 56-61). One of the rare media texts where cheerleaders are named is an Australian report on a cheerleader/footballer fashion parade ('This Thursday: Rabbitohs HQ Fashion Show at Westfield Eastgardens' 2006). Here, the cheerleaders are identified by first names (and – in the case of 'Hayley #1' and 'Hayley #2' – by numbers) in contrast with the footballers who are identified by both first and surnames (ibid).

Many images of cheerleaders in both the electronic and non-electronic news media are reminiscent of soft pornography²⁵⁴ – a trend common in women's sport in general (Duncan cited in Rowe 1999, p. 24). It is extraordinarily rare to find a story about a cheerleading-related internet photo scandal that does not take the opportunity to reprint the offending images – often accompanied by a selection of visuals from similar scandals²⁵⁵. It is also common to find photographs of cheerleaders which are run with only the most tenuous of news 'justifiers' (Mettee et al 2007/2008, p. 66). When the *Sports Crackle Pop!* web site published seven large photographs of Miami Dolphins cheerleaders modelling bikinis, the rationale it offered was that the pictorial would help pass time during the six-week wait for the football season to commence (Ing 2006).

²⁵³ Rachel Johnson, a British journalist, argues that the 'beauty quotient' of female journalistic subjects is one of the informal rules governing whether and how women appear in news photographs in UK news culture (2001).

²⁵⁴ For examples, see: Evans 2009b; and Smith 2009.

²⁵⁵ See: G 2008; and Hurd 2009. Even a cheerleading-friendly author who criticises the focus on cheerleading scandals uses an illustrated list of 'The Best Cheerleading Scandals' as a promotional device for a book focusing on the athleticism of the sport (Torgovnick 2008b; Torgovnick 2009).

The news media's seemingly irresistible urge to run sexualised images of cheerleaders, regardless of the merit or content of the accompanying story, results in some odd juxtapositions between written and visual text. An example is the 'Health News' section of an on-line news media site in which five paragraphs of coverage are devoted to a suggestion from the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons that safety guidelines would help cheerleaders avoid severe traumatic injuries ('Ways given to avoid cheerleading injuries' 2008). Yet while this advice targets competitive cheerleaders who perform stunts, the story is accompanied by a large photograph (with an additional 'enlarge' option) of four unidentified sideline professional cheerleaders engaged in nothing more athletically hazardous than standing in a straight line (ibid). There is evidence to suggest that media consumers are aware of the conventions (and also have expectations) regarding the use of photographs in news media coverage of cheerleading. Commenting on a story about tryouts for the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders, one reader complains about the lack of graphics, asking, 'Is it even legal to run this kind of story without high-resolution photographs?' (Lishin commenting on 'Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders tryouts drew more than 700 contenders' 2009). Another reader remarking on this story states that, 'One mustn't ever post articles about God's cheerleaders without some photographic loveliness' (Bush commenting on 'Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders tryouts drew more than 700 contenders' 2009). The sense of entitlement readers often have in relation to sexualised images of cheerleaders (regardless of the nature of the accompanying written text) is also evidenced by a reader's comment about a story whose stated intention is 'to make people more aware of how much work is required' in a varsity sideline cheerleading squad. 'This is all well and good,' the reader posts, 'but I was expecting much, much more cheesecake to go along with the information in this article. Some bunda would have been nice, is all' (Cubehead commenting on Blight 2009)²⁵⁶.

An obvious question is whether popular cultural and news media responses to cheerleading differ from their treatment of other sports – particularly their treatment of other women's sports. There is much academic work which theorises the substantial differences between the

²⁵⁶ 'Bunda' is Portuguese or Brazilian slang for a woman's buttocks ('Angolan Portuguese'; 'Bunda' 2004).

coverage of sport practiced by women and the coverage of sport practiced by men²⁵⁷. These trends are illustrated in a 2010 report carried out on behalf of the Australian government which reveals that female sport and male sport receive starkly disproportionate amounts of coverage on Australian television, despite the ongoing successes and strong participation levels of women in sport (Lumby et al 2010, p. v). Coverage of women in sport makes up just nine per cent of all sports coverage in Australian television news and current affairs, and seven per cent of other sport programming (ibid). (To provide context: horse racing receives more air-time than women's sport in Australian television news [ibid]). Despite these gendered disparities, however, the tone and content of reports on female athletes and female sport have 'markedly improved' when compared to previous studies:

In the print and television commentary and reporting... there was a remarkable absence of stereotyping of female athletes. They were very rarely portrayed in a sexual way and most frequently portrayed as competitive and successful. Glamourised shots of female athletes (for example, the swimmer Stephanie Rice) were concentrated in entertainment media and were balanced by equally glamourised shots of male athletes (for example, cricketer Michael Clarke) (ibid p. v).

Extrapolating from this Australian report (as well as from the aforementioned international academic research), it is reasonable to conclude that, like other women's sports, cheerleading is neglected in quotidian sports coverage. Unlike other women's sports, however, cheerleading receives a great deal of fetishised and/or vitriolic coverage which (contrary to Australian trends in relation to female athletes) *does* trade heavily in stereotypes and sexualisation. As discussed in Chapter Two, feminism's low regard for cheerleaders and rejection of cheerleading as a site for activism is likely to contribute to this state of affairs.

Determining the dimensions of cheerleading's uniqueness in terms of media coverage is complicated by its unusual, symbiotic relationship with other sports. This makes both the

²⁵⁷Cf.: Hargreaves 1994; Birrell & Cole (eds.) 1994; Costa & Guthrie (eds.) 1994; Rowe 1999; Smith (ed.) 1998; Hargreaves 2000; Eitzen (ed.) 2001; Messner 2002; Heywood & Dworkin 2003; O'Reilly & Cahn (eds.) 2007; and Tomlinson (ed.) 2007.

existence and media coverage of scandals such as those involving 'fraternisations' with footballers unique to this activity. That said, there is evidence to suggest that news media framings of cheerleading have characteristics which are highly unusual when compared to representations of other sports. Commutation tests (McKee 2003, p. 107) in which 'cheerleader' or 'cheerleading' is replaced with other women's sports in the pornography, pop cultural and media contexts outlined in this chapter are illuminating. An example is the case of an Arizona teacher and cheerleading coach who was placed on administrative leave and who later resigned after video footage of her demonstrating a 'seemingly innocuous' (Carroll 2007) new cheer in front of a class circulated widely on YouTube ('Teacher Featured on YouTube Cheerleading Video Resigns' 2007). Although not impossible, it is very difficult to imagine disciplinary action being taken if a teacher and sports coach had demonstrated to students moves associated with other popular American sports such as baseball or ice hockey.

Similarly, it seems unlikely that a 50-year-old woman mauled to death by dogs would be identified as a former high school basketball player – as per 'Former Longhorn Cheerleader Mauled To Death By Dogs' (2007) – unless she had achieved an exceedingly high level of achievement in the sport. Consider also the effect of replacing 'cheerleader' with 'gymnast' (or even a generic descriptor relating to a role a woman might play in relation to football such as 'football fan' or 'league administrator') in an Australian newswire report which opens with: 'The woman who says she may have been raped at the unit of a Wests Tigers rugby league player is not a cheerleader...' ('NSW: Woman in sex attack claim not a cheerleader: Ince' 2006). Given that there had been no suggestion that the victim of this sexual assault *was* a cheerleader, it is telling that a major mainstream news organisation felt it necessary to allay any suspicions that a cheerleader might have been involved.

One of the difficulties when analysing news media responses to cheerleading concerns the addressing of tensions between representation and the lived realities to which those representations purportedly correspond, particularly in relation to sexualised images. Professional cheerleaders, for instance, are selected for teams because of their sexual attractiveness, and they are required to wear uniforms which reveal parts of their bodies. When media images focus on these uniforms and bodies, therefore, is it evidence of a

fetishistic approach or is it simply offering a reasonable portrayal of a putative lived reality? I also note that the long history of the erotic in sports (Guttmann 1996) currently manifests in a media obsession with the celebrity status of and sex scandals associated with male as well as female sports stars²⁵⁸. My research, however, provides good evidence that media representations of cheerleading focus overwhelmingly on the sexualised elements of the activity at the (conspicuous) expense of other elements, and in a manner which is not replicated in representations of other sports involving either gender.

Consideration of the tensions between representation and lived experience is also key when contemplating the frequency with which cheerleaders are framed as being culpable of generating the scandals and crimes with which they are regularly linked. These framings are often congruous with institutional rulings suggesting, again, that the media is merely engaged in acts of reportage. The cause-and-effect dynamic of this relationship, however, is uncertain. It is possible, for instance, that repeated media framings of cheerleaders as being both uniquely blameworthy and requiring greater control than other citizens could influence the extent of sanctions imposed by educational institutions and commercial bodies. While this is less likely to apply to the remedies imposed by courts in criminal cases involving cheerleaders, there is academic research to suggest that criminal justice policies reflect a public appetite for punitiveness. The phenomenon of 'penal populism' (Roberts et al 2003) provides theoretical context to a media report of a sexual assault case in which the accused man, a 28-year-old police sergeant, claimed that his 14-year-old victim's purported lies were motivated by a thirst for revenge provoked by being ineligible to gain a place on a cheer squad (Houston 2007). While this is, indeed, what the defendant said in court, the popular (negative) stereotype of the over-competitive cheerleader who will go to any means necessary to win may still have influenced the defence case (which relied on speculations about the cheerleader victim's motivations) as well as the way this defence was both received by legal adjudicators and emphasised in subsequent media coverage of the trial.

My case in relation to the representational disconnects outlined above, therefore, is that while cheerleaders undoubtedly have some non-mediated sexual components and may be involved in some incidents of a scandalous or criminal nature, these elements are fixated on

²⁵⁸ See: Rowe 1999; Holt & Mason 2007, pp. 197-201; and Delaney et al 2009.

and amplified by the media in a fetishistic fashion. One of the consequences of this discursive pattern is the creation and/or strengthening of negative cheerleading stereotypes which circulate in discourse as commonsensical 'truths'. These tropes are either implied subtextually or stated explicitly via direct editorialising, and include typecasting of teenaged female cheerleaders as insubordinate, bullies, and laws unto themselves²⁵⁹, and images of the parents of cheerleaders as hyper-competitive, vindictive, and violent. The cliché of evil 'pom-pom moms, a species dedicated to advancing the cheerleading careers of its offspring, no matter what the cost' (Steptoe 1991) is particularly prolific²⁶⁰. While the meanings media consumers draw from media representations of cheerleaders are individually determined, news media framings of cheerleaders certainly issue a strong invitation for audience members to conclude that cheerleaders are more miscreant than many other members of society and therefore more likely to be involved in scandals or crime than other citizens. There is, therefore, a strong suggestion that cheerleaders may be partly or wholly to blame for the mishaps that befall them.

The manufacture or exaggeration of cheerleaders' involvement and/or culpability in scandals, crimes and mishaps occurs via a number of news media practices. These practices include a heightened focus on minor incidents which are likely to have been ignored or given only minimal attention if they could not be framed as being connected to cheerleaders or cheerleading. An example of this is media coverage of the 2009 theft in the US of \$147 from two girls selling caps and T-shirts. Despite the relatively small amount of money involved, the crime attracted significant media attention throughout America, with the vast bulk of texts focussing on the fact that one of the three teenaged thieves was a high school

²⁵⁹ 'If there is one thing the public has learned about cheerleaders over the past several decades, thwarting them can lead to all sorts of serious repercussions,' writes one American journalist. 'And it isn't just the cheerleaders. More often as not, parents are involved as well' (Beck 2009). See also: Kovach & Campo-Flores 2007; Hupp 2007; 'Goodbye Sarah Palin, Sorry We Hurt Your Feelings' 2009; and Chandler 2009e.

²⁶⁰ See: Hanson 1995, pp. 111-12; 'Beer stunt gets cheerleading mom \$750 fine' 2008; 'Mother punches woman during cheerleading fracas' 2008; 'Cheerleader's Mom Indicted' 2009; Beck 2009; and Cavanaugh 2009. Here I note that the joke, 'What's the difference between a pit bull and a cheerleader's mother? Answer: Lipstick' (Hanson 1995, p. 111), began circulating in relation to the mothers of cheerleaders well before 2008 American presidential candidate Sarah Palin received international media coverage for using it in reference to 'hockey moms' (Benedictus 2009).

cheerleader²⁶¹. Similarly, there is often a heightened focus on scandalous or criminal incidents' tenuous cheerleading connections, usually via the identification of protagonists as cheerleaders or former cheerleaders. One example is a report on a fatal shooting in which both the headline and lead paragraph highlights the fact that a former high school cheerleader sent a homicide suspect a text message shortly before a murder, even though there was no suggestion the cheerleader was involved in the crime ('Former cheerleader sent text message to murder suspect shortly before fatal shooting' 2009)²⁶².

References are frequently made to protagonists' cheerleading or former cheerleading connections in stories which concern inconvenience, injury or death in circumstances which are not intrinsically cheerleading-related. Examples include stories on: problems with public transport and lifts; exposure to noxious gases; dog maulings' and car crashes²⁶³. A specific example is a report on a 2009 car crash involving five American students in which the headline reads, 'Lodi Cheerleader Critically Injured In Wreck' (2009). Another account describes a homicide murder as a 'Cheerleader Murder' despite the victim being only a former cheerleader ('Cheerleader Murder Lands In Court 2 Years Later' 2008). Given the wealth of adjectives which could be used to introduce a non public figure who appears for perhaps the first time in a media report, it is significant that 'cheerleader' or 'former cheerleader' is so frequently chosen. The gratuitous use of cheerleading as a descriptor for protagonists in news media reports, combined with the force of pre-existing negative cheerleading stereotypes, may also produce implications of blame. In 2008, a Florida high school student died from a rare genetic disorder triggered by certain anesthetics after undergoing surgery to correct a birth defect and also to augment her breasts. 'Florida High School Varsity Cheerleader Dies after Breast Implant Surgery' (2008) and 'High School Cheerleader Dies of Breast Surgery Complications' (Donaldson-Evans 2008) are typical of

²⁶¹ For media coverage of this incident see: Cook 2009; 'Cheerleader charged in charity fund theft' 2009; and Miles 2009.

²⁶² For other examples of this type of coverage see: 'Ex-cheerleader coach sentenced to 90 days, 4 years probation' 2008; Gackle 2008; Silverman 2008; Gant 2008; 'Mom accused of mutilating 5-week-old son' 2009; and Kravets 2010.

²⁶³ See: 'Former Longhorn Cheerleader Mauled To Death By Dogs' 2007; 'Ammonia-like fumes sicken dozens of cheerleaders in Scranton' 2007; 'Burglars Caught Leaving Titans Cheerleader's Home Slade 2008; Kamm 2008; 'Cheerleaders left stranded by allegedly drunk bus driver' 2009; Burton 2009; Straehley 2009; and Kaplan 2009.

the headlines associated with news coverage of this incident. Given that vanity and conceit are common negative traits associated with female cheerleaders (Hanson 1995, p. 104), readers may assume that cheerleading-related narcissism was causally implicated in the death.

Individual cheerleading-related scandals are frequently framed as being part of a much larger whole. The news media frequently presents (often minor) incidents involving cheerleaders as being the tip of a large and threatening iceberg. With the exception of the high rate of injuries involved in cheerleading practice, this iceberg thesis is not supported by either quantitative research or expert opinion; rather, it is usually 'evidenced' anecdotally in the form of references to previous scandals and crimes. In a 2006 report headlined 'Cheerleading: a sport in crisis' and published on the *guardian.co.uk* web site, a journalist claims that 'for the last five years America has been ripped apart by a maelstrom of cheerleader sex, substance abuse and violence' (Wells 2006). The eight incidents offered to support this claim are emphatically trivial; any criminal ambience surrounding the incidents is a product of the sensational terms in which they are narrated. 'In Pennsylvania,' one entry reads, 'a mob of drunken cheerleaders, doped up with malt liquor by their coach, went on a car-trashing rampage' (ibid). The vague language and dearth of specific details such as dates and charges (what, exactly, constitutes a 'car-trashing rampage'?) makes these incidents impossible to verify²⁶⁴ and gives them – and the maelstrom they supposedly represent – an archetypal quality. It is also common for the news media to make sweeping, negative generalisations about all cheerleaders' behaviour based on a single incident. 'Hell hath no fury like a cheerleader scorned,' one on-line journalist writes in response to a scandal relating to cheerleading selection (Chandler 2009e). Furthermore, cheerleaders are frequently framed as being the primary – or only – perpetrators of scandals and/or crimes that implicate an array of guilty parties. When *risqué* photographs of girls or women associated with cheerleading appear on the internet, for instance, the subjects often claim the images were posted and/or circulated by mischievous or vindictive others. Yet it is overwhelmingly

²⁶⁴ Despite extensive internet and media text database searches, I was unable to locate the Pennsylvanian incident to which this journalist referred. Attempts to locate this writer and ask directly were impossible because he passed away in June 2009 (Ingle 2009).

cheerleaders who are framed as the guilty parties both in media coverage and institutional responses to such coverage²⁶⁵.

The discursive imputation that cheerleaders are intrinsically culpable has profound ethico-political implications when this framing occurs in relation to rape and violent crime. Research undertaken for this chapter suggests that when cheerleaders are the victims in such instances, their putative culpability is 'established' merely by techniques of textual proximics and regimes of semiotic coding – specifically, the reiteration of well-worn negative cheerleading stereotypes which connect cheerleading, moral depravity, and misadventure. An example is a 2002 newspaper article about the strangulation of a 13-year-old described as a 'promiscuous internet Lolita' (Johnston 2002). The victim's cheerleader status is included in the first paragraph which may imply that it is linked to (or possibly even responsible for) her promiscuous and Lolita-like behaviour, and her death. This case is typical of media coverage of murder cases in which victims' status as cheerleaders or former cheerleaders is routinely privileged over other facts which seem more pertinent to the case²⁶⁶. The risk, here, is that cheerleaders are subtextually depicted as having a potent, possibly irresistible appeal which incites their attackers to sexually-motivated violence.

Texts which link cheerleaders and violent crime are a common motif in the Australian media, where sex scandals involving footballers (but not cheerleaders) have resulted in calls to ban cheerleading. In the wake of a group sex scandal involving footballers and a 19-year-old waitress, a newspaper quotes a marketing expert as saying cheerleaders 'just propagate that type of behaviour' (Markson cited in Benns 2009). She goes on to say that: 'Rugby league needs to ban cheerleaders and take the focus away from sex and put it back on sport... I don't believe cheerleaders are beneficial to rugby league' (ibid). In the same story, the Federal

²⁶⁵ For an example of this, see: Chandler 2008.

²⁶⁶ In one story about a rape, the fact that a victim is a cheerleader is offered to readers before the fact that she is a child ('Cheerleader Rape Charges Rock Texas HS' 2008). Other examples include: a media report about a footballer and his wife charged with the stabbing murder of a 16-year-old girl which privileges the victim's status as a high school cheerleader, explaining that she was also the footballer's ex-girlfriend and that his wife did not like the fact that her husband still had contact with the girl ('Couple accused of killing cheerleader' 2008); and a story about a 36-year-old man who strangled a 19-year-old cheerleader and set her body alight because she resisted his sexual advances ('Cheerleader Murder Lands In Court 2 Years Later' 2008) See also: 'Cheerleader fatally stabbed by boyfriend' 2007.

Minister for the Status of Women describes a club which had banned cheerleaders as having 'hit on something' (Plibersek), while another prominent Australian feminist says she does not think it is 'a good idea to have a lot of young women dancing around half-naked in front of a lot of footballers' (Cox cited *ibid*). Similarly, an editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* links 'raunchy cheer squads' to 'ugly and entrenched' attitudes in the NRL ('Women and League' 2004).

The suggestion that cheerleaders may be partly or wholly to blame for attacks against them and/or that men cannot reasonably be expected to behave decorously (or legally) in their presence is articulated more flagrantly in the readers' comment sections accompanying on-line news media reports. Beneath a 2009 piece about a cheerleading coach arrested for having sexual contact with minors, several readers direct rage toward whichever 'idiot' was responsible for putting a 23-year-old man in charge of a group of school cheerleaders in the first place, suggesting this person should be arrested, too²⁶⁷. The implication is that a man cannot be expected to control himself under such circumstances. Similarly themed comments appear in relation to reports about a man arrested for encouraging cheerleaders from his son's school to dance on a 'stripper pole' (Hardon 2009). One reader denies the girls involved had 'vague or conflicted feelings about whatever went down' claiming, 'They fucking loved it' (Summers commenting on Hardon 2009).

Imputations of culpability extend, more broadly, to the practice of cheerleading itself which is frequently framed as a powerful force which can exert an adverse influence on individuals and may therefore be partly or wholly to blame for misadventure which occurs proximate to it. 'Cheerleading seems to produce a social toxin that poisons the brain of anyone it touches – the girls, their parents, teachers, administrators and the public,' one American newspaper opinion columnist writes in response to a cheerleading internet photographs scandal and beneath the headline 'Cheerleading one sport worth ditching' (Parks 2007). Another framing of cheerleading as corruptive occurs in an on-line report on cheerleading scandals in which a commentator suggests that girls who become college cheerleaders are likely to end up 'starring in 250 porno videos' (Stalter 2009). A third example, from 2008, concerns a 34-year-

²⁶⁷ See: caringmsnurse commenting on Lovelady 2009; and CelticLady9 commenting on Lovelady 2009.

old mother arrested for committing a petty rental fraud which netted a mere \$US800 ('Cheerleading mom committed' 2009). The incident received extensive international media coverage because, at the time of her apprehension, the woman had enrolled under her daughter's name at a high school where she spent a day attending classes and joining a cheer squad. While a jury ultimately accepted that the incident was a result of a delusional mental illness and the woman was sentenced to three years in a mental institution (Ayres 2009), the vast majority of related media reports ignored the psychiatric elements of the case and focussed instead on what was framed as the irresistible siren song of high school cheerleading. 'Most people cannot wait to finish high school,' read a report in the *Times*, 'but it seems that the lure of being a pom-pom-bearing cheerleader just one last time proved too much to bear for one American mother' (Tedmanson 2008).

Cheerleading is also demonised via the journalistic positioning and privileging of facts in a 2008 newspaper report about a 45-year-old Canadian man who sexually abused two nine-year-old girls ('Neighbour admits abusing girls' 2008). Here, the lead paragraph focuses on the perpetrator's dressing of his victims in cheerleader outfits, even though a number of other (unidentified) outfits and a number of other far more serious offences were involved. In this case, cheerleading paraphernalia is aligned with the abuser and framed as the pedophile's weapon of choice²⁶⁸. The fierce competition involved in cheerleading is also blamed either subtextually or outright for many violent incidents (including murder) involving cheerleaders and/or their parents²⁶⁹. Once again, these events are fixated on and amplified by the news media in a fetishistic fashion. A small subsection of competing discourse typically accuses the media of blowing cheerleading-related scandals and crimes 'out of proportion' (Kovach 2008)²⁷⁰, but texts with such themes are rare and isolated.

²⁶⁸ Other examples of news media reports of scandal, crime and mishap which focus on tenuous links to cheerleaders and may create an impression of cheerleading culpability include: 'Ashley Alexandra Dupre dressed as a cheerleader during threesomes with Charlie Sheen' 2008; 'Woman Comes Forward To ID Mystery Room' 2009; and Geary 2010.

²⁶⁹ See: Felkins 2007; Erskine 2007; 'Mother punches woman during cheerleading fracas' 2008; Chandler 2009e; Clay 2009; 'Cheerleader's Mom Indicted' 2009; and Torgovnick 2009.

²⁷⁰ 'OK, some cheerleaders go awry,' one cheerleader involved in an internet photos scandal says in a media report. 'Why do people care? Let's talk about Africa and blood diamonds, or something important' (cited *ibid*). The mainstream media's news values in relation to cheerleading are also questioned in relation to the coverage of the previously discussed case of a teacher suspended for performing a 'seemingly innocuous cheer' at the front of a

The journalistic practice of castigating cheerleaders as intrinsically and generically blameworthy without writers' acknowledging their own roles in the creation and/or amplification of this guilt points to broader issues concerning the news media's various disavowals with respect to cheerleading. Disavowal in terms of the Freudian idea of fetish originally referred to the process whereby a boy both sees and doesn't see his mother's 'missing penis': he "'knows" what he has seen (female genitals), but denies it, focusing on his new fetish/replacement penis, and convincing himself that he "doesn't know"' (Albury 2002, p. 50). In the context of cheerleading, the news media can profitably be framed analogously – as simultaneously seeing but not seeing its role in the very constitution of cheerleading's culpability. News media disavowal is evident in the editorial dismissal of cheerleading's worth, relevance, and/or interest value accompanied by the simultaneous production of a multitude of texts parading the very thing being denounced. Furthermore, news media reports often question or criticise the 'glamour quotient' (Ghose 2009) cheerleading adds to sport without acknowledging that – by accompanying such articles with photographs of the offending performers – cheerleading also adds a glamour quotient to the news media making the criticisms.

As previously canvassed, it is extraordinarily rare for news media coverage of cheerleading to be circulated without visuals – regardless of the smallness of the incident or the extent of the mismatch between content and imagery. A particularly blatant example of media performative contradiction²⁷¹ involving cheerleading visual representation is a story by an on-line sports site columnist who calls for an end to cheerleading and complains that even media critiques of cheerleaders are used as an excuse to run sexualised, objectified photographs of cheerleaders (Musolino 2009). His piece is accompanied by a photograph of an unnamed cheerleader with sexual appeal to readers. One posts that he or she 'only clicked on this story because of the picture attached to it' (WA commenting on Musolino 2009). Another reader points out to the author that, 'there is some irony in the fact that the photo

classroom (Carroll 2007). 'It shouldn't make the *Today* show,' an Arizona educational authority tells a journalist. 'Why is this national news?' (cited in Carroll 2007).

²⁷¹ Habermas describes 'performative contradiction' as occurring when 'a constative speech act $k(p)$ rests on noncontingent presuppositions whose propositional content contradicts the asserted proposition p ' (1990, p. 80, emphasis in original).

attached to your article could also be seen as somewhat sexist, exploitative, misogynistic [sic]' (Jim commenting on Musolino 2009). The publication of sexualised photographs of cheerleaders adjacent to media narratives railing against the sexualisation of cheerleaders illustrates what Hartley and Lumby describe as the 'latent sexual component of the caretaking gaze' and 'the relationship between the desire to watch and to watch over' (2003, p. 54). As Hartley puts it:

Often the news media deal with the tension between their own propensity to communicate via sexualized young people, and their own tendencies to police young people's sexuality... by having their cake and eating it; showing the pictures (communicatively, democratically) while wagging their fingers (truth-seekingly, governmentally) (1998).

Performative contradiction is also evident in a story headlined 'Your Network For Cheerleader Crotch' in which the on-line sports site *Deadspin* ridicules the CBS network for using a photograph in which the focal point is a cheerleader's spread legs, yet which does not miss the opportunity to run a near full-screen version of the image as well (Chandler 2009d). Similarly, a text accusing a TV network running a new cheerleading reality program of having a 'pom-pom girl fetish' demonstrates, arguably, a similar fetish in publishing the story in the first place ('CMT Rehabs Out-of-Shape Cheerleaders' 2007)²⁷². Other inter-textual tensions occur due to clashes between media content and advertising. An example is an on-line opinion piece defending cheerleaders against the media stereotype that they are 'non-athletes who are out there to look cute in their skirts' (Johnson 2007), accompanied by an advertisement for an internet dating site inviting readers to 'Browse photos of Cheerleaders Hot near you'.

A counterpoint to the disavowal exhibited by the mainstream news media exists in the unapologetic excitement articulated in on-line forums about the potential for cheerleading-related scandals and crimes to produce sexually stimulating visuals. Of a cheerleading-related scandal, an internet site featuring nude and semi-nude celebrity content writes:

²⁷² See also: 'Ways given to avoid cheerleading injuries' 2008.

THE UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE BOASTS... SOME SERIOUSLY LUSCIOUS CHEERLEADERS. AND, WHEN THE HEAVENS ARE ALIGNED JUST SO... SOME CO-ED ALLOWS A BOYFRIEND TO PHOTOGRAPH HER TIGHT NAKED BODY... AND WHEN THE STARS ARE ALIGNED JUST SO, SAID IMAGES ARE MADE AVAILABLE TO THE WORLD. THE WORLD IS YOU AND WE'VE GOT WHAT YOU WANT TO SEE! ('University of Louisville Cheerleader Sex Scandal', emphasis in original).

The proliferation of news media texts expressing surprise that cheerleading is more difficult or impressive than the author or the author's interviewees previously believed is another example of news media disavowal. This is because, while ostensibly championing cheerleading, the positioning and privileging of negative stereotypes is likely to contribute to their continued existence and potency. Texts constructed in this manner occur so routinely that the approach could almost be classed as a template for 'positive' coverage of cheerleading in the news media²⁷³. An example is a Scottish newspaper report stating that its goal is to correct inaccurate cheerleading stereotypes yet which marvels at the absence of 'pom-poms, cheesy grins or mini-skirts' (Diamond 2009), as well as the opening lines of a New Zealand news story about a local squad competing in an international competition:

When most people think of cheerleading, they think of pompoms, short skirts and over-excited girls squealing and shouting as the blokes play footy. But as it turns out... [c]heerleading is gruelling, hard work and a sport in its own right... ('Cheerleading – it's not just pompoms and squealing girls' 2009).

While such texts supposedly promote a positive view of cheerleaders, they clearly situate negative stereotypes as the dominant norm. As a result, it is feasible that any audience member who did not previously associate cheerleading with pom-poms, short skirts and over-excited girls squealing may do so after reading the 'Cheerleading – it's not just pompoms and squealing girls' (2009) text. This effect can be better understood by

²⁷³ For examples see: Baird 1986; Miletic 2004; Yan 2004; Baker 2007; Johnson 2007; Gándara 2008; Wight 2008; Irwin 2008; Schmit 2009; Oakes 2009; and LeBlanc 2009.

considering theories of psychological reactance, and the paradoxical consequences of 'thought suppression' in which telling someone not to think of a subject is believed to produce 'the very obsession or preoccupation that it is directed against' (Wegner et al 1987, p. 5). As such, an American journalist's plea for readers to, 'Forget the American archetype of blond cheerleader in tight sweater pining for the muscled quarterback' (Brady 2002), is exceedingly unlikely to produce the amnesia it advocates.

The type and extent of the negative effects of ostensibly pro-cheerleading news media texts depends on individual rhetorical and semiotic configurations. The use of the headline 'Cheerleading is not all pom-poms and inane grins', for instance, suggests that cheerleading is at least *partly* these things (Diamond 2009), while a newspaper report which reads, 'There's more to cheerleaders than pompoms and perky dispositions, or so those involved would have us believe' (Polutele 2007) clearly casts doubt on the reliability of those responsible for alternative cheerleader framings. In some cases, news media texts constructed as a rejection of one set of negative cheerleading stereotypes not only reinforce these, but promote others. An example is an *Observer Sports Magazine* report on an English cheerleading competition which reads:

Is this really what cheerleading is all about? Where are the salacious undertones? The wolf whistling? The hotpants? There is nothing suggestive or sexy about any of it. The event is more like one big sleepover, complete with bags and bags of fizzy sweets (Kessel 2009).

CASE STUDY: JENNIFER'S BODY

The lead-up to the 2009 release of the comic horror film *Jennifer's Body* (2009) generated a large volume of media texts which exemplify a number of aspects of the fetishisation of cheerleaders in popular discourse. The film was written by Academy Award-winning US writer Diablo Cody, whose 'punkish attitude' ('What makes Diablo Cody unique now gets

pans') and her status as a 'stripper-turned-screenwriter' (ibid)²⁷⁴ have contributed to her positioning as an exemplar of third-wave feminist sensibilities. It is the story of a glamorous high school pep squad member Jennifer Check (played by Megan Fox) who is sacrificed by a group of devil-worshipping musicians because they mistakenly believe she is a virgin. As a result of this miscalculation, the ritual backfires and Jennifer is transformed into a cannibalistic demon who feeds on the flesh of young male school mates in order to maintain her beauty and vigour. Check's best friend and occasional lover, Anita 'Needy' Lesnicki (played by Amanda Seyfried), eventually uncovers Jennifer's secret and kills her. In the extended 'uncut' version of this film, only five verbal and visual references are made to Check's membership of the high school's flag waving pep squad. These references are, in chronological order:

- 1) A black-and-white still of Check wearing a pep squad T-shirt (visual);
 - 2) A sequence in which Check waves a flag in a pep squad uniform during a high school basketball game (visual);
 - 3) Check's confession that having anal sex with a policeman meant she was too uncomfortable to 'go to flags the next day' (*Jennifer's Body* 2009) (verbal);
 - 4) A short flashback to the sequence depicted in point two of this list (visual);
- and
- 5) A shot of the blood-spattered cover of *Flag Team Quarterly* magazine in the grim finale (visual).

Check's flag waving: a) is only an incidental part of the film; and b) is flag waving *not* cheerleading. Yet the vast bulk of media discourse about *Jennifer's Body* erroneously designates her as a cheerleader, emphasising this by referring to it in headlines or the first paragraph of stories²⁷⁵. Additionally, a Google search for 'Jennifer's Body' and 'Megan Fox' yielded

²⁷⁴ Many stories about Cody's work mention that she used to work in peep shows and as a stripper and pole dancer. She also written about these experiences herself in her blog, and in the memoir *Candy Girl: A Year in the Life of an Unlikely Stripper* (2008).

²⁷⁵ Examples include: MacGregor 2009; 'Megan Fox as a Cheerleader in "Jennifer's Body" Pictures' 2009; and 'Jennifer's Body Cheerleader Promo'.

878,000 results²⁷⁶, while a search for 'Jennifer's Body', 'Megan Fox' and 'cheerleader' or 'cheerleading'¹ yielded 850,000²⁷⁷. This shows that almost all internet-based textual references to *Jennifer's Body* also contain references to cheerleading. Distinction-related errors or oversights are common with regards to cheerleading. It is possible, therefore, that the authors of media discourse about *Jennifer's Body* are confused about or unaware of the differences between cheerleading and other 'pep squad'²⁷⁸ activities such as flag twirling. That said, the substitution of 'cheerleading' for 'flag waving' in this instance can be interpreted as serving a number of significant psychosexual, commercial, and cinematic functions.

It is possible that the invention – and then exaggeration – of this film's cheerleading content is due in large part to the fetishisation of and sexual obsession with cheerleaders. Media stories about *Jennifer's Body* explicitly attribute a potent, bordering on magical, sexual charge to the (imagined) presence of cheerleading in the film. Much is made, for instance, of the novelty and salacious appeal of an attractive female celebrity – in this case Fox – wearing a cheerleading uniform. At the *Celeb Jihad* web site, blogger Jimmy Jihad writes:

Damn you, Megan Fox! Just when I think I finally hate you enough to stop looking at your half-naked body, you go and put on a cheerleader's outfit. Well played, you awful harlot (2009).

A similar fixation with the combination of Fox and a cheerleading uniform is evident in headlines such as: 'Megan Fox's Cheerleading Costume Shows Her Jennifer's Body Team Spirit' ('Megan Fox's Cheerleading Costume Shows Her Jennifer's Body Team Spirit');

²⁷⁶ The exact search, entered on May 31 2010, was '"Jennifer's Body" "Megan Fox"' (without the single quotation marks) which had a Google URL of http://www.google.com.au/search?hl=en&safe=off&client=safari&rls=en&q=%22jennifer%27s+body%22+%22Megan+Fox%22&aq=f&aql=g10&aql=&oq=&gs_rfai=.

²⁷⁷ The exact search, entered on May 31 2010, was '"Jennifer's Body" "Megan Fox" cheerleader OR cheerleading' (without the single quotation marks) which had a Google URL of http://www.google.com.au/search?hl=en&safe=off&client=safari&rls=en&q=%22jennifer%27s+body%22+%22Megan+Fox%22+cheerleader+OR+cheerleading&aq=f&aql=&aql=&oq=&gs_rfai=.

²⁷⁸ The role of a pep squad is to encourage enthusiasm, or, in the context of educational establishments, 'school spirit'.

'Megan Fox in a Cheerleader Uniform, New "Jennifer's Body" Stills' (MrDisgusting 2009); and 'Megan Fox in the Tiniest Cheerleader Uniform' ('Megan Fox in the Tiniest Cheerleader Uniform' 2009). Under the latter, a blogger writes:

Is there anything better than Megan Fox dressed as a hot little cheerleader...
Jennifer's Body looks like an utter shitfest, but these stills alone have sealed the
#1 spot at the box office (ibid).

Another critic applauds the combination of cheerleaders and lesbianism in the film. 'Thank God for hot lesbian cheerleaders,' this commentator writes. 'Is there anything they can't fix?' ('Megan Fox as a Cheerleader in "Jennifer's Body" Pictures'). There is evidence to suggest that the filmmakers – or at least the filmmakers' promotional team – were aware of the value of trading in sexualised, cheerleading-esque imagery when marketing the film. Official publicity photos for *Jennifer's Body* depict Fox in a cheerleading-type uniform similar to the one she wears in the film, but featuring a new top which is cropped higher to reveal her torso ('Megan Fox's Cheerleader Pictures') and which does not appear in the feature²⁷⁹.

Given the widespread designation of Check's character in *Jennifer's Body* as a cheerleader in media discourse framing the film, the remainder of the analysis in this case study will assume this to be the case. Independent of the accuracy of such a designation, it reflects the likelihood that consumers of both discourse about the film as well as the film itself will draw from their knowledge of cheerleading as they construct meanings about the film. Part of the third-wave sensibility of Cody's work in general and *Jennifer's Body* in particular is the ironic and subversive objectification of women's bodies and sexuality. Cheerleading as an activity, in contrast, is objectified and stereotyped along far more traditional lines. As such, the idea of cheerleading in *Jennifer's Body* provides symbolic shortcuts to meaning, trading on two common, conflicting stereotypes of cheerleading. The first positions the cheerleader as 'a young female who is physically attractive (cute), socially popular and influential – a wholesome, extroverted, enthusiastic Good Girl' (Hanson 1995, p. 100). The second

²⁷⁹ For comparison stills of Check's uniform as it appears in the film, see: Baxter 2009; 'Megan Fox's Cheerleading Costume Shows Her Jennifer's Body Team Spirit'; and "'Jennifer's Body" Photos of Megan Fox and Amanda Seyfried' 2009.

characterises the cheerleader as sexually promiscuous (ibid p. 103-6). In *Jennifer's Body*, trading on this first stereotype extends the breadth of Check's journey from a schoolgirl to a supernatural killer, while the latter aids in establishing her credentials as a 'drop dead' gorgeous *femme fatale* – first metaphorically and then literally.

The utilisation of traditional cheerleading stereotypes in *Jennifer's Body* is particularly significant because so many other elements of this film are disruptive to traditional tropes regarding gender and sexuality. Aspects of *Jennifer's Body* which can be framed as 'progressive' in a feminist sense include its use of a 'distinctly female point of view' (Charity 2009) and its reversal of 'the tradition/idea that only "bad" girls have sex when they're 16 [while] the good ones – those who, like Needy, do their homework and are responsible – never slide past first base' (Rodrigez 2009). In contrast with these multiple instances of gender-related subversion, I can only identify two, relatively subtle moments in *Jennifer's Body* in which representations of cheerleading are subverted rather than conforming to dominant stereotypes. The first concerns the second scene listed in paragraph two of this case study in which Lesnicki gazes and waves adoringly at a uniformed Check during a pep squad performance. (This subverts the dominant cheerleading-related stereotype that the beauty and sex appeal of the uniformed cheerleader in action is only appreciated by the male gaze [though Check does uphold the pornographic stereotype of cheerleaders being at least part-time lesbians].) The second cheerleading-related subversion concerns Check's preying (homicidally) on a male footballer when dominant feminist discourse positions cheerleaders as being preyed on sexually by men. That Cody's conspicuous subversion of gender stereotypes only extends to cheerleading on these two occasions is representative of the broader trend, discussed in Chapter Two, in which cheerleading is ignored as being unworthy of feminist attention.

Of most significance given this thesis' use of fetish theory, however, is the fetishised missing cheerleader in *Jennifer's Body* and her multiple, imagined replacements in discourse framing the film. It is extraordinary that so much cheerleading is seen where no cheerleading is present: to paraphrase Voltaire, if cheerleaders do not exist, it is necessary to invent them²⁸⁰.

²⁸⁰ The original quotation from French philosopher Voltaire was, 'If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him' (cited in Manser 2002, p. 134).

It is also evidence that – despite framings of cheerleaders as intrinsically pornographic – the fetishised cheerleader exists first and foremost in the minds of fetishists.

CONCLUSION

The fixation and hyper-sexualisation evident in cheerleading-related texts in pornography, popular culture, and the news media converge to construct an image of the cheerleader who is irredeemably debauched, irretrievably delinquent, and – regardless of the transgression – always to blame. Analysing such texts shows that these imaginings of the cheerleader are underdetermined by any empirical reality and are primarily the constructs of fetishists. It is the fetish object, however, which is seen as responsible and is (as I will go on to show in Chapter Five) vilified and punished. Cogent, here, is the cheerleading-related work of American sociologists Gary Alan Fine and Bruce Noel Johnson (1980) who study 29 versions of ‘The Promiscuous Cheerleader’ legend (mentioned earlier in this chapter) collected from Minnesota college students. The researchers observe that the cheerleader in this story ‘is punished for her moral transgression by becoming ill’ while the football players ‘are thought not to violate their proper sexual roles and thus receive no punishment’ (ibid, pp. 106, 124).

Fine and Johnson’s overall conclusions are temporal and location-specific: they conclude that the legend ‘exemplifies the traditional sexual order that American male adolescents have held to in the 1970s’ (ibid, p. 125). Yet the subtext of ‘The Promiscuous Cheerleader’ also exemplifies the order extant in fetishistic and/or vitriolic media representations of cheerleading in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Like the fictional cheerleader in ‘The Promiscuous Cheerleader’ legend, it is non-fictional cheerleaders, not the producers of their discursive representations, who are framed as guilty and dissolute, and are therefore made to ‘pay’²⁸¹. My argument, however, is that when sexual fetishisation and vitriol are combined

²⁸¹ Here I note that part of the suffering endured by cheerleaders relates to the negative stereotypes and hyper-sexualisation proliferating as a result of the circulation of discourse such as ‘The Promiscuous Cheerleader’ (1980). Thus the telling of a story whose subtext involves the penalties suffered by a fictional cheerleader contributes to the punishment meted out to non-fictional cheerleaders.

and directed at human subjects such as cheerleaders, there is a charge to be levelled not at the targets of the discourse but at the discourse producers themselves. As Freud writes, 'when sexual satisfaction is linked to the condition of the sexual object's suffering pain, ill-treatment and humiliation... we call it sadism' (1989, p. 13).

CHAPTER FOUR: A FETISH FOR VITRIOL

This chapter explores mediated vitriol whose defining characteristic is a mechanistic, all-encompassing negativity towards cheerleaders. It builds on the themes and genres discussed in chapters Two and Three, and explores the fetishistic dimensions of the denigration of cheerleaders in media texts. The psychological, social and cultural functions of anti-cheerleading rhetoric are explicated with reference to academic work relating to anti-Americanism, antifandom²⁸² and scapegoating, beneath this thesis' overarching analytical umbrella of fetish theory. Theoretical eclecticism is particularly useful when analysing hate because of the ambiguous academic status of emotion, which UK cultural studies scholar Sara Ahmed argues is often viewed as being "'beneath' the faculties of thought and reason' (2004, p. 3). Additionally, I have drawn on a diverse group of key writers and theorists from a range of disciplines because media studies offers few theoretical lenses for the examination and explanation of mediated vitriol. Literature on antifandom is scarce but proves fruitful for the unpacking of some aspects of anti-cheerleading discourse. Work on moral panic is far more plentiful but (as canvassed previously) makes a poor fit for cheerleading-related media texts.

The argument I will make in this chapter is that vitriol targetting cheerleading is fetishistic: because of its frequent sexual themes; because my research suggests a fixated, obsessive interest in condemning cheerleaders; and because there is good evidence that many critics of cheerleaders gain pleasure and disavowed (or unacknowledged) advantages from publicly deriding this activity and its practitioners. The views of Beckerman illustrate many aspects of the fetish evident in vitriol directed at cheerleaders. This American author seems, for instance, to take pleasure and pride in the creative venom of his anti-cheerleading stance, which breaks a number of taboos regarding the expression of sexual interest in and aggression towards school-aged children²⁸³. Beckerman's repeated derision of cheerleaders resonates with Indian journalist Gitanjali Sharma's reflections on the controversy over

²⁸² See: Gray 2003; 2005.

²⁸³ See: Beckerman 2002; Beckerman cited in Traister 2002; and Beckerman cited in Wells 2006.

cheerleading at IPL matches (2008). Sharma's case is that the so-called guardians of Indian culture:

continue to carry images of cheerleaders long after they perform at stadiums. They have carried them in their minds, preserved them, dwelt on them, obsessed about them, exaggerated them, magnified them and finally blown them out of proportion just about everywhere... on the streets, public forums, state assemblies and even Parliament House (ibid).

Criticism of cheerleaders ranges from passing put-downs, to what can be classed as antilocution or hate speech²⁸⁴. Many of these texts express both fascination and aversion, often manifesting in a combination of sexualised imagery and misogyny. It is also common for anti-cheerleading discourse to involve the 'sudden intrusions of prejudice into irrelevant contexts' which American psychologist Gordon Allport uses as a measure of the intensity and salience of a hostile attitude (2000, p. 40). While the most extreme examples of anti-cheerleading discourse are usually located on-line in niche web sites, blogs, and readers' comments sections, there are significant similarities between the unchecked cyber censure of cheerleaders and that occurring in mainstream media texts.

Cheerleaders are frequently stereotyped in discourse as being: opportunistic and greedy²⁸⁵; vain and conceited (Hanson 1995, p. 104); bitchy²⁸⁶ and/or snobbish²⁸⁷; fake and hypocritical (usually because they are framed as not being *genuinely* interested in the qualities of 'pep', sporting support and teamwork)²⁸⁸; and/or exhibitionistic²⁸⁹. They are commonly dismissed

²⁸⁴ Antilocution – often used interchangeably with 'hate speech' – refers to verbal rejection and is the first stage in a five-step intensity scale measuring the manifestation of prejudice devised by Allport in the 1950s (2000, p. 39).

²⁸⁵ See: Hanson 1995, p. 105; and Hisaoka 2007.

²⁸⁶ See: Tartt 1994; and 'All Star Cheer Squad' 2009.

²⁸⁷ See: White 2009; and Tartt 1994.

²⁸⁸ Tartt, for instance, writes of the 'mean girl' captain of her freshman squad who, along with 'her cronies' ostracised younger girls despite talking 'a lot about spirit and pep, and how important it was... to work as a team' (1994).

²⁸⁹ See: Tami commenting on Pumilia 2007; and Rosenfield 2009. On this subject I note that, like so much of the criticism directed at cheerleaders, the desire to be looked at is hardly unique to cheerleading. Guttman, for instance, argues that there 'must be at least a trace of

as trivial – referred to as: ‘fluffbunnies’ (Wells 2006); ‘shiny things that move’ (Merandino 2008); ‘jiggling ninnies’ (bettybugbear commenting on Tharoor 2010); and ‘the parsley of athletic competition... a frivolous expenditure... [an] ephemeral excrescence’ (King 2009). Extraordinarily common is the claim that cheerleaders are unintelligent or ‘bimbos’ (Hanson 1995, p. 103)²⁹⁰. American cheerleaders, recalls one reader of the *Guardian*, were ‘not the brightest students... Most of the other girls with even the slightest feminist inclinations treated them with contempt as bird brains’ (farfrom commenting on Tharoor 2010)²⁹¹. A related theme is that the *activity itself* is stupid. One blogger describes cheerleading as ‘mind numbing’ (Pumilia 2007), while other commentators describe it as ‘asinine’ (brandon commenting on Pumilia 2007) and for the ‘brain dead’ (AJ commenting on Pumilia 2007). Another sports editorialist writes:

There is no question that cheerbabes are politically incorrect, but that’s not my objection. My objection is that they are stupid. Not individually. Some of these girls probably are as smart as whips. Though you never seen them on ‘Jeopardy’. It’s the concept that’s stupid (cited in Adams & Bettis 2003a, p. 77).²⁹²

The trope of cheerleading as inane also arises in the common invocation of the high school cheerleader as a binary opposite to the dedicated student or ‘geek’. A journalist writing in the *Times* says that as a high school girl in America, she was ‘a bookish bespectacled chubbster

narcissism and exhibitionism in any sports performance that attracts spectators’ (1996 pp. 156, 153-4).

²⁹⁰ There is evidence that cheerleaders are aware of and on guard about framings of them as having limited intellects and interests. ‘The girls always have to defend themselves,’ one Australian cheerleading coach tells a Sydney newspaper. ‘It’s like just because they do cheerleading, they have to prove they are smart. Most of them go to uni or have good jobs’ (Pakula 2008). Cheerleading organisations are also taking steps to reject the stereotype of its practitioners as unintelligent and uninformed. The Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders (unlike the Dallas Cowboys football players) have to take a 100-question test during tryouts which includes questions on national and international current affairs (Reilly 2009). ‘We want our cheerleaders to be knowledgeable and well-spoken in interviews,’ says cheersquad head Kelli Finglass. ‘If they’re not, it’s a deal breaker’ (cited *ibid*).

²⁹¹ For other framings of cheerleaders as unintelligent see: ‘Paternity Madness: Raiderette Cheerleader Files Suit Against Larry Fitzgerald’ 2007; Alper 2009; and KevinE 2009.

²⁹² For other framings of cheerleading as an activity as inane, see: Adams & Bettis 2003a, p. 77; ShariL commenting on Tharoor 2010; Pumilia 2010; and brandon commenting on Pulimila 2010.

more concerned with conjugating French verbs than joining lithe blondes in cheering the school football team to victory' (Lamé 2010). Another American journalist, remembering her time as a cheerleader, tells a Michigan newspaper that it 'lessened the nerd factor' of also being a good student (Johnson cited in Lloyd 2009)²⁹³.

Relevant here is fiction writer Donna Tartt's memoir about being a high-school cheerleader. In this account, Tartt positions herself as being very different to her peers in that she read books and worried about algebra while the other cheerleaders 'gripped about not being allowed to ride with the players... punched listlessly at the radio, applied Bonne Bell lip gloss...' and so on (1994). Tartt describes miming along to the teen conformities required for cheerleading and elsewhere, explaining this with a quote from George Orwell's *1984* in which the character of Julia says: 'Always yell with the crowd, that's what I say. It's the only way to be safe' (cited *ibid*). Talking later about her recollections, Tartt maintains she did not have a cheerleader's personality, saying the main point of her account was about 'being an outsider, a distinct individual in a group' (cited in Wyndham 2002). It is revealing that Tartt does not consider that her cheerleading sistren may have felt the same; that they may have also had 'subversive' (1994) inner worlds and, like her, been simply going through the motions of conformity. Rather, she insists with confidence, they were 'dreaming of backseats, and letter jackets, and smooching with their repulsive boyfriends' (1994).

Popular discourse frequently contains fierce condemnations of cheerleaders' appearances. They are condemned: for being overweight; for having 'thunder thighs' (Torgovnick 2008a, p. 101); for having breasts that are too small or too large; for being too old; and/or for generally being 'U-G-L-Y' (Insulin commenting on Chandler 2009c) or physically unattractive²⁹⁴. Particularly vitriolic comments claim cheerleaders look like they have a physical or mental disability. Commenting on a photograph of a group of Australian

²⁹³ Similarly, actress Winona Ryder tells *People* magazine that she always thought it was 'cooler to be interesting than to be pretty' and that, she 'never wanted to be beautiful, [she] never wanted to be a cheerleader' (Perry 2009).

²⁹⁴ See: rstyles 2008; Scrutoon 2008; aaaaaa commenting on Walsh 2009;; Chris 2009; darkjedi commenting on Hogfather 2009; 'Not All Cheerleaders Were Created Equal' 2009; TicMan commenting on Hogfather 2009; and truballin commenting on Rosenfield 2009. YouTube also hosts a large number of mocking amateur footage 'of love-handled cheerleaders who dare to tumble in a miniskirt' (Lamé 2010).

professional cheerleaders, a viewer writes of one: 'she's a fucking mong hey her face is fucking weird like a downy or something' (darkjedi commenting on Hogfather 2009). And from another visitor to this site: 'I go to the football to watch footy, not watch some fat trogs whos [sic] faces resemble a bucket of smashed crabs' (Thimes commenting on Hogfather 2009). There is also a pictorial spread entitled '8 Cheerleaders that [sic] Will Make You Root for the Other Team' featuring photographs of: a cheerleader in a neck brace; several overweight cheerleaders; and a cheerleader whose transgression seems to be that she is aged in her mid 30s (the latter is accompanied by the caption 'What has been seen can never be unseen') (Smosh 2010). One viewer says the photos make her or him want to pour hot tea in their eyes and jump out a window (Archer commenting on Smosh 2010). Others describe them as '[h]orribly disgusting' (HellNoJess commenting on Smosh 2010) and 'effing disgusting' (Chickasaur commenting on Smosh 2010). A number of viewers claim to have vomitted or been close to vomitting²⁹⁵ as a result of viewing the photographs.

Sexualised, physical appearance-oriented vitriol also appears alongside a sports web site's story about and photographs of a blonde American professional cheerleader who works as a full-time molecular neuroscience researcher (Chandler 2009a). This report prompts a number of acerbic comments from readers including: 'I knew there had to be some explanation for her face' (Error commenting on Chandler 2009a); 'I'm assuming the hair color came from some terrible laboratory accident' (Marth commenting on Chandler 2009a); and 'so that's what they did with Anna Nicole Smith's corpse!' (acer commenting on Chandler 2009a). In reference to the moles apparent on this cheerleader's skin, there is also: 'who rhinestoned her stomach?' (twoeightnine commenting on Chandler 2009a); and 'I would play connect the dots on her midsection with my joy-juice' (RickeyRickay commenting on Chandler 2009a). Such discourse both relishes in *and*/condemns cheerleaders for their alleged hyper-sexual nature. Similar themes are apparent in the response to the disbanding of a cheerleading squad team after a 'provocative' dance during a basketball game (Matteucci 2009). One visitor to the *Deadspin* web site says: 'Well they'll just go back out to

²⁹⁵ See: HellNoJess commenting on Smosh 2010; EmoBabeLoves commenting on Smosh 2010; hippielove77 commenting on Smosh 2010; and punkgirl92 commenting on Smosh 2010.

get drunk and fuck guys at parties. Good job, parents' (Afino commenting on Chandler 2009c).

Schadenfreude and vitriolic humour is a distinguishing characteristic of much discourse generated in response to cheerleading accidents and injuries. Commenting on a story about a cheerleader who fell backwards off another's shoulders and suffered a severe head injury, one person jokes: 'Luckily her IQ was unaffected' (Dodger commenting on Bennett 2009). There is also the 'Cheerleader Falls on her Face in Front of the School' (*Nothing Toxic*) clip discussed in the Introduction of this thesis, as well as the posting of footage of a cheerleading pyramid accident accompanied by the text: 'We must be careful to observe the time in which the cheerleader falls and gives a very strong blow against the floor. It is very funny...' ('A cheerleader blow' 2010). A short video of a professional cheerleader falling during a routine is greeted by the comment, 'boom !!! She on her back...' (904ALLSTAR commenting on 'NEW YORK KNICKS CHEERLEADER FAILS DURING HALF-TIME ROUTINE!' 2010). Another blogger writes that she takes pleasure in learning of the axing of cheer squads and enjoys counting the number of times her school's cheerleaders fall because 'what they are doing seems pointless' to her (Pumilia 2010).

Academic work on anti-Americanism²⁹⁶ is also useful in explicating cheerleading-related vitriol. As with much anti-American discourse, media texts frequently frame cheerleading as being both absurd and dangerous (Markovits 1997, p. 71), and tend to be all-encompassing and essentialist in nature. 'i [sic] hate cheerleaders,' a reader writes in response to an on-line list of cheerleaders from film and television. 'theyre [sic] the easiest most predictable chicks out there that are brats' (ArbtheRipper commenting on IGN Stars 2009). Such texts are rarely supported by evidence but – as US political scholar Ruth O'Brien puts it in relation to anti-Americanism – are antonymous and indicative of a 'blank bias' (cited in Markovits 1997, p. viii). Apt, too, is the argument of Australian academics Chris Fleming and John O'Carroll, who note that some anti-Americanism is so habitual, it has become ritualised, manifesting 'in the patterns of mechanical gesture and repetition' (2003/2004).

²⁹⁶ Cf.: Strinati 1992; Markovits 1997; Ceaser 2003; Revel 2003; O'Connor 2004; Fleming & O'Carroll 2003/2004; Rubin & Rubin 2004; and Markovits 2007.

Scholars who conceptualise anti-Americanism often note the utilisation of the US as a code or symbol for a range of perceived, contemporary ills²⁹⁷. Strinati, for example, writes of the condemnation of Americanisation as 'the source of all that is bad and harmful, trivial and banal, unintelligent and undemanding, standardized and repetitive, showy and vulgar, manipulative and mercenary, commercial and barbaric' (1992, p. 51). Cheerleaders operate as a similar symbol and are blamed for an equally vast range of modern malaises. Thus, like America, cheerleading has provided the basis for a lingua franca – a 'sort of global antinomy, a mutually shared language of opposition to and resistance against the real and perceived ills of modernity' (Markovits 2007, pp. 27, 1). There are also parallels with Markovits' case that the vehemence and durability of anti-Americanism is related to this nation's provocation of contradictory impulses such as desire and contempt (1997, pp. 37, 39). The US, he writes, is equated with 'a despised proletarian culture' yet one that involves 'something tempting and irresistible': 'Add to this the ingredient of *schadenfreude*, and this resentment becomes part of a potent mixture of simultaneous feelings of inferiority and superiority' (ibid).

Markovits' exploration of the psychological dimensions of anti-Americanism provides a useful entry point into a consideration of the possible motivations of and consequent benefits which may accrue to critics of cheerleading. Condemning cheerleaders is likely to serve a number of psychological functions for individuals, including the redirection of vitriol away from oneself and towards another. Lanier, for instance, criticises the 'mob-beckoning ridicule' prevalent on the internet, but confesses to engaging in such strategies himself: 'I... become relieved when someone else in an on-line exchange is getting pounded or humiliated, because that means I'm safe for the moment...' (2010, p. 60). There is also the 'pleasant catharsis' of speaking one's mind (Allport 2000, p. 40) and/or the self-affirmation that can be obtained through derogating others (Fein & Spencer 2000). UK media researcher Vivi Theodoropoulou discusses the latter in relation to antifandom practices, which she says provide 'not only mechanisms to safeguard one's fan identity but also ways to gain a great deal of "identity boost" and self-esteem' (2007, p. 325). Also writing on antifandom, US communications scholar Melissa A. Click notes that while some regular viewers and readers watch *Martha Stewart Living* to relax and escape, others report 'amusement, irritation, or anger when watching the show' (2007, p. 310). While critics of cheerleading do not explicitly use

²⁹⁷ See: Markovits 1997, p. 85; Ceaser 2003; and O'Connor 2004, p. 85.

positive terms such as 'relaxing' or 'pleasurable' to describe their involvement with cheerleading or cheerleading-related texts, the flamboyant glee with which writers such as Beckerman pillory cheerleaders suggests these may be appropriate terms to describe their experiences.

Some denigrations of cheerleading produced by women seem motivated by jealousy, resentment, or revenge: 'i have a hatered [sic] for cheerleaders after not making the squad', one woman posts (Samantha commenting on Pumilia 2007). Another journalist writing in the *Times* says: 'cheerleaders... made my teenage years hell... I believed that it was my God-given right to detest cheerleaders as much as they disliked me' (Lamé 2010). Adams and Bettis observed similar psychological defence mechanisms during their cheerleading-related research:

When we presented some of our research to a small group of colleagues we knew fairly well, the group members spent a good part of a two-hour meeting telling personal cheerleader stories, many of which were fueled by anger and pain. One woman told the group, 'I hated cheerleaders in high school and have really never gotten over that'... (pp. viii-ix).

Their conclusion is that cheerleading often prompts potent recollections for many adult Americans, evoking powerful reflections of one's youth and one's position in the typical school hierarchy (ibid). The mutual dislike which can exist between cheerleaders and non-cheerleaders in scholastic settings is also reflected in the ironic cheer which opens the film *Bring It On* (2000). It includes the lines: 'I'm wanted, I'm hot/I'm everything you're not'; 'I'm rockin', I smile/And many think I'm vile'; and 'Hate us 'cause we're beautiful/Well, we don't like you either/we're cheerleaders' (ibid). Also cogent when considering the broader rejection of cheerleading by the women's movement is Baumgardner and Richards' thesis that there is a jealousy among second wave feminists when it comes to the lives of young girls, because these lives are so radically different from what older women experienced (2004, p. 60).

Cheerleading's mass cultural status and epitomisation of mainstream cultural norms may endow detractors with a degree of subcultural capital²⁹⁸. The activity's popularity and cultural power also contributes to the ease with which producers of discourse are able to frame their anti-cheerleading utterances as harmless, justified, courageous, and/or righteous. Again, I follow Markovits who, in relation to European anti-Americanism, writes that, by directing prejudice at a seemingly retrograde and evil 'Mr Big', citizens who have 'rightly dislodged many... previously held prejudices from acceptable public interaction' can indulge in prejudice not only guilt-free but convinced they are acting 'morally, justly, and virtuously' (1997, pp. 221-2). As canvassed elsewhere in this thesis, an important explanation for the extent and nature of vitriolic framings of cheerleading relates to the fact that feminists – the usual gatekeepers who protect the public sphere from mediated misogyny – actually participate in generating venom. Also critical is the all-encompassing culpability of cheerleaders implied in news media discourse. These factors, combined with the circulation of negative cheerleading stereotypes, allow the producers of vitriol against cheerleaders to justify their rhetoric as the reasonable chastising or punishment of wrong-doers.

There are parallels, here, with Markovits' argument that anti-Zionism facilitates the acceptability of anti-Semitism (1997, p. 165). 'Being an anti-Semite puts one clearly beyond the pale of the acceptable...' he writes, 'being anti-Israeli places one at the core of the current empathies and sympathies among millions of Europeans' (ibid p. 170). By the same token, anti-cheerleading rhetoric involves 'a public flaunting of an attitude with an impunity, even pride' (ibid, p. 182) that would be regarded as socially unacceptable in other contexts. There is a fetishistic element to this configuration because cheerleaders are used as substitutes for other concerns. In this sense, cheerleading-related vitriol offers media producers a 'loophole' when negotiating contemporary norms about what is and is not permissible to say about young women and, to a lesser extent, children and the working class, in public. So long as a denunciation is framed as being first and foremost about cheerleading, critics are not only exculpated but applauded.

²⁹⁸ Following Bourdieu, Thornton use the term 'subcultural capital' to refer to the significance of subcultural distinctions (1995, p. 11).

Another signal characteristic of anti-Americanism – and anti-cheerleaderism – revolves around issues of power. As Ruth O'Brien puts it in relation to prejudice against America:

Whereas discrimination against peoples considered weak and helpless is viewed as abhorrent behavior, this isn't. Anti-Americanism is regarded as a form of fighting back. It's battling against an eight-hundred-pound gorilla which... [is] 'threatening, powerful, clumsy, yet also inferior' (cited in Markovits 2007, p. viii).

The relationship between vitriol and the perceived power of an object of hatred is specifically addressed by Theodoropoulou, who argues that such relationships are predicated on 'a series of emotions such as fear, admiration, respect, and envy for the *opposing* threat that cause hatred' (2007, p. 316, emphasis in original). Feminism's complicity with and participation in the vilification of cheerleaders (as well as the 'Mr [Ms?] Big' dynamic outlined earlier) are particularly relevant when considering anti-cheerleading vitriol generated by mainstream media outlets, where there are both explicit institutional and tacit rules influencing what can be said about whom in which way. Consider Beckerman's description of 13-year-old school girl cheerleaders as 'urine stain[s]' (cited in Traister 2002), 'dumb bitch[es]' (2000, p. 43) and 'loose bimbos with the brain capacity of squirrel faeces' (ibid), that he would, nevertheless, still like to 'nail' (2002). It is difficult to imagine such comments being adjudged appropriate or humorous if a similarly popular writer published them in equivalent mainstream media contexts²⁹⁹, and they were directed instead towards school girl track and field athletes or basketballers. As with anti-Americanism, cheerleading offers an excuse for 'public expressions of humiliation' that are rarely acceptable elsewhere (Markovits 2007, p. 15).

Ambivalence is a frequent feature of mediated vitriol directed at cheerleaders and can be better understood by considering the complexities in the relationship between and the

²⁹⁹ Beckerman was a 'cub reporter' (Wells 2006) working for the *Anchorage Daily News* when he conducted the 'urine stain' interview with a 13-year-old cheerleader. *Death to all Cheerleaders* (2000) was a self-published collection of his newspaper columns and received national American media attention: it was compared with the work of Hunter S. Thompson, humour writer Dave Barry and stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce, and led to his hiring as a columnist with the *New York Press* (Schaub 2004). He is currently a blogger for *Esquire Magazine* ('Eat Like A Man').

economies of love and hate as discussed in affect literature. Ahmed, for instance, writes of the way hate generates its object 'as defence against injury', noting that 'it is a common theme within so-called hate groups to declare themselves as organisations of love' (2004, p. 42). This, according to my analysis of the media archives described above, holds true with anti-cheerleading rhetoric generated by groups such as feminists, social conservatives, and sports fans who frame their dislike of cheerleading as part of a protective love of other things (feminine liberation, youthful innocence, sporting purity and so on) that they see as being threatened by cheerleading practitioners or supporters. Theodoropoulou, helpful again, notes a similar dynamic within the phenomenon of antifandom, where:

the dislike of object A results from liking object B; where the hatred for something is dictated by the love for something else and the need to protect 'the loved one' (2007, p. 318).

A popular understanding of the love/hate axis can be summarised as these two emotions existing side by side in a paradoxical marriage of dual obsession, mutually opposed to each other yet fixated, in parallel, on the same object. A manifestation of such a formulation would be a person who loves some aspects of cheerleading yet hates others. Vitriol targetting cheerleading, however, suggests that the act of hating can itself be an intensely pleasurable and psychologically affirming activity, and may be actively pursued for these benefits. As UK cultural studies scholar Jonathan Gray notes in relation to the activities of antifans, some audience members may deliberately expose themselves to texts they dislike 'precisely to raise their blood pressure' (2005, p. 853). In this sense, the 'love' that exists in relation to cheerleading flows from the pleasures experienced from hating them. It is rare to find explicit admissions of the love of hating (in general) or the love of hating cheerleaders (in particular), but there are exceptions. English essayist William Hazlitt frames the pleasures taken in hating in somewhat essentialist terms: 'Nature seems... made up of antipathies: without something to hate, we should lose the very spring of thought and action' (c. 1826). Byron, meanwhile, writes of the sustaining and recreational aspects of hate:

The joys of mutual hate to keep them warm,
Instead of love, that mere hallucination?

Now hatred is by far the longest pleasure;
Men love in haste, but they detest at leisure (2007)

A small number of media texts explicitly refer to the love of hating cheerleaders. An example is a web site story entitled 'Why we love to hate the Dallas Cowboys – Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders' which prompts comments such as:

The cheerleaders are the epitome why [sic] we hate the Poopkickers³⁰⁰. They 'lead cheers' for the other team. They are blond haired and blue eyed... with terrible motives. Nice legs with skimpy outfits... torn to divide partiality... carnal knowledge of the fullback in motion scheme (AndyStandsUp commenting on 'Why we love to hate the Dallas Cowboys').

Articulations of both desire and contempt in cheerleading-related discourse are frequent: like Beckerman, many media producers denigrate cheerleaders in the most extravagant of terms, yet still express an interest in having physical relations or other forms of intimacy with them³⁰¹. Framings of cheerleaders as both contemptible and desirable may be attributable to the fact that their detractors find them sexually appealing yet simultaneously view them as possessing either: a) a surplus of sexual availability (thereby making them worthy of contempt because they are regarded as 'sluts'); or b) a deficit of sexual availability in that they are seen as unavailable to anyone except the most elite, alpha males (thereby making contempt a more psychologically tolerable reaction than feelings of rejection-related inadequacy). US legal academic Martha C. Nussbaum offers a version of Friedrich Nietzsche's critically important concept *ressentiment*³⁰² when she writes, of internet misogyny, that:

³⁰⁰ My understanding is that 'poopkickers', here, is used in reference to the Dallas Cowboys footballers.

³⁰¹ See: King 2009; andelSell commenting on Tharoor 2010.

³⁰² The concept of *ressentiment* – introduced by Nietzsche and developed sociologically by Max Scheler – has similarities with the English word resentment, but differs in '(1) the protracted (chronic) character of the emotional experience and (2) powerlessness to take retaliatory action' (Meltzer & Musolf 2002, p. 243): 'For both Nietzsche... and Scheler.... *ressentiment* is a generalized chronic feeling that involves both a desire for revenge against its perpetrator(s) and failure to express the revenge in direct action' (ibid, emphasis in original).

People who feel themselves to be weak or inadequate vis à vis some other group of people seek to validate themselves by creating an entire world in which these people are no longer glorious, autonomous or happy, a world in which they themselves enjoy complete power over those who formerly held power over them (2010, p. 69).

An example of such dynamics can be found in a 'sample "play" scene' on the adult web site Dolcett Enterprises, which describes itself as offering 'Women As Nature Intended Them To Be' and advertises that it provides services for those 'interested in exploring the wilder themes of sexual submission/slavery in the extreme, bondage, domination and sado-masochism [BDSM] in a unique and safe [fashion]]' ('Dolcett Enterprises - Sample "Play" Scene'). A scenario called 'The Cheerleaders' asks users of the site whether they hate 'the top girl cheerleaders' in their school and want 'some sweet tasty revenge' on 'the HIGH SCHOOL Girls You Love To HATE!!':

Do you dream of being rid of that arrogant bitch who's always looking down her nose at you and all your friends? Are you sick of her smarty arsed friends, her cute overdressed and untouchable arse? The cunt you'll never fuck!!? Why not take advantage of our 'Chop A Cheerleader!' special offer (ibid). For just \$10,000 we'll take her and give her all you know she REALLY deserves! NO, you don't pay us \$10,000, WE PAY YOU (ibid).

Theoretically relevant here are Ahmed's conclusions on the intimacy and intensity involved in hating; she notes that hate involves a certain kind of excess, and is therefore opposed to indifference rather than love:

Certainly, within psychological theories of prejudice, hate is seen as tied up with love. Or, to put it more precisely, love is understood as the pre-condition of hate... There can, in fact, be no hatred until there has been long-continued frustration and disappointment... As Mikkel Borch-Jacobson puts it, 'Hate wants *to get its hands on* the other; it wants to touch even when it wants to destroy'... (2004, pp. 50, 51, emphasis in original).

A further explanation for ambivalent, sexualised responses relates to conflicting representations of cheerleading as both a wholesome activity for prepubescent children as well as a highly sexualised performance by and for sexually available adults. This raises the question of whether the desire for cheerleaders is psychologically confusing as it elicits pedophilic and hebephilic taboos. Another question worth posing is whether vitriol containing contradictory content is likely to be generated by critics of cheerleading who experience a sexual desire for cheerleaders yet have a disregard for the activity, thereby raising the possibility that they are expressing a displaced repugnance for their own predilections.

In a more general sense, the pleasures gained from actively hating cheerleading and cheerleading texts can be better understood by considering theories relating to antifandom – a term pioneered by Gray to describe the practice of actively disliking genres, texts, or personalities (2003; 2005). Gray makes the case that:

hate or dislike of a text can be just as powerful as can a strong and admiring, affective relationship with a text, and they can produce just as much activity, identification, meaning, and 'effects' or serve just as powerfully to unite and sustain a community or subculture (2005, p. 841).

In relation to the textual reception continuum, Gray proposes that pleasure and displeasure responses be positioned not on opposite ends of a spectrum, but on the edges of a Möbius strip, with the behaviours and performances of textual lovers and loathers 'resembling, if not replicating, each other' (2005, p. 845). Fans of cheerleading texts (be they fans of mediated discourse or actual acts of cheerleading) are therefore not restricted to the common understanding of the term 'fan', but also include Gray's antifans – committed textual consumers who claim to dislike or even detest cheerleaders. Publically loathing texts can be creative and rivalrous to the point where antifans may consciously or subconsciously compete to produce the most original, humorous or politically incorrect anti-cheerleading response: interlocutors attempt to outflank each other in a competition of offensiveness. Gray notes, for instance, that some antifans expose themselves to texts they dislike as 'an intellectual-rational challenge' that allows access to intellectual, comic, and cultural capital via the engagement of 'witty and

analytical textual deconstruction' (2005, p. 853).

Examples of anti-cheerleading vitriol which have resulted in tangible artistic enterprise include: the writings of singer Kurt Cobain who fantasised about cheerleaders being stripped naked and humiliated at gunpoint (cited in Wells 2006); the formation of a Baltimore punk band called Die Cheerleader Die which released a CD entitled 'Down with the Pom Poms Up with the Skirts' (*Die Cheerleader Die*); and the establishment of the satirical Anti-Cheerleading Association web site which claims cheerleading 'is kept strong by the forces of Hitler from beyond the grave' ('A.C.A.'). Also evidence of creativity is the emergence of anti-cheerleader portmanteaus such as 'chimbo' which is used to refer to someone who is both a 'cheerleader and a bimbo' ('chimbo') (though common vitriolic framings suggest many critics of cheerleaders would regard this expression as tautological). Some expressions of cheerleading-related antifandom involve what can be described as engaged enagement. 'There is not one iota of this film that makes any sense,' reads an on-line review of the film *Cheerleader Massacre*. 'Surpassing eye-rolling annoyance, it truly is the highlight of the film to see just what glaring error they're going to make at any given point' (Criswell 2007).

Other anti-cheerleading texts are less informed – or at least informed by an active avoidance. On an internet forum dedicated to expressions of hatred for films, a contributor states that they refuse to watch any cheerleading movies. 'EWWWWWWWW!' this post reads, 'I HATE THOSE!' (Amplify commenting on "What movie do you refuse to watch?"). Given that this commentator does not view cheerleading movies, it begs the question of how they know they hate them. Gray, however, argues that it would be rash to dismiss such comments because even un-read texts clearly have meaning and relevance to antifan audiences in that they inspire and require 'the language of physical repulsion' (2005, p. 848). His conclusion is that, in cases such as these, the moral rather than the aesthetic 'or even the rational-realistic' text has been read and responded to (ibid). This configuration fits with the generic, non-specific nature of much anti-cheerleading vitriol, though there is evidence to suggest that it is the *symbolic* dimensions of cheerleading-related texts which provoke the most outrage.

In addition to the individual benefits which can accrue to those who experience and express vitriol towards cheerleading, there are advantages which accrue to collectives. As such, it is

possible to view the social practices of communities in terms of those practices being *solutions* to *problems* that arise for members. The 'in-group' cohesion offered by the collective rejection of an 'out-group' (Allport 2000) is a concept which has been explored at length in a diverse range of fields including psychology, philosophy, sociology, and political, cultural and media studies. Allport, for instance, describes the way antilocution can cement group membership and strengthen solidarity: 'To reject out-groups is for [some individuals] a salient need' (2000, pp. 40, 39). A sociological take on the role of the 'other' can be found in the work of UK academic Kathryn Woodward, who writes of the process of identities forming in relation to 'what they are not' (1997, p. 35). Political scholars such as Barry Rubin and Judith Colp Rubin note the transfer of 'psychological insecurity' into hostility directed outwards (2004, p. 22), while Markovits argues that, 'every state structure, especially in its initial stages, only achieves self-consciousness when it defines itself in opposition to another state' (1997, p. 217).

In the field of media studies, Hartley's case is that news is organised around strategies of inclusion and exclusion which create the domains of 'wedom and theydom' and permit an insidious rather than 'open, offensive prejudice' against those who are 'unlike us' and therefore 'like each other' (1992, p. 206-9). This is relevant when considering the proliferation of media representations in which cheerleaders appear unnamed or headless in visuals³⁰³, framed both literally and metaphorically as being part of an indistinguishable mass of 'others'. Explorations of the communal benefits of public disapprobation – especially in response to issues of crime and deviance – can also be found in moral panic theory³⁰⁴. In a discussion of 'the age of the moral panic' (1988, p. 2), UK sociologist Kenneth Thompson refers to Durkheim's argument that public indignation about social deviance is functionally beneficial for recreating social unity (1988, p. 23). Such figurations can be tracked back to Marx's view that the criminal 'renders a "service" by arousing the moral and aesthetic sentiments of the public' (1961, p. 167).

³⁰³ See: Cantor 2008; and DAULERIO 2009.

³⁰⁴ While I have reason to take issue with many aspects of moral panic theory, its concept of a vilified 'other' does cohere well with my configuration of cheerleaders as scapegoats.

The theories of French philosopher René Girard offer particularly valuable insights into the social cohesion gained when adversaries form a '*de facto* allegiance against a common enemy' (2003, p. 26) in the form of a scapegoat, particularly if this occurs when extant cultural orders are on shifting or uncertain ground. Of Girard's work, Fleming refers to the way 'the tension and unrest bedeviling a community is purged, temporarily at least, by inflicting the violent rage of a mob on a victim or group of victims' (2004, p. 48). While it is rare for literal violence to be directed towards cheerleaders³⁰⁵, textual aggression is still likely to serve a Girardian function in terms of its unifying and affirming effect among, in particular, feminist groups and social conservatives. This occurs in an intra-group sense (in that feminists and social conservatives are able to define themselves in opposition to cheerleaders) and on an inter group level (in that the intersecting, anti-cheerleading rhetoric of movements such as feminists and social conservatives converge to produce strategic advantages).

Furthermore, I note Hartley's identification of a post-Cold War, post-postmodernist political splintering, which has stripped the political Left, in particular, of a sense of shared opposition, making a search for new 'enemies' a priority (1992, p. 15). Cheerleaders may provide a reassuring sense of threat in this regard, particularly given the widespread agreement about their objectionable nature: condemning them is something the entire family (in a sociological sense) can enjoy and bond over. When considering the congregational perks of shared animosity, it is also important to acknowledge that the experiencing and expressing of vitriol have the potential to create new social formations as well as bolster existing ones. Gray, for instance, writes of the way on-line antifans join to create warm communities which promote mutual pride and support (2005, p. 4). In this sense, the cheerleader as a figure of hate serves a similarly key role to that of widely pilloried celebrities such as Paris Hilton whose critics are able to feel part of a superior and 'righteous' community of critics (Forgas cited in Dunn & Cubby 2007).

The content, production and function of cheerleader-directed vitriol contains a number of fetishistic elements, including: surrogates that have been overloaded with meaning;

³⁰⁵ Cogent here is Hazlitt's observation that 'the essence or principle of hostility' is not predicated on the external demonstration of brute violence (c. 1826).

psychological displacements; and disavowals (or lack of acknowledgements) of intent³⁰⁶. Individual cheerleaders are frequently replaced by *all* cheerleaders, just as cheerleaders operate as a substitute for 'women' or 'young girls'. The gendered logic and oppressive effects of such formulations are obscured by the commonsensical force of converging discourse, as well as by tacit feminist sanction (which is itself unacknowledged). Vitriol targetting cheerleaders can be constructed as fetishistic in the popular sense in that it involves a sexually charged and pleasure-producing fixation. It also has elements which accord with specific historical understandings of the term fetish. Vitriolic media discourse constructs cheerleaders as potent figures which – as per Tylor's definition – are both worshipped and sacrificed, petted and ill-treated (cited in Budge 1988, p. 57), and to whom are ascribed magical 'powers'. The commodification of cheerleaders occurring via the economic exchange of cultural artifacts and texts hosting cheerleader-directed vitriol can also be framed as fetishistic in the Marxist sense³⁰⁷. This is because of the elimination – and arguably the exploitation – of the human components of the value-forms of these commodities. Cheerleader-targetted vitriol is circulated and traded to supply a complex set of demands relating to individual, group and social psychologies – as well as to accrue various capitals, including intellectual, comic, cultural, sub-cultural, and financial. Such discourses also have the potential to metaphorically 'sell' feminist, social conservative and sports-related ideologies. Scant regard is shown for the potential cost to cheerleaders in any of these markets.

There are fetishistic logics at work in the disavowed or unacknowledged substitution of agitations about cheerleading for agitations about other things. The latter may concern anxieties relating to, for example, popular, youth and/or raunch cultures, or they may relate to 'unspeakable' impulses such as the urge to verbally, sexually or physical abuse young women. This fits with Wray's interpretation of Freudian fetish as involving anxiety sublimation (1998), as well as Ahmed's theories on the mechanisms of hate:

Hate may respond to the particular, but it tends to do so by aligning the particular with the general; 'I hate you because you are this or that', where the

³⁰⁶ Cf.: Freud 1961, pp. 152-155; Freud 1962, p. 19; and Freud 1964, p. 277.

³⁰⁷ Cf. Marx 1961, pp. 88-89; and Marx 1976 pp. 163-76.

‘this’ or ‘that’ evokes a group that the individual comes to *stand for* or *stand in for*’ (2004, p. 49, emphasis in original).

Cheerleading directed vitriol is also fetishistic in the Giradian purview of the ‘surrogate victimage mechanism’ in that, as Fleming puts it, mob polarisation against a victim operates in a non-volitional, automatic way: ‘Indeed the fact that surrogate victimage operates unbeknown to its participants is not “accidental” ... its very operation *requires* miscomprehension’ (2004, p. 53, emphasis in original). Also relevant when considering the psychological displacement involved in the fetishistic expression of vitriol towards cheerleaders is Ahmed’s case that, rather than residing in a given subject or object, hate is economic, circulating between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement. Such feelings become fetishes – ‘qualities that seem to reside in objects’ – when the history of their production and circulation has been erased (2004, p. 11). This holds true for cheerleader-directed vitriol because, while cheerleaders are framed as being intrinsically deserving of hate, a study of the manifestations and mechanisms of this vitriol reveals that understandings of cheerleaders as unworthy rely on self-serving constructions. As such, cheerleaders can be viewed not as the genesis of others’ hate but as convenient vessels and mediums for it³⁰⁸.

Fetishistic forces in the form of substitutions and psychologically beneficial forgetting can also be identified in the selection and persecution of cheerleaders as social scapegoats. Fleming notes, for instance, that scapegoats often hold an ambiguous or liminal social status in which they are both marginal and internal to a community – but rather than being seen as victims, they are instead invariably viewed ‘as victimizers *par excellence*’ (2004, p. 50). This is achieved, in part, via the misrepresentation and exaggeration of scapegoats’ alleged crimes, with persecutors often attributing to their victims ‘remarkable – indeed, often supernatural – capacities that [imbue] their malevolence with extraordinary malignancy’ (ibid p. 50). While the ‘supernatural’ capacities of cheerleaders may be metaphorical rather than literal, the collective female cheerleader which emerges from accumulated discourses of vitriol is a

³⁰⁸ Hazlitt also recognises the fungible nature of objects of hate when he writes of the unbearable ennui and abhorrent vacuum which can result if a target is not found for the ‘quantity of superfluous bile’ upon the human stomach (c. 1826).

figure of great threat. She can be figured as being responsible for every adolescent hurt and rejection; for the triumph of mass, trash culture; for the corruption of children; and the destruction of the purity and glory of sport. Irredeemably pornographic, she is every bad thing a young woman has ever done and will ever do.

My conclusion, consistent with that reached in previous chapters, is that mediated vitriol targetting cheerleaders converges to produce both discursive *and* extra-discursive effects. Textual hatred directed at cheerleaders provides a socially sanctioned outlet for vitriol that would normally be considered socially unacceptable in mainstream media contexts. Examples are texts containing misogyny and, to a lesser extent, classism and racism (in relation to dialogues of hate directed at America). Such venom is likely to be self-replicating, particularly in on-line environments. This is partly because of a broader trend for on-line commentators to compete to produce the most inflammatory and/or offensive utterance, often in the form of 'trolling' or 'flaming' (Jane 2011)³⁰⁹. There are also claims that racist and sexist stereotypes are spreading on the internet due to Google's 'autocomplete' function which pre-empts requests based on other users' on-line activity. As journalist Megan Johnston writes in the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

Typing in certain phrases that mention the word women, for example, prompts search queries that advocate violence against females; some sentences including 'Chinese people' bring up xenophobic fears; and sequences using 'Jews' may lead to highly offensive comments about the Holocaust (2011).

Johnston's thesis certainly holds true in the case of cheerleading. On 31 March 2011, typing 'cheerleaders are' into the Google search engine resulted in a 'drop-down' list of seven suggested phrases. The first was positive ('cheerleaders are athletes') but the remaining six were negative: 'cheerleaders are stupid'; 'cheerleaders are mean'; 'cheerleaders are annoying'; 'cheerleaders are useless'; 'cheerleaders are dancers gone retarded'; and 'cheerleaders are not athletes'. In response to the phrase 'cheerleaders should be', only one suggestion was offered: 'cheerleaders should be banned'. Google's autocomplete results are both diagnostic

³⁰⁹ An escalation of vitriol targetting cheerleaders can be found in the comments posted in response to Hogfather 2009 and Smosh 2010.

(in that they reveal past users' anti-cheerleading biases) and also generative (in that they potentially 'perpetuate prejudice by encouraging users to look up inflammatory material' [Gollan cited *ibid*].)

The extra-discursive dimensions of cheerleading-directed vitriol are likely to include a disempowering deflation of the reputation of both cheerleaders individually and cheerleading overall. Here, I agree with UK sociologist John Thompson's argument that, 'in a world where symbolic capital is a scarce and valuable resource, reputation really does matter' and can 'spread beyond the lives of the individuals concerned, weakening or even undermining the institutions or policies with which they are or have been linked' (1997, p. 57). As such, negative discourse is likely to make cheerleading more physically dangerous by framing it as an activity unworthy of rigorous safety consideration and institutional support. (In addition to the findings of Muellar and Cantu [2008, p. 44], I concur with the work of US women's sports researchers Jean O' Reilly and Susan K. Cahn who argue that an 'absence of information and accurate representation can influence athletic experience' [2007, p. 264]³¹⁰.) Rather than entering the lengthy and contested debate over the notion of objectification, I note that the relentless, fetishistic degree to which the cheerleader's 'sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her'³¹¹ may: have negative psychological consequences for individual cheerleaders³¹²; and fuel negative perceptions (and ongoing negative media framings) of cheerleading as an activity in general.

Connections may exist between mediated vitriol and physical and verbal aggression against cheerleaders. In 2006, an Australian cheerleader was left with a 'red mark on her collarbone

³¹⁰ In relation to women's boxing, O'Reilly and Cahn note that the media often treats: 'women's events as a spectacle, freak show, or sidelight to the main event rather than a legitimate activity (2007, p. 264). When matches are sold to the public as spectacle rather than as evenly matched competitions, boxers do not always receive adequate preparation... The media, then, not only report the news but shape the culture of sport, influencing the news they then report' (*ibid*)

³¹¹ This is poststructuralist feminist philosopher Sandra Lee Bartky's definition of sexual objectification (1990, p. 26).

³¹² I note the work of American psychologists Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts on the mental health risks linked to the individual self-objectification which often follows cultural practices of social objectification (1997).

the size of a golf ball' (Tadros 2006) after a member of the crowd threw a missile – believed to be an item of food – at her during a football game. Former American cheerleaders also recall objects being thrown at them while performing (Miller cited in Watson 2009), as well as 'harrowing experiences' in which audience members have grabbed at their hair and clothing (Hanson 1995, p. 68). A multi-layered assault against a cheerleader involved a young woman who was sexually assaulted by a star student athlete and then removed from her American squad as punishment for refusing to cheer for him (Netter 2010). Cheerleaders also report numerous cases of verbal abuse. Australian cheerleaders have been called 'sluts' and 'whores' by crowd members during matches (Tadros 2006), with one telling a newspaper that, 'Drunk guys yell things all the time' (Polutele 2007). Another describes being a cheerleader as 'a little scary', saying she knows girls 'who've got harassing e-mails and things like that' (cited in Pratt 2002). In 2008, a visiting cheerleader told the *Hindustan Times* that cheerleading in India for the IPL had been 'horrendous': 'Wherever we go we do expect people to pass lewd, snide remarks but I'm shocked by the nature and magnitude of the comments people pass here' (Tabitha cited in Scrutton 2008). While it would be overstretching to claim a direct, causal link between anecdotal accounts of textual vitriol and physical or verbal aggression towards cheerleaders, there are strong indications that antilocution of such intensity 'is almost certain to be backed up by discriminatory action' (Allport, 2000, p. 40). Lanier certainly expresses concern that the aggression and pack mentality evident in on-line cultures might 'scale-up' and manifest in literal acts of violence (2010, p. 64). Cogent, also, are Gray's findings that the darker dimensions of antifandom such as pseudo 'revenge' or punishment fantasies reveal an 'e-lynch mob mentality' and a 'dire need for a socialpsychological examination of textual hatred' (2005, p. 851). With respect to cheerleading, there is no reason to doubt either Gray's sombre conclusions – or to question the value of his appeal for further inquiry.

CHAPTER FIVE: RESISTANCE, SUBVERSION AND **AUFHEBUNG**

While most framings of cheerleading in the majoritarian discourses canvassed in this thesis are fetishistic and/or vitriolic in nature, a significant sub-group of media texts disrupt such representations by portraying cheerleading in a positive and potentially subversive fashion. This discourse offers insights into what cheerleading means to cheerleaders, and highlights a dramatic disconnect between the meanings made about cheerleading by practitioners and those made by outsiders. It also complicates feminist framings of cheerleaders as passive dupes or objectionable allies of structural forces such as capitalism, the patriarchy, or the sports-media complex. This chapter's analysis of positive and/or subversive representations of cheerleading in minority discourse is made with an awareness of the reductionist dangers of designating texts as *either* 'negative' or 'positive', *or* 'acquiescent' or 'subversive'³¹³. It also acknowledges the limits putatively positive and/or subversive texts may have in remedying negative stereotypes – a theme explored with reference to Hegel's notion of *Aufhebung*³¹⁴ in case studies focussing on the 2000 film *Bring It On* and the first season of the television series *Glee* (2009/2010).

Relevant when considering cheerleader resistance is Rowe's argument that sport 'is often placed in the service of reactionary ideologies' which can promote prejudice and gendered exclusionism (1995, p. 140). Yet – drawing on the work of Foucault (1990) – he notes that the nature of power is that the exertion of its oppressive weight inevitably provokes resistance and subversion³¹⁵. Examples offered by Rowe include the positing of multi-racial sport against sporting apartheid, the assertion of gay pride and rights against the 'openly

³¹³ Ostensibly 'negative' texts are still open to 'positive' interpretations. As Felski writes, textual meaning is produced through a complex web of intertextual relationship 'and even the most conciliatory and apparently monological of texts may show evidence of dissonance, ambiguity, and contradiction rather than simply reinscribing conformism' (1995, p. 29).

³¹⁴ Cf.: Taylor 1979, p. 49; Hegel 1991a, p. 154; Hegel 1991b pp. 47, 87, 123; Hegel 1994, p. 57; McCarney 2000, pp. 86-7; Beiser 2008, pp. 103, 130; and Hegel 2010 pp. 81-82.

³¹⁵ Foucault's position is that 'where there is power, there is resistance' (1990, p. 95). He argues that this resistance 'is never in a position of exteriority of power' in that the very existence of power relationships depends on 'a multiplicity of points of resistance' (ibid).

expressed' homophobia in sport, and the mobilising of women against 'male control of sporting institutions, practices and representations' (1995, p. 141). As such, negative rhetoric framing cheerleaders may have a spurring-to-action aspect. Moritz, for instance, argues that the extant spectrum of media depictions gives cheerleaders images to both incorporate and rally against (2006, p. 84)³¹⁶. Rowe's case is that while 'non-hegemonic' sporting activity and fandom may be scattered and minor in comparison with the operations of the sports-media complex, 'they nevertheless represent the exercise of identity-based, positional politics within the micro-circuits of everyday life' (1995, p. 142). Cheerleading resistance occurs frequently in such 'micro-circuits', although its articulation can be: latent; subtle; and/or in response to oppressive forces which do not fit traditional conceptions of oppressive hegemony. An example is third-wave-inspired cheerleading resistance to second-wave feminist rhetoric concerning what is and is not an 'acceptable' manifestation of empowered sports participation. This resonates with Grindstaff and West's position that, as a social phenomenon, cheerleading does not simply express agreed-upon definitions of emphasised femininity or hegemonic masculinity (2006, p. 501). Instead, it is an activity 'where the very terms of femininity and masculinity are constructed and worked through side-by-side, and the question of what is "emphasized" (or hegemonic) along the way is a matter of empirical investigation' (ibid).

Minoritarian media texts provide evidence that cheerleaders evince a variety of levels of agency, including the ability to 'talk back' and resist fetishised and/or vitriolic framings³¹⁷. In at least one instance, this resistance was so extreme it was deemed criminal. In 2007, the FBI offered a \$5000 reward for help finding whoever mailed dozens of threatening letters – including some containing a potentially harmful insecticide – complaining about exploitative television coverage of college cheerleaders and professional female athletes ('FBI Seeks

³¹⁶ Here, I also note Meijer's point that: 'The feminist reader sees sexist texts not so much as assaults on her mental well-being, but rather as documents of the system that she wants to denounce. In a way a sexist text serves a reverse purpose. It plays [sic] a role in feminist-political discourse, as an illustration and demonstration which undo its misogyny. As a result the sexist effect of a text is diminished for future generations of readers' (1995, p. 30).

³¹⁷ The exertion of resistance – like the exertion of power – is polymorphous. Here I follow Foucault whose case is that in the strategic field of power relations there exists a 'plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial...' (1990, p. 96).

Author of Threatening Letters About Cheerleaders, Female Athletes on TV' 2007). Excerpts from these letters read:

Pigs park their cameras on us close up, front view, dozens of times each game
 ... We have asked nicely for them to respect us and all women, yet they refuse.
 They exploit innocent people, so we will too. When they start respecting us, we
 stop mailing these out (cited *ibid*).

While such vigilantism may not conform to mainstream norms of acceptable political protest, it does confound dominant framings of cheerleaders as mere pawns and/or proxies of oppressors such as the patriarchy. It also provides evidence that cheerleaders are knowledgeable about media framings and the influence these have on perceptions of themselves and their sport. In response to an MTV special, for example, members of a high school cheer squad say they are angry, disappointed, and disillusioned at how they are depicted by the show's directors (Dandes 2009). One spokeswoman for the squad claims 400 hours of filming was edited to 42 minutes concentrating only on unrepresentative 'bad moments' (Underkoffler cited *ibid*). Media forums inviting commentary about cheerleading³¹⁸ suggest this is a subject whose associated meanings are contested and potentially malleable, with cheerleading-focussed debates also providing an opportunity for young women to express their views³¹⁹. This holds true regardless of whether these views are in favour of or against cheerleading.

Like the participants in other gendered and fetishised activities such as beauty pageants, cheerleaders are neither complete victims nor entirely free agents. In her research on neo-burlesque performance, Emily Layne Fargo writes of two dominant schools of thought in relation to such sexual, physical displays (2008, p. 2). The first claims these are: demeaning; exploitative; antithetical to feminist goals; and not far removed from other types of sexually oriented work (*ibid*). The second frames such performance as allowing women to publicly express their sexuality, suggesting it constitutes a positive, empowering and even feminist act (*ibid*). Fargo's conclusion – which is equally applicable to cheerleading – is that it is overly

³¹⁸ See: carissahionlife8 2009.

³¹⁹ See: Fisher 2008; and Healey 2009.

reductive to categorise such activities as inherently demeaning or inherently empowering (ibid). Instead, it is instructive to contemplate a third approach which involves considering the unique meanings made by individuals, based on their own cheerleading practice and experiences. The negotiation and contingency involved in such meaning-making can be situated in intra-feminist debate by referring to Banet-Weiser's theorisations of competitions such as Miss America, in which she posits a 'distinctly feminine' wielding of power, which 'does not simply recuperate the dismissal by radical feminists that women with power are merely women... acting like men, because power is only configured as masculine' (1999, p. 23). Also apt are Hartley's theorisations about the way:

The 'behavioral' consumer of the long-dominant 'media effects' model of communication – the despised or vulnerable feminized figure who... stood passive and manipulated... responding to... causal agents farther up the value chain... – is giving way... to a new model of the consumer as 'action.' This much more interesting figure is the *user* (Hartley 2006, p. 416).

Feminist rhetoric evokes an analogous 'cheerleader effects' model in which the despised and vulnerable cheerleader is framed as similarly passive, manipulated and sexually exploited by irresistible overhead forces. Yet emerging counter-discourse reveals a far more complex cheerleading figure, suggesting the idea of a user who acts, rather than a figure who is simply used and acted upon.

SUBVERSION AND ALTERNATIVE APPRECIATORS

The most substantial sector of discourse which either explicitly or implicitly refutes dominant cheerleading-related stereotypes concerns descriptions of this activity as an elite and/or an extreme sport³²⁰. Media texts highlight the fact that competitive cheerleading squads frequently practice two or three times a day, 12 months a year (Adams & Bettis 2003b, p. 77) under rigorous, sometimes quasi-military conditions. One text explains that push-ups are imposed as punishment on cheerleaders who allow squad members to fall

³²⁰ See: Steelman 2008; Hicklin 2008; Steelman 2008; and iCheer(rip mj) 2009.

during stunts (Coman 2002), while another relates the way a parent of a competitive cheerleader tells her sick and feverish daughter to carry on and 'just get over it' (Torgovnick 2008a, pp. 149-50). Other discourse refers to research supporting the athleticism of cheerleaders, such as media accounts of a 2003 American university study finding that female high school cheerleaders have strength and fitness on par with Olympic level soccer players and gymnasts (Hall 2008).

Counter-discourse also frames professional cheerleading – supposedly the least demanding of the cheerleading genres – as athletic and difficult. The director of the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders estimates that each five-minute dance represents thirty hours of practice (Mitchell cited in Hanson 1995, p. 62), while a member of this squad talks of the exhaustion resulting from performing 100 consecutive high kicks (Scholz et al 1991, p. 9). Media discourse such as the reality television program *Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders – Making the Team* (2006) also portrays the lengthy and grueling procedures involved in American professional cheerleading selection (which one participant compares to a boot camp [Jenkins cited in Ciren 2007]). Reflecting on such discourse, a young female scientist who calls herself Ms. PhD wonders in her blog whether a similar selection regime might improve the choosing of faculty in the academic sciences:

Imagine if there were no tenure, and existing faculty had to try out again every few years to show they can still compete with the younger candidates. Imagine if search committees put as much time into choosing new faculty as [the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders] put into choosing new cheerleaders (2007).

This comment is revealing because of the dominant positioning of cheerleading as being in binary opposition to intelligence and educational endeavour. In contrast, Ms.PhD thinks the academy may actually have something to learn from high-kicking sideline cheer squads.

Contradicting another dominant trope is the framing of cheerleading as the main event rather than merely an adjunct to male sports. '[C]ompetitive cheerleading is an activity on its own that does not happen to the side of anything else,' writes one on-line commentator. 'It

is the main game... [and] just as demanding as any other gymnastics or dancesport' (Radford commenting on 'Women in college athletics' 2010). Similar themes can be found in the film *Bring It On* (2000), in which a male cheerleader attached to a highly successful squad suggests it's 'just plain mean' to cheer for his educational institution's highly unsuccessful football team (ibid). His point is proved when audience members are wildly enthusiastic at the appearance of the cheer squad, yet can muster only weak applause for the footballers (ibid). It is instructive in this respect to note the increasing number of competitive cheerleading events in which cheerleading is the central (in fact, the only) attraction. Similarly, in the professional cheerleading domain, it is possible to purchase tickets to watch the finals for American football cheer squad selection³²¹. Here, once again, even the most allegedly accessory-like and subordinate genre of cheerleading is offered as an athletic/entertainment end in itself.

Another disruption to negative and/or fetishistic framings of cheerleading is the portrayal of cheerleaders and their sport as any combination of respectable, wholesome, healthy, beneficially influential, and so on. In many American contexts, cheerleading is depicted as an acceptable, indeed desirable, pastime for children – including the disabled – for reasons of both fitness and social inclusion³²². An associate principal at a high school with a 15 year old cheerleader with Down syndrome says: 'When you see the girls work with Annie you see this is what life is all about. Nothing makes you live up to your potential more than feeling like you belong' (Scott cited in Erzen 2008). Cheerleading is framed as offering educational opportunities in the form of cheerleading-related scholarships and majors at American university campuses³²³; congratulatory discourse describes the involvement of cheerleaders in charity and troop support work³²⁴; inspirational work ethics for children are said to be found in a picture story called *Patty Pom-Poms* (Cayen & Lazor 2009) written by a former

³²¹ See: 'Tickets On Sale For Broncos Cheerleader Tryouts' 2009; and 'Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders tryouts drew more than 700 contenders' 2009.

³²² See: 'Westlake High holds cheerleading clinic at Teen Center' 2007; 'Groups Work for Social Inclusion of Intellectually Disabled Kids' 2007; Quinlan 2007; Amato 2007; Jolly 2008; Woolf 2008; Bourdet 2009; Kristin 2009; and Voorhees 2010.

³²³ See: Hanson 1995, p. 41; Rucker 2007; Ashley cited in Torgovnick 2008, p. 175; and Shukla 2010.

³²⁴ See: McGilvray 2006; 'Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders to Entertain Troops on USO Tour to the Persian Gulf' 2007; and 'Eagles Cheerleaders Return From Iraq' 2008.

professional cheerleader (James 2009); and media texts reveal that meeting the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders was the dying, quasi-spiritual wish of a terminally ill man (McIlwain). Minority media discourse also portrays cheerleaders engaged in acts of altruism and heroism, including one story about a 15 year old American cheerleader's saving of a 10 year old from drowning (Wheeler 2007). Other minority discourse describes cheerleaders as highly knowledgeable about sport (Mazzucchi 2009) and as providing inspiration to young people (author 2010) or others in need. A soldier deflated by an extension to his posting in Iraq says, of a mere photo opportunity with high school cheerleaders: 'God has just used a group of young women to turn [my] attitude around. Life is suddenly good again' (Chris 2007).

Extending the theme of cheerleaders as wholesome and respectable are media texts about American cheerleading squads run by churches and other religious organisations (Stein 2009). In the US, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes runs cheerleading camps and has established a cheerleading ministry to 'bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all cheerleaders in the United States' (Young 2008). The Christian Cheerleaders of America, meanwhile, states that its mission is to encourage 'excellence in Christian Cheerleading and service to the Savior' by teaching "'state of the art" cheerleading techniques, material and methods while maintaining Christian standards' ('CCA Mission'). There is also the Fellowship of Christian Cheerleaders ('Christ Centered Cheerleading Excellence Worldwide'). According to one television journalist reporting on the subject, there were 59 Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCC) camps and clinics in the US in 1983, compared to more than 500 in 2005 (Hayes 2005). The smaller Christian Cheerleaders of America group is estimated to be growing by about 25 percent annually (ibid).

Some of these religious squads have caused controversy, including a 2009 ban on cheerleaders carrying signs displaying biblical verses at football games (Fu 2009). Yet religious groups obviously still see the value of harnessing the status of cheerleaders to promote their agendas. The FCC, America's largest faith-based cheerleading body, describes cheerleading as a way to honour and worship God, and maintains that the ultimate judge of routines is 'the Lord' (Hayes 2005). A spokeswoman for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, meanwhile, says: 'Cheerleaders are leaders in our schools and when they are on fire for Jesus, it can change an entire campus' (Braswell cited in Young 2008). Members of religious

cheerleading organisations frequently distinguish themselves from other cheerleading practitioners by highlighting the modifications made to cheerleading uniforms and routines in the interests of modesty. As one Christian cheerleading coach says:

We don't do a lot of the hip movements... the wiggling hip movements... our uniforms are modest. We ordered ours to be made one inch longer than what's in the typical catalog (Ward cited in Beckerman 2000, pp. 6, 9).

Another religious cheerleading league includes the requirement that cheerleaders 'display proper modesty and values' and avoid objectionable moves and songs and 'unsportsmanlike conduct' (Cheerleading Regulations). In the FCC, meanwhile, there are 'no lewd dance moves, no bare midriffs and no routines that would embarrass parents', as well as 'a ban on trash-talk' (Hayes 2005).

Also evident are increasing numbers of what Adams and Bettis call 'transformative cheerleaders' who disrupt dominant assumptions about the role and activities of cheerleading (2003a, p. 27). Members of such squads demonstrate the way 'individuals and groups of individuals are actively engaged in redefining for themselves cultural practices and what counts as normal masculinity, femininity, sexual orientation and cheerleading itself' (ibid, p. 4). Examples include: feminist and queer activist squads; senior citizen squads; parody groups; solo cheerleading performers; and various punk and gothic hybrids³²⁵. 'Jeerleading' groups support roller derby teams ('Jeerleading'); the Art Cheerleaders use cheerleading as 'a medium for satirical, political and social commentary on the arts' (Palmer 2008); and San Diego's 'Radical Fuckin Cheerleaders' group stages protests about various issues including police brutality ('San Diego Radical Fuckin Cheerleaders Lead October 22 Rally Against Police Brutality' 2007). Musing on such squads, Wells concludes that the 'spiky, transgressive (and occasionally satanic) alternative cheerleader' has become so prolific, she borders on being a:

³²⁵ See: Adams and Bettis 2003a; Ingold, 2007; Marchand 2007; Hunt 2008; and 'Cheerleader Dances at Tokyo Railway Station' 2010.

counter-cultural cliché ... She's a regular at roller derby games, anti-war demonstrations, alternative karaoke evenings, psychobilly gigs and wherever hipsters gather to knit, sip Pabst Blue Ribbon beer and bitch about the straights (Wells 2006).

As such, the image of the radical cheerleader may become another cultural norm girls and women resist, raising the possibility that a 'regular', un-punk-looking cheerleader is evidence not of conformity but of a rebellion within a rebellion. The transgressive impact of such nuanced (and invisible) resistance is debatable, but still problematises the dominant feminist framing of cheerleaders as mere puppets.

Also disruptive to dominant cheerleading stereotypes is the phenomenon of alternative appreciators and audiences of cheerleading. Dominant discourses frame cheerleaders as being primarily or exclusively intended for and appealing to the male gaze. Yet there is evidence in media texts to suggest that female (as well as occasionally male) cheerleaders are also appreciated visually, aesthetically, athletically, and/or sexually by female viewers³²⁶. Writing of professional cheerleaders at India's IPL, one internet poster says: 'Although I am a heterosexual woman, I still find a group of girls performing a sexy acrobatic dance more interesting than cricket' (GensUnaSumus commenting on Tharoor 2010). An American professional cheerleader, meanwhile, reveals that, as a child, she always found herself watching the cheerleaders more than she did football games ('Cheerleader of the week: Larissa S' 2009). Of the formation of the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders, the Scholz sisters write: 'The Cheerleaders were not Schramm's way of attracting men. He already did that with a winning team. The Cheerleaders were his way of drawing women... (1991, p. 145). Such texts assist in shedding light on the complexity of cheerleaders' appeal and audiences. They can be further understood with reference to intra-feminist debates concerning feminine gazes and female scopophilia³²⁷. As Smelik writes, understanding visual pleasure exclusively

³²⁶ See: 'David Beckham is ogling cheerleaders again' 2008; Williams 2008; 'Cheerleader of the week: Larissa S' 2009; and Fox 2010.

³²⁷ *der Schautrieb* or scopophilia is Freud's term for the desire to look (Smelik 1995, p. 69). Mulvey extends this concept to argue that the erotic, voyeuristic, narcissistic and controlling pleasures involved in the male gaze are objectifying and oppressive to women (1975).

in terms of sexual difference risks being caught up in a 'straitjacket' and overlooks the fact that women, as well as men, can enjoy images of female beauty (1995, p.73).

Minority discourse relating to cheerleaders and lesbianism disrupt dominant assumptions about cheerleading, sexual allure and sexualised performance. While fictional lesbian cheerleaders proliferate in mainstream pornography, Grindstaff and West note that non-fictional lesbian cheerleaders are 'virtually invisible', arguing that the heteronormativity of co-ed cheerleading appears to resolve the issue of sexual preference in the 'right' direction (2006, p. 510). There are, however, occasional instances of cheerleading-related media texts which confound the idea that lesbian cheerleaders are simply a patriarchal fantasy. Of the proliferation of pornographic web sites featuring faux cheerleaders and faux lesbians, American 'sexpert' Susie Bright notes the – necessarily underpublicised – existence of cheerleaders engaged in lesbian activities and relationships which are not connected with pornographic performance or intended to appeal to any form of audience (2005). In reference to the 2005 arrest of American NFL cheerleaders Angela Ellen Keathley and Renee Thomas for having sexual relations in a nightclub bathroom, she writes:

What I love about Angela and Reneé, is that unlike every fake lez cheerleader porno, they did their 'sex act' in the women's room – for themselves, oblivious to everyone else. That's what I cherish, that they got it on for their own self-interest, as opposed to the panting crowd, the GGW camera, the titillation machine (ibid).

Bright argues that such lesbian cheerleaders 'couldn't care less about men, or straight people' yet are also estranged from 'political dykes': they are the 'ultimate separatists' (ibid).

These propositions about the politics of lesbian cheerleader separatism are also explored in the cult film *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999), in which a high school cheerleader is sent to a residential therapy camp to 'cure' her lesbianism. The opening scenes include lingering shots of a cheerleader's breasts and buttocks which, as representative of the sensual imaginings of a young lesbian, confound many dominant themes of cheerleading-orientated pornography. It is also revealing to note that the leading character of *But I'm a Cheerleader* is eventually able

to woo her reluctant lesbian lover (another patient at the therapy camp) with a cheerleading performance after other forms of persuasion have failed. The movie *Sugar and Spice* (2000), meanwhile, includes a prison scene where a female inmate ogles a group of high school cheerleaders in a manner more commonly associated with the male gaze. 'Thems some sweet skirts y'got there,' she says. 'Well, thank you,' one of the cheerleaders replies, 'they're actually uniforms – we're cheerleaders.' 'Mmm-hmm,' responds Inmate No. 1 lasciviously, 'Y'sure are' (ibid).

The increasing presence of men in cheerleading can also be framed as subversive (which is ironic, given that when cheerleading first appeared in American society it was an exclusively masculine endeavour). A particularly emphatic disruption to dominant cheerleading stereotypes is the Florida Marlins – an all-male, 'all obese' cheerleading squad which supports an American baseball team ('Marlins Baseball Team Looking for a Few Good Chubby Male Cheerleaders' 2008). Popular media texts suggest scant awareness of cheerleading's gendered historical origins, with many mainstream commentators expressing surprise or shock at the existence of male cheerleaders – especially the rare occurrence of all-male squads³²⁸. When pictures of President George W. Bush performing as a cheerleader at Phillips Academy in Massachusetts circulated on the web, outraged Republicans 'decried the claims as a bogus attempt to usurp the president's manhood' (Polutele 2007). Given that the word 'cheerleader' in dominant mainstream media discourse refers almost exclusively to female cheerleaders ('male cheerleader' is required when the gender is reversed), it is cogent here to note the theory of ex-nomination from French cultural theorist Roland Barthes³²⁹. As McKee explains, ex-nomination means outside of naming and refers to the way dominant groups or ideas in

³²⁸ For other texts expressing surprise or shock at the existence of male cheerleaders, see: Malone 2007; Pakula 2008; and Meacham 2002.

³²⁹ In *Mythologies* (2009), Barthes argues that the bourgeoisie is able to name itself as an economic fact (capitalism) yet has difficulty acknowledging itself as a political fact: 'there are no "bourgeois" parties in the Chamber' (ibid, pp. 163-4). In ideological discourses of representation, meanwhile, the bourgeoisie 'completely disappears' but appears in 'normalized' forms as common sense (ibid, pp. 164, 166). Barthes work has since been extended to encompass other aspects of contemporary culture such as race, gender and nation (O'Sullivan et al 2006, p. 111), with American linguist Robin Tolmach Lakoff writing of the way exnominated groups become 'normalised', apolitical and nonideological: 'They just *are*. Their rules become *the* rules' achieving the status of a 'natural order' (2001, pp. 53-4, emphasis in original).

society become so obvious or commonsensical they don't have to draw attention to themselves by giving themselves a name: 'They're just the "normality", against which everything else can be judged' (2003, p. 106). In this instance the exnominated term is 'female' in what would be the expression 'female cheerleader'. This phenomenon demonstrates the overwhelming association of cheerleading with the feminine, and assists in explicating the 'shock' expressed in response to male participation.

Men are, in fact, participating in contemporary cheerleading in increasing numbers. It is estimated that half of American college cheerleaders are now men (Torgovnick cited in Lynn 2008) compared to four per cent at the high school level (Engel 2009). Most contemporary male cheerleaders are involved in competitive squads in which there is, as Grindstaff and West put it, a gendered division of labour:

Men on coed teams facilitate the visual spectacle of cheerleading, particularly through stunting, tumbling, and pyramid building, but they generally are not asked to smile constantly, bounce up and down, shake pom-poms, or wiggle their fingers in the air (a gesture known as 'spirit fingers'). To do so would risk being labeled gay, a scenario described by one male cheerleader as 'the gay cheerleader syndrome' (2006, p. 510).

One of the ramifications of this 'gay cheerleader syndrome' is 'compensatory hyper-masculinity – the explicit assertion of heterosexuality in the face of the "discrediting" fact of being a male cheerleader' (ibid, p. 511). An example is the growing number of media texts in which male cheerleaders boast about the various benefits of performing in such close proximity to attractive females³³⁰. There is also the Australian male cheerleader who maintains he 'won't touch' poms-poms and alters those parts of routines he feels are 'too feminine' (Grey cited in Murray 2002). He says he changes the 'wafty hands... to be a bit more masculine' (ibid). While many male cheerleaders are often referred to in a derogatory, arguably homophobic fashion, as gay³³¹, one newspaper article congratulates openly queer male cheerers as courageous (Porteous 2009). Another text focussing on famous American

³³⁰ See: Meacham 2002; 'It's ally oop for Andrew' 2006; and Engel 2009.

³³¹ See: Bleustein 2002; Lynn 2008; and Gonzalez 2009.

male cheerleaders suggests they are 'secure-in-their-manhood' ('Top 5: Famous former male cheerleaders', 2009), while an Australian media commentator praises male cheerleaders for promoting football as 'a mixed sexes field of endeavour' (Montgomery 2008). Other emerging discourse reveals male cheerleader pride in the athleticism and – as per discourse generated by female cheerleaders – the dangers involved in competitive cheerleading³³². Such pride is expressed in satirical T-shirt slogans such as: 'Any man can hold a cheerleader's hand but only the elite can hold her feet' (Bluestein 2002).

WHAT CHEERLEADING MEANS TO CHEERLEADERS

Minority cheerleading-related discourse sheds light on the polyvalent meanings made by cheerleaders about their activity and the complexities of their practice. (Relevant here is Hargreaves' reference to the 'multiple realities' of women's sporting experiences [1993, p. 2] and Bourdieu's discussion of 'dispersion' in the context of sporting practice³³³). Such discourse helps answer a cheerleading version of the question Banet-Weiser poses in relation to beauty pageants (1999, p. 22): namely, what motivates women to continue participating in the activity in the face of various attacks? In addition to sports- and health-related benefits such as fitness, cheerleaders speak of advantages such as: increased confidence (Adams cited in Pratt 2002); fun (Moritz 2006, p. 67); camaraderie (Torgovnick 2008); a sense of identity (ibid, p. 32); leadership (Rucker 2007); travel opportunities (Pickworth 2006); future employment opportunities (Brady 2002); the pleasures associated with being a fan (Hanson 1995, p. 58); access to other areas of show business (ibid, p. 59); and attention from others (Scholz 1991, p. 10). Competitive cheerleaders often argue that – because a range of body types are required for stunting – cheerleading has helped develop their self-esteem and acceptance of their bodies (Moritz 2006, pp. 73-75). Such findings unsettle the dominant claim that cheerleading causes eating disorders and is detrimental to girls' psyches. Professional cheerleaders, meanwhile, speak of the 'spectacular' thrill of being watched by

³³² See: Torgovnick 2008a, pp. 145, 218; and Montgomery 2008.

³³³ In 'Program for a Sociology of Sport', Bourdieu notes that one of the difficulties of analysing sporting practices resides in the fact that the 'nominal unity... that statistics assume... conceals a dispersion, more or less pronounced depending on the sport, of the ways of practicing it' (1988, p. 155).

enormous crowds (Nehring cited in Hanson 1995, p. 60) and of having a 'licence to be loud and extroverted' (Morrow cited *ibid*, p. 114). Once again, such discourse disrupts the dominant framing of professional cheerleaders as oppressed and exploited figures.

Discourse suggests that the benefits of participating in a competitive endeavour appeal to both competitive and professional cheerleaders. While the competitive attractions of stunt cheerleading are overt, professional cheerleading – despite its ostensibly supportive nature – also includes many competitive components. In addition to the fierce competition required to gain squad selection, for example, professional cheerleaders compete with teams for audience and media attention. Both competitive and professional cheerleaders are engaged in a fierce representational struggle over the meaning and worth of the activity – a situation which may bring pleasure (in the form of feeling one has a voice and can use that voice to achieve certain gains) as well as pain (in the form of being the subject of vitriolic discourse). The significance cheerleaders give their activity is evident in the fact that, as Hanson writes, individuals often include their cheerleading background in public statements such as engagement notices and obituaries: 'Cheerleading is listed as an achievement along with college attendance, employment history, and volunteer work' (1995, p. 113).

Media discourse generated by cheerleaders often expresses pride in individual and group sporting achievements. In the competitive domain, this includes boasting about the weight of squad members who can be lifted during stunts (Torgovnick 2008a, p. 210). As canvassed earlier, such attitudes are expressed humorously in the form of T-shirt slogans such as: 'Throw like a girl'; 'Cheerleaders do their own stunts'; 'All women are created equal – then a few become cheerleaders'; and 'Athletes lift weights – cheerleaders lift athletes' ('Cheerleaders Gifts'). There is evidence that such achievements are also recognised by non-cheerleaders. One media profile, for instance, applauds a 17-year-old high school cheerleader for being able to throw and catch a 'flyer' solo, whereas normally four women are needed (Gill 2009). Professional cheerleaders express pride in being able to: 'lift hopes' (Ninemire 2007); boost morale (Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders); and generate spirit (Mahon 2010). This suggests professional cheerleaders positively reframe the supportive role of their activity.

A significant motivating factor, particularly for professional cheerleaders, is likely to be the attractions of achieving a degree of celebrity (Hanson 1995, p. 59) – the flip side to the infamy and notoriety discussed elsewhere in this thesis. Discourse suggests the fame-related appeals of cheerleading include the opportunity to achieve: status; social success; popularity; sexual elitism; prestige; and schoolyard visibility³³⁴. ‘Everyone wants to be a cheerleader,’ one 15 year old tells a media outlet (Vicky, cited in Gold 2007). ‘And I am one. I can show off as much as I want. It is like being a pop star’ (ibid). Of the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders, the Scholz sisters write at length of the appeals of media exposure, international celebrity, and proximity to Hollywood film stars (1991). Another magazine journalist notes that ‘a stint on the sidelines can serve as a springboard to a career in the public eye’ (Cantor 2008 p. 56). Hopes that cheerleading may lead to other types of fame and success are likely to be fuelled by the media exposure given to the former cheerleader status of celebrities and politicians such as: Halle Berry; Renee Zellweger; Paula Abdul; Franklin D. Roosevelt; Kirstie Alley; Faye Dunaway; Dwight D. Eisenhower; Cheryl Ladd; Jack Lemmon; Jerry Lewis; Shirley MacLaine; Steve Martin; Susan Sarandon; Cybill Shepherd; Dinah Shore; Carly Simon; Meryl Streep; Cheryl Tiegs; Lily Tomlin; Raquel Welch; Ronald Reagan; Gloria Steinem; and Aaron Spelling³³⁵.

Some cheerleaders describe the fame- and attention-related attractions of the activity in almost transcendental terms, talking of the thrill of signing autographs for queuing fans and of being ‘media darlings’ and a ‘phenomenon’ (Scholz et al 1991, p. 97)³³⁶. As the Scholz sisters write:

If you’re from Texas and one day you get chosen to be a Cowboys Cheerleader, it’s right up there with your wedding day. And, depending on who you marry, it might even be bigger (ibid, p. 64).

³³⁴ See: Hanson 1995, pp. 100-102; Ciren 2007; Adams and Bettis 2003a, pp. 4-5; and Cantor 2008, p. 56;

³³⁵ See: Hanson 1995; *Bring It On* 2000; and Torgovnick 2008.

³³⁶ See also: Scholz et al 1991, p. 192; Hanson 1995; Adams and Bettis 2003a, p. 5; and Kelly 2009.

They equate joining the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders with becoming Miss America and being 'whisked off into a fairy tale' (ibid p. 10). Another professional cheerleader describes the beginning of a football game as being 'the biggest rush ... Everyone in the entire stadium is just watching you. You're in the middle of the field, and they're screaming and yelling and all excited. It's amazing' (Tarrant cited in Pratt 2002). Given the fetishised nature of celebrity in contemporary culture³³⁷, the fame-related aspects of what has been called the 'cheerleader wish' (Bombeck cited in Hanson 1995, p. 115) can be figured as a social fetish, in that there is a fixation with the fame-related benefits which may be delivered via cheerleading.

Discourse generated by cheerleaders provides strong evidence to support Moritz's claim that cheerleading is an exemplar of third-wave feminist sensibility (2006). She compares cheerleading to 'dreaded feminist topics' such as Barbie, fashion and cooking – domains which third-wave feminism has helped transform into sites of contention, strength and creativity (2006, p. 32). Cheerleading, Moritz argues, is creating a feminine space of athletics which is generating more sporting opportunities for girls and women. In this sense, cheerleaders are not only active physically but also metaphorically in that they are: 'creating their own definitions of athlete, producing their own space to participate in sports' (ibid, p. 92). Contrary to the common feminist critique that emphasised femininity weakens a women's sporting practice, Moritz's case is that cheerleading's combination of athleticism and 'girliness' is precisely what makes it so transgressive (ibid, p. 85). Relevant here is Baumgardner and Richards' definition of 'girlie' as a potential juncture of feminism with feminine culture rather than simply 'booby traps' set by the patriarchy:

Girlie encompasses the tabooed symbols of women's feminine enculturation ... and says using them isn't shorthand for 'we've been duped'. Using makeup isn't a sign of our sway to the market place and the male gaze; it can be sexy, campy, ironic, or simply decorating ourselves without the loaded issues... we know how to make girl stuff work for us (2004, p. 60).

³³⁷ There is a vast array of literature on the mass fixation with celebrities (Marshall 1997), as well as the 'fast track to social mobility' regarded as accompanying celebrification (Asselin 2008, p. 210). Cf. also Rojek 2001; Turner 2004; and Lawrence 2009.

As such, the contested field of athletic cheerleading epitomises the clash between second-wave feminist ideals of gender equality, and third-wave celebrations of contradiction and blended identities. As Moritz puts it, the noise cheerleaders 'make on the margins can impact' the 'central notions of sport and classic second wave feminism' (2006, pp. 2-3). Once again, this situation offers ironies in that a cheerleader who looks as if she is passively acquiescing in patriarchal norms may actually be resisting second-wave feminist pressures. Here, I note Baumgardner and Richards' positing of a third-wave predestiny to fight against the rigid stereotype of the feminist as being too serious, too political, and too asexual (2004, p. 62). Such nuance, schism and internecine battle reflect the broader problem of 'difference' in the women's movement³³⁸. As Waaldijk writes, the experiences and interests of different women 'often stand diametrically opposed to each other', confronting feminism with difficult and painful contradictions (1995, p. 21). Associated themes can be found in girls' studies where Australian sociologist Anita Harris argues that initial 'waves' of academic work focusing on the exposé and rectification of oppression have now been replaced by investigations into the legacies of these interventions (2004, p. xx)³³⁹. Thus, instead of asking 'how do cheerleaders fail second-wave feminist ideals?', it is apt to invert the inquiry and ask, 'how do second-wave feminist ideals fail cheerleaders?'.

Cheerleaders share many similarities with the new 'girl heroes' discussed by thinkers such as Australian communications academic Susan Hopkins, who notes the way such figures thrive on sexual and moral ambiguity, and valorise fame as the 'primary fantasy object' (2002, pp. 3-4). The emphasis on aesthetics in cheerleading also resonates with Hartley and Lumby's argument that the realm of appearances offers young girls one of the few forms of power legally available to them (2003, p. 54). As Leslie Heywood and Shari Dworkin put it, 'for much of the younger demographic, exhibiting a hot body is an intense sign of valuation and

³³⁸ This relates not just to the theorisation of difference, but to the way difference is thought about and managed in a project such as feminism. It relates to the tensions (and, indeed, contradictions) between intellectual integrity and openness to divergent opinions, *and* political and social solidarity; the former being necessary to cultivate, extend, and articulate a viable series of theoretical models (for the purposes of critique of patriarchy, for instance), and the latter required to effect sociopolitical change.

³³⁹ The cheerleader also shares similarities with Harris' figuration of the 'future girl' (2002, p. 10), in that she is discursively positioned and scrutinised to determine whether she is a 'can do' or 'at risk' individual (ibid).

does not signify as devaluation' because being sexualised no longer denotes the social stigma it once did (2003, p. 89). Many cheerleaders certainly speak matter-of-factly – or with pride – about the activity's aesthetic requirements. 'Having a spray tan and fake eyelashes is all part of the uniform,' one New Zealand professional cheerleader tells a newspaper (Turner cited in Rassie 2009). Ironic distance is evident in another cheerleader's description of the activity as the 'ultimate gender performance':

When I apply my make-up, ...put on my short cheer skirt, and do my hair, I am performing my gender in the most obvious of ways. Part of me is doing so mockingly; another part of me is embracing the fact that I am a woman, and can choose the ways in which I express my sexuality, and my athleticism (Curatolo 2005).

Such subversions provide key insights into the third-wave political practices of younger women, but their invisibility to the naked eye is likely to contribute to the continued condemnation, by second-wave theorists, of cheerleading as both disempowered and disempowering. Here, there are parallels between the second-wave feminist demand that young women opt out of consumerism (Baumgardner and Richards 2004, p. 62³⁴⁰) and the second-wave feminist demand that young women reject activities (such as cheerleading) which involve conspicuous displays of feminine aesthetics. As Baumgardner and Richards write:

Younger women, who have grown up with increased access to the 'good' parts of capitalism, have begun to ponder the fact that asking women to opt out is essentially asking them to choose to be marginalised (ibid).

Paralleling Betty Freidan's idea of the feminine mystique (2001), Baumgardner and Richards posit a feminist mystique in the form of an attitude that makes women feel guilty for embellishing themselves 'with girly things' (2004, p. 66) Their conclusion is that, under the

³⁴⁰ Baumgardner and Richards' argument is that consumerism is provocative to second-wave feminism because of the latter's links with socialism or at least to the critiquing of capitalism (2004, p. 62).

guise of helping girls and women keep their voices, 'the women's movement inadvertently mutes them' (ibid, p. 65). As such, the barrier to individuality and individual expression for third-wave generation is no longer (or not just) the patriarchy that hobbled the second wave but feminism itself (ibid). This critique of feminism certainly holds true in the domain of cheerleading, where feminist objections to young women's participation in cheerleading forms an unlikely alliance with explicit misogyny, and is likely to be thwarting the growth and regulation of the sport.

PROTESTING TOO MUCH AND *AUFHEBUNG*

Much counter-discourse generated by cheerleaders directly refutes dominant negative stereotypes. A blogger, for instance, addresses what she says are 10 common misconceptions, including the suggestions: that cheerleaders have to be thin; that cheerleaders are unintelligent; that cheerleaders are all blondes; that cheerleaders are snobs; that cheerleading is not dangerous; and that cheerleaders are all female ('Stereotypical!' 2007). While such discourse does provide alternate imaginings of cheerleaders, its defensive tone and direct positioning of itself against negative representations, is likely to uphold or, at the very least, draw attention to, the offensive stereotypes it purports to reject³⁴¹. It may also invite skepticism if it is seen to 'protest too much' (to employ a Shakespearean reference³⁴²). Hall's position is that 'positive' images do have the advantage of 'righting the balance' because they invert the binary opposition, privileging the subordinate term and sometimes reading the negative as positive (1977, p. 272). But while such texts can expand the range of representations and the complexity of their meanings, 'the problem with the positive/negative strategy' is that the binaries remain in place and thus meanings continue to be framed by them (ibid p. 274).

Echoing Hall's work in her writing on moral panic is Australian journalism academic Tanja Dreher who argues that positive representations presented as a reaction to, or a reversal of,

³⁴¹ See also texts such as: Chadwick 2008; Sargent 2009; dpeterfreund commenting on Healey 2009; Reilly 2009; and Gertz 2009.

³⁴² 'The lady doth protest too much, methinks' is a quote from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* suggesting that a vehement denial may indicate a disavowed opposite (1999, p. 196).

negative representations or widely circulating stereotypes may simply replace one stereotype with another (2007, p. 120). Also apposite is the work of Slovenian theorist Slavoj Žižek who complicates notions of resistance by arguing that texts which seemingly resist prevailing ideology may serve to strengthen it (cited in Thornhill 2009). Offering examples such as obscene Yugoslavian military marching songs and seemingly subversive anti-communist humour, Žižek argues that even seemingly subversive humour can spread cynicism and indifference which allows a dominant power to reproduce itself and is therefore not subversive at all (ibid). Irish academic Edward R. Brennan also notes that 'humour that is apparently resistive may unintentionally act to reinforce the structures it attacks' (2011, p. 828).

Another sector of minoritarian cheerleading-related discourse offers a more complex combination of 'positive' and 'negative' signifiers and can be explicated via the Hegelian concept of *Aufhebung*. Although usually situated in the domain of idealist metaphysics, this central Hegelian concept suggests itself as possessing a theoretical reach undetermined by (and likely unimaginable from) its original contexts of application – a claim that will hopefully be borne out in the analyses to follow. *Aufheben* is a term which has been translated both as 'sublate' and 'supersede'³⁴³, and refers to the dialectical interplay of ideational content which concomitantly negates, preserves, and transforms. *Aufheben* is defined by Hegel in *Phenomenology of the Spirit* as 'the negation proper to consciousness, which supersedes [*aufhebt*] in such a way that it *retains* and *preserves* what is superseded, and therewith survives its own supersession' (1994, p. 57, emphasis in original). *Aufhebung* will be employed as a hermeneutic lens in the accompanying case studies focussing on the film *Bring It On* (2000) and the first series of the television series *Glee* (2009/2010).

Also relevant are the cluster of girl heroes in popular culture whose cheerleading activities are a form of cover for secret lives. For characters such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer³⁴⁴ and Claire Bennet from the science fiction television drama *Heroes* (2006), being a cheerleader

³⁴³ The difficulties in finding English equivalents to the German *Aufheben* are discussed by American professor of philosophy Howard P. Kainz in the 'Translator's Preface' to Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1994, pp. xiii-xiv).

³⁴⁴ My point, here, is more relevant to the 1992 film than the television series which began in 1997.

helps disguise their supernatural abilities primarily because so little is expected of them. In these cases, dominant stereotypes about cheerleaders being superficial and trivial are both upheld and subverted in that the low expectations of cheerleaders advantage cheerleaders and disadvantage those who hold the disparaging views. As per Hegel's theorisation of *Aufhebung*, stereotypes are both 'clear[ed] away' and 'cancel[ed]' but also 'preserv[ed]' (1991a, p. 154). This relieves us of the compulsion towards either/or understandings, such as cheerleaders being either: significant *or* trivial; subversive *or* acquiescent; powerful *or* powerless.

CASE STUDY: BRING IT ON

Arguably the most significant representation of cheerleading in contemporary popular culture, *Bring It On* (2000), is one of the few cheerleading-themed pop cultural artifacts to receive a positive critical response. It is described by one American reviewer as having 'wit, verve [and] sharp visual grammar' and as being 'the "Godfather"' of modern cheerleader movies (Olsen 2009). Billed as a comedy, *Bring It On* addresses, from an insider perspective, many serious criticisms of the sport. These include issues such as: physical dangers and injury rates; eating disorders; overly competitive parents; and feminist condemnations of cheerleading as a demeaning and sexist support for male sports. It is revealing that *Bring It On* does not subscribe to the common media convention of positioning unworthy cheerleaders against worthy non-cheerleaders: instead, its villains and heroes all lie within the cheerleading fraternity. Thus cheerleaders are conceptualised as belonging to a complete social ecosystem, rather than being an odd species inhabiting the cultural fringes.

Bring It On tells the story of high school senior Torrance Shipman (Kirsten Dunst) who has just become the captain of The Toros, a cheerleading squad in training for its sixth consecutive national championship title. When a team member is injured at a practice, Missy Pantone (Eliza Dushku), an off-beat new student and gymnast, successfully but reluctantly auditions for the squad. As a cheerleading outsider on the inside, Missy's character provides much of the anti-cheerleading rhetoric to which other cheerleaders respond, while also

personifying the link between cheerleading and other, less vilified athletic endeavours such as gymnastics:

Missy: See, I'm a hardcore gymnast. No way jumping up and down yelling 'Go Team Go!' is gonna satisfy me.

Torrance: We're gymnasts too, except, no bars, no vault (*Bring It On*, 2000).

The film's central plot concerns the heated rivalry between The Toros and a predominantly African-American team from East Los Angeles called The Clovers. When Torrance discovers her predecessor stole routines from this economically disadvantaged squad, she embarks on a series of last-minute attempts to develop an original routine. The Toros eventually take second place to the Clovers at the national titles, but, for Torrance, this loss is mitigated by the friendship and respect that has grown between the two squads. Typical of the film's knowing references to extant cheerleading tropes is the fact that its closing credits depict the former rivals (as well as other members of the cast) singing and dancing together to the Toni Basil song 'Mickey' (whose 1982 music video features cheerleading costuming and choreography).

Bring It On is widely regarded as a pro-cheerleading film and is credited with dramatically increasing global interest and participation in competitive cheerleading. This is despite – and also, paradoxically, because of – its parody of cheerleaders as shallow, 'bitchy', hyper-competitive, and culturally and intellectually clueless. Rather than subscribing to dominant cheerleading-related binaries, *Bring It On* suggests it is possible for cheerleaders to be sexually objectified *and* possess agency and elite athleticism – that the former can exist alongside rather automatically abrogate the latter. Its cheerleaders, for example, are resigned to spectators coming to ogle, instead of to appreciate their athletic skills. Yet the football team they 'support' are clearly regarded by everyone as a pathetic warm-up act rather than the main event. 'Why don't you let your cheerleaders play for you?' taunts a rival football player. 'At least they win shit occasionally.' *Bring It On* subverts traditional ideas and expectations regarding cheerleading and gender in other ways. Despite their key role as 'bases' for the

female 'flyers'³⁴⁵ in this film's cheersquad, the male characters in *Bring It On* are marginal figures – depersonalised supports for their female team mates, for the sport they are engaged in, and for the film overall. This interrupts the common feminist criticism that, in cheerleading, it is the female participants who are depersonalised and sidelined. Another gender inversion includes the rival female cheerleaders' sexual taunting of each other with aggressive pelvic thrusts and phallic motions. Also subversive, at the level of genre, is the way this 'chick flick' (Kiss 2010) appropriates the kind of ribald humour more commonly found in what are known as 'dick flicks'³⁴⁶.

Significantly, the film avoids defensive rebuttals of common criticisms of cheerleading, opting instead for a wry, postmodern appropriation of anti-cheerleader discourse. 'Oh don't play dumb,' one cheerleader says. 'We're better at it than you.' This loaded put-down – which suggests that feigning stupidity is a skill that can be mastered and employed for advantage (and is therefore far from *authentic* stupidity) – exemplifies a subtext which, despite ostensibly supporting negative cheerleader stereotypes, ultimately subverts them as per the Hegelian notion of *Aufhebung*. Also evident here is 'overcoding', a term Hartley uses to describe the translation of internal knowledges and meanings into 'the ironic, kitsch, joking, camp, self-referential parts of the semiosphere' (1996, p. 165). As a result, archetypes traditionally regarded as displaying tastelessness and extravagance enjoy 'a curious inversion of their poor reputé' vis a vis the compliment of the send-up (1996, p. 165). In this respect, *Bring It On* exemplifies the postmodern trend for despised identities to appropriate discourse used to deride them, revelling in that which causes agitation to others.

³⁴⁵ 'Bases' are the squad members – invariably male in co-ed teams – who throw and catch the airborne and pyramid topping cheerleaders who are known as 'flyers' and who are usually petite females in co-ed teams.

³⁴⁶ 'Dick flicks' are defined by the on-line Urban Dictionary as a 'chick flick for guys' ('Dick-Flick'). Examples include films that are geared towards male audiences such as the work of filmmakers Peter and Bobby Farrelly.

CASE STUDY: GLEE

Another highly significant depiction of cheerleading in contemporary popular culture is the American musical comedy-drama television series *Glee* (2009/2010) which premiered in the US in 2009. As with *Bring It On* (2000), this award-winning³⁴⁷, highly rating³⁴⁸ and internationally syndicated program simultaneously upholds yet also subverts cheerleading-related stereotypes in a Hegelian fashion. The first season of the series pits a squad of 'mean girl'³⁴⁹ high school cheerleaders and their tyrannical coach, Sue Sylvester, against a struggling school glee club (also referred to as a show choir) run by Spanish teacher and relative nice guy Will Schuester. While *Glee's* title is indicative of its central concern, the role of the Cheerios cheer squad as a foil to the New Directions glee club is pivotal. The Cheerios are the school's standout performers in the sporting arena and, as a result, dominate the educational facility economically and socially. In fact, the squad absorbs so much school funding that the teaching staff's coffee budget is withdrawn in order to pay for its nutritionist ('Pilot' 2009). The cheerleaders, meanwhile, stalk the school corridors (almost always in full uniform) bullying those situated beneath them on the high school food chain. This adolescent hierarchy is delineated explicitly by Sylvester, who notes that members of the glee club occupy the 'sub-basement' of the high school caste system as opposed to the cheerleaders who inhabit the 'penthouse' ('Pilot' 2009).

Reviewers have criticised *Glee* for trading in 'sickening' stereotypes ('Glee FAIL, Crossing the Line!!')³⁵⁰, yet there is strong evidence to suggest that the series employs stereotypes with the aim of parodying rather than promoting them. In relation to cheerleading, early episodes

³⁴⁷ See: '2009 14th Annual SATELLITE AWARDS™' 2009; 'AFI Awards 2009' 2009; '2010 People's Choice Awards Honor Sandra Bullock, Mariah Carey, "Twilight"' 2010; and '16th Annual Screen Actors Guild Awards Recipients' 2010.

³⁴⁸ *Glee's* September 2009 premier attracted 7.136 million viewers making it the Fox network's best ratings performance for a scripted premiere in three years (Seidman 2009). Additional testimony to the popularity of the program can be found in the fact that fans of *Glee* – known by the portmanteau 'gleeks' ('Gleeks' 2009) – have engaged in more activity on social networking internet sites than fans of the Fox network's science fiction shows (Stelter 2009).

³⁴⁹ Drawn from the 2004 film *Mean Girls*, this term now is now used generically to refer to bullying female members of aggressive high school cliques ('mean girls').

³⁵⁰ For other criticisms of the reliance on stereotypes in *Glee*, see: Muldoon 2009; Dehnart 2009; and Setoodeh 2009.

depict the three central cheerleading characters – Quinn Fabray, Santana Lopez and Brittany Pierce – in line with dominant stereotypes, as vain, shallow, stupid, manipulative, bitchy, and possessing both a deficit and surplus of sexual availability. Head cheerleader Fabray, for instance, is both pregnant to someone other than her boyfriend *and* president of the school ‘celibacy club’, while Pierce thinks ‘the square root of four is rainbows’ (‘Ballad’ 2009). Many of these cheerleading stereotypes, however, are discomposed in later episodes when more sympathetic sides of cheerleading characters are revealed. The characters of Pierce and Lopez also become more complex after hints they may be in a lesbian relationship (Sectionals 2009). While lesbian cheerleading themes proliferate in mainstream pornography, Pierce and Lopez’s affair is not sexualised but understated to the point where internet fans have posted a freeze-framed shot from the series for the purposes of discussing whether or not the two girls are depicted holding hands in the background to the main action (Snarker 2010). The cult appeal of this union, particularly in the queer community, is also evidenced by the appearance in media discourse of the portmanteau ‘Brittana’ (‘Brittany & Santana’), as well as overt excitement on queer web sites such as *After Ellen*, which describes this aspect of the show as taking ‘awesome to the next level’ (Snarker 2009). The depiction of Pierce and Lopez’s relationship, therefore, subverts mainstream pornography’s usual approach to cheerleaders both in terms of content and audience appeal.

As with *Bring It On* (2000), *Glee* reconfigures stereotypes via the disruption of cheerleading-related binaries. In the first episode of season one, the cheerleaders are established as all-powerful villains/antiheroes while the glee club members appear as underdog victims/heroes. The mutual exclusivity of these two groups ends when Schuester begins poaching cheerleaders and their footballing counterparts to boost New Directions’ numbers (‘Pilot’ 2009). This occurs in the other direction when queer glee club member Kurt Hummel joins the school’s failing football team and helps it win a game (‘Preggers’ 2009)³⁵¹. The depiction of the glee club as offering redemptive opportunities for the school’s evil ‘alpha’ students is consistent with dominant discourse framing cheerleaders as unworthy and requiring salvation. Yet contact with the cheerleaders also provides benefits to the glee

³⁵¹ While none of the female glee club members become cheerleaders, Hummel’s multi-tasking is still relevant in this context because footballers are often framed as cheerleaders’ male twins (Hanson 1995, p. 102).

clubbers via an increase in social acceptability and via New Directions' increased viability and eventual success in winning the sectionals level of a school show choir competition ('Sectionals' 2009). The evil cheerleader/good non-cheerleader binary also becomes progressively displaced during season one as the cheerleaders are gradually portrayed as more sympathetic, while the glee clubbers are depicted as more nefarious and/or unlikable³⁵².

Cheerleading-related binaries are unsettled more subtly via the series' problematising of the notion that scholarly education is superior to physical endeavour (associated with what Hanson refers to, in relation to cheerleading, as the notion of 'strong body, weak mind' [1995, p. 104]). In one episode, Schuester tells Sylvester that one of her Cheerios misspelled her name and answered every question on a Spanish quiz with a drawing of a sombrero. Sue's reply is:

I empower my Cheerios to be champions. Do they go to college? I don't know.
I don't care. Should they learn Spanish? Sure, if they wanna become dishwashers
and gardeners ('Throwdown' 2009).

Sylvester's over-the-top 'political incorrectness' gives her remarks a self-parodying quality, yet the indisputable achievements of the Cheerios (not to mention the absence of any conspicuously successful current or former students from Schuester's Spanish class) suggests there may be a realpolitik accuracy to her observation. The strength of her comeback to Schuester's criticisms of the Cheerios certainly endows the cheerleaders' sporting success with a force and legitimacy rarely evident in other discourse. It is also significant that season one of *Glee* contains only one example of a character blatantly calling into question the worth of the cheerleaders. The brevity and nature of Sylvester's riposte – 'your resentment is delicious' ('Pilot' 2009) – suggests that not only the coach but the makers of the series feel that a detailed defence of cheerleading is unnecessary.

³⁵² An early example is Schuester's planting of marijuana in quarterback Finn Hudson's locker so he can blackmail him to join New Directions ('Pilot' 2009).

Glee's nuanced approach to cheerleading-related binaries also complicates the common framing of cheerleading as being concerned with garish and debased aesthetics at the expense of authentic sporting ideals. The cheerleaders in *Glee* are undoubtedly obsessed with their physical appearances, but, once again, this is exaggerated to the extent that it is the stereotypes – rather than the cheerleaders – which are being parodied. An example is Lopez's weeping over Sylvester's punitive revoking of her 'tanning privileges' ('Acafellas' 2009). The cheerleaders' aesthetic and cultural opposites, the glee club members, are also depicted as having an obsession with externals which extends beyond vanity to chicanery. This is evidenced in 'Hairgraphy' when New Directions embrace a dance style which involves ostentatious hair-tossing to detract from performance limitations (2009). Given the frequent media framing of cheerleading as being reliant on such aesthetic sleights-of-hand, it could reasonably be expected that Sylvester would approve of the tactic. Instead, she condemns the 'demeaning, fruity hair tossing', telling Schuester:

Do you know why I make each of my Cheerios wear her pulled hair back in a ponytail? Because I don't want to distract from her impeccable talent. You seem to be taking the opposite approach, Will, and that leads me to believe you know your kids don't have what it takes ('Hairgraphy' 2009).

Cheerleading is thereby cast as involving authenticity and demanding unadorned ability as opposed to the glee club's embrace of superficiality – of style over substance.

Arguably the most intriguing character in *Glee* is cheerleading coach Sylvester who undermines stereotypes relating to cheerleading specifically and to sport and gender issues in general. Sylvester is played by openly queer actress Jane Lynch (Berrin 2010) who is known for playing sexually predatory middle-aged women in films (Spitznagel 2009). In *Glee*, Lynch's character claims to be a retired Special Forces operative who 'was on the strike team in Panama' during the extraction of former military dictator Manuel Noriega ('Acafellas' 2009). Her subsequent success as a cheerleading coach has resulted in her being named Cheerleading Coach of the Decade by the fictitious *Splits* magazine, and in her being given a segment on a local news station. Like her cheerleaders, Sylvester almost always appears in 'uniform' – in her case, a retro tracksuit – which provides a constant and cartoonish

reminder that she is on team cheerleading (as opposed to team glee club), as well as providing a metaphor for the manner in which her win-at-all-costs competitiveness extends beyond the sporting realm.

Sylvester's bullying, abuse and militaristic approach inverts many traditional conceptions of masculine and feminine sporting values³⁵³ – as does *Glee's* representation of cheerleading overall. The opening scenes of episode one ('Pilot' 2009) depicts the co-ed Cheerios engaged in a difficult competitive cheerleading routine which is stylish but demonstrates elements of speed, strength, endurance, challenge, courage and danger. When a Cheerios squad member plummets from a three-tiered human pyramid, Sylvester – armed with a megaphone and stopwatch – responds with a scowl, bawling: 'You think this is hard? Try being waterboarded, *that's* hard' (ibid). Later, she barks at the cheerleaders to get the 'agony' out of their eyes (ibid). Sylvester's drill sergeant demeanour contrasts with that of Ken Tanaka, the head coach of the football team, who demonstrates a number of stereotypically feminine behaviours such as disliking football, engaging in love-lorn mooching, and embarking on a slimming regime before the official yearbook photographs ('Mattress' 2009).

In addition to privileging stoicism, athleticism and risk-taking over aesthetics, encouragement and safety in her training of the Cheerios, Sylvester has a number of other traits frequently framed in discourse as being quintessentially 'masculine'³⁵⁴, including: a dearth of emotion (she claims to have had her tear ducts removed because she wasn't using them ['Mattress' 2009]); threats of violence (she threatens to 'steal' into Schuester's home at night and punch him in the face ['Mash-Up' 2009]); and an obsession with dominance and victory (Schuester

³⁵³ According to sports and education researchers Anne Torhild Klomsten, Herb W. Marsh and Einar M. Skaalvik, characteristics assigned to 'masculine' sports include danger, risk, violence, speed, strength, endurance, challenge, team spirit, courage and/or aggression (2005, p. 626). 'Feminine' sports, in contrast other hand, are still frequently associated with aesthetic features such as gracefulness, non-aggression, and 'conforming to the stereotyped expectations of femininity, such as beauty' (ibid).

³⁵⁴ Of the gender-related stereotyping of masculine and feminine characteristics, American academic Daewoo Park writes that: 'Traditionally, women have been characterized by qualities such as dependence, passivity, fragility, non-aggression, non-competitiveness, inability to risk, and emotionality. By contrast, men have been thought to possess such characteristics as independence, aggression, competitiveness, leadership, assertiveness, courage, rationality, confidence, and emotional control' (1997, p. 166).

observes that Sylvester is used to being 'cock of the walk' around the school ['Showmance' 2009]). Sylvester seems to take a sadistic pleasure in her war with Schuester which extends beyond her declared motivation of ensuring all available school funding is directed towards the Cheerios rather than the glee club. 'Power and winning,' Lynch has told *Vanity Fair* of the character, is '[Sylvester's] entire world view' (Spitznagel 2009). Sylvester also grooms female squad members in skills, traits and activities stereotypically associated with masculinity rather than femininity. In her on-going efforts to destroy Schuester and the glee club, for example, she orders Fabray, Lopez and Brittany to engage in aggressive infiltration, espionage and sabotage in emulation of the military tactics she used during her time in Special Forces ('Acafellas' 2009).

As with the nuanced framing of cheerleaders in *Glee*, it is important to note that Sylvester is *not simply depicted as a woman behaving like a man*. Her persona is complicated by the fact that she also has a number of (admittedly less dominant) characteristics that are usually framed as being feminine. These include compassion (she has a beloved sister with Down syndrome ['Wheels' 2009]), as well as sexualised vanity (she: is rumoured to have once posed for *Penthouse* [Spitznagel 2009]); is distressed at having failed an audition for *Baywatch* ['Wheels' 2009]); and has plastic surgery in preparation for the school yearbook photos ['Mattress' 2009]). Her views on the spoils of war are also intriguing. 'I want my full budget restored,' she says in one episode. 'I need a fog machine' ('Acafellas' 2009). Her willingness to go to such extreme lengths for something as ostensibly trivial as a fog machine lampoons both her 'masculine' power mongering, as well as her 'feminine' obsession with an accouterment that could reasonably be categorised as primarily decorative.

One conclusion about *Glee's* complex framing of cheerleaders and their coach is that they simply reflect the conflicting and ambivalent responses to cheerleading evident in other media forms. This would explain one character in the series praising the Cheerios for attracting the school's most talented performers³⁵⁵ while another dismissing them as not

³⁵⁵ In the director's cut of the first episode, Schuester says to Sylvester: 'I need more kids – performers. And all the best ones are in the Cheerios' (2009).

constituting performers at all³⁵⁶. More instructive when considering the net result of *Glee's* complex and ostensibly contradictory framings of cheerleaders, however, is Hegel's notion of *Aufhebung*. Using this theoretical framework means that *Glee's* cheerleaders can be figured as both continuing and rupturing traditional negative stereotypes, akin to a Hegelian synthesis of binary opposites, a 'dialectical transition in which a lower stage is both annulled and preserved in a higher one' (Taylor 1979, p. 49). It is impossible to say whether *Glee's* nuanced portrayal of cheerleading marks the beginning of a broader change in media framings of and, perhaps, community attitudes to cheerleading. The mainstream popularity of the series does, however, suggest both these developments are feasible.

While dominant discourse constructs cheerleading according to fetishistic and/or vitriolic logics, cheerleading-related representations are not monolithic: they contain significant strands of minority discourse portraying the activity as a legitimate sport providing a range of benefits to its practitioners. Moritz's optimistic assessment is that the fierce competition associated with contemporary cheerleading has resulted in the signifier of the non-threatening, popular cheerleader being replaced by that of the fearless, competitive athlete (2006, pp. 17-18). My conclusions are that fetishised and/or vitriolic framings of cheerleaders still dominate media texts, but that new, athletics-related signifiers *are* becoming increasingly prevalent. Reflecting and fuelling this discursive struggle and shift is cheerleading-generated discourse demanding respect for the activity³⁵⁷: many cheerleaders regard themselves as being in a subordinate position not because they are on the sideline of masculine games or engaged in an intrinsically oppressive activity, but because they are not taken seriously by influential sectors of society (including feminism – the very movement purporting to be lobbying for the increased respect of women's endeavours). The success of pro-cheerleading counter-discourse in changing dominant views of cheerleading is hampered by: the overwhelming volume of fetishistic and/or vitriolic framings of cheerleading; the convergence of social groups producing such discourse; and the large number of 'positive' minoritarian texts which inadvertently privilege the 'negative' texts they ostensibly reject. Emerging sectors of competing cheerleading representations which offer more complex

³⁵⁶ In the director's cut of the first episode, the school guidance counsellor asks the cheerleading coach 'since when are cheerleaders performers?' (2009).

³⁵⁷ See: Keough 2007.

resolutions of 'positive' and 'negative' signifiers are, however, advancing less vitriolic and less fetishised imaginings of the cheerleader.

CONCLUSION

Cheerleading is the focus of exceptional fetishistic and/or vitriolic discourses which frame participants as comprehensively – and self-evidently – objectionable: ridiculously inane; unforgivably corrosive; and irredeemably pornographic. Dominant cheerleading-related discourse is produced in multiple contexts by a vast range of ostensibly disparate producers whose voices converge to produce a negative and hyper-sexualised image of the cheerleader which circulates as commonsensical and axiomatic. Such texts frequently contain both lasciviousness *and* claims to moral superiority – a fetishistic fixation with cheerleaders *and* the insistence that they are unworthy of attention. A sports web site suggests in a story tagged as ‘humour’ that America’s national basketball teams be seeded, not on the basis of wins and losses, but by how ‘hot’ their cheerleaders are (‘Seeding the NBA Playoffs by What Really Counts: Cheerleaders’ 2009). This article – accompanied by a slide show of 18 photographs of professional cheerleaders ranked according to their sexual appeal – prompts 67, often innuendo-laden comments from readers. Most are congratulatory (on the thesis of the original story and its visuals) but one announces that cheerleaders look ‘like hookers’ and that denouncing them is simply a matter of proclaiming ‘right’ over ‘wrong’ (Augustin commenting on ‘Seeding the NBA Playoffs by What Really Counts: Cheerleaders’ 2009). This lofty condemnation is commended for bringing a ‘sense of objectivity’ to the debate (No Idea commenting on ‘Seeding the NBA Playoffs by What Really Counts: Cheerleaders’ 2009).

Such texts are typical of the ambivalence contained in dominant media depictions of cheerleading. Used as a signifier for norms suggesting the best and worst aspects of sexualised femininity, the term ‘cheerleader’ is used to embody the heights of feminine decorum as well as, far more frequently, the depths of feminine disrepute. Thus, themes and symbols of respectability vie with those of taboo, reflecting the unstable and contested nature of idealised imaginings of contemporary girl- and womanhood, as well as tensions between denial and desire. The contradictions apparent in mediated representations of cheerleaders are also evident in other domains. Dialectics of crisis (regarding the sexual,

cultural and ideological threats supposedly posed by cheerleading) and urgings of containment co-exist with an obsessive and fetishistic interest. The propositional content expressed by much anti-cheerleading discourse is often immune to counterevidence and, moreover, surprisingly capable of incorporating seeming disconfirmation into its rhetoric. Thus the feminist who criticises professional cheerleading for being unathletic also condemns stunt ‘flyers’ at the tops of competitive cheerleading pyramids for being tossed about like purely decorative objects’ (Nelson cited in Pratt 2002); and the male readers who learn that a cheerleader is a molecular neuroscience researcher make lewd suggestions that she must be ‘into the Double Helix position’ (Ibracadabra commenting on Chandler 2009a), and might accept a warm ‘donor sample’ (ClickClickThud commenting on Chandler 2009a). Cheerleaders are castigated: for being unathletic *and* engaging in the wrong type of athleticism; for being too sexually attractive *and* too unsightly; for attracting too much attention *and* not enough; for putting themselves in danger *and* being dangerous; for being overly powerful *and* offensively trivial. In majoritarian discourse (in sharp contrast to the emerging domain of stunt cheerleading competitions) cheerleaders cannot win.

When discussing this research with friends and colleagues, I often encountered the beliefs that vitriol against cheerleaders isn’t significant because it’s *just cheerleading*, and that vitriol generated on the internet doesn’t count because it’s *just the internet*. Such attitudes run the risk of reviving traditional dismissals of the social, cultural, and intellectual significance of the feminine and the popular. Further, the very universality and purported self-evidence of the proclamations here offer good reason to believe that such expressions of disdain and dismissal are *themselves* culturally and intellectually significant and therefore cry out for further investigation. Fetishistic and/or vitriolic discourse targetting cheerleaders is especially significant *precisely* because it involves cheerleaders – young women who are seen by so many as so deserving of hate. The nature and ramifications of fetishistic and/or vitriolic discourse produced on-line also merits close scrutiny because of the dominance of two, polarised views about the internet itself. Internet critics dismiss much on-line content as dumbed down, fragmented triviality, while internet evangelists focus primarily on its egalitarian upsides. As a result, antilocutory acts in the cybersphere have rarely been the subject of nuanced intellectual investigation. Cheerleading, therefore, is a particularly revealing site for scholarly examination because it involves studying the combination of: a denigrated pursuit

(cheerleading); a denigrated gender (female); a denigrated demographic (youth); a denigrated textual genre (popular media texts, in particular on-line discourse) – pursued via a denigrated mode of inquiry (media studies³⁵⁸). Given that the target of fetishists are usually objects or partial subjects, I note also that there are scant advocates for the targets of fetishists. Part of the aim of this thesis is to rectify this oversight by exploring the ethical consequences of an *en masse* fetish directed at human subjects.

Chapter One of this dissertation shows the dramatic alterations in practice and demographics that have occurred in cheerleading since its emergence – as an elite and exclusively masculine endeavour – in the US in the late 1800s. Cheerleading's metamorphosis into a feminised – and consequently sexualised and trivialised – pursuit from the 1950s has been accompanied by protests accusing it of threatening a broad spectrum of ideals, including those dear to feminism, moral conservatism, sport, and cultural authenticity. Chapter Two reveals that, in the first decade of the 21st century, cheerleaders have few cheerleaders of their own. Feminists condemn this popular activity as epitomising the commodification of the female body under patriarchy, framing cheerleaders as sexual exhibitionists for the male gaze and accusing participants of betraying the sisterhood by serving as subordinate accessories to male sporting endeavours. Modern moral crusaders – a group whose concerns intersect with those of many feminists – accuse cheerleaders of being part of a corrupting raunch culture. Sporting purists regard cheerleading as a frivolous distraction from the main game and from 'serious' male players, claiming it brings with it lascivious, antisocial and even criminal behaviour. Guardians of high culture outside America condemn it as a trashy US export and exemplar of American cultural imperialism, while sophisticates within its home nation cringe at its 'made in the USA' origins. This convergence of discourse highlights the predicament faced by 'femininity and feminine bodies' (Urla & Swedland 2008, p. 232) in an era in which the condemnation generated by groups traditionally associated with female oppression and the condemnation generated by

³⁵⁸ Over the course of its 25-years graduation from polytechnics to university settings, media studies has been, and remains, the subject of strident criticism, in the UK in particular. As Hartley observes: 'It is still seen as an unworthy subject, taught in unworthy institutions, to unworthy students, who will then fail to get worthy jobs' (2009, pers. comm. 16 July). For debate on this subject, cf.: 'Conflict in Journalism Education' 1998; Hirst 2002; 'Does media studies get too much of a kicking?' 2003; and Luckhurst 2006.

feminism can intersect in an ideological pincer movement. This leaves young women associated with activities such as cheerleading cornered and largely without allies.

Underpinning much of the cheerleading-related discourse in Chapter Two, as shown in Chapter Three, is a fetishistic obsession with cheerleaders in pornography, popular culture and the news media. Representations in these genres frequently portray cheerleaders as hyper-sexual frivolities intended primarily for the gratification of male desires. They relegate the sport's overwhelmingly female participant base to a culturally labile space between the athlete and the sex worker, and facilitate news media framings of cheerleaders as being wholly or partly to blame if they are the victims of misadventure or violent crime. The strength of negative, cheerleading-related stereotypes allows cheerleading to be used as shorthand for a variety of assumptions and anxieties about gender authenticity and cultural sophistication. An example is Australian columnist Peter Fitzsimons who praises the TV comeback of a former rugby league player who lost a regular broadcasting job after being linked with a group sex scandal (2010)³⁵⁹. For Fitzsimons, one of the high points of the new program is that it contains, 'no cheerleaders' cleavage' (2010). Here, cheerleading is equated – *sans* explanation or evidence – with sexism in sport and the media. Similarly, a *People* magazine article positions cheerleading in binary opposition to depth and 'street cred' (Perry 2009). It praises actress Winona Ryder for maintaining 'the edginess that made her the Generation X poster girl', quoting her as saying she always thought it was 'cooler to be interesting than to be pretty' and that, she 'never wanted to be... a cheerleader' (ibid).

Such comments are milder than more extreme examples such as – in response to a clip of a young woman cheering – 'parents really know how to raise whores these days' (Frankenfuss commenting on 'Cheerleader Dancing' 2007) and 'Ugly and smells like fish' (Nice Jewish Twat commenting on 'Cheerleader Dancing' 2007). But mainstream negative stereotypes are key to the reputation deficit suffered by cheerleaders partly because they are so frequently presented as self-evident. Chapter Four also posits such denigrations as fetishistic – in part, because they are a disavowed or unacknowledged mechanism for obtaining individual or group advantages. It argues that such discourse is likely to: contribute to the regulatory weakness (and consequent riskiness) of cheerleading; facilitate a blame-the-victim mentality

³⁵⁹ See also: Ferguson 2009.

when cheerleaders are the victims of violent crime or mishap; and be self-replicating. Vitriolic discourse also casts cheerleading as the 'monster scapegoat'³⁶⁰, responsible for all that is wrong with feminised sexuality, mass culture, and commodified sport. The eradication or severe curtailing of cheerleading comes, therefore, to symbolise a monster panacea.

Cheerleading-related fetishism is exercised in a number of ways, and can be explicated with reference to various uses of the term 'fetish' through history in both scholarly and popular contexts. The fixation with cheerleading accords with lay understandings of fetish as an obsession expressed in ritualistic behaviour³⁶¹, while the refusal to acknowledge this fixation resonates with Freud's suggestion that fetishism is an energetic action undertaken to maintain disavowal (Freud 1961, pp. 152-155). The power ascribed to cheerleaders shares similarities with the magic associated with fetish objects as figured by anthropology³⁶², as does the combination of petting and ill-treatment cheerleaders receive at the hands of fetishists³⁶³. Discourse which frames cheerleading as the embodiment of the patriarchy, 'pornification', cultural depravity and so on, also comports with Tylor's view that the fetish object embodies a spirit 'acting through it or communicating by it' (1871, p.133). Marx's figuration of fetish as reflecting the tension between material and ascribed values³⁶⁴ is also apt with respect to the evident disconnect between the *unexceptionality* of the real life practice of cheerleading, and the *exceptionality* of the large volume of fetishistic and/or vitriolic discourse it attracts. In this sense, fetishised and/or vilified cheerleading representations are to non-fictional cheerleaders as Marx's commodities are to labour. In each case, there is a scotomisation of humanity.

³⁶⁰ Philosopher Jean-Francois Revel uses this expression in relation to European anti-Americanism. The original quote is: 'The fundamental role of anti-Americanism in Europe in general, and particularly among those on the Left, is to absolve themselves of their own moral failings and intellectual errors by heaping them onto the monster scapegoat, the United States of America. For stupidity and bloodshed to vanish from Europe, the U.S. must be identified as the singular threat to democracy (contrary to every lesson of actual history)' (2003).

³⁶¹ Cf.: *Macquarie Concise Dictionary* 1998 p. 409; and *Webster's New World College Dictionary* 'Fetish'.

³⁶² Cf.: Tylor 1871, p. 133; and Brown 1993, p. 938.

³⁶³ Cf.: Tylor 1871, p. 133; and Durkheim 1975, p. 80.

³⁶⁴ Marx 1867.

Cheerleaders are frequently depersonalised and reduced to fungible objects offered for exchange. Pornography sells images of nameless, non-cheerleading 'cheerleaders' for sexual gratification; the news media displays salacious photographs of anonymous cheerleaders (often alongside diatribes against the debauchery of cheerleading); and popular culture's use of characters dressed in cheerleading uniforms is a symbolic shortcut for 'bitch', 'bimbo' or 'slut'. Erotic and economic, the cheerleader has a potent symbolic charge which is both more and less than the sum of her parts. This paradox exists because the feminine cheerleading subject is simultaneously hyper-invested with and purged of meaning, which comports well with broader theorisations of the cultural status of the female body as simultaneously 'empty and at the same time all-encompassing' (Banet-Weiser 1999, p. 23). Thus, cheerleading is cast – in an essentialist fashion – as offering *everything* there is to know about a woman while simultaneously being denigrated for being *nothing*.

Throughout this thesis I have used fetish theory as a lens through which to study discourse framing cheerleading. Having pursued this analysis, it now seems possible – through a kind of epistemological inversion – to then use the original object under investigation as a lens through which to view theory. Having examined cheerleading through a variety of theoretical perspectives and via a series of eclectic analytical rubrics, it is then possible to employ lessons learnt to cast an eye back to those theories utilised in prosecuting the analysis. Specifically, examining the discursive patterns of fetishism and vitriol directed at cheerleading can assist in a re-examination of: a) the valorisation of the pleasures and agency involved in individuals' relationships with texts; b) the portrayal of new media practices as evidence only of (or primarily of) bold transgression and progressive democratisation; and c) the broad conceptual architecture of hegemonic theory which frames oppressive power as moving in a top-down direction. As this thesis has shown, the producers of fetishistic and/or vitriolic discourse targetting cheerleaders are often self-publishing individuals rather than mass media monoliths: they represent an *ad hoc*, *de-facto* alliance rather than a traditional hegemon, power-bloc or dominant ideology. As such, much cheerleading-related discourse functions to provide strategic opportunities and self-serving psychological outlets for the former rather than shoring up the power base of the latter. The fact that cheerleaders still suffer oppression as a result is evidence that media-related power flows in the 21st century can

involve lateral power plays in addition to shows of force from above. This phenomenon has been largely overlooked in theory.

In fact, there is evidence to suggest a hegemony of sorts – of hegemonic and quasi-hegemonic theory³⁶⁵ – within the domain of media and cultural studies. Most dominant approaches to the theorisation of power and media circulation are predicated on assumptions about the central position of monolithic top-down forces: media texts are produced by or on behalf of large power blocs and ideology is passively *absorbed* by audiences; or media texts are produced by or on behalf of large power blocs and ideology is creatively *negotiated* or *resisted* by audiences. In the first framing, the hegemon imparts ideology and exercises control via the media onto a mass of helplessly compliant receivers. In the second framing, these receivers are resistant rather passive. Either way, media consumers are still construed exclusively in relation to a hegemonic force or forces, whether or not it is explicitly thematised. As I will show, this may create an analytical bias which results in the downplaying of lateral power flows within groups, particularly on-line. Before further pursuing these themes and considering how they relate to discourse framing cheerleading, I will briefly outline the history of scholarly debate about the power dynamics between producers, texts and audiences.

Themes of textual subjects as inactive and disenfranchised receptacles of ideology can be found: in Marxist analyses of the media of mass communication's role in the social reproduction of the status quo (Stevenson 2002, p. 9); in the Frankfurt School's framing of mass culture as a means to a type of 'thought control' (Hartley 2004, p. 92) and as constructing 'unconscious desires in the masses' (Banet-Weiser 1999, p. 212); in Gramsci's

³⁶⁵ While this is a playful use of language, it is in recognition of American scholar Thomas Clayton's broad definition of hegemony, in *Rethinking Hegemony*, as 'the dissemination of, and consent to, ways of thinking and action associated with various groups' linked 'with the maintenance or reconfiguration of relations among groups stratified according to race, gender, social class or regional or national affiliation' (2006, p. 1). My positing of a hegemony of hegemonic theory is therefore in recognition of: a) 'the chronic danger of automatic response' regarding 'the dynamics of consensus formation in intellectual practice' (Gregg 2004); and b) the cultural capital and vertical hierarchies involved in the scholarly class. While tempting to frame the critical academic speaking position as being located outside the influence of hegemony, Gramsci actually framed 'traditional' intellectuals as being aligned with oppressive social formations and requiring co-option by progressive movements (Clayton 2006, p. 10).

naming of media as inherent to forms of cultural hegemony (cited in Landy 2009, p. 111); in the 1970s classic realism orthodoxy of 'screen theory' (Fiske 2003, p. 62); in Noam Chomsky's mass media propaganda model – aka the 'manufacturing of consent' (Herman & Chomsky 1988); and elsewhere.

Opposing views stressing the interpretative agency of audiences grew from the work of thinkers such as Michel de Certeau, who argues a decline in the power of social elites to prescribe certain kinds of meaning-making. De Certeau conceptualises readers and consumers as nimble poachers, able to elude strategies of top-down control by forging independent and creative subjectivities around immovable metaphysical and physical structures (1984). (In the case of 'Walking in the City', they are able to navigate tall buildings in a single series of ambiguating 'walking rhetorics' [1993, p. 131]). Also highly influential is the work of Hall, whose 1980 essay on encoding and decoding (1996) argues that audiences vary in the responses to media messages, and that responses can be hypothetically categorised as dominant-hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional. UK Communications academic John Fiske – who argues that all cultural commodities 'bear the forces that we can call centralizing, disciplinary, hegemonic, massifying, commodifying' (1989, p. 28) – amplifies these ideas to constitute readers as 'resistance fighters' (ibid, p. 45). He argues that the popular pleasure involved in a media consumption act such as watching wrestling or rock videos on television 'necessarily' contains semiotic strategies of resistance (2003, p. 240); that resistance, in fact, is inbuilt into the reading act itself (1989, p. 28). Feminist theorists such as Ien Ang, meanwhile, have provided critical commentaries on the potential for transgression in women's readings of popular (and often denigrated) media forms such as the TV series *Dallas* (1996).

The complex literature area addressing the passive versus active audience is so voluminous it almost forms a field of its own and it is not my intention to do more than gloss it here. Certainly my grouping of theory and theorists in this fashion is not to ignore the work of thinkers such as Michel Foucault – who conceptualises more subtle and diffuse power formations such as those flowing from discourse and knowledge (1973; 1979; 1990; 2005; et al); and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2004) – who, as Foucault puts it, reject reductive political analyses and postulate 'an economy of flows' (2004, pp. xxix, xx). Neither is it to deny the more nuanced and complex configurations of power explored in the critical

perspectives of contemporary cultural and media studies scholars such as Lumby (1997a; 1999; et al); Wark (1994; 1998; 2004; et al) and Hartley (1992; 1996; et al). I note, also, critics of the automatic equating of 'the popular' with 'the transgressive' or 'the radical'. Felski, for instance, writes of the risk that the rehabilitation of the popular text as an object worthy of analysis may slide into 'a rhapsodic hymn to its subversive powers' (1995, p. 141) and reinscribe 'the more dubious tenets of subcultural theory in its appeal to a unified collectivity of resistive subjects' (ibid, p. 142). Similarly, UK cultural studies scholar Jim McGuigan dismisses the conflating of the popular with the progressive as a 'simple inversion of the mass culture critique at its worst' (1993, p. 62). Also cogent here, is the argument of American theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick that the terms hegemonic and the subversive have suffered a gradual evacuation of substance:

as a kind of Gramscian-Foucauldian contagion turns 'hegemony' into another name for the status quo (i.e. everything that *is*) and defines 'subversion' in, increasingly a purely negative relation to that... One's relation to *what is* risks becoming reactive and bifurcated... dramatizing only the extremes of compulsion and voluntarity (2003, pp. 12-13, emphasis in original).

Australian cultural studies scholar Meaghan Morris, meanwhile, humorously posits a master-disk in a publisher's vault which pumps out 'thousands of versions of the same article about pleasure, resistance, and the politics of consumption... under different names with minor variations' (1988, p. 7).

While my analyses of (or conclusions about the configurations and mechanisms) of power often do not differ in orientation – or even in substance – with many of the 'subtleist' theorisations mentioned directly above, they do in emphasis. My argument is that even analyses that ostensibly surrender a unipolar conception of power may gravitate back towards it *in the actual prosecution of analyses*; a theoretical commitment might be avowedly Foucauldian, but an analysis often cannot resist the gravitational pull of more traditional conceptions of power relations. Further, I note that merely to invert 'the hegemon' and 'the people' does nothing to displace the questionable theoretical architecture upon which such inversions are predicated: while a hegemon may defeat or be defeated, it remains the primary

reference point for which all media consumer/producer actions are considered. Hall's articulation of the relationship he sees between 'the people' and 'the power-bloc' is particularly revealing. He argues that it is 'the people versus the power-bloc' rather than 'class-against-class' which is 'the central line of contradiction around which the terrain of culture is polarized' (Hall 1981, p. 238) (ibid). Also relevant is E. Graham McKinley's observation that for cultural studies researchers the issue of active audience agency has been 'inseparably linked with resistance to dominant social mores' (1997, p. 32).

The first complicating factor in such central lines and polarisations concern the issue of media power. Conceptions of media power in Marxist, quasi-Marxist or post-Marxist terms rely on neat divisions between media producers and media consumers and were formulated at times when the media ecosystem was very different to its present form. There is ample evidence to suggest that contemporary blurrings of the consumer/producer binary are changing the way media-related power flows are actualised – and must therefore have an impact on the way media-related power flows are conceptualised. The second complication is epistemological in that overreliance on a unipolar relational or referential framing risks limitation; prefabricated conceptual matrices will tend to produce conclusions in strict conformity with the assumptions in which such investigations are conducted. A relevant analogy might here serve the purposes of illustration. In a study of a hypothetical indigenous culture emerging from colonization, focussing on the presence of and various forces applied by the colonising power may be the natural starting point for inquiry and may indeed constitute an apt remedy for any previous assumptions that the presence of such a power was unproblematic. But examining the lives of members of this hypothetical indigenous culture *only* in relation to the colonisers runs the risk that other relations may be missed or mis-framed. Intra-cultural power flows may be overlooked in that there may be an over-fixation on the power flows between coloniser and the colonised. (In non-fictional media studies scholarship, a particularly fitting example of this *idée fixe* is evident in Fiske's argument that the meanings made by Australian Aborigines watching television 'can be made only within and against white domination' [1989, p. 25]). Contrary to dominant theoretical paradigms, however, discourse framing cheerleading shows that the consumption and/or production of discourse can involve oppressive force executed laterally by people against other people.

One of the striking features of fetishistic and/or vitriolic discourse framing cheerleading is that traditional power-blocs such as capitalism and the patriarchy have conflicting interests in the type of cheerleading-related discourse that would be of most benefit to them. Capitalism in the form of American entrepreneurs selling cheerleading programs, camps and uniforms to school girls and their families could be argued to have a vested interest in the representation of cheerleading as a wholesome activity that is suitable for children. Capitalism in the form of the soft pornography industry, however, benefits most from its intense sexualisation. By the same token, some sectors of patriarchal orthodoxy could be framed as standing to gain from discourse calling for the banning of cheerleading because it represents the control and quashing of women's sexuality. Other quarters, however, could be seen as benefitting from the unrestricted circulation of cheerleading representations because it fuels the scopophilic male gaze. This is not to say that these ostensibly contradictory motivations cannot work together; it could be argued that the oppression and exploitation of women's sexuality are co-constituting. The point here is that traditional power-blocs cannot be situated as either advocates or antagonists of cheerleaders. Fetishistic and/or vitriolic discourse framing cheerleading is certainly not always in their interests. Instead, anti-cheerleading discourse tends to be generated by disparate collections of individuals whose diverse range of vested interests may haphazardly *intersect with* rather than being unproblematically *representative of* monoliths such as the patriarchy, capitalism or the mass media. In many instances, the 'villainous' force here is not organised, centralised and top-down but chaotic, self-organising and bottom-up. As such, framing the lines of disputation along the axes of traditional ideological lines will be of little use in the analysis of such phenomena.

My argument is that the unipolar conceptualisation of a power-bloc as a theoretical sun around which all user-producer responses orbit is problematic beyond cheerleading-related discourse and perhaps even beyond the media in general. The fragmentations, intersections, contradictions, unpredictability and divided loyalties that are hallmarks of modern media audiences can be identified not just in media user-producers but in mass media organisations and capitalism itself. American media scholar Henry Jenkins argues that what he calls media convergence 'is both a top-down corporate driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process' (2006, p. 18). When he describes the responses of media conglomerates to 'the withering of traditional gatekeepers' (ibid, p. 21) associated with convergence, he uses

descriptors more traditionally associated with active audience members; terms invoking heterogeneity, contradiction, reinvention, radicality and resistance (ibid, pp. 19, 22). Contrary to the notion that power-blocs call the shots from above, he notes that 'entrenched institutions are taking their models from grassroots fan communities' (ibid, p. 22). Such arguments muddy the notion of exclusively top-down force, suggesting that monoliths such as Gramsci's hegemons, Hall's power-blocs and dominant ideologies contain domains where power flows are diffuse, intersecting and/or circulatory.

At this point the natural question, when considering cheerleading-related discourse, is: if the classic cultural and media studies 'villain' of a hegemon, power-bloc or dominant ideology is not the sole or primary culprit for the critical mass of anti-cheerleader texts, then who else is involved? Ironically, a large part of the answer can be found by looking to the classic media studies 'victim' of the mass media consumer (who, thanks to the self-publishing nature of the internet, is now more likely to be a mass media user-producer). Much fetishistic and/or vitriolic cheerleading text is generated at a grassroots level via blogs, reader's comment sections, chat-rooms and citizen web sites. It is unplanned, disorganised and accidental (itself an interesting phenomena in an era known for the organised activity of lobby and interest groups in various spheres³⁶⁶). There is certainly no evidence of any pressure group whose sole goal is the banning or condemning of cheerleading; no evidence of a grand, or even a minor, conspiracy against cheerleading. In many way, rather than being overarchingly teleological, the shape of anti-cheerleading discourse patterns resonates with the ideas of self-organised systems and spontaneous pattern formation found in chaos theory. As British theoretical physicist Jim Al-Khalili puts it: 'design does not need an active, intervening designer' (2010). This problematises celebratory framings of new media convergence³⁶⁷ in that it involves the – almost organic – convergence of antagonistic individuals into vitriolic mobs.

Much fetishistic and/or vitriolic discourse framing cheerleading can be viewed in terms of the psychological and strategic advantages individuals gain from sexualising and/or denigrating others. As such, it cannot be classed as an exemplar of transgressive or progressive politics. Neither can it be neatly positioned as either acquiescence or resistance to dominant ideology.

³⁶⁶ See: McRobbie & Thornton 1995; Deegan 2002; and Bob 2005.

³⁶⁷ Cf.: Jenkins 2006; and Crawford & Lumby 2011.

The work of Lanier assists in understanding the logics and ramifications of vitriol in on-line environments (2010). Contrary to the notion of the 'wisdom of crowds', he argues that the design and culture of on-line environments can result in 'groupthink' and aggressive 'moblike' behaviour (ibid, pp. 55, 17, 19): 'The culture of sadism on-line has its own vocabulary and has gone mainstream (ibid, p. 60). 'Trolling,'³⁶⁸ therefore, is not confined to a string of isolated incidents, but has become the status quo in the on-line world; exemplifying the way 'the hive turns against personhood' (ibid, p. 60). Lanier goes on to configure a 'standard sequence of troll invocation' in which warring individuals establish a pecking order and make peace, before goading each other into increasingly intense hatred of nonmembers: 'A pack emerges, and either you are with it or against it. If you join the pack then you join the collective ritual hatred' (ibid, p. 62). He also argues that the internet is saturated with an ideology of violation which radiates from the heights of the academy rather than the depths of trolldom: 'There are respectable academic conferences devoted to methods of violating sanctities of all kinds' (ibid p. 65).

In addition to celebratory rhetoric applauding the cybersphere's expansion of journalism, democracy and the public sphere³⁶⁹, internet-based user-producer activity is frequently framed in media studies as an 'information revolution' (Crawford & Lumby 2011, p. 4), and a victory for semiotic insurgents³⁷⁰ who are using new technology to resist the older overlord of the capitalist class. Australian Communications academic Tony Moore, for instance, characterises new media producers as savvy digital guerillas storming the fortresses of established gatekeepers such as 'press barons, oligopolies, mass markets and paternalist public broadcasting' (2010, pp. ix, vii). He describes the new breed of amateur commentator as 'a latter-day revival of the 19th century "man of letters" or Gramsci's "organic intellectual"' (2010, p. ix). 'Organic intellectuals' were key players in what has been dubbed 'progressive hegemony' (Clayton 2006, p. 9), in which – contrary to the more familiar Gramscian notion

³⁶⁸ Trolling entails 'luring others into pointless and time-consuming discussions' and often merges with 'flaming', in which the intention is to 'insult, provoke or rebuke' (Herring et al 2002, p. 372).

³⁶⁹ Cf.: Shirky 2010; and Deitz 2010, p. 24.

³⁷⁰ 'Semiotic insurgency' is a term used by UK sociologist Nick Stevenson to describe evasive and active audience-ship (2002, p. 95).

of regressive hegemony – exploitative ideas and structures are overturned ‘leaving in their place new and more equitable ways of thinking and acting’ (ibid).

There is a danger, however, of glorifying contemporary media consumers – of fetishising them as a new kind of noble savage inhabiting an attractively exotic realm. In reality, this domain of new democracy and of citizen journalists is a morally divided space. It can facilitate frontline reportage of and resistance to oppressive political regimes³⁷¹, but it is also home to: on-line vandals who compete to deface the memorial Facebook sites of murder victims with pornographic material (Moses 2010); and observations that a cheerleader who injures herself in a sporting accident will now be able to give men better oral sex because she no longer has teeth (Yellaa_Fella commenting on ‘Cheerleader Falls on her Face in Front of the School’ 2008). Thus, while this thesis accepts media studies framings of new media spheres and practices as having the potential for promoting democracy, progressive activism, and community building³⁷², it also agrees that it provides collectivist opportunities that lend themselves to aggressive mimesis, scapegoating and hate speech³⁷³. Potential remedies for the latter are likely to lie outside the domain of traditional media regulation. In their discussion of Australian media governance, Crawford and Lumby divide the convergent media ecology into three distinct layers: the infrastructure level of the networks, platforms and content (2011, p. 6). They argue that ‘laws designed to regulate traditional publishers are often ill-suited to on-line services because they are based on traditional media production and use practices, according to which a proprietor can be assumed to take responsibility for published content’ (ibid, p. 14). Their argument is that users are driving the public culture of the internet creating ‘normative language and behaviours, thus determining what will become the acceptable uses of an on-line space’ (ibid, p. 43).

The formulation of progressive hegemony argues that hegemony is not only a top-down opportunity for the power-bloc, but a force which can also be applied from the bottom-up by

³⁷¹ An example is the key role played by the social network service Twitter in the violent aftermath of the 2009 Iranian presidential election (Grossman 2009).

³⁷² Cf.: Hartley 1992; Hartley 1996; Hartley 1999; Lumby 1999; Gauntlett 2004; McKee 2005; Jones 2008; and Deitz 2010.

³⁷³ Cf.: Herring et al 2002, pp. 371-2; Tolton 2009, p. 11; Lanier 2010; and Levmore & Nussbaum 2010.

‘the people’ for ethical, progressive purposes³⁷⁴. On-line vitriol formations – such as those targetting cheerleaders – reveals that this type of bottom-up hegemony can also be harnessed for purposes which are *not* ethical or progressive (a regressive progressive hegemony). It is ironic that media reception theories which identify and celebrate agency frequently overlook the fact that this agency can also be used to commit profoundly unethical acts. Interestingly enough, this move strips new media user-producers of a significant dimension of their power: the power to cause harm – and automatically exculpates them in advance from any wrongdoing. Also cogent here is the fact that new technologies invariably give rise to the emergence of new horizons of ethical reflection and decision-making³⁷⁵. But while technological invention invariably outpaces our ability to reflect on the ethics of the use of new devices and processes, this does not excuse an absence of ethical reflection at all; rather, it heightens the necessity for such reflection. We can conclude, therefore, that the agency enjoyed by citizens in their new role as media user-producers is not always used upwards to resist the forces of hegemonic evil, but – as illustrated by the cheerleading-related discourse under analysis in this thesis – may also be employed sideways, downwards or upwards to denigrate or oppress others. Such grassroots oppression is not necessarily on par with that of a traditional hegemon, but the force it exerts is significant and warrants further investigation. Acknowledging the new – and expanding – dimensions of the agency exercised by new media user-producers also contains a call for increased accountability and ethics underpinned by the notion that with great micro-power comes great micro-responsibility.

³⁷⁴ Cf.: Clayton 2006, p. 9; and Friedman 2009, pp. 355-365.

³⁷⁵ Fleming, for instance, notes the way the development of techniques of nuclear fusion ‘bestowed on humanity dilemmas concerning its proper use – dilemmas attendant upon the power that such techniques conferred’ (2011, pers. comm. 15 April).

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