

Summer 2021

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Recommended Citation

Austin, Ainsley G., "Contemporary Feminism as Portrayed in Popular Media" (2021). *Summer Research*. 413.

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Contemporary Feminism as Portrayed in Popular Media

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Abstract

The wide variety of definitions for “feminism” makes it complicated to identify and evaluate feminist media. The goals of feminist action have changed over time, but the overarching ideals of equality have not. The advent of social media has made it much easier to disseminate feminist rhetoric, but the temporary nature of most social media apps doesn’t allow for nuance or in-depth explanations of the feminism that’s being shared. The most popular example of a simplified feminism is “girlboss feminism,” which makes feminism marketable for a mass audience.

Feminist rhetoric is also seen more and more frequently within a range of blockbuster films, including *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) and *Wonder Woman* (2017). A “strong female character” is often seen as the hallmark of a progressive and/or feminist film. However, many of these films do not dive deeply into feminist history or theory, and simply use a strong woman character as a red herring for progressivism when, in reality, the films may be advocating for anti-feminist actions.

This project serves as a case study of the various problematic ways contemporary feminism is used for anti-feminist purposes, including in film narratives, unethical business practices, and United States foreign policy. The research examines business models, social media posts and marketing, popular media, and political messaging.

Introduction: Feminism Against Feminism?

The topic of feminism has become increasingly popular within the Western world over the last century and can be defined in a wide variety of ways depending on who you ask. This makes identifying and evaluating feminist media complicated, as there are many lenses through which to approach the discourse. Theoretically, feminism can be used to achieve equality across all genders and better equity in society overall. But, activist rhetoric has been co-opted in recent years as a popular marketing technique for brands, social media users, and political campaigns alike to further their agendas, even if they don't align with those of feminism. Contemporary uses capitalize on the Western popularity of feminism for their personal anti-feminist narratives.

In recent years, there has been an increase of representation of women in popular films, including *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Captain Marvel* (2019), *Little Women* (2019) and *Promising Young Woman* (2020). In differing ways, each of these movies center on "strong" female characters and have been hailed as feminist for their attention to women's issues. With the exception of *Captain Marvel*, which was co-directed by a woman and a man, all of these films were directed by women. They vary widely in their characters, themes, and approach to women's stories, but have generally been seen as important "women's films." Frequently, a film with a strong female lead is seen as representative for all women, whereas strong male characters are not generalized in this way.

Many of the above films can be described as "postfeminist," which is a type of discourse that uses "broadly feminist sentiments" but doesn't adequately engage with feminist history, theory, or politics (Whelehan, 2010). Many articles have been written about postfeminist discourse in contemporary women's movies (colloquially called "chick flicks"), including

Trainwreck (2015), *The Intern* (2015), *Wonder Woman* (2017), and *Captain Marvel* (2019) (Cobb & Negra, 2017; Jones, 2018; Schubart, 2019; Curtis, 2020), as well as more serious media like *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) and *Homeland* (2011-2020) (Deylami, 2019). These films and TV shows frequently depict individual women succeeding in their personal and professional lives without overcoming or addressing larger societal oppression, such as misogyny, racism, ableism, or homophobia.

In much the same way as it is seen within Hollywood, postfeminist discourse is seen within business practices and marketing. Businesses that claim to champion women's rights are not only able to market their businesses as pro-woman, but consumers often assume that this progressive stance means a brand is ethical in other ways, such as sustainable products or livable wages. However, many "pro-woman" companies use unethical business practices, including sweatshop labor, unhealthy work-life balances, and unfair treatment of pregnant employees. Though these types of scandals would theoretically turn consumers off of "progressive" businesses, the powerful marketing tool of postfeminism makes any woman-owned business seem like a great success, regardless of ethics.

In many ways, postfeminist discourse is an easy way to make a character, film, or political candidate appealing to women without real risk of isolating male and/or more conservative audiences by openly siding with a more progressive feminism. It can be a simple way to get activist brownie points without fully confronting actual issues or the media's role within oppressive systems. This project attempts to explore the various uses of contemporary feminism within popular medias and how surface-level "feminist" rhetoric is often used as a red herring to justify or mask anti-feminist narratives and goals.

Feminist HERstory

The goals and rhetoric of self-identified feminists have changed over time. Early (Western) feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were originally interested in gaining voting rights (suffrage) for both women and Black men. Unfortunately, they quickly changed campaign strategies to win the Democratic vote, resulting in their use of racist rhetoric (Free, 2015). A big change throughout feminist history has been that early feminists were working off of previous activist movements, such as slavery abolition, and the modern-day movement has more innovation, especially in how it disperses information (Baumgardner, 2011). Each “wave” of feminism has had different goals and different methods of connecting with supporter, varying from in-person meetings to written pamphlets to social media posts (Baumgardner, 2011).

Social media has allowed people with historically marginalized voices to forge their own platforms with which to speak out about their identities and experiences. Social media provides people, especially women, with the means of digital production and marketing (Caldeira, De Ridder, & Van Bauwel, 2018). This allows social media influencers to not only create their own brand, but also to participate in the “everyday politics” and “everyday activism” that is now common on social media (Caldeira, De Ridder, & Van Bauwel, 2018, pp. 24-25). This everyday activism may include posts about social issues, reposted infographics, or simply existing as a marginalized person within the public eye.

#GIRLBOSS: Definition and History

Postfeminist discourse has become more popular media in recent years and is often manifested as “girlboss feminism” (frequently stylized as #girlboss or #GIRLBOSS, especially in online posts). Girlboss feminism is a type of discourse that takes feminist rhetoric and ideas and simplifies them so they’re marketable on a mass scale. Girlboss marketing often includes

products that say phrases like “girl power,” “girlboss,” and “boss babe.” As shown by these examples, a prominent feature of this marketing is gendered terms and a focus on success within modern-day womanhood.

The term was coined by Sophia Amoruso, founder and former CEO of women’s clothing brand Nasty Gal. The company began as a vintage clothing reseller on eBay.com, but grew into a multi-million dollar company with its own designs sold both online and in physical stores (Amoruso, 2015). Amoruso gives a detailed account of her transformation from anarchist anti-capitalist hippie to CEO and self-proclaimed “boss” in her book *#GIRLBOSS* (2015, originally published in 2014). The hashtag and capitalization are a consistent style choice throughout the book. Early in the text, she states “I entered adulthood believing that capitalism was a scam, but I’ve instead found that it’s a kind of alchemy. You combine hard work, creativity, and self-determination, and things start to happen,” (p. 16). Clearly, the American dream of starting a business from scratch worked for Amoruso. She is considered an icon within both the fashion and feminist communities, especially because she started Nasty Gal without a college degree. Amoruso’s belief in the power of capitalism fueled her desire to be financially successful, which unfortunately has led Nasty Gal to engaging in unethical business practices.

While the main thesis of Amoruso’s life is that women can do whatever they want, Nasty Gal’s practices suggest she only means this to be true for *some* women. Fast fashion is a business model that prioritizes making clothing and accessories quickly and cheaply to match trends (Merriam-Webster). Because of the emphasis on speed and low costs, fast fashion companies use sweatshop labor. Nasty Gal uses fast fashion practices (GoodOnYou.eco), and thus pays their garment workers less than livable wages in unsafe conditions.

Nasty Gal's website features "sustainability plans" (NastyGal.com, n.d.) which outline their goals in regards to eco-friendly clothing and their intentions to adopt "better practices within our internal network to reduce our environmental footprint." The site does have a section entitled "Out Suppliers on Better Terms" which states the company will work with suppliers to ensure factory workers are being protected. One of these promises is that Nasty Gal is are going to disclose our factory lists and our purchasing practices" in 2021. However, upon the writing of this paper in August 2021, it was difficult to find accurate and clear information about Nasty Gal's factory practices on their website or the Internet more broadly.

In addition to the unethical practices of using sweatshop labor and an apparent lack of eco-friendliness, Nasty Gal has faced controversies, including a case of firing a pregnant employee and bankruptcy (Schaefer, 2017; Cao, 2018), which calls into question the legitimacy of Amoruso's business talents, not to mention their ethics. It seems that a business that prides itself on supporting women would allow pregnant ones to continue their employment. Nasty Gal was sold to clothing retailer Boohoo after its bankruptcy in 2016 (Schaefer, 2017; Cao, 2018).

Amoruso's book addresses not only her personal and professional story, but also offers advice to budding girlbosses to aid them on their journeys to success. She states that "this book will not teach you how to get rich quick, break into the fashion industry, or start a business. It is neither a feminist manifesto nor a memoir," (p. 5), though the popular and critical reception of the text seems to interpret it as all of these things. A review from *The Washington Post* describes the book as "part memoir, part management guide, and part girl-power manifesto. A sort of *Lean In* [the leadership and business book by Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg] for misfits, it offers young women a candid guide to starting a business," (McGregor, 2014).

Amoruso's views on feminism are counterintuitive because of her clear advocacy for

women in positions of power, a belief reminiscent of Second Wave feminism (Baumgarder, 2011). Though she seems feminist in this sense, Amoruso is explicitly against describing her book or company as being based in any sort of feminist thought. In her book, she says:

This book is titled #*GIRLBOSS*. Does that mean it's a feminist manifesto? Oh God. I guess we have to talk about this. #*GIRLBOSS* is a feminist book, and Nasty Gal is a feminist company in the sense that I encourage you, as a girl, to be who you want and do what you want. But I'm not here calling us 'womyn' and blaming men for any of my struggles along the way. (p. 14, original capitalization and spellings)

This quote is telling of Amoruso's general attitude throughout her book (and, as it seems, her life), as well as accurately describing the overall tone of girlboss feminism. Amoruso wants girls to do "what [they] want," but also seems entirely uninterested in engaging in more advanced feminist theory, a common thread within postfeminist discourse. In stating that she doesn't "blame men for any of [her] struggles," Amoruso ignores the ways in which overarching gender discrimination affects women's success, just because she never experienced it within her family (Amoruso, 2015, p. 14).

When considering girlboss feminism, the first thing that jumps out to me is the term *girl*. Within the word "girlboss" itself, there is an implied understanding that not only can women not be considered "bosses" in their own right, but that they must be reduced to girls. "Girl" calls to mind children, immaturity, and naivety. Of course, to say that the main issue with girlbosses is the "girl" part implies that the simple solution would be to just call women "bosses." However, I would like to push back against the idea that the end-all-be-all of modern-day, successful womanhood is financial success. As seen with Nasty Gal, this focus on wealth can easily lead to unethical business practices that exploit other women in the name of feminism.

The Feminism of Pyramid Schemes

As shown by Nasty Gal's business practices, companies have begun to take advantage of today's girlboss culture. One of the biggest ways they are capitalizing on this mentality is through multi-level marketing business models. Multi-level marketing companies (MLMs) are also referred to as network marketing (Koehn, 2001). This model is based on selling products/services via multiple levels of independent agents. These sellers are recruited by other agents who receive commissions or bonuses for bringing new people to the company (Koehn, 2001, p. 153). These companies are often accused of being "pyramid schemes" (endless-chain distributors), which are solely recruitment-based. In this fraudulent and illegal business model the "product" being sold is the license to recruit others into the scheme instead of an actual item (Koehn, 2001, p. 153).

MLMs can be legal if they sell actual products, but can also be illegal and/or unethical (Koehn, 2001; Taylor, 2012). Even if an MLM is not technically a pyramid scheme, it is difficult for them to be ethical because the business model alters human relationships and encourages an unhealthy work-life balance (Koehn, 2001). Additionally, MLMs typically advertise themselves as easy ways to make large sums of money, but a Consumer Awareness Institute study found that the average loss rate for MLM distributors was over 99%, meaning almost 100% of MLM sellers lose money due to their participation in the company (Taylor, 2012, p. 127).

These numbers clearly don't make MLMs seem like a good investment, but much of their success has to do with their marketing and consumer base. Most successful MLMs sell products primarily marketed towards women, such as beauty products. Some of the biggest and most well-known network marketing companies are: Amway (home and personal care), Avon (cosmetics), doTERRA (essential oils), LuLaRoe (women's apparel), Mary Kay (cosmetics),

MONAT (hair and skin care), Nu Skin (skincare), Pampered Chef (kitchenware), and Tupperware (food storage containers). While of course men use personal care products and kitchenware, beauty and food preparation are historically considered to be within the feminine sphere. As such, many of the buyers and sellers of the aforementioned companies are women. This can be seen in the social media posts of these organizations — many of the photos include women with the products.

In the past, MLMs operated through in-person selling and recruitment, but this activity has moved to social media in recent years. The participation of women in these companies is increased by their prominence on social media apps like Instagram, which is used more by women than men (Caldeira, De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2018). Participation is further increased by the online presence of girlboss culture, which encourages women to take charge of their careers and to work as much as possible. This “hustle” mentality was spread even more by Netflix’s 2017 *Girlboss*, which was based on Sophia Amoruso’s book and life story. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic created an uptick in both remote working and the need for secondary income, resulting in widespread MLM advertising on social media (Hobkirk, 2020).

Online Examples

As shown above, both MLMs and the girlboss mentality are very present online, particularly on social media sites like Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook. Instagram seems to be especially well suited for running a network marketing business because of its variety of features. The platform includes “stories” (temporary photos or videos posted on a user’s account that disappear after 24 hours), “DMs” (direct messages between users), “IGTV” (short for “Instagram TV,” which can be used to post longer videos), livestreaming capabilities, and the newer addition of “reels” (short videos that are very similar to those on popular social media app

TikTok). The various posting options offer multiple ways to connect with possible buyers and recruits.

The prominence of women in MLMs can be shown through a study of the common hashtags they use on social media. MONAT is a popular MLM that sells hair, skin, and wellness products and many of its distributors are active on Instagram. Hashtags frequently used in conjunction with #MONAT are often gendered, reference motherhood, and/or comment on the financial freedom MLMs can supposedly offer. These include: #bossbabe, #bossgirl, , #womenentrepreneurs, #womenempowerment, #girlboss, #businesswoman, #mompreneur [a portmanteau of “mom” and “entrepreneur”], #momlife, #sahm [an abbreviation for “stay-at-home mom], #momboss, #financialfreedom, #sidehustle, and #payday. The frequency of finance-related hashtags is notable because though Taylor (2012) showed that network marketing doesn’t offer stable finances, the marketing of this business model has been effective in portraying itself as a good financial decision.

A Google image search of “girlboss wallpaper” shows a good example of the types of images frequently used in online girlboss culture. These images are intended to be used as social media posts and phone or computer backgrounds (“wallpapers”). The graphics are typically a simple background (usually pink or light neutrals) with short phrases that either exemplify the girlboss mindset or are supposed to be inspiring. Much like with the hashtags seen above, a common thread within these wallpapers is a focus on womanhood/girl-ness and financial freedom.



Figure 1: A photo with a white and gray marble pattern background and a pink swatch in the middle. In the center are gold words stating “BE A GOAL DIGGER” in all caps.

The image above is an example of both the visual and written themes of the online girlboss aesthetic. The marbled background is both neutral and implies wealth and success. Marble is a frequently used material within high class homes or spaces and as such, the use of this pattern serves as a reminder of the monetary success girlbosses should desire. Pink is also a common thread within these images, reinforcing the femininity the girlboss mentality encourages. The gold of the wording suggests wealth, especially when paired with the marble background.

The words themselves are an important aspect of the overall effect this image creates. “Goal digger” is a play on the colloquial phrase “gold digger,” which is used negatively in reference to women, implying they are only interested in material wealth. Merriam-Webster defines a gold digger as “a person whose romantic pursuit of, relationship with, or marriage to a wealthy person is primarily or solely motivated by a desire for money,” (Merriam-Webster.com). In reclaiming this term in an inspirational way, this graphic takes control over the idea that women are only interested in wealth and success. Instead, it suggests women should be interested in their own success (their “goals”). The words “goal digger” are significantly larger than the rest

of the wording, which draws attention to the wordplay and encourages viewers to consider why the creator may have made this switch.



Figure 2: A drawn graphic of a laptop on a brownish-pink background. The laptop screen has a design of triangles and a quote from Sophia Amoruso: “Life is short. Don’t be lazy.” shown in all caps.

Not only does Fig. 2 feature a quote from the original girlboss herself, but overall it exemplifies both the girlboss and the hustle mentality. The blunt wording — don’t be lazy” is not a surprise. Both girlboss feminism and postfeminism highly value individual responsibility for success. This phrasing implies that “laziness” is the sole factor in whether or not a person (in this case, a woman), will achieve great things during their “short” life. The visual aesthetic is somewhat similar to that in Fig. 1, though the laptop more directly suggests business success than the material-focused one that marble and gold imply.



Figure 3: A graphic with a light gray background and bronze and black wording that says “luck has nothing to do with it. #GIRLBOSS STATUS” in a calligraphy font.

The image above again features a neutral background and font color. The beginning of the phrase is in a bronze color, suggesting wealth like the gold lettering of Fig. 1. It features a phrase that places individual responsibility at the forefront of success. It doesn't just imply that individuals are in charge of their futures, it explicitly states “luck” isn't involved at all in the creation of the writer's so-called “girlboss status.” Like much of postfeminist discourse, this graphic doesn't acknowledge the outside factors that may hinder a woman's success, including sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, or generational poverty.

Additionally, the use of a hashtag in the graphic itself shows it is meant to be posted online as a declaration of the poster's mentality. It is also likely supposed to be motivational for the user's followers. This is a common thread within the online girlboss community — the desire to share successes in order to flaunt wealth and the lifestyle of a girlboss and to motivate other women. This can be seen especially within communities of women who participate in MLMs because the lifestyle itself is a selling point to many potential recruits (Duffy & Hund, 2015;

Hobkirk, 2020; Vaynshteyn, 2020). This graphic is an excellent example of the way that girlboss feminism and postfeminist discourse simplifies feminist rhetoric to be easily marketable. An in-depth quote about intersectional feminism would not be easily made cute for an Instagram post. But, a short phrase like those seen in Figs. 1, 2, and 3 are easily shareable and reproducible, especially on Instagram which has the option for users to share other people's posts to their story, allowing for attractive images like the ones shown above to be seen by thousands of people in minutes.

In a similar vein, the glamour of a girlboss lifestyle is easily shared on social media, which works as free advertisement for MLM sellers, though it isn't passive work by any means. The women who work for MLMs are constantly creating content to post about their businesses and products in attempts to recruit new people into the scheme. Social media provides people, specifically women, with easy access to the means of digital production and marketing (Caldeira, De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2018).

Online girlboss culture exists on all social media platforms, including Instagram and YouTube, which is a popular location for women to give advice for other women to be inspired by. Kimberly Ann Jimenez posts videos for entrepreneurs and advertises her YouTube channel as way to "build your brand & make a bigger impact." Her content ranges from "How To Create Graphics With Canva (For Beginners)" to "How I Started My Social Media Marketing Business + 3 Tips To Get More Clients." As shown by these two examples, Jimenez's content isn't only for women, but she does create content specifically geared towards women in business. Additionally, her channel has a light and feminine visual aesthetic consistent with visuals in Figs. 1-3 above. She uses a variety of script fonts in her video thumbnails, as well as light pink, white,

and black. This shows that her branding is more geared towards girlboss culture even if the content itself is gender-neutral.

One of her more popular videos, posted April 30, 2020, has 102,000 views (as of August, 2021) and is titled “8 Girl Boss Habits Every Female Entrepreneur Needs To Grow FASTER [smiling emoji with heart-shaped eyes].” The tips covered in this video are fairly general and apply to anyone in business, but Jimenez frames them to be specific to women. The tips include wellness (making your health a priority), reading habits (Jimenez infers that because Elon Musk, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffett all read at least ten pages a day, reading is an element of success), and lifestyle (running your life like a “boss” will reflect on your business, i.e. implementing a daily routine will lead to more productivity). To her credit, Jimenez encourages her viewers to take time away from work, which is uncommon in most “hustle mindset” influencers. She makes the content specific to women by specifying that when women are “overly stressed,” “overworked,” and “burnt out,” they can’t be their “best selves,” personally or professionally. Additionally, Jimenez states that the world need women’s “female qualities” of being nurturing, smart, and strategic (Jimenez, 2020). Like with much postfeminist discourse, she’s being encouraging to women, while still subscribing to a narrow idea of womanhood/femininity that doesn’t appear to think critically about why women are expected to behave in specific ways.

Though it is extremely important to take time away from work for personal development, it isn’t a coincidence that Jimenez’s reasoning for doing so focuses on how women can be better for other people. Her viewers are implied to be women and her focus is on “show up as your best self in your work, for your family, maybe for a spouse or your kids if you have them,” (Jimenez, 2020). The video states that it’s crucial to “unplug and re-energize,” but the end goal, as shown by the quote above, is to ultimately serve others. Being a girlboss entrepreneur appears to be a

personal journey and about finding your own power, but many women entrepreneurs focus on their ability to serve others. For example, an advertised benefit of MLMs for stay-at-home moms is the ability to (theoretically) have more time for their families/themselves while still making money. However, men are not typically expected to have to balance their work and family lives so delicately.

The Media Wants You to Think You're Empowered

Much like how social media encourages women to become girlbosses, all kinds of popular media comment on women's appearances and lifestyle choices. Much of postfeminist discourse focuses on the way that women can be empowered in regard to their bodies and physical appearances. Laura Mulvey's 1975 article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" examines the male gaze, how women are represented in film, and how audiences experience pleasure from viewing people onscreen. Mulvey states that film has historically depended on a voyeuristic relationship between a male audience and sexualized women portrayed onscreen. In this line of thinking, the "male gaze" is the audience's traditional view, which sexualizes and objectifies women as it places viewers into the mind of the men behind the camera (Mulvey, 1975).

Following this theory, it's important to understand that aesthetic and lifestyle choices do not exist within a cultural or historical vacuum. Though women who conform to conventional Western beauty standards can do so for their own enjoyment and benefit, these visual conventions didn't appear out of thin air. The Second Wave feminists of the 1970s proclaimed that beauty standards (including makeup and bras) were inherently oppressive towards women. Modern day postfeminism has swung in the complete opposite direction, with many people finding the act of applying makeup to be a vital part of their artistic and gendered expression.

Additionally, there has been a similar rise of cosmetic plastic surgery being considered empowering because it's a personal bodily choice. Style and aesthetic expression can be fun, artistic, empowering, and gender-affirming, especially to transgender or gender-nonconforming individuals.

However, with all of that being said, beauty standards and choices are not standalone. Society exists within a complex visual system that is further complicated by social media. Though a woman may feel better, more confident, and happier with a breast augmentation, the idea that breasts should have specific shapes, sizes, and appearances does have an origin. More often than not, this origin is the patriarchy, which has crafted strict guidelines dictating how women can exhibit maximum sex appeal. This goes so far as to include specific body types, which go in and out of style like clothing. This can be seen in *Wonder Woman* comics (Schubart, 2019) as well as with celebrity appearances. The focus of this project is not to debate the merits of makeup, feminine clothing, or plastic surgery for individuals, but I believe the current debates surrounding these issues are valuable to mention.

These arguments can be seen in articles like Caldeira, et al. (2018) which discusses the variety of ways gender is represented on social media sites like Instagram. In studying Marisa Papen, a semi-nude Instagram model who was banned from the platform, they found that though Papen states she participates in the photography and modeling industry for her own empowerment, many of the visual standards she holds herself to (such as physical appearance, posing, and styling) fit into the narrow, heteronormative beauty standards of the male gaze (Caldeira, De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2018, pp. 38-39). Additionally, Caldeira, et al. found the popular social media idea that "empowerment is found through your physical appearance" closely aligns with postfeminist ideals. Sophia Amoruso echoes this thought process in

#GIRLBOSS, stating that when she wears makeup, it isn't with the intent to "pander to antiquated patriarchal ideals of feminine beauty," and that she does so because "it feels good," (p. 15).

While, like Marisa Papen, this philosophy is likely genuinely empowering within her own life, Amoruso's idea of "feeling good" is quite similar to society's expectations surrounding women and makeup. Altering your physical appearance can absolutely be empowering, but it's important to critically examine the origins of these ideas. The white male gaze impacts all of Western society and media and cannot be overlooked (Mulvey, 1975; Williams, 1991; Looft, 2017; Schubart, 2019).

Beauty Standards and Gender Roles in *Wonder Woman*

The nuance surrounding women's physical appearance and empowerment that's examined above is exemplified in DC Comics' 2017 *Wonder Woman* film, starring Gal Gadot. The big-budget superhero film was directed by Patty Jenkins and was widely regarded as a feminist breakthrough for the genre. Not only was it the first DC film directed by a woman, but only the second to have a woman as the lead — the first being *Catwoman* in 2004 (Curtis, 2020). Similarly, Marvel's *Captain Marvel* (2019) was the first woman-led film since the beginning of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the second woman-directed Marvel film (Curtis, 2020). Since 2000 and 2005 respectively, only seven out of seventy-one Marvel and DC films have had a woman as the lead or the director. The historical casting and directing of these films resulted in them largely being regarded as feminist. Their close release dates also suggested a change within the superhero/comic genre and Hollywood more broadly.

Though many fans were excited about the possibility of more representation in action blockbusters, both films were surrounded by a "culture war" within the fandoms in which conservative audiences were upset by "progressive" storylines (Curtis, 2020, p. 929).

During this time, “diversity then became a term of abuse,” within the comic book world (Curtis, 2020, p. 929). For example, many fans felt that Gadot was too “skinny” to play Wonder Woman and that her breasts were “too small,” despite the comic book character displaying multiple body types since her creation in 1942 (Schubart, 2019).

Wonder Woman follows Diana (Gal Gadot), princess of the Amazons, as she journeys from her home island of Themyscira to London (“The World of Men”) to help pilot Steve Trevor (Chris Pine) to stop World War I. The Amazons are female warriors designed by ancient Greek god Zeus to protect mankind from Ares, the god of war. Steve is a British spy who’s saved by Diana when his plane crashes off Themyscira’s coast. Upon hearing about WWI, Diana believes it is Ares’s doing and that it is her duty to kill him. She retrieves her Lasso of Truth, shield, a sword (“The God Killer”) and her now-iconic Wonder Woman outfit. Steve and Diana travel to the front lines to stop Dr. Isabel Maru (“Dr. Poison”) and General Ludendorff from using a new deadly gas. Ares is revealed to not be Ludendorff, as Diana originally thought, but British official Sir Patrick Morgan, who tells Diana she is the daughter of Zeus. This knowledge, combined with the pain of Steve’s heroic death, give Diana the strength to defeat Ares and she realizes that love will defeat evil. It is notable that two men, Zeus and Steve, ultimately give Diana the power to accomplish her end goal.

As stated above, the film was widely considered to be a feminist work, especially due to the physical and moral exceptionalism Diana exhibits. I would like to push back against the idea that this film’s representation of women is feminist. Firstly, Jones (2018) found that Diana is out-spoken by Steve Trevor throughout the film. Not only does Steve speak more lines than Diana, but he is spoken to more often. This gives his character a narrative centrality expected of the protagonist, not her love interest. Jones found that both male superheroes (Thor in *Thor*,

2011) and other female action heroes (Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games*, 2012) were allowed to speak most in their own films. This data suggests that Diana's is an outlier within the action genre. It isn't a coincidence that she lacks narrative centrality.

Additionally, there is a limited number of named and speaking women characters.

Diana's mother and aunt are nonexistent once she leaves Themyscira and the only women in The World of Men are Steve's secretary Etta Candy, and evil Dr. Maru. Etta and Dr. Maru function as Diana's foils, both in physical appearances and their roles in the narrative. Diana is a conventionally attractive, thin, fit, and light-skinned cisgender woman. Etta is short, chubby, and serves as a comic relief. In one of her early (and only) scenes, Etta has a conversation with Diana about their differing body types that shows how *Wonder Woman* scratches the surface of feminist discourse but doesn't deeply engage.

Diana: [seeing a corset for the first time] Is this what passes for armor in your country?

Etta: Uh...well, armor. [rolling her eyes] It's fashion. Keeps our tummies in.

Diana: Why must you keep them in?

Etta: Only a woman with no tummy would ask that question.

This quick moment shows not only Diana's recurring naivety when she is in The World of Men, but also the physical differences between her (immortal and highly trained) body and that of Etta, a human woman. Diana's confusion at why women should make themselves look skinnier reads less as a feminist declaration that all bodies are beautiful, and more as an example of how out of place Diana is among humans. The Amazons are made up entirely of women and while it does make sense that an all-woman culture would develop different beauty standards than that of the patriarchal human one, there was not a lot of bodily diversity shown in the scenes on

Themyscira. Plus, the exchange between Etta and Diana is so short (14 seconds long) that it doesn't provide a lot of weight to the idea of bodily diversity and acceptance.

Next, I think it's important to examine how Diana's physical appearance is approached in the film itself. Wonder Woman's iconic costume is not only sexualized, but appears that it is less functional by being so. The outfit consists of red, blue, and gold form-fitting armor (which is designed to look essentially like a corset and short skirt), metal armbands, a gold headpiece, and wedge-heeled thigh high boots. This outfit is consistent with female characters in action movies. They typically wear things that would not be functional (a tight corset) or safe (high heels) to wear while doing stunts, yet they are still dressed this way because of the sex appeal.

Viewers are constantly reminded of Diana's beauty and femininity throughout the film because of the way supporting characters react to her appearance. Steve's friend Sameer ("Sammy") says she is a "work of art" and immediately tries to hug her upon their meeting, showing how much people sexualize her. When the whole friend group first meets in a pub, Diana wins a physical fight with some of the male patrons there, prompting Sammy to announce he is "both frightened and aroused." This is clearly a sexualizing sentiment and inappropriate to say about a woman you just met. Sammy repeatedly states how attractive he thinks Diana is throughout the film. Etta also describes Diana as the "most beautiful woman you've ever seen." Diana's physical strength and ability is clearly shown throughout the film, but other characters' reactions to her beauty are present for much of the storyline. This foregrounds the merits of her physical appearance and distracts from the ways in which she is physically, mentally, and morally exceptional. Diana is a demigod, giving her clear physical superiority over humans, but this is less emphasized than her looks.

There is an additional problematic layer to these interactions when we consider race. Gal Gadot is Israeli and has a noticeably lighter skin tone than Sammy, who is Moroccan. Many racist stereotypes paint men of color as sexual predators and Sammy's character doesn't do anything to dispute these ideas. It seems that a truly feminist/activist film would attempt to dispel racist stereotypes but *Wonder Woman* does a surface-level job of this work. It should be stated, however, that there is also a Native American supporting character named The Chief, played by Eugene Brave Rock. This character was received positively by the Indigenous community and the inclusion of the Blackfoot language was especially important representation. The Chief and Diana speak Blackfoot upon first meeting. This conversation is exciting because it reveals to Blackfoot speakers that The Chief is actually Napi, a Blackfoot demigod. Brave Rock, who is part of the Blood Tribe of the Blackfoot Confederacy, has stated in interviews that he was able to be involved in the creation of his character and that the inclusion of both his language and an important cultural figure was especially meaningful to him. (Jones, 2017; Davy, 2018; Zipchen, 2018).

Torture and Politics in *Zero Dark Thirty*

Wonder Woman isn't the only film that uses a main woman character to appear feminist while not actually being progressive. *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) was directed by Kathryn Bigelow and stars Jessica Chastain. Much like *Wonder Woman*, *Zero Dark Thirty* was directed by and stars a woman, which prompts viewers to consider this narrative as a "woman's story," and even a feminist film. The plot follows CIA agent Maya, who is working to catch Osama bin Laden within the United States's War on Terror after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. She deals with her male superiors doubting her work and instinct in locating bin Laden as well as with the sudden death of her coworker and practically only friend Jessica. Throughout the film Maya displays the

stereotypically masculine traits of aloofness and independence. She has no time for the interpersonal relationships typically expected of women, such as a spouse, children, or even friends.

Right off the bat, the film starts out by showing a torture scene in which an alleged 9/11 conspirator is tortured for information by CIA agents Maya (Jessica Chastain) and Dan (Jason Clarke). Initially, Dan is the only interrogator without a face mask on, meaning that viewers are unaware of Maya's gender in the very beginning. She is immediately set apart from the other people on her team during the first conversation between her and Dan, in which she advocates for continuing with the interrogation immediately. This sets a precedent for Maya's work attitude and intensity throughout the rest of the film. She is consistently more intense and invested in her projects than other people are/expect her to be. The first conversation goes as follows:

Dan: They're [interrogations] not always this intense.

Maya: I'm fine.

Dan: Just so you know, it's gonna take a while. He has to learn how helpless he is. Come on, let's get a coffee.

Maya: No, we should go back in.

Dan: [After a long pause] There's no shame if you want to watch from the monitor.

[Maya shakes her head and Dan smiles] Alright.

Dan, who has been doing enhanced interrogations for much longer than Maya, wants to take a break, but Maya persists on continuing with the torture. This conversation also shows the dynamic that Maya has with most of the men in the film. She is intensely invested in her work (catching Osama bin Laden), and they often doubt her because of her youth and gender. Even

Dan, who she is friendly with throughout the narrative, gently suggests that this work may be a bit too much for her, but she pushes back against this idea.

Zero Dark Thirty is as a postfeminist depiction of women in the government. Maya is an example of “the heroized figure of the obsessed CIA agent,” (Deylami, 2019, p. 757). The United States military is generally seen as a masculine force and women who work up within its ranks are forced to engage in masculinism in order to protect the state (Deylami, 2019). Women in these positions are what Deylami (2019) refers to as “security feminists,” meaning that they are empowered by the state to further masculine violence. This is seen in the film as Maya doesn’t show stereotypically feminine traits like being emotional, having deep personal connections, empathy, or maternalism (Deylami, 2019). Additionally, Maya is empowered to stand up for herself and make her own choices, which is a feminist goal, but these choices end up being choosing to engage in enhanced interrogation (torture). Further, Deylami (2019) found that the idea of state protection is masculine at its core because it stems from the idea of men protecting vulnerable populations (women and children).

Maya’s womanhood not only makes her storyline seem more modern and relatable, but also makes her choices seem justified. Gender stereotypes assume that women are gentle in nature and lack violent tendencies (Deylami, 2019). Because Maya is an all-American woman, the brutal physical violence she perpetuates appears crucial. Though some of the other (minor) characters, like Osama bin Laden, are real, Maya is a composite character — meaning that she represents a variety of real-life people that worked within the War on Terror’s efforts to catch bin Laden. This reinforces the idea that Maya is an everyday American who is just looking out for the best interests of her fellow citizens. But, it shouldn’t matter if Maya is a woman or represents an everyday American citizen, she still engages in unethical interrogation techniques. The torture

is just masked by her underdog storyline that focuses on her overcoming of workplace sexism perpetuated by her white male superiors. The audience is told to root for Maya because of her personal struggles and to ignore the fact that she is a white woman engaging in physical and mental violence against men of color. The privileging of white women over men of color is not only highlighted in this film, but also seen in real-life politics.

Girlboss War: Real Life Political Implications

American political campaigns and administrations have used postfeminist rhetoric as justification for their actions and especially their foreign policy in the Middle East. This is primarily seen in the War on Terror, but also in discussions of female politicians. Women in political office are often considered champions of women's rights even if a deeper look into their policies reveals otherwise.

As previously stated, women and women's rights played a big role in the U.S. War on Terror. Pratt (2013) found that "the post-9/11 period appears to constitute a paradox for feminists," (p. 327) because on one hand, the U.S. government used "women's rights" as a justification for action within the Middle East, and on the other hand, many feminists are against war and military action. The 2010 United States National Security Strategy has "supporting the rights of women and girls" as one of their objectives (Pratt, 2013, p. 327). This seems like a big win for the feminist agenda and women worldwide, but when considered within the greater context, it seems to be less about helping women than it does about justifying military action and violence against men of color.

Though "supporting" women's rights worldwide seems to be a great and noble cause for the United States to back, the War on Terror destabilized countries like Afghanistan, making them more unsafe for the women living there (Pratt, 2010). Pratt (2010) points out that this is an

example of the United States acting as white saviors, stating that many of the military actions of the time were “white men saving brown women from brown men,” (p. 328). Pratt also notes that “women’s rights” have been justification for colonizing actions throughout history. For example, British governor Lord Cromer stated he was against Islam’s alleged gender inequalities, but opposed women’s suffrage otherwise. His opposition of Islam was less about concern for Muslim women, and more about his desire to elevate Christianity and whiteness in Egypt, where he was stationed (Pratt, 2013). Similar attitudes have been seen in the War on Terror.

Within the War on Terror, enhanced interrogation techniques were approved and employed by the United States. Though this violence doesn’t appear to be about gender on the surface, it is fundamentally gendered in addition to being racialized. This is seen in *Zero Dark Thirty* with the images of Dan and Maya, a white man and woman, torturing men of color. This portrayal is accurate as real enhanced interrogation often relies on humiliation, which is also shown in the film. This humiliation is gendered in that it is often based on heterosexual norms and misogyny (Deylami, 2019). American soldiers in the real-life Abu Ghraib prison verballs, physically, and mentally tortured Iraqi men. Prisoners were humiliated and violated with sexual assault, which is commonly used by men to control and degrade women. Maya and the real female soldiers reclaim this power, in a sense, but not positively. They use their newfound gender empowerment to hurt and humiliate others. I am not aware of any time that feminists advocate for inflicting gendered violence upon men as part of an upheaval of gender oppression.

In addition to enhanced interrogation, women politicians in the last few decades have experienced both gendered hate and empowerment. Two of the most notable women politicians of the last few decades are Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin. They were especially prominent in the 2008 U.S. presidential election in which Clinton ran for president Democratic ticket, and

Palin was selected as John McCain's Republican running mate. Edwards and McDonald (2010) define two types of representation: descriptive, which is based on group similarities (a woman candidate would be the choice of all women) and substantive, which is based on shared interests (a Republican will more likely vote for a Republican, regardless of characteristics like gender identity). Edward and McDonald's four types of representation for women (The Pioneer, The Puppet, The Hostess-Beauty Queen, and The Unruly Woman) can be applied to Palin, who was represented as all of these identities within contemporary political cartoons. She was most often portrayed as the Beauty Queen and the Unruly Woman and used these tropes to her advantage. Palin was able to appeal to conservative gender norms by being stereotypically physically feminine and to the intensity of the 2008 presidential campaign by being willing to challenge the status quo through "unruliness."

Hillary Clinton was portrayed differently in political cartoons and messaging in 2008. Much of the media's criticism surrounded her perceived "coldness," (Edwards & McDonald, 2010), which is often associated with masculinity. Interestingly, where this type of aloof anti-emotion is seen as a positive for men and for characters working for the military state (Maya in *Zero Dark Thirty*), this was and is a highly criticized trait in women. Because it's shown as a positive for Maya (her coldness leads to finding bin Laden), it's surprising that this personality trait is not also seen as a positive for Clinton, who also works for the state. I think the fundamental difference between Hillary Clinton and Maya is that Maya's narrative is clearly presented as being morally superior. Because of our national history, Americans are expected to agree with Maya's goal of enacting revenge on the people responsible for 9/11, no matter her methods. But because Clinton is a real person with a variety of beliefs and policies to agree or

disagree with, there is nothing that all Americans can rally behind. So, her personality and gender is attacked instead of her politics.

Conclusion

Feminist rhetoric is used not only in activist spaces but also online on social media, in various business models, in film, and American politics. Though there are many positive aspects to feminism becoming more widespread, there is always an inherent risk of oversimplification that often leads to the appropriation of feminist discourse by large organizations that may actually be working in the best interests of women, but furthering their personal agendas. Much more can be done in the field of media and rhetorical studies to examine the role that activist language and theory is starting to play in popular media. I think that feminist rhetoric will continue to become more popular and all that critics and activists can do is to stay critical of how and when it is used.

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