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## The Pretty Pink Box

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## The Pretty Pink Box

“The diversity of voices, issues, approaches, and processes required to make feminism work as an inclusive social movement is precisely the kind of knotty, unruly insurrection that just can't be smoothed into a neat brand.”

(Andi Zeisler, *We were feminists once from riot grrrl to govergirl®: The buying and selling of a political movement*, 2016)

*This essay focuses on the consumerization, capitalization, and popularization of feminism within mainstream culture: how it is branded, how it is portrayed, and who it represents. As a young consumer and feminist, I acknowledge that this needs to be addressed for the sole reason that feminism is not a trend or fad that can afford to die out for its goals and strife are far from over- when we water down a political and social movement based on equality into nothing more than a trendy label, we put our needs at risk. It is important to critique and question what is happening around us even if it appears to be “fighting” the good fight.*

My final year of high school was when my so-called “feminist awakening” manifested. Of course, I had always been a feminist; I had just never been exposed to the term that would represent the thoughts that followed my life as a young woman in America. Why was I expected to be polite, complicit, pretty, thin, and agreeable to integrate myself successfully into society as appropriately feminine? Why did I have to be constantly aware of what other’s thought of me, especially men? Why, regardless of what I chose to do “when I grew up,” did I have to reserve time to idealize romantic love, be someone’s wife, be a mother? Why was I responsible for whatever happened to me; that, if I were to be raped or sexually assaulted, it would be because of what I wearing or how much I was drinking?

Why was I responsible for my reputation when word got out around my school that my boyfriend and I had sex? Why was I a whore while he remained unscathed and praised? I molded myself into this small person, someone who stayed quiet, small, wore clothing that wouldn't draw attention, didn't ask questions.

Finally, at the age of seventeen, I decided to take the Women's Issues class that my school offered for upperclassmen. One of our first assignments was to ask five individuals what their definition of feminism was. Of course, I had asked my mother and some of my fellow female-identified classmates, whose definitions may have been tamed but nonetheless, provided me with the "womanly" assurance I felt I needed to reach the assignment's full potential. I remember that, on the morning the assignment was due I still needed two definitions, so I asked two boys in my prior class. "Feminism is for bitter, ugly women. It is a pointless movement. Women are already equal," was the response I received from one while the other nodded along. This sparked a bickering match between the two of us (which I am very good at). This would be one of the many times throughout my young adult life that I was confronted with the harsh reality of

the outlandish presumptions many Americans have created in regard to what feminism entails: that it is solely a movement for women who hate men, and that all women have achieved equity. This was one of the many times I would have to justify my "radical" but not so radical beliefs predominantly to heterosexual, cis-gender men to assure them that feminism isn't a threat but a movement that is necessary to make the world a better place for all identities.

Today, four years later, I am a senior in college. Since then we have had a presidential election that has caused severe division, uproar, and resistance, particularly among women. Since January 2017, cities across the United States have started an annual tradition of the Women's March to combat the non-inclusive and misogynistic agenda our current Presidential Administration perpetuates. We have more women in Congress than we have ever had in America, and Hollywood sparked up the "#TimesUp" and "#MeToo" movements to combat sexual assault and provide women with the space and strength to come forward with their stories and experiences. In fact, over the last several years, feminism has progressively become more and more involved and embedded into popular culture, advertising, and marketing.

Feminism is more accessible and visible than it has ever been in recent times. It can be bought on a T-shirt or tote bag at stores such as Forever21. Feminism is immersed into plots of TV shows on networks such as “Freeform” or “The CW” and is a selling point for every blockbuster film with a strong female lead. Girls I attended high school with, who rolled their eyes at the utterance of feminism, are suddenly posting pictures at local Women’s marches, sharing articles on Facebook such as “Beyoncé is a Feminist! And you can be too!”, throwing away their bras, or sporting feminist necklaces, beanies, backpacks, anything you can think of! Of course, it's all pink. What’s so bad about the color pink, after all?

While I would love to celebrate the growing support and exposure of the feminist movement, I sit back and question its motives, especially after becoming a Women and Gender Studies major in college. I have learned that feminism is more than freeing the nipple, girl power, fucking whom you want, and reform-based approaches to equality. Labeling yourself as a feminist requires you actually to BE a feminist, and for it to thrive, it has to be intersectional. It has to extend past the surface level, “attractive” or “edgy” talk pieces. Feminism must extend past the

western lens, it must be for trans women, women of color, disabled women, poor women, fat women, and women who experience oppression in severe forms. But *Buzzfeed* articles on feminist celebrities provides no feminist representation when writers focus on the white, privileged, or “shiny pink fluff” feminist identities. One’s feminism can not only be contingent upon the issues they have witnessed from their point of view. It cannot be that simple, because we cannot possibly progress with a mindset that narrow.

Author and activist Andi Zeisler (2016) noticed the recent rise and glamorization of contemporary feminism with the growth of digital media. Zeisler highlights the dangers of marketplace feminism typically sold to us using a pink shell or by celebrities who pride themselves on girl power, dating all the way back to the formation of the Spice Girls. This particular feminism attracts young women and consumers while giving them a false representation of all that feminism entails. It is wrapped up in a **pretty pink box**, all while coinciding with patriarchy and not truly combatting the real sexist issues at hand. Pink Pussy hat feminism, and the image that marketplace feminism strives to enforce on what a feminist should look like, reinforces the

gender binary that we are attempting to dismantle. Zeisler (2016) says: “The question I wanted to put out, if not definitively answer, was this: If everything is feminist—music, movies, strip clubs, energy drinks, underpants—than what does feminism itself become, and what is it for?” (p. 24)

In this paper, I explore what it truly means to be a feminist in 2019. I am interested in whether the effects of contemporary feminism using digital media, popular culture, and celebrity endorsements has propelled or set back a movement that women and activists have so desperately tried to conceptualize and gain approval on since Second Wave feminism’s initial rise in the 1960s.

### **Women’s Liberation**

Merriam Webster’s dictionary defines feminism as “a theory advocating political, economic, and social equality of the sexes” or the “organized activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests” (Feminism, 2019). These ideologies were championed by women in the United States beginning in 1960, when women propelled a movement that sparked immense social as well as cultural change that would become known as the Women’s Liberation Movement. *The Feminine Mystique* by

Betty Friedan (1963) is widely viewed as the spark of the second wave of feminism, challenging the notion that women are solely fulfilled in roles such as housewives and mothers. This expectation of women sprouts directly from the separation of the public and private sphere that normalizes men holding positions of power (ex. Businessman, politician, etc.) while also being the primary breadwinner in the family, keeping women’s rightful place within the home. Friedan (1963) entertained the notion that women deserved better than an average life with little to no passion. She encouraged women to find meaningful work in the workforce, which would enable husbands and children to become more self-sufficient people, capable of tending to their own needs (Tong & Botts, 2017). Although Friedan’s writing was revolutionary for its time, radical feminists criticized it heavily, focusing solely on a white, middle class, heteronormative woman’s perspective who found traditional expectations of womanhood and motherhood disappointing.

Friedan also underestimates the challenges women do face when or after entering the workforce on top of being a mother and housewife. This perpetuated the unachievable stereotype (that lingers

even today, in 2019) that mothers and wives can “handle it all” while ignoring the structural changes needed to encourage men to contribute to labor within the private sphere (Tong & Botts, 2017, p. 26). Instead of taking measures to deconstruct the toxic ideologies and systems that uphold these ideas of a woman’s role in society, Friedan encourages women to be more “like men”( Tong & Botts, 2017, p. 27) to assimilate into a culture that is laborious and patriarchal. With the development of radical feminism in the 1970s, as well as the development of womanism by bell hooks (2016) (Womanism is to feminism as lavender is to purple), which gave women of color a name to define their oppression not only based on sex but race as well, liberal feminism’s agenda became less appealing. When your movement is exclusive to those who live and look a certain way and strives to work within institutions whose power builds upon the disenfranchisement of minority groups, the movement will only go so far.

Criticisms of liberal feminism are necessary because, in this case, its conception of equality is too “abstract and formal” (Tong & Botts, 2017, p. 46) It is evident that liberal feminism is the foundation on which the movement is founded. Therefore its ideologies are

often recanted and reignited within our current social movements. While modern day feminism has shifted some of its focus for the better to issues such as rape and sexual assault (“Take Back the Night” and “Slutwalk” are yearly marches meant to empower women’s safety and autonomy), as well as reproductive health care and equal opportunity, we still grapple with the issue of being inclusive to all women facing other forms of discrimination and injustice.

### **Celebrity Feminism: Who Are They?**

It may seem refreshing for women and girls to see feminism everywhere, especially those who have claimed feminist ideologies before it hit the mainstream and its messages promoted by their favorite celebrities. But some argue that its pervasiveness is damaging to feminism’s overall goals and underlying message. Zeisler (2016), author of *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to CoverGirl®, the Buying and Selling of a Political Movement*, argues that the growth of celebrities using their platforms to promote surface-level feminism has tarnished its authenticity and continues to oversimplify the political goals and need for deep rooted social change that feminism stands for. Since the 2016 presidential election, it

seems that most (predominantly female-identified) celebrities have taken to their Instagram accounts to speak out against our current administration. This includes (but is not limited to) Emma Watson, who embraced feminism and encouraged women as well as men of the United Nations to take part in its cause for equality globally. Or Jennifer Lawrence who argued for equal pay between herself and her male costars, sparking conversations about equity in Hollywood. Even celebrities such as Kim Kardashian have claimed feminist identities when combatting slut shaming and sexual expression.

The largest and most celebrated claim of feminism was that of Beyoncé Knowles, who famously claimed her feminist identity (after years of beating around the bush) during her 2014 performance at the MTV Video Music Awards (VMA). There she stood before a screen that read “Feminist” while performing her song “Flawless,” which samples excerpts from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s (2012) “We Should All be Feminists”. Adichie’s excerpts explain and justify the need for gender equality. This image at the VMA acquainted young girls around the world with the concept of feminism “completely free from more than a century of baggage” (Ziesler, 2017,

p.114), and it received mass media attention ranging from positive to severely negative reactions. Among these negative critiques was that of feminist scholar and writer bell hooks (2016) who claimed Beyoncé to be a “terrorist... especially in the terms of her impact on young girls.” (The New School, 2014). bell hooks (2016) critiques Beyoncé’s expression of feminism in how she exploits her already sexualized body (as a black woman). Beyoncé submits herself to conventional beauty standards and the female form to market her “product” (feminism). This suggests that feminism/black woman’s experience can only be a topic of conversation if it presents itself using attractiveness, sexualizing black women’s bodies more than they already have been in popular media.

hooks’ (2016) critique on Beyoncé’s use of her body and sexuality may be warranted in warning against the risk of sexualizing the black female body more than it historically has been. I argue, then what would represent a healthy expression of a black woman’s sexuality? Is it possible to create a middle ground where black women and women of all identities can express their sexuality in a healthy way? It is necessary that we stay away from regressive ideals that second wave feminism promoted in terms of

not giving anyone (men/society) a reason to disrespect you. These regressive ideals perpetuate toxic ideologies that dressing the way we want or hinting at being sexual warrants disrespect or a reason not to be taken seriously. However, where is the ground for women to express their sexual agency absent of sexist critique? Tamara Winfrey Harris (2013), in retort to hooks' (2016) critique, discusses how our interpretations of Beyoncé's feminism and the policing of feminist credibility is a contradiction of the movement itself and perpetuates the culture that tears women apart when they are given platforms to express themselves, especially black women whose femininity and bodies are heavily policed. Jackson (2016), a race and media scholar at Boston's Northeastern University adds:

The idea that Beyoncé being sexy is only her performing for male viewers assumes that embracing sexuality isn't also for women... the criticism also ignores the limited choices available to women in the entertainment industry and the limited ways Beyoncé is allowed to express her sexuality, because of her gender and her race (p.18).

All in all, Beyoncé's expression of feminism is that of a modern one and challenges perceptions on black

women's bodies that should be questioned:

Her engagements remind us that once we proclaim that "the booty don't lie" -- despite the incredible lies told on the black booty -- we can dance in the space of our own truths, reclaim our bodies, assert our beauty, and redefine our sexual selves on our own terms (Hobson, 2018, p 119).

Perhaps then, this embracement and appreciation towards one's sexuality as a woman, particularly a woman of color, allows a threshold for truly embracing the parts of oneself that society has demonized and muffled, because it is about the power of that choice to express oneself that is radical while straying away from the traditional concept that women can't be sexy and also stand for something.

### **Championing a True Feminist Identity**

When observing and commenting on celebrities' expression of feminism, we form a sense of generalizability in recognizing their sphere of influence. It is safe to say that Western feminism's growth in popularity among pop culture influencers, such as musicians and actresses, has made the topic of gender equality accessible to people everywhere, but predominantly young girls. Roxane

Gay (2014) said in her reflection on celebrity feminists,

So long as we continue to stare into the glittery light of the latest celebrity feminist, we avoid looking at the very real inequalities that women throughout the world continue to face... We avoid having conversations about the hard work changing this culture will require (para. 12).

Therefore, we do a disservice to the “average” women living in America when we feature faces of wealthy and attractive women who are shielded by their fame from real-life experiences that are unavoidable for those who do not live within that Hollywood bubble.

While I agree that the progression towards having conversations about feminism and planting its seeds of influence within the minds of young people has had positive effects, I do not believe that celebrities are always the best people to facilitate these conversations. These women are often compromised within their own spaces of privilege, especially in regard to money and resources, while receiving high praise and awarded labels as feminist icons for doing the bare minimum. Feminism is a political movement with political aims that demands recognition in the so-called “real” world where trans-women, women of color, and poor

women are continuously put at a disadvantage. Who is uplifting those voices?

These women (celebrity feminists), similar to the methodology of second wave feminists, work within the tight confines of an ineffective system; therefore, they endorse and invest in a de facto police state (Udorie, 2018). This perpetuates the ideal that it is in fact *possible* to achieve the radical, inevitable change third wave feminism demands while working within oppressive systems. Historically, we know that this does not work. This transformation cannot happen overnight, nor would it be a simple swap. Reform-based approaches to equality rarely signify any deep-rooted social change, but offer a Band-Aid to cover a gunshot wound, so to speak. What is actually required is the transformation of the relationships we have with each other in order to “create new forms of safety and justice in our communities. The work of abolition insists that it is necessary that you *change everything*” (Udorie, 2018, p. 4).

This new form of mainstream feminism has lost the radical vision of “changing everything” and struggles. Feminism is not an explicit platform, but rather an ideology for anyone who has recognized the power imbalances that exist within society. This is a

contributing factor as to why feminism has been co-opted by corporations who use surface-level sentiments of “girl-power” and female empowerment for advertising and brand-making, as well as the mainstream media anointing “clueless celebrities such as Lena Dunham, Taylor Swift, and Amy Schumer as vanguards of righteous, pro-lady politics” (Udorie, 2018, p.5). Modern feminism, as an ideology, has widened its venture so much that it is assumed that gender alone makes one eligible for the label. This version of feminism calls for change while attaching itself to the complicities of coinciding with hierarchies such as racism, transphobia, capitalism, colonialism imperialism, and ableism. Therefore, being a feminist today is immediately associated with binary, shallow, non-radical phrases such as “strong women” (a developed version “of girl power”).

If feminism was contingent upon gender, we would not see the long-standing hesitance towards proclaiming the label, and this label would hold true regardless if she is exploiting workers in other countries in the name of capitalism (predominantly women and children), ignoring the rights of trans-people, or working to keep her neighborhood free from immigrants (Udorie, 2018). This

feminism ignores problems of disenfranchised women while radiating those who hold privilege: the white, cis-gender, heterosexual, able bodied, middle/upper class woman. This also closes us off to potential feminist alliances, not only with each other as women of varying identities, but distracts us from incorporating men and non-binary individuals as well into feminist movements.

So, how can one properly claim a feminist identity in 2019 without feeding into this toxic cycle of hypocrisy? “The personal is political” is a phrase that has been coined within feminism and women and gender studies for decades. The important distinction that can be made to ensure that we are being the best activists and feminists we can be today is to add that just because something doesn’t affect you personally does not mean you shouldn’t take it personally. It should infuriate everyone that the rate of change is so slow in regards to the gender wage gap in the United States. If this change continues at the past fifty years’ pace, “it will take 40 years -- or until 2059 -- for women to finally reach pay parity” (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2019, para. 3). For women of color, the rate of change is even slower: Hispanic women will have to wait until 2224 and Black women

will wait until 2119 for equal pay (Institute for Women's Policy Research, n.d., para. 4). It should infuriate everyone that trans-women's safety and well-being is of the greatest threat, with research showing that transgender women of color in particular are at the highest risk, that "the intersections of racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia conspire to deprive them of employment, housing, health care, and other necessities, barriers that make them vulnerable" (Human Rights Campaign, 2019, para. 1). These problems should be universal to the cause and goals feminism strives to achieve. We must do better to be allies to those who hold disadvantages different to our own, and uplift those voices rather than drown them out with our own. There is power in claiming a feminist identity, and it should mean so much more than throwing on a t-shirt capitalizing off that identity, especially

when its creation promoted the disenfranchisement of another human. Pink pussy hats are no longer relevant because you do not need to have a vagina, let alone a pink one, to be a woman or a feminist.

Rebecca Walker (1995) wrote:

...it is more important now more than ever to fight to be all of who we are. Rather than allowing ourselves and others to be put into boxes meant to categorize and dismiss, we can use the complexity of our lives to challenge the belief that any person or group is more righteous, more correct, more deserving of life than any other (p. 11).

Feminism's legacy demands that we know and understand ourselves as people. We must recognize the power imbalances and disparities that occur across identity lines and have not one face, but several faces on the front lines, which requires us to activate for change across all identities, not just our own.

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