

Postfeminist Distortions: Complicated Discourses of  
Feminist Identity, Choice and Sexuality

by

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A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Approved April 2017 by the  
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2017

## ABSTRACT

In what has been coined the postfeminist era, successes of the second wave feminist movement have been distorted by sociopolitical and economic structures to proclaim that sexism and inequality no longer exist within liberal American society, and thus feminism as a movement is no longer necessary. While theoretical and quantitative work has examined women's relationship with feminist identity, limited research exists on women's subjective, qualitative accounts of feminist identity. Furthermore, there is a dearth of research on women's subjective identification across the spectrum of feminist identity, particularly from non-college and non-white populations. Using thematic analysis this study critically analyzed 20 qualitative interviews from a community sample of women in a large Southwest city (Age range: 18-52; Mean age: 35.35, SD: 12.0). Narratives revealed four themes surrounding women's identification with feminism and conceptions of sexuality: 1) Feminist self-labeling associated with a collective identity 2) Empowerment as a personal endeavor 3) Female empowerment and relationships with men and 4) Investments in femininity and sexual empowerment. This data supports the notion that feminist ideals of equality and agency have been distorted by postfeminist and neoliberal ideology to prevent women from identifying as feminists. Additionally, data postulate that this distortion has permeated ideologies of feminist women, thereby discouraging collective action for change.

*Keywords:* Feminist identity, Postfeminism, Sexuality, Choice, Neoliberalism, Empowerment, Feminism, Third wave feminism

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## **Introduction**

In what many academics and activists alike have denoted the postfeminist era, the belief that feminism has met all its goals and has become an irrelevant movement in the struggle for social justice proliferates throughout American society. In line with this logic, now that women have the right to vote, open a bank account, bring forth lawsuits for sexual harassment, etc. the work of feminism and feminists is over (Swim 1995). Thus, when attempting to point out the structures of oppression that still dominate women's lives, feminists are accused of hating men and victimizing women (Anderson 2015). While this animosity towards feminists is nothing novel, there is a growing trend of feminist ideals touted as commonsense, and the feminist identity still denied (Bay-Cheng & Zucker 2010; Williams & Wittig 1997). Moreover, postfeminist and neoliberal ideologies have appropriated feminist language to assert that the second wave has accomplished its endeavor to empower and liberate women (Aronson 2003; McRobbie 2004; Scharff 2006). Efforts to prevent women from identifying as feminists, in combination with the mainstream disarticulation of feminist ideology allude to a neoliberal investment in deterring women from collective action that would disrupt the status quo.

While later discussion will reveal the multitude of tensions, both theoretical and real, that exist for women within the postfeminist era an example of this discourse will prove helpful in framing this work. In an interview with Stephen Colbert, Megyn Kelly, the well-known female anchor of MSNBC (formerly Fox News) addresses her unease with being labeled a "feminist icon", stating she feels that it is alienating and prefers

collaborative efforts. Kelly described her “own brand of feminism, if that’s what it is,” is for women to perform at a higher level for themselves, stating:

I love the Steve Martin motto, which is: ‘Be so good they can’t ignore you. I was never lined up outside of my boss’s office saying give me an opportunity, there’s not a woman in primetime. ... I was just trying to be so good they couldn’t ignore me. The best answer and the best way forward to young women out there who want to get ahead is work your tail off. Work harder than everybody. Be better than everybody else. Do better. Try harder (Rosen 2016).

In this quote, Kelly outlines the values of neoliberal and postfeminist ideology: 1) the prioritization of self-interest and self-service 2) entitlement to autonomous choice and striving and 3) personal responsibility for all consequences (Anderson 2015). It is important to note the contradictions within this rhetoric. Initially, she states her discomfort with the feminist label because of its perceived exclusiveness and then refutes her call to action in the next statement, stating that hard work and personal responsibility are the pathways to success. Mirroring this language, Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook and author of the book *Lean In* (2012), argues that women must pursue individual efforts to economic success in order to combat women’s oppression. Sandberg asserts that increasing women’s representation in higher levels of business and thereby shattering the glass ceiling for other women, will open the door for all women. While articulating beliefs in personal responsibility and success, Kelly and Sandberg represent a growing ideology that assumes responsibility for their lives as empowered, liberated women, personally equipped to overcome obstacles in their path. However, this “trickle-down

feminism”, much like trickle-down economics, largely ignores intersections of race, class and sexuality, and assumes that people are born with equal access to resources and opportunities.

While it is of personal concern that the number of women, particularly young women, identifying as feminists is declining, it is not my scholarly aim to advocate that all women should identify as feminists. Rather, the aim of this study is to understand 1) how women do or do not identify with feminism and 2) how they view feminism intersecting with their own sexual lives. To understand how modern women, interact with feminism we must begin by understanding how women make meaning of feminism in terms of their own sexuality and lives. This type of knowledge production must be understood at the source, and therefore qualitative, semi-structured interviews provide the best source of women’s nuanced understandings of feminist identity and sexuality (Clarke & Braun 2013). In doing so, this study has illuminated the permeation of postfeminist and neoliberal ideology in women’s conception of feminist identity and sexuality, while also revealing that prescriptions of femininity have only become elaborately more complicated and rooted in the neoliberal and postfeminist era. Thus, it is of great importance to understand how the modern feminist identity operates and benefits women. Concurrently, the shifting sociopolitical and economic climates of the past 30 years are explored to begin to reestablish the link between the personal and political.

### **Review of the Literature**

#### *Postfeminism, neoliberalism, and the third wave*

The legacy of second wave feminism today exists in nearly every facet of women’s lives, particularly of middle to upper class white women. Once relegated to the

roles of wife and mother, women have poured into the workforce in mass, and are now seen (mostly) economic and sexual agents, independent of the men in their lives (England 2010; Ringrose 2007). However, despite these advances, there has been no consistent theoretical underpinning of the feminist movement since the feminist sex wars of the late 1980s, which created a polarization within the second wave feminist movement (with camps defined as sex-negative or sex-positive). While academics agree that we have entered a new wave or era of feminism, the categorization and ideology of this movement hotly debated (Anderson 2015; Vance 1984). Postfeminism has been used as a catch all phrase to describe the current state of feminist politics, however this term is used as both a descriptor and a critique (Brathwaite 2002; Hall & Rodriguez 2003; Snyder-Hall 2010). Without a consensus on the ideological underpinnings of the feminist movement there has been a decline collective action against women's oppression and thus, the gains made for women through the latter half of the twentieth century have become stalled and precarious. Regardless of sex-positive/sex-negative debates, the feminist sex wars solidified a panic around critiquing women's individual choices.

Angela McRobbie (2009) finds the striking irony of the proliferation of feminism as "common sense" and hostility toward feminists as a symptom of the neoliberal values that have proliferated American and British society. In this "double entanglement," now that women have the right to vote, get an education, work outside the home, the work of feminism is now finished. The rise in globalism and the proliferation of access to media via the internet, has facilitated the intense internalization of neoliberal ideology. While power in neoliberal society is centrally tied to capital, narratives of individualization and personal responsibility serve as propaganda for encouraging citizens with the possibility

of upward social mobility to maintain the status quo, despite a lack of capital.. In *Growth Against Democracy* (2012), HLT Quan argues that this perceived neutrality has become engrained in American identity, and little critical thought is given to capitalist ideologies of “development” and “progress”, therefore neoliberalism is not only a political or economic ideology, but also a social structure that demands the citizenry be “sufficiently anesthetized to dehumanize the human consequences of economic development” (2012, p. 4). This anesthetization is facilitated through a social hierarchy that rewards obedience to cultural norms with increasing access to power and functions as a smoke and mirrors ploy of the state. An example of this hierarchy is revealed through a simplistic analysis of the mainstream Republican political rhetoric of the 1980s and 1990s. Along with the advancing the model of trickle-down economics as a set of neutral economic policies that promoted deregulation, privatization, and provided large tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy (Aghion & Bolton 1997), Republican politicians wove poetic stories of patriotic, hard-working people who “came from nothing” and “picked themselves up by their bootstraps” to take responsibility for their own social standing and achieve success (Messner 2007). In theory, Western ideologies of personal responsibility and individualism operate with the basic assumption that people have access to the same basic opportunities and therefore have shared life experiences. Thus, narratives of personal responsibility are used to divert liability away from the state, and on to the individual. Pre-occupation with personal success and an intense internalization of personal responsibility for one’s life ensures citizens are less likely to make connections between their struggles, and thus less likely to act collectively.



Therefore, women and people of color today are relentlessly negotiating the reality that their lives are not what they had been promised, as full and equal American citizens, as neoliberal ideology largely ignores histories of oppression. This cognitive dissonance present in the lives of marginalized peoples indicates the potential for radical socio-political change. However, critical analysis of current structural oppressions illuminate the reality that access to capital is determinate of access power, as “the powers that be”- i.e. neoliberal powers are heavily invested in maintaining the status quo and thus their privilege (Overton & Murray 2013). Therefore, it is of great concern that neoliberal ideas have become a central component to postfeminist language suggesting a fusion of the neoliberal values of “individualism” and “personal responsibility” with feminist language of “choice” and “agency” to create a new female subject (Scharff & Gill 2007). This woman, both sexually and economically empowered, must perform cost-benefit analyses between their private and public lives; constantly negotiating the demands of them as economic actors, as well as emotional caretakers (Budgeon 2011; Rottenberg 2016) Thus, while feminists of the second wave decried that “the personal is political”, postfeminism has sacrificed the political, for the personal, drawing the feminist identity inwards towards the self (Baer 2014). On the one hand, the feminist sex wars of the 1980s retain some responsibility for this schism, as women grew increasingly hostile towards feminist critique of women’s sexual lives, heterosexual desire, pornography etc. (On 1992). And on the other, the mainstream adoption of (some) feminist ideals as common sense have helped sell a social climate that renders women liberated (though only superficially) and, thus feminism unnecessary (Gamble 2006; Hall & Rodriguez 2003).

While millions of women have broken the proverbial glass ceiling in the job market, academia, and professional careers, research shows there has been 1) been little movement of men into traditionally feminine jobs, such as maid, teacher, or social worker, and 2) a lack of movement by women into blue collar professions, such as carpenter, plumber, or construction worker (England 2010). This suggests that even when women break into the workforce, they are still being relegated to traditionally feminine roles. Moreover, research shows that more and more Ivy League educated women are voluntarily leaving careers to stay at home, and support children and/or husbands (Ferguson 2010; Hirschmann 2006; Kirkpatrick 2010; Rottenberg 2014). Defined by Hirschmann (2006) as “choice feminism”, this ideology that because feminism has liberated women collectively, individual women can now use their experience and knowledge of the self to make decisions in their own best interests and resist oppression. This emphasis on the individual distorts the radical feminist rallying cry, and sacrifices the political for the personal (Baer 2014). While women have been wildly successful in desegregating the public sphere, their personal lives remain bound to deeply entrenched, gendered expectation of their behavior. The dissonance between personal and social selves distorts their participation in collective action, as it assumes that only an individual woman can know what is best for herself (Ferguson 2010; Heywood & Drake 1997). While it is hopeful to assume that women have been liberated by the second wave, the reality of women’s lives do not suggest that choices are removed from the cultural context within which women exist (Budgeon 2014; Gill 2012; McRobbie 2009).

Regardless of whether they *choose* to stay home or pursue careers, women today still do the vast majority of parenting and emotional caretaking within their relationships,

only now they are expected to have successful careers outside of their families (Budgeon 2015; Fetterolf & Rudman 2014; Fahs & Swank 2016). This focus on the self, and individual choices is evidence of the growing fusion of feminist buzzwords such as “choice”, “agency”, and “empowerment”, with Western liberal ideologies of ‘individualism’ and ‘personal responsibility’, that assert concern for the self over collective identity. While many feminist theorists perceive the mainstreaming of feminism as evidence of the movement’s success (Baumgartner & Richards 2000; Haywood & Drake 2006), many feminists suggest this is neoliberal appropriation of feminist language that attempts to undermine collective action for true women’s liberation. This sacrifice of the political for the personal can perhaps best be seen in women’s conceptions of their sexuality.

#### *Tensions with defining a feminist identity*

But all of this begs the question: why should we care about whether women are identifying as feminists? Much research reveals a relationship between feminist attitudes, and women’s self-efficacy and psychological well-being, helping women cope with sexism and the deeply gendered violence, normalized violence (Zucker 2004; Yakushko 2007). Moreover, it has also been linked to *collective self-efficacy* (Eisle & Stake 2008), and *generativity* (Rittenhour & Colander 2012), providing women a societal lens from which to view sexism and discrimination. Feminist identity has also been associated with higher self-esteem and self-efficacy, a variation of self-esteem that asserts one’s belief that they have meaningful impact on the outcome of their own life (Eisele & Stake 2008; Saunders & Kashubeck 2006). This is crucial considering research that shows women

who invest in more traditional ideas of gender reported higher levels of sexual compliance, or the willingness to have sex despite not wanting to (Katz & Tirone 2009).

Body image has been one the most researched sites in terms of the intervention presented by feminist identity. It has been shown that self-identified women are less concerned with subscribing to gender norms of the body and thus less prone to eating disorders and poor body image (Sabik & Tylka 2006). This physical empowerment is critical when discussing sexuality, as preoccupation with societal norms of thinness and beauty and investments in traditional notions of women as feminine and passive, have been linked to greater unwanted sexual encounters and decreased sexual satisfaction (Ackard et al. 2000; Impett, Schooler, Tolman 2006). Reviewing 26 studies conducted between 1995 and 2008, Murnen & Smolak (2009) concluded that “it is likely that feminism helps women critically evaluate and perhaps avoid harmful critical messages” (p. 193). However, several studies showed that feminists were not impenetrable to cultural messages of thinness and femininity (Bordo 2004; Chancer 1998; Rubin et al. 2004). Thus, the link between feminist attitudes and benefits provided by such beliefs has yet to be established, impeding the prognosis of feminist identity.

While research shows that feminist identity provides some benefit to women in navigating patriarchal society, there is often a conflation of feminist *identity* and feminist *attitudes* that cloud the extent and directionality of this relationship (Liss et al. 2012). Often represented by some form of the phrase “I’m not a feminist, but...”, these women endorse feminist attitudes, but qualify such actions in an effort to distance themselves from feminist identity (Aronson 2003; Duncan 2010; Williams & Wittig 1997; Zucker 2004). On the same token, there has been little theoretical or thematic analysis of women

who self-identify as feminists (McCabe 2005). The Feminist Beliefs and Behavior (FBB) measure was developed as a quantitative attempt to understand this contradiction, by women in three clusters of identification: *nonfeminist*, *nonlabelers*, and *feminists*. While *nonfeminist* and *feminist* are relatively self-explanatory, *nonlabelers* are defined as those who endorse feminist beliefs and yet do not identify as feminist (Zucker & Bay-Cheng 2010). Research has been unclear in this articulating the potential of *nonlabelers* to become card carrying feminists. While some *nonlabelers* may be ambivalent towards feminism (Aronson 2003), or in fact express a positive affect toward the ideals while rejecting the label (Levy 2005), many nonlabelers are openly hostile towards feminism (Rich 2005; McRobbie 2004). These women downplay the role of feminism in gaining women's equality and instead contribute the rising equality of women to an inherently progressive society in which individuals are born free and empowered to make individual choices. However, in their 2012 study, Fitz and colleagues found that the category of *nonlabelers* could be expanded to include its own categories: *quasi-feminists* and *neoliberals*. They assert that *quasi-feminists* represent those with the potential to identify as feminist due to their understanding of sexism, whereas *neoliberals* were more likely to align with meritocratic beliefs. Though this may seem like never ending reduction of identity, it is important to understand the complicated and nuanced ways that women identify with, and reject the feminist identity, and speaks to larger sociopolitical forces at work that seek to thwart feminist identification.

#### *Postfeminisms: Choice, empowerment, and sexuality*

A key theme in the cultural norm of modern womanhood is the idea that women have become full agentic sexual actors in society (Anderson 2015). However, both

empirical and theoretical research indicate otherwise. These cultural scripts are ever present and increasingly hypersexual in Western culture (Bordo 2004; Durham 2009; Gill & Scharff 2013; Tolman & McClelland 2011). Second Wave feminists touted female empowerment via *agency*, or one's ability to act in their own interests to undermine patriarchy and allow women to assert their desires. However, the ability of women to act in their own best interests while existing within a culture of violence, has rarely been researched, and when it has occurred it has been met with panic and outrage, as described in earlier. Regardless of sex-negative/sex-positive debates, quantitative and qualitative research across a spectrum of disciplines shows that there is reasonable doubt as to whether women can fully comprehend and effectively navigate cultural scripts that deny their personhood (Evans 2013; Fahs 2011; Operman et al. 2014; Plante 2015). Thus, it is of use to understand the ways in which cultural scripts have distorted feminist ideology to serve the gendered status quo. Furthermore, while it is a relevant critique that sex-negative feminism allows little room for the reality of women's lived experiences and identities, choice feminism and neoliberalism have sequestered sex-positive feminism and feminist ideals of agency, to say that women's sexual desires, behaviors, and identities are off limits to critique (Hirschman 2006). This is evident in the increased tensions within feminist academia regarding women's bodies (Bay-Cheng 2015; Duits & van Zoonen 2006; Gill 2012; Lerum & Dworkin 2015), as well as women's stereotypes of feminists as distinctly anti-sex, and thus why they do not identify as feminists (Baker 2010; Rich 2005). While choice feminism superficially solves the theoretical tensions of the second wave (Snyder-Hall 2010), it replaces the perceived condescension of the feminist movement with a placation that is neither helpful nor a concrete ideology for a

social movement (Gill 2007). Thus, this emphasis on choice and empowerment allow gendered power to operate throughout society, with little structural critique.

Moreover, women's invitation into the sexual sphere is also highly privileged and racialized, and serves as a method of distorting narratives of choice and feminist agency. In fact, this distortion is a social mechanism by which to lend the illusion of access to power to the modern "good woman" -- White, heterosexual, feminine, agentic, and capitalist oriented, creating the modern feminist subject (Budgeon 2015; McRobbie 2009; Rottenberg 2014). This façade serves a similar function of the addition of lower class white people into the citizenry in early colonial times. By giving poor white people the right to vote and own land, rich plantation owners insured that poor white folks had just enough to lose because of their participation in slave rebellions, but not enough to disturb the sociopolitical and economic order that favored the wealthy (Zinn 1984). Similarly, while women's entitlement to their own sexuality has inarguably improved over the last century, feminist narratives of "choice" and "agency" have been appropriated to maintain the status quo of women's subordination to men within neoliberal society. Modern ideals of womanhood demand women's participation in the economic sphere, while ideals of masculinity have not adjusted to demand men's participation in the home or in child-rearing (England 2010). Now, womanhood is judged by a woman's ability to juggle it all; to exist fully in both public and private spheres, with little expectation of their male partner. The modern prescriptions of femininity and womanhood are no longer the virginal, supportive housewife, relegated to home economics and childrearing. However, they do not liberate women from prescriptions of heteronormativity, which demands women desire men (Alcoff 1988). Thus, women have not been fully liberated, only

asserting a freedom to do the things they want, rather than a freedom from culture prescriptions of femininity (Fahs 2014). Furthermore, sexuality is demanded of contemporary woman and they are no longer judged based the virgin/whore dichotomy, but rather on perceived control of their own sexuality (Bay-Cheng 2015). This can be seen in popular shows regarding women's lives, such as *Sex and The City*, where successful women are portrayed as successful economic actors and hypersexual, but still in control of their sex own lives (Arthurs 2003). However, this hypersexualizing of femininity and increased policing of women's identities based on perceived agency plays into highly privileged intersections of identity (Sanchez 2006). Thus, by adhering to cultural norms of femininity privileged women, particularly white, middle class, educated women, such as Carrie, Samantha, Miranda and Charlotte, gain access to power via social and economic elevation. However, to gain access to this power, these women must participate in both their own oppression and the oppressions of others', who's intersections of identity deny them full inclusion in society (Haworth & Hoepfner 1999). This access to power not only demands adherence to social and cultural norms of femininity and sexuality which re-inscribe narratives of oppressions, but also serves to undermine women's collective action.

### **Research Questions**

Mainstream feminism today presents quite a phenomenon, which requires examination from two distinct, and yet intertwined lenses. The discrepancy in the ideologies between women who hold feminist beliefs and self-identified feminists remains understudied; thereby muddling the research that attributes protective benefits to women who identify as feminists. Answering calls for deeper research regarding how



women react, reject and identify with feminist identity, this study employs a purposeful sample of community women to begin to move beyond the narratives of White, heterosexual middle-class, college educated women (Zucker & Bay-Cheng 2010; Zucker 2004; Yakushko 2007; Haworth & Hoepfner 1999). Moreover, due to the nuanced in which women both resist and comply with oppression, this study uses the narratives of women provided through guided interviews to employ women's chosen language. Finding that women overwhelmingly describe sexual satisfaction in terms of their partner's satisfaction, Sara McClelland (2011) problematizes quantitative measures of self-reporting, arguing for a qualitative or at the very least, a mixed methods approach to understanding the nuanced way in which women resist, comply, and articulate their selves. Therefore, qualitative research, which derives meaning from the words and stories of women themselves, is crucial understanding the nuanced ways in which women identify with or reject the feminist label, as well as navigate their own sexuality. Not only does this allow for a more colorful analysis of women's lived experiences, but this also begins to bridge the gap between highly theoretical analyses of gender and sexuality, and the reality of living day to day as a woman in Western culture. Thus, this research utilized several research questions to guide its analysis. First, how do women claim, qualify or reject feminist identity? How do women see a feminist identity as beneficial? How do women rationalize rejecting or identifying as feminist? Finally, how do women conceive of themselves as sexual beings? How does a feminist identity interact with women's conceptions of sexuality?

## Methods

This study uses a small subset of secondary data collected in 2014 by Dr. Breanne Fahs, from a large metropolitan city in the Southwest United States. To ensure a community sample of women, participants were recruited through local entertainments and arts listings, which are distributed freely, as well as the local volunteer page on Craigslist (for information on the oversampling of college students see Henry 2008). Women were screened only for gender, racial/ethnic background, sexuality identity, and age (18-59). A group of 20 adult women were interviewed and their data collected. To provide greater demographic diversity, sexual minority women and racial/ethnic minority women were oversampled, and a wide range of ages was represented (35% aged 18–31, 25% aged 32–45, and 25% aged 46–59), thus creating a purposive sample. This data sample includes 60% White women and 40% women of color, including 2 African American women, 4 Mexican American women, and 2 Filipina women. The women self-reported their sexuality identities, resulting in 60% heterosexual women, 25% bisexual women, and 15% lesbian women (though it should be noted that women’s self-reporting rarely reflects the same-sex eroticism that exists among women). All participants fully consented to having their interviews taped and transcribed, and were compensated US\$20.00 for their time. Their names have been removed and replaced with pseudonym for the purposes of this study, and as such I have no access to original names. Participant were varied in their socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, their employment histories, as well as their relationship and parental status’. Though this study will only focus on a small number of questions asked in the original interviews, it seems necessary to address the entirety of the methods used in collection. All participants were

interviewed by the original collector and author, in a room that ensured privacy and no interruptions. Volunteers participated in a semi-structured interview, containing 36 questions regarding sexual history, sexual practices, and feelings and attitudes towards sex, lasting approximately 1.5- 2 hours. The questions covered a range of topics in sexuality including: aspects of their best and worst sexual experiences, feelings about contemporary sexual culture and media, questions about their relationships and feelings about “friends with benefits” experience, and their ideas about body image. Several of the questions addressed issues relevant to this study on women’s attitudes about feminism and their own sexuality in contemporary culture. For example, women were asked if they identified as feminists, and the follow up question “I am particularly interested to hear your views on feminism, and whether you feel feminists have made it easier to be sexual in our culture?”. Additionally, Women were also asked to articulate their own ideas about being a “sexual woman in the context of contemporary culture”. As a semi-structured interview these questions were scripted, but served to open dialogue and conversations on related topics, making conversation natural and allowing for improvised follow-up questions. The questions were purposefully broad and open-ended, to allow the participants to direct the discussion and conversation.

Responses were analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2008), and poststructuralist feminist theory and gender theory (Braun & Clarke 2006). To conduct the analysis, I familiarized myself with the data, first reading the transcript in its entirety, and then began to analyze for themes and interpretations in subsequent readings. These themes were illuminated by reviewing lines, sentences, and paragraphs of the

women's narratives to look for patterns in the way women respond to questions about feminism and its relation to their own sexuality.

## **Results**

Supportive of previous research, this study found that women expressed a wide range of opinions regarding their relationship to feminism. Only four women explicitly identified as feminist, three women assertively rejected the feminist identity, and the remaining 13 women fell in between these two poles. However, regardless of identity women were compelled to qualify their support of feminist ideology. Consistent with the post-feminist proliferation of aspects of feminism as common sense, feminists and nonlabelers alike agreed that women deserved equality and the right to self-determination, even if they expressed hostility towards feminism or feminists. Narratives revealed four themes surrounding women's identification with feminism and conceptions of sexuality: 1) Feminist self-labeling associated with a collective identity 2) Empowerment as a personal endeavor 3) Female empowerment and relationships with men and 4) Investments in femininity and sexual empowerment.

### **THEME ONE: Feminist self-labeling associated with collective identity**

Four women expressed support for the goals of feminism and explicitly identified as feminists. These women emphasized a connection to earlier feminist movements and described a benefit prescribed to them because of feminism. For example, Corinne (21/White/Bisexual) was asked to describe why she identified as a feminist, stating that:

I feel like we need it. I feel like we need it. As long as we still have rape culture and slut shaming and people hating on women for all of the things we mentioned- not shaving, or doing whatever or because they have half

their head shaved like I do, or because they're gonna tattoo their lower back and now they're a whore. I need feminism because I make mo- or make less than a man does. I need feminism for all kinds of reasons. So as long as you think buying me a drink entitles taking me home, I need feminism.

While Corinne expressed the *need* for feminism thereby implying a benefit that she receives by identifying, other feminists directly articulated the benefits of identifying as feminist. Rachel (39/White/Bisexual) asserted that while she may have a bone to pick with the present popularity of second wave feminists, feminism did provide a benefit: "What I do think feminism has given us is more of a pronounced voice but I think it's not the shout that some people like to claim it is." Similarly, Zari (43/African American/White) asserted that, "feminism is good for us women, We should be treated just like a man, you know what I mean?" Finally, Veronica (49/African American/Heterosexual) articulated that women receive a benefit because of feminism and its ideologies, even if they do not identify, exclaiming that: "I think that women have to stick together because when they do we can do anything... You know, I've just always felt like being a feminist was important to me. I hate it when women don't say they're feminist but they're happy to get promoted at work or have good sex with their husbands or have more opportunities than any other generation. What the hell is that!" These women recognize the implications of feminist activism, both historical and present, in their lives. These women not only support the goals of feminism, but they assert that a feminist identity provides some benefit to them as women. This was the most apparent

intervention that a feminist identity provided women, as data revealed feminists use of postfeminist language regarding personal empowerment and adherence to femininity.

In comparison, there were women who took on feminist ideology, without the feminist label. These women were distinct from the traditional categories of non-labelers, as they assume a collective struggle between women and address power discrepancies between men and women, however they argue that the depictions and discussions surrounding feminism and feminists complicate the work for true liberation. For example, Daphne (33/White/Heterosexual) states that:

I identify as a humanist. I think that part of the feminist movement, I think that we have left men too far out of the conversation to where they've almost, I don't want to say they've gotten off the hook, we've let them off the hook, but I think that they're meandering and they're not on a path that for them really defines what it means to be a man now. That's concerning. I also think that, in feminist conversations, that there is a hate towards men and that saddens me because humans are humans and our society is what they are. Patriarchy needs to go. But I don't believe that the answer is the recreate a matriarchal society. I think that there has to be partnership.

That's why I would consider myself to be a humanist.

Similarly, Gretchen (52/White/Heterosexual) no longer identifies as a feminist, stating:

"I-I think that- I have gone back and forth where, you know, I was real strong feminist and now- I think part of the problem is that the way feminism gets discussed, both by feminists and non-feminists, is- it gets to be a divisive... Rather than finding the common ground it's, "you're a horrible person, you're a horrible person". So I think that it's- and

it's not that its feminisms fault that that's the way it is but I think that it tends to be a hot button issue." For these women, the feminist movement has left something to be desired. While they may once have identified as feminists, they see the connotations surrounding feminism as self-defeating. Thus, they qualify their identity in order to reconcile it within their beliefs.

### **THEME TWO: Empowerment as a personal endeavor**

While nearly all women articulated support for the feminist ideal of equality with men, half of the women perceived this empowerment as a personal endeavor. Perhaps the most extreme example of this was given by Felicity (20/White/Heterosexual), who when asked whether she identified as a feminist, stated that: "No, I don't. Um, like I said, I identify as an empowered woman, emphasis on the woman, emphasis on the empowered, but I wouldn't call myself specifically a feminist. Because I feel like feminists are kind of dumb because they tend to fight for rights that they don't understand." Though Felicity was alone in her outright hostility towards feminists, others still asserted that existing as an empowered woman rested on one's ability to advocate for themselves. Take for example Joyce (21/Filipina/Pansexual), who stated that, "I identify with feminism in the way that I'm aware of systems of powers and positions of powers more than I think of the non-feminists would be. I don't go around and say I identified the feminist like I don't wear that label... I see it, I see feminism in a situation that maybe has nothing to do with gender I just see it as being aware of power and trying to balance it out even though there are some situations where it's almost impossible to completely have balanced of power but working towards it. Yeah making the balance of powers more equal even if it can't be." While Joyce does not express

hostility towards feminism, she articulates that her solution is a personal endeavor to balance power within unbalanced situations. Similarly, Rachel (39/White/Bisexual) who, although she identified as a feminist, stated that:

Women are not taught, as a general sense, how to negotiate. I've had to learn, *on my own*, through watching other men. How did they negotiate? I've watch- I have four brothers, I have watched them. I'm the second oldest, I watched them, you know my- get better pay from me even though I had more experience and more qualifications! [said in irritation] So I had to learn the common denominator which is negotiation. What I do think feminism has *given us* is more of a pronounced *voice* but I think it's not the shout that some people like to claim it is.... and also I'm disgusted in how quieted the Hispanic and black voice is in terms of feminism. It makes me feel almost apologetic because I don't fully understand what their struggles are but I'm aware of them. And for me as a white, American woman I've empowered myself already to have the same privileges that a white, fifty-five-year-old, male has. I acted, I fake it till I make it, you know what, no man has ever told me no because I have that same- they identify with my behavior, not with the fact that I'm a woman

While Rachel can articulate that women's lack of assertiveness in negotiation is a shared problem, her solution rests in her personal responsibility to overcome this obstacle, even going so far as to say that women of color are responsible for articulating and asserting their own desires. Bea (37/Filipina/Heterosexual) postulated that feminism was just women "being reliant on themselves" while expressing that:



I want to be a strong woman I just don't know how to get to that point right now but I think it's good for females to be strong and independent on their own and not have to, like I don't I am because I'm dependent on him right now I would love to be a strong independent female that didn't need to rely on you know. That could I even feel like I've lost my sense of making choices and not because of him but just cause I lost myself somewhere along the lines and it's not his fault. And I think it's my, I know it's my fault that. I'd like to be a strong so I don't know

While Bea is certainly referencing feminist ideals of agency and empowerment as central to women's self-efficacy, she articulates that *she* "is lost" and thus, she alone is responsible. Bea does not see her struggle as part of a shared struggle among women. These narratives reveal a sense of empowerment that is located within the self, rather than through collective action for change.

This sense of personal empowerment was also evident in women's descriptions of an aversion towards politics or activism. Six women cited their lack of passion for feminist activism as an impedance to their identifying as feminists. For example, Gail (45/White/Bisexual) when asked why she didn't identify though she, "definitely identified with a lot of their ideas, a lot of their open ideas" offered that: "I guess because I don't act upon it. I don't have the activism I associate with being a feminist." Antonia (25/Mexican/Lesbian), stated that she did not identify as a feminist, and described a lack of passion that made her perceive feminists "extreme". Though she qualified that: "Um, I think that, [sigh] identifying as a feminist, you, ssss, in, it kind of incorporates some sort of political involvement, and I am not interested in politics what so ever, and um,

activism, and just things like that, where um, I, I think maybe because I'm comfortable in my own life, it doesn't interest me." Similarly, Yvonne (41/Latina/Heterosexual) described her identification with feminism as "kind of medium", stating that "I-I enjoy the women out there fighting for, you know, to have jobs that men have. It doesn't bug me, I don't really- I just personally, probably wouldn't do some of it my own self, so." These women describe an ambivalence towards feminist activism, and do not see it as relevant in their lives. Kathleen (49/White/Heterosexual) echoed this sentiment stating that:

Oh, this is funny because I have a sister who is just out of control with it. She'll argue and say how much of a feminist I am. I think the difference is I am so sick of everybody. I don't give a shit if you are a woman, hear you roar. I don't give a shit if you're black, I don't give a shit if you're gay. Are you an asshole? Don't talk to me. That's just kind of how I feel about it. I do realize, in our society, so many things have been repressed and you have to swing all the way over here because you've been all the way over here to get to the middle. I get that. I guess I just really believe people are deserving. I don't care what gender you are, what sexuality you are, what race you are, I think you're deserving and I don't think you're more deserving than somebody else because of this, that or the other.

What Kathleen asserts here is an acknowledgement of the need for political activism, however she does not see herself within this collective endeavor, as she makes individual assessments of people's character to determine their merit. Naomi (18/White/Pansexual) stated that although she thought feminism was "awesome," she did not identify as a

feminist: “I just, it hasn’t really, I haven’t really felt passionate, I haven’t had much discrimination as a woman, to make me super passionate enough to wanna super rally for it, you know what I’m sayin’?” Finally, Iris (22/ Mexican/Jewish/ Lesbian) who identified “I guess-kind of” as a feminist, asserted that she did so, “just because I do think that there should be more equality given, but I’m not any kind of extremist or anything. I agree with it, but I don’t, I’m not proactive with it, I’m not active in the activities that they do.” While these women express little hostility towards feminism or feminists and even endorse feminist attitudes, they see little benefit of a personal or political investment in feminism and thus dismiss identifying.

### **THEME THREE: Female empowerment and relationships with men**

#### ***Women want to be empowered, feminists want power***

Narratives of these women also revealed deep tensions between desires for personal empowerment, and navigating men and relationships. Five women articulated negative representations of feminism as man-hating or desiring power over men that complicated their identification with feminism. For example, Joyce (21/Filipina/Pansexual), stated that: “I don’t go around and say I identify as feminist, like I don’t where that label. Even though I think I do have that mindset partially because I think it does carry around that stigma in society right now as ‘feminist’ being really like, like just having a lot of rage towards men specifically.” When asked whether she identified as feminist, Iris (22/Mexican/Jew/Lesbian) qualified her endorsement of feminist ideology: “There’s different kinds of feminists. Definitely, I think there should be equality. But I don’t think women need to be higher than men.” Similarly, Naomi (18/White/Pansexual) asserted that:

Well a lot of people make fun of feminism, like you know, because ‘feminazi’s’ you know, it has a very bad stigma I think. For people that go overboard with it, I think. You know, the girls that are saying they’re feminist but are really just thinking that women are better than men. And that’s not okay, you know, I think everybody is equal.

Finally, when asked about what she thought of feminists, Sofia (42/Mexican/Heterosexual) responded that: like let’s say you wanna be equal as men, then you’re not, you don’t want to work on that stage, as just being equal to men, you wanna be more in power. You know? I [...] right away... Yeah. But, I mean, I think, you know, in the times that we are right now, like women can have more power than men... When, they, they say the term feminist, hat they’re totally against, absolutely everything what men does and things. That’s what I think.” This concern over the effects of feminist ideology on men reveals the tensions between heteronormativity and female empowerment. What is interesting to note is the diverse sexualities of these women who still view feminist identity within the heteronormative framework of feminists as distinctly anti-male.

#### *Tensions between empowerment and heterosexual desires*

This tension was also revealed as women described feminist identity as incompatible with femininity. Four women described the incompatibility of feminism with their desire for more feminine gender roles or heterosexual partnerships, as their impedance to identifying. For example, when asked about identifying as a feminist Lila (36/White/Heterosexual) asserts that:

I mean, I prefer, I like chivalry, real so like yeah I'm not all like, I like the guy to open the door for me. I'm not going to be like '[scoffs] I can do it myself' so I so much prefer like to feel like the woman is on a pedestal. Though I do think it's unfair I mean I don't, the fact that guys, if a guy still wants to do that way, then I'll happily take it. But yet I still feel the need to also contribute financially even though my dream is to be a mother and that would be my job but I would still feel guilty that I'm not working and he's paying all the money so unless I know that he is old fashion like that you know I'd always feel that, that's just not fair but I still like it that way.

Similarly, Emma (42/White/Heterosexual) asserts that while she is "strong and independent", she still, "wants a man to in my life to help take care of me. It's still, it's still in there. It's not completely gone." Both Emma and Lila refer to feminists as an "other", that they did not identify with. Yvonne (41/Latina/Heterosexual) emphasizes that even though she "can pretty much do everything" on her own, she "has her limits" and chooses not to learn how to some traditionally male tasks to make her boyfriend feel needed and masculine:

I [small pause]- I-I-I don't know. [laughing] I-I'm fine with- I think some women take it too far maybe, I don't know, I- I'm a very independent person so I do a lot on my-on my own. I try to save stuff for my boyfriend to be able to feel needed or wanted that he has to, so like I refuse to learn how to change the tire on my car or something, you know, cause... Yeah, like I-I'll leave that for him or I'll leave things around the house that need

to be done. I enjoy him always opening the car door for me still. I know how to do it but I enjoy that, so. Yeah, I don't know, it's kind of tough I-I think they can- if they want to fight for it but- and I just- I have my limits, so.

Finally, Sofia (42/Mexican/Heterosexual) who early stated that women can be equal to men in contemporary times, asserted her choice in her participating traditional gender roles:

So that's why like, it all depends on how you define your feminism. In my point of view, I know that some guys, according, to la joya, you gotta be same as your husband, but sometimes your husbands, they say "well you know", like my husband sometimes says "oh well you gotta", not that he says this, but like you gotta submit to your husband, and like, yeah I agree with that. But see, if the husband is not working, if the husband is not providing, if the husband is not doing anything, then that's when the woman needs to step it up, you know? And technically, all women's, whenever they have a child, they have to step it up, you know?

These narratives reveal a panic surrounding independence as a precondition for feminist identity. These women express a desire for heterosexual relationships, that they believe would be complicated by a feminist identity. Even women who walked the line of identifying as feminist stated that it complicated their lives. Daphne (33/White/Heterosexual), who identified as a humanist, lamented about the struggle of finding a man who will desire her, even with her sense of empowerment: "But I find myself and all of that power that I now have as a woman, I still want a partner, though. I

still want a man that can stand next to me and be comfortable and can not feel inferior to the fact that I am determined, I am strong and I am beautiful. That's where I think my generation's screwed. What, what is gonna happen in these experiences? I don't think the men know what their place is anything." These narratives reveal that a constant source of tension for feminist identity is relationships with men and heteronormative prescriptions of femininity.

#### **THEME FOUR: Sexual empowerment and femininity**

The rest of this analysis will address the intervention of a feminist identity as it relates to participant's conception of "being a sexual woman in context of contemporary culture". Quantitative research suggests that there is a marked difference between feminists and non-feminists in matters of sexuality. These interviews only partially support this claim, as narratives reveal this phenomenon may not be as clean as surveys suggest.

##### *Empowering the sexual self*

Over half of the women interviewed emphasized sexual empowerment as exploration of the self. These women's narratives reveal deep assumptions of sexual liberation that enable empowerment via sexuality. Five women described their sexuality as a personal endeavor. For example, Naomi (18/White/Pansexual) asserted that being sexual "was great", elaborating that "I feel empowered by it. I feel like I'm doing something that makes me feel good and you're not going to stop me, you know I feel good about it."

Kathleen (49/White/Heterosexual) affirmed this sentiment, stating that:

I don't really think about it because that is just the way that it is. I feel good about that. I feel like that's a gift that I give to myself and I love it

when I'm feeling very in touch with my sexuality. You feel, you do feel empowered and you do feel like the world just feels better. It feels lighter. When you're having hormonal issues or health issues or stress issues, it weighs you down, it's very heavy. I think that feels very light and freeing.

These narratives assume that women have been liberated, and enjoy the state of being a sexual individual, with little attention to how gender operates within this sphere.

This theme was also mirrored in narratives of nonsexual women. While these women did not identify as sexual, they suggested that personal issues or decisions regulated their sexual self. Three women who did not identify as sexual assumed personal responsibility for their lack of sexuality. These women ignored outside influences on sexuality stating it was a personal issue or responsibility, rather than a collective. Gretchen (52/White/Heterosexual), who argued that she did not identify as feminist due to feminism's sex-negative attitudes, stated that:

I-I guess I- that's hard for me to say because I am- don't really consider myself to be a sexual woman right now. I'm not, you know, I'm not in a relationship with anybody, I don't feel particularly sexy or sexual, I don't think about sex that much- part of that's hormones, part of that's other psychological things going on.

Finally, Felicity's (20/White/Heterosexual) response to being asked about being a sexual woman, highlighted the lack of critique of social pressures, stating that:

Well, fortunately, I haven't had to deal with that too much because I tell people I don't want to have sex with them and then I walk away. And I'm not missing out on anything, and I don't feel like I'm missing out on



anything and you know what, they might have a moment of pain, but you know what? There's another girl right behind me, so I haven't had to deal with that too much, I guess I've been lucky to only have partners that share my same view.

Felicity asserts that her asexuality is a choice that she feels empowered to articulate, however the assumption that there will be "another girl right behind her", again ignores the culture of violence that plagues American society. While that "other girl" may not possess Felicity's sexual efficacy and perhaps be coerced into unwanted sex, Felicity sees her responsibility as only to herself. This lack of a social perspective, whether asserting sexuality, or a lack thereof, led to an uncritical depiction of being a "sexual woman in context of contemporary culture". These narratives largely ignored larger social forces, that affect women's sexuality, and they project a personal perspective as descriptions of what it is like to be "a sexual woman in context of contemporary culture".

Even women who addressed the question of sexuality on a general, societal level were overwhelmingly positive in their assessments, and articulated the same investment in the sexual self as the women previously. Four women described "being a sexual woman" as a hopeful exploration of women's sexual self. Zari (43/African American/Heterosexual) stated that being sexual today meant having "a certain boldness, and a certain equality to yourself, I think. You know, my age- we're not, you know, our mother's mothers, and we're not our mothers, and you know we're evolving and getting better as time goes on I guess." Likewise, Joyce (21/Filipino/Pansexual) noted that "there's such a stark difference between the two I feel like with the onset of online dating it also changed a lot sexuality in contemporary culture I feel like it's more common now

to have sex just for pleasure because it's more convenient to do so or there is an avenue for it so it's, it's interesting I would say and I do think about how different my sexuality might be if I had been born like just like 10 years earlier." These women's narratives reveal hopefulness and imply that women's sexuality has only improved over the past 20 to 30 years. However, this liberation has come to be assumed and therefore feminist critique has become irrelevant to sexual liberation. Moreover, they imply that women themselves are doing the evolving themselves, rather than society evolving to meet their needs.

*Being a "sexual woman"*

Six women described empowered female sexuality in terms of adherence to femininity. However, only three describe a struggle in reconciling these two identities. Three women describe their personal choice in adhering to gendered norms. For example, Emma (42/White/Heterosexual) describes her pleasure as the object of sexuality, rather than subject: "I love it. I mean, I know my kids don't like to hear me talk about it. But I love it. I love being looked at sexually, I like being talked to sexually. There is a matter of appropriateness, I know that. But I enjoy the whole sexual atmosphere. And I've been told by too many people that I just exude a sexual sensuality that I'm not even aware of. I don't know if it's true or not. But I've had so many tell me that." While Emma is not personally aware of the sensuality she "exudes", she takes others' word for it. Moreover, she describes sexual behavior as something that is done to her, rather her own actions. Similarly, Lila (36/White/Heterosexual) simply stated her preference as the object of men's desires, indicating that she chooses a more traditional relationship: "I like it, I'm glad I'm a woman and not a man I mean as far as like the role I feel that women have that

women are more desired than men and you know it's men who case women and I like that And I wouldn't want to be, I don't want to be in the reverse." These women assert being desired sexually as their preference, despite its deeply gendered implications. This is important when noting that these women are both white, and heterosexual. While Rachel (39/White/Heterosexual) did not state her preference for women as the object of sexuality, she articulates an investment in femininity that justifies her sexuality. For Rachel, being a sexual woman meant that she is "constantly educating":

I've actually had a coworker of mine say that he could tell if a girl was good or not by how many sexual partners she had. And I was like, "I'm in triple digits, I'm a mother, and I make more money than you. Now, explain your theory...And he was just really taken aback. And it's educating moments like that. Taking away the power of patriarchy without diminishing the place of each male because, I love men! [laughing] But, I don't want them to get away with saying things that aren't true or oppressive or discounting of the other half of the population.

While Rachel's head-on approach to sexism is perhaps facilitated by her feminist identity, her need to rationalize herself as a liberated woman, hypersexual, maternal and economically successful, reveals an investment in normative femininity. Subliminally, her justification reveals that her idea of sexuality rests on a "successful femininity", which "involves living a tension between exercising the traditional feminine mode of relationality and the exhibition of individualized agency previously associated with masculinity" (Budgeon 2011 p. 285). Explicitly, her argument against oppression, which relies on her own conception of liberation (hypersexual, maternal and economically

successful), not only ignores an entire spectrum of sexuality, but also assumes that all women match her model of empowerment.

The remaining three women describe a discontent with the current state of women's sexuality, though they do not offer strategies of resistance or solutions for the problems they perceive, nor are they able to perceive this dissonance outside of a heteronormative lens. For Corinne (21/White/Bisexual), this tension rests in her inability to reconcile her sexual agency with men's entitlement:

I struggle a lot with men's entitlement. Especially like, because I am very sexual and I am – when I go out I put on confidence and I dunno. I've got my makeup on, and I've got my hot girl disguise on, is what I call it. I put my face on and my hot girl disguise and I go out and yeah, I mean I feel good about the way I look, and I mean you can- you can stare. That's fine. I'm good with the attention thing, but if you're gonna like start touching me or like- even if you just rub your hand down my back-like I didn't give you the right, there's a line.

Though Corinne attributes her struggle to a larger problem with male sexual behavior, she is unable to establish a similar larger, theoretical link between her concept of sexuality as a gendered performance of femininity, i.e.- her 'hot girl disguise' and men's entitlement to women's bodies. Thus, while Corinne is able to point out there is something amiss about the intersections of contemporary sexuality, her investment in gendered behavior as a function of sexuality blinds her from the way contemporary sexism operates (i.e.- women are still consumed as sexual objects, though liberation narratives superficially tell

otherwise). Finally, Veronica (49/African American/Heterosexual) states that while she acknowledges the increasing openness regarding sexuality has benefited women, sexual expectations still plague women:

Sometimes it's great, sometimes it's awful. I hate when, you know, I feel pressured to give blowjobs when I don't want to. I think the women in the '50s could say no more often and get away with it...Um, I do like talking about sex more openly than them. I don't have to, you know, be afraid or ashamed of sex.

Here, Veronica alludes to the social and sexual issues, sexual coercion, sexual compliance, and the demand of access to the female body that women navigate regularly. Moreover, she lamented the type of "successful femininity" that Rachel celebrates, stating that: "Now we have to do it all—we have to work and give blowjobs and take care of the kids and do all of the housework and call that feminism. I don't think my mom or grandmother did that." Despite her recognition of these complexities as problematic, she nonetheless feels the pressure to perform sexually, whereas earlier women perhaps did not. Here she alludes to a polarization of women's sexuality over the past 60 years. While Victorian ideals of femininity and virginity certainly shamed and denied women their sexual self, through both violent and benevolent structures, the entrenched moralism that created the Virgin/Whore dichotomy perhaps provided them some protection from unwanted 'blowjobs'. However, the modern-day upsurge in dialogue about sex, particularly for women, advocated by the second wave feminist movement, is complimented by an increase in sexual expectations of women. While most women in this study reveled in this sexual empowerment, they prescribed personal experiences to

an assessment of contemporary sexuality and described their desire and investment in heteronormative behavior. Even for women who recognized this sexism, as most of the self-labeling feminists did, they did not possess either the critical thought or the tools with which to resist this hypersexualization of women that comes with modern heteronormativity.

### **Discussion**

This study provides a complementary contribution to the current research aimed at operationalizing a distinct feminist identity that subjects can be measured against enriches the current literature of feminist self-labeling, though not necessarily consistently. Drawing from a diverse sample of women, nearly all narratives revealed elements of postfeminist ideology—even those of self-labeled feminists. In line with previous research women in this study were overwhelmingly supportive of feminist ideals of equality and choice, however an assumption that the second wave feminist movement had achieved irreversible equality, underpinned their narratives (Swim et al. 1995). For non-labeling women, or women who endorse feminist attitudes and simultaneously reject the label, this assumption manifested in their ambivalence in feminist politics or activism, and/or the stigma of feminists as anti-male. Feminist women described a collective struggle shared by women and that feminism benefited them in overcoming these struggles. However, they did not provide a united front on what the movement meant for modern women, and their narratives were infused with the same postfeminist themes, present in non-labeling and traditional women’s narratives: themes of personal empowerment and femininity. Data here concurs with previous research that mainstream endorsement of feminist ideals of equality and choice, does not translate into

a population of feminists (Anderson 2015; Bay-Cheng & Zucker 2007; Fitz et al. 2012; McRobbie 2009; Williams & Wittig 1997; Duncan 2010). However, themes of personal empowerment and choice were central to women's narratives of identity and sexuality, regardless of whether they identified or not. Four women expressly identified as feminist, and the remaining women fell along a spectrum of feminist identity.

While feminists asserted that women's lives were inextricably linked by social forces and feminism benefited them as collective, non-labeling and traditional women viewed identifying as a personal decision, one that they chose not to participate in. Here, the stark difference can be seen between feminists and nonlabelers, in terms of identification. Despite this investment in a collective identity, feminists and non-labelers both asserted empowerment as a personal endeavor. While feminists and some feminist-oriented non-labelers asserted that women still experienced discrimination, they described a personal responsibility in correcting this imbalance. Both non-labelers and self-labeling feminists use narratives of personal empowerment to counter sexism, rather than emphasizing collective or political action. For non-labeling women, this narrative of personal empowerment was also linked with an aversion towards political activism.

Women who supported feminist ideals, but did not label as such, associated feminist identity with a political activism that they had no stated interest in or lacked passion for. These women were overwhelmingly supportive of feminist ideals, some even going so far as to say that they should identify as feminists, but did not do so due to a lack of passion, knowledge of feminism, or experience of discrimination. These women described feminist activism as a choice, and not necessary to sustaining the equality they supported. This finding supports previous research that central to postfeminist discourse, is a depoliticization of

individual experience (Anderson 2015; Baer 2014; Baker 2010; Rich 2005). Interestingly, despite this association of feminists with political action, none of the feminist women in this study mentioned activism when elaborating in their identity, rather they focused on the personal empowerment facilitated by their feminist identity. However, it should be noted that research shows that even claiming a political identity does not ensure political activism. Particularly in the growing consumer culture of the United States, where self-interest is valued over collective action (Michelette & Stolle 2012).

Non-labeling women's aversion toward political identification as feminists was also associated with conceptions of feminists as anti-male. Despite overwhelming support for feminist beliefs, nearly all participants qualified their support of feminist goals with concessions about loving men, or not identifying due to stereotypes of feminist's as anti-male. This suggests that conservative and mainstream caricatures of feminists remain effective, despite research that suggests that in fact traditional women, and those just able to articulate sexism, are most resentful of men (Fischer & Good 2004; Anderson et al. 2009). Moreover, this study revealed that even self-labeling women qualified their identities, asserting that even feminists "should still always be a woman and not a man", or making sure not to diminish masculinity when countering sexism. This notion that women who identify as feminist want power over men or that they run the risk of turning into men is an essential theme of postfeminist discourse (Budgeon 2015). Not only does this imply that a feminist identity is associated with more masculine behavior, it also reveals a panic around being perceived as unfeminine, even for queer women who perhaps do not have the same investment in relationships with men. This points to a



heteronormative framework by which women's empowerment is still framed and in which women are obligated to desire men (Alcoff 1988).

Finally, non-labeling women described conflict between a feminist identity, and their desire for a male partner. These women's narratives revealed an investment in femininity, and an assumption that identifying as such prevented healthy, heterosexual relationships. While more traditional women portrayed feminism as an option they have chosen not to participate in, due to their preference for traditional gender roles, most women described a constant negotiation of their strong and independent selves and more feminine behaviors, i.e. the negotiation between making choices and maintaining or desiring a male partner. However, much like the discrepancy between the perception and reality of "man-hating" feminists, research has shown that women divested from traditional gender roles have more egalitarian relationships that lead to higher satisfaction (Fetterolf & Rudman 2014). Surprisingly, few women were outright hostile towards the idea of feminism. Unsurprisingly, however, these hostilities were articulated by women who described themselves as more traditional. Much like feminist narratives, these women did not agree on a singular critique of feminism. While two of these women described feminism as incompatible with the norms of heterosexual relationships, the other describe feminist activism as stupid because it assumed to speak for a collective "we" that she did not perceive. What is also interesting to note, is that while these women desire a heteronormative relationship where they are the object of men, they all articulate women's capacity to exist beyond those categories; whether by choice or will. Thus, it could be conjectured that it is not a feminist identity that complicates women's relationships with men, but the very act of existing as a woman in a society that

superficially endorses the equality of women, and implicitly denies them full exploration of the self.

When asked what it was like to be “a sexual woman in contemporary culture” women spoke of their individual preferences and experiences. Women overwhelmingly describe sexuality in terms of openness, empowerment, and pleasure. While heterosexual women, who tended towards traditional gender roles, articulated their preference as the ‘object’ of male desire (i.e. looked at, talked to, cased by men), others emphasize sexuality as a pleasurable and empowering personal endeavor. Even women who did not identify as sexual assumed a personal responsibility for their lack of sexuality, whether by circumstance or choice. These narratives revealed an investment in the self as a tenant of contemporary female sexuality. Some women who tended towards a feminist identity, offered a more societal perspective of women’s sexuality and were largely hopeful and positive regarding the evolution of women’s sex lives. They argued that the evolution of sexuality, particularly over the last 10 to 20 years has allowed women to explore deeper into their selves and sexuality. These women allude to a past that was rigid and prescriptive, whereas now women are free to explore their sexuality in a myriad of ways, without recourse. However, even with a more social lens on sexuality these women argued that this was a chance for the individual woman to explore her sexuality, rather than to challenge the restrictions of female sexuality within patriarchal society. These narratives uncover an underlying assumption that liberation has been achieved, and now women can explore their sexualities and desire without social judgement. However, this assumption ignores rape culture, prescriptive heteronormative femininity, and the increasing sexualization of women in the public sphere. While previous research has

postulated a link between sexual self-efficacy and feminist identity narratives of these women did not necessarily support this research, as women across identities asserted their sexual empowerment and liberation. While feminists were more critical of “being a sexual woman in context of contemporary culture”, their critiques were aimed at men themselves, rather than the larger structures that perpetuate sexism. Moreover, they associated being sexual with investments in femininity. Feminism offered them a collective identity to view shared struggles among women, they were uncritical about the category of “woman”. Therefore, while they described sexism that they experienced, feminist women’s narratives were similar to their non-feminists counterparts, in terms of investments in femininity and empowered sexuality.

Postfeminism is not necessarily a coherent ideology, mostly used to denote the backlash of conservative, anti-feminist rhetoric. However, the feminist movement has been without concrete ideological underpinnings and goals since the late 1980s, and thus has not presented collective resistance to this narrative. This has led to a complicated and distorted understanding of feminism both as a movement and an identity. Data in this study reveal this internalization, as women claim the benefit of a collective identity that affords them the freedom *to* do as they please, with little focus on the freedom *from* narrow, prescriptive roles of femininity (Fahs 2014). Most women provided positive assessments of sexuality, describing it as empowering and transformative. Two women, both white and heterosexual, claimed that they simply preferred women’s status as the object of men’s desire. While on the opposite end of the spectrum feminists acknowledged the pervasiveness of sexism, but in ways that were inextricably linked to narratives of empowerment, through sexuality and femininity. While feminists could

problematize masculinity and men's sexual behavior, investments in empowerment and femininity framed their conceptions of sexism. Therefore, this study postulates that while feminist self-labeling offers women a collective identity, a declaration of the "political", that they see as beneficial, this does not translate into the privatized sphere of sexuality. While feminists could recognize sexism that their non-feminist counter parts could not, they described deeply gendered behavior that was similar of women who did not identify.

#### *Limitations and future directions*

Some limitations are inherent in this work. Firstly, this study employs secondary data that was collected by another researcher. Therefore, all research decisions, including the questions included in the interview guide, language used, and flow of the conversation between participant and researcher were determined prior to the conception of this manuscripts. This did not allow me to directly decide on word choices and to engage with participants directly. Future studies could more precisely ask women how their conceptions of feminism and feminist identity are shaped and maintained. Researchers should also pay close attention to elements of political activism in feminist narratives; while many non-labelers associated feminist identity with activism, the feminists in this study did not articulate an investment in activism as the solution to sexism, rather they described personal efforts in countering sexist men. Finally, researchers should continue to perform qualitative research on community samples of women in order to more concretely identify patterns across race, sexuality, class, etc.

This analysis of women's narratives reveals the intense tensions that exist in the postfeminist era. How can the successes of the feminist movement be asserted as common sense, while at the same time feminists are continually described in negative

ways? This contradiction is a tension of this work. Feminist language of choice and empowerment, popularized by the second wave, were meant to assert women's agency in deciding the fate of their lives, however these terms have increasingly become synonymous personal responsibility and individualism, ideals of Western enlightenment and liberalism. While one could argue, and certainly many do, that the mainstream adoption of feminist ideology is indicative of its successes, many assert that this is nothing but an appropriation of feminist language that serves to ensure, on both fronts, that women do not seek collective action for change. Thus, while it has been established that the majority of women would fall within the spectrum of non-labelers whose feminist attitudes do not translate into identity, we must also be wary of the repackaged, ideologically hollow post-feminist identity that permeates popular culture. As the data of this study suggests that it is not just non-labelers and traditional women who are susceptible to this distortion, but self-identified feminists as well.

Analyzing the current socio-political atmosphere and its intersections with the feminist movement as backdrop for these women's narratives, provides a context for this work. The postfeminist phenomena reveal the internalization of values of individualism and personal responsibility, across all identities. Indicative of the tensions surrounding the feminist movement since the 1980s. While narratives of non-labeling women correspond with previous research that suggests postfeminist rhetoric continues to impede feminist identification, narratives of feminists reveal investments in femininity that frame their identity. This speaks to the need to contextualize women's narratives of feminist identity within the current sociocultural atmosphere. Though academics and activists should never be in the business of policing bad feminists, revolution will be needed to

reenergize political activism, and therefore it is crucial to understand where feminist identity resides now. Since the end of the second wave feminist movement, there has been no concrete or underlying theory that unites all feminists against oppression. While feminists have debated this since as early as the 1970s, recent socio-political events expedite the call for such reformation, as nationalist movements are increasingly gaining ground across Western Europe and the United States. These movements appropriate feminist ideology and language of women's liberation to promote an Islamophobic agenda: vilifying Muslim men and cultural practices, and falsely claiming the superiority of the enlightened West due to its liberation of women (Gill 2007). While it has been suggested that this appropriate dissociates white, heterosexual, upper to middle class women from the feminist movement (McRobbie 2009), nearly all women in this study, regardless of race, sexuality, or age, asserted their empowerment as independent, sexual women.

Though this is potentially disheartening, as neoliberal or postfeminist ideology has perhaps permeated even marginalized peoples' identities, it may also be a cite of potential hope and resistance. While women may be increasingly individualized, there is collective agreement that women and men are equal, even if some make an essentialist argument regarding gender. Therefore, future research must continue to not only understand the nuances of identifying as feminist, but also actively seek ways to unite women, focusing on the same basic goals. Though this endeavor does involve some element of understanding women's conceptions of feminism, there has been a disconnect between the academic work of feminism and the reality of women's lives that must be overcome. Moreover, while these narratives, both of identity and sexuality, reveal a

problematic individualization, they show (mostly) that women are capable of owning their lives, and living for themselves. Therefore, it should not be asserted that women's perception of their personal or sexual empowerment is ignorant or incorrect, but rather ask why all women do not feel that way? We should not be looking at identity or sexuality as essentially good or bad, but rather ask more questions surrounding the divergence of these narratives (Halley 2008). This way, we can use the successes of the second-wave, to propel a third wave feminist ideology. Therefore, researchers should continue to employ qualitative and quantitative methods of understanding and categorizing feminist identity. However, feminists can come together to agree upon a theoretical underpinning of feminism and reenergize the movement for social and cultural change that is left for the third wave, perhaps before academics reach consensus on what in fact feminism means today. I would imagine a constant negotiation between these two spheres to remain relevant and informed, but not overly concerned with the problems within feminism, focusing on instead on pulling women out of their individual spheres and engaging them in political discourse. This certainly includes feminist academics that dominate women's studies and psychology departments today, but also women within the community and in engineering, science, and math. Here, we create a collective of women, from all types of thought who come together to assert that women possess the same capabilities as men, and thus gendered differences are social, rather than essential. Therefore, future work, both academic and political, should focus less on the categorizations of feminism, and more on combatting altered and yet, unmoving depictions of feminist's as prescriptive, anti-male and irrelevant, as it is not whether

women identify as feminist truly matters, but whether they are committed to making the lives of women better for each generation.

Moreover, while the appropriation of feminist language is certainly problematic, I postulate that these phenomena point to the efficacy of the feminist movement; as the old saying goes “imitation is the highest form of flattery”. While patriarchal capitalism once relegated women to roles of wife and mother, the second wave was successful in the recognition of women’s selves, independent of their husbands and children. More plainly, the second wave proved women could, and ultimately would exist outside of the home, and therefore sociopolitical forces adjusted to maintain the capitalist status quo.

Neoliberalism’s appropriation of feminist language and cultural prescriptions of femininity serve as a backlash to the successes of second wave feminism (Faludi 2009; McRobbie 2009). These two phenomena coincide to keep women distracted and occupied with the self; tempering their independence with an investment in femininity that keeps women tied to traditional notions of womanhood. Therefore, in addition to research on the cultural prescriptions of womanhood, it is of importance to shift this critical lens away from the individual woman and towards the structures that devalue and hypersexualize femininity. Whether you believe gender is constructed or essential, research shows a rise in sexism and violence against women, coinciding with a rise in white nationalism, as we conclude the second decade of the twenty-first century. To counter the hegemonic masculinity characterized by these phenomena feminist activism should refocus attention on the equality and strength of feminine traits, in addition to research that deconstructs the prescriptions of femininity. This effort would take extreme caution not assert to that women are inherently feminine or passive, but rather shift focus



away from women's physical bodies and towards gendered nature of power, inextricably linked to capital within neoliberal society. Power is crucial to understanding the way in which prior experience and knowledge inform women in making life decisions. Moreover, this endeavor would seek to encourage men's expressions of femininity and emotionality. Women's desegregation of the public sphere, though not flawless, proposes the existence of masculine and feminine selves within the individual, and thus the same could be postulated for men. Therefore, in addition to countering heteronormative masculinity, feminists must increase efforts to encourage men's desegregation of the private sphere. We must encourage, if not demand, men's participation in more traditionally feminine roles and feminist collective action.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the examination of feminist identity. Data provided in this work reveal tensions of the postfeminist era are not only reflected in non-labeling women's narratives, but also those of self-identified feminists. Moreover, while the empowered, modern woman has been constructed as white, heterosexual, upper to middle class, women across all identities employed postfeminist rhetoric that portrayed feminism as irrelevant, anti-male, and in contrast with femininity. If the feminist movement is to have any future beyond the second wave, then we must continue to understand how feminism is received and assessed by its target audience. However, this study articulates that there is a disconnect between public declarations as a feminist, and personal investments in gendered behavior that re-inscribes traditional notions of femininity. This investment in femininity as a prescription for good womanhood constructs women as complicit in their own oppression. This complicity distorts women's

views of themselves, making it infinitely more difficult for women to articulate and resist sexism and oppression.

Despite the disarticulation of feminist ideology, these women's narratives provide a sliver of hope for a third wave feminist movement. While research shows that postfeminist assertions of liberation does not manifest itself in women's public or private lives, nearly all participants asserted the belief that women were inherently equal to men. Therefore, this study proposes a renewed focus on how power operates in engendering women's choices, particularly in terms of sexuality. Feminist focus on power, intimately linked to capital in the neoliberal state, will help to demystify the inequalities women face every day, and avoid the panic induced when women's choices themselves are critiqued. Focusing on power and the valuation of gender, when analyzing women's sexuality and identification as feminists, in addition to sexualization and femininity would perhaps provide a more fruitful in route to a concrete third-wave feminist ideology.

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