

## Empowerment without Feminism? Sexual Objectification Post-feminist Style

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### Abstract

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In our contemporary post-feminist media culture, new forms of constraint and regulation emerge through a seeming proliferation of female “freedoms” that are adopted by advertisers using the surface terminology of feminism to sell products. Rosalind Gill has addressed a significant shift in ads, where women are no longer presented as passive sexual objects, but are seen as active, desiring sexual subjects, who enthusiastically participate in practices and forms of self-presentation that earlier generations of feminist scholars considered to be forms of sexism and subordination. In our contemporary post-feminist media culture, post-feminist ideology adopts discourses of feminist “resistance” in order to reinforce patriarchal norms. Thus, women are only “empowered” to make choices insofar as they do not disrupt patriarchal norms that govern marriage, motherhood, consumerism, female beauty and female sexuality. This paper will address the ways in which “empowerment” is utilized as a part of an ideological agenda to direct women’s attention away from the fact that they have not gained equality, with particular attention being paid to media representations of female beauty and female sexuality.

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### Introduction

Increasingly in contemporary Western culture, advertising is inescapable. Over the course of one average North American lifetime, Kilbourne (1999) estimates that the figure for media consumption is approximately three years, and citizens of other developed countries are not far behind. In the 1960s and 1970s, advertising became an increasingly important focus of feminist scholarship and activism in Western countries (Gill, 2007). From the 1960s to the 1980s, feminist scholars documented common stereotypes of women in ads. Ads showed women in the home as housewives and mothers, in dependent and/or subservient roles, and portrayed in a “beautiful” and “sexy” way as the value of women was dependent on how they looked (Gill, 2011). By contrast, men were often employed as the voiceovers in ads to reinforce their superiority (Gill, 2011). Goffman (1979) focused on non-verbal signals in ads that emphasized the difference between male and female power. Women were frequently portrayed in a child-like way, were typically lower and smaller than men, and often appeared to be distant or withdrawn (Goffman, 1979). Studies frequently show how ads visually dissected women by focusing on their eyes, lips, breasts or other body parts (Gill, 2011). Kilbourne (1999) discusses the ways in which these images deny women’s humanity by not representing women as whole people, but rather as fetishized, dismembered objects:

Ads don’t directly cause violence, of course. But the violent images contribute to a state of terror. And objectification and disconnection create a climate in which there is widespread and increasing violence. Turning a human being into a thing, an object, is almost always the first step toward justifying violence against that person. (p. 278). This argument in Kilbourne’s book, *Can’t Buy My Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel*, has been invaluable for feminist scholarship and activism by demonstrating the ways in which sexism, sexual violence and cultural representations of women interconnect. A significant number of changes in representations of women in ads have transpired due to feminist critiques such as Kilbourne’s.

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Gill (2011) discusses how advertisers responded to three challenges in the early 1990s. The first was consumer fatigue due to the constant bombardment of ads and consumer logos and messages. The second was increasing skepticism with respect to ads. The third was the widespread knowledge of feminist critiques of advertising that advertisers had to address to overcome women's increasing anger at ads using sexism to sell products. One response to these challenges was advertisers developing what Gill (2011) calls "commodity feminism", defined as "an attempt to incorporate the cultural power and energy of feminism whilst simultaneously domesticating its critique of advertising and the media" (p. 259). Rosalind Gill has addressed this significant shift in ads, where women are not mere passive sexual objects, but are active, desiring sexual subjects, who enthusiastically participate in practices and forms of self-presentation that earlier generations of feminist scholars considered to be forms of sexism and subordination (Gill, 2008, 2009). Throughout this paper, we will address the ways in which "empowerment" is utilized as a part of an ideological agenda to direct women's attention away from the fact that they have not gained equality, with particular attention being paid to representations of female beauty and female sexuality in our post-feminist media culture.

Gill argues that the most important aspect of the shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification is the emphasis on a discourse of playfulness, "freedom" and "choice". Gill (2009) discusses the ways in which "women are presented as not seeking men's approval but as pleasing themselves, and, in doing so, they just happen to win men's admiration" (p. 148). In contemporary ads, women are "empowered" by buying products that will help them conform to Western standards of beauty and thus give women power that comes with conforming to Western beauty norms. In our post-feminist media culture, acts as trivial as buying a pair of shoes or choosing to eat a cereal bar of a particular brand are considered to be as empowering as pushing for a stronger and more influential voice in politics (Gill, 2008). This shift largely took place coincident with women's increasing financial independence, making them new targets for products (Gill, 2008; McRobbie, 2008). In contemporary ads, purchasing power is a primary way for women to demonstrate their power and independence from men. In this context, female empowerment is limited to consuming products and services. However, it is only possible to empower people who do not already have power.

In contemporary Western ads, post-feminism successfully utilizes the surface terminology of feminism while ignoring feminism's social, political and economic goals. In this context, "'choice' has become the bottom line value of post-feminism" (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011, p. 99). As long as contemporary representations of women show that women's actions or circumstances are the result of their own choices, no further analysis or critique is possible. Feminist scholars have continually debated the extent to which women can be "empowered" through beauty practices and consumerism. In the 1970s, feminist critiques of Western beauty practices emerged after women shared, in feminist consciousness-raising groups, their harmful experiences arising from their engagement with these practices (Jeffreys, 2005). During this time, feminist scholarship and activism focused on the ways in which Western beauty practices oppressed women as a fundamental part of male dominance (Jeffreys, 2005; Wolf, 1990). However, in the 1990s and early 2000s, a controversial disagreement emerged among feminist scholars regarding the extent to which Western beauty practices are empowering or oppressive for women (Jeffreys, 2005; Bartky, 1990; Dworkin, 1974; Negra, 2009; Macdonald, 1995; Power, 2009; Gill, 2008; Rice, 2010; Wolf, 1993; Walter, 1999; Lehrman, 1997). Radical feminists Sheila Jeffreys and Andrea Dworkin, for example, oppose the idea that Western beauty practices are forms of empowerment and agency for women, and see these practices as being critical to male domination and a backlash against feminism. Additionally, Gill (2007), Negra (2009) and Macdonald (1995) challenge the idea that women are "empowered" since empowerment for women is limited to their role as consumers (mostly of beauty products) in the capitalist market. However, despite beauty practices being a common critique of second-wave feminists, beauty practices such as wearing lipstick or shaving one's legs no longer presents any ideological dilemmas for many feminists (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011). Feminist scholars such as Natasha Walter, Naomi Wolf and Karen Lehrman, argue that because of feminism, beauty practices are something that women can now choose to make themselves feel good (Walter, 1999; Wolf, 1993; Lehrman, 1997).

However, the post-feminist promise of "empowerment" and "liberation" through "free choice" coincides with increasingly powerful beauty images that emphasize the discipline and beautification of women's bodies. While our goal in this research is not to frame women as mindless victims of patriarchal capitalism, we will discuss the ways in which post-feminist ideology represents an intensification of pressures around beauty and sexuality that operate through new forms of constraint and regulation.

Althusser (2006) defines ideology as cultural structures that we inhabit unconsciously (as being “common sense” and “the way things are”). He argues that ideology is powerful since it convinces us that we are in control while at the same time keeping us blind to how we are being controlled.

Ideology convinces people that they are unique, “free” individuals who have agency to purchase whatever products and services they desire (Althusser, 2006). In this context, we feel that we are free even though we are under the control of a patriarchal capitalist system. Hence, post-feminist ideology in ads frequently reinforces oppressive norms as the “best choices” in women’s lives by using “empowerment” as an alibi for sexism. Understood in another way, contemporary ads are a “post-feminist articulation of sexism” (Gill & Elias, 2014, p. 179-180). Women are only “empowered” to make choices insofar as they do not disrupt patriarchal norms that govern marriage, motherhood, consumerism, female beauty and female sexuality. Due to the ways in which the surface terminology of feminism is exploited in our post-feminist media culture, it is crucial that feminism is explicitly defined when combatting inequality in order to limit the broad nature of feminism as a term that has been drawn on to justify everything from anti-choice laws to the extension of oppressive beauty norms in the capitalist market.

In our post-feminist media culture, new forms of constraint and regulation emerge through a seeming proliferation of female “freedoms” that are enhanced by advertisers and magazine editors who adopt the surface terminology of feminism to sell products and magazines (Gill, 2007). Post-feminist ads and articles are powerful since they appear to critique harmful beauty “ideals” and the social surveillance of the female body while reinforcing the same oppressive norms in more sophisticated ways. In contemporary representations of women in Western culture, social media is portrayed as a tool for subversion rather than as a part of the problem (Gill & Elias, 2014). The marriage of neoliberal and post-feminist ideologies exaggerate female advancement. In contemporary Western ads, women’s post-feminist attitudes towards themselves is one of the main ways in which the discipline and regulation of the female body has become more sophisticated. Gill (2008) describes women’s post-feminist attitudes towards themselves as a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification. Someone else is not sexually objectifying women but rather women sexually objectify themselves as a form of “empowerment”. Not only does post-feminist ideology contribute to the regulation and social surveillance of the female body, but it successfully adopts discourses of feminist “resistance” in order to reinforce patriarchal norms that govern female beauty and female sexuality. We will make this argument in relation to contemporary Western beauty norms, representations of female sexuality, and women’s fashion.

### **1. Empowerment as an Alibi for Sexism**

We will begin by problematizing how the post-feminist rhetoric of “empowerment” and “choice” is drawn on to get women to purchase products and engage in beauty practices. For women, failing to conform to Western beauty norms is socially consequential. Various studies have discovered that women who conform to Western standards of beauty receive higher incomes than women who do not (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011). Additionally, psychological studies show that it is common for people to believe that “beautiful” people are more intelligent, more trustworthy, more likeable and more desirable than less conventionally beautiful people (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Langlois, Kalakanis, Rubenstein, Larson, Hallam, & Smoot, 2000). In relation to these studies, the cultural privilege attached to achieving Western beauty standards is a compelling reason for women to engage in beauty practices. Many scholars have critiqued the post-feminist rhetoric of empowerment and choice for making effort invisible and for hiding the extent to which noncompliance with beauty norms is socially consequential for women (Bartky, 1990; Wolf, 1990; Gill, 2007, 2008). In contemporary representations of women in our post-feminist media culture, women playfully express themselves by choosing their level of engagement in beauty practices. However, this perspective ignores the cultural conditions that constrain women’s choices.

Many feminist attempts to analyse constraints on women’s choices often face accusations of erasing women’s agency. The post-feminist rhetoric of empowerment and choice poses a challenge for feminists who wish to leave some room for choice while also attending to the social conditions that constrain women’s choices. Therefore, it is crucial for feminist scholarship and activism to problematize “agency” and “choice” and the relationship between subjectivity and culture in a way that does not render women passive victims or illusory, “freely choosing” individuals (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011). Stuart & Donaghue (2011) use a feminist post-structuralist framework to examine how young Australian women position themselves as freely choosing and able to resist oppression. The women these authors interviewed with regard to hair removal practices did not describe conforming to beauty norms as a choice, but did describe noncompliance as a choice: A woman with a beard was seen as making a controversial statement and

the price for 'being herself' was that she would attract constant attention. The woman was questioned for failing to remove her beard, i.e. her choices were questioned.

This example indicates how non-conformity can be constructed as an active choice or statement, whereas conformance is often unnoticed and unquestioned. This also reveals the complexity involved in choice; while decisions are constructed as ultimately residing with each person (e.g. you choose to keep or remove facial hair), the consequences may serve to effectively remove that choice as an option. (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011, p. 113)

In Stuart & Donaghue's (2011) study, many of the women described non-conformance to hair removal practices as a choice, despite their experiences of social denigration and pressure to resume "normal" grooming practices. Given this conflict, it is not surprising that many women explained their engagement in beauty practices as necessary in order to provide themselves with confidence, self-esteem and "comfort" (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011). While "comfort" justifies the choices that women make about hair removal, it does not problematize the reason why the majority of women in Western culture feel the need to remove their body hair in order to feel comfortable in social settings. This post-feminist construct of "choice" makes little allowance for women to acknowledge the social pressures that constrain their choices as this conflicts with the neoliberal self as "self-responsible, flexible, and autonomous" (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011, p. 116). In our post-feminist media culture, beauty practices are "an unproblematic expression of the autonomous, self-regulating and self-choosing feminine subject" (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011, p. 117). This post-feminist framework ignores the physical and emotional toll on women to achieve Western beauty norms and enables the post-feminist rhetoric of empowerment and choice to convince women that their engagement in beauty practices is "free" and "empowering", removing any need to critique oppressive neoliberal, post-feminist ideologies.

Ironically, the discursive constructions that appear to value women's "natural beauty" and "choices" frequently reproduce conditions in which women feel the need to comply with oppressive beauty norms. Stuart, Kurz & Ashby (2012) describe this process in relation to breast augmentation. These authors argue that "women's choices are inherently socially influenced to the point where some women may feel they have little choice but to undergo procedures such as cosmetic surgery" (Stuart, Kurz & Ashby, 2012, p. 406). For women in our post-feminist media culture, cosmetic surgery is a form of self-help and "extreme" practices such as cosmetic surgery are a woman's psychological failure to retain self-acceptance and autonomy. Our post-feminist media culture encourages women to have cosmetic surgery to attain Western standards of beauty, while also pathologizing women who experience body dissatisfaction and choose to undergo cosmetic surgery as a result (Stuart et al., 2012). In post-feminist discourses about women's breasts, larger breasts are more desirable. However, despite this, breast augmentation is an unacceptable "choice" for women to make since it is taken as an indication that women have failed to resist appearance pressures regarding their breast size.

Breast augmentation is framed as socially undesirable since fake breasts are often described as "visually obvious", "excessively large", and "plastic looking" (Stuart et al., 2012, p. 410). This supports Gill's (2007) and Wolf's (1990) arguments that women must keep work that goes into beauty practices invisible. In our post-feminist media culture, having small breasts is undesirable but is not as bad as having breast implants due to the post-feminist belief that undergoing breast augmentation means that women are "trying too hard" (Stuart et al., 2012). In our post-feminist media culture, practices such as cosmetic surgery are the result of a woman's psychological failure to demonstrate self-acceptance and autonomy.

Due to their failure to present themselves as "self-confident, neoliberal subjects", women who undergo breast augmentation are frequently pathologized (Stuart et al., 2012). In Stuart et al.'s (2012) study, a woman's "choice" to have breast augmentation was often used as grounds for an accusation of individual deficiency or psychopathology: "The problem is would you have a relationship with a woman who has such low self-esteem they have to change themselves to make them feel better" (p. 411). This extract demonstrates how individual women are pathologized and vilified in relation to "confidence issues" and "low self-esteem" rather than there being any identification, acknowledgement, or examination of the social pressures that create low self-esteem and, therefore, the need to partake in breast augmentation. In post-feminist discourses about breast augmentation, the only thing that is worse than having small breasts is breast augmentation surgery itself, since women who undergo this procedure fail to present themselves as self-confident, neoliberal subjects. In such discourses, one can see how negative attitudes towards breast augmentation work to reinforce the same oppressive beauty norms that frequently create the desire to undergo breast augmentation in the first place (Stuart et al., 2012).

By pathologizing and vilifying women who have “low self-esteem” due to patriarchal beauty norms, neoliberal, post-feminist prescriptions for women remain intact as they are able to downplay the influence of oppressive beauty norms in the media by framing women’s actions as the result of “individual choice” or some form of psychopathology.

A study conducted by Rubin, Nemeroff & Russo (2004) also draws attention to the limitations of choice by showing that media literacy does not provide women with meaningful choices when faced with contemporary Western beauty norms. Rubin and colleagues found that feminist women’s knowledge of unrealistic beauty norms did not necessarily decrease the level of pressure they feel to engage in beauty practices, but rather contributed to the guilt they experience for failing to resist patriarchal beauty norms. Rubin et al.’s (2004) aim was to examine the specific strategies that young feminist women use to resist cultural ideologies. While feminism provided the women with an alternative way to interpret cultural ideologies of women’s bodies, and offered specific strategies to resist these ideologies on a personal and societal level, many women confided that “despite knowing better”, they still experience body dissatisfaction and shame about their appearance (Rubin et al., 2004). In this regard, media literacy is not sufficient for overcoming oppressive beauty norms in our post-feminist media culture. Media literacy as a solution to oppressive beauty norms is ineffective as it neither lowers nor eliminates the pressure that is placed on women to conform to Western beauty norms, and places the work of deconstructing harmful cultural messages about beauty onto women. Thus, by emphasizing the importance of media literacy, women are encouraged in a whole new way to become “responsible neoliberal subjects” (Gill, 2012, p. 741), successfully trivializing sexist media in the process.

## 2. Post-feminist Representations of Dieting

Cairns & Johnston (2015) discuss a common tension at the centre of neoliberal consumer culture between embodying discipline through dietary control and expressing freedom through consumer choice. Specifically, they argue that “embodied dimensions of neoliberalism find gendered expression through post-feminism” (Cairns & Johnston, 2015, p. 153). In contemporary North America, the so-called ideal woman is someone who knows that food will make her fat, but who works hard to avoid the appearance of dieting. We will discuss this in the context of the “do-diet” discourse, which are ads that frame dieting as a healthy “choice” and form of “empowerment” rather than a form of restriction (Cairns & Johnston, 2015). In this “do-diet” discourse, women know when to restrict their bodies and when to indulge (Cairns & Johnston, 2015). This is how dietary restrictions are framed as positive choices while maintaining an anti-diet message. For example, in a UK Harper’s Bazaar photoshoot with actor Jennifer Aniston, she says, “I eat really well and I work out, but I also indulge when I want to. I don’t starve myself in an extremist way. My advice: just stop eating shit everyday” (Huffpost, 2017). In this example, there is resistance against oppressive beauty norms that require women to enter a state of semi-starvation and health is a “positive choice”. In the “do-diet” discourse, the thin disciplined body is a responsible and successful neoliberal subject, while fat bodies are shamed as sites of failure. In our post-feminist media culture, women’s “empowerment” is emphasized through consumer “choice”, which is in contention with neoliberalism’s emphasis on discipline and self-control (Cairns & Johnston, 2015). Therefore, to be a “good neoliberal subject” is to master the tension between consumption and constraint.

By framing itself as “empowering”, the “do-diet” discourse successfully navigates the contradictory logic of consumer choice and self-control. The “do-diet” discourse criticizes women who are “too health obsessed” while creating social conditions in which women feel as though they need to restrict their eating habits. Despite pressure to avoid being viewed as health-obsessed, being too lenient about one’s eating habits “runs the risk of being perceived as ignorant, and perhaps worst of all fat” (Cairns & Johnston, 2015, p. 159). In a post-feminist context, the work of embodying health is associated with femininity, self-worth and choice. This post-feminist framework fetishizes “choice” at the expense of significant discussions about gender inequality. In post-feminist discourses about health, health and thinness are “desirable” and “empowering” in the promotion of commodities. One example of this is an ad that describes the health benefits of eating a tiny amount of dark chocolate every day by telling women to “indulge in dark chocolate daily” (Cairns & Johnston, 2015, p. 160). In another example, women are told, “Do eat smart after dark” (Cairns & Johnston, 2015, p. 160). In these examples (as well as many others) women are encouraged to consume in the service of health. In this post-feminist context, health is more important than female beauty, and healthy eating is a form of “empowerment”. This can be seen in an ad that says, “Skinny is not sexy. Health is” (Workout Quotes, 2018). In this context, choosing health is about making positive choices rather than about responding to body image pressures (Cairns & Johnston, 2015). Post-feminist dieting discourse draws on feminist critiques of oppressive body norms while also encouraging women to conform to the same thin body norm.

The control side of the “do-diet” discourse emphasizes hard work, discipline and education, which is required to make “good” food choices (Cairns & Johnston, 2015). Informed consumers must incorporate nutritional knowledge into everyday food choices to promote wellness and to protect their bodies from excess weight. The control side of the “do-diet” discourse requires continual education and self-improvement. This ongoing education and self-improvement is the key to controlling one's body and health. In this post-feminist context, thinness is the deserved outcome of healthy eating. Hence, “health replaces skinny as the paradigm of control” (Cairns & Johnston, 2015, p. 167). In this regard, gendered body ideals that associate femininity with thinness persist but are a matter of “choosing health”. Hence, celebrating healthy food choices while emphasizing the need for bodily discipline allows contradictory neoliberal discourses of consumption and self-control to co-exist. The emphasis on empowerment and choice aims to distract women from the fact that they are still oppressed by the same patriarchal beauty norms that post-feminist discourse claims is a thing of the past.

### 3. Post-feminist Representations of Female Sexuality

Another key way in which “empowerment” is utilized to divert attention away from gender inequality is in representations of female sexuality in our post-feminist media culture. This is particularly evident in representations of the “hot lesbian” in ads (Gill, 2009; Jackson & Gilbertson, 2009). The increasing rate of queer representations in ads is the result of the growth of queer media, the growing significance of the pink economy and the increasing “coolness” associated with queer sexualities (Gill, 2009). However, queer sexualities only emerge as a way to add “edginess” to a product's image (Gill, 2009; Mistry, 2000). Representations of lesbians in ads frequently conform to an attractive, conventionally feminine appearance (Gill, 2009; Mistry, 2000). As Gill (2009) describes, “Women depicted in this way are almost always slim yet curvaceous, flawlessly made up and beautiful” (p. 151). Thus, representations of lesbian women in contemporary ads mostly package lesbianism within heterosexual norms of female beauty. Thus, lesbian representations in our post-feminist media culture are for male titillation since men often watch the two seemingly lesbian women embrace in ads. In this regard, the sexuality of lesbian women is secondary to the “far more important” sexuality of straight men. Gill (2009) describes how these representations play out in two particular ways that are common in heterosexual male fantasies in pornography:

Either each woman will be shown with her ‘other’ e.g. a black woman with a blonde light skinned woman, in ways reminiscent of many soft porn scenarios in which men choose their ‘type’ or ‘flava’. Or, alternatively, they will be shown with another woman whom they resemble closely. This ‘doubling’ is, of course, another common male sexual fantasy which plays out in porn and is implicitly alluded to in many adverts. (p. 152). This sexualization of lesbian bodies occurs in a heteronormative framework, which trivializes lesbianism as an autonomous and plausible identity. Diamond (2005) refers to this concept as “heteroflexibility”, where women are thought to have “sexual agency” when in fact female sexual encounters are only taken seriously insofar as they revolve around heterosexual men. Placing lesbianism within a heteronormative framework trivializes lesbianism before it can be a possibility for women.

Hence, ads portray women as having the power to “resist” heteronormativity by “choosing” their sexuality, all while containing female sexuality within patriarchal sex norms.

The social regulation of female sexuality is demonstrated in Frith's (2015) research that draws on *Cosmopolitan* magazine to discuss the shift towards a post-feminist sexuality coupled with a rational management of sex as work. In post-feminist discourses of sexuality, orgasm is “the natural and necessary end-point of sexual interactions” (Frith, 2015, p. 310). In such discourses, the emphasis placed on orgasm for a natural and necessary end-point reinforces heteronormative gender roles by “rendering ‘atypical’ gender and sexual expressions, desires and appearances invisible and marginal, and narrowly defining what counts as legitimate and appropriate sexuality” (Frith, 2015, p. 311). As a result, women may consider their sexual interactions a failure if they do not orgasm during intercourse (despite experiencing orgasm in other sexual activities). Additionally, the gendered nature of orgasm discourse places unequal obligations on men and women to give orgasms to their partners and to perform orgasm to affirm their own sexual pleasure and the sexual skill of their partner (Frith, 2015). In post-feminist discourses of sexuality, women are compelled to pursue orgasm as an essential goal in sexual interactions, reflecting “a neoliberal shift towards a rational and managerial approach to sex” (Frith, 2015, p. 311). While men are frequently represented as “needing sex”, women are required to develop sexual skills to keep their assumed male partners satisfied. In post-feminist discourses of sexuality, “pleasing” men reaffirms women's self-worth, and is therefore “empowering”. Frith (2015) describes this process as follows:

“Having a Brazilian wax, ‘giving’ a blow job, engaging in anal sex, watching pornography, or being handcuffed to the bed become the emancipatory choices of women who feel empowered since facilitating male pleasure affirms their own sexiness” (p. 312). In this post-feminist context, Frith (2015) argues that women are liberated and empowered since sex is thought to be bold and transgressive in itself.

In line with the neoliberal rhetoric of self-improvement, sex is “increasingly characterized by quicker, longer, more intense and more frequent orgasms” (Frith, 2015, p. 313). An example can be seen in an article in *Cosmopolitan* magazine where sex is framed as something women should exercise and/or train for in order to be able to have “gold medal sex” (Cosmopolitan, 2012). *Cosmopolitan* magazine frequently draws on so-called experts to add legitimacy to the advice given. Frith (2015) states that this advice includes “instruction on how to interpret bodily sensations, how to position and move the body in order to experience pleasure, and how to hone the sexual body to achieve maximum efficiency” (p. 323). In this regard, “post-feminist discourses of ‘the sexual adventurer’ align with neoliberal discourses of work and management to position sexual bodies to be worked on, exercised, developed, known and manipulated in the pursuit of orgasmic goals” (Frith, 2015, p. 323). In post-feminist discourses of sexuality, the neoliberal drive for a continually improving sexual self combines with post-feminist demands for compulsory sexual agency (Frith, 2015). In this regard, a display of sexual knowledge and skill has become central to female sexuality, with magazines instructing women on how to improve their sex lives. Post-feminist discourses of sexuality are not only heteronormative, but they construct women as sexually knowledgeable and in need of expert instruction in order to achieve self-mastery (Frith, 2015). Despite the post-feminist discourse of “empowerment” and “agency” that is drawn on in contemporary representations of female sexuality, representations of the empowered woman who orchestrates sex misrepresents unequal gender relations by hiding the fact that women are less likely to experience orgasm in heterosexual relationships than men (Frith, 2015), and are only granted “freedom” and “agency” if their “choices” reinforce patriarchal sex norms.

#### **4. Post-feminist Representations of Women’s Fashion**

Post-feminist celebrations of “breaking fashion rules” also adopt discourses of feminist “resistance” in order to reinforce patriarchal norms and classism. In contemporary post-feminist fashion culture, women experience tension between expression and constraint when they have to express themselves “freely” all while managing a normative gender performance (Jolles, 2012). In this regard, women have to successfully display self-invention and self-regulation in post-feminist fashion culture in the figure of the fashion rule-breaker (Jolles, 2012). The contradiction between self-invention and self-regulation requires an investment in and detachment from social norms. In contemporary post-feminist fashion culture, self-invention is demonstrating resistance to fashion rules (Jolles, 2012).

An example is an ad from *Style & Company* that shows a woman in a printed wrap dress with a caption that says, “I have my own dress code. I wear what I want” (Jolles, 2012, p. 47). This implies that women who lack confidence or strong subjectivity are the only women that would follow fashion rules. In our post-feminist fashion culture, the importance of individualism ensures that self-invention is more important than self-regulation (Jolles, 2012). In this context, individuality is associated with defiance of and mastery over rules.

Post-feminism’s successful femininity is possible through a paradoxical relationship to cultural norms. This requires women to rely on cultural norms to perform middle-class respectability and self-regulation while resisting them to display uniqueness in post-feminism’s logic that reads self-defiance as self-invention (Jolles, 2012). Conforming to social norms takes on positive connotations when rule-following is the mark of self-regulation, and negative connotations when rule-breaking is needed for self-invention (Jolles, 2012). Post-feminism derives its ambivalence towards social norms by relying on a critique of norms and normalization that belongs to feminist traditions (Jolles, 2012). In our post-feminist media culture, feminist insights into normalization are interpreted as a condemnation of norms themselves, characterizing normalization oppressive in all of its forms (Jolles, 2012). This is problematic as it “ignores the enabling and productive nature of some norms to give meaning and shape to identity and experience” (Jolles, 2012, p. 49). Thus, post-feminism corrupts the insights of feminism by framing all norms as inherently oppressive.

In our post-feminist fashion culture, “being normal promises respectability, and, as its effect, the freedom to be oneself” (Jolles, 2012, p. 49). This is why self-regulation and self-invention are difficult to distinguish, as norms play a role in both.

Class privilege enables the freedom to invent oneself since those who are not at risk of losing their respectability have more freedom to break fashion rules (Jolles, 2012). Those who do not have class privilege likely adhere to rule-following.

While the post-feminist subject needs norms to achieve respectability, she declares independence from them to embody her own uniqueness (Jolles, 2012). Hence, a post-feminist subject gains power by manipulating the rules to her will, rather than being constrained by them. This can be understood as a post-feminist movement beyond feminism in which women are “free to choose” for themselves.

In our post-feminist media culture, the language of choice and empowerment, coupled with critiques of norms as oppressive, is from the earlier feminist movement. Although post-feminism celebrates women who will not be bossed around, feminism as “a set of strict, unforgiving rules has garnered real contempt due precisely to the post-feminist conception of norms as constraints on individual will” (Jolles, 2012, p. 54). In this regard, women who achieve successful femininity demonstrate a separation from feminism. Post-feminism's hostility towards feminism is enforced through its hostility towards norms. Thus, feminism is under attack for its normalizing rules (Jolles, 2012). This draws attention to the need for feminism to recognize that disruption is not always the form that agency takes. If Western feminism continues to equate disruptive behaviour with agency, it will continue to “produce the fertile ground for post-feminist affectations of defiance that serve, rather than undermine, symbolic violence among women” (Jolles, 2012, p. 57). Thus, resistance is not inherently politicizing but rather is appealing for a consumer culture that wants to sell women products (Gill, 2007). Through discourses of empowerment and rule-breaking, post-feminism successfully fetishizes female power and resistance while placing it within firm limits. This is why Jolles (2012) argues that it is crucial for feminism to distinguish between a dangerous post-feminism and a progressive feminism by defining feminism as “neither a disciplinary ideology nor an antagonist of all things normative” (p. 59). By adopting discourses of feminist “resistance”, post-feminist fashion culture reinforces patriarchal and classist norms that govern female beauty and fashion.

### **5. The Privilege of Empowerment**

In our post-feminist media culture, “empowerment” is an individualized phenomenon that is unrelated analytically to issues of power, inequality or oppression. As a result, post-feminist discourses of empowerment homogenize and ignore differences (Gill, 2012). In our post-feminist media culture, sexualization does not operate outside of gendering, racialization, and classism, and works within processes that are ageist, disablist, and heteronormative (Gill, 2012; Douglas, 2015). In the “do-diet” discourse, the feminine ideal is white, middle-class and heterosexual, erasing structural inequalities that shape the embodied lives of women.

In post-feminist discourses of sexuality, heterosexuality dominates with few representations of queer sexuality. When queer sexuality is present, it is contained within a heteronormative framework. Thus, women are empowered only insofar as they do not disrupt heteronormativity and male privilege. Lastly, in post-feminist fashion culture, economic disparities are set aside, which makes post-feminism white and middle-class by default. Throughout this section, we have demonstrated the importance of utilizing an intersectional analysis of oppression when problematizing post-feminist discourses of “empowerment” and “choice”. Since empowerment and choice are cast as individualized phenomena that are not related analytically to issues of power, inequality or oppression, our post-feminist media culture is able to naturalize the myth that women no longer need feminism to overcome oppression.

### **6. Conclusion**

Throughout this research paper, we have demonstrated the ways in which empowerment is utilized as a part of an ideological agenda to direct women's attention away from the fact that they have not gained equality, with particular attention being paid to representations of female beauty and female sexuality in our post-feminist media culture. Currently, post-feminist discourses of empowerment are used to sell anything from food to makeup by adopting feminist critiques without taking up feminism's social, economic and political goals. Since “empowerment” is fraught with many contradictory messages and meanings, its use analytically is a difficult and harmful project (Gill, 2012). Since empowerment is an individualized phenomenon that is unrelated analytically to issues of power, inequality or oppression in our post-feminist media culture, we must understand oppression and resistance through a relational approach. As Parkins (1999) argues, “the individual is only defined by her relationship to the world and to other individuals; she exists only by transcending herself, and her freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others” (p. 380).



This relational approach to resistance provides a stronger foundation for the feminist movement since it makes it increasingly possible to attend to intersectional oppression by taking the social, economic and political reality of women's lives into account when advocating for social justice. By making beauty practices, dieting, sexuality and fashion seem as though they are simply a matter of choice, contemporary visual texts are able to fetishize female power while placing it within firm limits.

Although post-feminism frames Western beauty practices as a form of empowerment and choice, women are encouraged to conform to sexist beauty norms in a more sophisticated manner, making our post-feminist media culture increasingly difficult to critique. In our post-feminist media culture, gendered body ideals that associate femininity with thinness persist but are "a matter of choosing health". Ads often portray women as having the power to "resist" heteronormativity by "choosing" their sexuality, all while containing female sexuality within patriarchal sex norms. Additionally, women are empowered to develop sexual skills to keep their assumed male partner satisfied, since sex is thought to be bold and transgressive in itself (Frith, 2015). In post-feminist fashion culture, the post-feminist subject needs norms to achieve respectability, but must declare independence from them in order to affirm her own uniqueness. In this context, a post-feminist subject gains power by manipulating the rules to her will, rather than being constrained by them (Jolles, 2012). This is reflective of our post-feminist media culture that claims that women have achieved equality and are free to choose for themselves. As a result, future attention needs to be paid to the role of female complicity (Monteverde, 2014), not to blame women, but rather to develop a deeper understanding of the ways in which "the model of choice eschews psychological complexity by refusing to address how power works in and through subjects" (Gill, 2007, p. 76). An understanding of the role that post-feminist ideology has on this psychological component is crucial as it is far more complex than post-feminist discourses of empowerment and choice will have us believe. Ultimately, our post-feminist media culture is able to reinforce gender inequality by regulating female sexuality under the guise of "empowerment". Thus, misunderstanding the consequences of our post-feminist media culture is to misunderstand women's position in the contemporary social order, allowing the fetishization of female power in service of patriarchal norms to continue.

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