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Linda Chardon

The Personal, Political and the Virtual?

Redefining Female Success and Empowerment in a Post-feminist Landscape

Choice. Consumerism. Success. These are what define modern women's liberation. This is the feminism of today. It is broken. The private and professional spheres are so immeasurably separated that women are left empty and unsatisfied. They don't understand. They feel that women have progressed and moved forward, but the modern woman doesn't see why progress doesn't feel more progressive. The "post-feminist" young woman remains unfulfilled. She does everything; she is burnt out and she is tired. So, what is missing? Well, since the dawn of feminism there has been a fight for women's rights and equal opportunities for women in a "man's world." Today, we define feminine success in terms of masculine models; we frame our "feminist" triumphs in the language of the patriarchy of society. Popular culture and cultural values have perpetuated these beliefs and reinforced these standards in all aspects of women's lives. Where we should be searching to discover what defines both professional and relational equality for women, we have, as an alternative, borrowed the organizing structures of male hierarchies and applied these systems to females. Women must be successful as a man would be in regards to career. Women must exploit their sexual agency and have many casual sexual partners, as a man would. We view this as power.

But what is our post-feminist power? If it truly is our right to "choose," we must make choices that fulfill *our* desires and *ourselves* on our own terms. What is it that women of today *truly* want? Feminism in our society acts under a guise of "choice," and functions under a quest for perfection as the goals of female equality and "liberation." The independent woman has become the heroine of modern feminism. But independence, at its core, implies separation. A separation from something or someone, an act of being separated and an act that leaves you alone. This freedom, these "choices", can leave you empty and broken—leave you "alone together" in the world of today (Turkle). In fact, this is the trend of the contemporary world: that of fragmentation.

Parallel to characteristics that define the digital era, post-feminism can leave women's "self" feeling fragmented.

Digital technologies' pervasiveness and accessibility has allowed pop culture and politics to infiltrate every aspect of our lives, at any time of day. This forces an increase in women's exposure to culture, and therefore further propagates the effects pop culture has on societal standards for women. Post-feminism argues that gender inequality seen in culture and society no longer exists, and that we live in a world where the female private and the public spheres exist harmoniously, free of sexism. Yet, through my analysis, we see that these inequities continue to persist in today's society, and that the feminist goal of bringing the personal and political together is as relevant as ever. I argue that digital technologies and the virtual world have contributed to this reconfiguration between the public and private spheres of women's lives today while also complicating and challenging the feminine/feminist and personal/political dichotomies. As Sherry Turkle argues, digital technologies confuse public space and private space, and create new ways in which the personal and political are separated. She claims that, with new mobile technology, "what people mostly want from public space is to be alone with their personal networks. It is good to come together physically, but it is more important to stay tethered to our devices" (Turkle, 14). Turkle further reiterates, "we defend connectivity as a way to be close, even as we effectively hide from each other" (281).

In this essay, I am calling for a reunification of all spheres of feminine life: a repair of "self" through collaboration and reconciliation. I want women to feel whole again. There must be a recombination of the political and personal spheres, to bring them together and provide women with inner sustainability. Interestingly enough, I feel that digital technologies and web culture may be critical in this resolution between the personal and the political, for the Web has the power to bolster both the collective and the individual. Additionally, the digital world promotes the collective action of social movements like no other communication technology has before. The potential egalitarian and global nature of digitization may provide an environment to bring about the most powerful feminist movement the world has yet to see. I believe women *can* do it all, but not as long as we are operating under the expectations of a system originally constructed by men. The patriarchal hierarchies and systems of current society, such as the modern professional environment, the economy, the sex culture, and the domestic sphere, are restricting our equality and essentially dictating the "choices" and options women have to choose from. We must redefine

what women want and need—what does success in all aspects of life look like for a female? How should it look? Most importantly women must learn to support each other, for how can we expect men, society, and culture to respect us if we don't respect each other and ourselves? It ends now. We cannot continue to perpetuate this system. Otherwise we will be left with shells of once great women—empty, confused, unsatisfied and exhausted.

FEMINISM: A HISTORY

To understand the condition of feminism today, we must first understand the history of feminism and the past goals and accomplishments of this movement. Often, literature and scholars divide feminism into waves as a way of explaining the changes of the movement throughout time. This is, however, not always the case, and other scholars will instead divide feminisms based on "type" or the conceptual focus of a particular form of feminism (i.e. liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, socialist feminism, psychoanalytic feminism) (Coleman, 4). The differences in effectiveness of historical categorical strategies of feminism has been debated by some, but for the purpose of this essay, let us begin with the first wave of feminism.

First-wave feminism is said to have been launched at a women's rights convention in New York, where Elizabeth Stanton and other activists drafted the "Declaration of Sentiments" in 1848 (Dicker & Piepmeier, 9). The basic message of the declaration was a call for the necessity of women obtaining the same rights and privileges that men had in the United States. The movement really began to gain momentum in the late 19th century, and continued on through the early 20th century (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 1). The goal of the movement began with gaining access to the public sphere, or essentially gaining a legal identity for women—providing them with the rights to own property, to sue, to form contracts and to vote (Dicker & Piepmeier, 9). It then progressed to promoting equal opportunities in society (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 1).

The "suffragists" also advocated for abolition, voting rights, and temperance causes (Sidler, Heywood and Drake, 23), and "were primarily focused on legal and institutional changes that would allow women to gain more power and autonomy" (Martin) to fight for social justice. They frequently utilized unconventional forms of activism and defied traditional gender stereotypes to encourage political and social change. In one instance, the National Women's Party organized a protest during World War I outside the White House, where they displayed the message that Germany had granted women's suffrage but the United States had not (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 3).

The positive portrayal of Germany shocked both the public and the government, but the fact remained that the statement was true. This display of public persuasion defied the stereotypes surrounding women in that time period, and the women's rights movement challenged society to reevaluate "proper" feminine behavior (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 5). After a long, hard-fought battle, the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in 1920 and women had won the right to vote (Dicker & Piepmeier, 9). Both "liberal feminism" and "socialist feminism" were developed during this movement.

Second-wave feminism arose in the 1960s and 1970s in the conditions of a postwar Western welfare society (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 1), where a variety of oppressed groups were beginning to rise up and advocate for their civil rights. This movement was set in motion by the activism of other movements, including the Civil Rights Movement and countercultural protests (Dicker & Piepmeier, 9). Where the first-wave is often called the "women's rights movement" the second-wave is referred to as the "women's liberation movement" (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 8). The goal was to gain full human rights for women in all aspects of their lives and empower women through policy changes reflecting equal opportunities in employment and education, access to childcare and abortion, and the eradication of violence against women (Dicker & Piepmeier, 9). As a movement, second-wave feminism focused on the Equal Rights Amendment, wage equity, criticizing beauty culture, the separation between "sex" and "gender" and consequential analysis of the social construction of gender roles, as well as the collaboration with other minority and New Left movements (Sidler, Heywood and Drake, 23). Its intent was to free women from the oppressive confines of our patriarchal culture and society, and activists strived for the social and psychological liberation of women (Martin).

Second-wave feminists believed sisterhood was powerful and that, collectively, women could empower one another (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 9). They moved beyond equal opportunity in the public sphere by also attempting to record sexism in the private sphere. They debated subjects like the "politics" of housework, the confines of marriage and motherhood, the expression of sexual freedom, and women's right to their own bodies. These ideals are embodied in the second-wave slogan, "the personal is the political." Second-wavers established a feminist agenda that attempted "to combine social, sexual, and personal struggles and to see them as inextricably linked" (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 10).

Consciousness-raising was a key method employed by the second-wave movement to raise awareness and prompt change. According to Hogeland (108), consciousness-raising functions in three ways: first, as an instrument for mass movement recruitment; second, as a device for personal transformation; and third, as a theory-building strategy that operates in a space between theory and action. At its core, consciousness-raising was enacted through group meetings where women collectively spoke about and examined their experiences, taught each other to recognize strategies of patriarchal oppression, instructed members in establishing other groups, and eventually focused on shifting this awareness to specific political action (Hogeland, 111). Consciousness-raising (CR), as a recruitment strategy, provided a way for women to raise awareness about the cause and gain a following to push the movement forward. This is expressed as "mass-movement feminism" or even "liberal feminism" in the sense that it attempted to organize a large quantity of women using the power of numbers, media pressure, persuasion and rhetoric (Hogeland, 111). Personal transformation was a type of CR that dealt with personal change on an individual basis where women believed that working to change the sexism and oppression in their private life could then come together and lead to larger-scale social change (Hogeland, 113). Through CR, women were able to come together and speak about the issues they were experiencing in their lives and then work toward a solution. One individual's stories or transformation may effect another and so on and so forth eventually leading to viable action for major change. In this way, "personal change precedes political change"—change yourself and then you can then work to change the world (Hogeland, 114).

The saying "the personal is the political" was one of the major concepts for second wave feminism. However, since its start, the meaning has frequently been misinterpreted. The original intention of this expression was to identify the oppression and inequality women were experiencing in their personal lives and expose structural change onto these issues in order to generate real political transformation. "The personal is political was meant to argue that politics construct our lives at home, as a way of breaking the public/private barrier on our theorizing—it was never meant to argue that our lives at home were our politics" (Hogeland, 115). I believe that in some ways this misinterpretation have helped to create a more individualized, and potentially a more selfish, feminism that is based on working toward personal liberation rather than success as a collective movement. This also may help explain particular trends of feminism in current society, including the idea of empowerment by individual "choice."

Theory-building as a type of consciousness-raising was the important step between personal experience and political action within the movement (Hogeland, 117). The CR group utilizes its experiences within the group to build on specific concepts, develop tactics for resistance, and consequently create an outline for action. This is the process of theory—when ideas and observations transform into concrete arguments, devices and strategies. These theories allow feminism to come forward and call for political change in some specific way. Scholars argue that consciousness-raising as a feminist strategy was most prominent in the second wave but, in fact, still occasionally exists today within the movement and should resurface further, as it may be one of the more effective tools in pursuit of feminism's success (Hogeland, 117) (Dicker & Piepmeier, 5).

As the movement progressed, the vision morphed slightly around the 1980s when more diversity was introduced and the concept that identity is intersectional was explored. "Even if sisterhood is global, not all women's lives and experiences are identical" (Dicker & Piepmeier, 9), and this established the basis for the part of the movement known as third world feminism. A multitude of views formed through the analysis of the diversified intersections of gender, class, race/ethnicity and sexuality and the negotiation of identity, or "identity politics," became another focus of women's liberation (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 15). The later portion of this wave was marked by greater inclusion of women from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. Both "difference feminism" and "third world feminism" were developed during the second wave.

The third wave of feminism is a movement that is highly disputed. In fact, some scholars doubt its existence. Yet regardless of whether or not today's feminism is simply an extension of the second-wave or is no longer relevant due to a post-feminist era, the third wave of feminism is accepted by enough sources to be discussed. What is not necessarily as accepted or agreed upon are the defining messages and philosophies behind the movement, but that will be investigated later in this section. Third-wave feminism developed in the late twentieth century influenced by academic and cultural critiques of globalism, capitalism, neoliberalism, informational technology, environmental crisis, and commercialism, and theoretical perspectives derived from postcolonialism, postmodernism, and postsocialism (Dicker & Piepmeier, 10). The term "third wave" when referring to the feminist movement was first coined by Rebecca Walker in a 1992 *Ms*. magazine article (Dicker & Piepmeier, 10). The grrls, or great-girls, were born, and feminist power was transformed into something playful and self-assertive (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 16). Portions of the movement such as "lipstick feminism" or "cybergrrl feminism" were brought to life in this

emphasis on strength, diversity, individuality and choice. The third wave derived some of its qualities from the earlier third world feminism, including the insistence on women's diversity and complex concepts of identity. In essence, it seems to rejects traditional and "stereotypical" understanding of feminism and, in this way, is generally perceived as antithetical to the second wave (Dicker & Piepmeier, 5).

Heywood and Drake claim that the third wave is —"a movement that contains elements of second wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse, and power structures while it also acknowledges and makes use of the pleasure, danger, and defining power of those structures" (3). Through this definition, we see that, in embracing diversity and employing inclusion, the third-wave must often, then, embrace contradictions, as well as "paradox, conflict, multiplicity [and]…messiness" (Dicker & Piepmeier, 16). Such "ambiguity and diversity" (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 2) is the result of a commitment to and privileging of transversal dialogue and politics, rather than framing concepts as universal or particular. This generation of feminists exhibits a variety of balanced oppositions in ways that they are regarded as "passionate yet playful" and "inclusive yet rigorous" (Dicker & Piepmeier, 10). Through methods that second-wavers may have seen as disempowering, third-wavers employ individual choice and sexual agency as forms of empowerment. For example, Marcelle Karp and Debbie Stoller, editors of *The Bust Guide to the New World Order*, declared "'[their] tits and hips and lips – are power tools'" (qtd. in Coleman 9).

The issue third-wave feminists were facing at the time of the gathering of this movement was something many scholars refer to as "backlash"—essentially, a fear of feminism or the anti-feminist sentiments of a "postmodern world" or a "postfeminist" world (Dicker & Piepmeier, 11). Many scholars have critiqued the third wave for its apparent lack or disinterest in politics and activism. Though this may be the case, it is possible that this lack-of-action is a symptom of the current postmodern condition. The backlash and postmodern environment made the mobilization of the third-wave more difficult than ever before, and, because third-wavers grew up with the opportunities the women before them provided for them, the level of difficulty further increased (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 2). As a result of the backlash and the change of the times, third-wave feminism generally critiques and rejects portions of second-wave feminism and emphasizes individual empowerment in all aspects of women's lives (Coleman, 10-11).

These third-wave texts speak to people who may not necessarily want to call themselves feminist, but still want to address issues of oppression and inequality in today's world (Renegar and

Sowards, 2). Observing, emphasizing and employing "contradiction" frequently occurs in third wave feminist literature as a method of recognizing the complexity and multiplicity of the global environment (Renegar and Sowards, 2). Jennifer Borda claims that this focus on pluralism may operate under the third wave intention to settle complicated tensions that were not dealt with by the second-wave, "such as emboldening women *both* personally and politically" (9). Numerous scholars claim that the deliberate use of contradiction is a method third-wavers utilize to disrupt normative thinking and foster a sense of agentic self-determination (Renegar and Sowards, 14) (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 16) (Kroløkke, 147). Though I do not necessarily agree with the idea of contradiction as agency (Renegar and Sowards), I think a valuable part of the third-wave use of contradiction is the exposure of a potential third option when presented with a two-option dichotomy. Employing contradiction, like metaphor, "takes elements of meaning apart in order to bring them back together again in new, unexpected combination" (Emirbayer and Mische qtd. in Renegar and Sowards 8). This new combination, or third option, may present alternatives outside of the current systems, structures, and ways of thinking. It also can reveal the constructed and false sense of "choice" provided for women in today's postmodern world.

Through my review, I believe that this constant acceptance of contradiction may be detrimental to the third-wave movement as a whole. When does contradiction simply become confusion? In promoting a "free-to-be-me" type feminism, there is also a promotion of a type of "feminist free-for-all" that lacks direction and core values (Coleman, 9). In my analysis, I have noticed that, similar to Coleman's observations, much of third-wave feminism's efforts involved the production of concepts, narratives and dichotomies without clear theories and political strategies to assess them through. If we completely accept multiplicity and differing opinions, this agreement and harmony will keep the movement at a standstill and deter steps toward change. Katie Roiphe (6) made an important call for the return of dissent, and I believe that through dialogue and uninhibited discussion it is possible to use these contradictions to present new outcomes—rather than choosing between the two options, exploring them may inspire the creation of a third option. "Patriarchy constructs false dichotomies that force women into either/or decisions where neither option is attractive. [Mary] Daly's method of over-coming these pseudo-forced choices is to devise a third option that transcends the foreground limitations embedded within false dichotomies" (Renegar, 131).

I do understand the third-wave's critique regarding the homogenizing of feminism and how this can oppress some women fighting in a movement against oppression. Universal "sisterhood" may not be the answer, and it is important to foster differing beliefs rather than sacrifice them for the power of the unified movement. Still, are we not all "sisters" in a sense? Do we not all want to globally liberate women everywhere to allow them a claim to equality and opportunity in all aspects of their lives? This is where it may be essential that feminism break based on goals and objectives rather than "waves." Accepting contradiction and all opinions wholeheartedly, reveals that feminism neither agrees to disagree nor does it disagree; currently, it agrees to "evade" (Hogeland, 118). Is contradiction as agency simply contradiction as evasion? Through this viewpoint and the third-wave lack of dissent, "we foreclose the real conversations feminists must have about politics, conversations that could help us clarify our positions, conversations that could help us work more effectively both together and separately" (Hogeland, 118).

Following this belief, it is sometimes argued that generational-thinking or "wave" thinking can restrict feminism and be detrimental to the movement as a whole. Generational thinking in its construction makes generalizations about groups of people and therefore can cause defensive attitudes and feelings of marginalization (Hogeland, 110). The social climate and culture is always changing and as such often puts generations in positions of opposition to one another. "The rhetoric of generational differences in feminism works to mask real political differences—fundamental differences in our visions of feminism's tasks and accomplishments" (Hogeland, 107) and can cause "waves" to simply reject the feminism of the generation before them in efforts to detach from the previous generation. Accrediting the differences in feminist thought to generational difference rather than to theoretical or political difference forces us into a "mother/daughter" relational mindset rather than a "sister" or an equal with different thoughts and opinions (Hogeland, 118). Rather than simply rejecting *some* of the previous feminist thought and actually adding to or utilizing other portions of it, the generational aspect of division seems to force us to, at first, reject most if not all of the previous feminist ways. Also, generational thinking can confine the movement to account for all feminist thinking at a certain time, and therefore can either marginalize different feminist beliefs in a time period or force the "wave" to develop theories to explain these differences.

Feminism has progressed throughout time in a specific pattern, moving from an emphasis on equity to universalism to difference to particularism to transversity (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 23).

We see that this follows the pattern of the waves: first wave began with a fight for equity and as such adopted universal thinking; second wave confronted, but did not resolve, difference and moved toward more particular, individual thinking; and third wave tried to rejoin both with transversal thinking which acknowledges individuals in the light of diversity and multiplicity. In thinking about the organization of feminism, it may be more effective to create branches rather than generational waves—such as liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, socialist feminism, psychoanalytic feminism (Coleman, 4), and more in the past—in order to foster both differences in opinion and clear visions for political actions in the future.

So, where is feminism today? Deborah Spar claims that her generation, or the third-wavers/modern feminists, "made a mistake." She states, "We took the struggles and the victories of feminism and interpreted them somehow as a pathway to personal perfection. We privatized feminism and focused only on our dreams and our own inevitable frustrations" (Kantor). The opportunities second-wave feminism has provided us, as women, has allowed us to have a feeling of possibility for the world and for our future. Due to the backlash and the societal view of "man-hater" feminism, many of today's young women identify more with the idea of "I'm not a feminist but…" I still believe in equal opportunity for everyone. However, it seems, the female opportunities in modern society have also transformed us into a more selfish group of women. We perform acts of personal empowerment and have an individualistic view on exercising our power—feeling good about oneself and having the power to make our own choices seems to be what constitutes agency in the third-wave (Coleman, 8).

In my own investigation, I feel the third-wave lacks a certain degree of power, popular understanding and allegiance for various reasons including backlash, postmodernism, capitalism, feminist progress, etc, and consequently feminism today seems to act as a kind of "background" feminism. As women, we *have* made a great deal of progress thanks to the feminists that have come before us. There are growing numbers of women participating and excelling in academic institutions of all kinds, in the workplace, in the media, and in politics and the government (McRobbie, 74), and it is important to note that a *substantial* degree of equity has been won for women in certain areas of life. This is where some people argue that feminism no longer exists, or is necessary, and that we may live in a post-feminist world. However, abundant inequities continue to exist for women, and this is why it is important that we do not fall into this way of thinking.

Contrary to concepts of modern feminism is the belief held by some that we are currently not in a third wave, but that, instead, we are past feminism in general and are living in a post-feminist era. Post-feminism is part of the larger postmodern movement, and makes the assumption that oppressive institutions have been resolved and now there is a dependence on the making of personal choices by individual women in ways that will support those societal changes and uphold a path of empowerment (Coleman, 7). Coleman refers to postfeminism as a "slippery beast" in the sense that it celebrates "feminism's" success but does this through the belief that its success was based on natural cultural evolution rather than feminist's efforts (7). Post-feminism presents itself as a type of shadow feminism or substitute feminism for a pseudo-postmodern world that has seen the effects of second-wave feminist backlash. Despite the great deal of progress the second-wavers made for women and feminism as a movement, it seems that, in fact, in the contemporary world "traditional structures of oppression" such as the news media, popular culture, literature, etc, still remain in power (Dicker & Piepmeier, 21). The lure of the postmodern condition allows these traditional structures to convey the message that we, as a society, have moved beyond oppression and inequality.

The guise of "choice" is essential when considering the concept of post-feminism. Culture and society today creates a figure of a girl or young woman who displays her empowerment through her "capacity, success, attainment, enjoyment, entitlement, social mobility and participation" (McRobbie, 57). This creates the illusion of a comfortable place beyond feminism where women are liberated to choose for themselves what they want, and don't want, to do. "Crucially, postfeminism often functions as a means of registering and superficially resolving the persistence of 'choice' dilemmas for American women" (Negra, 2). These messages and images involving "life choice" dilemmas are conveyed to women through popular culture, the media and societal actions. Still, it is difficult to argue the existence of a true post-feminism due to the overwhelming number of inequities and inequalities that still exist in society currently (Coleman, 7).

Nevertheless, in my research, it seems that some scholars treat post-feminism as more of a movement than a condition. In these cases, critics and feminists are not satisfied with third-wave feminism and are searching for another option or a "new" feminism. Women today are left with conflicting and confusing messages with regard to feminism, and this can create an environment in which feminism has lost its way and does not necessarily positively influence younger generations. Currently, most conventional "post-feminism" ideals are conveyed and encouraged through popular

culture, politics and the media, and, as such, permeate both the private and public spheres of feminine life. These post-feminist messages, essentially implying we as women have come far enough to no longer need feminism, affect society and contemporary women in a variety of ways. Yet, more often than not, these messages have negative effects on women and the feminist movement. Coleman makes an incredibly astute point that

> the new feminism seems largely silent on issues that have absorbed old feminism for decades; issues such as why, when we have had an Equal Pay Act since 1972, women still only get around 83-85% of men's average wage in the same occupations, or why we still have not achieved a basic equality (assuming that equality means 50-50) of representation in parliament, on governing bodies and advisory boards, and the like. Presumably the gender pay gap and lack of equality in political representation are women's choice? (Coleman, 4)

If culture continues to operate under the artificial assumption that we live in a post-feminist era, there may be lasting consequences for women everywhere.

THE CURRENT CONDITION OF FEMININE LIFE

At present, women living in modern culture and society are faced with many inequities, inequalities, and oppressive structures in both their private and political life of which they may not be aware. In my analysis, I identify a number of areas in current American society and culture where women face inequality and disempowerment in their professional and personal lives. Though it may seem as if a great deal of feminist progress has been made in the past few decades, my research shows that this is not entirely the case.

In the United States today, a little more than half of the national population is female, yet women represent less than a quarter of the national government—"only 13 of 100 U.S. senators and only 59 of 435 representatives are women" (Dicker & Piepmeier, 6). America has also never had a female president. Politics and the government, as a portion of the public sphere of women's lives, reveal inequalities that still exist for women today. Currently, females do not have accurate representation in government, and consequently can encounter difficulties when trying to actively participate as citizens, leaders, and policy makers. Employing laws and political change is key for movements fighting for social change. If we can change the structures that these inequalities exist in, we can create new institutions and political frameworks where civil rights and equality can flourish.

It seems a large number of the feminist issues that exist today in the public sphere involve the progressively more unstable economy and job market, and feminist political action should work to allow equality to function within those conditions (Sidler, Heywood and Drake, 32). The capacity to work or joining the workforce is no longer only an *opportunity* for young women, but often is a *necessity* due the current state of the country. In this way, the economy dictates the need for a career rather than female empowerment or independence (Sidler, Heywood and Drake, 26). "The pressure to do well and make money in an age of diminishing economic expectations looms larger than it did for those who went to college in the sixties and seventies" (Roiphe, 13). In 1973, 57 percent of twenty-something women were working, and by 1993 that number had risen to 73 percent (Sidler, Heywood and Drake, 26). Though more women are entering the professional sphere than in the past, it seems that through this examination of the economy not all women view the ability to join the workforce as an opportunity. In fact, many recent female college graduates who have four-year degrees are being forced to work one "McJob" to the next, and, as Krueger notes, these young women's future professional aspirations are going to be further complicated by their desires for a family (Sidler, Heywood and Drake, 29).

Many of the feminist battles throughout the history of feminism have involved the fight for equality and female empowerment in the professional sphere and workplace settings. This focus on work has come to dominate the ideas surrounding female empowerment, and the modern girl's wage-earning capacity often is used to argue feminism's complete success. The "high-achieving girl" (McRobbie, 76) has been used by society and culture as a poster-child of modern feminism to show the improvements that have been made within education and the government. Consequently, though, wage-earning capacity and work has come to define and dominate the modern woman's self-identity (McRobbie, 61). Occupational status is now a large component of young women's presentation of self, and, as such, the contemporary female is motivated, ambitious and develops a clear life-plan at an early age (McRobbie, 77).

While there has been a great deal of progress when it comes to women and careers, inequalities in the job market and the office still exist in modern society. The Pay Gap between male and female workers has been a major concern of feminists in recent years. Currently, American women earn approximately seventy-three cents to a man's dollar when factors such as age, education, experience, occupation and industry are controlled for (Dicker & Piepmeier, 6). Additionally, "women between 25 and 34 are still making an average salary only 82 percent that of

their male counterparts" (Sidler, Heywood and Drake, 29). Even more concerning are the statistics surrounding women and managerial positions or upper-level careers. For the past ten years in the US job market, women have had only 17 percent of the board seats and only 14 percent of the top corporate jobs (NPR Staff and Sandberg). Essentially, this means that, in the current professional environment, "99.94 percent of the CEOs and 97.3 percent of the top earners are men" (Dicker & Piepmeier, 4). Of the Fortune 500 companies in 2002, only six of those CEOs were women (Dicker & Piepmeier, 6).

When examining these statistics, we can see that an enormous inequity is present in the decision-making and power-brokering positions of the workforce—women are not being represented in these upper-level positions. The managerial position wage gap between women and men, in fact, *increased* from 1995 to 2000 (Dicker & Piepmeier, 6), and the income pay gap between male and female college graduates has also widened since the mid-1990's (Negra, 1). "Nationally, women now outnumber men in college enrollment by 4 to 3 and outperform them in graduation rates and advanced degrees" (Taylor, 2). It seems that, although women are becoming more and more educated, this is not entirely translating to the job market. The startling conclusion is, then, that although females have become more educated and gain a variety of degrees, this high level of academic achievement is not correlating with upper-level management positions. Why is this the case? And what can we do to rectify this imbalance?

There is also a certain level of inequity within the workplace setting itself. The "working girl" or "young career woman" has benefitted from feminism of the past, and, often, the assumption is made that, now that she has the capacity to do so, she can pursue her personal desires in the workplace without occupational gender inequality (McRobbie, 78). Yet, even the women who obtain their desired job and are considered "successful" in today's job market can still experience disempowerment in the professional environment. Angela McRobbie suggests that modern women put on a "post-feminist masquerade" when operating in the world of today to acquire a level of success without seriously disrupting traditional structures and institutions. As such, females are constantly balancing agency, i.e. their supposed "freedom" to ascend in the workplace, and structure, i.e. the established and traditional professional institutions, to reach the optimal level of "success" and empowerment in current society.

Subsequently, this is how the "background" feminism continues to function—underneath a guise—through ambitious aspirations without actions that will completely rock the boat. Perhaps

subconsciously, modern working women acting under this "post-feminist masquerade" are aware of their threat to men as competition in the labor market and enact certain nervous gestures to reduce conflict: regularly apologizing, wearing "feminine" clothing, making "'oh silly me'" type "self-reprimands" (McRobbie, 66). This compromise allows the working girl to achieve status in the workplace without "going too far", and, in this way, allows her to continue to be desirable to men (McRobbie, 79). In fact, Sandberg reveals data that demonstrates positive correlations between male success and likability, and *negative* correlations between female success and likability (NPR Staff). This is consistent with the idea that the successful woman must constantly reassert her conventional femininity while also slightly disempowering herself in the workplace environment to maintain her desirability and likability.

As a result, the contemporary workplace culture operating under cultural ideas of post-feminism portrays an environment that is "competitively anti-social and corrupt" (Negra, 89). This cynicism in regard to the public sphere can drive the private and the public spheres apart and continues to perpetuate their separation. Regarding the private sphere, professional women of today are demanding more flexibility in the workplace environment in their attempts to foster their domestic life and lives as mothers (Sidler, Heywood and Drake, 29). Yet, it seems that inequity continues to exist here as well. Women of today are delaying marriage and motherhood due to their ability to come forward in the job market (McRobbie, 85). There is often a social compromise made on the part of working mothers, and this might be part of the answer to the question asked about why the most skilled and well-educated women are not making it to the top of the labor market.

The economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett conducted a study of professional women and children and determined that more than half, 55 percent, of 35-year-old working women were childless. Also, more relevant to my argument, she found that 49 percent of female corporate executives that earned $100,000 or more did not have children, in comparison to the 19 percent of male corporate executives (Dowd). This means that only 51 percent of upper-level career women have children, yet 81 percent of upper-level career men have children. We can see that there is an obvious disconnect between occupational success and domestic success for the women of today. "Every day come stories that pick apart the rise of women (claiming that working women are 'bitchy' bosses, neglectful mothers and selfish, barren singles, for instance); the subtext always being that it would

be much better if we would just retreat to our homes to practice our baking and child-rearing" (Cochrane, 27).

Popular culture and the media reiterate these current societal beliefs about the "working girl" and directly feed the "post-feminist masquerade". In fact, cultural attitudes are directly influenced by the media, and as a result create images and messages for what contemporary femininity should look like. Many of the inequities we see in the female public and private spheres of everyday life are enabled and disseminated by values and meanings portrayed by popular culture and the media. Large media structures "not only affect our public world but also shape the self-images and choices available to people—especially adolescent girls" (Dicker & Piepmeier, 22). The images and meanings created by these messages present us with "*should's"*—what we *should* wear and do, how we *should* act and see ourselves. The media is curating these images and arguments presented in popular culture through a process known as agenda setting; big media decides which issues are discussed and how, and therefore is able to maintain their power through the maintenance of the status quo (Dicker & Piepmeier, 37). Additionally, the messages and issues being shown are generally influenced by the desires of advertisers, and although we are told the media covers "what the public wants", the media frequently instead "prioritize[s] profit over the public interest" (Dicker & Piepmeier, 46).

Current popular culture, aligning with a post-feminist ideology, focuses many female narratives around anxiety and empowerment women may feel in relation to home, time, work and consumerism (Negra, 12). The idea created is one where, if women are able to effectively manage every aspect of their lives including work, home, time and choices, than they can achieve a better, more authentic self (Negra, 5). Accordingly, the cultural image of the young woman is geared toward an emphasis on "capacity, success, attainment, enjoyment, entitlement, social mobility and participation" (McRobbie, 57)—essentially concepts surrounding how women can take control of their lives. These concepts mirror post-feminist beliefs surrounding empowerment, and that women's ability to manage their lives and make their own choices can be translated to the complete success of feminism. The media and popular culture has conditioned us to believe that, if we can control each aspect of our lives and make the right decisions, than we can eventually manage our way to a total perfection of self. Even as early as the 1970s in the Charlie girl ads, we see the image of a woman who is combining work, motherhood and sexuality with ease. She

seemed to be able to effortlessly bring her traditional roles of wife and mother together with professionalism and the possibility of being whatever she wanted to be (Spar and Gross).

The media stock figure of the modern post-feminist girl is confident and independent, both sexually and occupationally (McRobbie, 21). Television shows such as *Sex in the City* and films such as *Bridget Jones' Diary* portray these young women who have the capacity to work and live on their own, are intelligent and confident, and boldly enjoy their sexuality and independence, yet at the same time are flirtatious, often act "girly" in the more traditional sense, second-guess themselves fairly regularly, and feel anxiety about finding a man and a husband. The image of a powerful *and* attractive working girl is then seen by the female audience as a standard against which to measure their own competence in the professional sphere. Popular media also shows competition and fierce rivalry among women in the workplace, and in other spheres of life, as seen in the movie *Working Girl* (Negra, 6). This unfortunately begets the female audience to develop a viewpoint that the "mean girl" mentality and the "bitchiness" of powerful women are just natural conditions of the working world, and can add to fostering a sense of distrust in the public sphere.

A young woman living in modern society is subjected to many unspoken societal standards that she is expected to uphold. It seems that some of the opportunities created for women by feminism of the past, morphed into societal expectations for women today (Spar and Gross). Debora Spar says that because, now "we [as women] *can* do anything, we feel as if we *have* to do everything." The women of today's society feel pressure to be attractive and successful professionally, sexually, maternally and domestically. We are expected to keep up with our looks, to stay fit, to be sexually competent and desirable, to be an incredible mother and wife, to be great at our jobs, to be strong and intelligent but not too threatening, and to do all of this without a great deal of complaint, showing of weakness, or strong declarations of "feminism." Yet, this "quest for perfection" operates under the guise that these expectations are not standards, but instead personal "choices" women can choose to make or not make. Women must make the right "choices" to determine the kind of life they want to live and must do so through the creation of a solid life-plan (McRobbie, 19).

In today's culture, female empowerment has a greater emphasis on personal satisfaction or personal success through the upholding of these cultural and societal expectations, rather than the collective social female empowerment sought after in the past (Spar and Gross). I believe Spar does make some good points about the crushing societal pressures women are subjected to in the

modern world, however I don't completely agree with her sentiments that we need to step back and that women "can't do it all." Sometimes I felt as if she was saying, good job girls you gave it your best shot but now its time to take a break. I do not believe compromise and "satisficing" (Spar) are necessarily the answer in making women feel less stressed and over-worked in every aspect of their lives. It seems to me that this attitude gives women an excuse to validate their stress and find something to blame it on, rather than coming up with a better solution. I believe the issue is that women are trying to "do it all" operating within standards that are set by a patriarchal society. To develop a better solution we must evaluate and define what we want as women and advocate for adjusting the politics and structures accordingly.

The societal standards placed on women, as I identified above, are greatly perpetuated through popular culture, the media, and the beauty industry. Culture and society has created an image for ideal femininity that; is sexually desirable and attractive through the utilization of beauty and self-care decisions made for personal satisfaction, exhibits her wage earning capacity, has both fervent career and domestic (and maternal) aspirations, and acts and displays emotion within more traditional feminine norms. "The successful young woman must now get herself endlessly and repetitively done up, so as to mask her rivalry with men in the world of work (i.e. her wish for masculinity) and to conceal the competition she now poses because only by these tactics of re-assurance can she be sure that she will remain sexually desirable. She fears the loss of her own desirability, so she gets all done up, but where in the past this was a necessity, now it is a personal choice" (McRobbie, 68).

In contemporary society, decisions about how you look and act are no longer about "appealing to men," but instead make it look as if you are "doing it for yourself". Through this way of thinking, desirability and male approval is sought after indirectly, and the fashion-beauty system provides the standards and the judgments imparted on women. The cultural system of beauty demands women's continuous "self-judgment" and "self-beratement" by making comparisons to a set of "rigid cultural norms" surrounding feminine beauty (McRobbie, 68). Post-feminism has commodified this quest for "corporeal perfectionism" through beauty practices, including plastic surgery and vaginal grooming, and "disciplined" yet "erotic and playful" exercise regimes (Negra, 123). Often, we see popular culture emphasize the importance of employing your sexual freedom and bettering your life maternally and domestically.

Commercialism, consumerism and capitalism in America have majorly contributed to the construction of fashion-beauty industry standards. The emphasis on "required rituals of femininity" alongside an "intensification of prescribed heterosexually-directed pleasures and enjoyment" create a commercial domain that is largely disempowering to women (McRobbie, 61). Ironically enough, the commercial domain operates under the pretext that participating in these activities is empowering to women, when it seems, in fact, that this participation has the opposite effect. Ten million American girls develop eating disorders a year, and, in 2007, Americans (mostly women) spent over thirteen billion dollars on plastic surgery (Spar). Consumerism and post-feminism go hand-in-hand—the ability to obtain the "right" commodities promises a certain personal lifestyle and this capacity is seen as female power (Negra, 4). The purchasing of high-end commodities, then, is seen as steps that can be taken in the bettering of one's "self" on this journey of personal satisfaction and empowerment (Negra, 143).

The commercial market also utilizes terms and concepts from third-wave feminism and post-feminism in its marketing and advertising strategies. They take existing ideas about female empowerment—such as Baumgardner's interpretation that third-wave feminism is about "a 'joy and ownership of sexuality' and 'a type of energy'"—and turn them into a means for profit (Wiehl). This commodifies feminism and can distort the original intentions of the movement. As such, the media, technology and academics often are complicit in the mechanisms of corporate oppression and the pursuit of the bottom-line (Sidler, Heywood and Drake, 32). Capitalism, as a basic principle, makes it very difficult to strive for equality, and seems to naturally oppose feminism or any type of social movement with a basis in equity. Competition is a concept that is ingrained in capitalism's structure, and a completely de-regulated free market would make advocating for total female equality with men in the public sphere impossible and unreasonable. Yet, we can utilize politics to fight for fair rights and equal opportunity and allow for the creation of a market where humans have a real chance to be equal on levels of salary, power and representation (Sidler, Heywood and Drake, 37).

The media and popular culture have continually emphasized the empowerment of women through sexual freedom. Perhaps it is the industry's love of scandal or the idea that "sex sells", but, for whatever reason, young women's ability in today's society to exploit their sexual power is central to many narratives and images presented in contemporary popular media. These portrayed messages encourage the female audience "to overturn the old double standard and emulate the

assertive and hedonistic styles of sexuality associated with young men" (McRobbie, 84), supposedly on behalf of sexual equality. However, the media's depiction of the sexual empowerment of women frequently shows images that seem to actually be degrading to women and sexual in the attempt to acquire male attention.

The promoters of the television show "Pussycat Dolls Present" stated that the series embodies "third-wave feminism" in the sense that they believe the show to be centrally about "female empowerment" (Wiehl). Female action heroes, such as Veronica Mars, Charlie's Angels and Buffy the Vampire Slayer, are media representations of women who are powerful and sexual (Renegar and Sowards, 12). However, while these images may be empowering in some ways, there are certain issues involved with depicting strong women in very sexualized ways. Additionally, women in popular culture are increasingly having more and more casual sex, and illustrating these sexual acts as "no big deal" and simply a part of contemporary everyday life. Yet what messages does this send to the young women of today? Does this mean that to be a powerful woman, or even a third-wave feminist, you must dress and dance like a stripper and have sex with as many men as possible? And what if this doesn't make you feel good about your life or about yourself, or even makes you feel *dis*empowered, does that mean you are not properly exercising your rights as a modern woman? More importantly, why aren't these questions being given more weight in current society?

Inequities still exist in the modern personal or private sphere of feminine life. Women of today continue to experience issues regarding relational and sexual equality. The modern woman, the "can do" girl of today, has been endowed with both sexual and economic capacity, and these have come to define her power and her freedom (McRobbie, 61). Unfortunately, however, this frames contemporary female success largely around economic prosperity and sexual triumphs. The emphasis on empowerment through extreme sexual expression may have been an unforeseen consequence of second-wave activism, where expressing your sexuality as a woman was a symbol of female empowerment and a personal display of feminism. Stressing sex-as-feminine-power has subsequently contributed to the "pornification" and oversexualization of our culture today.

Yet is this really the best way to demonstrate how far women have come? "Because we have determined that all empowered women must be overtly and publicly sexual…we have laced the sleazy energy and aesthetic of a topless club or a *Penthouse* shoot throughout our entire culture" (Levy, 26-27). A study conducted by Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillman claimed that porn, on

the whole, *disempowers* women and can encourage men watching porn to view women being demeaned as a turn-on (Tanenbaum, 20). It seems that, in determining that sexuality for a woman means being "exhibitionistic and lickerish," we ignored the fact that these sexual actions/expressions may only appeal to *some* women and not *every* woman, and have instead promoted sexually liberated females as women who imitate "strippers and porn stars" (Levy, 26-27).

This "phallic girl," representing the modern sexually liberated woman, exhibits both overly sexual female behaviors while at the same time adopting the sexual appetite of a male (McRobbie, 84). Though she may give "the impression of having won equality with men by becoming like her male counterparts," she has instead simply "adopted the phallus" and presented a self that does not "critique…masculine hegemony." Essentially, these women are asked to balance a performance of masculinity "without relinquishing the femininity which makes them so desirable to men" (McRobbie, 84). Ariel Levy describes this condition as the "female chauvinist pig," who either acts like "a cartoon man – who drools over strippers, says things like 'check out that ass', and brags about having the 'biggest cock in the building' – or like a cartoon woman, who has big cartoon breasts, wears little cartoon outfits, and can only express her sexuality by spinning around a pole" (Cochrane, 26).

But does this sexually liberated environment really embody progress for women? In the current environment it seems, "male sexuality is dominantly displayed while female sexuality is ever more a quotation of itself" (Negra, 99). While there are certainly positives to female's new sexual agency, the current method of feminine sexual expression is built on a masculine system of sexuality. It is important that women feel free to express themselves sexually and follow their personal desires, but perhaps the current method built around casual sex and "raunch culture" is not completely working for the pursuit of female empowerment (Tanenbaum, 21). "Since the job of a lap dancer or stripper is to feign sexual arousal, when the female sex worker is cast as the universal model for female sexuality, women's sexuality is played out in an imitative mode and women's actual sexual pleasure is at a further and further remove" (Negra, 99).

Furthermore, emphasis on female empowerment through sexuality and high achievement in the professional world has aided in fostering a "hook-up culture" for young women. "Broadly defined, the hook-up culture makes sex the starting point for romantic relationships, rather than a final destination" (Harden, 258). Though the origin of this phenomenon is debated, it seems that

there are many factors that contribute to its dissemination. Most likely, it developed from a combination of female newfound sexual agency, male desire for casual sexual encounters, and, interestingly, academic and professional goals set by ambitious young women. “With ideas of marriage and long-term commitment having vanished from most twentysomethings’ minds, elite, career-minded young women see emotional entanglements as dangerous. Women now view sex with no strings attached as a way of life more conducive to upward mobility” (Harden, 258).

Kate Taylor interviewed over 60 female students at U Penn about their thoughts on hookup culture, and she found many of the women claimed they “hooked up” simply because they did not have time for a boyfriend. Others believed the males had more control over the relational culture at universities, and, unfortunately, it seems that female pleasure is often devalued in these types of encounters (Taylor, 6). One interviewee explained hookup culture as “a spiral,” saying, “the girls adapt a little bit, because they stop expecting that they’re going to get a boyfriend — because if that’s all you’re trying to do, you’re going to be miserable. But at the same time, they want to, like, have contact with guys.” So the girls hook up and “try not to get attached” (Taylor, 4). This emphasis on professional success for women has developed from years of feminists fighting for gender equality in the workplace. Many feminists of today, such as Hanna Rosin, seem to define female success almost solely based on “professional prestige and earning power” (Harden, 258).

Rosin “preaches a gospel of extreme careerism, asking young women to sacrifice their humanity on the altar of feminist empowerment, and regard every act of loveless sex as a declaration of freedom” (Harden, 258). In fact, a number of Taylor’s interviewees “saw a woman’s marrying young as either proof of a lack of ambition or a tragic mistake that would stunt her career” (7). Of course, there are plenty of young women who are able to act within and enjoy the environment this hookup culture creates. Also, there are plenty of young men who desire intimate, romantic relationships. Thus, I am not entirely critiquing this way of approaching sexual relations, but instead examining the potential cost of writing off romantic relationships for the sake of a career and the cost of the emphasizing male pleasure over female pleasure in the context of casual sex. Is an act of casual sex really a display of female empowerment if the woman is left feeling unfulfilled and unsatisfied afterward?

The self-help industry is filled with self-bettering texts that provide so-called solutions to these types of questions and dissent. In this way, culture and the media take the problems women are encountering and the valid questions they are asking, and instead turn those issues back on

women. We see this everyday on the covers of magazines, on morning talk shows, and on bookshelves with titles like “Make Every Man Want You: How To Be So Irresistible You’ll Barely Keep from Dating Yourself”, “Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus: Practical Guide for Improving Communication”, “The 12 Biggest Mistakes Women Make in Dating and Love Relationships”, “The Busy Mom's Guide To Stress Free Organization: How To Organize, Clean, And Keep Your Home Stress Free”, “Feel Calmer Every Single Day: Tips to Cut Your Stress in Half”, and “Get Healthy and Happy! Inspiring Ideas to Help You Lose Weight, Look Great and Boost Confidence…Every Day”.

When women question certain aspects of culture and society or have feelings of confusion or unhappiness in their lives, these texts demonstrate solutions of, not how you can or should change the *system*, but how you can change *yourself* to better work within the system. They unsuspectingly make women feel as if they are doing something wrong, but then, no fear, provide a solution for how women can fix their lives and these feelings they’re having. Composure is the trademark (Negra, 139) of today’s “background feminism” because as soon as women become “emotional” or argumentative they are written off as crazy, “bitchy” or irrational, and the powerful women of the moment do not want to be associated with the stereotypical “angry feminists” of the past. Although, in current society, female poise and unemotional presentation may be more effective in delivering an opinion, composure and a “no sweat” attitude merely maintain the status quo through lack of opposition and lack of potential change. As an example, relationship self-help literature is generally built around responding to women’s uncertainty and upsets that occur in current dating environment. However, this advice expects females to regain composure and simply adjust their expectations and desires to fit within this environment, as if the institution of romance today is simply the way it is and cannot be changed. The literature seems to act as a coach for “women on how to adapt to such a [dating] climate rather than challenging or seeking to modify it” (Negra, 138).

DIGITAL CULTURE AND FEMINISM ONLINE

The online world is a place where both the personal and the public spheres collide, and whether or not digital technologies have brought those spheres closer together or pushed them further apart is yet to be decided. Still, the Internet’s role in the empowerment or disempowerment of women has been debated since its creation. When assessing whether or not web culture may benefit or harm the feminist cause, it is important to examine the system and structure of the

medium itself.

The Internet was engineered, developed and brought into creation largely by men. It therefore exists as a patriarchal structure and, as such, can present issues in regard to gender equality. “Technologies are, after all, the master’s tools, created by men for the advancement of capitalism” (Sidler, Heywood and Drake, 37). When cyberspace first came into being, it existed much more as a space for men than women. “Feminist scholars early on documented women’s experiences in online environments. They came overwhelmingly to the conclusion that the Internet reinstates patriarchal forms of control” (Kroløkke, 141). Another negative aspect found on the Web is seen in the options for user anonymity online, which can promote prejudice and sexism as seen in various comments and articles found in the digital sphere. Nevertheless, there has been a great deal of progress for women online. A large number of feminist and female blogs and websites exist today that champion gender equality and women’s rights. Yet, even with sites like Feministe, Jezebel, and Feministing, we still have a lot of ground to cover to reach a place where feminism is alive and well in a digital world. Additionally, it seems that commercialism and consumerism permeates every aspect of web culture, and that can translate onto feminist sites where the content seems to be more about popular culture than serious discussion.

Sherry Turkle explores the aspects of the online world that separate and rearrange certain portions of our lives. In this new cyberspace where the private and public are placed together, it seems that those spheres can sometimes instead be further separated. Fragmentation and confusion mark the bond between “online” and “offline” life, and Turkle argues this separation of “worlds” can complicate our “selves” and our relationships. She states, “after an evening of avatar-to avatar talk in a networked game, we feel, at one moment, in possession of a full social life and, in the next, curiously isolated, in tenuous complicity with strangers . . . suddenly, in the half-light of virtual community, we may feel utterly alone . . . Sometimes people experience no sense of having communicated after hours of connection. And they report feelings of closeness when they are paying little attention” (Turkle, 11-12). She claims the virtual world can create a place where we are more artificially connected yet further apart than ever. Even in public spaces we pretend that we are interacting with humanity physically and intellectually, when often instead we are immersed in our own personal networks (Turkle, 14). We become unsure of where our private life stops and our public life begins, and vice versa, therefore causing us to retreat into our personal lives while rejecting our authentic public lives.

Turkle also reveals the ways that the mixing of the public and personal spheres online can be a negative influence on our lives and our well-being. She sites an example of a museum curator, Diane, who feels overwhelmed by the pace and expectations set by new technology. Diane's contact list has grown exponentially by the global nature of digitization and her work is demanding at all hours of the day—she is constantly keeping up with emails, schedules, responsibilities, etc. She says, "I suppose I do my job better, but my job is my whole life. Or my whole life is my job" (Turkle, 165). Sherry Turkle observes that, "as the cell phone and smartphone eroded the boundaries between work and leisure . . . . we experience ourselves as 'on call' . . . even when we are not 'at work'" (Turkle, 13). In this way, the personal and public spheres can come together to a point where we can feel overwhelmed by the constant demands of both aspects of life. If your private and public lives are being accessed and performed 24/7, there are currently too many expectations surrounding this way of living. Moreover, she claims this leaves you in a position where you are never able to completely escape to be alone with yourself and your own thoughts.

On the other hand, the online world also seems to provide a space where the spheres of private and public life can merge in a positive way. Digital technologies yield high levels of interactivity and therefore promote audience participation. This new media environment provides users and fans with more power than ever before, and producers have begun to notice. I believe one of the Internet's most important and beneficial features is its potential for amateur creation and its tendency to foster innovation and imagination. We, as digital users, are creating content everyday—whether it is a blog post, a tweet, a comment, a Facebook post, an Instagram image, etc. Web culture can encourage users to develop new ideas, arguments and ways of thinking, and this is essential when considering ways to promote the creation of new theories and solutions for a social movement.

Often, fans of various topics will coalesce in an Internet setting to celebrate a particular topic, creating a group called a fandom. The amazing thing about online fandoms and creative web culture is the sense of community it generates. Online fan culture is far from the competitive, free market that the media industry operates within. Instead, its user-generated content is about sharing, exploration, collaboration, contribution and participation (Palfrey and Gasser, 118). The Internet is a suitable environment for user creativity to prosper because consumers can create content at low costs, have that content reach large audiences, easily access digital content to use for remaking, and organize/share their work and other's work through "tags" and "likes" (Palfrey

and Gasser, 122-123). These characteristics of the online world essentially allow for messages to spread faster and further than ever before. For the same reasons as user creativity, user activism is also fostered in an online environment.

If feminism was able to generate the kind of activism fandoms do in today's online culture, the movement could be incredibly powerful. The Internet offers a space that allows for individuals to assert their ideas, yet do so in a collective setting. This may be what the second-wave feminists were imagining when they theorized "the personal is the political"—web culture provides the perfect space to discuss feminist issues women have experienced in both the private and public spheres, and then allows them to utilize those narratives of the individual to act collectively in the form of political and theoretical action. Yabroff states, "the space for [the] conversation [where personal feminist struggles are addressed collectively] may be on the Internet." Digital technologies may provide a place where feminism can break the "public/private barrier on [its] theorizing" (Hogeland, 115), and therefore collective feminist action could be mobilized by embracing web culture.

The potential for generating collective action as an aspect of digital culture has been explored by a number of media theorists. The ecosystem in which information exists today has changed dramatically from what it looked like before the invention of digital technologies. The Internet democratizes knowledge and potentially breaks down many traditional hierarchies. Consumers and "ordinary" people can readily create, access, alter, and spread information, and therefore the professional's monopoly on information is taken away. Digital technologies greatly reduce the creation and distribution costs of information, greatly increase the ease of information creation, and greatly increase the ability to find like-minded people. Self-publishing, or the act of creating and circulating information, has now, not only become quite easy and inexpensive, but has also developed a reasonably fast and widespread delivery. This allows for the simple creation and distribution of ideas, and possibly plans of action, very quickly over large geographic areas. It is not then hard to imagine how effective digital technologies can be in spreading awareness and rallying group support.

The Web allows people around the world to quickly and easily share and collaborate on information and messages. It intrinsically creates networks and groups of people through connection. Digital technologies increase the ease of sharing information (Shirky, 149), remove barriers of growth for a social movement, allow for interaction and coordination of a movement

due to the low cost of information aggregation (Shirky, 150), and promote collective action (or the assembly of a group that takes action together) due to the ease and speed of turning *thought* into *action*. These new technologies "altered the spread, force and duration of [a] reaction" because they "removed two old obstacles: locality of information and barriers of group reaction" (Shirky, 153). E-mail has been particularly useful in sparking group action due to its low-cost and instant communication (Shirky, 157). The Internet, at its foundation, seems to have been built for bringing people together and connecting them to one another, through its construction as a many-to-many communication medium. Previous technologies have been one-to-one or one-to-many, so this new level of widespread interactivity has extraordinary crowd forming potential and potential as a rallying point for group action.

The mass amateurization (Shirky, 60) of information and communication that the Internet and digital technologies provide allows for the instigation of both positive and negative collective action. The digital age has aided social movements, revolutions and riots. Social networking sites can be used for both destructive group behavior and social movement activism. Nonetheless, digital technologies do promote *general* collective action, and consequently promote positive collective action, such as the mobilization of social movements fighting for rights and equality. Still, social tools don't *create* collective action; they simply remove the barriers and obstacles that make rallying a movement difficult (Shirky, 159). Additionally, collective action cannot be achieved unless the digital technologies are integrated into everyday life and society/culture adopts the use of those technologies as regular behavior (Shirky, 160).

Third-wave feminism is often critiqued for lacking in clear theory and political action—whereas the first two waves of feminism were highly politically involved and used strategies such as consciousness-raising, protests and marches to fight for social change and gain awareness and support. Compared to its predecessors, third-wave feminism does seem to lack in these aspects—relying on personal narratives and academic analyses to create awareness and critique culture. However, it seems possible that digital technologies may be exactly what the third-wave needs to mobilize the movement and turn thought and concepts into organized action. "Feminists of all stripes have found the Internet especially productive for reconfiguring and reimagining the public sphere and mass publicity" (Everett, 1283). A new digital feminism, or perhaps viral feminism, could get culture involved in the movement in new ways and perchance defy some of the post-feminist backlash that currently exists.

Digital culture provides a space that elevates the individual *and* the group at the same time through methods in these new information and communication ecosystems: sharing, cooperation, collaboration and collectivism (Kelly). Utilizing these characteristics of the online world could potentially grant more autonomy to the individual while bettering the communal, and therefore translate to progress for both the personal *and* the political. Additionally, it may be the perfect medium to resurrect methods of consciousness-raising in order to generate realistic change. Web culture has the potential to break down hierarchies and bolster equality, bringing people together and bringing "higher-ups" closer to the public. Is it possible the online world may provide a space for new levels of democracy? Isn't a level of equality, dialogue, and breaking free from traditional hierarchies exactly what feminism desires from the world today?

Reddit was created in 2005 and is currently owned by Condé Nast. It is a website that acts as "social news aggregator" and "discussion forum" (Phelps). Essentially, Reddit works as a web community where users, or redditors, post links and short blurbs, and other redditors decide what stories are important or interesting to them by voting the submissions up or down. The users that post articles with a large number of upvotes, or have posts that are popular, gain "karma" or points that show their success and status on reddit (Phelps). There is also not simply one main Reddit list, but the site is split into sections or subforums called subreddits (Rosen). These forums are devoted to particular subjects or topics. The subreddit "I Am A" allows users to post "AMA" or "Ask Me Anything" to hold a forum where other users can ask them whatever they would like. Often, AMA's are posted by celebrities or experts to connect to more "common" users. In 2012, President Barack Obama posted an AMA, and it was said to be the most popular Ask Me Anything in the history of Reddit (Howard). At the conclusion of the session, Obama wrote that his AMA was "an example of how technology and the Internet can empower the sorts of conversations that strengthen our democracy over the long run" (Howard).

Additionally, Reddit has been reported on for its notable amounts of online, and consequently offline, activism. For example, in 2010, Stephen Colbert held a mock political rally referred to as the "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear" in Washington, D.C., through the persuasion and activism of the Reddit community. The real-life rally brought in thousands of people and the event in its entirety raised over $600,000 for charity (Phelps). In other reports, the site has been criticized for offensive content and derogatory speech, as well as spreading false information and misinformed activism. The wrongful implication of the suspect, Sunil Tripathi, in the Boston

bombings is an example of how serious the online crowdsourcing can be (Lee). However, the Reddit creators and leaders have strong commitments to values of open structure, "free speech and hands-off moderation" (Phelps).

It seems that sites like Reddit have shown the amazing potential for public collaboration, learning, discussion, dialogue and democracy. In fact, many Reddit-based movements and online activisms, such as the Stephen Colbert rally or "Random Acts of Pizza" (RAOP), have translated into the physical world and generated real-world action. RAOP is a subreddit where users can post requests for free pizza and can donate pizza deliveries to people in need; the forum's motto is "Restoring Faith in Humanity, One Slice at a Time." Furthermore, other aspects of the online world can be used to promote physical consequences. At the 2004 March for Women's Lives in Washington DC, Valenti claims "feminist blogs drove the million-plus turnout," which shows that the Internet and blogging can, in fact, potentially translate into "real-world activism" (Yabroff). Though sites like Reddit have, yes, had issues with sexism, anti-feminism and derogatory comments towards women, many of those issues have/had to do with a lack of diversity in the Reddit community and other websites. The people making those comments on Reddit were/are very active Reddit users and are often males who spend a great deal of their time with technology. However, the Reddit climate is changing; there is currently a Feminism subreddit with 32,934 subscribers (and counting).

If the virtual community could effectively reflect the "ideal" public community in the physical world, we could potentially have a collaboration of people who could discuss issues directly with the people in power, and with each other, in an environment of sharing, learning, change and physical action. The web, at its core, is an enormous public space that brings networked communities together, and one that could bring policy makers closer to their constituents. Digital culture is "reaffirming the right of everyday people to actively contribute to their culture" (Jenkins, 204). In this way, the new digital environment could reaffirm the right of citizens to actively contribute to decisions within their society and their government. The Internet could also present a potential solution to the mistrust the people of today, in the personal sphere of their lives, have been feeling toward the public spheres of the world—it could bring women closer to the politics that construct society and culture. As such, I believe it is imperative that feminism embraces web culture and attempts to use it to encourage activism and change in our society.

CONSEQUENCES AND FEMINISM OF THE FUTURE

As women, it is apparent that we have made a great deal of progress since our mother's youth and even more since our grandmother's childhood. Yet, with all of the opportunities that we have gained, why are women and "post-feminists" still feeling unfulfilled, unhappy and even trapped in a space where they cannot find satisfaction? "Armed with trophies, college letters, certificates of achievement, and degrees, why do we [the young women of today] feel so empty?" (Heywood and Drake, 46). Why, "at a moment of widespread and intense hype about the spectrum of female options, choices, and pleasures available" (Negra, 5), are so many women feeling as if the assortment to choose from is not enough? The actions, abilities, and opportunities where female empowerment and liberation is assumed for women in current society seem to be coming up short. Our women are feeling burnt out and overwhelmed by the endless pursuit of success and perfection in all aspects of their lives.

Heywood and Drake remark, "shouldn't we be strong, self-assured, happy, whole and able to carry the torch in a way our mothers, fatally disabled by sexism, never could? We were raised to think we could do anything that (white) men could do, that we have the same opportunities, can compete with men equally, man to man" (42). Yet herein lies the problem. Why are we trying to compete with men "man to man"? Why aren't we trying to compete with men, woman to man? Equal opportunity is important, but that doesn't mean women and men have to pursue the same opportunities and goals. If we separate female desires from male desires, what is it that women want? It's no wonder women are feeling empty and unsatisfied—for they are searching for success in the same way men measure achievement in a world built by men. We have to find out what makes *women* happy, and what defines female success for both men *and* women.

We are unaware that the sense of "choice" post-feminism promises is instead presenting us with a guise of choice. Is it really freedom and women's liberation to have the agency to "choose" within a system of pre-determined options? These choices are artificial, for they are more ultimatums than decisions. Women are boxed into binary choices or dual expectations—work or home, career or children, ambition or relationships, casual sex or loneliness, reason or emotion, public or private, or face the failure of trying to completely and successfully do both. "Patriarchy constructs false dichotomies that force women into either/or decisions where neither option is attractive" (Renegar, 131).

But why is it an either or? Why must the decision be made between success in the personal *or* the political? The current separation of the public and private spheres of life has greatly

contributed to the issues modern women are facing. The division of women's career life from their domestic and relational life has been a major factor in this feeling of dissatisfaction. It seems that if we are to reconsolidate the spheres and help women to feel satisfied and whole, we must generate out-of-the-box solutions. Johanna Brenner, for example, reveals a potential situation where the private and personal are able to live together:

> If we envision, for example a radically democratized organization of production which allows individuals to 'be themselves' at work, which breaks down the division between work and play, which makes work self-affirming instead of soul-destroying, and which allows individuals to build a sense of community and collegiality on the basis of the common purposes and shared decisions of their efforts, can we not then envision work as a place where we are 'at home?' (qtd. in Negra 89)

This feeling of dissatisfaction is also due to the fact that women are trying to find happiness, success and equality in systems and infrastructures built by men. The options and choices available for women to choose or make are offered to them inside of established patriarchal systems. "Choices that are the result of the dominant, white, masculinist, heterosexist imagination limit human agency by requiring adaptation to these constructed situations" (Renegar and Sowards, 14). As one potential step toward liberation from these binary choices, Mary Daly suggests that, "women should seek to create a transcendent third option that spans the differences between forced choices and illuminates the artificial and constructed nature of these dichotomies" (qtd. in Renegar and Sowards 11).

We need to break free of the binaries and patriarchal systems that women are making choices in, and reevaluate what it is women want separate from them. As we saw with "raunch culture" and hookup culture, many so-called sexually liberated women are simply taking a male code of sexuality and applying it to their lives. But why, "in this apparently post-post-feminist age, do some young women still feel a need to perform for men, to conform to male desires rather than their own?" (Cochrane, 26). Shouldn't female sexual empowerment be about female pleasure, rather than adopting the methods that promote male sexual pleasure? Shouldn't female professional empowerment, and empowerment in general, be about seeking out what makes women feel strong and happy, rather than simply following male suit and aggressively pursuing a top-management business position?

We are defining female success in the way we have defined male success for years. As Ariel Levy explains, it is imperative we make "'the young women in our lives aware that this [raunch culture] is the culture they live in, but they don't have to take part in it, they will still be attractive to men, because people have managed to recreate the species for some time … You will find a partner, but the main project is you. What do you want to be? What do you want to think about? What turns you on?'" (qtd. in Wiehl). We need to ask, while putting aside the expectations of culture and society, what do women imagine total "success" looking like? What is it that women truly desire in all aspects of their lives? The young women of today should not see marriage as some demon that will ruin their lives, as some of the students interviewed at University of Pennsylvania did (Taylor). In fact, finding a good husband or partner is most likely just as important to female happiness as landing the dream job. Gender equality should be more about trying to *provide* equal access and opportunity whilst not pressuring anyone to pursue anything but what makes him or her feel fulfilled as a human being.

So what does that mean for the feminist goals of today? Looking back on the history of feminism, we see that the first wave was focused on the public sphere and women operating within the world (concentrating on equity for men and women and universalism), and that the second wave was focused on the private sphere and women's rights as individuals (concentrating on the differences between men and women and particularism). Ideally, the third wave or a new feminism should bring the public and the private together (Kroløkke and Sørensen, 23). However, the third wave has seemingly failed at this and instead introduced concepts of transversity and welcomed contraction, which embraced and accepted the separation rather than trying to repair the division. The use of contraction, however, does provide some benefits toward the feminist cause, as the combination of "inconsistent ideas" can aid in the construction of "new choices" outside of the binaries presented as reality to women today (Renegar and Sowards, 15).

I propose a new feminism—a feminism that would take the place of the current "background feminism" and would pick up a torch lit from the fire of both the second and third wave. This feminism would call for a recombination of the public and private spheres of feminine life and would set up new systems with "third-option" choices that allow women to define their own desires and success separate from complete gender "equality" and patriarchal expectations. It would learn from the mistakes of third wave feminism, absorb the positive aspects of the

movement, and utilize digital technologies and the Internet to transform personal narrative into collective and political action.

Another portion of this movement must be to educate society on what feminism actually means, rather than what post-feminist backlash has trained us to believe. The women of my generation must want to identify as a feminist instead of feeling embarrassed or that they might be judged by associating with the movement. In order for this to happen, there must be a shift in culture in regard to the stereotypes and connotations of "feminism" and powerful women. We want young women to *want* to be strong, successful, and intelligent, and want to celebrate ideas concerning equal rights for humanity. Research has shown that currently it seems higher levels of intelligence can hinder a woman's chance for marriage and partnership, and these cultural beliefs about women and power can deter females from fulfilling their potential. "The prospect for marriage increased by 35 percent for guys for each 16-point increase in I.Q.; for women, there is a 40 percent drop for each 16-point rise," according to one 2005 report surveying a number of British universities (Dowd). We must begin to foster a culture that sees successful, powerful women as desirable rather than unfeminine and intimidating, so as to motivate these young women to wholeheartedly pursue their ambitions, embrace a feminist role, and defy the "angry", "bra-burning" labels of the past.

I believe harnessing the potential power of digital culture is key in making this new movement successful. The young women of today are immersed in the world of digital technologies, and therefore utilizing the Internet and smartphones to motivate youth culture to become involved with and inspired by feminism again is essential. The digital world's ability to disseminate information quickly, to many people, over great distances can be incredibly helpful in mobilizing a movement. Also, it presents a space where equality and difference can both be recognized—where the individual and the collective can be addressed communally—where the private and public spheres of life can meet. In New York City, there was an activist network founded called the "Third Wave" that stated a vision "to become a national network for young feminists; to politicize and organize young women from diverse cultural backgrounds; to strengthen the relationship between young women and older feminists; and to consolidate a strong base of membership able to mobilize for specific issues, political candidates, and events" (Coleman, 9). If a new social media network could take this vision and channel it into their goals as a website, it may offer an environment where this new feminism could flourish.

It is clear that we do not currently live in a world where the fight for gender equality is irrelevant. Inequities still exist for women in the private and public spheres of feminine life. Trying to build equality in a structure that was constructed based on the inferiority of women leaves us with lose-lose situations and decisions where the binary choices cannot truly provide us with what we want. Finding a way to reconcile the public and the private and provide women with third-option choices outside the current double-binds will be essential for feminism moving forward and for generating situations where women can feel truly successful, happy, and fulfilled. The virtual sphere provides a space where the personal and political spheres can come together in new ways. As such, it provides a space where "background" feminism can be brought into the foreground of everyday life. A digital feminism could create a network for people who support gender equality and could connect women, both young and old, as a group to expose inequalities and to fight for political and social change. The future of feminism is here. The digital and virtual sphere may be exactly what the women's movement has been waiting for.

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