"Owning it": an approach to perceptions on (self-)sexualization within a post-feminist era

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Abstract

The current paper analyses the perceptions of young feminists on self-sexualization as a contemporary tool of female empowerment. Throughout this study the historical developments of feminism are presented and outlined in relation to the rise of sexualization culture and the concurrent phenomena of 'sexualization' and 'self-sexualization' of women. Both of these concepts will be further explored and developed in light of current socio-economic and cultural values within western societies, which are mostly expressed through the consideration of 'individualism', 'freedom of choice' and 'agency'. Thereafter, drawing on Foucault's theoretical contributions on structures of power and hegemonic discourse, this study engages in the philosophical debate between 'freedom of will' and 'determinism', which composes a central issue for its critical discussion. Finally, 'Post-Feminism' and the conceptualization of a post-feminist 'sensibility' are presented as the crucial basis of this research. For this matter, the works of Rosalind Gill are posited as fundamental sources of academic relevance within (critical) postfeminist and cultural studies and further substantiated throughout this study's analysis.

The aim of this research lies in the comprehension of divergent perspectives, among feminists, on how self-sexualization of women in contemporary western societies may (or may not) serve the purposes of the feminist movement. This conundrum, which reveals different conceptualizations of feminism and female empowerment, will be approached through the discussion of female pop artists (such as Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj), and also through the discussion of sex industries in relation to the position of women in society.

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Mãe, hoje é a minha vez de cantar: “Pouco a pouco o passo faz-se vagabundo, dá-se a volta ao medo e dá-se a volta ao mundo (…) E vem-nos à memória uma frase batida, hoje é o primeiro dia do resto da tua vida”.

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1. Thesis Introduction

In recent years, ‘postfeminism’ has become an influential site of studies within feminist cultural analysis (Gill, 2007) – and one that scholars have often linked to the emergence of neoliberalism (Gill, 2007; Gill, 2017; Cann, 2015). Interestingly, however, there has been little to no agreement on what ‘postfeminism’ actually *is* among feminist scholars (Gill, 2007). While, on the one hand, it has been characterized as a new chapter within feminism – one with its own core features, aligned with the current social, economic and political contexts (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009), and perceived as ‘backlash’ of Second Wave Feminism – on the other, it has been referred to as a final stage of the feminist movement, where feminism is no longer needed and has become, at last, obsolete (Cann, 2015). This theoretical position, which foresees the end of feminism, is often expressed by a regression from the political sphere in which feminism was raised (Gill, 2007).

Either way, the scenery surrounding ‘postfeminism’ seems to be characterized, at large, by great optimism and celebratory screams of ‘Girl Power’ (Gill & Scharff, 2013). Shifts in the way ‘femininity’ is perceived, through discursive (re)production and negotiation of meaning (Cann, 2015), openness in regards to sexuality and female pleasure (Attwood, 2006; Evans, et. al, 2010; Snyder-Hall, 2010), and freedom of choice concerning women’s personal lives, careers or appearances (Duits & van Zoonen, 2006), all seem fairly positive aspects of contemporary (western) societies. Nonetheless, many scholars – such as Angela Davis (1981) with her poignant stances on intersectionality and the importance of black feminism, or Angela McRobbie (2008) with her take on the politics of meaning within media imagery and popular culture – have questioned the verity of this reality and the consequences of staging such a celebration.

Rosalinda Gill, for instance, has become a prominent name in feminist cultural studies by recurrently offering critical analyses of media culture and ‘postfeminism’. Gill has discussed issues such as femininity, objectification and subjectification, self-surveillance, individualism, choice and empowerment (Gill, 2007), all of which constitute what she has referred to as part of a new postfeminist ‘sensibility’. Gill’s work has primarily discussed these components in regards to the intricate relations of power that are inherent to ‘choice’, combining the role of the media and popular culture in the formation of subjectivities. For this matter, Gill also denotes – as well as the notorious feminist scholar Judith Butler (1990) – the importance of intersectionality in the analysis of social and cultural (power) structures, while discussing these new (western) ideals of feminism and liberation.

This study seeks to explore the issues that are intercalated with what Gill conceives as a 'postfeminist sensibility', and its association with agentic sexualization as a tool of female empowerment. As such, the research question resides in how young feminists perceive sexualization as a form of female empowerment, having as its primary goal the comprehension of how feminism is currently perceive (and operated) in western societies. By delving deeper into issues such as intersectionality, power structures, dominant discourses and notions of empowerment, this study aims to contribute to a better understanding of feminism and feminist ideology in the current social landscape and simultaneously inform future research by fostering a progressive understanding of gender equality.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this section, the existing literature on feminist theory, post-modernism and postfeminist critical studies will be reviewed. First, and in order to have a broader and deeper understanding of current debates surrounding sexualization and female empowerment, this chapter will focus on providing a contextualization of the various feminist movements, while placing them in their own social, cultural and political circumstances. Secondly, Post-modernism will be approached as an important theoretical framework in current debates surrounding determinism and agency in regards to power structures, and finally Postfeminism will be discussed more extensively through Rosalind Gill's critical contributions within cultural and feminist studies.

2.1. Second Wave Feminism

Throughout the historical development of feminism, many schools of thought have emerged in accordance to societal circumstances, largely motivated to serve period-contingent issues. The Suffragette Movement, for instance, surfaced at a time when it became pressing for women to attain the right to vote. Despite its relevance, as the Suffragette Movement paved the way for many subsequent developments in the vindication for the rights of women, this movement seemed to lack representation of all women. Indeed, while progress was made, the newly accomplished achievements remained exclusive (or perhaps only relevant) for the white and wealthy women of the middle class. Since then, many other movements arose to fulfil the gaps that previous movements failed to cover, being commonly located within different feminist 'waves'. This framing of movements as 'waves' alludes to the fact that while each wave has a connection with its predecessor, it also emerges with the aim (and necessity) of differentiating itself from it (Scanlon, 2009). Notwithstanding, waves are not necessarily positioned according to a linear time frame, as they may, at times, overlap.

Second wave feminism – which, in light of this study, is relevant as the predecessor of third wave feminism (and post-feminism) – appeared at a time when the idea of breaking with the "normative" was sought as the only path towards women's liberation from oppressive social (and patriarchal) constructions of 'gender', 'femininity', and 'gender roles' – all of which occasioned a disadvantaged position for women (Snyder-Hall, 2010). As such, 'self-determination', as a core value of feminism, was understood by second-wave feminists as the complete disengagement with traditional notions of ‘femininity’, as well as the rejection of any cultural norms linked to gender. Ultimately, feminism stood as the choice between “femaleness” and “humanness”, both of which, along the lines of the radical feminism that came to grow alongside second-wave feminism in the 1960’s and 1970’s, could not co-exist (Harris, 2004) – the former being conceived as inherently oppressive for women.

Coming from a New Left and a structural form of analysis, Radical Feminism – which is mentioned somewhat interchangeably with Second Wave Feminism by Snyder-Hall (2010) – brings forth the vital idea that the private sphere is political. In other words, that individual experiences of marriage, heterosexual love, and other normative practices all undermine the feminist movement by perpetrating power relations that are regulated by a male dominance (Snyder-Hall, 2010). More than attempting to tackle inequality issues and uplift women towards a more equal and fair social reality, radical feminists envisioned to transform the entire system that continuously privileges men over women, under the belief that women’s self-determination could not possibly materialize in a patriarchal-rooted social structure.

Herein, and stemming from a long process of raising consciousness on the collective character of women’s oppression, second-wave feminists held under scrutiny the role of sexual desire in women’s compliance to their own subordination: “Sexual desire in women, at least in this culture, is socially constructed as that by which we come to want our own self-annihilation. That is, our subordination is eroticized in and as female” (MacKinnon, 1987). By this time lesbianism had become particularly normalized amongst radical feminists whom believed no sexual encounter with a male counterpart could be innocuous to the feminist movement (Snyder-Hall, 2010). As an aftermath, the movement split between feminists who advocated for free sexual expression (even if that meant fitting into gender roles), later known as ‘pro-sex’, and feminists who maintained the idea of sexual egalitarianism as the only one aligned with feminist principles, later known as ‘anti-sex’.

Deriving from backlash of what came to be known as the ‘sex wars’, Second Wave feminism became deeply branded as “anti-male, anti-sex, anti-femininity, and anti-fun” (Snyder-Hall, 2010), causing a new wave to emerge, which was, indeed, pro-male, pro-sex, pro-femininity and pro-fun.

2.2. Third Wave Feminism and the Demise of Second Wave

Third-wave feminism was, as Mann et.al argues, “the rise of a new discourse or paradigm for framing and understanding gender relations that grew out of a critique of the inadequacies of the second wave” (p. 57). These primarily denoted the movement’s essentialist character, the rigidness with which ‘feminism’ was determined and, most importantly, the judgmental tone it took in regards to women’s sexualities and sexual desires (Mann, et. al, 2005). As a response, and emerging from the backlash of the second wave, third-wave feminism arose with core values of inclusion, non-judgement, and celebration of femininity and choice.

Primarily informed and structured by post-modern theory, third-wave feminism – a feminism “without foundations” (Snyder-Hall, 2010) – grew into renouncing any pre-conceived ideas of meaning, with the intent to break from fixed (and rigid) notions of gender, most particularly from the categorization of “women” as a uniform social group. While second-wave feminism attempted to promote a sense of unity among women – through notions of ‘sisterhood’ and the ‘we’ that was bonded by collective experience and consciousness of patriarchal oppression (Snyder-Hall, 2010) – it also neglected, consequently, the intricate complexities of “women” as a political subject, reducing this category to an essentialist notion of gender (Gillis, et. al, 2004). As a result, the political mobilization that was desired through the unification of “women” ultimately blended individual experience, failing to encompass the struggles that arise from race, class, ethnicity and sexuality (Mann, et. al, 2005).

Denouncing a white and middle-class bias, black feminists, as the true pioneers of third wave feminism, began to point out, around the 1990’s, the structural issues within second-wave feminism. Those comprised a general disregard for the multitude and simultaneous forms of oppression that women endure, as well as the hierarchies in which these are organized (Mann, et. al, 2005). Aiming towards a more inclusive movement, third-wave feminism, counting with theoretical contributions of many renown black feminist scholars – such as Angela Davis, Barbara Smith and bell hooks (Mann, et. al, 2005) –, fundamentally stressed the importance of recognizing intersectionality as a structural, and crucial, element of women’s struggles. As such, more than asserting external forms of oppression, third wave feminists probed to explore the different ways in which discrimination appeared internalized within (Mann, et. al, 2005), encouraged by processes of socialization that seem to often carry oppressive biases.

Following the post-modernist trend of deconstructing the canons, third wave feminism also affirmed itself within new ideals of liberation (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010), not only on the account of the categorization of "women" but also, and particularly, on the account of women's sexual liberation and expression. Countering second wave assumptions that gender equality should be prioritized over sexual expression (Snyder-Hall, 2008), this new movement strived to offer a non-judgmental stance in regards to women's sexual choices: "[the new movement] defends pornography, sex work, sadomasochism, and butch/femme roles, but it also recuperates heterosexuality, intercourse, marriage, and sex toys from separatist feminist dismissals." (Heywood, 2006). Herein, a sex-positive agenda was placed at the centre of the third-wave movement as its most prominent and distinctive feature.

More than expressing the need to recognize the multitude of experiences and struggles women face (Snyder-Hall, 2008), third-wave feminism also came to accept, and welcome, a variety of definitions of feminism, as women with different social realities, should logically aspire equally different social goals. As such, and in compliance with this new intersectional view of the third wave movement, feminism no longer aimed to represent, within this lens, a unified idea of what female liberation should look like (Mann, et. al, 2005). Instead, the movement sought to pursue a universal acceptance of "choice" as the ultimate pre-condition of women's self-determination, under the banner of non-judgmental support. Ultimately, third-wavers foregrounded personal narratives that illustrated intersectional and multi-perspective versions of feminism, and embraced "multivocality over synthesis and action over theoretical justification" (Snyder-Hall, 2008, p. 175).

Notwithstanding that third-wave feminism emerged out of necessity for what was perceived as an inflexible, judgmental and exclusive second-wave movement, this newly formulated paradigm or discourse of feminism also revealed structural weaknesses that are widely connected to the formulation of a "feminism without foundations" in regards to its political purpose, as well as the conceptualization of "choice". Both of these issues will be further discussed throughout the next chapters.

2.3. Post-Modernity and Foucault's contributions to Feminism

Post-modernity has been characterized by, and parallel to, a series of other movements that claim to be an "afterwards" of previously canonical theories and structures (Gill, 2013). Positioning itself within the same anti-foundationalist discourse as postcolonial and post-structural theory (Snyder-Hall, 2010), post-modernity places an emphasis on the deconstruction of fixed notions with the idea that identity is merely "a construct of language, discourse, and cultural practices." (Mann, et. al, 2005, p. 63). Thereby, and with a particular focus on ethical subjectivism, the rise of postmodern thinking fundamentally envisioned to dismantle these social constructs of identity, as to undermine hegemonic regimes of discourse (Mann, et. al, 2005, p. 63). In other words, it was considered that the formulation of identities as uniformized concepts would not only diminish the complexities that are intrinsic to individuals, but also enable the reproduction of the dominant discourses that were complicit in their construction. Hereafter, the affirmation of collective identities for political purposes paradoxically meant the compliance to the hegemonic structures in which those were created.

Within this line of thought scholars such as Foucault and Judith Butler were central to the establishment of a new feminist era. Beyond recognizing that "woman" as a political subject is, in fact, hampered by other modalities such as race, class, ethnicity and sexuality (Butler, 1990), Butler also seems to express that resistance against categorizations, which carry hegemonic regimes of discourse, should be understood as the only means towards emancipation from restrictive ontologies (Mann, et. al, 2005):

> "Feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism. The effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms." (Judith Butler [Feminism and Subversion Identity], 1990, p. 59)

In essence, freedom was believed to consist in the resistance towards classification. Foucault, as well, reinforces this idea by posing it as "the happy limbo of nonidentity" (Foucault, as cited in Mann, et. al, 2005, p. 63). However, the fact that social realities tend to be composed by relations of power that are propagated and reproduced in the social sphere (Stoddart, 2007), is both undeniable and acknowledged by these authors.

Foucault's contributions to feminism deeply rely on his theorization on structures of power. Denoting, much like Butler, that the actors that aim at transforming the structure are, paradoxically, complicit to its maintenance through the reproduction of internalized hegemonic discourse (Storey, 1994), Foucault places an emphasis on the conventional philosophical debate between free will and determinism (Butler, 1990). The idea was that 'discourses', conceptualized by Foucault as "systems of thought, or knowledge claims, which assume an existence independent of a particular speaker." (Stoddart, 2007), are transmitted and assimilated within the social sphere, only to be performed again through a vast social network of personal interactions.

As opposed to Marx, who believed ideology to be a mystification or distortion of reality that serves class interests (Barret, 1991), Foucault conceptualizes 'discourse' as a much more complex theoretical model in the comprehension of power relations. Instead of focusing on the dualism between the ruling class and the proletariat, Foucault theorizes power as something that can be operated through discourse, at a micro level – being exerted as well by those that are said "subordinate" social groups. Henceforth, intersectionality is acknowledged by the claim that power isn't restrictive to social class, as it flows in multiple directions and portrays many different interests outside those of class (Stoddart, 2007). Moreover, besides conceiving that power also operates at a local level, not being exclusive to the ruling class, Foucault also justifies the perpetuation of uneven power relations as the result of understanding 'ideology' as a regime of 'social truth' (Stoddart, 2007). Although these regimes do not necessarily correspond to verified 'truths', their relevance lies on them being thought of and enacted as such – i.e. the proliferation of something in a social environment is not necessarily reliant on its truthful value, but on its acceptance as a collective truth (Storey, 1994).

Herein, Foucault's theoretical assumptions on the intricate ways in which power can be disseminated through discourse seem to be particularly valuable to the analysis of culture as an element of power as well. Indeed, culture, whether it denotes a process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development, a particular way of life or the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity (Storey, 1994), has become wildly available for everyone within contemporary societies, reproducing its effect of uniformization on a global scale. Stuart Hall (1980), similarly, highlights how the media plays a role in the reproduction of dominant discourse with his theoretical model of

Encoding/Decoding. Creating an analogy with Marx's renowned *The Capital*, Hall theorizes about the institutional media structures, their practices and networks of production as part of the 'labour process' in which 'discourse' is produced (Hall, et. al, 1980). The 'product', thereafter, is only to be completed once the message, encoded by these institutions, is transmitted and 'decoded' by the public, allowing for it to have an 'effect' on the subject, who in turn integrates dominant discourses into social practices:

> "It is this set of decoded meanings which 'have an effect', influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences. In a 'determinate' moment the structure employs a code and yields a 'message': at another determinate moment the 'message', via its decodings, issues into the structure of social practices." (Hall, et. al, 1980)

Although both of these authors theorize about the structure in order to explain the formation of subjectivities, there still seems to be space within their theoretical frameworks for notions of agency and free will, which also promoted a shift within feminist thinking from centralized power blocks towards more dispersed sites of power (McRobbie, 2004). Foucault, for instance, admits the possibility for 'points of resistance' (Stoddart, 2007) by claiming that power can be exerted at a micro level, thus distancing himself from the (arguably) overly deterministic views on 'class' articulated by Marxist theory. Likewise, Hall determines 'decoding' as, possibly, the assimilation of dominant discourse. However, the possibility for 'negotiated' or 'resistance' readings, as well as 'oppositional readings' – in which case the message is decoded with a contrary meaning to what it was intended (Shaw, 2019) – is not repudiated. Moreover, Hall suggests in his theoretical model that class position largely shapes readings of encoded messages – i.e. lower classes tend to be more indulgent in the assimilation of dominant discourse, while upper classes, which control the 'means of production' of encoded messages, tend to be more critical (Shaw, 2019).

Concerning feminist theory, these models appear to be important contributions for the dualist discussion between free will and determinism. While it is argued that 'women' should not be conceived as "a passive identity, upon which power stamps its own images." (McNay, 1992), it is also important to acknowledge how 'women', as a social and political subject, cannot be understood outside of cultural norms that retain power dynamics and discourses. This debate, which culminates in questionings of ‘agency’, particularly the agency of women in a post-modern era, is predominantly present within the analysis of modern sexualizing cultures.

2.4. The Rise of Sexualization Culture and the ‘up for it’ femininity

Along with post-modernity, which issued a general rupture with previously established notions and understandings of society, ‘individuality’ arose as one of the new core values of contemporary societies (Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2008; Attwood, 2006). Edified and reinforced under a western neoliberal ideology, individual choice and autonomy were placed as the ultimate expression of freedom and emancipation, emerging as a new set of ideals within feminist ideology as well (Gill, 2007). Recovering from the sexual rigidness of second-wave feminism, a general concern for individual experience and appraisal of the individual as the creator of its own meanings (Attwood, 2006) contributed to the rise of a feminist stream that aimed at turning into dominant norm liberal ideas on sexual expression, representation and visibility for women – a “democratization of desire” (Gill, 2009, p. 138). This expression was coined by Gill (2009) with the intent to describe how ‘desire’ has become more generally accessible, particularly with the advent of the media, allowing women to express and engage with sexual desires outside of traditional norms.

According to Gill (2009), the ‘sexualization of culture’, which has been recurrently discussed in the last few years, is referent to a range of different things: the proliferation of sexual texts and images, a contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, identities and practices, and a general shift towards a more permissive sexual attitude (Attwood, 2006). As both a cause and a result of this collective shift of mentalities, sexual imagery has become more standardized within pop culture – not only in terms of sexually explicit content but, most importantly, in regards to the re-sexualization of women’s bodies in the media (Evans, et. al, 2010; Ward, 2016). Moving from a longstanding polarization between representations of women as either respectable housewives or sexual deviants, mainstream media has evolved towards conveying a new ideal of a “sexually savvy and active woman” (Evans, et. al, 2010) who is confident in her own sexuality and asserts her power by being the agent of her own sexualization. Expressing this shift from sexual passivity towards a more active, confident and autonomous female sexuality (Evans, et. al, 2010), discourses around sexual expression seem to have produced an ‘up-for-it femininity’ that has linked female self-determination with sexual liberation. As a result, from pole dancing classes to the proliferation of sex toys and the ‘porno-chic’ fashion styles (Evans, et. al, 2010), feminist discourse seems to hold an expectation of exploring ‘female sexuality’ as something that is presumed relevant in relation to female emancipation.

Although modern media discourses have contributed to a more open and positive attitude towards female sexual expression, it seems that they have also contributed to the rise of some concerns in regards to the so-called 'up-for-it femininity' and the nature of agency and choice for women within contemporary social landscapes. While some may argue that this shift away from sexual stigma allowed for women to step away from old dynamics of oppression within heteronormative relations, and take hold of their own sexualities, the discourse of liberation through self-ruling sexualization led to contradictory positions among feminist scholars (Evans, et.al, 2010). These contradictions were mostly manifested in debates surrounding issues such as the reinforcement of patriarchal norms, the commodification of women’s bodies and, particularly, the nature of ‘choice’ while discussing female sexual empowerment.

2.5. The Ontological issues of Agency and Choice

Founded within third-wave feminism, the narratives of ‘choice’ that seem to have spread in the 1990’s convey a key element of American feminism (Snyder-Hall, 2010). Initially coined by Linda Hirshman, “choice feminism” represents the widespread belief that the women’s movement has developed towards liberating women to make whatever decisions they want (Ferguson, 2010). Allied with the rise of sexualization culture, this emphasis on choice did not only concern politically charged matters (Hirshman’s initial focus was on wage work and unpaid labour at home [Ferguson, 2010]), but also mundane ones, such as the ways in which women decide to express or not to express conventional femininity, experience (or not) multiple sexual encounters, engage in sex work, eroticize male dominance, and so on (Snyder-Hall, 2010).

Hereupon, feminism was defined by third-wave feminists such as Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards as something that encompasses any life choices, as long as those are accompanied by a ‘political consciousness’ (Ferguson, 2010; Thwaites, 2016). The idea was that ‘feminism’ should not urge ‘gender equality’ by being restrictive of women’s options but indulge, instead, the varied life paths and social (or sexual) behaviours one may desire to adopt. In this sense, and deriving from the post-modern tendency to deconstruct formulated ideas, ‘choice feminism' has evolved to accept ‘choice’ as the only requirement of female self-determination. While many feminist scholars stress the importance of ‘choice’ in defining feminism, upholding it as the original and primal purpose of feminism (Snyder-Hall, 2010), others allude to the dangers of this rhetoric.

According to Ferguson (2010), ‘choice feminism’ appears as a response to common criticisms of feminism – among them, the perceptions that feminism tends to be “too radical” (demanding change both in the political, public and private spheres), “too exclusionary” (adopting a notion of ‘women’ as a uniform, and hence exclusive, political and social subject) and “too judgmental” (by setting a moral compass around gender equality). However, many scholars have also criticized this new focus on individual ‘choice’ by arguing that it tends to not only dismiss the political purposes of the feminist movement (Ferguson, 2010; Thwaites, 2016), but also neglect the influence of the social structures in which ‘choices’ are made: “One of the problems with this focus on autonomous choices is that it remains complicit with, rather than critical of, (…) neoliberal discourses that see individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating.” (Gill, 2007b).

Although ‘choice feminism’ emerges with a very positive and appealing image of a feminism ‘for everyone’ – one that is fundamentally supportive, and inclusive, of all women, encouraging the need for more opportunities, more freedom and less restraint on which roles one chooses to play (Thwaites, 2016) – it seems to have also contributed, paradoxically, to a political stagnation (Thwaites, 2016; Snyder-Hall, 2008; Gill, 2013). While Butler has questioned the necessity of unity for an effective political action (Butler, 1990), considering ‘non-identities’ to be inherently subversive, the primordial safeguarding of individualism and choice (as the embodiment of empowerment), combined with a supreme rule of non-judgment, has resulted in a feminist movement that discourages political action altogether (Thwaites, 2016). Resulting from the same desire to part with generalizations, what essentially distinguishes the former from the latter is the social and political consciousness that collective action is yet to be done in order to overcome systematic inequalities. By focusing on the individual as the sole actor responsible for self-determination, ‘choice feminism’ discourses appear to have vastly downplayed the need for intervention in the political sphere, entering a realm where everything is reduced to uncritical choice and ‘unthinkingness’ (Thwaites, 2016). In this sense, not only does this movement ‘remain complicit’, as Gill (2007b) argues, with current power structures that are embedded in neoliberal discourse, but it also endorses the ‘exclusionary’ traits that it so promptly wished to criticise.

Herein, the issue with ‘choice’ lies within the fact that it cannot possibly be considered outside of its social, political, economic and cultural environment (Gill, 2007b). While second wave feminism was perceived as ‘exclusionary’ for pursuing a political agenda that inevitably represented (in its majority) the struggles (and/or vindications) of a small section of ‘women’ (Mann, et. al, 2005), ‘choice feminism’ denotes, erroneously, that all women have within reach the possibility to ‘choose’, and hence to be ‘self-determining’ (Gill, 2007b). The problem with this idea is that it assumes, beforehand, that every woman occupies similar positions of power in society (Butler, 1990), overlooking, thereafter, the struggles of women who do not enjoy the same range of ‘choice’ as those who are more highly positioned on the social ladder. Consequently, Gill (2007b) claims, such notion reinstates, rather than criticises, the sense of a unified and rational subject – which has been object of feminist critique all along. Moreover, the general withdrawal from the political sphere, following the belief that ‘self-determination’ is the product of individual choice, has paradoxically disabled feminism to expand the options available to women, obscuring structural inequalities and contributing to the maintenance of the status quo (Snyder-Hall, 2010).

Debates around ‘agency’ have been at the forefront of feminist literature, particularly in regards to the sexualization of culture (Evans, et. al, 2010). Following Duits and Van Zoonen (2006) academic notes on the positive diversity that women have produced over the celebration of individuality and sex positivity, Gill (2007b) has argued, in response, that the configuration of ‘agency’ in contemporary feminist discourse is somewhat skewed and needs to be cautiously evaluated in relation to its social and cultural contexts (Evans et. al, 2010). Divergent views on this topic have particularly emerged from women’s adherence to sexualization. Arguing, on the one hand, that women are “capable and responsible agents, who produce “speech acts” with their choice of clothing” (Duits & van Zoonen, 2006, p. 115), different scholars have stressed how ‘self-expression’, while impersonating women’s right to ‘choose’, must be considered in light of particular circumstances, especially when it comes to sexualization.

2.6. Sexualization and the ‘technology of sexiness’

Early definitions of the concept of sexualization originated from research that examined media portrayals of women (Ward, 2016). According to the APA Task Force – a report that was commissioned due to increasing concerns about the sexualization of girls in society and its consequences (Ward, 2016) – ‘sexualization’ occurs when “a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics; OR a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; OR a person is sexually objectified – that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use; OR sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person” (APA, 2007, p. 1). Although these occurrences seem to be, in general, negatively charged, the rise of sexualization culture has generally complicated notions, as women have progressively taken upon themselves the ruling of their own sexualization (Evans, et. al, 2010).

The rise of the contemporary ‘up-for-it femininity’, which generally encapsulates the discourse of empowerment and liberation through autonomy and choice (Gill, 2007), has primarily expressed a renegotiation of meaning in regards to women’s sexualization. Moving beyond ‘male gaze’ approaches, which rendered women in roles of mere passivity (McNay, 1992), academic literature has recently advanced towards the analysis of women’s sexual agency. Evans et. al (2010), for instance, developed the conceptualization of the ‘technology of sexiness’ in analogy with Foucault’s ‘technology of the self’. Similar to what Foucault theorizes as the ability of individuals to construct, to some extent, their own subjectivities – while simultaneously recognizing that their potential for agency remains constricted to a limited range of discourses –, the ‘technology of sexiness’ is referent to contemporary expressions of (active) femininity (Evans, et. al, 2010), based on sexual knowledge and practice (Gill, 2007). Employing the idea that identities are a result of a semiotic relation between representation and self-representation, Gill (2003) emphasizes the ways in which women seem to have, uncritically, merged both, by turning to agentic self-sexualization as a form of liberation.

The re-signifying of symbols that have traditionally belonged to patriarchal practices of oppression, represents, for many, a shift in the power dynamics in which those practices appear to reside. Attwood (2007) illustrates this by considering how terminology that used to be associated with negative sexual slang – such as ‘slut’, ‘ho’, or ‘bitch’ – has been reclaimed and embraced by women as a form of rebellion: “(…) the discovery of ways to represent and articulate the ‘slut’ experience is, for many women, a powerful way of rescuing themselves from their sexual victimization. For them, the slut is a myth that women need to ‘retrieve’, ‘revisit’ and ‘reckon with’.” (Attwood, 2007).

Similarly, the re-appropriation of a sex-positive femininity, which foresees the confident ownership of one’s bodies and sexualities (Evans, et. al, 2010), has also been perceived as a form of retrieving the long-lasting patriarchal dominance over women’s sexualization. This turn in discourse was coined by Gill (2003) as ‘sexual subjectification’ – i.e. the practice in which women take an active role in their own sexualization, leaving the place of passivity where they were found under the ‘male gaze’. Notwithstanding that sex-positive discourses and screams of “girl-power” create a general sense of feminine confidence, sorority, and acceptance of diversity, the means through which sexual autonomy is being reclaimed seem to be worthy of further consideration, especially in current contexts of consumer culture and disciplinary discourses of neoliberalism (Evans, et. al, 2010; McRobbie, 2008).

Assuming that subjectivities are, indeed, partially influenced and constructed by the context in which they develop, Gill (2007) largely criticizes the emphasis on agency within post-modern societies by claiming that what women ‘choose’, as agentic sexual beings, seems to resemble exactly what was previously the object of their oppression – “[women are] endowed with agency on condition that it is used to construct one-self as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy” (Gill, as cited in Evans, et. al, 2010, p. 117). Also considering the role of socialization, Marso (2006, p. 114) denotes that “what women are taught to desire also denies them their freedom. The very substance of what makes a woman feminine is what holds her in bondage.”.

Without stumbling upon the theoretical debate around determinism, which is arguably the centre of division between feminist scholars on the subject of sexualization, studies on the rise of sexualization culture have shown that the exposure to sexual-objectifying media predicts, in fact, self-objectification (Barzoki, et. al, 2017; Daniels, et. al, 2020; Karsay, et. al, 2018). Herein, such conclusions seem to suggest that sexual subjectification, while aiming to re-signify oppressive traits of the patriarchy, still appears to reproduce similar results. As Gill (2003, p. 105) puts it – “sexual subjectification, I would argue, has turned out to be objectification in new and even more pernicious guise”.

In turn, consumer culture is also presented by McRobbie (2008) as an element of analysis within feminist discourses of ‘agency’ in contemporary western societies. For her, it seems, corporate culture is progressively taking hold of the instrumentalization of popular feminism ("in its most conventionally liberal feminist guise" [McRobbie, 2008, p. 531]) as a means to present itself as an ally for young girls. The rhetoric of a new emancipated femininity – "the right to be beautiful" (Lazar, in Gill & Scharff, 2013) – appears, hence, closely related to the enticement of a consumer culture, which, by reproducing this feminist discourse, sustains itself at the heart of current neoliberal economic rationalities (McRobbie, 2008).

The moment in which all these developments seem to be taking place has been generally designated in feminist literature as 'postfeminism', which is extensively illustrated by Rosalind Gill through what she has conceived as a new 'postfeminist sensibility'.

2.7. Post-Feminism and the 'Post-feminist Sensibility'

The notion of post-feminism has recently become one of the most recurrent and contested terms in feminist and cultural analysis (Gill, 2007). Mostly, debates around the historical exclusion of feminism(s), the consciousness (or unconsciousness) of gender by young women or the ideological stance of contemporary media culture, have all formed disagreements on what 'postfeminism' actually is (Gill, 2007). Nonetheless, it seems to be clear that the debates surrounding this intricate conceptualization are a product of new developments on notions of feminism, the transformation of media culture, and the mutual relationship between the two (Gill, 2007). While some have perceived the use of the term by the media as the 'end' of feminism (Cann, 2015), others conceive it as a new moment in feminist thinking – a "post" which alludes to its communalities with the theoretical movements of postmodernism, poststructuralism or postcolonialism (Gill, 2013).

Following the theoretical inconsistencies on the designation of 'postfeminism', Gill (2007) – a prominent scholar of postfeminist critique – suggested that it shouldn't be understood as an epistemological perspective, nor as an historical shift, as was previously expressed in the delineation of feminist waves. Instead, Gill proposes this new notion of feminism to be conceived as a 'sensibility', with the intent to outline its most prominent features and critically analyse their presence in contemporary media culture (Gill, 2007). Although 'postfeminism' is often referred to interchangeably with third wave, particularly by American feminist scholars who conceive it as an historical shift – or ‘backlash’ – after second wave feminism, what seems to be distinctive about postfeminist discourses, Imelda Whelehan (2000) argues, is the emergence of what she claims to be ‘retrosexism’ (Gill, 2013). Similarly, McRobbie’s analysis of contemporary media culture denotes, as a crucial feature of postfeminist discourse, the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist ideas (McRobbie, 2004). Both of these assessments appear to be implied within Gill’s account of a ‘postfeminist sensibility’.

Beyond the characteristics that were previously mentioned as part of contemporary feminism, which is closely related to (and arguably influenced by) neoliberal societies (McRobbie, 2009) and sexualization culture, Gill (2007; 2013; 2017) considers ‘postfeminist sensibility’ to include: an emphasis upon individualism, choice and agency; a generalized disregard for structural inequalities and cultural influence; a ‘reterritorialization’ of women’s bodies (McRobbie, 2009) through their retreat from the ‘male gaze’, and finally an intensified self-surveillance and body discipline. Particularly relevant for the understanding of this postfeminist sensibility is the shift in the dynamics of female sexualization. From an external, and objectifying, male gaze to a “self-policing, narcissistic gaze” (Gill, 2007, p. 152), traits of postfeminist sensibility seem to materialize in the discourse of female empowerment through this self-regulating sexualization that is offered to women. Herein, Gill (2007) centres her criticism in the mediated representation of neoliberal subjectivities where sexual objectification is presented as something women actively choose and wish, as agentic, confident and assertive individuals.

Paradoxically, while proposing itself as an expression of female (sexual) liberation, postfeminist discourse appears to be accompanied by the rise of a self-imposed surveillance which, along with the (re)construction of ‘femininity’ as a bodily property, only indicates an intensification of the regulation of women (Gill, 2007). Furthermore, the ways in which postfeminism sensibility portrays women as entirely free agents has largely replaced notions of the social and the political, or the idea that individuals are vulnerable subjects to outside pressures, for a general focus upon the psychological (Gill, 2007) – that is, the remark that women are responsible for their own transformation and empowerment, in which case the absence of what is deemed ‘liberating’ is perceived as women’s own doing or choice. In this sense, postfeminist discourse does not only undermine the political within the feminist movement, as it also presents itself as virtually hegemonic (Gill, 2017), sustaining thereafter the structures responsible for the perpetuation of systemic inequalities.

2.8. Perspectives on Feminism, (Self-)Sexualization and Female Empowerment: Research Question and sub-questions

Following this theoretical framework, which conveys important issues in regards to post-feminist ideology within contemporary western societies, this study attempted to understand, primarily, how young feminists perceive feminism by looking into the social phenomenon of sexualization (particularly, self-sexualization) and, secondly, what kind of aspects may be deemed relevant within conflicting perspectives on this matter. In other words, rather than trying to solely grasp the various perspectives of young feminists on self-sexualization, this study seeks to make sense of a range of different opinions regarding feminism and female empowerment by examining manifestations of 'sexualization' in the media. This exploration aims to shed a light on how 'sexualization' reflects and embodies ideas on feminism and empowerment, while simultaneously revealing insights on the complex dynamics of contemporary feminist discourse.

In this sense, this research will touch upon topics that will involve the ways in which self-identifying feminists, who have female empowerment at heart, make sense of sexualization culture; how this sexualization culture may shape audience's ideals of feminism; what kind of patterns can be associated with divergent ideas and how can certain viewpoints on female empowerment be connected to the social/economic position of the actors.

3. Methodology

The present chapter discusses the methodology of this study. Firstly, the research design (including research questions and sub-questions) and the methods of data analysis are outlined. Secondly, the operationalization of concepts, the sampling, the data collection and the data analysis procedures are explained.

3.1. Research Design

This study was carried under a qualitative mode of analysis, with a focus on thematic analysis of individual semi-structured interviews. While qualitative methodology is known to be the most useful in light of studies that contemplate experiences, values and perceptions, allowing for an explorative analysis of the collected data (Bryman, 2016), it is also one that has been unanimously chosen for feminist research, as it reveals to be consensual with approaches that highlight intersectionality, and do not reduce lived experiences to a series of variables that are dismissive of the complexities of social life (Naples, 2007).

In turn, while discourse analysis might also be suited for this research, as theory informs expected results one might look for in data through selective coding (e.g. recurrent words respondents use may conform to larger theoretical assumptions), thematic analysis is considered to be more flexible, as it is explorative of all data through complete coding (Clarke & Braun, 2013). In this sense, it allows for the researcher to provide a rich and detailed account of the data, with the possibility of further interpretation (Clarke & Braun, 2006). Nonetheless, discourse is still rather relevant in the process of data analysis, and should not be unaccounted for.

Finally, the model of semi-structured interviews was chosen in light of the explorative character of this study. In order to grasp the experiences and perceptions of young feminists, it is fairly important to create space for a fluid and open conversation that allows for further clarifications of personal views or backgrounds. Furthermore, it is particularly important that the interviews are composed by open-ended questions, allowing participants to share the ideas that may surface once they are exposed to media examples or situations regarding the topic of sexualization (see ‘Operationalization’ in chapter 3.3). Although the interviews were meant to last one hour, as that was considered to be the adequate time to capture in depth the perceptions of participants, there were slight fluctuations on the time each interview took due to different levels of engagement with these open-ended questions. The shortest interview lasted 45 min., and the longest one was 1h 14 min.

3.2. Sampling and Data Collection

The targeted sample of this study was European students who self-identify as feminists. The preference for feminist-identifying students was intended to have a sample of people who (1) are assumed to be aware of (unequal) gender relations and societal power structures and are supportive of the feminist agenda (according to their own understanding of it), and (2) are assumed to be a population that is very much in contact with contemporary (western) popular culture.

Although the label “feminist” cannot be trusted to mean the same thing for everyone, nor can it be expected that the sample will have the same views on what being a ‘feminist’ entails, using self-identification as a sampling criterion takes into account this possible divergence of values and meanings, and poses it as an equally important outcome of this study, since the actual meaning making around feminism engaged in by feminists is relevant to the research question. As such, while going into organized feminist collectives for interviews would allow for a more concise (and comparable) target group of ‘feminists’, it would not reach the purpose of this research – as it is more likely that the perceptions on female empowerment in these circles would be (presumably) more similar. Hence, the recruitment was proceeded with the criterion of feminist-identifying European students, allowing for an indiscriminate variety of self-identifying feminist students to share their thoughts on sexualization culture and the media, and provide a broader understanding of how and why feminism is perceived in different ways by different people.

While it would be interesting for the sample to encompass many different nationalities, from different continents, it was pondered that it could become a risk that, by doing so, the study would be pulled extensively in the direction of how different national cultural backgrounds play an important part in the perceptions of sexualization of women, instead of how different factors may be at stake in this discussion. Henceforth, the sample was restricted to students who come from European countries, as it was expected that those will have in common first-hand exposure to *western* media and culture.

After contacting student associations via social media, a few offered to help with the recruitment process by sharing a personal 'story' on Instagram. The *instastory* requested that students, who self-identified as feminists, reached out in case they were interested in participating in this study. Most of the participants who reached out learned about this study through Erasmus Pride student association, which, on the one hand, enabled the sample to be more broadly representative of the student community of Erasmus University in terms of gender identities and sexualities, but, on the other, meant that certain demographic groups were not reached. Following the initial batch of eight participants resulting of this channel, the subsequent recruitment was enabled through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is known to be an effective recruitment method to access specific populations that may sometimes be difficult to reach by researchers (Browne, 2005). Considering that 'feminist' may be perceived as a social trait/identity that connects people, snowball sampling was used to access those social networks that encompass feminist ideals. Nonetheless, while this method facilitates the recruitment of participants, some of its downsides comprise the homogenization of the sample (i.e. if participants come from the same social circle it is likely that they will have similar perspectives on feminist issues) and the exclusion of people who do not belong in those social circles (Browne, 2005). Indeed, the sample for this study counted with an asymmetrical number of psychology students (6 out of 15) that was further instigated by snowball sampling as a secondary recruitment method.

Although a diverse sample was aimed for, presuming it would perhaps lead to an equally diverse and nuanced set of results, students who reached out and/or showed interest in participating in this study turned out to be, in overwhelming majority, white and female. Notwithstanding, considering that qualitative analysis is less about representability of a larger population, and more about grasping in-depth understandings of social phenomena (Bryman, 2016), this lack of diversity should not jeopardize the overall purpose of this research. Herein, the list of participants ranged from 19 to 26 years of age, counting with two white men, two white non-binary persons, ten white women and one black woman. In total, fifteen students from Erasmus University were interviewed for this research.

List of Participants

Participant*	Age	Study Programme	Nationality
Devon (they/them)	19	BA Psychology	Romanian
Mara (she/her)	20	BA Public Administration	Luxemburgish/Portuguese
Aikaterini (she/her)	25	MSc International Public Management and Policy	Greek
Eveliina (she/her)	23	Mundus MAPP (Arts and Public Policy)	Finish
Margarita (she/her)	23	MA ESHCC	Italian
Moos (they/them)	20	BA Psychology	Dutch
Marjane (she/her)	22	BA Psychology	Finish (/Somali)
Julie (she/her)	21	BA Psychology	German
Dimitris (he/him)	26	MA ESHCC	Greek
Anika (she/her)	26	Research MA ESHCC	Dutch
Maggie (she/her)	21	BA Psychology	German
Inês (she/her)	19	BA Psychology	Portuguese
Connell (he/him)	25	MA ESHCC	Irish
Chantal (she/her)	23	MA ESCHH	Dutch
Maria (she/her)	22	MA ESCHH	Portuguese

*Names presented in this table are the pseudonyms that will be used in the Results section.

3.3. Operationalization

The operationalization of this research, which uses both ‘female empowerment’ and ‘sexualization’ as its main concepts, was carefully proceeded by means of examples, and open-ended questions. Firstly, ‘female empowerment’ was operationalized through the selection criterion of the sample itself – as participants self-identify as feminists, the multiple definitions of ‘feminism’ and, ultimately, its agenda or final goal, were expressed by them through open-ended questions. Even though a direct question about ‘female empowerment’ was kept for last, this notion, or terms relating to it, emerged naturally throughout conversations following questions such as “What does feminism mean to you?”, “How do you put feminism into practice in your daily life?”, or “How do you think women are portrayed in the media today?”. The analysis of this concept, hence, relied on participants’ own viewpoints and ideas on the meaning of ‘empowerment’ in contemporary societies.

‘Sexualization’, on the other hand, was operationalized through media examples. As this concept seems to be, in itself, negatively charged, ‘sexualization’ was addressed in interviews through the approach of case studies, which were carefully selected in harmony with the theoretical conceptualization of ‘sexualization’ as was presented in the literature review. Firstly, the role of Beyoncé, as a world-wide celebrity with a prominent influence in popular culture, was addressed in relation to feminism. While some may view Beyoncé as an icon of female empowerment – and lately an anthem of the LGBTQI+ community – others believe that her feminist rhetoric is substantially vacuous and merely wielded to monetize feminism (Keleta-Mae, 2017). As such, the debate that is intrinsic to this study’s research question was brought forth through the perceptions of participants on Beyoncé’s role within feminism. Thereafter I trusted that the arguments presented to sustain either one or the other side of the discussion would grasp valuable insights on the core concerns addressed while deliberating the concept of ‘feminist’.

Thereafter, other examples of sexualized portrayals of women in the media – which may express similar visual language as Beyoncé’s music video “Single Ladies”, but entail different scenarios and situations (e.g. Nicki Minaj in ‘Anaconda’, and the background dancers of Snoop Dogg’s music video ‘Drop it Like it’s Hot’) – were addressed in order to understand if there are shifts in how participants perceive them. This sought to incite further debate on the factors that affect the perceptions of sexualized portrayals/behaviours as more, or less, empowering.

In a similar line of thought, ‘OnlyFans’, a website originated in 2016, was discussed in comparison to pornography, in regards to issues surrounding ‘female empowerment’ and feminism. While the porn industry has been predominantly considered as oppressive, misogynistic and exploitative of women, the emergence of ‘OnlyFans’ – which became particularly known for its sexual explicit content – re-opened conversations that questioned that reality. ‘OnlyFans’ is an online platform that allows content creators to share various types of content with their subscribers – such as photos, videos or live streams – in exchange for a subscription fee. This way, ‘creators’ are given the opportunity to monetize their fanbase, having access to a more direct string of revenue. As such, ‘OnlyFans’ has been widely debated both as empowering – along the lines of individual choice and financial independency – and as detrimental to the feminist movement, by its arguable promotion of commodifying consent (Akanksha, 2021). Both pornography and OnlyFans worked as instruments to further operationalize the concept of ‘sexualization’ in regards to feminism. This was facilitated through questions such as “What do you think about pornography in relation to the position of women in society?” and “What is your intake on OnlyFans in regards to feminism?”.

As an end-goal, the discussion of both these terms was expected to contribute to an elaborate formulation of how ‘feminism’ is perceived by participants, and, ultimately, what kind of feminist discourses are at play in contemporary societies.

3.4. Data Analysis

Once data was collected, all 15 interviews were transcribed in verbatim. A first step into the data analysis was the familiarization with the data. This process was accompanied by a set of notes, written after interviews, that already forecasted possible themes based on issues that were consistently and transversally mentioned by participants. According to Clarke & Braun (2013) the process of ‘immersion’ in the data is particularly important for the researcher to consider the study’s findings in a holistic way. Beyond searching for the meaning of what is being said, this initial stage served the purpose of systemically engaging with the data that was gathered in order to make sense of it as a whole. A preliminary analysis of the findings revealed a surprising consistency of discourse by participants, which directed the analysis towards finding nuance among this seemingly generalized consensus.

The coding process was carried out using Atlas.ti software, following an approach of complete coding. This particular approach allowed for a more inclusive deduction of the data, as all remarks were considered as possibly relevant ones for the comprehension of current feminist discourse. As this type of coding involves the identification of anything and everything that may be of interest to answer the research question (Clarke & Braun, 2013), the themes that emerged from a total of 422 codes did not necessarily follow the thematic structure of the interviews. After formulating a sum of 17 code groups – the largest ones being “ownership as retaliation”, dismantling of liberal discourse”, “objectification”, “portrayals in the media”, and “capitalization of female sexuality” – I was able to merge these groups into five main themes that were thought crucial for a clear account of the results. These main themes were also articulated in relation to previous theoretical contributions, with the aim of further developing them (Boeije, 2010). Firstly, “Individualism and choice” resulted from a consistent discourse that highly praised the individual and individual choice as dominant values in participants’ feminist discourse. Secondly, “media representations of women” was a theme that very much followed the structure of the interview questions, illustrating how remarks were, at times, contradictory or nuanced. “Ownership as retaliation” was directly transformed into a theme, as it represented the largest code group and one with the strongest relevance in regards to the research question. “Consumer Culture and the Dismantling of Choice Discourse” merged two main code groups and denoted a shift from a mere description of perspectives and hegemonic discourse to a more critical insight to what those perspectives entail. Finally, “Female Empowerment” aimed at illustrating, conclusively, how the feminist discourse presented by participants conveyed general inconsistencies.

3.5. Validity and Reflexivity

In terms of validity, this research ensures trustworthiness by following a clear scientific process in the data analysis. Firstly, data was collected through in-depth interviews that aimed at reaching a complete picture of participants’ perceptions on the topic. Secondly, the surprising recurrence of similar perceptions across all 15 interviews also emphasized how this study proved itself reliable. This constancy of ideas did not only allow for concise results, but it also suggested a saturation of the data, thus strengthening the arguments presented in relation to the research question. Additionally, participants were regularly asked to clarify their answers each time they used subjective terms, which ensured that the analysis of the data remained close to the interviewees’ own ideas and perspectives, avoiding overly speculative interpretations and assumptions on what was being said.

In turn, reflexivity also played an important role in both the procedure of collecting data and the analytical process. As all qualitative research is contextual (Dodgson, 2019), it is pertinent to reflect on circumstance and positionality (in terms of gender, age, race, socio-economic class, etc.) in order to ensure a deeper understanding of the study that is being conducted and its respective limitations and/or conditioning factors. Partially, the researcher’s own reflection on these issues may produce more inclusive and flexible results that are discerning of power dynamics (England, 1994). Herein, given the critical aspirations of this feminist research, it was important to acknowledge that, being a white young woman, with a high level of education, there are inherent socio-economic biases that were considered throughout this study. In regards to positionality, it was clear that in this particular case my stance as a researcher counted as an insider one due to resemblances in both social status and ideological interests. For one, although it was evident that participants did not share the same socio-economic backgrounds, there was a sense of parity arising from our shared academic environment. In this sense, every participant shared a privileged position stemming from their higher education that I also relate to. Moreover, common ideological interests that are paramount to a feminist identity also seemed to reinforce my position as an insider.

While Hodkinson (2005) points out the implications of an insider view in terms of a possible lack of critical distance or a potential bias in interpreting data due to previous knowledge, which I recognize, I believe that having an insider position in this research was mainly positive in terms of access and reliability of data. By perceiving me as a peer, participants demonstrated to be sufficiently comfortable (and even enthusiastic) in sharing their thoughts on the subject of feminism, which secured the results to be reliable, trustworthy and rich in valuable insights.

4. Results

This section presents the results of the data analysis, tracing back to the previously drawn theoretical outlines. A striking observation that emerged from the interviews was a general consensus among participants, despite of their gender, age or other personal characteristics and backgrounds. Throughout this section this remarkable sense of agreement will be mostly present, with only a few more noticeable variations in the final chapters. The themes that predominantly emerged from the data include individualism and choice, media representations of women, ownership as retaliation, the implications of consumer culture, and female empowerment as a buzzword. While the first three themes primarily capture participants' perceptions and values within contemporary societies, the last two dive deeper into the intricacies of the feminist thinking that was previously drawn.

4.1. Individualism and Choice: The Foundation of Contemporary Feminist rationalities

More than representing an overarching theme in this study's analysis, "Individualism and Choice" appear to have worked as the framework in which all feminist arguments rested throughout the conversations. On the one hand feminism was largely understood as intersectional – "If you ideologically want the emancipation of people or someone, the emancipation of a specific sex is a given." (Dimitris, 26); "my ideal form of feminism is a really intersectional one where we acknowledge that intersectionalities in (…) ethnical background and gender and religion (…), they just create an intersectional identity that you should acknowledge" (Moos, 21) – which predicts the awareness of the structural composition of systemic inequalities and the different levels of oppression that arise from intersected modalities such as race, class, ethnicity and sexuality (Butler, 1990; Crenshaw, 1992). On the other, however, the discourse through which the majority of participants sustained their arguments did not appear aligned with an intersectional (or structural) perception of the feminist movement, as it largely emphasized individual perspectives over collective considerations.

A general emphasis and concern for the individual was shown in many different forms. Firstly, interviewees found it particularly difficult to comment on the role of celebrities (such as Beyoncé or Nicki Minaj) in regards to feminism by arguing that, if not knowing the personal beliefs and opinions of these celebrities, they could not provide substantiated remarks on their feminism (or lack thereof) – "This doesn't tell you anything if she's a feminist. (…) I don't know what [Beyoncé] votes, I don't know what other things she advocates (…)" (Dimitris, 26). This general concern for the personal does not only enhance the value that is currently attributed to the individual – as one responsible for the creation of its own meanings and experiences (Attwood, 2006) –, but it also reveals how 'feminism' or being 'feminist' seems to be an equally private experience, and one that does not necessarily relate to public action – "if she considers herself a feminist, then she is a feminist" (Moos, 20). Partially, this emphasis also resonates with the anti-foundationalist discourse (Snyder-Hall, 2010) that has allowed (and encouraged) individuals to create their own notions of feminism. As Eveliina (23) puts it: "I think the expression of feminism doesn't have to be this like very set idea that we have, you know, it's however you want to express your own feminism.". On a similar note, just as 'feminism' was comprehended as a personal experience, unique to each person who identifies as a feminist, the perceptions of participants on 'female empowerment' also revealed to be largely related to individual notions of empowerment. Anika (26), for instance, associated 'female empowerment' to 'feel good' sensations, suggesting to perceive 'empowerment' as an individual feeling one can work for, oftentimes related to self-confidence or boldness:

> "You can just do it yourself, like for example myself. I try to do it sometimes when you feel good (…) then you like 'Yeah, I'm just gonna do it' 'I'm just gonna wear this' or 'I'm just gonna ask for a promotion' or whatever. But when you're a bit more insecure when there's other things, then you might be more prone to social pressures, or maybe I shouldn't be too loud or you know…" (Anika, 26)

Following the 'de-structuralising' of 'feminism' and 'female empowerment' as uniform (and collective) notions, 'free-will' was relegated as the only factor by which "expressions of feminism" can, in fact, be assessed on. Ultimately, the spectrum on which one estimates how feminist and/or empowering a course of action may be seems to relate primarily to the extent to which that action is taken voluntarily and autonomously by women, regardless of its substance – "if it's your choice… you can do whatever you want, as long as it’s not impacting with other people’s liberties.” (Aikaterini, 25). In this sense, “free will”, enacted by ‘choice’, appears in this analysis as a formative element of both contemporary western societies and current feminist mentalities, substantiating McRobbie’s theorization of the complex relationship between present ideas of feminism and neoliberal economic rationalities (McRobbie, 2008). Consensually, feminism was defined by participants as, above all, the expression of the inalienable right to choose:

> “I think what feminism is about is that we don't tell women what to do anymore (…). So if they want to be hyperfeminine and go out in a tiny ass bikini and dance around shake your ass a lot… cool. If your type of femininity means you want to go out in a baggy ass outfit and chill and don't say much. That's also really empowering. It's about the woman having the right to make a choice how she wants to live her life.” (Moos, 21)

Besides highlighting ‘choice’ as the ultimate expression of liberty – and thus (allegedly) equality among genders –, the assertion of choice as a fundamental trait of feminism by participants also revealed itself through a celebratory, non-judgmental impression of feminism. Following the knowingly recurrent criticism of feminism’s overly judgmental tone (Ferguson, 2010), the insights of interviewees appeared perfectly aligned with the third wave mindset of celebrating women for their choices (Gill & Scharff, 2013), instead of condemning what those may be – even in cases where participants expressed more critical and nuanced opinions by recognizing conflicting situations. This discourse was particularly relevant and sustained throughout the entire argumentative debate on sexualization of women as a form of female empowerment.

While commenting on Nicki Minaj’s performance in her music video ‘Anaconda’, Moos (21) voiced to be supportive of the artist’s choices in expressing femininity and sexuality, denoting, at the same time, how ‘female sexualization’ can be a difficult topic to discuss due to further implications related with sexual objectification. Nonetheless, ‘nonjudgment’ seemed to prevail, as a core value of feminist mentalities, over the remaining possible issues in sexualization: “if it's her reclaiming her own femininity and her sexuality and her body and the fact that she's not a skinny woman (…) if this is her way of reclaiming it then go off. Who am I to stop you?” (Moos, 21). Similarly, Marjane (22) showed a celebratory support for women who, hypothetically, were to choose to participate in music videos as background dancers for male rappers, where sexualization is more evidently conveyed through a male gaze – “if they were to do it, and like watching this and like, yeah, I want to be a Snoop Dog's backup dancer, and actually goes and gets it and does that, yeah. Get the bag. I support it. I think that's empowering." (Marjane, 22).

This overall focus on the individual as the one responsible for one's own empowerment, which is perceived as the exercising of free will, seems to corroborate Gill's claim on how the defence of 'choice' in contemporary feminist discourse appears to overshadow the ways in which individuals may be constrained by a male-dominated culture (Gill, 2007). Notwithstanding, as will become clear in the next chapter, participants' perceptions on media portrayals of women largely comprised a general recognition of gender inequalities through the presence of stereotypes and gender roles.

4.2. Unveiling Media Representations of Women: Perceptions, Stereotypes and the Pursuit of Change

In reference to perceptions of current portrayals of women in the mainstream media, the great majority of interviewees seemed to convey a somewhat gloomy scenario. Some of the most recurrent descriptions of these portrayals indicated a general representation of stereotypical beliefs that convey the female gender as vulnerable and weak (Devon, 19), often preyed on (Aikaterini, 25), "not as tough and strong as men" (Maggie, 21) and even dumb (Mara, 20). As a consequence, female characters were also thought of as largely underdeveloped – "there's not much character building in the women characters" (Devon, 19) –, plain and unrealistic, functioning merely as sidekicks of male protagonists:

> "It's very subtle but you can sort of tell when it's a male director making up a female character because it's never how we act, (…) a male director is always gonna make up a dumb woman that is just beautiful and… it's not very representative." (Maria, 22)

Besides the idea that women are still presented as merely beautiful – "I do think it's definitely just still traditional (…) women are still just pretty, that's kind of what they do <laughter>." (Anika, 26) –, female characters were also perceived as often built around romantic interests (Connell, 25) "even if the plot is not about love" (Aikaterini, 25). Herein, this consistent description of female representations, mostly along the lines of shallow characters and vigorous concerns for looks, seems to not only emphasize how beauty standards are still being pushed onto women, as part of their inherent value, but also how those standards are being translated, as Gill (2007) suggested, into an extreme body vigilance in contemporary societies. This 'hyper-surveillance', which appears to be simultaneously exposed in and encouraged by the media, was particularly expressed by Maria (22) through her remark on 'body trends':

> "There's this comeback of the heroin Chic era (…) we're evolving past curvy bodies and going back to skinny. Which; the fact that this is a discourse (…) it's so problematic on its own. Because this kind of trends are just based on women's bodies, there is not – that I know of –, a trend of oh men were muscular and now we're going back to skinny men like you never hear this absolutely never <laughter>." (Maria, 22)

Concurrently, this focus on the female body was also revealed through a general recognition of the phenomenon of sexualization of women in the media, which was mentioned by participants either through a 'male gaze' kind of perspective, where women are presented as passive sexual objects (Margarita, 23), or through a self-managed sexualization. Chantal (23), for instance, expressed to believe that portrayals of women in the media are mostly 'over-sexualized', referencing Cardi B's famous single 'WAP' as an illustrative example – "it's become more sexualized than for example 15 years ago, if you look at the lyrics and the way they dress, I feel like it's getting more and more sexualized" (Chantal, 23).

Nonetheless, participants also seemed to acknowledge a positive shift in female representations, suggesting that the media is bound to please public demand – "I feel like recently there are more different examples, (…) because people have been changing in their ideas and so media is adapting to it." (Margarita, 23). Indeed, many recognized that female characters are starting to occupy protagonist roles and growing into becoming more independent from their male counterparts, not being as bound to love interests as they were before (Maggie, 21). Nevertheless, these changes were mostly perceived as superficial ones. For instance, on the one hand it was suggested that female characters are slowly becoming more 'rounded' and complex, moving away from previously drawn stereotypes – "There are [now] protagonist women that have flaws, that have wants and needs (…) women in films don't have to be temptresses or (…) be the good person who supports the character. They can be people. And people are messy as well." (Dimitris, 26). On the other hand, many interviewees still denoted a lack of diversity in representation of women and femininities (Moos, 21) and a continuation of the same stereotypical dynamics under new frames:

> “For example, “Ginny and Georgia”, (…) Georgia is like this badass girl, whatever, she's great. But she's also a *femme fatal*. (…) It's still something that is made for men, for men to enjoy the fact that she has “spice”, she’s still this stereotype of this person with spice and spunk who isn't truly realistic. (…) They're trying to cover it up with other stuff, but it's still the same.” (Inês, 19)

This particular remark on how media representations are ‘changing while staying the same’ seems to cleverly unravel the case in study. The way that participants showed to perceive media representations of women, as well as their changes over time, seemed to partially reveal how feminism is understood to be playing a role in these changes, and which directions those are taking in contemporary western societies. Both of these aspects, which appear central to this study, place ‘Ownership as Retaliation’ as the most significant theme of this research.

4.3. Ownership as Retaliation

The restructuring of the concept of ‘feminism’ did not only occur from the perception of the notion itself – as something unique to each person – but also from the standpoint of how ‘femininity’, as a performative signifier of ‘gender’ (Butler, 1990), is currently understood (Cann, 2015). Reinforcing the idea that “feminism is about choice” (Inês, 19), ‘femininity’ was presented by participants as a possible ground for re-negotiated meanings and subversive stances. While ‘femininity’ was comprehended by second wave feminists as inherently oppressive (Snyder-Hall, 2010), ‘choice feminism’ discourses seem to have retrieved expressions of femininity as equally feminist ones. As the exercising of ‘free will’ emerged as the primary purpose of feminism, ‘femininity’ also seemed to re-emerge as part of that manifestation:

> “I have had phases where I thought ‘okay feminism is about not being feminine because I have the liberty to do anything I want’. And like the feminine, you know (…) looking very pretty and clean and having makeup and skirts and stuff like that, I used to think at some point that ‘okay, that's not feminism because

> you're still going to the gender stereotypes'. So I have to sort of be not-feminine to show that I *am* a feminist. (…) But then I sort of came to learn that feminism can just be about accepting to express yourself any way that you want to. It can be feminine or not feminine. So now I'm definitely more open with looking feminine. I don't mind at all. I am wearing a skirt right now <laughter> like… I like wearing skirts and makeup." (Mara, 20)

Interestingly, this shift seems to not have only vested "femininity" with a positive (and feminist) connotation – "I present myself according to the perceptions of how femininity is supposed to look like. Cause in that sense I feel more empowered" (Aikaterini, 25) but also with a subversive one – "she unapologetically is very traditionally feminine" (Eveliina, 23). The idea of being 'courageous' by approaching and embracing femininity in a scenario where 'femininity' is commonly, and "traditionally", expected appears to highlight the importance that is currently given to processes of re-claiming notions, expressions and behaviours, as forms of rebellion – particularly, within feminism, the ones that were previously proscribed from the realm of 'feminist'. Herein, 'Ownership as retaliation', congruent with the emphasis on 'Individualism and Choice', appears in this analysis as an important part of the perspective of the interviewees, mostly embodying the core of this study.

Similarly to how 'femininity' was redefined within an 'empowering' and 'feminist' lens, 'sexualization' also seems to have been transformed into a vindicating (positive) practice. Throughout interviews, the concept of 'sexualization', often mentioned together with 'sexual expression' or 'female sexuality', was fairly present, alluding to different issues and encompassing many different scenarios. Interestingly, however, mentions of 'sexualization' were presented closely related to notions of 'hyper-femininity', as both concepts were, at points, interchangeably used or described in similar ways – "[Beyoncé's femininity has] a lot of nudity type of clothing, long hair (…)" (Moos, 20); "A sexy woman shows up her legs. Dances real nice. Doesn't care about a man. (…) it's very performative." (Maria, 22). In this sense, participants' perceptions of femininity, which seemed to be linked to notions of sexualization, appeared to largely substantiate Gill's claim on how contemporary views of femininity are linked to bodily properties (Gill, 2007). Moreover, the discussion on how this (hyper-)'femininity' was reclaimed as part of feminism becomes ever more pertinent once 'feminism' is recognized, conversely, through the presence of 'femininity'. Connell (25), for instance, claimed to perceive Beyoncé's music video 'Single Ladies' as 'feminist', by noting a strong 'feminine' presence, creating, thereafter, a point of convergence between 'feminism' and 'showing skin':

> "There's like three females in the video. And it's just kind of them like presented in the whole thing. And maybe because they had like the outfits are showing a bit of skin (…) kind of like normalizing that kind of thing (…) having the body on display and not like hiding it away or trying to be prude about stuff." (Connell, 25)

The importance of this mutual exchange between 'feminism' and (sexually charged) 'femininity' relies on the fact that, while rising from an anti-foundationalist discourse, the ideas of feminism expressed by participants appear to convey, paradoxically, the presence of virtually hegemonic norms that are heavily embedded in sexualization practices. Indeed, although 'sexualization' was defined by APA (2007) with the intent to clarify its negative consequences, most participants seemed to offer a positive connotation to (self-)sexualization, often relating it to the celebration of women embracing their own sexualities – "if [Nicki Minaj] goes out and she says 'I want to reclaim the fact that I'm a curvy woman and I'm a sexual being' and whatever. That's feminism to me." (Moos, 20). Underlying to this shift, which represents the epitome of 'ownership as retaliation', was the important distinction made between 'sexual' and 'sexualizing'.

On the one hand, some interviewees consented to the idea that women are, in fact, engaging in sexual subjectification, and most of them did not consider it to be an "unfeminist" practice – "I do think it's feminist. I do think it's opening up space for women to sexualize themselves, which I think is an (…) important part of feminism." (Inês, 19). Others, in turn, insightfully questioned the possibility of one sexualizing oneself altogether – "You can't really sexualize yourself. I mean… you're, you're just a being." (Moos, 20). From this perspective, 'sexual ownership' was presented with a generally positive meaning, which seems to validate the compatibility of sexual(-ising) practices and feminist ideals, underlying once more the prominence of the individual over the social structure that arguably shapes its identity (Stoddart, 2007).

Similar to Moos' proposal on how one cannot sexualize oneself, Devon (19) also suggested that 'presenting sexual' – i.e. expressing sexuality or sexual attributes through ones appearance, presentation or behaviour – is not equivalent to exempting oneself from personal value; as such, ‘sexual’ does not necessarily equate to ‘sexualizing’:

> “if a woman does that it's not like she's saying that she is just a sexual object for men. She's just expressing her sexual side without sexualizing herself in the way that ‘oh, this is everything that I am. (…) I am just a sex machine, and something to be used whenever the man wants to.’ Because this is kind of the message that the men portray. But when women do that, (…) [they’re saying] “oh, we also have these needs” and it’s different.” (Devon, 19)

Following these ideas, ‘sexualization’ was shown to be perceived as an ambiguous practice, and one that is mostly understood according to circumstance. For instance, participants’ perceptions on Snoop Dogg’s music video were consistent in identifying it as sexualizing of women – displaying them as ‘props’ (Maggie, 21), accessories for the ‘male gaze’ (Moos, 21), symbols of social status (Dimitris, 26), or simply bodies: “the girl is faceless, nameless, (…) she’s like (…) just an image that is kind of there” (Inês, 19) – largely relating it to definitions of objectification. However, perceptions on Nicki Minaj’s music video ‘Anaconda’ did not appear aligned with this same notion. Besides the claim that female sexual expression is pertinent within feminism as a way to ‘desensitize’ and normalize sexual desire for women – “I see the argument of saying like ‘I'm putting in your face. I'm exaggerating on it.’ So that you get desensitized.” (Margarita, 23) – the crucial argument on the distinction between Nicki Minaj’s and Snoop Dogg’s music videos relied on the agency of said sexualization. Overall, participants argued that the positive or negative connotation attributed to ‘sexualization’ is fundamentally contingent to whether it derives from the subject itself or from a (male) counterpart – “I feel like it takes away the harm if a woman says these things about herself because she can say whatever she wants about herself. But if a man says it about a woman it's offensive.” (Julie, 21). In other words, whether or not the act of exposing oneself sexually is decoded as a form of insurgence against patriarchal norms was expressed to deeply rely on the agency (and choice) involved in that practice. For instance, while background dancers in Snoop Dogg’s music video were perceived as passive to their sexualization, being presented in a male-centred power dynamic (Maria, 23), Nicki Minaj was viewed as an active performer and protagonist of that sexualization. By ‘reclaiming’ her own sexuality, actively exaggerating sexual expression and exposing her body, while inviting other women to embrace their bodies and sexualities, Minaj was considered to portray a very strong (feminist) message.

These advances towards ownership of sexuality, particularly stimulated by performers such as Nicki Minaj and others mentioned during interviews (e.g. Megan Thee Stallion or Cardi B), were also discussed as important steps in stirring a conversation around the topic. As an example, some participants found it interesting that (negative) controversy seems to arise in contexts of agentic sexualization, but does not occur in cases where a man engages in sexist or sexualizing dynamics towards women – "I think there's a very interesting conversation of like men wanted to talk about sexualizing women, but when women sexualize themselves, they get upset. They're not controlling the conversation (…) as a woman, how dare you? <laughter>" (Marjane, 22). Others questioned the actual origins of current notions of 'over-sexualizing', suggesting that the concept itself is contingent to patriarchal mindsets – "I don't think there's such a thing as over-sexualization. (…) What is over-sexualized? you know? Who gets to decide? What's the line?" (Maria, 22). Additionally, Julie implied that controversy around self-sexualization seems to be necessary to change narratives:

> "Change mostly happens when you have extremes. So I guess that's just a way to point out how men are presenting women in a way and then doing it yourself because it's different when you do about yourself and it is empowering to like be proud of what you have and be able use your body however you want to." (Julie, 21)

Considering that, historically, patriarchal societies have shown to repress women's sexual expressions, the overall message conveyed by participants in regards to this topic seemed to relate to a general eagerness to unbind women from patriarchal power dynamics, by positioning 'agency', 'choice', 'boldness' and screams of 'girl-power' as elements of subversion. Ultimately, the logic between denying sexual expression as to not be sexualized by a male gaze, but simultaneously being restricted from that expression, still complying to patriarchal pressures, is cleverly summarized by Devon (19) – "women don't have to repress their sexuality just so they are not viewed as sexual objects" – and Eveliina (25) – "at some point (…) we cannot just let the male gaze also hold us back, right?".

Nonetheless, the discourse around agency, which seems to be consistent with matters of "choice", appears to become more nuanced once consumer culture is acknowledged as deeply aligned with a sexualizing culture that is rooted in sexist power structures. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

4.4. *"Sexy sells":* the Implications of Consumer Culture and the Dismantling of 'Choice' Feminism

While a great share of this study's findings indicate that 'choice' and 'ownership' categorically occupy a dominant position in interviewees' discourses, 'consumer culture' and the 'capitalization of female sexuality' appeared, on the opposite side of the coin, as equally relevant themes in this analysis. Challenging the linear discourse through which participants seemed to highlight 'choice' within feminism, both of these themes showed to not only emphasize the dualist character of 'choice', but also evidence the ways in which neoliberal rationalities can be intertwined in (post-)feminist thinking.

'Consumer culture' was first mentioned in this research in reference to McRobbie's (2008) theoretical propositions on how corporations seem to be instrumentalising feminism to elicit and sustain mass consumption. Conversely, 'consumer culture' appears in this analysis in reference to what is perceived as profitable, which is inevitably suggestive of what is ruled by profit, and the dominant discourses that seem to be behind it. Entangled in the feminist ideal of the 'strong, independent woman', consumer culture does not only entice young women to adopt a consumer behaviour that sustains the market, but it also offers a specific image of an 'empowered woman' that is, suitably, completely unchallenging of the status quo. More than promoting the "right to be beautiful" (Lazar, in Gill & Scharff, 2013) – supporting, hence, an entire market of beauty products and procedures that address the ideal of the 'empowered woman' –, this image also greatly emphasizes the 'right to be sexy', inviting women on a journey of (sexual) self-discovery that is celebrated as representative of sexual freedom and empowerment. However, if on the one hand the rise of sexualization culture enabled women to express their sexualities more freely, on the other, it appears that the right to express sexually has turned, paradoxically, into a demand. For instance, while most participants showed to be supportive of women's sexual expressions in the media, some also pondered the real motivations behind this kind of content: "there is always a part of the industry that wants women to sexualize themselves so they get more attention, you know, because it's more scandalous.” (Inês, 19); “I think with these celebrities it’s difficult, because to what extent is it just commercial (…)? Nicki Minaj then says “oh yes because of this and this”, and then it does make me question – is it really or is it just a really good song that sells?” (Anika, 26). Similarly, addressing a market that appears to be deeply rooted in this sexualization culture, participants also appeared to suggest a link between ‘success’ and the compliance to this demand of ‘sexiness’:

> “Pop culture singers or performers (…) now have the ability to express their sexuality, but at the same time is [that] what is giving them success? (…) if there's a new female pop culture icon that (…) chooses to not dance like this or show her body as much, is she gonna be as successful as someone who does? (…) the snowball effects from this now, I feel like it's sort of demanded that women are semi-naked on stage.” (Maria, 23)

Herein, ‘profit’ and ‘capitalization’ were alluded as part of the equation of ‘choosing’ to engage in sexual behavior. Indeed, further insights on this topic seemed to posit ‘money’ as a crucial element when discussing ‘agency’, and one that notably blurs the lines between ‘choice’ or ‘consent’, and ‘monetization’. For instance, while discussing wages within the sex industry, Moos (21) suggested that pornography or sex work can be particularly alluring for women in difficult social and financial situations, recognizing that structural issues often distort notions of ‘choice’:

> “I do think that it's a really easy trap to lure in a lot of financially unstable women that probably are already from vulnerable backgrounds. Or are the victims of racism or, I don't know, fatphobia or ableism or whatever that has led them to be in a financially insecure place to begin with, so it's a very intricate cycle I think.” (Moos, 21)

Furthermore, Moos (21) also suggested that the high wages that are involved in sex industries seem to reflect a society that “values your body more than your brain”, and further encourage an ongoing cycle of female objectification that is sustained by economic interests. Likewise, Maggie (21) expressed how the sex industry, and the money involved in it, seems to convey the idea that women “can be bought”, highlighting issues that are intrinsic to the commodification of consent[1] – "I feel like it still kind of influences the sexist way that men have on women, being like, (…) 'I can't sleep with you but then again for money you will take off your clothes.'" (Maggie, 21). In this sense, while 'consent' was often mentioned to argue in favour of sexualizing imagery or sex work – "if they're consenting, and it's their choice…" (Aikaterini, 26) – it was also denoted that the meaning of this concept appears to be elusive considering these industries, the media, and the economic interests behind them – "It's really hard to get into that because you never really know what is really consent and like in which situations women really want to do it the way it happens?" (Julie, 21).

This critical reasoning, however, did not seem to deter most participants from defending 'choice' and 'individual freedom' as primary values of contemporary feminism. For instance, Maggie (21) still claimed persistently that "everyone can do whatever they want to" even though "it can still influence the picture that men have on women", revealing throughout her speech a supremacy of non-judgement. Herein, and as a result from this focus on individual choice, beyond recognizing that the media tends to profit from female bodies and sexualities, pleasing a 'male gaze', the reverse – i.e. women's self-capitalization off their own bodies – was also particularly outlined by interviewees, appearing as an important theme within notions of female empowerment. As an example, although pornography was mainly perceived as 'inherently sexist' (Dimitris, 26), the capitalization off the male gaze by women who engage in sex work was perceived as 'empowering': "there's all these men just paying money just to look at your body. I don't know, I think that's in a way also kind of empowering." (Anika, 26). Similarly, 'empowerment' was also linked, more crudely, to the actual economic gains that derive from (self-)sexualization, which has suggested that financial independency (or empowerment) – highly valued in neoliberal economic rationalities – is also currently entangled in notions of 'female empowerment'. Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj, for instance, were recurrently perceived as 'empowered' in reference to their 'success' in a male dominated industry.

These inconsistencies, which seemed to merge feminist and anti-feminist ideas in one single reasoning of 'choice', appeared to be also characteristic of participants' notions of 'female empowerment', which largely disclosed the ways in which "feminism" is thought of within the western world.

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[1] i.e. the process through which (sexual) 'consent' gains an economic value.

4.5. Female Empowerment: a buzz word?

Although ‘powerful’, ‘strong’ or ‘empowered’ were words participants mentioned recurrently throughout the interviews, there seemed to be no consensus on what those words actually mean, as they were used in multiple occasions and with a variety of different meanings. While ‘powerful’, for instance, was often associated with notions of ‘success’, being used to describe Beyoncé as a ‘self-made’, ‘admirable’ and ‘influential’ woman, it was also referenced in regards to ideas of ‘boldness’, ‘self-confidence’ and ‘authenticity’ – “I think she's really expressing herself (…) through her own liking. It's not like she's trying to look a certain way for the audience or anything like that, and I think that's really powerful.” (Devon, 19). Similarly, the adjective ‘strong’ was mentioned in statements like “she is a strong black woman” (Chantal, 25), which contextually related to notions of ‘resilience’ and ‘pride’, but it was also linked, in other instances, to notions of ‘independency’. Notwithstanding the lack of cohesion in the use of these terms, both of them appeared deeply related to ‘female empowerment’, being denoted as ‘feminist’ traits.

If, on the one hand, ‘powerful’ and ‘strong’ were conceived by participants with a range of different meanings, ‘empowered’ or ‘empowering’ appeared to work as umbrellas for even broader connotations, concerning a variety of situations. For instance, Julie (21) and Moos (21) expressed how ‘empowering other women’, by supporting them in the face of hardship and inequalities, is part of how they engage with feminism in their daily lives – “I try to empower other women when they have bad experiences or when they think they can't do something. (…) I try to empower them that they can. So like empowering others and fighting with others…” (Julie, 21). On a similar account, Aikaterini (26) considered Beyoncé to be a ‘feminist’ arguing that she ‘empowers’ other women by “uplifting them”. The word ‘empowered’, in turn, was also often used while discussing contexts of agentic sexual expressions, or, at large, female agency on its own. As an example, Chantal (25) revealed that, at a young age, she perceived the female protagonists from ‘Sex in the City’ as ‘empowered’ women, particularly for their sexual agency and independency.

The same kind of imprecision in definitions was noted when participants were asked, directly, what ‘female empowerment’ meant to them, as the final question of the interviews. Interestingly, in midst of loose meanings, ranging from ‘challenging the patriarchy' to 'be yourself, love yourself' mindsets, 'female empowerment' was mostly defined within its indefiniteness:

> "I think (…) it's also just, yeah, just really doing what you want to do. If you want to do an onlyfans you can do an onlyfans if you want to be Nicki Minaj in Anaconda, that's also fine. But if you want to be a scientist or you know like a professor. That's also okay. If you want to stay at home and just take care of your kids, that's also fine." (Anika, 26)

Herein, there seem to be a few aspects regarding this generalized idea of 'female empowerment' as 'anything a woman wants it to be' that are worth mentioning. First, the loss of a collective-oriented idea on 'female empowerment', which is structuring to feminism, as a collective movement with a clear end-goal, seems to correspond to an equal loss of an ideological and political orientation of that movement. By and large, the notions of 'female empowerment' that were revealed by most participants did not indicate a regard for the 'whole', but rather a particular concern for the 'personal'. Secondly, this loss of collective structure and ideology also seemed to be reflected onto the use of the word 'feminist' as an individual 'identity' that does not necessarily relate to public action, integrating elusive meanings that are mostly subjective to each individual. Finally, and as a result, contemporary feminism seems to have turned to a celebration of 'female power', 'individuality', and 'ownership' that is mostly characterized by a general disregard for the structural issues that perpetuate systemic inequalities. As Maria puts it, while critically contemplating this ambiguity in contemporary feminism:

> "I think the difference should be: your empowerment needs to be beneficial to women in general and not just to you as a woman (…). Like Kardashians – very empowered to have these companies making a lot of money. Yes, as a woman, a few years ago this wouldn't have been possible, yes, but what are you selling? Are you capitalizing on women's insecurities to make yourself rich? is that empowerment to women? (…) That's empowerment to you, not to you as a woman, like that's empowerment to you as a person because you're getting rich, (…). Empowerment should be a collective thing." (Maria, 23)

5. Conclusion

This research has attempted to provide insights on how young feminists perceive self-sexualization as a tool of female empowerment, with the aim to ultimately reach a wider comprehension of how feminism, in general, is currently understood in contemporary western societies. Specifically, this study has sought to explore how post-feminist ideas are entrenched in contemporary feminist thinking, offering a critical view of their influence and implications.

Accompanied by a rise of anti-foundationalist discourses – stemming from post-modernist, post-structuralist and post-colonialist movements (Snyder-Hall, 2010) – and the concurrent liberalization of sexual imagery and agency in media culture (Attwood, 2006; Gill, 2009), feminism was also seen to take a turn along these lines by the end of the 20th century. Moving away from the rigidness of second-wave feminism, which was thought to be overly essentialist and generally exclusive (Mann, et. al, 2005), third-wave feminism sought to assert itself within a post-modern and anti-essentialist stance that conceded women the right to choose for themselves how they wished to express femininity, sexuality or feminism. By promoting the destabilization of fixed notions of 'gender', and rejecting unitary definitions of 'feminism', third-wave embodied a new period in feminist history where individualism, and particularly individual *choice*, were perceived to be praised beyond the traditional concern for the collective and unitary sense of "women".

While this new movement established 'choice' as the ultimate expression of freedom, conveying a celebration of women for their uniqueness and offering sexual exploration as a form of self-determination, this study aimed to unveil the implications of such conceptualization by considering 'choice' within the context of well-established (patriarchal) power structures and dominant discourses. Although the general shift towards encouraging women to take an active role in their own sexual expression appears to be an important step in the direction of women's liberation, it was denoted in this research how approaches to agentic sexualization as a tool of female empowerment seem to undermine the critical lens in which feminist thinking traditionally resides, and which carries its inherent purpose of remaining challenging and disruptive of the *status quo*.

Indeed, the most relevant findings of this research – which comprehend an emphasis on individualism, a perception of choice as empowering and the reclaiming of sexualization practices as means of resistance against the patriarchy – seemed to reveal, on a larger scale, far more important conclusions relating to feminism as a whole. Firstly, the categorical focus on individualism and the destabilization of fixed notions, that was meant to transform feminism into a more inclusive movement, paradoxically resulted in a general loss of ideological cohesion among feminists. While, on the one hand, participants argued that women should be allowed to express 'their own' feminism, conveying a particular regard for each and everyone's right to pursue personal interests or desires, on the other the dismantling of 'feminism' as a unitary and collective notion seems to have resulted in the erosion of 'feminism' as a politically-oriented movement altogether. Essentially, the assumption that every 'choice' pursued by women is inherently 'feminist' by the simple fact that it is believed to reflect female agency, completely diluted the purpose of 'feminism' as an ideologically charged and goal-oriented movement, in favour of individual experience and *self*-determination. In fact, perceiving 'choice' as a form of 'female empowerment' paradoxically implies the underlying belief that women are no longer constricted by oppressive patriarchal tethers, and that, hence, feminism is no longer needed.

Herein, what seems to be problematic in this conjecture is not only the fact that 'feminism' ceases to work as a political and activist movement, particularly for those who are still far from reaching a wider range of 'choices', but also the way in which this scenario appears to completely neglect the power structures in which 'individuals' are formed and 'choices' are made. Conversely, the general rejection of criticism, which appears to be rooted in the supreme rule of non-judgement conveyed by participants throughout interviews, does not only sustain the power structures that are responsible for many (intersected) forms of oppression, as it also perpetuates them under a false signalization of 'freedom'.

A second important outcome of this research is centred on the apparent connection between contemporary feminist thinking and neoliberal/capitalist rationalities and values. Beyond the evident similarities that reside within the highly esteemed regard for individual freedom and freedom of choice, an even sturdier connection was denoted through the discussion of 'female empowerment' by participants. Relating to the aforementioned finding of this research, the apparent loss of ideological cohesion among feminists also allowed for the gradual encroachment of a new set of values into feminist discourse that closely mirror those of capitalist mindsets. Although 'female empowerment' generically relates to the empowerment of the female gender as a whole, interviewees' perceptions of this notion curiously revealed to be (indirectly) built on economic, and individualistic, aspects. For instance, the terms ‘success’ and ‘power’ were frequently used to characterize ‘empowered’ women, which indicated, at large, an important overlap between ‘female empowerment’ and ‘economic empowerment’. If, in fact, the economic empowerment of women – that is, the accumulation of capital – is perceived as a means of female empowerment, and simultaneously the defence of ‘choice’ proceeds to encourage an uncritical view of power structures, it seems that (post)feminist ‘ideology’ has, at large, merged with contemporary liberal ideologies in western societies.

Ultimately, what these consistent discourses around choice, individualism and empowerment seem to convey is that, while attempting to detach from established theoretical notions, and hence assume a defiant stance against hegemonic discourses, post-feminist ideology seems to have become, paradoxically, an hegemonic discourse itself. By promoting values of individuality, sexual ownership, and complete non-judgement, post-feminist thinking revealed to not only fail in critically engaging with existing power structures, but to also be complicit in their perpetuation. At large, this study has shown that whilst striving to safeguard individualities, contemporary feminist thinking moved onto placing liberal values – based on profit, consumption and independency – at the forefront of women’s ideal of liberation, undermining the collective struggle for women’s emancipation and equality.

Herein, this research offers valuable insights on the implications of post-feminist discourses, contributing to ongoing academic debates on the matter of female empowerment through agentic sexualization in contemporary western societies. By critically examining the complexities of post-feminist ideology, with a specific focus on the reproduction of power through dominant discourse, this study attempted to develop and add to the existing body of knowledge of contemporary feminism, highlighting the ways in which it is constantly evolving. Moreover, by exploring the relation between post-feminist ideology and hegemonic power, drawing on a larger social landscape, this study also proved to be particularly relevant to inspire critical evaluations on contemporary feminism as a tool of social progress. Therefore, the societal relevance of this research lays in the recognition that feminism seems to be losing its significance both in political and social spheres. This trend, which nearly represents the demise of feminism as a social movement, largely poses a threat to the continuity of legal, social and economic advancements for all women – as it overshadows structural (and intersectional) inequalities – and ultimately foresees the stagnation of social progress towards equality.

Both these aspects are evidenced by this study and call for a deeper reflection on the path that lays ahead for feminism as a social movement.

Despite its relevance in both scientific and societal domains, there are obvious limitations to this research that need to be addressed. For one, it is important to acknowledge that the sample of this study consists of highly educated people who possess a knowledgeable (and perhaps privileged) view of the world that is not transversal to all people who identify as feminists. As such, this research is limited to a social group that is not representative of all feminist perceptions on ‘self-sexualization’ and ‘female empowerment’. Secondly, the sample criteria that calls upon ‘self-identifying feminists’ inevitably excludes those who do not identify as feminists but may reveal vital insights on the matter of female empowerment, or even ‘choice’ as a dominant discourse – both of which could be useful in order to have a broader understanding of social phenomena within feminist studies. Additionally, although one of the main findings of this research highlights the prominence of liberal values that place economic capital at the forefront of liberation in contemporary western societies, it is important to mention that their influence in contemporary feminist thinking was not as developed as it is believed to be relevant.

In sight of these limitations, it is essential that future research attempts to expand these findings onto different domains, providing a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the topic. Firstly, it would be interesting to undertake a similar research in a non-western context to ascertain the ways in which western culture may be influencing non-western societies. This would be particularly relevant to draw more conclusions on current hegemonic power and the reproduction of dominant (western) discourses in the East. Secondly, the aforementioned finding that relates to feminism’s loss of (ideological) significance and strength in the political and social spheres could be further corroborated if ‘choice’ discourses were to be found in people who do not identify as feminists but share similar perspectives with those who do. Finally, this loss of ideological charge, which was partially attributed to the influence of (liberal) hegemonic power, could be also investigated in other social domains in order to understand if this phenomenon may represent a pattern for all social movements in contemporary societies. For instance, the LGBTQ+ movement seems to currently share a general tendency for hyper-sexual representations of ‘queerness’, which is, likewise, transmitted as a form of empowerment. On the other hand, most conservatives tend to point out this ‘over-sexualization’ to justify their dislike for the community, which, in turn, hides oppressive agendas under concerns of ‘morality’. As such, it would be interesting to understand if these similar issues also share a common outcome – that is, the undermining of the social and political aspects of the LGBTQ+ community through a ‘rainbow washing’ of queer (sexual) empowerment.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Interview Script

Feminist backgrounds

1. Could you tell me your name and your age?
2. What is your study programme?
3. How would you situate yourself politically? What political party do you have sympathy for? (possible follow-up: what do you mean by that?)
4. Can you tell me very briefly where you're from, where you grew up, how was it growing up? Family, surroundings, school…
5. You are taking part in this interview because you identify as a feminist, what does that mean to you?
6. Do you remember your first contacts with feminism? What made you start thinking about it? First Contacts/References
7. Would you say your mother was a feminist?
8. Is there someone you consider a feminist role model? (culture?) Why did you consider this person? Can you tell me a bit about them and what makes them a feminist role model to you?
9. How do you put feminism into practice in your daily life? What does it entail for you, personally?
10. How does feminism appear in your daily life in terms of how you present yourself?
11. How does it appear in your personal relations? (in the way you interact, connect with people)

Perceptions on pop culture and female artists

12. How do you think women are portrayed in the media today? Could you give me an example of a portrayal you agree or disagree with?
13. Do you think these portrayals have been changing over time? (possible follow-ups) How do you perceive these changes? In what way do you think they're changing? What would you say has fundamentally changed?
    OR in what ways do you perceive they haven't been changing?

Beyoncé has been often considered a pop icon both by the media, and the public. "Single Ladies" was one of her biggest hits and is arguably considered to be illustrative of her image (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4m1EFMoRFvY)
For many, Beyoncé is also a feminist role model.

14. Do you agree?
15. What image of femininity do you think is presented by her and her music?
16. (so, summarizing) what would you say is her role in relation to feminism?

Nicki Minaj's music videos have been subject of controversy about her intentions in regards to feminism, even though she is also considered to be a feminist role model by many and has claimed multiple times that her music is about female empowerment, body positivity and self-acceptance.

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6u3eTsCaRQg&t=1s)

17. What are your thoughts on this?
18. How do you perceive the participation of female dancers in the background of music videos, where they are usually presented semi-naked, in relation to feminism? (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3cDcBsK-2rg ; 2.10min)
    a. (possible follow-up) why do you think you find it different from Beyoncé? (Or Nicki Minaj)

Perceptions on Sex Industry

19. What do you think about pornography in relation to the position of women in society?
20. Pornography is one of the few industries where women dominate, how do you make sense of the high wages that are involved in sex industries in relation to women's position in society?

21. Have you ever heard of OnlyFans?
1. OnlyFans was created in 2016, and became particularly popular during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is an internet subscription service, that is mostly famous for streaming explicit sexual content. Content creators use this platform to monetize their fanbase, and profit relies on the number of subscriptions and views, without having gate-keepers in between taking part in it.

22. What is your intake on OnlyFans, in regards to feminism?
    a. (possible follow-up) Do you find "OnlyFans" to be different from pornography?

23. Finally, what does female empowerment mean to you?