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The Bold Feminist

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Abstract

My paper revolves around 'identity as a performative and political tool and/or as a site of political resistance and change.' I will use the concept 'popular feminism' to critically evaluate the current feminist momentum, characterized by its proliferation in pop culture and fashion, and its impact on the feminist movement with regards to empowerment and resistance. Popular feminism can be characterized as the increasing visibility and popularity of feminism within mainstream popular culture. This form of feminism is increasingly incorporating a more intersectional approach, but I would still argue that the current feminist identity is problematic through its exclusionary attitude. I will exemplify this through the American television show *The Bold Type* by Freeform that aired in 2017. This show has been celebrated for its representation of women of color and queer relationships. However, through analyzing the feminist statements that are featured in the show (e.g. intersectionality, the portrayal of female sexuality), I uncover the problematic structures that are apparent in the current feminist momentum.

Popular feminism promotes a type of empowerment that is limited due to the power relations that it perpetuates and the lack of resistance it generates. This becomes evident through the *The Bold Type's* focus on consumer behavior and sexual agency as sources of empowerment. This form of individual empowerment is tied to those that are in the privileged social position to obtain this and does not include resistance against patriarchal societal structures. Empowerment entails a process, beginning with a state of disempowerment. However, the women that are represented in popular feminism are highly privileged and as such, do not reflect empowerment. As such, it fails to address systematic inequalities with regards to gender that are still apparent in society.

Key words: popular feminism, The Bold Type, empowerment, resistance, popular culture

Introduction

In 2014, Beyoncé performed at the MTV Video Music Awards (Hamad and Taylor 2015). In the middle of the performance, the music stopped and the audience was introduced to the voice of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. It was a segment of her speech 'We Should All Be Feminists' and hereafter, Beyoncé performed her song *Flawless*. The performance marked a significant moment for the relationship between popular culture and feminism as "a word with a complicated history [was] reclaimed by the most powerful celebrity in the world." (Bennett 2014). This moment could be considered a turning point in the relationship between feminism and popular culture, as the media visibility of feminist statements has increased over the last four years. Specifically over the last year, one could not avoid the conversations surrounding #MeToo. On October 5th 2017, the New York Times published an article in which film producer Harvey Weinstein was accused of sexual harassment and misconduct by several women (Kantor and Twohey 2017). Ten days later, actress Alysia Milano used the hashtag #MeToo and the campaign went viral (The Sunday Times 2017).

The increased media visibility of feminism and issues related to feminism could be interpreted as a sign of victory. At last, feminism receives recognition. However, recent interest in feminism and its increased media visibility have received a significant amount of critique by various feminist scholars and activists. Feminist writer Andi Zeisler (2016) argues that even though the visibility of feminism and the loss of its status as a 'dirty word' are productive developments, the movement has lost touch with its political and radical side. However, I want to refrain from immediately criticizing this current trend, but rather critically evaluate this feminist momentum. Thus, the central question guiding my research revolves around how feminism is represented in popular culture and how this type of feminism contributes to the feminist movement in terms of *empowerment* and *resistance*. The relationship between feminism and popular culture will be explored through the concept of 'popular feminism'. Popular feminism can be defined as the increasing visibility and popularity of feminism within popular culture (Glitre 2011). This concept will be illustrated through an analysis of *The Bold Type*, a television show by Freeform that aired in 2017 (Watson 2017).

Social movement theory will be elaborated on to conceptualize notions of *empowerment* and *resistance* (Diani 2014; Hollander and Einwohner 2004; Kabeer 1999). As popular feminism is the primary space in which my research is conducted, a thorough conceptualization will be provided. I will argue for my choice of concepts and link the term to other feminisms that have often been employed by feminist scholars researching popular culture, namely commodity and neoliberal feminism. This will serve as the framework for my analysis of *The Bold Type*. The analysis will be executed in two different sections. In the first section, an analysis of the main characters will be presented, to illustrate the construction of feminist identities. Following this, a second section will provide a thematic analysis of some of the feminist issues that are discussed in the show. It will be illustrated that even though popular feminism is able to promote individual empowerment and agency, the type of empowerment that popular feminism creates a space for is currently limited due to the power relations that it perpetuates, and the lack of resistance it generates. Through its focus on consumer behavior and sexual agency, it fails to address bigger structural issues that are relevant to the feminist movement. The empowerment and choice that is promoted in popular feminism is limited to those that have the privilege to attain it.

Empowerment and Resistance

It is relevant to draw upon social movement theory to conceptualize the concepts of empowerment and resistance and their relationship to social movements in general. Diani (2014) argues that a movement is "a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups, and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity." (Diani 2014, 271). Engagement in a political or cultural conflict can be

linked to the notion of resistance, which is an important tool in evaluating the development and impact of a movement. Hollander and Einwohner (2004) set out to exemplify the diversity of conceptualizations and provide a typology of resistance. All types of resistance involve action and opposition (Hollander and Einwohner 2004). The essential element of the action, when it comes to resistance, is that it stands in opposition to dominant norms or values (Hollander and Einwohner 2004). Collective action as well as individual behaviour can be used as resistance strategies.

The aforementioned acts of resistance within social movements serve a purpose. They make movements move and through this, movements are able to impact society. It is particularly this impact that I am interested in: How does the feminist movement influence those that it sets out to impact (and those it might not directly set out to impact)? For many social movements an important objective for collective action has always been empowerment, to empower those that the movement stands for. However, as with resistance, the notion of empowerment is rather complex. For the conceptualization of empowerment I turn to the work of Kabeer (1999). She starts her conceptualization by defining power as “the ability to make choices.” (Kabeer 1999, 436). Thus, the denial of choice entails a state of disempowerment. An essential feature of empowerment is that it indicates a process of change. A prerequisite for empowerment is a state of disempowerment from which one progresses. Hence there is a difference between someone who is powerful – as in they have the ability to make choices – and someone that is empowered – as in they come from a state of disempowerment and moved towards the increased ability to make choices (Kabeer 1999).

Kabeer (1999) distinguishes three dimensions of choice: resources, agency, and achievements. These could be seen as a progression from pre-conditions to the process to the outcomes of choices. The access to resources can range from tangible to intangible resources and this dimension reflects distribution and exchange within different institutions. The second dimension is one’s sense of agency, which Kabeer (1999) defines as “the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them.” (438). These two constitute the capabilities that human beings have, that is, the ability to live their lives the way that they see fit. The achievements that derive from capabilities can vary greatly and elaborating on this is not relevant for the sake of the conceptualization that is offered here. Rather, it is important to understand that these three dimensions all constitute choice and that they should all be taken into account when measuring empowerment. One final remark that is important to mention has to do with the distinction between differences and inequalities (Kabeer 1999). This will become evident through the following example. There are two pregnant women: one of them decides to keep the child and the other has an abortion. Even though their choices are different, this does not tell us anything about (dis)empowerment. However, the situation changes when both of them would want to end their pregnancy, but only one is able to have an abortion due to the high costs. This indicates an inequality between the two women with regards to their ability to enact their choice to have an abortion. As such, the woman who cannot afford an abortion is in a state of disempowerment.

Popular Feminism

There are many different types of feminisms and different conceptualizations have been used by scholars to grasp the intricacies that constitute the feminist movement. My analysis will revolve around the phenomenon of popular feminism. Although this term has not been widely employed by feminist scholars, its conceptualization provides an adequate framework for trying to make sense of the relationship between feminism and popular culture. Popular feminism refers to the representation of feminism in popular culture, the popularity of these representations, and its influence in the widespread understanding of feminism (Glitre 2011). As such it is situated within media culture and revolves around the feminist discourses that receive visibility in contemporary media (Gill 2016). The types of feminist discourses within popular feminism are not immediately specified in its definition and this makes it an

adequate tool to examine media artefacts. As the feminist movement rapidly changes, many terms have been coined to account for its development. However, these terms become contested when the movement seems to develop beyond the scope of the term. With popular feminism I avoid the risk of only accounting for a particular moment within feminism, as the concept can encompass the development of the movement.

This research aims to address the relationship between feminism and popular culture, and the contributions of popular feminism to the feminist movement with regards to empowerment and resistance. Through this question I look at popular feminism from a critical stance. This becomes clear when locating the concept of popular feminism within our contemporary media landscape, which is exactly what scholars such as Gill (2016; 2008) and McRobbie (2004) attempt to do. Firstly, it is important to give a brief overview of earlier feminist representations in popular culture. In the 1990s, the word feminism was traded for 'Girl Power', a concept that was popularized by girl bands and marketed as "the nonpolitical and nonthreatening alternative to feminism." (Taft 2004, 71). It was a reaction to the rigid boundaries that the feminist movement put on the female subject. Girl Power was reclaiming femininity, stating that liking pink and 'girly' things is nothing to be ashamed of (Taft 2004).

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, the term feminism seemed to resurface. I have chosen to start my analysis from 2014 due to two specific events that are most often mentioned by scholars when looking at the contemporary representation of feminism in popular culture. The first is the aforementioned performance by Beyoncé (Hamad and Taylor 2015). In the same year, actress Emma Watson gave a speech at the United Nations on gender equality. Hereafter, many celebrities followed Beyoncé and Watson in publicly stating that they are feminists. The new popularity of feminism has been met with quite some backlash and controversy. Academics such as Gill (2016) have expressed the problematic nature that arises from the development of feminism from a dirty word to a shiny, desirable label. This becomes evident when looking at other types of feminism that play a central role in popular feminism.

Commodity feminism

An important aspect of contemporary popular feminism is its focus on commercialization. A feminist identity has become stylish and one can attain it through consumer behavior (Gill 2016). The notion of commodity feminism has been primarily prevalent in advertising, which incorporates the ideology to sell products (Gill 2008). Within popular culture, the fashion industry has been the front runner when it comes to commercializing the movement and has often collaborated with celebrities. Magazines such as ELLE and Vogue have 'Feminist Issues' that feature celebrities who have publicly stated that they are feminists and fashion companies such as Dior and H&M have produced clothes that carry feminist slogans, using celebrities for their campaigns (Harwood 2017).

Commodity feminism has been highly criticized by feminist academia and the feminist movement in general. Scholars such as Gill (2016) and Ramamurthy (2003; 2004) have shed light on the contradictory relationship between feminism and commodification. A lot of these products are manufactured by female garment workers who face sexual exploitation, something that the feminist movement should be against.

Neoliberal feminism

The most prominent identity that is represented in commodity feminism – and consequently in popular feminism – is the neoliberal feminist. Neoliberalism can be defined as an ideology proposing that it will be most beneficial for societies and the well-being of its citizens to liberate "individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey 2005, 2). This entails that the state should minimize its interference with economic practices. This idea is extended to the

relation between the state and its citizens, as neoliberalists believe that individual freedom is a fundamental value of civilization and must not be threatened by state ruling (Harvey 2005).

Neoliberal feminism is the incorporation of a neoliberal ideology in feminist discourse, which can be explained by second-wave feminism favoring identity claims over actual economic justice (Fraser, 2013). This neoliberal feminist subject is aware of their personal responsibility for their well-being and thus shifts gender equality to a personal issue (Rottenberg, 2014). This individual narrative is highly visible in media, promoting self-love and confidence as solutions to gender inequality (Gill, 2016; Tyler, 2005). Through its prevalence in advertisement and journalism, neoliberal feminism is inextricably linked to commodity feminism. Fashion and beauty companies often use notions of self-love and confidence to sell their products. They target the 'strong independent woman', who uses the products to express her empowered identity (Gill 2008).

Many scholars are critical of the incorporation of neoliberal values in feminist identities (Gill 2016; Rottenberg 2014; Thwaites 2017). A particular concern is the focus on individualism and consumerism, that Thwaites (2017) incorporates into her concept of choice feminism. This type of feminism deals with the idea that female empowerment revolves around women choosing whatever they want for their lives. This idea of individual empowerment and choice tend to undermine systematic inequalities that the feminist movement should tackle (Thwaites 2017). In addition, it is important to reflect upon neoliberal feminist subjects and specifically on the position that they hold in society. Neoliberal feminists only make up a small percentage of the population, and their needs seem to overshadow those of the majority that would really benefit from structural changes (Rottenberg 2014).

Mapping out the varieties of feminisms

The different types of feminisms that were discussed in the previous section are just a few of the many different manners in which feminism is conceptualized. Hence, one could argue that feminism is not a static concept, but a spectrum. Kemp and Squires (1998) specifically refer to feminisms to account for the diversity of feminism within academia, but also within political commitments. Not only is there a great diversity in types of feminisms, these feminisms are often in opposition with each other and disagree on the conceptualization of feminism or feminist action. The growth of the feminist movement during second wave feminism simultaneously brought about a splintering of the movement, as well as the development of various theoretical perspectives within feminist thought (Kemp and Squires 1998). Around the 1980s, feminist research flourished and critically challenged dominant theoretical perspectives in academia (Kemp and Squires 1998). However, some have argued that the institutionalization of feminist research has stripped it from its critical edge (Scott 2008). This raises an important question, namely whether feminist research should radically go against dominant structure or work within the system? This question remains unanswered, as feminist scholars differ in their standpoint and approach.

Postfeminism

The term postfeminism has been conceptualized in various manners and Kim (2001) lists the three general approaches. The first could be defined as the more historical definition, referring to postfeminism as the era after second wave feminism – thus the 1980s and 1990s. This does not really tell us anything about the type of feminism that is represented in postfeminism. The second definition accounts for this, referring to postfeminism as the backlash against feminism. This can be seen in the aforementioned example of Girl Power (Taft 2004). It is here that similarities between postfeminism and popular feminism can be found. Girl Power and the feminism that is represented in popular feminism share the affirmation of femininity, as well as the incorporation of celebrity and consumer culture.

Nevertheless, employing the definition of postfeminism as a backlash would entail that in some sense, we have moved past feminism. This is not the case for popular feminism, as feminist statements have become trending and receive increasing media visibility (Gill 2016). Does this then mean that we have returned to feminism or arrived at a time of post-postfeminism? The treatment of postfeminism as a momentum beyond feminism attempts to account for the development of the feminist movement, but one could argue that it becomes useless when the movement has surpassed this momentum (Gill 2016). Why then is it still a useful term to take into account when addressing popular feminism? This question can be answered by looking at Kim's (2001) third definition, which is similar to Gill's (2016) argument. Postfeminism should be employed as "an analytical category, designed to capture empirical regularities in the world." (Gill 2016, 621). A postfeminist analysis can be used to understand the ways in which contradictory claims of feminism can co-exist, in the ways that it does in popular feminism. For my research, the term is mainly productive because of its incorporation in feminist media analysis. It has been used as an analytical framework for analyses on postfeminist shows of the 1990s such as *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones* (McRobbie 2004; Arthurs 2003). Several themes and tropes that were uncovered in this research are still visible in *The Bold Type*, and this is where I will draw upon postfeminist studies.

Introducing the Bold Type

The Bold Type was inspired by the life of Joanna Coles, the former editor-in-chief of Cosmopolitan. It follows three best friends working at the fictitious fashion magazine *Scarlet* in New York (Watson 2017). Similar to postfeminist shows such as *Sex and the City*, work and the private sphere are indivisible as work becomes a source for self-expression (Arthurs 2003). Their personal story lines are inextricably linked to their careers at *Scarlet*, especially with Jane as she frequently writes about her personal experiences. Through Jane's articles, the show touches upon feminist issues such as female sexual pleasure, breast health, and sexual assault (Watson 2017).

The show was produced by Freeform, formerly known as ABC Family. The first season premiered on July 11, 2017, and contains ten episodes (Freeform n.d.). Overall the show received positive reviews and has been renewed for two seasons, with season 2 airing mid-June 2018 (Freeform n.d.). This analysis will only focus on the first season, as the second season was not completely available yet during the course of this research. Freeform marketed *The Bold Type* as a feminist show and this becomes apparent through various features. Within the show itself, feminism is often directly addressed and discussed. For example, in the first episode Kat states: "I'm a feminist okay? I'm political and so is this magazine." (Watson and Fleder 2017, 21:46-21:51). In addition, the show uses promotion banners during their episode with slogans referring to feminism.

Analysis of characters

Sutton Brady

Sutton Brady is an assistant at *Scarlet*, who eventually pursues a career in fashion (Watson 2017). In the first episode, it is revealed that she is having a secret relationship with Richard Hunter, who's a member of the board of directors (Watson and Fleder 2017). The storyline between Sutton and Richard puts a significant emphasis on their sexual relationship. One way to interpret her character and this storyline is through the trope of the midriff that was formulated within postfeminist analysis (Gill 2008). This trope exemplifies the shift from women as mere sex objects to women as actively in charge of their sexual agency. Gill (2008) describes the characterization as a "young, attractive, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power." (p. 41). She takes control of her own sexuality and uses this as a source of confidence and self-esteem. Through this, it closely resembles

the aforementioned neoliberal feminist subject. Even though Sutton and Richard are also romantically involved, there is an emphasis on their sexual interactions, specifically around the office. For example, Richard calls Sutton whilst she is at the office to engage in sexually charged conversations (Watson and Fleder 2017). After their break-up, Sutton's relationship with another co-worker at *Scarlet* is explored through sexual intercourse (Sternberger and Nelli Jr. 2017). What is most evident is Sutton's character is the theme of sexual agency and choice. When Kat and Jane find out that Sutton is involved with Richard, they confront her. Sutton in return feels enraged and exclaims to her friends: "I can screw whoever I want!" (Watson and Fleder 2017, 31:13-31:16). The midriff trope can guide us in interpreting the themes of sexual agency and choice that are present in her characterization. These themes can be linked to neoliberal feminism and its emphasis on confidence and self-love. Sutton is in charge of her sexuality and her sexual agency constitutes a significant part of her storyline (Watson 2017).

Kat Edison

Kat is the social media director of *Scarlet*. The main storyline for Kat is her relationship with Adena el-Amin, which will be discussed later on in the analysis.

Jane Sloan

The first episode of the show starts with Jane's first day as a writer at *Scarlet* (Watson and Fleder 2017). During her time at the magazine, Jane is eager to write political stories, but this initially gets overthrown by the editor-in-chief. She wants Jane to write personal stories about her love and sex life. Even though Jane eventually is able to write more political stories, they are often linked to fashion (Lo and Weyer 2017). At the end of the show Jane leaves *Scarlet* to work at political magazine *Incite* (Watson and Nelli Jr. 2017b). Throughout the show, the audience witnesses Jane's increasing confidence as she becomes an active agent in her own love and sex life.

One of Jane's major story lines revolves around female orgasms. In episode 2, Jane has to write an article about the perfect orgasm (Watson & Nelli Jr., 2017a). Reluctantly, she reveals to her friends that she has never had an orgasm. She writes a heartfelt article concerning the importance of discussing taboos around female orgasms, specifically the lack of understanding of the complexity of female orgasms. Whereas the characters of Kat and Sutton conform with postfeminist representations of female sexuality, Jane's story line deals with a topic that is still rather taboo in our society and particularly, in media. The depiction of sexual (usually penetrative) intercourse in media rarely reflects difficulties regarding female orgasms (Newsom, 2011). In reality, only eight per cent of women are reliably able to orgasm from penile-vaginal intercourse (Dingfelder, 2011). Yet in shows such as *Sex and the City* this is never represented. Through Jane's article, the episode is able to depict a critical statement with regards to the rigid ways in which female sexual pleasure is depicted.

Unfortunately, the show quickly returns to stereotypical depictions of sex within two episodes. Episode 4 starts with a scene where Jane is having sex (Straker Hauser & Mastro, 2017). Their intercourse lasts less than a minute and solely consists of penile-vaginal intercourse. The scene ends, however, with Jane having her first orgasm. As only eight per cent of women are able to reliably have orgasms from penile-vaginal intercourse, it seems unlikely that Jane is able to, given her struggle with sexual pleasure (Dingfelder, 2011). In addition, the scene undermines the progressive message behind the storyline of female sexual pleasure. In the end, Jane relies on a male sex partner to experience sexual pleasure. The scene hereafter shows Jane walking to the office – with several close-ups of her black stilettos – and telling her friends: "I feel invigorated." (Straker Hauser & Mastro, 2017, 02:26-02:30). As mentioned before with the analysis of Jacqueline, the show's focus on shoes seems to symbolize power and status. The experience of having an orgasm is represented as empowering.

Jacqueline Carlyle

Jacqueline's character is based on Joanna Coles: she is the editor-in-chief of *Scarlet* and the embodiment of the type of feminism that the magazine wants to depict. She is credited with bringing *Scarlet* 'stealth feminism', which is defined as: "It's no longer how to please your man or woman in bed, it's how to please yourself." (Watson and Nelli Jr. 2017a, 22:00-22:05). The audience is introduced to Jacqueline when the three main characters arrive at the office in the first episode (Watson and Fleder 2017). What is remarkable about this scene is that we only see a specific part of Jacqueline, namely her shoes. The scene starts with the three women walking through the office. The camera focuses on Jane's face as the effect of slow-motion emphasizes her staring in awe. In the next shot, the camera slowly moves to the left to reveal Jacqueline's red high-heeled shoes. Later on in the episode, we see Jacqueline walking towards the board meeting and again, the first shot of the sequence solely depicts her shoes (Watson and Fleder 2017). Jacqueline is a symbol of empowerment and status, as the women are intimidated by her standing. If one were to imagine the same scene with other shoes, such as sneakers, would this scene have the same effect? What can be interpreted here is that the shoes are a symbol of the character's power and status, which is portrayed through the use of empowering music and dramatic cinematography. Jacqueline often figures as a role model to the three girls, guiding them in their careers and giving them advice on personal matters. She is a figure of standing and authority within the show and her shoes are used to convey this message.

As mentioned before, Jacqueline embodies the type of feminism that the magazine wants to communicate and what this feminism exactly entails becomes clear through her speech at the end of the first episode (Watson and Fleder 2017). During the 60th anniversary of the magazine, Jacqueline says:

"For those of you who say we are just a fashion and beauty magazine, I say: Here's the next great mascara to give you bigger eyes to see the world. Here's a fabulous pair of jeans now go climb a mountain in them." (Watson and Fleder 2017, 38:50-39:05).

From this statement, it becomes clear that the magazine offers empowerment through fashion. It provides its readers with consumer goods that they can use for empowerment and to 'conquer the world'.

Analyzing intersectionality in *The Bold Type*

Intersectionality is a term that has become of increasing importance to the feminist movement. The theory was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and discusses the different ways that identity groups interact with one another. Human beings consist of a multitude of identities that should not be regarded as distinct, but rather as roads that all lead to the intersection that is the human subject. She argues that an intersectional approach is key to understanding the issues that humans face. In recent years, intersectionality has received significant attention within academia, but has also gained media visibility in its productivity towards addressing 'white feminism' (Weiss 2015).

Kat and Adena

Intersectionality can mainly be found in the storyline of Kat and Adena. Their relationship deals with notions of race, sexuality, and religion. In the first episode, Kat meets Adena, a Muslim lesbian artist featured in *Scarlet* (Watson and Fleder 2017). This signals the start of their complex relationship, as Kat struggles with accepting her feelings for Adena. Adena moves to Paris but decides to go back to New York to be with Kat (Lo and Straker Hauser 2017). However, she is detained at customs and ordered to go back 'home' (Sternberger and Nelli Jr. 2017).

The character of Adena draws on the controversial topic of the veil. The figure of the veiled woman has played a pivotal role in the increasing islamophobia in Western countries through the discourse of 'Islam as anti-feminist' (Bilge 2010; Mahmood 2008; Scott 2007). Bilge (2010) elaborates on the paradoxical stereotypes that are visible in media and public debates regarding veiled Muslim women. They are either viewed as a symbol of oppression or as a symbol of resistance to Western hegemony. Adena frames her choice for wearing a veil as an act of resistance, which becomes evident through the following statement that she presents:

"I choose to wear the hijab. It does not oppress me, but liberates me from society's expectations of what a woman should look like. People tend to get uncomfortable when they cannot put you in a box, but I've always liked to make people uncomfortable." (Watson and Nelli Jr. 2017a, 28:20-28:44).

If one links this statement to the aforementioned conceptualization of resistance, it can be classified as such through its incorporation of action and opposition. The act of wearing a hijab is opposing Western beauty standards.

The issues that Adena faces with regards to discrimination and immigration are discussed at length throughout the show and are depicted through an intersectional approach, taking into account notions of gender, sexuality, religion, and ethnicity. However, several critics have discussed the problematic nature of the show not discussing Kat's race (Bennett 2017; Griffiths 2017; McDonald 2017). Kat, a main character on the show and Adena's love interest, is Black and even though the show openly discusses discrimination based on gender and religion, it fails to incorporate racism. For example, the show draws significant attention to Adena's vulnerable position with regards to institutions, such as immigration services and the police (Watson 2017). In episode 4, Adena is verbally assaulted by a passer-by for speaking Arab and wearing a hijab (Straker Hauser and Mastro 2017). Kat punches the passer-by and when the police shows up, Adena has fled the scene and Kat gets arrested. She is angry at Adena for abandoning her, who explains her actions by shedding light on her vulnerable position when it comes to the police. As she points out to Kat:

"You have a choice, but I'm a Muslim lesbian living in today's America. My choices are very limited." (Straker Hauser and Mastro 2017, 28:44-28:52).

Initially, Kat fails to comprehend what Adena is referring to and this is merely one of the instances that exemplifies Kat's lack of racial awareness throughout the show (McDonald 2017; Watson 2017). The show fails to mention the vulnerable position of Kat in relation to institutions such as the police, as police brutality towards African-Americans is not mentioned (McDonald 2017). Through this, the character of Kat is neutralized from the racial complexity that is apparent in American society, and from her own racial background.

Sexuality

The relationship between Kat and Adena can be linked to Gill's (2008) conceptualization of the 'hot lesbian'. The hot lesbian is characterized through an emphasis on beauty and femininity, which on the one hand liberates from previous negative stereotypes, whilst on the other hand creating new exclusions based on levels of femininity. Through this emphasis, the trope is "invariably constructed in relation to heterosexuality – not as an autonomous or independent sexual identity" (Gill 2008, 51). The link to heterosexuality is often emphasized through the depiction of heterosexual women who are experimenting. In this manner, it does not break with conventional norms of heterosexual attractiveness. This conceptualization can be linked to the character of Kat, as she constantly reaffirms her

heterosexual status, even though she is falling in love with a woman. Throughout various episodes, Kat makes statements like the following:

“I’m not a lesbian Jane, just not. [...] it’s just not who I am. I’m not about the ladies. I’m hetero. Proud hetero.” (Watson and Nelli Jr. 2017a, 28:13-28:29).

In addition, when Kat and Adena separate, Kat goes on a blind-date with a man because as she claims she’s “a one-woman kinda girl.” (Lo and Straker Hauser 2017, 02:36-02:38). This marks her relationship with Adena as an anomaly in her heterosexual status, as an experience that is not actually going against her heterosexuality.

Age, Beauty, Class and Gender

When analyzing the gender identity of the characters in *The Bold Type*, it becomes clear that all of the roles in the show are cisgender. Cisgender entails that one has a gender identity that aligns with the gender that one was assigned at birth (Lennon and Mistler 2014). All of the featured characters in the show are cisgender and their appearances conform to common conceptions of femininity and masculinity. However, the show never depicts the actual clothes that Alex will wear for the article, neither is the article mentioned again. This is where gender also links to the concept of beauty, which is a theme that has been discussed by many different scholars (Gill 2016; Laza 2009; Tyler 2005). All of the female characters in the show align with Western feminine beauty standards, even Adena who states that she is liberated from Western conceptions of beauty. They are all slim, wear a significant amount of make-up, and dress in accordance to social conceptions of femininity – skirts, dresses, bright colors, and accessories (Watson 2017). Another aspect that is often incorporated in the feminine beauty standard is youthfulness (Gill 2016; Lazar 2009). With the exception of Jacqueline – who serves as a role model and mother figure – the main characters are all in their twenties (Watson 2017).

As the show revolves around a fashion magazine, consumer culture is a prominent theme within the show and popular feminism in general. However, issues of class are rarely mentioned. The characters have a rather extravagant lifestyle with a spacious apartment in Brooklyn and new clothes in every episode (Leary, 2017). The only mention of class is through the character of Sutton. However, the depiction of her financial issues also incorporates opposing views. On the one hand, Sutton talks to other characters about her hesitations with regards to a career switch to fashion due to the lower wages. On the other hand, Sutton proudly shows her new designer (Miu Miu) shoes to Jane that she bought to treat herself (Sternberger & Travis, 2017). Shoes from such designers are easily around 700 dollars and this purchase would seem impossible for someone who is really struggling financially.

Discussion

The narrative of empowerment is prominent within *The Bold Type*, as it is often directly addressed by characters in the show (Watson 2017). This has been illustrated through the four main characters of the show that reflect feminist identities, and the feminist themes that are related to them. Sutton is empowered through consumer behavior – buying new shoes – and sexual agency – having control over who she has sexual intercourse with. The theme of sexual agency is also reflected with Jane, who is empowered through having her first orgasm. The aspect of empowerment is not particularly depicted with Kat, which could be interpreted as being due to her lack of awareness on her racial background in relation to contemporary discussions on race in America. Her main love-interest, Adena, is empowered as she openly expresses her sexuality and religion, yet disempowered when it comes to her vulnerable position with

regards to institutions. Jacqueline serves as the epitome of an empowered woman, conveying power and status through her appearance.

Nevertheless, I would characterize the type of empowerment that is represented as problematic. The aforementioned types of empowerment are predominantly focused on the individual, specifically empowerment through consumer behavior and sexual agency. The themes of sexual agency and consumer behavior, as well as other forms of empowerment featured in the magazine, are promoting aspects such as self-love and confidence as the solution to inequality and disempowerment. In this manner, it aligns with both neoliberal feminism and commodity feminism (consumer behavior). Empowerment is the confidence to talk openly about sexual pleasure and self-love entails treating yourself to expensive shoes because you deserve it.

An individualistic approach to empowerment is problematic and this becomes clear when it is analyzed next to power relations that are in place. One way to critically evaluate the representation of empowerment in the *The Bold Type* is to ask the question: Who can obtain the empowerment that is represented? The types of individual empowerment that are depicted are limited by privilege. The consequence of this individual, entitled empowerment is that it overlooks bigger structural issues with regards to social justice and equality. Empowerment through consumer behavior is merely available to those that have the financial means for it, which is the case for all the characters in the show. Even Sutton, who mentions her financial struggles, is able to pamper herself with expensive luxury goods as a form of self-love. This focus on consumption overlooks the harm that comes from this, such as the exploitation of female garment workers in non-Western countries that produce these goods. In addition, the issue of female sexual pleasure is something that should be discussed within the feminist movement and that deserves significant attention. Nevertheless, for women that do not have the financial means for or even access to birth control, the issue of sexual pleasure may not be their main concern. The women represented in *The Bold Type* and the problems that they face reflect merely a small percentage of privileged women and not the systemic inequality that the majority of women face (Rottenberg 2014).

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, empowerment is linked to resistance through its ability to foster empowerment and to protest states of disempowerment. Another problematic aspect of the empowerment that is put forward in *The Bold Type* is the lack of resistance, specifically the lack of opposition in their actions. This can be exemplified through the theme of sexual pleasure. Whereas the show sets out to provide an alternative depiction of female sexual pleasure, it quickly conforms to dominant misconceptions on female orgasms. The only character that could be said to offer resistance is Adena, through her choice to wear a hijab. However, the rest of her appearance does conform with Western beauty standards and gender norms. The same can be argued for all of the other characters on the show. They are all cisgender, thin, pretty, young and able. As the characters gain empowerment through individual aspects such as self-love and confidence, they are not confronting bigger systemic inequalities but rather conforming to capitalism and neoliberalism.

Hence, I would argue that *The Bold Type* does not incorporate resistance and as such, it cannot include empowerment, as empowerment cannot exist without resistance. This claim can also be illustrated through the work of Kabeer (1999). Empowerment entails a previous stage of disempowerment, and as such a process towards empowerment that should include a resistance towards the disempowered status. One could argue that the women in the show are able to make choices, which is at the core of empowerment, and as such are empowered. However, the requirement of disempowerment seems missing, as was previously illustrated through the privileged nature of the feminist issues that were represented. The female characters do not come from a place of disempowerment, as they have the ability to make life choices with regards to their career, their health, and their personal lives. There were opportunities for the show to elaborate on the disempowerment that Kat might experience from being an African-American in the United States, but her lack of racial awareness glosses over this issue. As such, the show, the feminist

issues that are represented, and popular feminism in general include limited perspectives on empowerment that could even be discredited as empowerment.

Conclusion

This research has shed light on the relationship between feminism and popular culture, specifically with regards to the current feminist momentum, which can be characterized by the popularization and increased media visibility of feminism. The conceptualization of popular feminism and its illustration within *The Bold Type* were productive tools for examining the representations of empowerment and resistance within this particular type of feminism. The representation of the feminist subject and the feminist themes that were discussed in the show (female sexuality and intersectionality) clearly directed itself towards depicting empowerment, which is in accordance with other case studies of popular feminism such as fashion magazines and celebrity performances. However, upon analysis of the show, it becomes clear that the necessary conditions of empowerment are not represented. Consequently, it fails to incorporate resistance and a state of disempowerment, which is a key element of the process of empowering (Kabeer, 1999). Besides this, the focus on consumer behavior and sexual agency promotes individual empowerment, but this can only be obtained by those that have the privilege to do so. Through this, it fails to address systematic (gender) inequalities that many still face.

The feminist movement, and feminism as an ideology in general, are difficult notions to pinpoint due to their complex structure, filled with opposing views and constant developments. The current feminist momentum is a perfect illustration of this. The celebration of feminism within popular culture has proliferated over the last decade and it could be argued that this is shift from the discourse of ‘feminism as a dirty word’ that was apparent in the 1990s can be defined as a success for the movement (Taft 2004). However, this momentum incorporates different types of feminisms – such as commodity and neoliberal feminism – that can be problematized. How then should this momentum be conceptualized and analyzed? Postfeminist analysis has been a productive source for examining media artefacts in the 1990s, but these are dated and postfeminism itself is a rather controversial concept, as it has often been identified as a backlash against feminism (Gill 2016; Kim 2001). This research has presented a new notion to adequately investigate the current feminist momentum and its media artefacts: popular feminism. The term is not tied to a feminist ideology, but rather entails the popularization of feminism. What this type of feminism would look like depends on the current feminist momentum and what types of feminism receive media visibility. As such, the concept is productive for looking at the relationship between feminism and popular culture and the spectrum of feminisms that are of significance for this relationship. I hope this work will serve as an incentive for feminist academia to use popular feminism as an analytical tool, specifically in combination with media analysis. When I was gathering literature on the relationship between feminism and popular culture, the majority of media analyses that I could find were focused on artefacts that were produced over a decade ago and as such are distanced from current trends within feminism (Markle 2008; McRobbie 2004; Arthurs 2003; Kim 2001). Scholars should continue to engage in such critical media analyses, but with current media products through the scope of popular feminism, as this will shed light on developments within contemporary feminism.

Short bio:

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