

The Aestheticisation of Feminism: A Case Study of Feminist Instagram Aesthetics

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Abstract

The sphere of aesthetics has come to play an increasingly crucial role in today's world, shaping every aspect of our contemporary culture and everyday life, from our practices of consumption, to the way we use the internet and our whole lifestyles. In this regard, it is especially interesting to examine to what extent and to what effect this phenomenon has also spread to socio-political areas which have traditionally little to do with art and beauty. With this article, I will explore the phenomenon of contemporary aestheticisation, from the perspective of the feminist movement. More specifically, I will focus on the impact of the digitalisation of contemporary culture and everyday life on the relationship between aesthetics and feminism, paying particular attention to practices linked to the sphere of fashion and art. I will begin to investigate the contemporary phenomenon of aestheticisation while addressing the following questions: What role does the digital realm play in the aestheticisation of feminism? How can we define today's intertwined connection between feminism and the creative and cultural industries? And, to what extent can digital feminist aesthetics remain radical while engaging with mainstream creative scenes? In order to keep a well-defined focus, I will concentrate on the case of feminist aesthetics on *Instagram* and the phenomenon of *Instagram* feminism.

Keywords: Aesthetics; Instagram; Feminism; Popular Culture; Digital Culture.

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Introduction

With this article, I am going to explore how feminism has become increasingly aestheticised in the context of contemporary popular culture. In order to do so, I will concentrate on a phenomenon which has played a key role in this process, that is the digitalisation of today's culture and everyday life. In other words, I am going to investigate the relationship between aesthetics and feminism, while paying particular attention to digital practices that are linked to the areas of fashion and visual culture. While this article introduces a broad and fascinating topic, which I intend to follow up with further research, here I will focus on *Instagram* feminism, as a particularly prominent case, and start mapping out its themes.

First of all, I will very briefly address the role that is currently played by aesthetics in bridging the frivolous and the serious. This will lead to a further short discussion which applies it to the matter of feminism. How can we understand the serious themes of feminism through the frivolous lens of aesthetics? Is it possible to talk about a feminist aesthetic? At this point, I will turn to the question of feminism in contemporary digital culture. On the one hand, I will stress how feminism has now become an increasingly popular term, or even a buzzword, used on the internet and by the mainstream media. On the other hand, I will focus on series of examples to highlight particular features of popular and aestheticised feminism on *Instagram*.

Throughout the article, I will begin to address the following questions: first, what role does the digital realm play in the aestheticisation of feminism? And second, to what extent can digital feminist aesthetics remain radical while engaging with mainstream creative scenes?

Aesthetics Bridging the Frivolous and the Serious

It is possible to argue that every aspect of contemporary life is becoming increasingly linked to the sphere of aesthetics. The ubiquity of the field of vision in Western society has been addressed in several seminal texts. For instance, Guy Debord talks about a "society of the spectacle" dominated by representation, while Martin Jay describes modern Western society as an ocularcentric one, where everything revolves around the sense of sight.

Today, the pervasive way in which aesthetics shape our practices of consumption, as well as our whole identities and lifestyles, is largely connected to new digital technologies.¹ In particular, visual-based social media, like *Instagram*, are emerging as a key object of research.²

In this context, it is important to consider how the realm of the aesthetic has spread even beyond matters of art and beauty. Moving into areas that have traditionally little to do with style, aesthetics is now increasingly bridging the frivolous and the serious. This dynamic is not new. In 1935, Walter Benjamin talked about Fascism in relation to the concept of the aestheticisation of politics. The political exploitation of the arts, he argues, can be resisted through a corresponding politicisation of aesthetics. Further prominent perspectives on this subject are those of Jean Baudrillard and Terry Eagleton, who, in the

1. See Mike Featherstone, "Body, Image and Affect in Consumer Culture," *Body & Society*, vol. 16, n. 1 (April 2010): 193–221; Agnes Rocamora, "Personal Fashion Blogs: Screens and Mirrors in Digital Self-Portraits," *Fashion Theory*, vol. 15, n. 4 (April 2011): 407–24, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174111X13115179149794>; Rebecca Coleman, "Transforming Images: Screens, Affect, Futures" (London: Routledge, 2012) and Katrin Tiidenberg and Edgar Gomez Cruz, "Selfies, Image and the Re-making of the Body," *Body & Society*, vol. 21, n. 4 (July 2015): 77–102, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X15592465>.

2. See Michele Zappavigna, "Social Media Photography: Construing Subjectivity in Instagram Images," *Visual Communication*, vol. 15, n. 3 (August 2016): 271–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1470357216643220>; Stephanie Alice Baker and Michael James Walsh, "'Good Morning Fitfam': Top Posts, Hashtags and Gender Display on Instagram," *New Media & Society*, vol. 20, n. 12 (June 2018): 4553–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1461444818777514>; David O'Connell, "#Selfie: Instagram and the United States Congress," *Social Media + Society*, vol. 4, n. 4 (November 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2056305118813373>; Kim Toffoletti and Holly Thorpe, "The Athletic Labour of Femininity: The Branding and Consumption of Global Celebrity Sportswomen on Instagram," *Journal of Consumer Culture*, vol. 18, n. 2 (April 2018): 298–316, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540517747068>; Karen de Perthuis and Rosie Findlay, "How Fashion Travels: The Fashionable Ideal in the Age of Instagram," *Fashion Theory*, vol. 23, n. 2 (February 2019): 219–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2019.1567062>.

1990s addressed the condition of ‘transaesthetics’ and the ideology of the aesthetic respectively. Parallel to ‘transpolitics’, ‘transeconomics’ and ‘transsexuality’, the idea of ‘transaesthetics’ describes how, in postmodern culture, separate spheres lose their boundaries, with everything thus becoming political and aesthetic, but also economic and sexual, at the same time.³ According to Baudrillard, society itself is turned into a system of visual signs where art is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. In Eagleton’s view, aesthetics play an ideological role in the silent imposition of the interests of the dominant social groups. Power, he argues, has become aestheticised, with aesthetics “operating as a supremely effective mode of political hegemony.”⁴

In present times, the entanglement of the serious and the frivolous, politics and aesthetics, takes on very interesting new meanings, particularly in relation to the proliferation of social media and the digitalisation of communication. For instance, in the USA, after being newly elected as a congresswoman in 2018, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez announced that she would be more active on visual storytelling platform *Instagram*. As of September 2019, her account has over 3.9 million followers. Similarly, a British example can be found in the way in which, in 2015, Labour politician Ed Miliband became the object of a youth-led digital fandom which spread stylised and digitally enhanced pictures adorned with hearts, or portraying the politician wearing flower crowns. While a more detailed critical examination of this kind of blurring of the boundaries between the aesthetic and the political is beyond the scope of this article, it helps to reveal their gradual collapse into one another; a concept which lays the foundation for the points I am going to make.

A Feminist Aesthetic?

If politics and aesthetics, the serious and the frivolous are increasingly blending into one another, how does it apply to the understanding of the relationship between feminist struggle on the one hand and the appreciation of beauty on the other? It is fair to say that, traditionally, feminist activism has usually kept at a distance from concerns of aesthetics. As a matter of fact, preoccupation with beauty has been widely interpreted as a patriarchal expectation linked to normative kinds of femininity, which feminists have been fighting to undermine. We can think for example of Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth*, in which “frivolous issues” and “trivial concerns” related to beauty, are identified as “political weapon[s] against women’s advancement.”⁵

If a feminist ‘style’ even exists, in the sphere of clothing as well, feminism has been predominantly identified as opposing conventional aesthetic in relation to anti-fashion and counter cultural style, rather than fashion.⁶ For instance, in the 1970s, a look characterised by “flat shoes, baggy trousers, unshaven legs and faces bare of make-up” was used to reject patriarchal capitalism and express “a strong statement about not dressing for men.”⁷ A further example, can be found in underground feminist punk groups from the 1990s, such as Riot Grrrl, who made a feminist statement by placing the rejection of aesthetic conventions and expectations around style and femininity at the heart of their philosophy. Appearance, Riot Grrrl’s founding member Kathleen Hannah claimed, carries no significance for feminism and women should “stop ... worrying about what [they] look like and what clothes [they] wear.”⁸

Today the relationship between feminism and aesthetics is growing increasingly complicated and it is no longer possible to identify contemporary forms of feminism in terms of such a straightforward rejection of frivolity, aesthetic obsession and beauty canons. This will be the object of the rest of this article.

3. See Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena* (London: Penguin, 2009).

4. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

5. Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used against Women* (London: Vintage, 1991), 10.

6. Valerie Steele, “Anti-Fashion: The 1970s,” *Fashion Theory*, vol. 1, n. 3 (1997): 279–95, <https://doi.org/10.2752/136270497779640134>.

7. Inge Blackman and Kathryn Perry, “Skirting The Issue: Lesbian Fashion for the 1990s,” *Feminist Review* (“Perverse Politics: Lesbian Issues”), n. 34 (1990): 68.

8. Hannah, quoted in Laura Havlin, “The Riot Grrrl Style Revolution,” *AnOther* (February 4, 2016).

Firstly, I will highlight how feminism itself has recently transformed and crossed the boundaries of mainstream culture. I will then consider the case of feminism on *Instagram*, and *Instagram* feminisms, while exploring feminism's new complex connection with frivolity and stylish aestheticised femininity.

The Mainstream Popularisation of Feminism

In the past few years, attitudes towards feminism have been rapidly shifting. Not too long ago, the term feminist was seen almost as a dirty word. In 2015, a YouGov survey reported that while 54% of respondents believed that the term 'feminist' was a neutral one, and 15% saw it as a compliment, 19% percent of them considered it an insult (YouGov 2015). In 2013 it was 23% (YouGov 2013).

Today, a growing number of young women are now proudly calling themselves 'feminists' and speaking out for women's rights. In fact, the concept is witnessing a cultural momentum as never before. Words like 'feminist' and 'feminism' have become buzzwords in popular and consumer culture. Examples are everywhere: major fashion magazines from *Vogue* to *Cosmopolitan* and *Elle*, have dedicated features and whole issues to the topic. Celebrities, moreover, are becoming increasingly outspoken about women's struggle and declaring themselves as feminists; from pop stars such as Taylor Swift, Beyonce and Miley Cyrus, to actors such as Mindy Kaling, Emma Watson and Angelina Jolie. Among self-proclaimed celebrity feminists, even men are on the rise, with A-listers such as John Legend, Harry Styles and Mark Ruffalo being vocal about gender equality. Today, prominent figures in popular culture seem to draw more controversy by failing to supporting feminist ideals rather than the opposite. For instance, pop musician Lana Del Rey has been the object of much discussion and criticism, as well as the topic of countless magazine articles, following a statement in which she appeared to dismiss feminism and condone outdated gender roles.

Feminism indeed seems to have won over both the media and the public with issues such as gender equality, women's rights, everyday and workplace sexism, discrimination and gender-based violence gaining mainstream visibility. But, is it really possible to interpret this as a victory for feminist struggle?

Feminist scholars have started to address the implications of this phenomenon. For instance, Rosalind Gill, and Jessalynn Keller and Jessica Ringrose, have stressed the cultural significance of hip and celebrity feminism in the contemporary context. "Feminism" writes Gill "is increasingly signified within the mainstream media as 'cool'."⁹ Reflecting on the way in which feminism appears now to be celebrated as 'hip', Gill asks whether we have possibly moved beyond post-feminism to post-postfeminism. In response to her own question, she goes on to draw attention to the postfeminist, or even outright antifeminist and misogynist themes, which still go hand in hand with today's mainstream feminism, and are incorporated within its themes. Commenting on new feminist media, Gill brings attention to how "feminism becomes a 'cheer word' — unimpeachable, but also devoid of substance; we are simply informed that it is 'having a moment'."¹⁰ She continues by claiming that, moreover, "feminism is signified in what has been described as a distinctly postfeminist fashion through an attitudinal pose of assertiveness and defiance" (ibid.). In other words, while the general tendency seems to be point at a move away from post-feminist themes and a new widespread embrace of feminism, post-feminist narratives are still present.

In this sense, it is important to recognise how its increasingly widespread popularity can be interpreted in terms of feminism gradually and silently losing its radical edge. The more it is used as a marketing tool, the more feminism's original message risks to get lost. As Gill argues, "the impression given of the feminism being promoted is that it is deeply corporate and sits comfortably with neoliberal capitalism."¹¹ According to Francesca Sobande, examples of feminist, or pseudo-feminist advertisements meant to appeal to the contemporary female consumer through messages of empowerment and inclusivity are now

9. Rosalind Gill, "Post-Postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times," *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 16, n. 4 (2016): 611, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1193293>.

10. Gill, 623.

11. Gill, 623.

extremely frequent. These, Sobande maintains, often feed into post-feminist, neo-liberal and capitalist sentiments, while using “feminist dialogue [as] a source of marketing material.”¹²

In the contemporary context, it does not come as a surprise that the new visibility of feminist themes in popular and consumer culture has also gone hand in hand with their digitalisation and aestheticisation. “Digital media feature prominently in the contemporary feminist landscape”¹³ states Sue Jackson, who indicates social media as a key site for digital feminist activism. Hashtags linked to digital movements for gender equality and opposition to sexual harassment like #metoo, #heforshe, #everydaysexism and #timesup are currently trending on *Instagram* and *Twitter*. As of September 2019, the hashtag ‘me too’ counts over 2.1 million posts on *Instagram* alone. General hashtags such as #womenempowerment, #womensupportingwomen and #girlpower are also highly popular and have been used in 7.9 million, 3.8 million and 18.7 million posts respectively.

According to Ealasaid Munro, contemporary feminist activism is so characteristically tied to the internet and new media technologies that it is possible to identify online feminism as a “fourth wave.”¹⁴ The debate about the extent of the potential impact of this kind of digital activism is more complex. Especially with regard to our theme of digital aesthetics, tied, as it is, to dynamics that operate across questions of ideology and resistance, representation and self-expression, consumption and creation. In order to narrow down the scope of this discussion, we will now focus on the case of *Instagram*, the main aesthetic-based social media platform, and a key site of today’s digital feminism.

Instagram Feminism(s)

With feminism growing more digitalised and aestheticised, *Instagram* has emerged as a key arena for the expression and discussion of gender issues. In particular, aesthetic discourses about feminism, femininity and the feminine body have rapidly spread across the platform. It should in fact be noted that a new generation of women addressing these themes and identifying as feminists seem to have found in social media their preferred means of expression. Several young artists who self-describe as feminists are now Insta-famous. As of September 2019, artist, photographer and fashion muse Petra Collins, for example, has 884 thousand followers on *Instagram*, while Insta-poet Rupri Kaur, whose poems focus on femininity and self-care, has 3.7 million followers. Other notable *Instagram* feminists include Tavi Gevinson, Arvida Bystrom, Maisie Cousins and Mayan Toledano. Fashion model Adwoa Aboah and actress Jameela Jamil have also turned to *Instagram* to spread feminist messages, launching their pages called *Gurls Talk* and *i_weigh* respectively.

The *Instagram* profiles of popular women’s magazines have also followed suit and embraced feminist themes on the platform (all accessed in September 2019). On *Elle UK*’s *Instagram* page, for instance, feminism is indicated as a keyword straight after fashion, and before other categories such as beauty or travel. Along the same lines, British *Glamour*’s bio describes the pages’ contents as “Beauty, Fashion and Empowerment.”

We will now take a closer look at a few of the key themes and patterns that characterise *Instagram* feminism and its aesthetic. Focusing on a few main features of emerging digital feminist aesthetic, I will begin to explore the problematic implications of this phenomenon as well as its potential to bring social and cultural change.

12. Francesca Sobande, “Femvertising and Fast Fashion: Feminist Advertising or Fauxminist Marketing Messages?,” *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, vol. 6, n. 1 (April 2019): 110; https://doi.org/10.1386/inf.6.1.105_7.

13. Sue Jackson, “Young Feminists, Feminism and Digital Media,” *Feminism & Psychology*, vol. 28, n. 1 (February 2018): 33; <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353517716952>.

14. Ealasaid Munro, “Feminism: A Fourth Wave?,” *Political Insight*, vol. 4, n. 2 (August 2013); <https://doi.org/10.1111%2F2041-9066.12021>.

Pastels, Glitter, and ‘Girly’ Aesthetics

Due to its aestheticised quality, the issues that *Instagram* feminism focuses on are often of a visual nature. The diverse representation of the gendered body becomes a recurring theme. Particular attention is paid to body hair, body fat, diverse skin tones and body shapes, as well as to the visual effects of menstruation. Women’s sexuality also usually features as an ever present underlying motif. What is particularly interesting about the digital feminism’s treatment of these themes can be found in their stylistic elements.

A first, and immediately noticeable, characteristic of *Instagram* feminism is the prevalence of a ‘girly’ aesthetic. Rather than disassociating from forms of aesthetics that can be described as stereotypically feminine, new digital feminisms appear to openly embrace them. Rhinestones, glitter, sequins, lace, soft lighting, candy and pastel colours, pretty flowers, princess crowns, dreamy atmospheres and every shade of pink are all common elements which frequently fill the *Instagram* archives of those who advocate for feminism on the platform. Menstrual blood becomes red glitter and feminist quotes can be found as hot pink neon signs or on rose-tinted backgrounds adorned with sparkling stickers. Following the same pattern, the embodiment of such aesthetic is usually found in doe-eyed teen girls with flowing hair, wearing minimal (or, sometimes, artfully excessive) makeup. Already at a purely visual stage, this eye-catching and candy-coloured aesthetic carries a series of contradictions which present potentially problematic implications.

On the one hand, as a medium of feminist activism, this kind of imagery often pushes towards a broader definition of femininity, and promotes bodies which do not necessarily conform to normative standards of feminine beauty. *Instagram* images by feminist artists such as Collins or Toledano present desirable femininity as a feature of diverse bodies, with an inclusive representation which goes well beyond tokenism. Thanks to the changing tastes of the mainstream public and new aesthetic trends, non-white and non-thin women are increasingly represented in dominant contexts as well. For instance, brands which adhere to the style of Instagrammable feminism now also embrace a more diverse representation. Beauty company *Glossier* is a very good example of this. With 2.3 million followers on the platform as of September 2019, the brand adopts an *Instagram*-friendly marketing strategy based on the pastel coloured celebration of feminine natural beauty, regardless of skin tone, body shape, age, blemishes and even gender. Both mainstream feminism and femininity, in fact, are becoming more gender inclusive and open to expressions of gender and sexuality outside heteronormativity and the gender binary.

Aesthetic constructions of glittery femininity similar to those found on *Instagram*, self-authored representations such as Bystrom’s, and the concept of women representing women as a form of female gaze, as in Collins’ work have all been recognised as holding an interesting potential.¹⁵ They can be interpreted as subverting the male gaze and reclaiming feminine representation by producing hyper-femininity as serious and valid. According to Derek Conrad Murray, on the one hand, acts of self-imaging and selfie culture cannot be separated from social media age’s culture of narcissism. On the other hand, however, young women who photograph themselves on the internet, such as Collins,

claim a representational agency that transcends the gender-specific slights and ideological trivializing of young women’s efforts to define themselves; to make themselves visible, in a cultural climate that continues to negate, ridicule, malign, and sexualize them.¹⁶

Nevertheless, we cannot fail to note that the identification of femininity with youthful girliness which emerges from many of the pictures of digital feminist artists also holds problematic connotations. First, it can be argued that it excludes older, or even simply fully-adult women, often concentrating on teenage

15. See Rosa Crepax, “Digital Fashion Engagement through Affect, Personal Investments and Remix,” *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 33, n. 98 (2018): 461–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2019.1567252>; Mary Celeste Kearney, “Sparkle: Luminosity and Post-girl Power Media,” *Continuum*, vol. 29, n. 2 (2015): 263–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2015.1022945>; Jacki Wilson and Morna Laing, “Revisiting the Gaze: Feminism, Fashion and the Female Body,” *Call for Papers 2017* (last accessed: September 21, 2019), <https://revisitingthegaze.wordpress.com>.

16. Derek Conrad Murray, “Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media,” *Consumption Markets & Culture*, vol. 18, n. 6 (July 2015): 512, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2015.1052967>.

problems of body image linked to self-confidence, while failing to address other crucial issues faced by women more largely. Secondly, as a consequence, it also implicitly reproduces the dangerous identification of desirable femininity with youthfulness. In several cases, this relationship is made even more problematic when the embodiment of this aesthetic appears to be a ‘woman-child’ Lolita. Pictures of rosy-cheeked teenage, or teenage-looking, girls in suggestive poses wearing white frilly underwear and ankle socks, sometimes juxtaposed with pastel pink bondage harnesses or pole-dancing shoes (e.g. on Bystrom’s *Instagram* page) are a very common example of self-authored *Instagram* imagery. In this sense, such aesthetics seem to betray an often ambiguous tension between the oppositional reclaiming of young feminine sexuality and the reproduction of what Morna Laing identifies as consumer society’s and the fashion industry’s fixation with the infantilisation of women.¹⁷

‘Empowerment’, Women Supporting Women, and the Girl Gang

The idea of women empowerment is one of the most pervasive themes in today’s mainstream feminism. As mentioned earlier, we see it featured, for example, as a keyword in *Glamour* magazine’s *Instagram* bio “Beauty Fashion and Empowerment” (accessed in September 2019). The concept of empowerment is also used for branding in the *Instagram* pages of fashion retailers such as *Asos* and *Missguided*: while the former expresses the desire to give consumers the “confidence to be whoever [they] want to be,” the latter describes itself on the social media platform as “empowering women to feel confident since 2009” (both accessed in October 2019). A previous version of *Missguided*’s slogan addressed women as “babes”).

Extremely popular in the context of this kind of digital communication is the use of so-called empowering slogans. That is, beautifully designed motivational phrases and quotes to be shared on social media. Again, the predominant aesthetic, characterised by pink and pastel tones, glitter, hearts and flowers, mirrors the one associated with *Instagram* feminism. In terms of their conveyed message, this kind of slogans often encourage women to take ownership of their bodies and their sexuality, to believe in themselves and love themselves. We can see, for example, sentences such as “my body my business,” “know yourself, love yourself, be yourself,” “you are stronger than you think,” “our bodies, our minds, our power,” or even simply “self love.”

It is easy to read these slogans and their broader aesthetic as part of a postfeminist dynamic. In fact, within the context of commercial *Instagram* feminism, like the one promoted by fashion glossies and clothing brands, the word ‘empowerment’ inevitably has little to do with fighting unequal relationships of power. Empowerment, and by extension also feminism itself, are predominantly equated with confidence and self love. They are thus placed within a series of middle-class, consumeristic and strikingly postfeminist narratives in which women’s strength is an asset to attract men, and confidence the natural result of good looks. As Gill underlines, contemporary forms of feminism which are “stylish, defiant, funny, beautiful, confident, and [champion] women” still have a “postfeminist sensibility.”¹⁸ They borrow the legacy, the themes, and the language of feminism, but they ultimately lack its substance.

I have already begun to address how it is also possible to see *Instagram* feminism through the lens of postfeminism; especially when it becomes intertwined with commercial interests and purposes due to its widespread appeal in today’s mainstream culture. When it starts being used as a hip aesthetic, feminism is increasingly turned into a marketing tool and stripped of its potential for challenging the status quo. I believe that it is however impossible to reduce *Instagram* feminism to a new form of postfeminism, as the platform not only offers a pastiche of post / faux / tentative / experimental / activist / etc. feminisms, but it also provides an open space for a continuous redefinition of their boundaries. Along these lines, addressing the relationship between feminist activism and digital media, Jackson (2018) claims:

17. Morna Laing, “Rewriting Lolita in Fashion Photography: Candy, Consumption, and Dying Flowers,” *Sexualities*, vol. 0, n. 0 (January 2018): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460717736719>.

18. Gill, “Post-Postfeminism?,” 625.

It is this somewhat murky brew of feminism, anti-feminism and postfeminism that creates a significant social moment in which to examine a seemingly unrivalled identification with feminism amongst girls who have grown up with a saturated postfeminist culture.¹⁹

Similarly ambiguous connotations also emerge from the popular trope of the girl gang. In October 2019, the hashtag ‘girlgang’ counts more than 1.9 millions posts on *Instagram*. A quick search of #girlgang uncovers thousands of pictures, where shades of pink reign supreme, and empowering slogans and quotes are interspersed with group portraits of young women, accompanied by captions celebrating friendship and community. Connected to the idea of the girl gang the term ‘girl squad’ has also recently spread across popular and internet culture, especially in relation to pop feminist Taylor Swift’s group of female friends. At the moment (October 2019), the hashtag ‘girlsquad’ counts over 1 million posts, while hashtag ‘squadgoals’ counts over 7.1 millions.

Along the same lines of what happened with the theme of empowerment, mainstream representations of friendship among young women on *Instagram* and the girl-gang aesthetic can be seen as often adhering to quite normative ideals. Again, feminism seems to be equated to being confident, having fun, being a girl’s girl and supporting other women through friendship. Scrolling through pictures tagged as #girlgang or #girlsquad, we are presented with a vast amount of images depicting mostly white women posing together at the gym, parties or weddings. Usually, this kind of representations of femininity and female friendship are also highly stylised and curated according to the dominant aesthetic of *Instagram* feminism, which they can be seen as reproducing. Akane Kanai addresses the instrumentation of feminism as part of girlfriend culture on the internet highlighting its connection to Western, middle-class, neoliberal and heterosexual identities. Kanai also highlights how, while girlfriendship is build around concepts of sameness, solidarity and ‘relatable’ femininity, it implicitly entails the exclusion “of those who do not ‘fit’.”²⁰ In this context, aestheticised friendship among conventionally-attractive and privileged young women is turned into an indicator of feminism which is ridden with contradictions. Again, as a result of its aestheticisation, feminism risks to be reduced to just a hip concept, and its aesthetic applied to pseudo-empowering slogans and groups of predominantly white young women, living privileged and normative lifestyles, while enjoying ‘*Instagram*-worthy’ holidays, parties and wedding receptions. Furthermore, in the case accounts linked to brands, media outlets or influencers, aestheticised girl gangs are more or less explicitly used to promote clothes or other products.

It should also be noted, however, that the mainstream appeal of this cultural phenomenon and its aesthetic, can be seen as also granting a platform to less visible and less normative examples of femininity. Even as it gets instrumentalised and trivialised in dominant contexts, popular feminism actively produces women’s free self-expression, self-determination and self-definition as cool. In turn, this opens up interesting possibilities for the large-scale inclusion of less visible forms of identity as part of this cultural phenomenon. As a matter of fact, increasingly diverse forms of femininity, and even male femininity all find expression within the girl gang aesthetic and *Instagram* feminism more broadly, especially in the context of the work of digital feminist artists. These often coexist side by side with more dominant representations, sometimes in the same *Instagram* feed or grid. Evidence can be found by exploring *Instagram*’s ‘followers’ and ‘following’ sections, which reveal that, in many cases, users interested in ‘feminist’ content engage with radical and instrumentalising, activist and pseudo-feminist accounts and hashtags alike.

Instances in which contrasting elements exist even in the same picture are also common. For example, in the *Instagram* accounts of Collins and Toledano, several pictures portray groups of young women of different ethnicities and body shapes, juxtaposing feminist statements with imagery which reproduces lolitesque sexualisation as attractive. Similarly, other pictures signify feminism through references to a pastel-coloured girly aesthetic and the belonging to a group of hip friends, but, on the other hand, they apply it to a broad definition of femininity. An example can be found in one of Todelano’s pictures, where the aesthetic is embodied by a trio of boys rather than girls. Visual elements mirror the ones

19. Jackson, “Young Feminists, Feminism and Digital Media,” 33.

20. Akane Kanai, “Beyond Repudiation: The Affective Instrumentalisation of Feminism in Girlfriendly Spaces,” *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 32, n. 93 (2017): 246, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2017.1407641>.

found in analogous representations of girls: the bedroom setting, the baby blue, light pink and pale yellow hoodies, the soft lighting and fluffy or frilly heart-shaped cushions. Moreover, the image sets itself against the more normative representations of the trope of the girl gang also in terms of ethnic representation and the implied status and lifestyle of the depicted young men.

In this sense, on the one hand it is true that tropes such as empowerment and the girl gang are often purged of radical elements and used for commercial or merely aesthetic purposes. However, at the same time, the mainstream visibility of feminist themes also makes it increasingly harder for brands themselves to ignore them. For instance, in order to sell razors, *Gillette Venus* is using *Instagram* to share empowering slogans and girl gang imagery, embodied by racially diverse models with diverse bodies (e.g. pictures include different body shapes and skin tones, as well as stretch marks, freckles, vitiligo and scars) while repeatedly stressing or implying that consumers can make their own choice whether they want to shave or not. On the other hand, while the implications of this phenomenon should be considered more at length, his kind of visibility and normalisation of more or less feminist messages also potentially builds a wide audience for more radical and less-biased parties in the debate.

Conclusion

With this article, I have laid the foundations for further research into what can be defined as the aesthetics of *Instagram* feminism. Rather than providing a thorough investigation of a circumscribed and well-defined question, the aim of this article was to begin to unpick some of the richness and the complexity of this unfolding phenomenon, while opening pathways for its exploration. In doing so, I also wanted to place these ideas in relation to broader theoretical and cultural debates, and engage in existing conversations about contemporary feminism and popular culture. With these objectives in mind, I have identified and isolated contemporary forms of feminism on *Instagram* as a particularly interesting case in the contemporary scene of popular digital culture. Building a theoretical framework for their examination, I have then contextualised *Instagram* forms of feminism in relation to a broader dynamic through which the boundaries of the serious and the frivolous are increasingly blurred through the medium of aesthetics. In this regard, the article has addressed the way in which urgent feminist issues seem to have been absorbed into charming, but alarmingly superficial, aesthetic play on social media. On the other hand, this trivialisation can be seen as only one half of the coin. As a matter of fact, it is possible to interpret the popularisation and aestheticisation of feminism on social media also in terms of an interesting potential.

As a quick look to popular media, or a scroll through *Instagram*, can testify, feminism has recently gained an unprecedented cultural momentum, as well as a widespread mainstream appeal among young women. As our culture and society are witnessing an increasing digitalisation and aestheticisation due to new technological developments, I have argued that feminism has become digitalised and aestheticised itself, particularly through *Instagram*. In an attempt to break up this phenomenon into more easily analysable units, I have also observed how common patterns found across different forms of today's *Instagram* feminisms can be identified as a girly aesthetic, the use of empowering and motivational slogans and, finally, the trope of the girl gang or 'squad'. While all of these themes have their own peculiarities and separate manifestations, my preliminary analysis was able to highlight interesting common features.

On the one hand, it is important to highlight a series of problematic aspects. Feminism is frequently reduced to a hip aesthetic built around messages about self-love and beautiful women enjoying girly fun together, which can be identified with notions of post-feminism. On the other hand, we should also recognise the potential that this phenomenon has beyond its more commercial application and appropriation. In fact, this article, as well as my previous research,²¹ and other studies, have started to address the different ways in which digital culture is able to offer interesting new spaces for the negotiation of marginalised identities and the discussion of topics which are often avoided in dominant contexts. This article has begun to explore a few interesting cases in this regard, but more research will follow to study this further.

21. Crepax, "Digital Fashion Engagement through Affect, Personal Investments and Remix."

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