

“Build-A-Betch”: An Analysis and Critique of Popular Feminism on Instagram

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Abstract

Feminism can be found emblazoned on mugs, t-shirts, dishcloths and other knick knacks in just about any store you go into but what does it mean to wear a shirt that says “feminist” without action to back up this identity? My thesis explores this popularized version of feminism and what it looks like online. Looking at the Instagram page for media conglomerate Betches, critical feminist discourse and visual analysis was used to uncover what feminist perspectives were being espoused and which gained traction online. The feminism I found centered and reproduced heteronormative and neoliberal paradigms of women and feminism.

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Introduction

She's edgy, speaks her mind, and commands a room just by being in it. – The Betches, *Nice is Just a Place in France*, 2013

Every year of high school for me started with one question from our principal, “who here would call themselves a feminist?” At an all-girls Catholic school in the late aughts, very few hands readily shot to the sky to claim this identity, but mine was usually among them. I’ve always felt at home calling myself a feminist. I couldn’t rattle off names of feminist theorists and activists like I can today, and I absolutely had no understanding of the intersections of race, gender, and class. As a white, middle-class girl educated in a private school, my understanding of race or class was non-existent. I wrongly believed that my life was the standard way of living and that poverty was a by-product of laziness and drug abuse. Racism was over in my mind and structural racism wasn’t a term I learned until 2014. To me, feminism meant that women could be what they wanted to be. Feminism told me I could be opinionated and heard. Feminism taught me that I could be a leader. While I claimed to be a feminist at this age, it wasn’t until my university experience and education that I learned about the structural inequalities of our world that so deeply influence and reproduce themselves in our social lives, which are so central to the feminisms I know today. During the time that I was learning about structural inequalities, systemic racism, and several other horrors that persist in contemporary society, I was also introduced to a blog site called “Betches Love This” by a college friend. We were both loud and opinionated girls and the take-no-shit attitude of “Betches Love This” spoke to us. This was a site that spoke to young women in college that were experiencing the trials and tribulations of juggling a full course load, dating and regular 10-day party benders. We lived for “Betches Love This”.

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As we grew up, left our party college, moved on to more school, jobs, and across the country, Betches grew up too. I was not a devoted follower of Betches, but as social media grew and Instagram became more popular, I followed their account and continued to track their content. Betches grew from their simple blog page to having two New York Times bestselling books, an audience of over 43 million, 12 different brands, and over 10 million Instagram followers across their accounts, which leaves them with over five billion social media impressions (About, n.d.). Betches brand now includes an Instagram page, website with daily articles, weekly emailed newsletters, podcasts, and an online store. They are a large media brand whose target audience is millennial and Gen Z women. They claim to be “a space for all women to get real about life – funny, honest and unfiltered” (About, n.d.).

Over the last decade I began to see on Instagram some of the critiques I was learning about structural racism, class, and gender inequality. Betches was still there, and their brand was evolving to include other categories of the brand such as Betches Sup. Betches Sup is a political newsletter, podcast, and Instagram page. This other brand category was created to channel content about important political and social movements relevant to women in the United States. Betches is by and for women in the United States, but their content still caught my attention through the relatable experience of being a millennial woman coming of age over the last decade. I wanted to understand why I was seeing feminism all around me through Instagram activism and meme accounts and fashion magazines flaunting shirts emblazoned “FEMINST” and “This Is What A Feminist Looks Like”. Simultaneously I was seeing abortion bans discussed on the news and sexual assault victims still being silenced and ignored despite the over three million #MeToo tagged posts on Instagram alone. There is a disconnect between the feminist praxis happening online and the offline world. Donald Trump was still president and it felt like I was watching the

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clock roll back on feminism. While my social media feeds showed women succeeding in the workplace and politics, the news was reporting on another abortion bill or domestic violence case. The incongruity between the empowerment narrative we were being sold on one hand and the reality of how women were treated on the other hand became more apparent.

To understand this disconnect I undertook the research presented here. Using a backdoor through Instagram, I collected posts from Betches over a six-week period from October 1 – November 13. This time frame was during the 2020 Presidential Election. My intention was to collect posts that offered an array of Betches content that included their political perspectives. Gathering a combination of generic everyday posts and political content provided the opportunity to analyze what content users were engaging with and how during a particularly politically charged moment in history. My study investigates the content Betches posts and the perspectives and ideas that Betches’ audience engages with. The aim was to uncover what feminist perspectives, if any, were gaining traction on this platform and what kind of response were they garnering.

Literature Review

Popular feminism has, in many ways, allowed us to imagine a culture in which feminism, in every form, doesn't have to be defended –Sarah Banet-Weiser, 2010

This literature review covers materials relevant to some of the discourses of contemporary feminism both on and offline. Beginning with a discussion of fourth-wave feminism and moving into more specific instances of feminisms on the popular social media platform Instagram. The chosen literature discusses the prominent discourses available to users and the importance of understanding what is happening online in order to understand our social and political lives offline.

An Introduction to Fourth Wave Feminism

The wave metaphor for the history of feminism is a quick and concise way of describing decades of feminist activism and visualising how feminism has ebbed and flowed through history. Predominately used to illustrate the history of U.S. feminism, the wave metaphor describes the movement of feminism from suffrage, through the civil rights movement, reproductive rights, and perseveres still today. Jennifer Baumgardner (2011) offers a brief overview of the waves of feminism and is careful to include what she calls “wave zero” (p. 246) to acknowledge that feminisms, in the sense of affirming gender equality, existed before the first-wave feminists of the suffrage movement (Baumgardner, 2011, p. 246). While the wave metaphor can clarify the ebb and flow of feminism, the temporal and theoretical lines between each wave is increasingly blurred (Baumgardner, 2011, p. 245).

This contentious metaphor has been the source of debate among feminist scholars (Hewitt, 2010). Indeed, the wave metaphor has been critiqued for being reductive, flattening feminism's rich history and silencing the voices and impacts of women of colour (Hewitt, 2010; Reger, 2017). The wave metaphor paints an image of a single set of waves suggesting that feminist activism

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happens in a similarly singular way: one specific set of issues is considered and dealt with within each wave (Reger, 2017, p. 201). The reality of feminism is much more multitudinous. Despite these critiques, Reger (2017) finds that the wave metaphor remains a central part of the vocabulary of the U.S. feminists she interviewed (p. 193). Reger (2017) argues that the wave metaphor has a “discursive legacy which allows feminists to identify their place in history, even as that history is overly simplified and contributes to intergenerational conflict” (p. 195). The wave metaphor is so central to a broad understanding of U.S. feminism that it has been adopted by the Library of Congress (Hewitt, 2010, p. 659). The centrality of the wave metaphor and its discursive legacy makes it a convenient starting place for explaining contemporary feminisms in the US and understanding the historical moment in which these feminisms are found. However, the wave metaphor is also an example of white feminism. The wave metaphor and its critiques illuminate the white history of U.S. feminism as it flattens and obscures the history and role of people of colour in the U.S. feminism movement. Whiteness is a component of the relationship between neoliberalism and feminism discussed below as well as central to the conceptualization of popular feminism discussed further on. The wave metaphor is used in this thesis to understand how contemporary online feminism came to be.

My research explores the era described as the fourth wave of feminism. Fourth-wave feminism is most clearly characterised by its digital ecologies and modalities and how these have shaped offline political culture and practices (Baumgardner, 2011; Cochrane, 2013; Munro, 2013). While feminists previously connected through flyers, zines, songs, and other tangible media, fourth-wave feminism is on blogs, Twitter pages, and, most pertinent to my research, on Instagram (Baumgardner, 2011, p. 252). The internet has allowed for unprecedented communication across borders—both geographical and political. This has made fourth-wave feminism into a mosaic of

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previous waves that includes both the micro-politics of the third wave and the demand for structural changes prevalent in the second wave (Maclaran, 2015, p. 1735). The internet has allowed for this multiplicity of voices to exist simultaneously, which is another prominent characteristic of fourth-wave feminism (Munro, 2013, p. 22).

The perspectives of fourth-wave feminism have four central themes: intersectionality, inclusions, online feminism, and a critical perspective on the emergence of rape culture (Chamberlain, 2017, p. 2). The inclusion of intersectionality in the categorization of fourth wave feminism does not negate the critique that the wave metaphor erases the contributions of Black feminists and people of colour, instead it emphasizes that these perspectives have been missing from the discourse. It also includes feminism that is enmeshed in, rather than resistant to, capitalism. Not only has feminism become something people are talking about and increasingly claiming as an identity, but it has also been capitalized on by celebrities and corporations to create feminism as a product purchased in stores. Jennifer Baumgardner (2011) points to this commodification of feminism when she discusses how she has been gifted countless shirts that say, “this is what a feminist looks like” (p.13). These shirts are also representative of the multitudinous nature of feminism, suggesting that any wearer of this shirt is a feminist and therefore feminism can look like anyone. The commercialization of feminism doesn’t stop there; mugs, stickers, clothing, even coffee table books are dedicated to feminism, its history, and heroines. The successes of centuries of feminism have been turned into knick-knacks and novelty socks. Feminist signalling can be seen everywhere we look, from bus ads, to social media and television shows, to clothing lines, and concerts.

The eruption of feminisms, which is characteristic of the fourth wave, includes three feminist positionalities that have been encountered repeatedly in the literature, specifically

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concerning feminism and the internet. The feminisms are neoliberal feminism, intersectional feminism, and popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018). However, it should be noted that these three feminisms are not the only modes of feminist thinking and action characteristic of the fourth wave, nor are they the only feminisms apparent on social media. To reiterate, these are the feminisms that have been highlighted throughout the literature and are the forms of feminisms that will provide a framework for analyzing the Instagram posts gathered in this research.

Neoliberal Feminism

To fully grasp neoliberal feminism, it is crucial to understand what neoliberalism is. Neoliberalism is based on the idea that political, cultural, and economic issues can be solved by participation in and with the free market (Fraser, 2009). Rising to popularity in the US through the 1960s and '70s and reaching its peak in the '90s, neoliberalism's ascendance coincided with the advances of second-wave feminist initiatives addressing equal wages for equal pay, reproductive rights, and recognition of women's unpaid reproductive and care labour (Eisenstein, 2005; Fraser, 2009). When we take a closer look at the relationship between the success of neoliberalism and the success of second-wave feminism, it becomes evident that neoliberalism usefully mobilized certain fragments of second-wave feminism while obscuring more ground-breaking feminist critiques of structural inequality along the axes of gender, class, and race (Fraser, 2009, p. 99). Fraser (2009) states that second-wave feminism's weaving together of the gendered injustices experienced by women through economic, cultural and political dimensions was the source of second-wave feminisms' strength (p. 99). However, these three dimensions, the cultural, economic, and political, became increasingly separated. This separation removed the lens that looked at the interconnectedness of these issues and made room for appropriation by neoliberalism (Fraser, 2009, p. 99). The economic shifts of the 1980s are characterized by Fraser (2009) as a

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move from state control of economic and social matters to “privatization and deregulation; in place of public provision and social citizenship, ‘trickle down’, and ‘personal responsibility’; in place of the welfare state and development states, the lean mean ‘competition state’” (p. 107). This shift had the effect of turning citizens into individual creators of capital and a decline of state intervention in the lives of citizens by defunding social safety nets in favour of bolstering industry and capitalist interests. Fraser argues that second-wave feminism helped in the individualization of citizens through politicizing the personal and illuminating how axes of identity such as class, race, and gender determine a variety of social, political, and economic inequalities and injustices for individuals and marginalized groups (Fraser, 2009, p. 103). These calls for justice, she argues, met with neoliberalism’s desire to increase market participation and transformed into an emphasis on recognition rather than a fundamental restructuring (Fraser, 2009, p. 108). The effect was an explosion of diversity initiatives in which critiques of structural inequality got lost in the efforts to superficially diversify the economic, political, and cultural fields. Seeking income and material goods but also independence, empowerment, and confidence, women’s participation in the workforce increased during this period (Fraser, 2009, p. 110). Second-wave feminism’s emphasis on the daily struggles of women’s lives and unpaid labour encouraged women from varying racial and economic backgrounds to join the workforce while neoliberal economic and political policies systematically dismantled structures that protected women and their children, such as healthcare, welfare, education, etc. (Eisenstein, 2005, p. 511).

Neoliberalism opened the door for the initiatives of second-wave feminism to be realized as women increasingly became individualized, which resulted in an emphasis on individual cultural recognition over economic redistribution and moving further away from addressing the structural inequalities and injustices that still plague marginalized groups (Fraser, 2000).

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Marginalized groups continued to suffer with less social safety nets while predominately white women and some women of colour ascended the ranks of the corporate ladder. Neoliberalism encouraged feminist initiatives that helped to increase market participation not structural change.

Catherine Eschele and Bice Maiguscha (2018) offer a critique of the relationship between neoliberalism and feminism. They conceptualize neoliberalism as a “highly resilient, adaptable process, capable of appropriating a range of challenges and counter-narratives” that is “uneven, unpredictable and marked by contingency” (Eschele & Maiguscha, 2018, p. 3). Neoliberalism’s rocky terrain produces a “wide array of feminist protagonists” including neoliberal feminism, which is obsessed with “personal responsibility, individual empowerment, and entrepreneurship” (Eschele & Maiguscha, 2018, pp. 3-4). By problematizing this empowerment and entrepreneurship, critics like Fraser and Eisenstein attribute the staying power of feminism within corporate institutions to the de-politicization of feminism vis-a-vis neoliberalism. Indeed, there is a connection between neoliberalism and feminism in the global corporate machine (Fraser 2009, Eschele & Maiguscha 2018, Perry 2018). This theoretical move centers the global North as influencing similar patterns in the global South (Eschele & Maiguscha, 2018, p. 4). The co-optation of feminism by neoliberalism combined with the global domination of neoliberal policies has led to a dissemination of this superficial feminism, which obscures the structural inequalities that still exist and are perpetuated by neoliberal policies.

Catherine Rottenberg (2018) uses the term “neoliberal feminism” to describe the variant of feminism that has emerged through the popular feminism manifestos published in the early 2010s, such as Anne-Marie Slaughter’s (2012) *Why Women Can’t Have it All* and Facebook COO’s Sheryl Sandberg’s (2013) *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*. Slaughter and Sandberg represent the ideal neoliberal feminist. Their books did not push women to fight for the rights of

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marginalized groups or demand systemic changes to rectify gender inequality. Instead, these manifestos encouraged women to “lean-in”, to work within the system not against it to rise through the ranks of the neoliberal capitalist complex. Effectively, books like these encouraged a singular, universal idea of what a successful woman and feminist is. Neoliberal feminism, according to Rottenberg (2018), centers the notion of the happy work-life balance that engenders a new womanhood –the professional woman who successfully balances her career and family life (p. 1075). The connection between feminism and neoliberalism is possible because of Rottenberg’s (2018) understanding of neoliberalism as a “dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject” (p. 1075). Echoing the definition of neoliberalism provided by Eschele and Maiguscha (2018), it is an adaptable process: Rottenberg’s neoliberal feminism adapts the neoliberal political project and produces a feminist subject who is individualized, responsible for her own career, both of which are predicated on her own work-life balance (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 1075). Rottenberg engages in conversation with Banet-Weiser about the connection between the neoliberal feminism described here and the popular feminism uncovered by Banet-Weiser. In sum, this happy work-life balance rhetoric has rendered a variant of feminism that is palatable and legitimate, which has spurred the diffusion, acceptance and circulation within the mainstream American cultural landscape (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p .8).

Imani Perry (2018) is a well-known Black American interdisciplinary scholar of race, law, literature and African-American culture. Perry offers further insight and critique of the relationship between neoliberalism and feminism. Perry (2018) refers to the “entrepreneurial woman” as a product of the neoliberal feminist approach to the state (p. 107). Indeed, these are women leaders or thinkers, often tagged as feminists, who have been encouraged to marketize their identity for

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self-maximalization (p.107). Women like Sandberg and Slaughter, white, middle class, upwardly mobile women, become icons of what a successful woman is in the neoliberal capitalist complex. Sandberg and Slaughter are marketable because they work within this complex, not against it. They “lean in,” with all its contradictions. The women become representative of what a woman is in a neoliberal capitalist complex. Women’s success in a neoliberal capitalist complex is therefore a double-edged sword, where women are seen, at first, to be destabilizing to the patriarchal logic that women are below men (p. 111). Upon further investigation, however, neoliberalism has co-opted the heteronormative “difference” between men and women and made the entrepreneurial woman a novelty, a commodity, a cog in the neoliberal capitalist machine (p. 111). Perry (2018) argues that “today, individual identities of otherness can be sold and traded on as ‘representative’ in lieu of redistribution or radical democratic structures” (p. 111). Perry joins Fraser, Eschele and Maiguscha in critiquing neoliberalism’s co-optation of feminism: neoliberalism has not done anything to address the structural and systemic issues that have led to the social, economic, class and gender oppression experienced by women, Black people, and other minorities. It instead commodifies these identities and increases visual representation, repackaging diversity as a Human Resources initiative instead of addressing systemic and structural issues with our social, political, and economic systems (Perry, 2018, p. 112).

Perry (2018) claims that “feminism that is framed around neoliberal market winners privatizes feminism” (p. 113). Representatives of this neoliberal feminism should illuminate some issues of gender domination, but it shouldn’t detract from their success within the neoliberal capitalist complex (Perry, 2018, p. 113). As a result of this relationship between feminism and neoliberalism, Perry (2018) points out a more democratic feminism in which consumers can make choices that identify them as feminist or not (p. 113). Perry (2018) uses Linda Hirshman’s term

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“choice feminism” to describe this commodity-driven feminism that allows consumers to market themselves as feminists based on the clothing they wear, the causes they post on social media, the mugs they drink out of and an array of other feminist red flags (p.113). Pushing this concept of choice, Perry (2018) discusses how women are sold emancipation and empowerment by the market to make choices that ultimately appeal to heteropatriarchal structures (p. 114). Perry (2018) describes it as “a dimension of neoliberal feminism that is rooted in freedom from conventional constraints but registered in terms of the ability to purchase and consume rather than as liberation in the context of more comprehensive social relations” (p. 114). This choice feminism echoes the sentiments of popular feminism. These feminisms put material signals of feminism and visual representations ahead of structural and systemic initiatives of feminism, thus, reproducing the relationship between neoliberalism and feminism as one of co-optation for the benefit of neoliberalism and the detriment of feminism.

We now have the benefit of some hindsight as we have been living with these neoliberal initiatives for decades and capitalism is on the precipice of another shift as technology infiltrates the financial world (Ruderman & Bruwer, 2016). In recent years we have seen an explosion of online activism with initiatives such as the #MeToo, #SayHerName and #BlackLivesMatter movements. These movements gain traction and become commodifiable virtue signals for brands and influencers online. We see feminist ideologies and perspectives that encourage structural and systemic changes online while experiencing little to none of that change offline.

My research explores what the generation of women raised by the neoliberal feminist of the Sandberg and Slaughter era are creating and digesting online. Betches claims to be a site for women and by women. To help uncover the women Betches are speaking to, for and about, this thesis examines 110 of Betches’ Instagram posts and considers ways in which concepts of

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neoliberal appropriations of feminisms are operationalized online. Some concepts that arise include, but are not limited to, women in the workforce, individualization, work/life balance, superficial diversity initiatives, and posts about wages or labour. These categories are reflected through the data via images and conversation that pertain to them, such as tweets about balancing work and dating. The resulting narratives of empowerment and individual power purported by neoliberal feminism are also prevalent in what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) terms “popular feminism.”

Popular Feminism

Sarah Banet-Weiser unpacks popular feminism and popular misogyny in her book *Empowered* (2018). Central to Banet-Weiser’s (2018) work is the understanding that this variant of feminism is popular in at least three ways: it is accessible because it is circulated in popular and commercial media; it is popular in the sense of being liked or admired by many people; and feminism is popular because it is a space where there is struggle over meaning and no one perspective is hailed as the all-knowing capital F Feminism (p. 1). In response to the popularization of feminisms in all the above senses, Banet-Weiser points to the phenomenon of popular misogyny. Popular misogyny is “a reactive response to popular feminism...a call to arms” (Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 37). Popular misogyny mobilizes tactics like trolling and cyberbullying in an effort to suppress the efforts of popular feminism and women in general on the internet and in the real world (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Banet-Weiser (2018) explores how popular feminism and popular misogyny circulate —sometimes they mirror each other or appropriate one another, other times popular misogyny is theorized as backlash or simply explicit violence (p. 40). Banet-Weiser uses the imagery of the funhouse mirror to explain the interlocation of popular feminism and popular misogyny. The funhouse mirror distorts bodies and politics so that men become the ones injured

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by widespread inequities and structural disparities (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 45). Popular feminisms see inequity and structural disparities as obstacles for women to overcome and in doing so, they are empowered. The women, who have overcome obstacles to be where they are in life and work, are regarded by these men as a threat to their livelihoods. Through the funhouse mirror, initiatives of popular feminism become targets of popular misogyny.

Banet-Weiser (2020) defines popular feminisms as the “practices and conditions that are accessible to a broad public, from organizing marches to hashtag activism to commodities” (p. 9). The most popular are feminisms that are compatible with the neoliberal commodity culture (p. 9). While marches and organizing emphasize structural inequalities and injustices, popular feminism is only concerned with current issues that are popular. This is to say that social and political issues at the heart of popular feminisms change with the social injustice popular at that given time.

Popular feminism is a mirroring of the effect neoliberalism has had on feminism insofar as it has obscured the feminist critique of structural inequality in favor of increased visibility of women in economic, political, and cultural realms. It can be argued that the appearance of popular feminism in this fourth wave supports the concerns raised by Fraser (2009) and Eisenstein (2005) regarding neoliberalism’s appropriation of second-wave feminisms. Neoliberalism cherry-picked feminist initiatives to achieve its own goals of increased market participation and individualized citizens and in doing so, popularized the bastardized version of feminism it has appropriated. Indeed, Banet-Weiser (2018) notes that:

within neoliberal brand culture, specific feminist expression and politics are brandable, commensurate with market logics...In a capitalist, corporate economy of visibility, those feminisms that are most easily commodified and branded are those that become most visible. This means, most of the time, that the popular

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feminism that is most visible is that which is white, middle class, cisgender, and heterosexual (p. 13).

The version of feminism that Banet-Weiser is calling popular feminism is tied to market logics, which is why we can so closely connect neoliberal feminism and popular feminism.

Feminism’s increased popularity through its relationship with neoliberalism has increased the visibility of women in corporate positions historically held by men. The achievements of the individual women have been contorted by the funhouse mirror to be understood as taking away power from “men” as a whole group (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 5). This reaction from some men is an example of popular misogyny (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Both popular feminism and popular misogyny use the lens of the individual, which obfuscates the systemic and structural barriers that are at the root of the issues of confidence and empowerment that are taken up by popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 5). Popular feminism emphasizes individual successes, which obscures issues that affect the majority of women who remain structurally marginalized.

Popular feminism opens doors for women who fit the characteristics deemed most desirable by the market. While the discourses of popular feminism are visible online, in shop fronts, and in popular film and media, Banet-Weiser (2018) argues that, in contrast, popular misogyny transcends the superficial and appears in institutional structures, such as anti-abortion legislation and the misogynist former president, Donald Trump (p. 5). Popular misogyny’s influence on institutional structures brings into focus its political power, especially concerning the 2017 election of Donald Trump. In the conclusion to her book, Banet-Weiser speaks to the superficial influence of popular feminisms in contrast to the structural influence of popular misogyny: “Feminism may be popular, but it is not always powerful...it is poetically fitting that Hilary Clinton won the *popular* vote in the United States, while Trump won the electoral vote –

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and the power of the presidency” (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 178). Banet-Weiser (2018) makes connections between popular misogyny, the election of Donald Trump, and his followers throughout the book. Donald Trump becomes a beacon for men who feel injured by the successes of feminism and the failures of capitalism (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 111). It was through his social media that Donald Trump spoke directly to this base and maintained its support. Donald Trump was endorsed not only by the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) but also by Men’s Rights organizations such as Return of Kings (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 120). This is just one direct link between popular misogyny and the election of Donald Trump.

Neoliberalism is not the only influence on popular feminism. Post-feminism provides an “ethos and sensibility” to popular feminism vis-a-vis the empowerment of women (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 19). Banet-Weiser (2018) points to Rosalind Gill, Angela McRobbie and Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker as notable authorities on post-feminism who have posited that post-feminism recognizes then repudiates feminism (p. 19). Post-feminism insists that women no longer need feminist politics because they are already “empowered” (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 19). According to post-feminism, women are empowered because feminism has done the political work needed to dismantle gender inequalities (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 19). Popular feminism bolsters this sensibility surrounding women’s empowerment by highlighting the achievements of women and through popular media and advertising campaigns about “strong” women, like the Dove #LikeAGirl campaign (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 43). Popular feminism and post-feminism also share a common sense of ease: one simply has to identify as feminist or as a woman and you are participating in popular feminism and post feminism, respectively (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 21). Popular feminism is superficial; it “tinkers on the surface, embracing a palatable feminism, encouraging individual girls to just *be* empowered” (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 21). This palatable

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feminism is a narrative encountered in Rottenberg’s neoliberal feminism. Palatability translates into visibility in a neoliberal capitalist culture. Banet-Weiser (2018) suggest that the popular feminism is therefore most visible in a space that is heteronormative, white, middle class and pushes economic success on women (p. 16).

Savolenian et. al., (2020) explore how users express feminism on Instagram. Through a series of semi-structured interviews with 25 Instagram users, Savolanien et al. (2020) analyze users’ reflections on their posts alongside the actual posts to understand the choices and trade-offs made to curate a feminist identity online (p. 2). The authors show how some forms of feminism are widely accepted and seen as appealing while others are pushed to the margins and suppressed because they do not garner the positive attention (likes, comments and shares) required to be picked up and amplified by the algorithm (Savolanien et al., 2020, p. 2). Savolainen et al. suggest that Instagram is an important platform for understanding how feminism has transformed from gauche to quite literally “in Vogue” because of its appeal to women worldwide.¹ Salvolainen et al. also stress that Instagram simultaneously complicates feminist expression (p. 3). This is further evidenced by the BCRW and Pew Research reports (see, for example, Auxier & Anderson, 2021) that point to increased use of the internet and Instagram specifically by young girls and women.

To understand how different forms of feminism are expressed on platforms like Instagram, Savolanien et al. use the concept of filtering (2020, p. 3). Filtering is understood both as the removal of unwanted material and as transforming image data into new data (Savolanien et al., 2020, p. 3). This is to say that feminism on Instagram is filtered and some pieces are left out while others are overvalued. Their work illustrates “how users structurally and technically conditioned judgments regarding what to display, augment, and conceal—together with algorithms that

¹ Instagram is used by 51% of women identifying people aged 13 and up worldwide (Clement, 2020).

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likewise value and rank content –produce and circulate a certain kind of feminist imagery and imaginary” (Savolainen et al., 2020, p. 3). Users purposefully post content that will please the algorithm even when this content may not perfectly align with their own perspectives. For example, one of the users interviewed, Adja, began and shut down a page critiquing white feminism within a week because of the negative backlash she was receiving both from commentators and from the lack of likes and comments on her post which would have boosted them in the algorithm (Savolainen et al., 2020, p. 9). The algorithm, therefore, has a policing mechanism that supports some perspectives while suppressing others. The tension between an individual’s beliefs and the content that garner’s them the most attention online is central to the conceptualization of the popular as a site of struggle over recognition and meaning as seen in Sarah Banet-Weiser’s (2018) *Empowered*.

On one side of the struggle are neoliberal, individualized empowerment forms of feminism, which are circulated because they garner more likes and views and therefore more potential revenue and followers; on the other hand, are users whose ideologies run counter to neoliberal feminism and aim to challenge existing gender, class and racial hierarchies (Savolainen et al., 2020, p. 5). The filtering concept used in Savolainen et al.,’s analysis shows how different feminist ideologies interact with the algorithm and what kind of feminism becomes popular as a result of these interactions [likes, comments, shares and saves] (Savolainen et al., 2020, p. 5). Interviews with users revealed many different forms of feminism and a plethora of feminist issues that users interacted with or expressed. This included intersectionality, views in opposition to “white, neoliberal, commodified feminisms”, and feminisms that did not necessarily align with political or economic commitments (Savolainen et al, 2020, p. 8). Many interviewees reported holding back political opinions they felt would not be sufficiently popular, like Adja. The incentives of

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Instagram to conform to posts that will gain popularity through the algorithm pushes users to post content that appeal to a wider audience and therefore the content that is posted on the platform is heavily influenced by other feminist perspectives and feminisms that have already been successful with the algorithm.

Filtering manifests in two major ways: subtractive and enhancing (Savolanien et al, 2020). Subtractive filtering describes when users would hold back political views that they deemed not sufficiently popular (Savolanien et al., 2020, p. 8). Enhancing filtering shows how Instagram is highly compatible with “a branded hyper-confident, and corporeal mode of activism” (Savolanien et al., 2020, p. 11). Subtractive filtering keeps users from expressing dissenting opinions as it could result in a loss of followers or a lack of likes on their posts. These are tangible costs for these users because of Instagram’s algorithm (Savolanien et al., 2020, p. 9). Users are encouraged to respect the algorithm by posting content that pleases it; content that will attract engagement. Extractive filtering entails using hyper-femininity to attract attention to more political feminist ideologies (Savolanien et al., 2020). The feminist ideologies that best align with this mode are those that encourage the body and sex-positivity movements. Mirroring the adage “sex sells”, scantily clad women attract engagement and Instagram supports this. Ida, one of the content creators interviewed, saw an opportunity on Instagram to join the body/sex positivity movement and began to tailor her content accordingly carving out her niche as a “feminist twerk dancer-slash-activist” (Savolainen et al., 2020, p. 11). Gaining popularity online by showing off her body and her sultry dancing has given Ida a platform on which she feels she can make an impact. However, Instagram giveth and Instagram taketh away. Instagram only allows sex and body positivity to go so far on their platform. Men can be bare chested, but a woman’s nipple is censored, which has started an entire movement on Instagram under the hashtag #freethenipple. This juxtaposition between the

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popularity and success of near naked women’s images and the censorship of the nipple is exemplary of the tension between popular feminism and more progressive feminist perspectives. While ensuring women are not unnecessarily censored is an important goal, the #freethenipple campaign detracts from the grassroots movement of body and sex positivity. In the same way this extractive filtering only allows for the images and ideologies that best align with Instagram’s algorithm, popular feminism is a filtered version of feminism shining a light only on the most marketable and transient ideologies and perspectives. The Instagram algorithm still insists that the images used be as, if not more, appealing than the caption and textual content, which means that the images that excel with this kind of filtering are also those that best align with the images of women deemed valuable by Instagram’s algorithm (Savolainen et al., 2020, p. 12). These two modes of filtering paint an image of an individualistic, aspirational woman as long as she continues to express the correct kinds of feminism for this platform. The feminism we are left with from Instagram is only compatible with “heteronormative displays on the one hand and the pursuit of individual success and self-entrepreneurship on the other” (Savolainen et al., 2020, p. 19). This is a highly curated feminism that has been policed and shaped by the interactions it garners on Instagram.

Missing from popular feminism and the curated feminism described by Savolainen et al. (2020) are the enduring structural critiques evident in other feminisms, both past and present. Analysis of the data in this project sought to discover if Betches posts are missing these enduring structural critiques or if they perpetuate the same popular feminism described by Banet-Weiser. Popular feminism is evident online through the mobilization of ideas such as empowering women, women supporting women, products that riff off a feminist aesthetic, hashtag activism or online movements, as well as sex and body positive messaging. On the other hand, popular misogyny is

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mobilized through themes of injury, belittling a woman’s success, and even explicit gendered violence. The missing link in neoliberal feminism is intersectionality. Intersectionality is a multipurpose tool used to illuminate the complicated relationships of race, class, gender, ability, ethnicity, and nationality in relation to political, economic, and social power. Intersectionality and its importance will now be explored.

Intersectionality

The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a renowned Black America critical race scholar, in 1989, but its tenets have been discussed and used by Black feminists since (at least) the early nineteenth century (Mizra, 2018). Derived from the lived experiences of Black women in the United States, intersectionality is a theory that illuminates the complexities of interlocking identities and how systems of power shape and affect them (Collins and Bilge, 2016, p. 2). Intersectionality is closely tied to Women and Gender Studies as its history is rooted in the U.S. Black Feminism Movement (Collins, 2015). Additionally, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s 1993 work “Mapping the Margins” in which Crenshaw provides an intersectional analysis of sexual violence in the US, has been a foundational text for scholars interested in intersectionality. By definition intersectionality is “the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as a unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (Collins, 2015, p. 2). Originating in law, intersectionality can and has been used as a theory, analytical tool, and a praxis (Cho et al., 2013; Collins, 2015; 2019). Intersectionality’s capacity as a multi-use tool has led to an increase in literature and scholarly work that employs intersectionality in multitudinous and multi-faceted ways (Collins, 2015). Collins interprets intersectionality as a “broad-based knowledge project” comprised of “intersectionality as a field of study...an analytical strategy...and as a critical praxis”

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(p. 3) and argues that defining intersectionality in this way allows users to imagine intersectionality as “an overarching knowledge project whose changing contours grow from and in response to social formations of complex social inequalities” (p. 5). This definition of intersectionality as a broad-based knowledge project used to describe the complexity of race, gender, class, sexuality, etc. presents a double-edged sword in which anything can be intersectional and therefore nothing is intersectional. For Collins, intersectionality is difficult to pin down and define because it is something she will know when she sees it (Collins 2015, p. 1). To aid readers, researchers and students in understanding if the work at hand is intersectional, Collins offers a list of guiding assumptions about intersectionality, one or more of which should be included in projects claiming to operationalize intersectionality in any way. Projects that claim to be intersectional or use intersectionality must understand race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, nation, ethnicity, and other similar categories of identity as relational to each other (Collins, 2015, p. 14). Some categories, like racism and sexism or gender and sexuality are understood as mutually constructive categories that shape intersectional systems of power (Collins, 2015, p. 14). These projects may take up the idea that intersecting power systems, like race and class, create “social formations of complex social inequalities” (Collins, 2015, p. 14), which are organized around unequal material realities and produce distinctive social experiences that vary across time and space. Variations in people’s points of view are dependent on the intersecting systems of power they find themselves in. These social locations are reflected in the knowledge they produce (Collins, 2015, p. 14). Finally, projects that claim intersectionality in any way should recognize that these intersecting systems of power are fundamentally unjust. These systems of power then shape the knowledge produced and the political culture, which ultimately upholds the status quo (Collins, 2015, p. 14).

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Intersectionality emphasizes the fact that social inequality is not caused by a single factor and instead “encourages an understanding of social inequality as based on interactions among various categories” (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 26). Popular feminism, as described by Banet-Weiser (2018), does not consider the varying ways race, class, or ability affect a woman’s capacity to simply lean-in and become empowered. Neoliberal feminism makes a similar mistake by conflating an increase in visible minorities in boardrooms with social, economic, and political equality. Intersectionality illuminates these missing pieces and acts as a missing piece in furthering popular feminism, which may be the key to maintaining the popularity of popular feminism.

Building on intersectionality’s need for understanding how axis of identity create power structures, Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser wrote a manifesto titled *Feminism for the 99%*. This manifesto calls for feminism to join hands with anti-racists, anti-capitalists, environmentalists and labor and migrant rights activists to create a feminism for the 99%. This feminism is pitted directly against what the authors call “feminism for the 1%” or liberal feminism (Arruzza et al., 2019). Liberal feminism is the enemy of feminism for the 99% because it encourages individualism and “is the feminism of the female power-holders: the corporate gurus who preach ‘lean in,’...” (Arruzza et al. 2019, p.12). The authors are proposing that rather than to individualize and see our movements as separate, all movements working for the betterment of the majority should work together to achieve their collective goals. Feminism for the 99% is not a movement for women, it is a movement for everyone. It understands the intricacies and power dynamics at play through our axis of identity. Feminism for the 99% understands that poverty, clean drinking water and access to reproductive health care are interlinking issues that can only be resolved if we fix each part.

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Feminism for the 99% is anti-liberal feminism, anti-neoliberal feminism and anti-social media feminism (Arruzza et al., 2019).

Liberal feminism’s...love affair with individual advancement equally permeates the world of social-media celebrity, which also confuses feminism with the ascent of individual women.

In that world, “feminism” risks becoming a trending hashtag and a vehicle of self-promotion deployed less to liberate the many than to elevate the few. (Arruzza et al., 2019)

The authors want to abolish capitalism and the patriarchal heteronormative that comes with it. This manifesto shows intersectionality in action as it calls on vastly different but deeply connected causes to work together. It provides a critique of capitalism and neoliberal feminism that illuminates the way in which they are harmfully reproduced even under the guise of progress.

This research has used intersectionality as a coding category to uncover if and how Betches operationalizes any images or discourses that could be considered intersectional. For example, the “Save 2020” video series, which is analysed further below, discusses gerrymandering, white supremacy and voter suppression. These videos were flagged as intersectional because they take up the power relations instantiated and reinforced by racism. Intersectionality is used in this research as a category of analysis, but it appears in the data as praxis. This research looked for intersectionality being enacted, intersectionality being practiced in our everyday lives. This is to say, this research does not aim to push the theoretical or definitional boundaries of intersectionality but instead looked for intersectionality in the world outside of academia. Intersectionality presents itself as a necessary lens for understanding the complexities and importance of the feminism during an especially political volatile time.

Role of the Researcher

This project is a feminist qualitative study of the Instagram page for media conglomerate Betches. As a feminist study, I acknowledge that the marginalization affecting women, Black, Indigenous and People of Colour, people with disabilities and people occupying bodies divergent from hegemonic norms is created through the political, social and economic structures of the world. The social inequality of our world is visible on a macro and micro scale, including in our lives lived online. I identify as a white cis-woman and experience the privileges that are afforded to me. My post-secondary education has afforded me the opportunity to learn more about the uneven structuring of our world through a feminist lens, which centres the experiences of the marginalized groups mentioned above. The research presented here is born from my education and seeks to further the conversation on feminist discourse circulating through social media. The project aims to pay close attention to how social inequities are reproduced through social media and how a media page built for women and by women responds, if they respond at all. My research required interpretation of the materials through a critical feminist lens.

The researcher acknowledges that her identity means she must be acutely attuned to the nuances of discussions surrounding the intersection of race, gender, class and ability. I also acknowledge that I will likely fall short of this task and see this as a learning opportunity in reading our world and understanding the complex nuances of identity and the effects of intersecting power systems.

Research Site

I have grown up with the internet, social media, and most specifically, with Betches. Developed in 2011, the creation of Betches aligned with my first year of undergraduate education and helped shape many parts of my personality that still exist today. Betches has always been a

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part of my timeline but as I became more interested in world events and activism, posts from Betches appeared less often as I was not engaging with their content as much. I began to see more of the information I was learning in classes about structural inequality on social media and in other popular media. Betches started their political newsletter BetchesSup, and then they began to appear again in my timeline. I revisited Betches and to me, it was a site that centred the experiences of women. My research shows that Betches centres the experiences of white, cisgender, heterosexual women. Furthermore, the women represented in the images circulated on their Instagram page are almost all straight sized and able-bodied.

The site was created by Aleen Dreksler, Jordana Abraham and Samatha Sage when they were undergraduates at Cornell University (About, n.d). The creators never signed their own names to their inaugural books or websites. Their blog was posted without an author and was created to satirize the stereotype of a “betch”. The term betch comes from a 2005 viral YouTube video by comedian Liam Kyle Sullivan titled “Shoes” and came to describe a type of woman who was a mean sorority girl hybrid with a boss babe (LiamKyleSullivan, 2007). Betches, the site, sought to fill a gap in the market for a comparable female perspective of “bro” culture (betches.com/about/). The blog went viral internationally and the founders wrote two best-selling books. The three-woman team have successfully run their multi-million-dollar media empire for the last decade. They describe themselves as follows:

Betches is a female-founded and led media and entertainment brand that provides a space for all women to get real about life—funny, honest, and unfiltered. Whether it's a podcast, meme, article, or hoodie, we'll have your group chat saying, "omg this is so us." (About, n.d.)

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Betches strives to be a space that is relatable and safe for women where they discuss issues ranging from *The Bachelor* to birth control, to police brutality and gerrymandering. Betches has evolved from a satirical response to bro culture to a media company invested in the experiences of women in the United States in all aspects of their lives including the political, economic and social.

Betches Instagram page is a public page with over seven million followers. Betches reach on Instagram is therefore exponentially larger than their followers as posts that garner attention will appear in the explore pages of other users who the algorithm has flagged for possible interest in the content of the post. This means that Betches consumer base is not constrained by those who choose to follow their account, but they reach others who may align with the beliefs they espouse and, as my data illustrates, they attract users who vehemently disagree with them. The audience for Betches, at least on Instagram, includes both supporters and opponents, making it a space that is unique for studying the response to feminist discourses espoused by Betches.

Posts were pulled from Instagram using a program called Instaloader which uses a back door to collect image, text, and video data from Instagram. Posts were collected from October 1, 2020 to November 14, 2020. This timeline includes the four weeks leading up to the presidential election and two weeks after to give a snapshot of the discourses presented by Betches and their followers during a politically volatile time. This timeline was chosen in an attempt to piece together the political and social values of feminism that gain traction via user interaction on Instagram and give the researcher and readers a taxonomy of the feminist values on Betches.

One hundred and ten posts were pulled from Betches' Instagram page. Posts are comprised of four units of analysis: the image, the caption, the top five comments and the likes. Likes are prominent on both the post and in the comment section. The top five comments were chosen based on the amount of likes the comments received. Liking a comment suggests that the reader agreed

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with whomever posted the comment and pushes the comment’s visibility on the post for other viewers. This means that top liked comments are not only “liked” but also end up being the most viewed comments. Usernames were removed as user identity was not analyzed. These aspects were analyzed both as individual units and as a whole. This offered an information-rich data set with a rather small number of individual posts.

Objective of Research

The objective of this research is to understand the popular feminist perspectives circulating through social media during a political tumultuous time. Women and girls’ activity online has increasingly become the interest of researchers. In 2012, the Barnard Center for Research on Women (BCRW) published a special issue which covered how women and young girls are mobilizing on the internet and what this could entail for the future of feminism. The researchers point out that the diversity of these voices is fostered by the internet, which is characteristic of what is termed the fourth wave of feminism, stating “There is no one feminist movement. Instead, there are many intersectional movements operating in tandem with much to learn from one another” (Martin et al., 2012, p.12). This research is interested in what these voices are or are not saying. With a multitude of voices and perspectives available, which stand out?

This research looks at a women-run Instagram account to determine what feminist perspectives are heard and valued on the platform. Instagram is one of the most popular social media sites of our time with more than one billion users worldwide (Clement, 2020). The United States (US) leads these numbers with more than 107 million Instagram users (Clement, 2020). In a 2021 Pew Research survey, 40% of Americans say they use Instagram, and of those users, 44% identified on the survey as a woman and 71% of users are aged 18-29 (Auxier & Anderson, 2021).

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These statistics point to Instagram as a place where young women are active. The sheer volume of women online in the United States and globally makes the site a worthy space for research. What women are saying and what is being said about women online matters. With so many women’s voices in one space, what voices or perspective rise to the top?

Typing “feminism” into the search bar on Instagram retrieves almost twelve million posts. There is a conversation happening on Instagram about feminism. My research uncovers how feminist perspectives are mobilized and gain attention on the platform. Users that post about feminist perspectives and ideas filter what they do and do not post to balance what they want to say with what will appease the algorithm and garner more likes and comments (Savolainen et al., 2020). The feminisms that become popularized on the platform are those that gain the most attention and are therefore picked up by the algorithm and shown on the search pages of users who follow similar accounts. This is a highly curated version of feminist perspectives. The Instagram algorithm is not an omnipotent being nor does it have its own agency. It is owned by Meta and programmed by their employees. For this reason the algorithm is rife with biases and is made to generate capital for Meta. The algorithm picks up on posts that are garnering more attention because attention in the form of likes, comments, shares, and saves leads to generating capital. Both users and Meta benefit from a post “going viral.” Users, therefore, are encouraged to post content that will garner this attention and increase their ability to use social media for capital gains.

The filtered feminism described by Savolainen et al. echoes Banet-Weiser’s popular feminism. What is discovered from Banet-Weiser’s discussion is that while certain variants of feminism are experiencing unprecedented visibility (i.e. “popularity”), it is a heteronormative, neoliberal feminism, a brandable feminism, a feminism that does not challenge structural inequities, and gets to live life in the limelight. Savolainen et al. (2020) conclude that most users

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they interviewed who identify as feminist and who post about feminism make compromises for the algorithm and include minute deviations to satisfy their personal feminist ideologies. Savolainen et al.’s research deals with individuals on Instagram, while my thesis analyses a business; but Instagram and its algorithm treats them as one in the same. For this reason, the data pulled from Betches is as profoundly influenced by the algorithm as the Instagram feeds of the individuals interviewed by the authors. My research uncovers the missing feminist perspectives posted by Betches. In light of Savolainen et al.’s findings surrounding how users censor themselves for the sake of the algorithm, which feminist perspectives are mobilized by Betches is as telling as what is missing from their narrative.

Research Questions

My research explores feminist discourses and perspectives that are communicated and engaged with on Instagram, a woman-oriented media company, during an important social and political moment in history: the 2020 U.S. Election. Instagram is a widely used site replete with data to understand our social and political worlds. The composition of Instagram posts, with their combination of visual and textual elements, presents an opportunity to understand the language of social media. Sharing and commenting on posts that we relate to is how younger generations communicate with each other; this is where a lot of socialization happens. Analyzing Instagram posts is not just about seeing what is being posted. As users interact with posts, they gain popularity, and more users can see and interact with the post. Looking at the posts that gain this popularity illuminates the community-building that happens on Instagram. People come together on posts that they relate to or sparks conversation. Brands and users begin to make similar content to encourage these users to stay and increase the traffic to these posts and pages. Analyzing these

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popular posts helps to understand what ideas and values these communities are being built around. It also illuminates who these communities are for and representing.

The site that has been chosen for this research is Betches, a woman-led media company that is geared toward the millennial and Gen Z generations. Jordana Abraham, Samantha Fishbein, and Aleen Kuperman created what is known today as Betches. The three women still own 100% of the company and in many ways are embodiments of the self-made women propagated by neoliberal feminism that is celebrated by popular feminism. The site started as a WordPress blog site aimed towards 18-24-year-old college women. They are most famous for their snarky and sarcastic humor that is decidedly opposed to hypermasculinity, but they also poke fun at the “nice girl” (Klich, 2019). Pushing back against the normative idea that women prioritize the needs of others above their own, Betches represents the women and girls who won’t be pushed over or ignored. They originally started out by commenting on celebrities, fashion, and romantic relationships advice, but with the creation of BetchesSup, Abraham, Fishbein, and Kuperman branched out into political commentary, including a weekly newsletter, podcast, Instagram page and merchandise section in their webstore.

While Betches does not self-identify as feminist anywhere on their “about” page, they do post content that could be considered feminist and includes feminist perspectives. This is exemplified by articles that center women’s experiences in dating, business, and politics. Importantly, advice about business and life centers around the unique experiences of women from a variety of racial and class backgrounds. Articles like “I’m a Black Woman. The System Has Not Served Me. Here’s Why I’m Voting Anyway” (October 21, 2020) and “4 Microaggressions to Remove from Your Vocabulary” (August 27, 2020) suggest that Betches is at least interested in garnering Black readers. They also include images of people from varying racial backgrounds, which signals, at

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least, a superficial commitment to diversity in representation. Interestingly, when you look at the “relationship” page on Betches webpage, almost all the images are of heterosexual couples and the only queer couple depicted is white. These are some indicators of the type of image that Betches puts out into the world. The images and discourses posted by Betches and the responses from the audience that these posts provoke are central to the research at hand and lead to my research questions, which are as follows:

- What feminist discourses do Betches communicate and how?
- Which discourses do followers of Betches engage with? What are their responses?
- What feminisms are reflected through the posts and their interactions?

These questions required research into contemporary feminisms. Betches is a media page, which means that their activity online is a source of income. Understanding which feminist perspectives are or are not visible on Betches’ Instagram page provides an illustration of the feminist perspectives that are popularized on Instagram. In order to uncover these perspectives, I used a multimodal approach to qualitative analysis informed by my literature review, my lived experiences with Instagram and prevalent emerging research. These methods are discussed in the proceeding chapter.

Methods

Discourse analysis involves studying language in the context of society, culture, history, institutions, identity formation, politics, power and all other things that language helps us to create and which, in turn, render language meaningful in certain ways and able to accomplish certain purposes. –Gee and Hanford, 2012

Instagram has over one billion users worldwide (Clement, 2020), which would make it one of the largest countries on earth by population. Whether we’ve chosen it or not, social media floods our daily lives. Even those not directly using any platforms are inundated with news and information about or from social media every day. This means that social media is increasingly becoming a space in which people’s lives are lived. What we do online impacts our offline lives and vice versa—or, as Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2021) puts it, the Internet has “given rise to worldwide surveillance networks, coproduced by states and corporations; social media algorithms, powered by military-grade psychological operations (PSYOPS) that spread lies and conspiracy of consumption” (p. 1). The incredible reach of social media and the grip it has on our lives, especially those of us of the millennial and Gen Z generations, makes it a space rich for ethnographic qualitative research to better understand current and prevalent values and ideologies.

The objective of this research is to understand the popular feminist perspectives circulating through social media. My research studies a snapshot of a corner of the internet during a politically charged period to gain insight into the feminist perspectives popular amongst women between the age of 20-30 in the United States. This demographic is important to me because I am part of this demographic, these are my peers and the next generation of world leaders. It is important to know what information we are being fed and how because of, as Chun (2021) explains, the gravitas and reach of social media. The information we gather, ingest, and regurgitate from social media will inform not only our social values but also our political ideologies and opinions. Betches is an excellent object of research because they are an internet media conglomerate made by millennial

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women for millennial and Gen Z women. To understand the discourses being circulated on their Instagram page, this thesis used Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to guide the analysis and uncover the nuances of gender relations and hierarchies at work within their posts and discussions. Because Instagram posts are a mixture of image and text, I used visual analysis in conjunction with FCDA to paint a fuller picture of what each post communicated and to better understand the popular responses to them. I’m not only interested in digging deeper into Betches, but I am also their target audience and a long-time follower. My background in academic feminist study brings a critical eye to the social media that I enjoy every day. Among contemporary feminists, this kind of autotheory is an important feature of any analysis (Fournier, 2018). Positioning myself and my experience within the research and analysis allows for a greater reflexivity, in the sense that Saldana and Omasta (2017) articulate in *Qualitative Research: Analyzing Life*: researchers that prioritize reflexivity try to be transparent about their “personal values, attitudes, and beliefs about the world, formed by [their] unique personal biography, learned experiences, and individual thinking patterns” (p. 34).

Multimodal Approach to Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative analysis allows for this research to be interpreted through a critical feminist lens. Numbers of likes on posts are considered a signal of popularity not as a quantifiable analytic. Most liked does not necessarily mean most popular when the context of the entire post, the image, caption and comments, are taken into consideration. A qualitative contextual analysis of the entire post is required to understand the importance of the number of likes on a post and for this reason I acknowledge the numbers, but provide deeper analysis of their historical, social and political context. As a feminist researcher, I have interpreted the posts and discussions from a feminist point of view that develops an intersectional analysis of the discourses and perspective circulated on this

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particular social media platform within this specific time frame. The work includes an analysis of which posts gain popularity and the responses to them.

Qualitative research requires reflexivity, and for the researcher to acknowledge their role in the research to outline potential biases in the analysis. In addition, “Critical and postmodern genres [of research methodology] ... assume that all knowledge is political and that researchers are not neutral, since their ultimate purposes include advocacy and action” (Marshall and Rossman, 2016, p. 118). Researchers should address this both by acknowledging their role and by remaining reflexive throughout the analysis of their data (Creswell, 2000). My research encourages popular feminist discourses towards a more critical analysis of structural inequalities. Discourses and perspectives of feminism that become popular must move beyond just the commodifiable taglines and hashtags and towards a deeper understanding of the systemic causes of inequality in our world.

Instagram posts present a unique combination of textual and visual data that must be understood as the sum of its parts. We cannot analyze captions without analyzing images and vice versa. My analysis of the data, therefore, combined critical discourses analysis, feminist discourse analysis and a visual analysis to understand the meaning conveyed by the post as a whole and the popular response to the post.

Using the Betches "about" page, my own familiarity with the brand and my literature review as a guide, I began coding some categories with subcategories that worked as a coding key for my research. These categories were Neoliberal Feminism, Popular Feminism, Intersectional Feminism, Second Wave Feminism, Negative Response, Popular Misogyny, and Something New. As I began my research, I uncovered two more categories: Heteronormativity and what I've called "Betches Politics" (See [Appendix A](#)). Categories emerged as I saw reputation of images and themes in the data. For example, the pandemic became a theme very early on in the research as posts which

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complained about Zoom meetings and working from home increased. I then amalgamated these categories into three broad groups and colour-coded them. The three groupings are: “Internet, Identity and Feminism”, “Political and Social Context” and “Backlash”. Subsections were used to pull out what the posts were talking about. These categories both helped to inform the discourse analysis and helped to uncover what was missing from the discourses on Betches. The coded data set can be found in [Appendix B](#).

Critical Discourse Analysis

James Paul Gee (2010) outlines seven “building tasks” that describe what discourse does and the critical discursive questions researchers should be asking of the words (p.17). The seven tasks include: significance, practices (activities), identities, relationships, politics (the distribution of social goods), connections, sign systems and knowledge (p. 17). Gee (2010) dedicates his appendix to explaining how these building tasks can also be used for analysing visual media such as posters and videos--or in the case of this research, Instagram posts (pp.193-200). This theory applies to this study because, as Gee (2010) argues, “discourse is about communication and we humans can communicate via other symbol systems or via systems composed using modalities other than language or ones composed by mixing other modalities with language” (p. 194). Instagram posts fit this description well as they combine images or videos with text, captions, and comments added by readers of the content. Instagram also has a wide reach with over a billion users worldwide. Ideas and perspectives in the content posted to Instagram therefore has the potential to reach millions of users as they become popularized on the platform. The potential for such an expansive reach and the affordance of Instagram to include a multitude of voices reflects the characteristics of fourth wave feminism. The voices, ideas, and perspectives that are gaining popularity on the

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platform can tell us about the values and attitude of the users. Betches is communicating specific ideas and images to their followers and the Instagram platform at large. Analyzing the textual and visual content of their posts will illuminate what exactly they are communicating and the potential impacts of these discourses.

The seven tasks correspond with seven questions that guide a researcher through discourse analysis. The first of these tasks is to gauge the significance or the weight that we give the language, or the image, being used (Gee, 2010, p. 17). This leads to the question “how is this piece of language [or image] being used to make certain things significant or not and in what ways” (Gee, 2010, p. 17)? For example, the post in figure 1 from October 8, 2020, depicts a mug for sale with the words “I’m speaking” written on it and accompanied by a GIF of Kamala Harris now infamously saying “I’m speaking” during the Vice President (VP) debate as Mike Pence attempted to interrupt her². This phrase is significant due to the speaker and the context in which this was uttered. The comment section of the post attempts to make the phrase and moment insignificant by questioning Harris’ intelligence, calling her a liar and attempting to focus attention on Pence’s alleged “crushing it”³ performance in the debate.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXFqTGBty1w>

³ Usernames of commentors have been removed to protect their anonymity.

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Figure 1 Post from October 8, 2020



Next, according to Gee (p. 18), we must decipher the question “what practice (activity) or practices (activities) a piece of language being used to enact”, or what are the words doing or telling us to do in the image being analyzed. In the example above, the combined practice being observed is the vice presidential debate and the selling of a commercial good. The activity taking place is Harris standing up against Pence’s bullying techniques. Together, the activity and practice combine to create a gendered and political event in which a woman publicly stands up against attempts to intimidate her on the stage of the 2020 Presidential Election, where all eyes were on the US⁴. This context makes the “practices and activity” enacted by the post more significant. It

⁴ Approx., 57.9 million viewers making it the second most watch VP debate in American history (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/08/business/media/pence-harris-debate-is-no-2-in-vice-presidential-ratings-with-58-million-tv-viewers.html>)

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combines opposition to patriarchal hegemony on an international stage with race relations as it depicts Harris, the would be first Black Asian American VP, standing up to a white male candidate. The post is more socially and politically important when this context is considered. The post is not just selling a novelty mug; it is selling the memory of a moment of perceived feminist resistance.

The third task in CDA is to analyse the language and images that are used to recognize a certain identity or role; “What identity or identities is this piece of language [or image] being used to enact? What identity or identities is this piece of language [or image] attributing to others and how does this help the speaker or writer enact his or her own identity?” (Gee, 2010, p. 18). The image of Kamala Harris very obviously reinforces her identity as the Vice-Presidential candidate for the Democratic Party in the 2020 Presidential Election. She also is visibly a woman of colour. Harris’s identity is important because it forces the reader to acknowledge the intersection of race and gender. Harris is not only the first female Vice-President, but she is the first Black and Asian American Vice President.⁵ Harris is an important role model for many women and children in the US, where women of colour are historically excluded from positions of political power. Harris potentially represents the dreams and aspirations of many American women and girls of colour. The caption identifies her as a woman and reaffirms the empowerment conveyed by her saying bluntly “I’m speaking” and by stating “she said what she said”. These are both sentences that support Harris as politically powerful and confident in her own intelligence and convictions. The empowerment discourse evident here reinforces the individualization characteristic of neoliberal feminism vis-à-vis encouraging women to empower themselves by standing up for themselves, by themselves.

⁵ Hyphens are not used for identities like Asian American because it diminishes the importance of modifier in two-word national identities like this. <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/racial-ethnic-minorities>

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Together with the image of Harris and the importance of her representation, her identity has become integral to understanding the significance of this post and more specifically, understanding the significance of the practice and action taking place. In contrast, the comment section attempts to undermine Harris’ intelligence by suggesting she is talking but saying nothing. As I will discuss in the Findings chapter, this dichotomy is common for any posts that support the Democratic candidates in this election. And given that there are no Betches posts that support the Republican candidates in this election, this antagonistic response is significant.

Gee’s (2010) fourth task mandates that the researcher consider the social relationships conveyed by the language used (p. 18). In other words, they ask the question “what sort of relationship or relationships is this piece of language [or image] seeking to enact with others (present or not)?” (Gee, 2010, p. 19). The post conveys patriarchal norms which depict Harris visually as kind and approachable while simultaneously conveying a pushback against these norms through the text and reference to this moment in time. This image is of Kamala Harris’ side profile and she is in the midst of saying “speaking” giving her a large grin. She does not appear menacing, nor could we deduce her intelligence from this image without invoking prior biases. Emblazoned across the image is the caption “I’m speaking”. The context of this image is also easily identifiable to anyone who was watching the VP debate or who followed the ensuing media coverage. Together, the image presents a woman asserting her space in a debate and setting individual boundaries. From a gender perspective, Harris is asserting a dominance that is traditionally assigned to men while maintaining the kind of polite and amiable nature that is traditionally assigned to women. Betches is celebrating this inversion of gender roles by creating and selling a mug. Celebrating Harris’s comment and what it represents is also celebrating flipping the traditional social relationship around and putting political power in the woman’s hands.

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The other social relationship we see emerge is between Trump supporters and social media. Despite Betches being a site that is quite obviously not aligned with the beliefs of Trump and his supporters, all the posts created that concern a Democratic candidate attract virulent and condescending comments from Trump supporters. This relationship will be further discussed in the proceeding chapter. The conclusion will outline why understanding this relationship requires further research on the social media presence and tactics of Trump supporters and analogous groups of far-right populist trolls.

The fifth question we ask of our data when employing CDA is concerned with politics, which Gee (2010) defines as the distribution of social goods (p. 19). Social goods imply that something is “good”, “adequate”, “normal”, “correct”, “proper”, “appropriate”, “valuable”, “the way things are”, “the way things ought to be”, “high status or low status”, “like me or not like me”, etc. (Gee, 2010, p.19). A social good could be analogous with values as they represent ideas such as “the way things ought to be” and “valuable” (Gee, 2010, p.19). My analysis understands social goods as values, specifically values which reflect feminist perspectives. This post reflects empowerment, intersectionality, and commodity feminism. The post takes women standing up for themselves and women setting boundaries as something that is inherently good. Intersectionality underlies the post as we see Harris, a Black Asian American, in a position of political power and encountering the kind of misogyny and respectability politics that many women, especially women of colour, face daily. The mug embossed with “I’m speaking” represents the values, the social good, Harris embodies when she takes up space on the stage across from Pence who is consistently interrupting her. Saying “I’m speaking” shows women they deserve to speak and be heard without interruption, and even more specifically Black women. Betches has monetized this by creating a mug available for sale, representing a commodifiable feminism that allows consumers to portray

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these feminist values but only through the capitalist system. The comment section ruthlessly undermines the “good” suggested by this post by ripping apart Harris’ intelligence and her integrity. I have conceptualized responses like this as backlash to the values presented in the posts.

The penultimate question asks the researcher “how does this piece of language connect or disconnect things; how does it make one thing relevant or irrelevant to another?” (Gee, 2010, p. 19). The “pieces of language” in the context of my project are the posts and their content. These connect their subject matter to Betches’ brand and to their followers. Additionally, the image and the caption of the posts connect to produce perspectives and ideas that Betches is interested in disseminating. For example, in Figure 1 the caption and image connect Kamala Harris to the concepts of empowerment and women standing up for themselves. This connection tells the reader that Kamala is a commanding speaker who won’t let anyone speak over her and by selling this mug, the content producers are encouraging other women to adopt the same attitude. Furthermore, the post connects to certain feminist perspective and initiatives. Celebrating the success of a woman, a woman who has worked with the status quo not against it for the most part, aligns with the initiatives of neoliberal feminism. Selling a mug with this slogan emblazoned on it signals commodifiable feminism. The comments then attempt to connect Harris with a lack of intelligence and being a liar. The content of this post makes it relevant to Trump supporters. The top five comments undermine the social good attempted by the post vis-a-vis empowering women and encouraging them to claim their space in the world. The values of the post are irrelevant to Trump supporters, but degrading and undermining Harris is relevant to them. Supporting Harris is relevant to Betches and, judging by their continued posting, receiving this kind of backlash is irrelevant to them. This balancing act further connects Betches to their target audience, an audience that believes in the empowerment of women.

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Finally, according to Gee (2010), the researcher must consider the sign systems and knowledge necessary to understand the words or images (p.20). The question becomes “how does this piece of language privilege or deprivilege specific sign systems or different ways of knowing and believing or claims knowledge and belief?” (Gee, 2010, p. 20). Instagram privileges images as a sign system, and above that, they privilege the meme. People create entire accounts dedicated to creating and circulating memes on the app. Betches also regularly posts memes that they have created, or they share the content of other creators. The post we have been analyzing is not a meme, but it runs on a similar sign system and illustrates a moment that was frequently meme-ified in the week after the Vice-President debate. Harris saying “I’m speaking” can be used out of its original context, but the utterance maintains its power as a woman’s stance against the patriarchal monopoly on political power and public communication. The post also privileges an understanding of American politics and is absolutely speaking to a specific political audience: one that supports the success of women and likely supports the Democratic party in this instance, but also wants its information distilled into memes.

This line of questioning is what I used for all the posts in my dataset. Gee’s questions allowed me as the researcher to understand the discourses at play within each post and throughout the entire period that I have observed Betches’ Instagram posts. As discussed, these questions were simultaneously read through a second lens, that of feminist critical discourse analysis or FCDA.

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA)

The aim of my research is to gauge which feminist discourses were circulating on Betches’ Instagram during the 2020 presidential election to get an understanding of what feminist discourses are popular and how they are received by their large audience. Betches is a media company made

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by millennial women and for millennial women with an Instagram following of over seven million. Betches does not explicitly identify as a feminist company, however, they publish feminist content almost every single day. For this reason, the posts were analyzed through a critical feminist lens that looked for not only feminist issues, but also for the nuances of gender that are at play through the discourses. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) aims to uncover “the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated and challenged in different contexts and communities” (Lazar, 2007, p. 142). FCDA is tasked with examining “how power and dominance are discursively produced and/or (counter)-resisted in a variety of ways through textual representation of gendered social practices...” (Lazar, 2007, p. 149). FCDA fundamentally requires the researcher to bring a feminist lens to the research that emphasises how power, gender, class, and race intersect creating the social world in which we exist. Betches claims to not be serious and for people who don’t take themselves seriously, but as a media conglomerate with an audience reach of over forty-three million and leaving over five billion social impressions (About, n.d.), what they choose to post has a large sphere of influence. Using the Betches "about" page, my own familiarity with the brand and my literature review as a guide, I began coding some broad categories with subcategories that worked as a key for my research. The coding key can be found in [Appendix A](#). All posts were coded using this key. My research is interested in understanding not only what kind of feminist discourse is directly presented by Betches, but also the ideologies espoused by Betches during this time period.

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Figure 2 Post from October 1, 2020

 **Amanda Duberman** ✓
@AmandaDuberman

When they asked me if they could put my tweet into the world I didn't think they meant literally



 **Amanda Duberman** ✓
@AmandaDuberman

An added benefit of wearing a mask is that men on the street no longer tell me to smile

Who says Twitter is just shouting into the void? Our editorial director of @betches_sup, @rubadubdub89 is casually gracing a massive billboard on Sunset Blvd in West Hollywood with her v wise words. If you're in the area, take a pic and tag us.

144k likes, 792 comments

1. Men telling women to smile is literally the most annoying thing like mind ur own business???	202
2. Men ask me to pull my mask down so they can see my face at work... I think that's worse lmao	136
3. 🙌🏻👍	80
4. I still had someone tell me to smile even with my mask on 😂	62
5. Wild	51

Betches identifies themselves as a women's media company so it can be safely assumed that there are indicators of gender at play throughout their posts. One of the first posts I collected is a screenshot of a tweet by Betches' editorial director Amanda Duberman of a billboard in LA. This tweet was then used as a post on Betches' Instagram page. The tweet read: "An added benefit of wearing a mask is that men on the street no longer tell me to smile." The post garnered 144,000 likes and 792 comments, the top five of which were all enthusiastically agreeing with the sentiment

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of the post. The post is exemplary of the kind of gendered experiences Betches posts about. Wearing a mask benefits women because they experience fewer men who feel entitled to tell them how they should be. This is a feminist value reflected by the post, pushing back against patriarchal norms. The post also encourages women to stand up for themselves, a repetition of the empowerment narrative encountered in the Harris post. This post tries to flip the power dynamic of men suppressing women via policing their behaviour and illuminates the irony that it has taken a global pandemic and worldwide mask mandates for women to not get harassed by men (in this one way). The post emphasises a woman’s agency and celebrates the success of their editorial director Amanda Duberman. The notion of men infringing on the space of women and the message of celebrating the success of the women who do not allow their space to be infringed upon is echoed in other posts, such as when Betches turned Kamala Harris saying “I’m speaking” during the presidential debate into a mug (betches, 2020). The repetition of this discourse signals that Betches values women who speak their mind and don’t allow men to tell them how to behave or invade their space. Both posts are also exemplary of the capitalistic nature of Betches as a business and brand. This is just one example of how FCDA is employed in my research to help uncover the discourses at work. Images play an integral role in the discourses that are at play in these posts. Understanding the discourses circulating on social media is important because of the competitive nature of the platforms. Content creators, be them individuals or brands, are competing to create audiences. The larger your audience, the more valuable the account is. The neoliberal capitalist complex thrives in this environment where individual accounts become commodities. Additionally, profitable accounts participate in advertising and selling of products. Instagram sells us not only ideas, perspectives, and discourses but we are also sold tangible goods and services.

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Visual analysis was necessary to understand the role and influence of these images both in each post and as a trend through multiple posts.

Visual Analysis

Studying social media has required researchers to create their own interpretive methods that respond to the subject matter they are studying and the method through which the information is being disseminated (Faulkner et al., 2018, p.164). I have used FCDA and visual analysis to uncover discourses circulated on a popular Instagram account aimed at women. The visuals used by Betches inform the reader that this is a space for women but predominately for women who are white, cisgender, straight-sized⁶, and heterosexual. Faulkner et al. (2018), point out in their discussion of analyzing images online that researchers must take an intuitive approach, suggesting they take the “specific content and social context of the images under consideration” (p. 164). Unlike other research on social media, my research does not involve the systematic extraction of a large quantity of images such as an analysis of images related to a hashtag or analyzing the recurrence of an image. Instead, my research discusses how social media images garner meaning from their relationship to other cultural discourses (Faulkner et al, 2018, p. 164).

Memes are exemplary of this concept as they use popular images to add inflection and connotations, adding to the cultural and historical meaning of the images. For this reason, visual analysis of small quantities of images on social media is closely aligned with the methods of Art History analysis, involving close readings of images “in terms of their formal qualities, symbolic content, and historical contexts” (Faulkner et al, 2018, p. 164). Visual analysis allows a close

⁶ Straight sized refers to women who fit into the sizes offered in most stores i.e. X-Small to X-Large. Straight sized has increasingly become the accepted term for people who are not plus sized.

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interpretation that is attuned to the socio-cultural meanings of visual social media, and that is often lost in larger data mining and quantitative studies. For example, the images of women that Betches post play an integral role in the understanding of what women Betches is speaking to through their posts. The data gathered reflected a singular, narrow definition of women as white, straight sized, and cisgender. As I will discuss in detail below, despite the lack of representation in images, some of the posts discuss issues concerning the intersections of race, gender and class like voting rights, gerrymandering, access to abortion and culturally insensitive Halloween costumes. There is a disconnect between the images used by Betches and some of the political content they create. Betches creates and circulates videos calling out white supremacy and institutional racism, but this kind of critical thinking is not applied to their own content. Betches does not thread their political critiques through the social discourses on their sites. In other words, Betches does not recognize how circulating images of predominately white, cisgender, heterosexual women further institutionalize the white supremacy they've critiqued the American political system for upholding. This normalized image of the entrepreneurial woman reinforces what it means to be successful in America. From this initial reading of Betches, we can understand that they are white women speaking to white women but the issues their audience is concerned about goes beyond just those concerning white women. Betches explicitly calls out white supremacy in the Republican party in one of their posts, and yet as I will discuss in my Findings chapter, less than ten of the posts collected center the experiences of Black women, Indigenous women or women of colour. This presents as a superficial intersectionality that is only concerned with the race and class dimension of gender issues when it is popular, i.e., only talking about how the Republican party has white supremacist roots after the most outwardly racist president has been in office for four years.

Validity in Research

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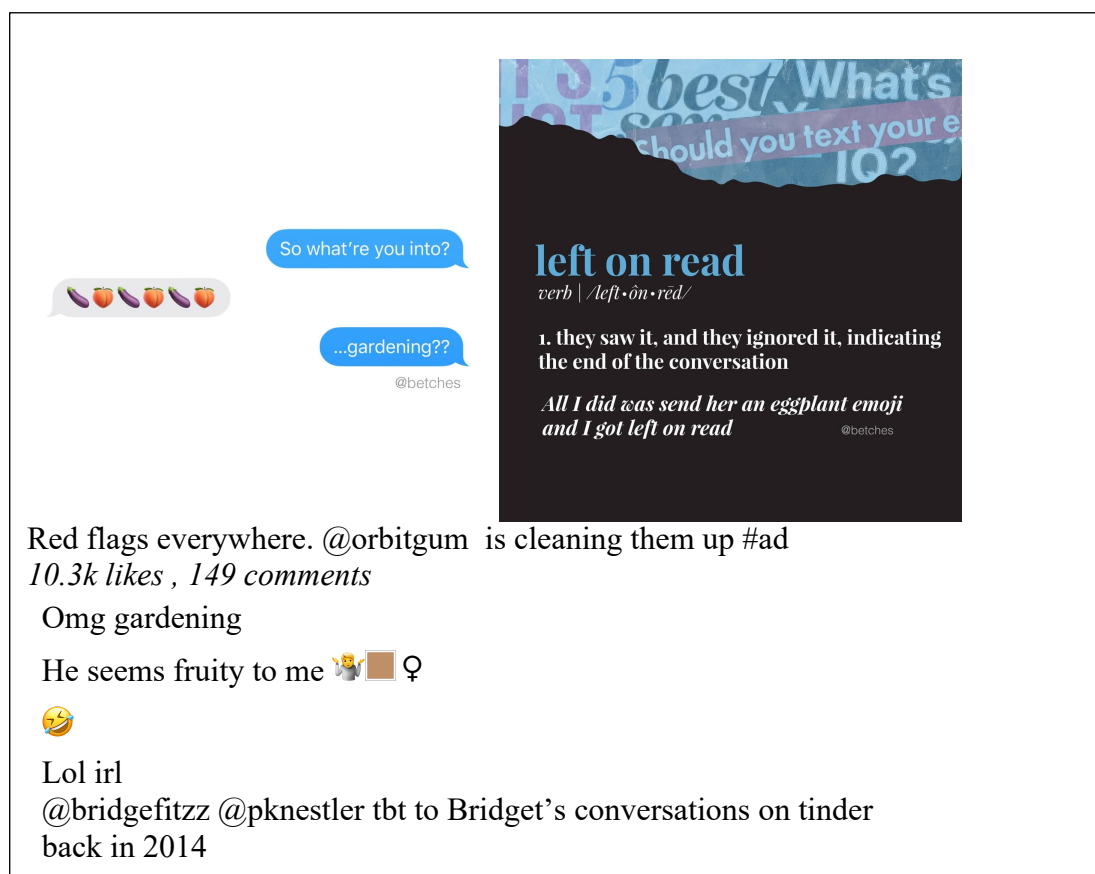
My research is validated by the ability of these interpretive methods, FCDA and visual analysis, to accurately represent the realities of the social phenomenon studied here (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p. 125). Creswell and Miller (2000) provide a two-pronged approach to establishing validity that requires aligning the lens of the research with the paradigm of the research (p. 124). The lens of the research refers to the viewpoint used for establishing validity (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p. 125). The authors point out three lenses frequently used by researchers: the views of the people who conduct the research, the views of the participants, and the views of an external reviewer or readers (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p. 125). The lens of the researcher is used for this project because of the interpretive nature of the data selected. The paradigms include postpositivist, constructivist and critical (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p. 125). A critical perspective paradigm most closely aligns with the questions of my research as they aim to uncover the discourses at play on a feminist media site during a politically volatile period. A critical paradigm aligns with interpretive analysis as they both require the researcher to situate the data within its socio-cultural and historical period and how this context may shape the data and its interpretation. Aligning the lens of the researcher with a critical paradigm encourages the kind of reflexivity required to ensure validity of this research (Creswell and Miller, 2000). In addition to reflexivity of the researcher, this research will be subjected to external review to ensure validity and lend credibility to the research.

The two-pronged approach to analyzing this data— using both visual analysis and FCDA— is required because of the intertextual and multiscalar nature of the medium. Using both methods allowed me to use a feminist lens for both the images and discourses, uncovering the feminist perspectives and ideas reflected in the content. An additional requirement for executing this research is an understanding of language and semiotics of social media, and, of Instagram,

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which comes from being a long-time user. I have grown up with social media and spend hours of my day ingesting content from Instagram. I have a keen interest in popular culture, especially celebrities, TV, and movies popular in North America. Much of the content made for Instagram references the facets of popular culture that I find myself submerged in for the better part of the last two decades. For example, one of the posts, which is a dating app advertisement, is a texting conversation including a response that is a bunch of eggplant and peach emojis (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Post from October 28, 2020



People who are not regular users of the internet or emojis would assume that this is about fruit and vegetables and may be confused as to why this would be in a flirtatious text. However, as a

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millennial social media user, I know that the emojis are meant to represent a penis and buttocks, respectively. This completely changes the message of the post and better aligns the contents with its main objective: selling the dating app. The entire post is playing off the confusion about sending fruit and vegetable emojis when someone is asked “what are you into?”. The caption also suggests this is a bad method of flirtation by referring to “red flags”. We also know from the use of the eggplant emoji that Betches is primarily targeting heterosexual women. Again, we are gaining an impression of the women who are Betches’ target demographic, which became narrower and narrower as I analyzed the data. The relationship between the women Betches target and the discourses they are circulating is discussed in the Findings and Discussion chapter of this thesis.

Data Analysis Procedures

Posts from Betches were gathered using the program Instaloader which uses the backdoor of Instagram to pull content including comments, captions and like counts. In total, 110 posts were gathered between October 1, 2020, to November 14, 2020. This data set can be found here: [Appendix B](#). Using the information gathered about some prominent feminist discourses in fourth-wave feminism, namely neoliberal feminism, popular feminism and intersectionality, I developed a coding key (See [Appendix A](#)) for analysing the posts. A first reading of the data illuminated the need for malleable categories and produced more categories than initially anticipated. I began with categories that were gleaned from my literature review and those that were immediately obvious when I began reading the data. The categories were “neo-liberal feminisms”, “popular feminism”, “intersectionality”, “negative response”, “second wave feminism” and “misogyny”. The categories had detailed sub-categories which included characteristics of each category heading. For example, under “Intersectionality” I included the concepts of “gender and race relations”, “power relations”, “perspective of a POC/WOC of BIPOC”, “issue affecting gender/class/race”, “social justice”,

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“reframing history”, “culture is not a costume”, and “person represented not white”. These categories expanded and I added on categories as I continued to read and analyze the data. Categories like “something new” developed as I saw the context of the pandemic become more apparent through posts, as well posts that required a level of Instagram literacy to understand. An interesting category that emerged was what I have called “Betches Politics”, which were moments where political and social issues were discussed as well as some common experiences during the election. For example, the anxiety surrounding waiting for results. The final categories can be found in [Appendix A](#).

Analyzed together, the 110 posts show an expansion of Betches identity as vapid, consumerist, neoliberal feminists of their 2011 founding. Through developing their own political interest newsletter, Betches Sup, in addition to their satirical commentary on life as a woman, Betches has pushed beyond the neoliberal need for encouraging women to join the work force. Posts have also presented combinations of different threads taken from multiple feminisms, which signals how feminisms continue to shift and diversify. There are also some categories that developed as analysis was happening, such as memes specific to the experience of a generation that has grown up with the internet that require a level of platform familiarity to understand. Posts that discuss relief from work and the stressors of life through the pandemic are also common, which point to a shared experience and a growing sense of community developing through the posts and interactions. As we are all moved to working from home, finding this sense of community became integral for social cohesion. Not all content garnered the same amount of mutual admiration and agreement. Posts concerning the election and political commentary received all of the backlash analyzed in the dataset.

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My research uncovers what feminist perspectives are espoused by Betches and valued by their followers. The next chapter discusses my findings, explaining how Betches is not only a product of popular feminism, but it also reproduces some of the harmful as well as some of the positive expressions of popular feminism. For example, Betches has an entire video series which discusses the structural racism present in the US through police brutality, gerrymandering and voter suppression. However, these critiques appear only in the context of the election and why this specific election mattered so much. The rest of the material predominately consists of funny posts about working, living through the pandemic, and life as a middle class, white, heterosexual woman in America. What this means for Betches as a site of popular feminism is discussed further throughout the remaining chapters.

Findings and Discussion

As I have written above, 110 posts were collected from October 1, 2020 to November 14, 2020. The content and top five comments from these posts were analyzed for markers of feminist discourses, targeted audience, political beliefs, and context. Posts included images, tweets, and videos. The result of this analysis helped to answer my research questions and opened more questions for further research. My research sought to answer the following questions:

- What feminist discourses do Betches communicate and how?
- Which discourses do followers of Betches engage with? What are their responses?
- What feminisms are reflected through the posts and their interactions?

Betches does not describe itself as a feminist content producer, but they post content that is speaking about political, social, and economic issues facing women while keeping their content light and humorous. Betches has created a community online. The community of Betches is evident through the multitude of comments from users tagging their friends, signalling that the audience finds the content posted relatable. Many of these posts consisted of a funny post that followers related to, evidenced by tagging friends in the comments, and comments that built on the jokes or agreed with the post. Content like commiserating over working from home and dating humour brought followers together. Building this community on Instagram is a result of Betches brand, a brand that over seven million people relate to or enjoy enough to follow on Instagram. The content they post on Instagram immediately becomes a part of their brand identity. This form of presentation is in reality a form of representation (Perry 2018, p. 132). Betches therefore becomes represented by the content they post. By analyzing their content, we can understand who their target audience is and the ideas, movements and trends that are important to them. To answer the questions which spurred this research, we need to know who Betches is and what they care

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about. Betches represents a generation raised by the neoliberal feminist entrepreneurial woman. This research uncovers who these women are, what they care about and even how they are being encouraged to vote. Drawing data from the 2020 Presidential Election provides a novel opportunity to look at the political agenda of Betches and the responses of their followers. The following sections discuss Betches’ brand identity, their important political and social causes and the negative feedback that their posts garnered. Together, these elements show that Betches identity and Instagram account adhere to the neoliberal capitalist complex and its potential to push this status quo. Betches has created a community where women go to relate about hardships in work and relationships. These people may not connect with each other directly, but it is evidenced through countless comments from users tagging other users that friends are talking to friends about what Betches is posting. They are literally making group chats go “oh my god, this is so us” (About, n.d.)

“Build-a-Betch” – Instagram, Identity and Feminism

Understanding who Betches it was the first step to answering my research questions. Identifiers of race, class, gender, and sexuality are prevalent throughout the data. Images of thin white women, memes and tweets commiserating with the hardships of corporate America and the transitions to working from home, targeted ads for birth control and skits about heterosexual dating all help to paint an image of who a Betch is and how she experiences the world. Betches are born from the neoliberal feminist climate produced by women like Sheryl Sandberg, Anne-Marie Slaughter, and Hilary Clinton, who tell women they can “have it all” if they just “lean-in.” The corporate lives these women should strive to have are the same as male CEOs and executives’ success is measured by market metrics, bank accounts and material goods. Betches was made for the young women who were growing up as the generation behind these trailblazers in politics and

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business. As a response to “bro-culture”, Betches aimed to be a site for young women to discuss dating, college-life, and the trials and tribulations of middle-class young adult women in the US. As the women who started Betches have grown up, so has their brand and content. The data shows that Betches is a by-product of the neoliberal feminism which encourages a singular definition of what a woman is: middle class, white, cisgender, straight sized and heterosexual. The proceeding section explores the content posted by Betches during the six weeks leading up to the 2020 Presidential Election. Images, memes, tweets and videos paint a picture of who Betches is speaking to and what Betches believes their audience values.

Among Collins (2015) criteria for a project that claims to be intersectional is an understanding that variations in one’s point of view depend on one’s social place which influences the work they produce. Their work is a reflection of their social place and lived experiences. In the case of Betches, this is a reflection of the experiences of middle-class cisgender women in the United States. Betches self-identify as “a space for all women to get real about life and claim they will “have your group chat saying ‘omg this is so us’” (About, n.d.). Betches aims to be relatable to millennial and Gen Z women at all stages of life “from drinking cheap vodka sodas and getting ghosted in college, to trying to get a job you’re not completely miserable at, to saving money so you can eventually plan a wedding and have kids one day...” (About, n.d.). This “about” page begins to build the image of the women that Betches is speaking to and about. These women have career ambitions, and maybe want to build a family. It is likely that they went to college or are in college, that they are also likely drinking regularly and actively dating. They are also of the millennial and Gen Z generations who have grown up with the internet, which means that content I have coded as "relatable" is relatable to those who have grown up through the '90s and early '00s and are now entering the workforce or college. Relatable is only relatable to Betches target

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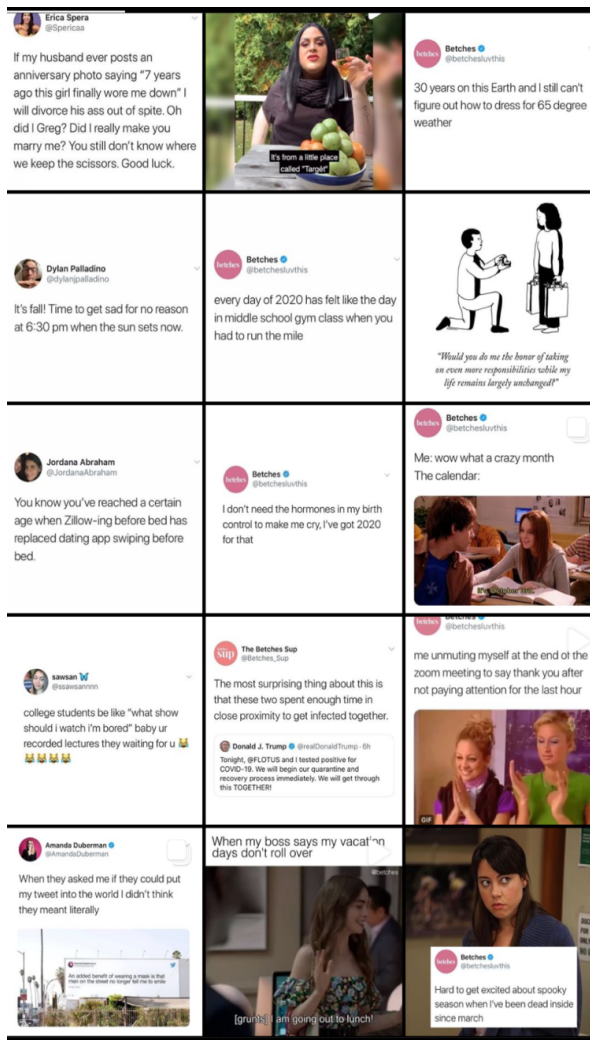
demographic, Gen Z and millennial women. However, Betches’ content reflects that it is made for a narrow definition of women, namely women who are white, cisgender, straight, thin and able bodied. Betches is also an American company, which means they are speaking primarily to American women in the context of the United States today. This background information helps to contextualize the identity Betches represents through their Instagram account: a site made by white, middle-class women for white, middle-class women.

Figure 4 presents Betches’ Instagram grid from October 1-6, 2020, the first week of samples, and reflects the visual representation of women repeated throughout the data. Nicole Ritchie is the only woman of colour represented; the rest are thin white cis women. Even the one man pretending to be a woman is pretending to be a white, middle-class woman. These women are also heterosexual. On this grid alone there are two mentions of heterosexual marriage and one reference to a well-known heterosexual crush from the 2004 hit *Mean Girls*. There is not a single mention of queer relationships. When relationships are mentioned, they are a part of advertisements for the newest season of the Bachelor dating show, which has famously never featured a 2SLGBTQIA+ Bachelor/Bachelorette, or are dating app advertisements. These are women who were born and raised in the neoliberal feminist era which pushed women to “break the glass ceiling” and to fight for equality with (white) men. These women lived through the Always “Like a Girl” campaign and knew women’s empowerment and success was a cause worth fighting for, but “feminism” was still a dirty word attached to stereotypes of bra-burning, man-hating women. Betches shows what the women raised in these conditions turned out to be, or at least what the white women in the United States have internalized from these movements. Some of these symptoms include an understanding that the home doesn’t run without you and the resulting fatigue from juggling work and home life. This pressure is especially relevant during the

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pandemic as women continue to work from home and we experience the “shecession” (Doepke, 2021). Betches claims to be for “women”, but the data shows that they are only speaking to a very specific and narrow definition of “women”. Namely, women that are white, thin, cis, straight sized, middle class, upwardly mobile, heterosexual, and able-bodied.

Figure 4 Screenshot of Betches Instagram Grid from October 1-6 2020



Considering Perry's (2018) discussion of identity, representation and feminism in the neoliberal capitalist complex, we can see that these posts by Betches are not just presenting

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content, they are representing Betches’ identity (p. 132). Visual representation, which is commodified in the neoliberal capitalist complex, is both who Betches are and what product sells in this market. Quantifiably speaking, data uncovered that 70% of Betches posts depict women who are white, thin and cisgender. Betches has found success in reproducing this normative version of femininity. Betches sells women as successful in business and upwardly mobile but does not disrupt the ideological underpinnings of the gendering of women (Perry 2018, p. 111). Unlike the entrepreneurial woman described by Perry (2018) and upheld by neoliberalism, the women in Betches’ content do not love their jobs nor do they wax poetic about corporate achievement. These women are tired, they resent their jobs, but they do them well. This attitude was prevalent for many during the work at home phase of the pandemic, as evidenced by the fact that “languishing” was the word of the year for 2021⁷. Figure 5 is exemplary of this attitude. These women will work but they are excited about when they don’t have to anymore. This post also suggests that these women are looking forward to a retirement, meaning they are in jobs that allow for a retirement, or benefit from generational wealth. Either of these options are indicators that these women are of a higher economic class. The pandemic brought on what has been dubbed the “shecession” (Doepek et al., 2021). This describes the mass exodus of women from the workforce due to the demands of the pandemic. Doepek et al. (2021) found that women left the workforce in larger numbers primarily to meet increased demands of childcare while schools were shut down. They also found that among telecommuters, women were experiencing greater loss in productivity because of increased demands from home life. These factors point to the community building happening on Betches’ page over the experiences of working from home.

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/well/mind/covid-mental-health-languishing.html>

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Figure 5 *Post from October 20, 2020*

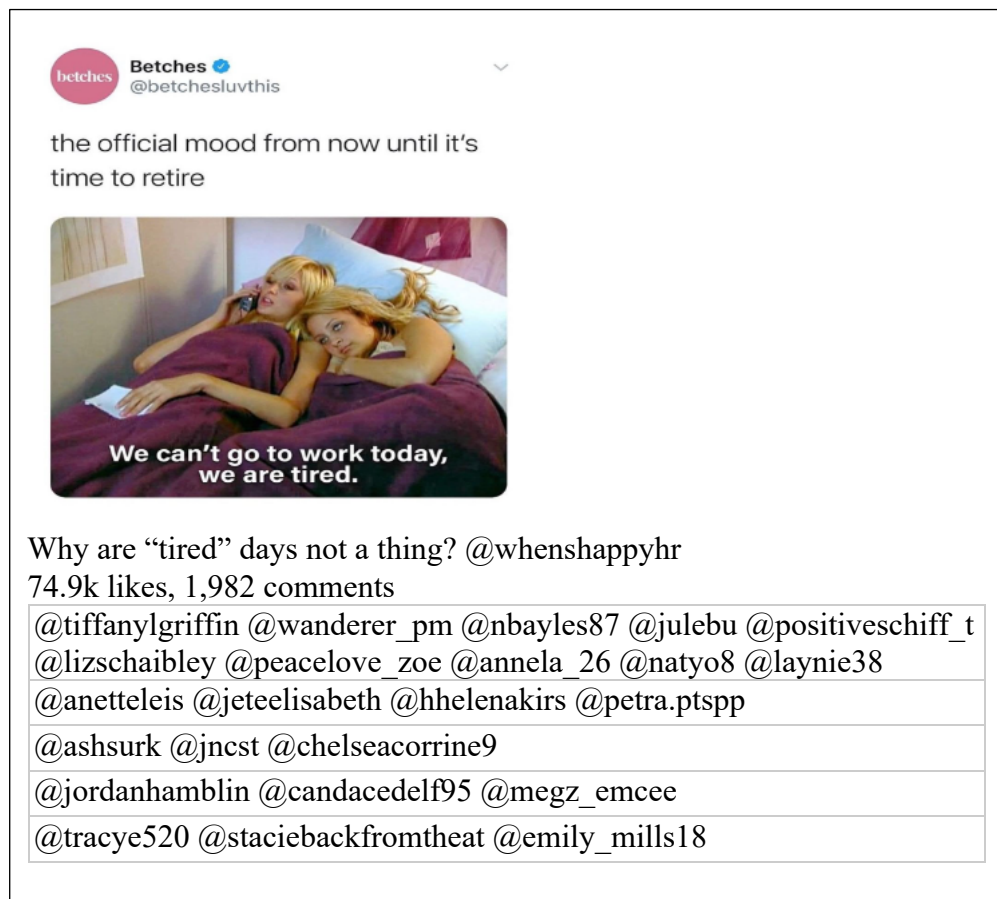



Figure 5 also provides a great example of the kind of comments that show the community building happening on Betches. The top five comments on this post are all individual users tagging multiple friends to bring their attention to this post. This shows that users agree and relate to the content of this post: they are also tired and cannot wait for retirement. This also suggests that commentators see themselves reflected in these posts, meaning that they are also capable of saving for retirement and are gainfully employed. Exchanges like these showcase the extent to which Betches speaks to a very specific class of American citizen: the middle to upper middle class.

We now know that Betches creates content about and for white, thin, cisgender, middle class women. Thus far we know that Betches is speaking to this privileged group of women

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because they post images of women, speak from a women’s perspective, and endorse products directed towards women. Betches genders women through their posts. For instance, in Figure 1 we saw an example of the gendering of women through images and text during the first week of posts collected. In the proceeding figure, Figure 6, we see women being gendered by separating themselves from men through humour and text.

Figure 6 Post from October 4 2020



Erica Spera
@Spericcaa

▼

If my husband ever posts an anniversary photo saying “7 years ago this girl finally wore me down” I will divorce his ass out of spite. Oh did I Greg? Did I really make you marry me? You still don’t know where we keep the scissors. Good luck.

GOOD LUCK GREG
credit/permission: @spericca via @betchesbrides
212k likes; 3879 comments

I'll be honest. It always confused me how men would act like marriage was a prison when literally everything was invented to benefit them anyway and nobody forced them to get married. Oh, and I'm over here all childfree and shit and know damn well men aren't interested if they can't make you a mommy.	1138
When she said scissors, did anyone else for a second think she was talking about..	257
RIP gregg. but his name is really chad.	159
Godspeed Greg	113
@wangchung_tonight we fight ALL THE TIME and you drive me CRAZY but there's no one else I'd rather suffocate in their sleep. Happy anniversary babe	87

This post illustrates a few things. First, it shows an entrepreneurial woman experiencing success. Erica Spera is a comedian in NY who produces comedy shows for 607 Comedy as well as having her own podcast “Shooters gotta Shoot.” She is a self-made woman comedian. Secondly,

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it provides us both visual and textual clues to the women represented by Betches. Her profile image shows us that she is a thin and presumably a cisgender woman. The text of her tweet tells us she doesn't think men are necessary for survivable, in fact they need women. Additionally, men frame themselves as the prize in this content but Erica is sure to point out that “Greg” is no prize. Women in this post exist to serve men and men are a prize to be won. Roxanne Gay (2014) comments on this entitlement men feel, describing it as a “virulent cultural sickness ---one where women exist to satisfy the whims of men, one where a woman's worth [is] diminished or entirely ignored” (p.189). Betches decidedly pushes back against this cultural sickness and firmly places women in a place where they can stand up to sexist, patriarchal manipulation. I called this attitude “I don't need a man” in the coding key and it is evident in other posts which demonstrate women's responsibilities in heterosexual marriages (see #11 and #16 in [Appendix B](#)).

Finally, the comment section shows us that the audience agrees and relates with the the content and messaging of this post. This kind of communal relation to the post suggests that there are entire groups of women who are also keen to stand up and push back against the kind of culture that perpetuates men's entitlement to women. While this is a noteworthy and noble trait, it does not pushback against the narrowly defined neoliberal entrepreneurial woman so aggressively marketed by Betches. Instead, the woman who pushes back against entitled men by not existing to satiate their every need is also the woman pushing back against male dominated boardrooms and spheres of professional politics. Women who push back against male dominated boardrooms rather than structural patriarchal norms are marketable in the neoliberal capitalist complex and therefore it is encouraged. Their gender combined with their adherence to the processes of the neoliberal capitalist complex make these women both marketable and “fungible,” in Imani Perry's terms. Betches appeals to the market, they create digital and actual commodities, and these are eaten up

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by their consumer base. Fundamentally, Betches shows us that the market still prefers white, thin, cisgender women, even if these women do not need to exist to appeal to men. Perhaps this should come as no surprise in a white supremacist American culture, but by not pushing against the status quo, and instead rebranding the entrepreneurial women, Betches is able to be successful because of its manual filtering of intersectional representation out of its feed.

With this understanding of the social and economic place from which Betches is making content, and for what social and economic base they are making content, we can approach a discussion of the political and social causes important to them. The context provided by this section will illuminate why the political and social causes discussed by Betches are presented on their page.

“Don’t Get Your News from Meme Accounts”: Betches expresses their political opinion, and the comment section riots

The previous section outlined how Betches perpetuates a normative model of woman, one that is white, thin, heterosexual, cisgender, and middle class. Betches’ audience relates actively to their content by tagging friends or engaging in conversations in the comments. The posts are quick and funny meme-like content which followers tag friends to show and share its relatability in the comment section or build on the joke with quips of their own. Things began to shift as more and more posts about the election were posted. The timeline for pulling this data was chosen so that it would showcase what Betches posts during a politically important time. Political coverage on Betches is often cross posted from their sister brand, Betches Sup. Throughout 2020 and in previous years, Betches has posted coverage of federal elections. The politically focused content posted to Betches’ Instagram illuminates the political opinions, perspectives, and movements Betches chooses to align with. These opinions, perspectives and movements are distilled into

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tweets, memes, and short videos to efficiently get their messages heard. This distillation is defined as “explanatory journalism” and it benefits Betches because it effectively and concisely conveys a perspective, idea, or opinion so a larger audience can understand and digest this information. It also drives engagement on their posts up as explanatory journalism that is quickly digested by the reader is exactly what gets traction on Instagram. This content attracts hundreds of thousands of likes and tens of thousands of comments, suggesting that Betches’ followers agree with or enjoy the content. Increased engagement also means that other posts by Betches are gaining traction on newsfeeds and overall increases the traffic to Betches sites, leading to more readers and more sales. However, with less long-form content on their Instagram, Betches is limited by word counts, video length restrictions and photo limits. What they choose to post is highly curated to attract a positive response and reach their intended audience. During the 2020 election Betches enthusiastically backed the Democratic candidates and encouraged their audience to go out and vote through much of their content. It was only these posts, posts that discussed the election and provided information about the history and logistics of voting in America, that attracted commentary that was contra to that shown in the post.


Posts relating to the 2020 presidential election receive many negative responses from the comment section. The backlash ranges from opposition to the candidate posted, to questioning the purpose of Betches’ account to blatant misogyny directed towards Kamala Harris. Betches’ election content is also pro-Democrat, and the comment section attracts pro-Trump commentary. An underexamined characteristic of Trump support on the internet (Dignam and Rohlinger, 2019; Lin, 2017; Weiser and Miltner, 2016) is that it infiltrates spaces that are not pro-Trump and attempts to saturate them with pro-Trump rhetoric. The far-right political movement has strong roots on the internet, specifically in public forums such as Reddit and 4Chan and flourishes behind the

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anonymity of a username, making this kind of negative comment spamming commonplace among supporters of Trump (Dignam and Rohlinger, 2019; Lin, 2017; Weiser and Miltner, 2016). The internet provides the perfect breeding ground for alt-right extremism and hatred. Anonymity, unaccountability, and decentralization allows users to express opinions they may not avow if they were not hiding behind a username and leads to birthing communities of like-minded individuals (Stern, 2019). Racist communities continue to thrive on the internet because it has always been allowed and even encouraged to thrive there (McIlwain, 2020). The cloak of anonymity afforded by the internet allows those who are too afraid to speak offline to find a community online where they are supported and encouraged to share their perspectives and opinions (McIlwain, 2020). Similarly, Betches community thrives like alt-right communities do but under a brand name rather than in the shadows of online forums. Trump supporters are born from this environment, they thrive online using tactics like trolling, spam posting and cyber bullying to get their message across (Stern, 2019). The comment section of Betches' posts from the election are examples of these Trump-supporting spam posters and trolls. Few comments say anything beyond “Trump 2020” or “TRUMP” with a series of American flag emojis, however they get the point across that Trump supporters are following the account. Witnessing that this backlash only occurs in response to election content suggests that these Trump supporters might have previously enjoyed and related to the other content posted by Betches. This is further evidenced by comments like “Since when did your account become political?” and “As a media company, it would be nice if your team didn't alienate half the country” that show the disappointment felt by these Right-leaning followers.

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Figure 7 Post from October 30 2020



Let 🙌 them 🙌 know 🙌 Get the sweatshirt at the link in bior or betches.co/speakin2
 @betches_sup @shopbetches
 20% of election merch (ex. tax/shipping) is donated to the ACLU's Voting Rights Project which is waging battles against voter suppression this election as we speak.
 35.3k likes ; 526 comments

Women worth listening to don't have to demand to be heard.	359
Yeah let's glorify a woman who threw people in jail, for doing things she does regularly. She needs to free all the people she wrongfully imprisoned.	285
Since when did your account become political ? We came here for jokes not political jargon. Shut up becky.	279
Speaking lies!! Trump/Pence 2020!!! U S U S U S	262
You can't create your own facts, Kamala.	217

Figure 7 presents us with an example of the posts made by Betches during this election as well as an example of the kind of backlash consistently present with these posts. First this post aligns with the empowerment discourse prevalent in popular feminism and neoliberal feminism as it celebrates a successful entrepreneurial woman standing up for herself. Kamala Harris is famously quoted for this moment during the Vice-Presidential debate where Mike Pence interrupts her and she simply


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states, “I’m speaking.” This post perfectly encapsulates choice feminism or popular feminism discussed by Perry and Banet-Weiser, respectively. In choosing to purchase the sweatshirt shown, the buyer is agreeing that women standing up for themselves is something that should be celebrated. Betches is offering a product for sale, a sweatshirt with a slogan, but they are also selling this specific version of female empowerment. Harris has risen through the ranks of politics alongside her male counterparts within the system that marginalizes most people like her, not only women, but Black women and women of South Asian descent in America. She is paving the way for women like her to follow her footsteps. The sentiment of this post, a powerful entrepreneurial woman claiming her space on this stage, is empowering and empowerment sells. But the post does nothing more. The aim of this post isn’t to empower marginalized women and girls to stand their ground and speak their mind. The post is about selling a sweatshirt. You get a little extra feel good because 20% of proceeds are going to the ACLU’s Voting Rights Project. For \$50 USD you too can wear this sweatshirt and feel empowered. Betches is showing women their empowerment can be bought and sold, empowerment is something that can be worn and taken off at the end of the day. It doesn’t speak to any of the reasons why a woman may need to stand her ground, it doesn’t stop men from interrupting her, and it doesn’t speak to any of the political values or initiatives of Kamala Harris. We don’t learn anything about the candidate other than she is a woman in a male dominated field being interrupted by a man. Users are left to educate themselves on the platform and to make their own judgement calls. If that user were to go to the comment section to find more information, they would be inundated with Trump support and angry commenters who expected Betches to stay in their lane. This would deter some users, but for others it could be just the push they need to support Trump.

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The caption urges users to purchase the sweatshirt with a portion of the proceeds going towards the ACLU’s Voting Rights Project. That gesture is meant to suggest that Betches has a vested interest in supporting voter rights and they believe their audience does too. For the most part, the audience agrees: with over 35 thousand likes and almost 700 comments, this post does well for Betches in the race to please the algorithm and show up on followers and prospective followers’ news feeds. However, when we look at the top five comments on this post, we are faced with nothing but backlash. Figure 8 shows the top five comments and their like counts. This shift from supportive comments to negative comments begged the question: are these computers or real users making these comments⁸. Usernames have been left out because analyzing the users was not a part of this project. Noting the shift in narrative in the comment section, users were checked to see if they were from real or fake accounts. For this post, all five comments were linked to verifiable accounts.

Figure 8 *Comments from posts on October 30, 2020*

Women worth listening to don’t have to demand to be heard.	359
Yeah let’s glorify a woman who threw people in jail, for doing things she does regularly.	285
She needs to free all the people she wrongfully imprisoned.	
Since when did your account become political ? We came here for jokes not political jargon.	279
Shut up becky.	
Speaking lies!! Trump/Pence 2020!!! 	262
You can’t create your own facts, Kamala.	217

The comment section provides a cross section of the backlash these posts attracted. The first and most liked comment attempts to discredit Harris and women by stating “women worth listening to don’t have to demand to be heard.” This suggests that Harris and other women are not worthy of being heard because they have nothing of value to say. This is reflective of the kind of

⁸ It is estimated that 95 million Instagram accounts are automated
<https://www.theinformation.com/articles/instagrams-growing-bot-problem>

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popular misogyny discussed by Banet-Weiser (2018) and Dingnam and Rohlinger (2019) that is characteristic of the alt-right and Trump supporters’ participation on social media. The comment separates women into two categories: those worth listening to and those demanding to be heard. It does not qualify what a woman worth listening to is, rather it suggests in a straightforwardly misogynistic way that Harris is not a woman worth listening to. Commentors like this have found community and support in the anonymity of the online world. This is, in fact, a mild example of what has been said to others online.⁹ Other defaming comments in this section include calling Kamala a liar and suggesting she creates her own facts. The rhetoric of falsifying facts and lying is a staple of Trump support online (Dingnam and Rohlinger, 2019; Greene, 2019). Interestingly, the second comment critiquing Harris could be read as one from a leftist reader as it critiques her history as prosecutor and calls for freeing of those wrongfully imprisoned under Harris. This comment is one of the few times we see a push back against the reproduction of the neoliberal entrepreneurial woman that isn’t directly linked to Trump support. This commentor is not defaming Harris from a misogynist perspective but rather is concerned with the racist carceral system which disproportionally imprisons Black people and other people of colour. Calling for Harris to free those imprisoned could align with Betches’ discourses surrounding white supremacy and structural racism present in their Save 2020 video series. Instead, the comment just receives the second most likes on this post and Betches ignores that critique in favour of posting their content that does not question the status quo.

Betches content only attracted this kind of misogynist commentary when they posted about Kamala Harris. Any other content that featured a woman as empowered or autonomous did not receive this sort of backlash. It was the opposite of what we saw in Figures 5 and 6 where

⁹ Gamergate is a prime example of the violent online attack and their real life consequences.

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commentors agreed with the content, added to the joke, shared their experiences, etc. Commentors are not original when it comes to their critiques of Harris. Comments on the previous Kamala Harris post selling the mug emblazoned with her followed a similar pattern: calling Harris a liar, suggesting she’s saying nothing of value and calling her integrity into question. The disconnect between the responses to posts with Harris encouraging empowerment and generic posts encouraging empowerment cannot be overlooked. Harris’ posts attracting pro-Trump comments and misogynist sentiments is not accidental. The alt-right is built on a virulently white supremacist platform. Harris represents not only empowered women but empowered women of colour who present the ultimate threat to the white nationalist machoism of the alt-right. Posting Harris-related content is nevertheless beneficial to Betches as it appeases the non-Trump supporting part of their following. The backlash on these posts did not deter Betches from continuing to post content supporting Harris and the Democratic party and anti-Trump content. This move suggests that Betches audience is comprised more of Democratic supporters than Trump supporters. This also means that they are catering to a wide breadth of perspectives and opinions on what issues women should be concerned with. Posting about Harris assuages the audience of white women that is striving to not look racist while simultaneously not wanting to rock the boat. Content with Harris and content about white supremacy and electoral history discusses enough about the intricacies of race in America to satiate the progressive left but does not leak into their generic content enough to upset the rest of their viewers.

Another repeated narrative in the comment section of election and political content is that Betches is posting content that their viewership is not looking for, or that Betches is incapable of reporting on. This trend is most prevalent in the comment section of their video series “Save 2020.” Commentors consistently called on Betches to stay in their lane with comments like “don’t get

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your news from meme accounts” and calling out the content for being biased or part of a leftist agenda. These comments did not deter them from posting pro-Democrat opinions. Ignoring the “haters” by continuing to post this content is exemplary of Betches embodying the empowered woman described by their “I’m Speaking” mug or sweatshirt. Betches stands their ground in their support for the Democratic party and pushes their perspectives. At the same time, their more generic content works to not completely alienate their Trump supporting, right-leaning following by using images of predominately white, heteronormative women and couples.

Four of the nine videos of the “Save 2020” series are included in the data. These videos cover: the two-party system, gerrymandering, white supremacy, and voter suppression. These topics all relate to the election at hand and the intention of the videos is to drum up support for the Democratic party candidates and illuminate the ways in which the electoral system in the US is inequitable. This video content is the longest posted by Betches, averaging 4 minutes per video. They are rapid-fire, infographic-heavy videos made by hired content creators. The videos are, significantly, the only content in the data that provides insight into the social political perspectives of Betches. This content leans left, attempts to be anti-racist by illuminating structural racism within the electoral process, and proves to be controversial to Betches’ audience. Electoral-centred content is the only place in the data where we experience dissenting opinions and backlash. Political opinions can alienate parts of their audience, as proven by comments calling for Betches to not divide the country with their leftist agenda. This “leftist agenda,” as it is called, is the bare minimum of anti-racist work Betches could be doing. They are calling out systemic and institutional racism that exists in the United States and elsewhere. While the videos are speaking directly to these issues, they all end with a call to register to vote. Not necessarily to vote for a particular party or opinion but just to vote. This suggests that Betches knows this content will have

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both support and dissent but regardless they want viewers to get the message that they must get out and vote. It is also important to note that the creators featured in these segments are from marginalized identities. These creators include Black women, Latinx woman and a white gay man. The labour of teaching these subjects has been left to those most marginalized by the systemic issues being discussed, effectively reproducing the white hierarchy which they are attempting to critique.

Figure 9 provides screenshots of the first frame of these videos and their subjects. The subject heading for each video is hyperlinked to their respective posts on Betches’ instagram.

Figure 9 *Save 2020 Video Series*



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The videos provide insight into the social and political causes the women of Betches care about. The ideal woman of Betches is normalized through representation as white, cisgender, heterosexual, and employed. Popular feminism cares about women uplifting women; it's concerned with confidence and empowerment. Neoliberal feminism privileges women who find success working with the system, not against it. Women who reproduce the status quo and encourage others to do the same. Betches has shown us examples of both, however in this content we begin to see Betches building its sociopolitical persona. We already know that they are supporting the Democratic candidate in this election from their posts about Kamala Harris' performance in the VP debate and the multiple pieces of pro-Harris products they have on sale celebrating this. These videos consistently portray the Republicans as the party that is on the wrong side of issues like gerrymandering, white supremacy, and voter suppression. For example, in the two-party system video, the narrator cites the shift of long time white southern democrats to the Republican party after signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and their support of abortion laws as examples of the increased polarization between the two parties. The gerrymandering video cites a 2014 Pennsylvania election to prove the consequences. In this election 44% of voters chose Democrats for the legislature but, because of the district splitting, 13 out of 18 districts are represented by Republicans. Additionally, 40% of Ohio voters voted Democratic for the House of Representatives but 12 out of 16 of their districts are represented by Republicans meaning Republicans won a majority. In combination with the other posts about the election, this framing of the Republican party as the beneficiaries of oppressive systems shows that Betches supports the Democratic party, and that a Betch is a Democrat. Presenting themselves as a democratic supporting brand, Betches alienates users that do not agree with this perspective. Doing this is a choice made by Betches to make themselves marketable to a specific demographic and attract their

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desired audience. Betches doesn't care if Trump supporters are upset about their Kamala Harris mug.

The other two videos on white supremacy and voter suppression do not hierarchize one party over another. The white supremacy video covers police brutality, far right terrorism, and white privilege. The white supremacy video samples Trump asking the Proud Boys to “stand back and stand by” as an example of how it is difficult to fight white supremacy in the US when a white supremacist like Trump is in the White House. This is also the only video narrated by a white person. Having a white narrator of this video suggests that Betches believes that a white man is the best person to speak on white supremacy. It can be argued that those who benefit the most from white supremacy shouldn't be the ones teaching about it, but as this is a predominately white space it makes sense that this narrator would be chosen to encourage users to engage with the content. This is exemplary of how Betches is capitalizing on a moment where awareness about structural and institutional racism is popular and widely accepted by their following. This does not make the popular feminism that fuels Betches more progressive nor does it suggest the end to a neoliberal feminism that encourages women to succeed only within the system. This content aligns with Perry's (2018) notion that “neoliberal capitalism loves to absorb and co-opt ‘difference.’ It feeds on novelty in the form of a particular transgression, if said novelty submits to overarching market logics. New products sell. They don't disrupt the market” (p.111). Betches is using these discourses of awareness about systemic racism, white privilege, police brutality, etc. not so that they can help to change any of this but because the market finds these discourses to be of value now. You can purchase a shirt from their shop emblazoned with “pro-woman, pro-science, pro-democracy, pro-equality” but their content reflects a narrow definition of woman, no representation or discourses surrounding the social model of disability, and very little

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representation for the marginalized groups that these videos are suggesting Betches cares about. Including this representation and discourse would push Betches into a more progressive space by including a large sector of the population and taking into consideration some of their concerns and imposed limitations.

These videos and other content like them which align Betches to a sociopolitical cause or perspective illustrate the paradox of popular feminism where not everything is good but not everything is bad. Roxanne Gay (2014) speaks to this paradox in her collection of essays “Bad Feminism.” In discussing her life, books she’s read, loves lost, and scrabble games won, Gay describes her own feminism. A feminism in which she can both love the colour pink, being soft and vulnerable and have “strong opinions about misogyny, institutional sexism that constantly places women at a disadvantage, inequity in pay, the cult of beauty and thinness, the repeated attacks on reproductive freedom, violence against women and on and on” (p.317). Betches finds themselves in a similar space. Their content complains about work and believes women should be running the world. They love the colour pink and they are beginning to show an interest in understanding the systemic inequities in our world. Unfortunately, that interest will only go as far as it is valuable to the neoliberal capitalism complex in which Betches is an active participant. This kind of individuation of feminist identity supported by Betches and Gay appears progressive on the surface. A deeper look provides insight into how this choice feminism, popular feminism, or bad feminism, does the work of reproducing the individualized neoliberal subject rather than encouraging a progressive, community centred individual. The comment section on other generic content which centers the career woman of neoliberal feminism or experiences in heterosexual relationships garners community building vis a vis users tagging friends. This community building isn’t based on community love but rather the relatable and presumed-to-be universal experience

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of being a heterosexual woman in 2020. These posts don't encourage sisterhood, they centre the individual experience of women as a singular universal group, one that reinforces whiteness and heterosexuality as default.

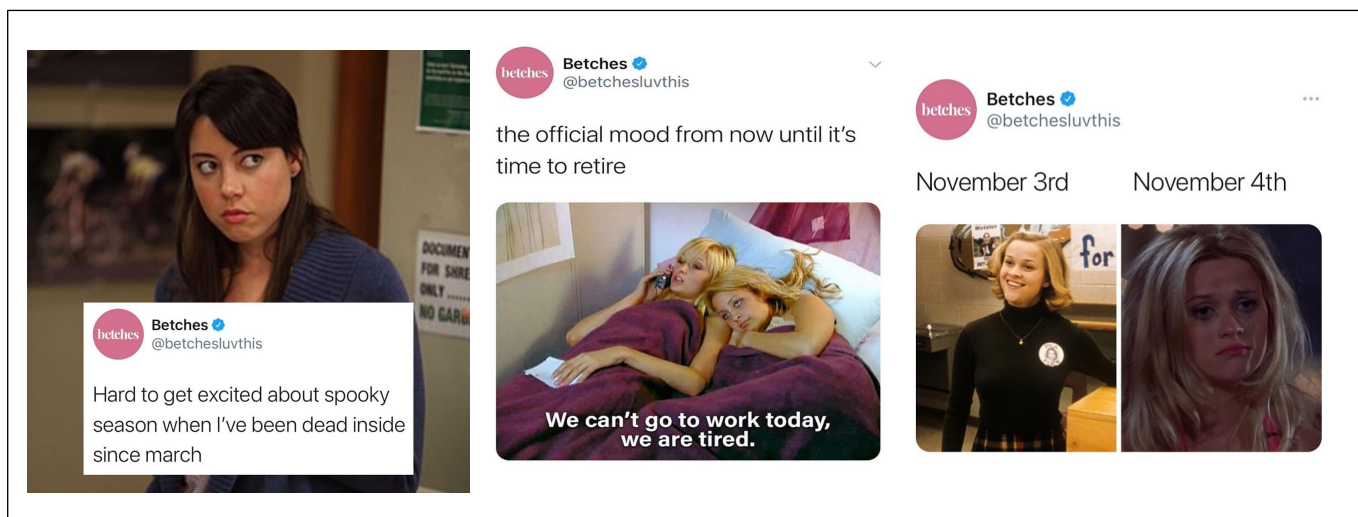
The top five comments on all these videos were negative. The comments ranged from telling followers to not get their information from meme accounts to the same misogyny towards Harris we have seen previously, to support for Trump. These negative comment sections juxtaposed with positive like counts suggests that commentors like this do not make up the majority of Betches following. Most people liked the content without leaving commentary. This means that this content is still valuable to Betches despite the negative comments that came through. Betches, after all, had an overall positive response to their election content. While Trump supporters and Betches doubters abounded in the comment section, Betches supporters stood by and continued to engage with the content in positive ways.

Filling out our image of what a Betch is, we can confidently say that she is Democratic and likely caught up on the news of the day. She understands concepts like “systemic racism” and “white privilege”, but these terms don't reach into her work or social life, they are sequestered to the realm of buzzwords that populate political ideologies and perspectives. This disconnect firmly places Betches in the category of a popular feminism that is trying hard but just missing the mark. There is a missing link in this version of feminism where capitalist interests supersede sociopolitical change. Where you can wear a shirt that screams “pro-equality” while you are participating in the system that maintains the inequality you are preaching against. Betches ostensibly doesn't see or doesn't care about this missing link.

Betches’ Brand of Feminism

At the outset of my research, I thought of Betches as a funny blog that I was able to relate to on many levels. While they do not claim feminist as an identity on their about page, I have always considered Betches to be feminist leaning because it centres the experiences of women. They post about issues affecting women both from a political perspective and in their own funny, not-too-serious manner. By digging deeper into Betches, I wanted to understand precisely what feminisms were reflected through the posts and their interactions on Betches’ Instagram page. My research has uncovered an obvious slant to Betches that I was oblivious to prior to analyzing the data: Betches is almost exclusively for and about white women.

Figure 10 *Examples of Centring White Women on Betches*



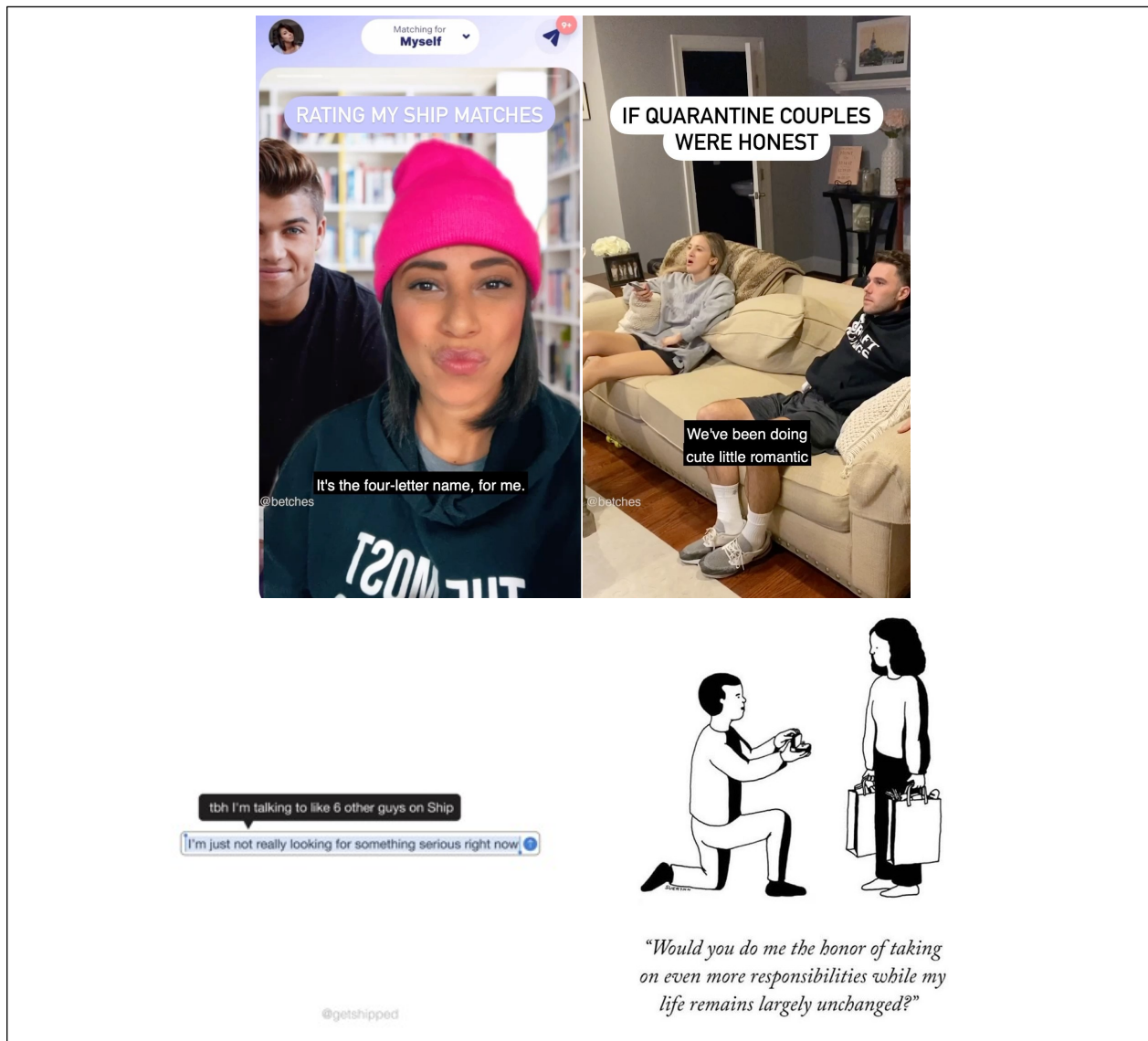
But what does the fact that Betches is predominately white have to do with the feminisms their posts may reflect? It means that Betches is making the same mistake we’ve seen made through neoliberal feminisms and the popular feminism described by Banet-Weiser (2018), which is ignoring the ways in which the structural social, political, and economic inequalities of our world impact the lived experiences of everyone in our world. Betches does not wholly ignore issues that

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affect marginalized women, however, as evident in the data collected, they only consider them in the context of the election or while they are “trending.” There is not a single post that considers women of varying abilities or transwomen. There is no imagery or discussion of queer relationships. Heterosexuality is invariably the assumed sexuality in their Instagram posts about relationships and dating. There is one content creator that identifies as gay through their own content, but this is never mentioned in the content they make for Betches. All the women presented are straight-sized. The only presentation of a plus-sized woman is a male comedian in drag. A lack of depictions of women that are not thin effectively erases fat women from the narrative Betches is presenting. This is counter to the claim on their about page which states that they are a site for and about all women. Betches misses the mark when it comes to including the critiques of structural inequality prevalent in other feminisms throughout their posts. This kind of critical thinking is saved for discussions of an explicitly political matter.

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Figure 11 *Examples of Heteronormativity on Betches*



As discussed in the above two sections and evidenced by Figures 10 and 11, Betches speaks to a very narrow definition of woman. Included in this definition is a woman who participates in the work force. Betches does not post about inequality in the workforce or labour rights. They post about the experiences of working during a global pandemic. Betches seems to be unaware of any other labour issues during the pandemic outside of being annoyed by Zoom meetings and constant emails. Making these complaints attracts followers that relate to these complaints, turning Betches

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into an echo chamber where middle class workers can empathize with each other without consideration of the experience of others not so privileged. The content creators of Betches had jobs that they were able to maintain during the various lockdowns and work-from-home orders. Their content reflects this experience, and the responses suggest that many of their followers can relate as they are comprised of users tagging friends to share the post. Content discussing this experience shared a common theme of relief from work. This content uses humour to deal with the exhausting experience of living and working through the pandemic.

Figure 12 *Examples of the attitude surrounding work on Betches*



Betches took up little to no social justice issues in their posts. The “Save 2020” video series picked up issues like systemic racism and white supremacy but these concepts and discourses did not appear throughout the data. Betches does, however, celebrate the successes of women throughout the data, and especially Kamala Harris’ historic election to the office of Vice President. Combined with the fact that Betches posts content that is white, cisgender, and heterosexual, the feminism reflected by Betches is a popular feminism. It is commodifiable, brandable, and palatable. The feminism of Betches knows that systemic racism exists, they know that political participation is important, and they support a women’s right to choose. My analysis suggests that Betches supports women’s rights and understands the importance of naming systemic racism but cherry-picks issues

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as they are relevant in the moment and does not carry these concepts through their other posts. In other words, if it has to do with social justice, intersecting oppressions, or women’s rights, it is relegated to Betches’ political partner site Betches Sup. The remainder of the data provides funny content that is relatable if you’re employed, white, heterosexual and cisgender.

Betches is an example of popular feminism and does very little in the way of pushing popular feminism towards a more critical and nuanced understanding of the world in which we live. Betches has reproduced the white, cisgender, heterosexual feminism that is commodifiable in the neoliberal capitalist context in which it exists as described by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018). Just as the Women’s Marches and hashtags of popular feminism rose and fell with their popularity, so too do discussions of race, class, and gender on Betches. These important facets of the human experience were only ever considered in the context of the 2020 Presidential Election and barely crossed over into the other posts. Betches mobilizes these power critiques to virtue signal for their followers when it becomes cool and trendy to support Black Lives Matter and to understand that white supremacy is alive and well in American politics. Despite some negative comments, this content performs just as well as other more generic content, which encourages Betches to maintain this rhetoric of caring about issues of race, class, and gender but only in their content relating to politics. Discussions of these power dynamics are relegated to political content only because they are too complicated to explain in the kind of explanatory journalism used by Betches. Additionally, including these critiques of power dynamics in their more generic content could have an adverse effect on their number of followers and the traction and exposure these posts gain on Instagram. As I discuss below, the “Save 2020” videos were able to show how “the complex social inequalities fostered by intersecting systems of power are fundamentally unjust, shaping knowledge projects and/or political engagements that uphold or contest the status quo” (Collins, 2015, p. 14). This

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intersectional lens was notably missing for almost all other content. For this reason, I have not qualified Betches as intersectional, but I am calling this “intersectionality-lite”. This watered-down version of intersectionality uses critiques about the axis of power only when they serve the purpose of gaining more visibility on Instagram. While these videos gained negative attention in the comment section, they gained a positive response from their high like counts. Similar to how neoliberalism was critiqued by Eschele and Maiguscha (2018) for co-opting feminist perspectives to forward neoliberal policies, Betches has co-opted intersectional critiques that appeal to their narrow base but doesn’t thread these critiques through the remainder of their content. It is hard to interpret this as anything other than an effort to not alienate their base.

Two posts that stand out for their intersectional threads are one post which calls out Columbus for being a genocidal maniac and another that reminds readers of “appropriate” Halloween costumes. In fact, one of the only notable instances of an intersectional perspective outside of the context of the elections was a passing commentary on what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable Halloween costumes. The post about Halloween costumes requires knowledge of the reckoning around the politics of Halloween costumes that has become increasingly mainstream over the last few years, where we have seen a number of critiques of costumes that are culturally insensitive, especially for white people to wear, because they reproduce harmful racist stereotypes¹⁰. Examples of such costumes would be wearing Black face, wearing a traditional Indigenous piece as a costume, or dressing as a “Mexican”, to name only a few. Neither of these posts take up a theoretical analysis of the power relations at play when a nation celebrates Columbus Day or a group of white girls dresses up as Pocahontas, but instead uses humour to

¹⁰ CBC News, “What we know about Justin Trudeau’s blackface photos—and what happens next?”
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-votes-2019-trudeau-blackface-brownface-cbc-explains-1.5290664>

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remind their audience to not white-wash Columbus Day or wear racist costumes. The top five comments on these posts were also positive and accepting. Many were tagging friends to bring their attention to the post which suggests that readers enjoy and agree with the post. These two posts are examples of how intersectional thought aligns with Betches’ image of the anti-nice girl. The anti-nice girl espoused by Betches doesn’t wear a Halloween costume that appropriates any culture, and she cares about the historical context of these white men we so readily celebrate. The posts use humour to illuminate some small ways we can integrate anti-racism and intersectionality into our everyday lives without naming either concept.

Figure 13 *Example of Intersectional Thought on Betches*



The comments on other posts I’ve coded as intersectional were not as positive. The “Save 2020” video series had the same sort of negative comments as the top five comments on all three posts that were gathered. These negative comments were predominately “Trump 2020” while others

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were longer critiques of the video content. Posts critiquing the content claimed the information was false or fake, and questioned the intelligence and very purpose of Betches. This negative backlash is exemplary of the kind of policing felt by Adia as cited in Savolenian et. al (2020). Adia created an Instagram satirizing white women’s feminism which she then removed because of negative responses from her friends (Savolenian et al, 2020). Unlike Adia’s case, the effect this negative backlash had on Betches was not necessarily condemning. In fact, none of the negative backlash that they received resulted in them removing these posts. Much of the backlash on Betches page was found in political posts and was predominately support for Trump. This suggests two things. First, that Trump supporters show up in droves to combat even a whisper of anti-Trump rhetoric. Second, that consumers of Betches expect funny, relatable content about being a woman in America and for some, this political content did not align with the content they expected from Betches. From calling for Betches to be funny and stay out of politics and telling other users not to get news from meme pages, these users are upset that a site they related to, that they saw themselves in, is posting content they do not agree with. Betches does have a separate political account. This account has around 460,000 followers in comparison to the over seven million that follow Betches main account, which is a substantial difference in following. Political content on Betches main page receives backlash that attempts to police what Betches, as an Instagram account, should be. These comments call for the company to ‘stay in their lane’ and only post funny content and encourages them to not post anti-Trump rhetoric. The backlash isn’t enough to keep Betches from posting the content. It is possible that the backlash on these posts is exemplary not of the response from Betches’ audience but instead a feature of far right trolls becoming bolder, more numerous and more active in general online (McIlwain 2020, Stern, 2019). Flooding Betches posts with “Trump 2020” and brashly questioning the intelligence of candidates and Betches gives

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the impression that there is more popular support for Trump than there was. Despite the backlash, Betches carries on knowing only this kind of content attracts the negative responses and continues to appeal to their base of white straight women through their more generic everyday content.

Conclusion

I set out on this research hoping to find a new iteration of popular feminism that pushed the boundaries of commodifiable feminism. I instead found a reiteration of popular feminism that serves to centre the experiences of white women and does nothing meaningful in the way of building power across diverse coalitions. Bringing together not only those pushing for “women’s issues” but bringing together the anti-capitalists, anti-black activists and environmentalists as called for by Arruzza et al. (2019). Betches is a cookie cutter of popular feminism, not the inclusive, anti-racist, different world-building feminism I was hoping to find.

Drawing this conclusion from the data caused me to reflect on my role as a researcher and feminist scholar. I asked myself how can I miss the overwhelming whiteness of Betches before I spent months of my life reading and analyzing the same 110 posts. However, the answer to my question was in the question itself. I have researched Betches’ posts as a cohesive collection rather than in a passing scroll as everyday users do which illuminates the whiteness of Betches. Discourses that considered the complex contours of the power relations of race and gender appeared only in a political context and were presented as learning opportunities for the audience: a lens which suggests that the intended audience has not lived a life acutely attuned to the realities of our systemically racist world. I was left with questions about what can be done and if social media still had the potential for good I believed it had when I set out on this project.

Betches can do better and still maintain a large following. Avoiding threading these “political” critiques that take into consideration the lived experiences of those other than white

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people erases people of colour, Black people, Indigenous people, Asian americans, disabled people, and more from their narrative and their brand. Betches aims to represent “women” as a universal group but only posts content catered toward this singular narrow definition. Betches, and other social media conglomerates, need to make a concerted effort to pass the mic to the voices and perspectives that they are categorically silencing. This means including the content of these creators not only when it is politically relevant or trending. Marginalized voices are only further marginalized when they are used only in instances that benefit these companies. There are plenty of Black, POC and other content creators on these platforms that make content which is funny and relatable. Alientating the heteronormative definition of women represented by Betches is not the be all and end all of Betches. They can still relate to the white hetero twenty-something while also producing content that includes all other definitions of women. They may begin to lose their politically right leaning base and for an American company that may mean a large amount of followers. But with social media’s global reach, followers from varying backgrounds, abilities and walks of life would increase, likely even more than the loss of followers this brand shift would cause. It is imperative that we amplify the voices of those least represented and not just when there is a new oppressive bill being introduced or the most racist president in US history is up for re-election.

Betches and all social media users must also consider the algorithm when creating and posting content. The algorithm is owned by Meta and is constantly edited by their engineers. This means that there is an inherent biases in these humans and the motivation of capital gains heavily influences the algorithm and what does and does not gain traction on social media sites. It makes sense that Betches would post about intersectional issues when they are trending on news outlets and other media because it is an opportunity for them to make more money by increasing the

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interactions on their site. The algorithm encourages this kind of manual filtering and is one of the biggest hurdles in the way of making more inclusive and representative content. This does not mean that it is impossible. As discussed above, investing in the creators that already exist and are already making this kind of content is the first step forward. The algorithm will ultimately “follow the money” and boost posts that are gaining attention even if they are not espousing the rhetoric of the dominant ruling class. I would find this content if I looked beyond Betches. It exists. It just doesn’t have over seven million followers and fifty-two billion impressions. They are not as popular.

Future research in this area should expand its reach. Researching posts that are tagged with #feminism may show a very different picture of what the popular feminist discourses on Instagram really are. Limiting myself to one account limited my ability to offer an account of feminism on Instagram as a whole. Betches is also a brand interested in making money and staying in business. This fuels much of what they post online. The filtering done by Betches to curate their identity on Instagram is done to maximize profitability. While my research considered the massive influence of the neoliberal capitalist complex, a more nuanced understanding of business on Instagram would have provided an added layer of analysis to my data. Additionally, as a white woman I am limited in my ability to critique whiteness as I am not the victim of it. More understanding of whiteness on Instagram, especially from the perspective of Black users, would offer a deeper understanding of the impact of whiteness in this space.

While Betches did not prove to be the feminist powerhouse I was looking to find, it was still a space worth researching. Instagram, and social media writ large, is increasingly a space where life happens. Intersectional thought did not drive Betches, but it did inform some posts. Betches can use humour to convey a complex understanding of race and power relations. However,

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Betches can also push this further. There are ten posts in which the speakers are visible minorities, and the rest are white women. None of the women represented are presented as queer or varyingly abled. Betches can produce a four-minute video on white supremacy and systemic racism in the US, which tells us that they recognize the relationship between race, gender, and power, but these conversations are relegated to the rarefied category of political content. Rarely does this recognition appear in the everyday funny content of Betches. While scrolling my Instagram feed, Betches appears just as another female-oriented page that provided me with content that usually made me laugh and occasionally reflects some of the political and social causes I care about. Betches is a manifestation of popular feminism that shows some potential for pushing the definition of popular feminism to include a critique of the structural inequalities. As engaged readers, we should push harder for feminist media that threads these critiques through not only their political content but also their more “relatable” everyday humorous content.

Appendices

[Appendix A](#)

[Appendix B](#)

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