

## Feminism rebranded: women's magazines online and 'the return of the F-word'

### *Feminismo rebranded: revistas femeninas en línea y 'el retorno de la palabra con F'*

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#### ABSTRACT

In recent years feminism has gained spectacular levels of visibility, notably among young women and in the media, especially online. This article makes a novel contribution to a growing discussion about 'the new cultural life of feminism' (Diffractions, 2016), and in particular the 'mediated feminist landscape' (Banet-Weiser, 2015) and its 'new luminosity in popular culture' (Gill, 2016) by bringing to the conversation the voices of those very individuals doing the mediating, providing such luminosity. Drawing on 68 in-depth interviews with the producers of women's online magazines from the UK and from Spain, we examine the range of ways in which these professionals define and dis/identify with feminism, as well as explain, applaud or critique the emergence of a 'new feminism' promoted by their publications. In general terms, the analysis shows that the talk of women's magazine producers constitutes a heterogeneous discursive terrain filled with ambivalence and ideological dilemmas. Additionally we show how the recent interest in feminism by these media is deeply but not only ideological, necessarily but not simply commercially-driven, and involved in simultaneous practices of de-stigmatising as well as depoliticising the movement. We suggest that in its transition into popular media feminism is 'rebranded' in such a way that both opens up and closes down possibilities, in a contradictory dynamic of regulation and adaptation that is characteristic of 'cool capitalism' (McGuigan, 2009).

#### KEY WORDS

Feminism, women's magazines, Internet, digital journalism, postfeminism, neoliberalism

#### RESUMEN

En los últimos años el feminismo ha adquirido niveles espectaculares de visibilidad, notablemente entre las mujeres jóvenes y en los medios, especialmente en línea. Este artículo aporta una contribución novedosa a una discusión creciente sobre 'la nueva vida cultural del feminismo' (Diffracciones, 2016), y en particular el 'paisaje feminista mediado' (Banet-Weiser, 2015) y su 'nueva luminosidad en la cultura popular' (Gill, 2016) al traer a la conversación las voces de aquellos mismos individuos que hacen la mediación, que proporcionan tal luminosidad. Basándonos en 68 entrevistas en profundidad con los productores de revistas en línea para mujeres del Reino Unido y de España, examinamos la variedad de formas en que estos profesionales definen y se des/identifican con el feminismo, así como explican, encomiendan o critican el surgimiento de un 'nuevo feminismo' promovido por sus publicaciones. En términos generales, el análisis muestra que el relato de las productoras de revistas femeninas constituye un terreno discursivo heterogéneo lleno de ambivalencia y dilemas ideológicos. Además, mostramos cómo el interés reciente en el feminismo por estos medios es profundamente pero no solo ideológico, está necesariamente pero no simplemente impulsado comercialmente, e involucrado en prácticas simultáneas de desestigmatización y despolitización del movimiento. Sugerimos que en su transición a los medios populares el feminismo es sometido a un 'rebranding' de manera que tanto abre como cierra posibilidades, en una contradictoria dinámica de regulación y adaptación que es característica del 'capitalismo cool' (McGuigan, 2009).

#### PALABRAS CLAVE

Feminismo, revistas femeninas, Internet, periodismo digital, posfeminismo, neoliberalismo

## 1. INTRODUCTION: 'THE RETURN OF THE F-WORD'

In recent years feminism has gained spectacular levels of visibility and even apparent approbation, with a diversity of voices and initiatives proliferating across social spheres. This includes civil society and institutional politics but also the corporate world and the global marketplace, as well as, and with particular intensity, the terrain of digital, celebrity and popular media cultures. What is more, as Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer (2017: 884) put it: "we now are living in a moment when feminism has undeniably *become* popular culture". "Everywhere you turn, there is an expression of feminism – on a T-shirt, in a movie, in the lyrics of a pop song, in an inspirational Instagram post, in an acceptance speech", Banet-Weiser (2018) additionally observes.

Such 'new cultural life of feminism' (*Diffractions*, 2016), especially its "new luminosity in popular culture" and among young women (Gill, 2016: 614), together with the "perplexing new trend" of widespread public—and often widely publicized—feminist self-identifications (Farris and Rottenberg, 2017: 5), has rapidly become the object of much feminist attention, generating empirical research and vibrant debate (see also the special issue edited by Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2017). For some the "emergent feminisms" "complicate" postfeminist media culture and hence the modes of feminist analysis (Keller and Ryan, 2018). In contrast others demonstrate how postfeminism, a gendered neoliberal sensibility, "informs even those media productions that ostensibly celebrate the new feminism" (Gill, 2016: 610). Also, as Farris and Rottenberg (2017: 8) note, various analyses underscore "the *righting* of feminism" —or its *neoliberalization*—which "has become a global phenomenon", even as they insist on the particularity and contingency of the context in which this righting occurs.

The present article makes a novel contribution to these discussions not only by focusing on one cultural site notably involved in the articulation and dissemination of the popular or 'new feminism'—young women's magazines—but by bringing to the conversation the voices of those very individuals doing the mediating, creating the luminosity. How do they relate to feminism? How do they *define* feminism? What brought about the take-up of feminism by women's magazines, and how is this negotiated with issues relating to genre conventions and commercial demands? How do local versus transnational sensibilities and dynamics come into play in this process? These are some of the questions we address in this article by drawing on almost seventy in-depth interviews with the producers of women's online magazines from the UK and from Spain.

## 2. FEMINISM, WOMEN'S MAGAZINES AND THE INTERNET

You've read the papers, you've seen the news; Feminism is back!  
—*FemaleFirst.co.uk*, 2015

After a long period of widespread repudiation and postfeminist stranglehold, albeit with different levels of visibility and engagement, many countries in the West and beyond have in the last few years witnessed a resurgence of interest in feminism (McRobbie, 2015). This involves a diverse and often opposing array of modalities of

thought and action, ranging from the high-profile (and high-profit) interventions of 'stadium feminists' (Gill *et al.*, 2016) from the corporate world, such as Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg with her 2013 "sort of feminist manifesto", to grassroots campaigning against welfare cuts by young women using creative forms of political intervention, such as Sisters Uncut, a British direct action group founded in 2014. Whilst high-powered bestselling authors tell women to 'internalize the revolution', with incitements to 'lean in' to their individual careers and close the '(leadership) ambition gap' (Sandberg, 2013), and to 'stand tall' and defy the 'confidence gap' (Kay and Shipman, 2014), low budget initiatives like the Everyday Sexism Project catalogue instances of sexism shared by users worldwide with the aim of "showing the world that sexism does exist, it is faced by women everyday and it is a valid problem to discuss" (<http://everydaysexism.com/>).

To be sure, one notable constant in this otherwise heterogeneous terrain of voices purposes and acts is the use of digital technologies and Web 2.0 spaces. Moreover, the Internet is considered as a defining element of what for some evidences a fourth wave of feminism (Cochrane, 2013). As Ealasaid Munro (2013: 24) observes, it "works both as a forum for discussion and as a route for activism" at national and international levels. This may span from the sustained effort of one individual to record and commemorate on a blog women killed through male violence in the UK (see <https://kareningalasmith.com/>) to global viral campaigns counting the engagement of famous figures and much media attention, such as #MeToo, which appeared in 2017 to raise awareness about the pervasiveness of sexual assault and harassment (for a critical reflexion on this 'movement', see Sarah Banet-Weiser, 2018). The Internet, Munro (2013: 23) also emphasises, has been used to create a 'call-out culture', "in which sexism or misogyny can be 'called out' and challenged [...] insofar as they appear in everyday rhetoric, advertising, film, television and literature, the media, and so on". One notable example in the British scenario is *The Vagenda* blog, namely: "a big 'we call bullshit' on the mainstream women's press". Indeed, the web is additionally used to *produce* media, especially by younger women – as evidenced by the number of feminist bloggers and, increasingly, YouTubers (for a study of girl feminist bloggers, see Keller, 2015).

Also key in making the "return of the F-word" ([Glamour.com](http://Glamour.com)) take a transnational and youthful dimension has been popular media and celebrity culture. An important moment in this sense was the performance at the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards by pop star Beyoncé to extracts of author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TEDx speech 'We should all be feminists' against an enormous neon sign reading: FEMINIST. That same year, young actress Emma Watson took the UN as a platform to tell men that 'gender equality is your issue too', launching the HeForShe global campaign. Soon after the question 'are you a feminist?' became a familiar part of media interviews to female—and increasingly male—'A-list stars', with negative answers almost guaranteed a critical headline. Thus, in sharp contrast to the notions of 'pastness' and redundancy, the othering, repudiation and at times hostility of postfeminist media culture (Gill, 2007), in the 2010s feminism has arisen as a 'trending topic', a 'cool', youthful, stylish, fashionable and decidedly desirable, even compulsory, self-identification: 'The New Do: Calling Yourself a Feminist', announced in an emblematic iteration of this the popular publication *Glamour US*.

Certainly, against widespread prognostications the Internet has not entailed the demise of young women's magazines. Despite the current ample possibilities for content creation and dissemination, along with the ongoing proliferation of new media forms, these commercial publications are still an inescapable feature of the cultural landscape of normative femininity. While print circulation is in the main declining, in line with the publishing industry generally and consumer magazines in particular, an online model is catapulting the reach of brands, especially those targeting younger generations. A case in point is *Cosmopolitan*, which is the highest circulating young women's glossy in the UK, reaching "1 in 4 millennials"<sup>1</sup>. Compare its 2017 combined print and digital monthly circulation of 351,338 to the more than 8 million unique users its website was engaging, with the *Hearst* title celebrating an additional "over 4.8 million obsessed social media (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, Twitter) followers" (see García-Favaro, 2016, for a critical study of these models of reader interaction).

Women's (magazine) media, then, is remarkably resilient. It has maintained high levels of popularity across time and space, in spite of significant economic and industry challenges—not least the 2008 financial crisis and the 'digital revolution'—and in the face of ongoing critique. Most notably, feminists have often understood women's magazines as a key cultural site for the re/production of normative, limited and limiting gender and sexual identities and relations (e.g. Ferguson, 1983; Ballaster *et al.*, 1991; Gill, 2007). Studies have repeatedly problematized the glossy magazine figuration of 'woman' as almost exclusively white, abled-bodied, middle-class and heterosexual; or the centrality of the fashion-and-beauty complex (McRobbie, 2009), and the constant promotion of 'commodified desire' (McCracken, 1993) and 'consumer femininity' (Talbot, 2010). This feminist scholarly work is marked by a concern about stubborn textual continuities, whose core ideological elements have been shown to endure *despite* claims to change. For instance, the 'revolutionary' seemingly feminist-inspired emphasis upon sex brought about by the reinvented *Cosmopolitan (US)* of the mid-60s ultimately meant yet more personal work and consumption for women (Winship, 1987). Building on this, there is now an expectation (in these media, and beyond) for women to achieve—and sustain—the 'mastery of (hetero)sex' (Cacchioni, 2007) adopting, in a distinctive neoliberal manner, an entrepreneurial approach (Harvey and Gill, 2011). A contradictory postfeminist ideal, the interpellated feminine subject must uphold discourses of 'pleasing oneself', freedom, self-determination, 'taking control' and empowerment (Gill and Donaghue, 2013) at the same time as she prioritises men's wishes and whilst modelling the self according to pornographic and other sex industry aesthetics and practices (García-Favaro, 2015). Another example of continuity despite claims to change can be observed in the positive, affirmative messages that have been increasingly targeting women, epitomised by the now omnipresent call to 'love your body'. Although at first glance offering women a sharp and very welcome contrast to the familiar messages of inadequacy and lack, feminist scholars have shown how these 'confidence' texts ultimately often re/produce—indeed *necessitate*—the very 'body hate' discourses, the micro-scrutiny and shaming of female bodies, purportedly under challenge (Murphy, 2013; Gill and Elias, 2014). Elsewhere we have analysed this 'cult(ure)

1) <http://www.hearst.co.uk/brands/cosmopolitan>

of confidence' (Gill and Orgad, 2016) or 'confidence chic'<sup>2</sup> (Favaro, 2017a) as a complex gendered technology that brings into existence new neoliberal subject(ivities) and that is, at the same time, connected to feminist ideas and proliferating engagements. The *Glamour.es* article 'Beautiful Big Bloggers' offers one illustration of this, describing the cultural landscape in 2014 as follows: "As advertising takes new benchmarks of beauty, campaigns for the self-esteem of women proliferate or feminism becomes cool, size diversity moves onto the blogosphere".

Since the early-to-mid 2010s, in many contexts including the UK and (slightly later) Spain, women's magazines have begun to claim to offer their young readers a 'Body Revolution' (*Glamour Spain*), a 'confidence revolution' (*Cosmopolitan UK*), as well as a—refreshed and rebranded—feminist one. Their printed and particularly digital pages often feature conversations and topics relating to feminism, especially in the form of celebrity-oriented texts, e.g. 'Beyoncé talks about marriage, fame and feminism' (*Glamour.es*), and of commodity publicisation, such as *Cosmopolitan.com*'s call to 'Level Up: 10 Products Every Feminist Needs', with *Sofeminine.co.uk* even speaking about 'Wearable Feminism'. One can also find news coverage such as the 2017 article '#MeToo: Women Around The World Are Sharing Stories Of Sexual Harassment' by *Elleuk.com*, as well as, occasionally, the promotion of feminist texts. One example comes from *Cosmopolitan.com/uk*: '40 empowering feminist books every twenty-something woman should read'. Increasingly there are even calls to action or resistance, for instance the article '8 answers to shut a chauvinist up. Do not stay silent' on the *Cosmopolitan Spain* website. Publications also organise events, launch campaigns and even annual special 'Feminism' issues in the case of *Elle UK*, following its 2013 Rebranding Feminism project, which aimed to "re-brand a term that many feel has become burdened with complications and negativity"<sup>3</sup>. This publication has self-proclaimed as a "game changer with regard to bringing the new feminism to young women"<sup>4</sup>, epitomising the rupture in young women's magazines after more than a decade of "self-definition as decisively post-feminist" (McRobbie, 2009: 5). It is precisely this recent—and decisive—moment of change that we aim to better understand by examining the explanations, opinions and experiences of industry insiders.

### 3. RESEARCH PROJECT, METHOD AND DATA

This article is part of a larger research project concerned to examine the representations of gender, sex, sexuality and intimate relations in young women's magazines, as well as changes and challenges brought about by the Internet, which includes a newly interactive and connected readership (Favaro, 2017b). In the context of a resurgence of interest in feminist ideas and engagement, the study also aimed to ascertain the ways in which these publications relate to—and reconfigure—feminism. These topics were explored with regard to the different dimensions of text, use and production, as well as issues to do with transnational flows and the significance of cultural context. As such the study took as its focus two countries, Spain and the UK, and young women's magazines *online*: the local web extensions of the well-established global brands *Cosmopolitan*,

2) This phrase points to the gendered, classed and commercial nature of the phenomenon under study, as well as its entrenchment within economies of visibility, especially those associated with digital media cultures (Banet-Weiser 2013).

3) From: <http://www.elleuk.com/fashion/celebrity-style/articles/a2322/elle-rebrands-feminism/>

4) From: <http://empowering.hearst.co.uk/be-inspired/inspiring-interviews/editors-interview-lorraine-candy-elle/>

*Elle* and *Glamour*; the sites by the successful digital media group Aufeminin, *SoFeminine.co.uk* and *EnFemenino.com*; and other popular online-only publications, *FemaleFirst.co.uk* and *TheDebrief.co.uk* in the UK, and *Grazia.es* and *Nosotras.com* in Spain. The research adopted a multi-methods approach, and collected a large body of different data: interviews with producers, editorial articles, user-generated content, in addition to other supplementary material such as magazine public communications, archived print copies and news reports on the sector.

Whilst informed by an ongoing review of the editorial content about feminism, the analysis presented here centres on the 68 interviews conducted by the first author between December 2014 and December 2015 with a range of women's magazine professionals, mostly editors and writers, who worked (or had worked) for at least one of the selected publications. Participants were predominantly female (62), all white and (seemingly) belonging to the national dominant ethnicity, with the exception of a Latin American woman in Spain. Apart from some very senior professionals, the research participants largely coincided with the target audience in age. This was most certainly the case in the UK, where the majority of the sample lies within the mid-20s to early 30s range. In the Spanish sample there is a slightly older and wider age spread, with the greater numbers falling within the late 20s to early 40s range. Almost every single participant had a first degree, many also postgraduate qualifications, and the majority were based in the capital cities of London and Madrid. Two were email interviews, and the rest took place via Skype (32), in cafés (27), on the phone (4), at the participants' office (2) and home (1). These in-depth semi-structured interviews lasted just over one hour on average in duration, were digitally audio-recorded with permission and later transcribed.

In this article we examine part of the conversations related to the interview guide section 'magazines and feminism', which typically began with the question: 'What would you say is the relationship between women's magazines and feminism (today)?' Interview transcripts were analysed with the aid of NVivo software and drawing on the method of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), which facilitated an exploration of the patterning of different constructions of feminism and interviewees' relationship to it.

When presenting interview extracts, only those details that do not compromise the anonymity of research participants are included. Illustrations from the Spanish data are the first author's translation. Underlining is used to indicate a significant emphasis in speech.

#### **4. ANALYSIS: FEMINISM AND/IN WOMEN'S MAGAZINES**

The following analysis is divided into two main parts, each in turn sub-divided into two sections. We begin by exploring the range of ways women's magazine producers dis/identified themselves and the(ir) publication with feminism, dividing the discussion into UK and Spain-specific subsections due to significant cultural contrasts. The second section turns to the terrain of 'the new', paying particular attention to the UK data since it was in this context where at the time of fieldwork feminism was more visibly 'having

a moment' (Valenti, 2014). First we examine claims about a "new wave of women's journalism" connected to a "cultural shift"; and then look at how the 'new feminism' was defined, endorsed, as well as critiqued.

#### 4.1. DIS/IDENTIFYING WITH FEMINISM

##### 4.1.1. *Feminist identifications in the UK*

Dramatically reversing a well-documented feature of postfeminism—namely the repudiation of a feminist identity (Scharff, 2012)—in the UK most research participants defined themselves as well as other women's magazine producers as "utterly 100% feminists". Indeed, there was a general tendency to portray female journalists or media professionals as particularly inclined to uphold such an identity, through the use of extreme case formulations emphasising 'everyone', 'all of us' and so on. For instance:

All of us would call ourselves feminist, especially women in magazines. We all work in the media, we're all very current, modern, informed, intelligent people so for us feminism is like a given. (Digital health editor, late 20s, UK)

This open self-identification with feminism by journalists was often framed as a distinctively new or contemporary phenomenon: "everyone would readily identify themselves as feminists now", said a young writer. In fact, some declared to have learned about feminism through their recent work: "I probably only understand that now because I've been working in women's magazines [...] That's been one of the biggest focuses of recent times." More recurrent, however, were accounts about the previous impossibility of claiming this identity and of covering feminist issues. For example:

Do you know what most of the journalists you're working with, female journalists, are? Not only feminists, but really strong feminists. They get frustrated about some of the content that they have to produce [...] and want to push feminist issues and have always wanted to, but it was seen as quite unfashionable until recently. (Features editor, mid-20s, UK)

As well as perhaps predictable expressions of admiration for public figures like Emma Watson, there were a number of endorsements of specific feminist authors. Two examples are: "I've read *Full Frontal Feminism* by Jessica Valenti, and I really, really like her" and "I agree with everything Naomi Wolf said about the beauty in *The Beauty Myth*". One news editor even spoke of entering the industry *because of her feminism*, on the basis of a conviction that: "The best way to change women's magazines is to work within them". She recalled:

I had a media studies teacher in 6th form who gave us a lot of critical theory and told us how to apply theory [...] from that I learned the very, very basic feminist theory, like Laura Mulvey [...] and from that I thought, "okay, the only way to change it is to work within". (News editor, late 20s, UK)

Certainly, several British participants were familiar with the feminist literature on gender and the media, and a number had even conducted critical analyses of women's magazines during their undergraduate studies. One example is:

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I used to hate *Cosmo*, because despite their kind of aspirational tone, it always felt that their message was more “you can be better by being thinner” or “you can be better by learning how to please your man”. I did a lot of studying on this at university for my dissertation. (Staff writer, mid-20s, UK)

By far the most recurrent response to the question about magazines' relationship to feminism was one of wholehearted enthusiasm. As one staff writer expressed it in an email: “We're all in the same boat – we're all feminists”. High modality claims suffused the UK interview data on this topic, expressing the obviousness and ubiquity of feminism in magazines, for example: “There is, obviously, a sense of feminism in all women's lifestyle magazines, of course”; and: “There is a huge sense of feminism in every women's lifestyle magazine”.

However, quite often these declarations were not followed by any specification about the *nature* or *content* or *politics* of such feminism. When asked to specify how feminism is understood within publications, participants explained that magazines work to “inspire” and “champion other women”. Another prevalent claim was: “We're celebrating women”. “They view it as empowering for women, helping women to become stronger”, a staff writer also clarified. Similarly, many declared: “They're feminist in terms of they're supporting women”. Further ‘emptying’ the concept, one features writer responded: “The idea is that feminism should not be derogatory to women”.

Repeatedly singled out in these discussions about an intrinsic link between feminism and women's magazines was the significance of the publication *Cosmopolitan*. “We're a feminist magazine”, its members of staff affirmed. Even those working for other publications explained how: “That is part of their brand DNA from Helen Gurley Brown and *Sex and the Single Girl* onwards. They were part of that history, particularly in America, of empowerment and emancipation”. Gurley Brown was described as a “feminist icon” and “very pioneering, especially when it came to sex and relationships”. At *Cosmopolitan* it was highlighted that: “We've always campaigned for women's rights and always campaigned to make women feel that they should put themselves first and that a man is never more important than they are”. Rather, an “it's always about doing it for yourself” rationality was presented as key to the “undercurrent of female empowerment” in this publication (and in women's magazines generally). One senior *Cosmopolitan* professional emphasised:

We have campaigned for the rights of rape victims. We've campaigned for equal pay. We've done lots of work with domestic violence, charities. We have got a day of remembrance for victims of honour killings. We have done lots of work to try and battle the whole issues of eating disorders. There are so many campaigns that this magazine has done for the last 43 years.

Some interviewees felt aggrieved that the feminist stance of their magazine was not appreciated: “*Cosmo* has always been a feminist magazine and a lot of people really underestimate it as a feminist magazine”. With regard to women's magazines more broadly, it was argued that: “It's frustrating when people always hold us up as prime examples of people who are failing feminism. It's upsetting, because it's like actually the work we do, how we work is feminist”. This *Glamour* professional additionally highlighted: “actually those voices are within our magazines”.



We have a lot of feminist voices who write in women's magazines, so someone like Zoe Williams in the *Guardian* writes a lot of features for *Glamour*. We have contributions from people like Caitlin Moran and Laurie Penny... someone like Victoria Coren has a column in *Elle*. So actually those voices are within our magazines. We tackle a lot of feminist issues. *Grazia* have their 'pay gap' campaign. We've got the 'sexism in sport' campaign. We write about sexual assault, attitudes in universities. And, also, a women's magazine office is one of the most feminist places you could possibly work. I'm surrounded by women, I have creative control or financial control or business control. It is really empowering! I sometimes think, "oh, I don't know if I could work with lots of men again". A women's magazine is a really empowering place to work.

In sum, there was a broad consensus among British producers that women's magazines are feminist spaces. In fact, only on three occasions across the interview data from the UK did a participant reject such an understanding, pointing to their commercial nature or simply to the fact that they are 'pro women' rather than feminist.

I wouldn't say that any women's magazine is a feminist publication because you can't be a feminist publication if you have higher priorities than feminism, and every magazine does. Their priorities are selling copies and getting money from advertisers. (Content director, late 30s, UK)

This type of distancing of women's magazines from feminism, whether underpinned by feminist critique or postfeminist repudiation, was considerably more recurrent in the talk of the Spanish journalists.

#### 4.1.2. *Dis/identifying with feminism: Spain*

As discussed above, the interviews with British producers are notable for establishing a general consensus regarding the magazine-feminism relation, summarised by a staff writer as follows: "How we work, what write about, who we get to write for us... We are all feminists". Contrastingly, the data from Spain constitutes a divided discursive landscape. Here participants tended to either articulate more forthright postfeminist logics than in the UK or, alternatively, more politicised understandings of feminism, which meant that they did not consider the magazines they wrote for as feminist. We will look at each of these broad themes in turn.

In what might almost be considered 'textbook postfeminism', many Spanish journalists put forward the idea that "Feminism had its *raison d'être*, but it no longer has it". The discourse of 'pastness' was often accompanied by what Elisabeth Kelan (2009) calls 'gender fatigue'. As critics of postfeminism have shown, these discourses serve not only to 'undo' feminism (McRobbie, 2009) but also to render present gender inequalities unspeakable (Gill, 2011). The following evinces such ideological work. In a context where women have been most affected by the economic crisis and recession and earn significantly less than men, for a number of women's magazine producers it nevertheless feels "antiquated to talk now about the equality of women at work". According to another writer: "There is no need to be defending constantly the value of women". A number of participants asserted that feminism not only "sounds old", but is also "a total drag" and "a topic that bores me to death". There are industry insiders, then, who reject feminism and its integration within women's magazines. Note in the first quote below the reduction of feminism to a "cliché", and the unashamed declaration "I can't be bothered" (with it) in the second:

I would get rid of all those clichés and simply value women and that's that. Be proud of women, love women, love everything that surrounds the feminine, and work toward that. I think that's more than enough. (Freelance writer, late 20s, Spain)

For me, feminism as such, I can't be bothered. If you talk to me about 'neofeminism' maybe it attracts me a bit more but not even. I think we should find another, more interesting, term because to me that one sounds out-dated (Ex-managing director, late 30s, Spain)

Although less common, another repudiatory move in the Spanish interviews—absent in the UK data—concerns the depiction of feminism as *equivalent to machismo*. For example:

I don't believe in feminist or machist. It's in the very word. I've often talked about this with friends, colleagues. If you are machist it has a negative connotation. Meanwhile 'feminist' appears to even have a positive one. Why? It's the same thing. (Freelance writer, late 20s, Spain)

Whether rooted in 'genuine' ignorance or anti-feminist strategising, it is striking how these ideas are expressed without any hesitation or even the need for any sort of disclaimer. This indicates the existence of a broader socio-cultural context that sanctions such ideas/narratives, as implied by her mention of discussions with "friends, colleagues". Not all her colleagues agree, however, and for many the situation was framed not in terms of feminism's redundancy, but rather the impossibility of the magazines embracing feminism enough. Epitomising the level of disparity in the Spanish interview data, one writer even spoke of resigning her job upon encountering feminism in a class on gender and the media during her journalism undergraduate degree. This interview made a fascinating (and for us heartening) case for the potentials of (feminist) education. She explained:

I had always defended the equality between men and women. Like in general terms, equal pay. But I had believed the tale that everything has been achieved. For me, to join that class means... what they say about putting on the violet glasses. To begin to see, and say, "my God, I was so deluded, I can't believe it". [...] It's very easy to defend equality. It's very easy to establish, "look, in this business a man earns more than a woman", and to say, "this is wrong". It is much more complicated to ascertain structural violence, the 'micromachismos', those small gestures, those small actions disseminated precisely by women's magazines and which contribute to the persistence of this whole system. The moment I join this class I begin to see all these things, and I begin to additionally see that the place where I work is a reproducer of all this, is a machine of this system. (Ex-staff writer, early 20s, Spain)

Although unique in her eloquent account, and speedy decision to quit her job, which is particularly noteworthy in the challenging Spanish labour market, this writer was not alone in her problematisation of women's magazines, nor yet in her decision therefore to leave the sector.

In Spain, many producers maintained that there exists a "huge gap between feminism and women's magazines", to the extent that some were left "speechless" by the interview question:

Laura: What would you say is the relationship between women's magazines and feminism?

Ex-editor: You leave me speechless. All women's magazines should be feminist. That's not actually the case. We are very far from feminism. (Ex-web editor, late 30s, Spain)

Another experienced former industry insider went as far as to describe the feminism-women's magazines relation as one of antagonism. She explained:

They are antagonistic, even enemies. There is a bad relationship that should be revised, related to those formulas that have worked for years based on distancing models of femininity from reality. The use of Photoshop, the trivialisation of women as frenzied consumers or as objects of consumption... (Ex-deputy editor, mid-40s, Spain)

Laura's question also met indications of the difference between feminism and femininity: "What is the relationship...? I could say that, well, small steps are taken. But feminine is not the same as feminist, not at all". Many asked back: "What do you understand by 'feminism'?" Some participants observed that their publications were not seeking a feminist identity. One writer explained: "There may be more feminist information, there may indeed be clearly feminist people in the team, but on the whole there is no attempt to identify the magazine with feminism". Others did note a feminist self-identification on behalf of their publication, only to then distance themselves from it. For example: "I consider myself a feminist and I think that my magazine identifies as feminist, though I don't know if from my own feminism I can consider it as such". In this spirit, many were critical of the engagements with feminism on behalf of the magazines they work for, which were perceived as hypocritical or empty of any real—political—commitment. Two vivid examples are:

On International Women's Day we all raise our fists, do actions, and give away a wristband, but in actual practice patterns continue to be repeated that aren't feminist whatsoever. (Fashion and lifestyle editor, mid-20s, Spain)

The day of domestic violence you become the most feminist of all, you write lots of articles, throw around thousands of statistics, you wear your pink ribbon, but then in the day to day you don't try to liberate women, not at all. (Online editor, late 20s, Spain)

When Laura told Spanish journalists that those working for the very same brands in the UK *did* define the(ir) magazines as feminist, they were often surprised. Many asked back: "What do they see as 'feminism'?" A few proceeded to make comments along the lines of: "If feminism is simply advocating for women, then us too". Others followed with a more critical note, such as: "You may think that it's a bit feminist to talk openly about sex. For me dealing with these issues would entail, yeah, sexual liberation, but also the liberation of women in society and work". Here, then, 'liberation' is used again in the Spanish data, conjuring the more politicised or radical forms of feminism, and a term that in the UK material is either absent or associated with feminist positions that are rejected or positioned as obsolete (see below). Some Spanish producers, therefore, contested the approach to feminism in British publications:

I don't know what magazines you have analysed in the UK, but *Grazia* or *Glamour UK* advocate for feminism quite a lot... they also advocate for the false feminism. Like showing Cara Delevingne and Rihanna, all super feminist. Beyoncé also, raised fist. I don't think they really are, actually. (Fashion and lifestyle editor, mid-20s, Spain)

In direct contrast, others expressed admiration toward the ways in which magazines relate to feminism in other countries, being particularly aware of publications in the US and the UK. Speaking about latter, one editor-in-chief narrated: "The hashtag was ElleFeminism, with Lorraine Candy who is the editor-in-chief. They even made a t-shirt by Whistles which was 'This is what a feminist looks like'. That, in Spain, *forget about it*" [English in original]. Venturing into something like *Elle UK's* Rebranding Feminism project was perceived as too risky commercially due to the characteristics of the Spanish market. For example, one editor-in-chief who admired such initiatives highlighted that British publications work within "a more powerful market where they could afford losing an advertiser". More generally, this impossibility was explained in terms of "We are a different society, with different customs". Also, according to women's magazine producers, in comparison to the UK there is a strong tendency in Spain to "maintain the status quo", and: "Editorial departments are much more conservative in the sense that they do not want to get their hands dirty". Also highlighted was "self-censorship", both in terms of wanting to avoid "getting into trouble" with the editors/directors, and more generally in terms of "let's not get into a mess". This was often granted as "very contradictory" since producers themselves are interested in the very issues they are deciding not to cover. One example is the abortion law proposed by the conservative government (Partido Popular) in 2013:

When the issue about the abortion law came out there were many people who were truly indignant. I'm talking about directors, editors. And in the end nothing was done, because of that self-censorship, like an attempt not to commit oneself too much, politically. (Online beauty writer, mid-20s, Spain)

Another recurrent 'Spain is different' discursive strategy revolves around the ideas that "There is still such a retrograde mentality" and that "We are still a very machist country". Many followed by specifying: "Women themselves are the machist ones". In this sense, some of the interviewed journalists pointed to readers/consumers, while the more critical voices also highlighted that (some) industry insiders themselves also uphold sexist views and anti-feminist sentiments, as seen above.

In these discussions it was also argued that there exists a widespread incorrect understanding of feminism. For some magazine producers feminism is "wrongly understood" on the following basis: "The image that women have about a feminist woman is that of a feminazi, like the one from Podemos that said, "I'm an anarchist, dyke, lesbian and feminazi""<sup>5</sup>. Many others similarly expressed disapproval with the ways in which in Spain "it seems that to be feminist you have to burn your bra, and go against men" and "not shave". For these reasons, interviewees contended, to "self proclaim as a feminist is still hard", and it "could cause more rejection than interest". According to one very experienced writer who self-identified as feminist: "The previous

5) Podemos is a Spanish left-wing political party founded in the aftermath of the 15-M Movement.

feminism was a feminism of attack, of 'I am a feminist and so I attack men', and a bit like a tomboy, of a woman that imposes herself and is aggressive". Hence, often even those who apparently uphold a pro-feminist position not only leave uncontested but actually reinforce the negative connotations associated with non-normative femininities and with more radical political positions.

Regardless of personal stances on feminism, there was a general agreement across the Spanish data upon the following two evaluations of the state of affairs in this context: "Many women don't like the label 'feminist'" and "Feminism has turned almost into a scourge to avoid". When discussing engagements in other countries such as the UK, it was repeatedly argued that publications are "scared" or "won't dare" to identify—at least "so openly"—with feminism due to "the historic burden that the term has in Spain". The material is saturated with almost identical statement like: "The label 'feminist' has a very bad name in Spain"; and: "The term 'feminist' in Spain has a very bad reputation". It was equally claimed that feminism "has many negative connotations in our country", "gets a bad press", "is pejorative" and "much reviled". Nonetheless, many proceeded to point out shifting cultural perceptions: "There has been a period during which feminism has been reviled, and we are seeing a series of renowned women talking about it, and it is beginning to be perceived a little bit more positively". Also observed was the ensuing response by media and advertising targeting women: "Everybody has jumped on the bandwagon a bit, because ultimately it is a current topic that everybody is interested in". Nonetheless, an editor-in-chief explained, most Spanish publications are still "careful about the term 'feminist', being closer to the label of 'female empowerment'". One director similarly noted that many "adorn" the term: "'Chic feminism' or they talk about 'women's empowerment', or 'a new wave of feminism'... turn it around a bit because it was a pejorative term". Likewise, it was highlighted how "At *Elle* we usually talk about 'new feminism'".

## 4. 2. FEMINISM REBRANDED

The first part of the analysis has shown how many British participants established a longstanding—even intrinsic, in the case of *Cosmopolitan*—connection between women's magazines and feminism. In Spain, by contrast, feminism was understood in more radical, politicised terms, and this led magazine journalists there either to repudiate it as old-fashioned, tedious or unnecessary, or, conversely, to argue that it is too radical for the commercial spaces of women's magazines. As we saw at the end of the last section, to the extent that feminism is mentioned in Spain's magazine sector and may be becoming a 'buzzword', it must be hedged around with modifiers that name it 'new' or 'chic' feminism. In this second part we further probe this difference in the two national contexts, by seeking to interrogate two related questions: first, how it is that feminism has achieved such luminosity and popularity in the UK (and also in other parts of the Anglophone world); and secondly how feminism is understood – that is, what are the main ideas and values considered when women's magazines—or their writers or editors—express an embrace of feminism.

### 4.2.1. "Not a dirty word anymore": Understanding the cultural shift

A key theme in the interviews, particularly in the UK, was the idea that feminism is no longer a dirty word. As one interviewee put it: "Feminism is obviously finally coming to

full force". Repeatedly highlighted as key to "bringing feminism into the mainstream", both in the UK and in Spain, were popular culture figures, events and products from the US. Notable among these were Beyoncé and her MTV awards performance, Emma Watson and her UN talk, and Lena Dunham and her TV show *Girls*. British journalists also made references to national feminist activism, for example: "All these groups like No More Page 3 and Everyday Sexism"<sup>6</sup>. The publication of the 2011 book *How To Be a Woman* by British journalist Caitlin Moran was also repeatedly mentioned as a key event. According to a writer in her mid-twenties, Moran was able to: "Bring what used to be a very scary, I think for a lot of them [young women] it's still a very scary, inaccessible conversation into the mainstream and made it fun and silly and caring and welcoming, which is feminism". It was also explained how:

She had a massive Twitter following and then she launched that book, which is a sort of feminist manifesto/account of a life lived with feminism, and became a huge hit partly because she had such a massive online following already. There were other books and other people in that group and in the wake of that, but it felt like it was a cultural shift going on. (Content director, late 30s, UK)

The level of success of Moran's book meant that "You couldn't ignore that as a publication catering to young women", with many also noting: "if only for commercial reasons".

It's dragged public voices and publications into engaging with it [feminism], if only for commercial reasons. If only because they're like, "oh, here's this feminist who everyone's talking about and who everyone loves. She's selling loads of books. We need to channel that as well". (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

In this sense, it was often noted that, as an *Elle UK* insider put it: "Every decision has got something commercially minded behind it". Magazine producers likewise pointed to "what the media is about", namely: "It's always trying to do the new thing and be the first one to do it"; and: "The media by nature want to cover things that are current and up to date and the things that people are talking about". Thus, for many producers magazines have recently turned to feminism because: "Feminism and love your body and all that sort of stuff has become quite popular and trendy and of the moment".

Everybody's talking about feminism at the moment. It's on everybody's lips. It's the first question that celebrities get asked these days and it's just very of-the-moment. That's probably why I would consider it to be so hugely covered, because it's such a huge topic. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

Women's magazines also felt the need to deal with feminism "because of the pressure, because of the competition". One British writer explained: "When it's about women and it's for women and it concerns women it would be crazy for a women's print magazine not to pick that up, especially if they're hoping to keep up with their competitors and with online". With regard to the latter, it was highlighted that feminism "is online everywhere" and especially in "all the social media". Participants also emphasised how

<sup>6</sup>) No More Page 3 was a British feminist campaign that began in 2012 for daily tabloid newspaper the *Sun* to cease the practice of featuring photographs of young women posing topless on its third page, which ended after more than four decades in 2015.

with "social media and the Internet [...] things can gain ground a lot more quickly". This means that the editorial inclusion of feminism additionally emerges as a necessity or obligation so as to avoid the "PR disaster" that can follow from getting 'called out' on social networking sites:

Twitter... mainly Twitter, but all social media, is very female focused and it's mostly female users. If you piss off a huge chunk of Twitter users, they will let you know. That's a PR disaster. That influences a lot of what people are producing. (Features editor, mid-20s, UK)

A number of producers explicitly welcomed these user practices. For example, one British staff writer in her twenties celebrated: "They [women's magazines] are pretty much all outwardly feminist, or dealing with conversations about feminism, which I think is really cool. Because if they're not, then they get called out on it thanks to social media". In addition to magazines themselves, their 'commercial partners' are also very keen to avoid a PR disaster – as well as to appear to be 'with the times', and to benefit from shifting cultural sensibilities. One director explained: "Advertisers, they're in the same milieu as everyone else. They can see which way the wind is blowing. They know that it's important for them to be on this bandwagon". At present, a features editor explained, "buzzwords" like "female empowerment [...]" are fashionable, and the advertisers find [them] a turn on rather than a turn off". This then "legitimises" the content that "we always wanted to write". She emphasised: "It's not that there was suddenly more female writers wanting to write feminist stuff. They've always wanted to write feminist stuff and there's always been feminist writers working in mainstream media".

Several of the British interviewees were keen to distance themselves from the idea that magazines' contemporary embrace of feminism is purely a corporate manoeuvre, and sought to stress their own authentic interest in feminism: "Also, the content producers, they're young women as well or mid-30s/late 30s. These are the things that we're interested in as well". For a content director:

I think it would be too cynical to suggest that you've got glinty-eyed robots sitting in a room going, "oh, feminism, that's a thing. We're going to put that in magazines", without caring about it at all. Once you start drilling down into it, you get actually to a group of individuals and personalities in a room who are making these decisions. (Content director, late 30s, UK)

In the same vein, the idea for the *Elle UK* rebranding feminism project was explained as follows:

It wasn't like, "now we're going to do feminism". It was 4 or 5 people from the team sitting in the room talking about, "what could we do?" That was the idea that came up and the one that people responded to the most, but if that had happened on a different day, with different people in the room. Who knows?

On the whole, in explaining the 'turn to feminism', (principally British) producers painted a multi-causal picture, speaking of "a complete package" where everything is "going on at the same time. It's all bouncing off each other". But what does this 'new' or 'rebranded' feminism consist of or look like?

#### 4.2.2. "If you believe in equality... you are a feminist": Understanding the new rebranded feminism

We're on a mission to reclaim the word.  
—*Elle UK*, 2014

As we have already noted, in the UK women's magazines are on a "mission" to "reclaim the word" away from "complications and negativity" through a "re-brand" (*Elle UK*). As implied by the term 're-brand', and corroborating the concern of critical commentators (e.g. Kord 2013), much magazine content establishes feminism as a commodity – to the extent of becoming something to 'spice up' ones' week, as in the *SoFeminine.co.uk* article 'Monday To Friday Feminism: How To F Up Your Week':

In case you haven't noticed, the whole feminist movement is making a big comeback and that means it is time to clarify what being a feminist actually means, and how you can incorporate it into your daily routine... spice up your week with some feminism.

What feminism 'actually means', women's magazine producers explained in the interviews, is wanting the "equal treatment of men and women". There is great consensus among research participants on this designation, certainly in the UK, with the editorial texts presenting too a uniform discursive landscape. Also evident in the quotes that follow is the adamant emphasis upon the 'simplicity' or 'straightforwardness' of adopting a feminist identity:

If you believe in equality, man, woman, boy or girl – and it really is this simple – you are a feminist. (*Elleuk.com*)

Feminism is having a RISE, and it's crucial every woman knows what it is. Do you want equal treatment of men and women? Yes? Then you are a feminist, welcome along. (*Cosmopolitan.co.uk*)

Ultimately, feminism is about equality of the sexes, a cause we think everybody needs to get behind. (*SoFeminine.co.uk*)

One way of understanding these—and many other similar—characterisations of feminism is as a welcome attempt to *de-stigmatise* feminism and to create a popular majority supportive of the 'cause', albeit if understood in very narrow liberal terms. As Banet-Weiser (2015) writes: "The marketing, or commodifying, of feminism does allow feminism to circulate in culture in some ways, to be then taken up in different ways, with different goals". If nothing else, the mediated popular feminism of women's magazines offers "an opening of space and mind" (Banet-Weiser, 2015) to those young women consuming—and producing—the content. Yet, as Banet-Weiser (2015) also observes, "commodifying feminism is clearly a neutralization tactic". Besides, in much of the work and talk of women's magazine producers the endorsement of feminism goes hand in hand with a project of *disavowal and boundary-marking*. One example is when *SoFeminine.co.uk* explains to readers how with the "New Wave Feminist" the focus "is less on female liberation, and more on gender equality".



Moreover, it is also evident that this boundary-marking involves an effort to reconfigure feminism according to what have previously been understood as (depoliticising) postfeminist sensibilities (Gill, 2007, 2016). One British editor explained her magazine's effort as follows: "It's very much about re-branding the idea that feminism means equal rights for women. That's what it means. It doesn't mean I don't shave, it doesn't mean I hate men". Indeed, in keeping with postfeminism, the 'new feminism' of women's magazines revolves around an unabashed celebration of *normative femininity* and *loving* men. In outlining their 'rebranded feminism', magazine producers highlighted the allegedly new principle that "you can be feminist and love fashion with a passion and love beauty", "waxing and high heels", want to know "how to have good sex" and "to put on make up right". One *Cosmopolitan UK* professional likewise explained: "We're trying to say, 'look, you can be a bloody feminist and like wear shoes and care about makeup and want a boyfriend'". As in the editorial content, in the interview material the sentence 'you can do X and be a feminist' comes to constitute a sort of mantra and a catchall truism. It is used below to avoid coming to uncomfortable conclusions, stirred in the case below by a sound academic knowledge of feminist media studies. Namely, it serves as a strategy to manage an ideological dilemma (Kelan, 2009).

I fully appreciate that by writing about waxing and high heels you are perpetuating an image of what is feminine, and what is an ideal version of femininity, and what women should aspire to, and what men should want. I get it. But, that being said, there's more to it than that. I don't think that those things are mutually exclusive. You can wear high heels and be a feminist. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

The obsessive preoccupation to marry feminism with normative femininity is in part an attempt by women's magazines to make the former palatable to all those readers *and producers* deeply invested in the latter. One Spanish freelancer defensively expressed: "I can wear red lipstick and stilettos and be as feminist as everybody else", while a British features writer declared: "I'm a feminist, but I love fashion and I want to see it". This dynamic also pervades the editorial data. One first person account in *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* reads: "Yeah, I like makeup and fashion – but don't you dare tell me I'm not a feminist". A tone of defiance, then, pervades the data on this topic – it is as if magazine writers imagine they are having to fight against a censorious feminist who wants to take away all their nice clothes and pleasures and ban the colour pink. Yet this caricatured feminist seems largely a figment of imagination: there are few attempts to concretise this figure or to point to any real expressions of the kind that are invoked. What is also interesting here is how this 'indignation' or 'defiance' takes up all the discursive space/attention so that there is none to discuss *why* feminism may critique dominant understandings of femininity and heterosexuality, or to engage in the harder work that is thinking about structural forces rather than individual preferences.

By suturing a feminist identity with normative femininity the editorial team is also, crucially, able to meet the demands of their advertisers. See for instance the following conversation with an *Elle UK* professional:

Laura: How do advertisers feel about this turn to feminism or the embrace of feminism by women's magazines?

- *Elle UK* professional: I don't think it's caused any problems, is the quick answer, partly because of the way... We would never do it in a way that would cause... Obviously, it's very... If you asked the question, "is it okay to be a feminist and wear makeup?"; we're going to say, "yes, of course it is and here's some that you can buy".

One particularly vivid illustration is the way in which *Elle UK's* 2014 Feminism Issue, where Emma Watson was featured on the cover and described as "the fresh face of feminism", included a free sample of an eyeliner pen. One young journalist expressed a conflicted and ambivalent position regarding this editorial decision:

It comes back to what the editor was saying about you can still be interested in make up and fashion but be a feminist, which I think is probably slightly problematic because I think, like giving away one free, it's kind of pushed ... I don't know... I guess as well you could argue that [...] they're exposing a new generation or a new group of women who might not necessarily have bought the Feminism Issue, but because they bought it for the eyeliner, they've then read the magazine and then perhaps have had their views challenged. I'm not sure.

The more senior staff member from *Elle UK* quoted above on the issue of advertisers conveyed a concern about the ways in which through processes of mainstreaming and commercialisation feminism "is becoming a broader and broader church":

As people and brands want to be able to identify with feminism because it's a cool thing, they're having to marry that with views or standpoints which aren't particularly feminist. It's becoming a broader and broader church of "you can be feminist and like make-up and go on diets".

Against this critical stance, and particularly in the UK interviews, there was a strong investment in the premise that: "You can want to look a certain way, and that's your prerogative. In it being your prerogative, that is feminist". *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* equally exhorts its readers to: "reclaim what true feminism stands for – equal rights and freedom of choice". Likewise, one *Sofeminine.co.uk* and *Enfemenino.com* article on 'Modern feminism: Busting feminism myths' explains: "You can be sexy, as long as you are choosing to do it" [English version]. In this transnational text, readers are thus assured: "If you want to be a burlesque dancer, that's fine!" In an article titled 'Can fashion and feminism ever be friends?', *Sofeminine.co.uk* argues in the affirmative as follows: "freedom of expression, freedom of choice and celebrating femaleness is what feminism is all about".

To legitimise these claims, women's magazines draw on public figures and their popular texts. Often mentioned in Spain was Sheryl Sandberg. For example, here one senior journalist explained that in contrast to the "feminism of attack [...] the new feminism of *Elle* is more Sheryl Sandberg in *Lean In*". Also prominent in the UK is Polly Vernon, a British journalist who writes for women's magazines and published a book in 2015 titled *Hot Feminist*. Indeed, her tenets pervade the media under our analytic gaze, including battling the "feminist fatigue" that many women are supposedly suffering through rebranding feminism (Vernon, 2015a: 23). Vernon (2015a: 13) continues: "What kind of feminist does that make me? The shavey-leggy, fashion-fixated, wrinkle averse, weight-conscious kind of feminist. The kind who likes hot pink and boys; oh, I like boys! I like

boys so much". Again paralleling women's magazines, of central importance to Vernon (2015b) is identifying "how to be fancied", "actively pursuing sexiness", and uniting fashion and feminism. Her book also discusses women's apparent FFOGIW—"feminist fear of getting it wrong"—in the face of "Snarkers and Trashers" (Vernon 2015a: 206). Some participants agreed, finding FFOGIW "annoying":

Polly Vernon talks in *Hot Feminism* about the fear of getting it wrong and how it means people don't say stuff anymore because they're so... they don't voice opinions because they're so worried about getting it wrong. They just go mute. I do agree with that and that is annoying. (Freelance writer, mid-20s, UK)

In contrast, *Hot Feminist* offers, as the subtitle puts it: 'Modern Feminism With Style, Without Judgment'. Like Vernon, psychotherapist and campaigner Leyla Hussein writes for *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* about her 'struggles' with "women judging other women": "I'm sick and tired of being judged and not taken seriously based on my choice of outfits, lipstick and on what I do in my private time [...] I'm only practising my feminist values of having a choice'. 'Choice', then, becomes a value in and of itself and always already feminist when exercised by women.

For British magazine journalists, rather than "splitting apart and having your own camps", feminism should be "about everyone coming together and accepting and living and let live". Moreover, one editor from the UK declared: "If we're going to get more people on board then what we do is we have accept that feminism doesn't mean one--well feminism means one thing, but it doesn't exclude everything else. It's a very simple, basic idea". She elaborated as follows:

"Feminism should be about equality for the here and now, and the atmosphere we live in is that we like things and we like shopping and we like clothes. That's a product of our consumerist society but really that's a different issue".

Another issue that is supposedly unrelated to feminism is the beauty industry:

I understand the idea that what the beauty industry does, as in beauty brands, they kind of create problems and then create products to fix these problems. This is how businesses work. And it's a sad state of affairs but it's different to feminism. Feminism is about the equality of men and women and that's that. (Digital health editor, late 20s, UK)

One British writer equally critiqued "the people that really are like, 'I'm a feminist'" because they allegedly "use feminism as an umbrella term to rant about other things that they believe are issues. I believe feminism is a basic thing of equality, and it's a basic thing of support". Taking this process of depoliticisation even further, for some producers the new feminism: "It's a basic concept of just being nice and being accepting".

Accordingly, the 'feminist' subject interpellated by magazines is one who supports and accepts all women regardless of their thoughts and actions, consents to—indeed embraces—the status quo, and refrains from "ranting about other issues" like consumerist society/capitalism and the beauty industry; because feminism is about

equality 'in the here and now', 'and that's that'. As well as unrelated to feminism, to be critical of consumer culture was considered as actually *unfeminist*. No only does it allegedly demonstrate lack of acceptance, but it is seen as *disrespectful* toward and even "excluding" of those who "enjoy it". And for the producers of women's magazines: "Feminism shouldn't exclude anything or anybody". It should be non-excluding to the extent of becoming whatever each individual wants – a feMENism. To this point, *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* claims that feminism "should mean something different to every individual". In another piece, the publication reiterates this idea by quoting Caitlin Moran: "you can make it whatever you want. There are going to be 3.3 billion different kinds of feminist because there's 3.3 billion kinds of women". Note how it is simply inconceivable to hear such claims about any other social movement (anti-racist movement, labour movement – one definition per worker?).

By becoming a floating signifier, feminism is fragmented, individualised and emptied of shared meaning to the point of *unspeakability*: "It's just so hard to talk about it because everyone sees it in different ways", voiced a staff writer. Sexism too becomes something different to every individual – *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* calls it 'subjective sexism'. In one piece called 'Why is EVERYTHING sexist?' and subtitled 'It's time to calm down a bit'—speaking to the 'fatigue' that is so distinctive of the postfeminist sensibility—the magazine expounds: "Wolf whistling is a perfect example of this [...] for every woman who blusters with red hot rage when she is wolf whistled there is another who positively basks in it". Pointing to the apolitical character of the confidence market-movement discussed above, this *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* piece was written by the founder of the Self-Esteem Team, "which delivers lessons on mental health and body image in schools and colleges throughout the UK". More generally, these examples show how as feminist ideas receive more visibility and backing, social critique is again silenced – but, most perversely, this time *in the name of feminism* – i.e. the embrace of feminism, not its repudiation, is now central to this de-politicising project.

Contradicting the pervasive idea of 'one feminism per woman', magazines often offer typologies of feminists. Especially valued are types named by *Sofeminine.co.uk* as "The Fashion Feminist", "The Cute Feminist" and "The Stripping Feminist". Another notable obsession both in the Spanish and British publications pertains to "The Male Feminist" (again, because we feminists *love* men). Also particularly favoured by women's magazines is what *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* calls "The Sneaky Feminists", who "go about their daily business, quietly thinking women should be treated the same as men and [...] like wearing make-up and think men are brilliant, and weep at rom-coms". Although the "Second Wave Feminist" is now allegedly obsolete, *Sofeminine.co.uk* nonetheless tell readers that: "we have a lot to thank these ladies for". All in all, there is really one vilified 'type' – "The Angry Feminist", who according to *Cosmopolitan.co.uk* is "A bit like a misogynist":

These feminists want men and women to be equal. But confusingly, they want all women to be equal, too – i.e. exactly like them. If you buy the wrong kind of magazine, or love giving blow jobs, or feel fleetingly guilty when you eat some cake, then you are a Bad Feminist. Angry Feminists believe that unless you express your feminism in the same way that they do, then you're not a proper one and should shut up. A bit like a misogynist, in fact.

Pervading the data, then, is hostility toward feminist positions that involve a *substantial critique of the status quo*, namely radical (and socialist) feminism. In addition to its critique of consumer capitalism, heteronormativity and normative (youthful) femininity, this "more radical feminism" is additionally rejected on the basis of questioning the innate nature of the gender system. This was particularly evident in Spain, where one very experienced writer gave the following explanation:

There are two points of view with regard to feminism. One, which is the one I uphold and [magazine] also shares, which is about a feminism that you can live with in your epoch. Then the more radical feminism thinks that we are the same as men in everything. (Freelance writer, mid-40s, Spain)

In her view, women and men: "Deserve the same rights and the same opportunities. But we are not the same, we have our differences, and what is still missing nowadays is for those differences to be valued". This writer explained that what her magazine tries to do is: "Value and enhance femininity in women, because it is often restricted and inhibited". Women questioning the necessity of the gender system and of embodying normative femininity, then, would be a real threat to business – indeed it would question the very existence of women's magazines.

Several research participants articulated critical perspectives and counter-discourses concerning the 'new feminism'. References were made to "commercial bandwagon-hopping", "tokenism" and "just lip service" to feminism. For example:

From knowing what it's like working in the industry, part of me very much thinks how much of this is just lip service, unfortunately, from the big magazines. I'm still not convinced enough that they believe what they are saying, or that they are true to the cause. (Former writer, late 20s, UK)

One previous *Elle UK* professional was frustrated at how engaging with feminism has not entailed more of a broader "underlying current" in the magazine, and spoke about "a trend to make money", which will thus most likely be soon replaced by a newer one:

The fact that they had to make a big deal out of it one month of the year, it's like, why can't you just have an underlying current? I think they do, for the most part, but why can't you have more of a... of every issue being, have we got X amount of women of colour? Have we got X amount of LGBT? Have you got X amount of plus size or just different? That sort of thing. No, I think because it's a trend to make money, I think that it's like, "okay, we've done that. Now, what's next?"

This was endorsed by one Spanish online editor, who critically expressed: "Right now the relationship is one of use. For us feminism right now is a hashtag, a trending topic, nothing else. It's not a fight, it's not a right, it's nothing". In Spain in particular, journalists critically referred to a "feminism lite" or even a "false feminism". One male freelancer expressed: "I always see a sediment of the old and pestilent machismo in that 'new feminism'". An ex-writer at *Cosmopolitan Spain* spoke of a "make-up", or a makeover, "operation"<sup>7)</sup>:

7) The word the interviewee used in Spanish was '*maquillaje*', which means 'make-up' in the sense pertaining to facial cosmetics.

I don't think these magazines are increasingly more feminist. What I think is that there is an increasing make-up operation everywhere with respect to feminism, including the media. It's PC, it's cool, it's super, to say that you are a feminist, but in practice they're not. Because the very same magazine that tells you "you have to be very feminist and love yourself lots" instructs you on the best weight-loss diets or treatments to be perfect for a man. That is not feminism. That is make-up.

It is in part for this reason that she expressed an intention to never write for women's magazines again "unless I needed it to feed myself". Another Spanish journalist who had also left the industry due to her feminist critical views about it offered a more optimistic analysis. For her, although "all of this has a very important commercial aspect [...] it is also positive to clean a bit the image" of feminism. She additionally said that "even though I condemn that double morality in women's magazines [...] I do think it is an important step forward", as some years ago: "it was almost impossible to have this type of content, and particularly in a magazine that has so many followers and readers". In this spirit, one former *Cosmopolitan UK* writer concluded: "So, it's good to be critical, but not to condemn all the small advancements. Because step by step is how it's done". A number of her British counterparts agreed, including those with a background in "radical social justice" publishing:

It's brilliant that feminism is actually being talked about in these publications. It's not a dirty word anymore. It's a bit of a sort of a 'feminism 101'. It's for people that have grown up thinking that feminists are all hairy lesbians, so it's kind of easing people in a sort of way that might be less scary than being really full-on political. I did have a problem with that for a while, but I'm growing to understand that that's the way you have to do it. (Freelance writer, early 30s, UK)

Later in the interview she also noted: "there are still things that are a bit out-dated in it [website], but I do think it's moving in the right direction and that makes me really happy". In addition to narratives about positive change, another way of navigating the ideological dilemmas that emerge from holding critical views about these publications while working in the industry is through notions of 'making a difference'. Below we quote at some length the account given by a British senior professional as it offers one valuable insight into the dilemmas faced by feminist women in the sector, together with some sense of the quotidian within the offices of women's magazines.

- Participant: My editor, although very keen on feminism now, is not a feminist. [...] She's not educated in it. She hasn't done the reading on it. She likes it because we did an article about it and it was really successful, so she was like, "let's do more of that". It doesn't come from the point of principle. I've sat in meetings with her where she's said, "we should do a thing about how it's fine to shave your legs if you're a feminist". It makes me feel so uncomfortable. Not... I shave my legs. I'm not saying you can't be a feminist and shave your legs, but the point is that she doesn't understand why feminists might not shave their legs. She doesn't understand. She has not done the reading or the thinking about beauty norms, about... She imagines a woman saying, "shaving my legs makes me feel good". She's like, "that's cool. Makes her feel good. That's fine". It's like, "but why does it make you feel good? Why does she feel bad if she doesn't do it? Why does having hair on your leg or not make any difference to how you feel about yourself or your abilities or your place in

the world?" That's where feminism... It was not in, "I feel good so that's fine".

- Laura: How do you negotiate having these views and working in the industry?
- Participant: There's the practical fact that I need to earn money and this is what I'm experienced and perhaps talented at, so this is what I do. [...] Also, I suppose... It sounds a bit self-aggrandising, but I do feel like I can make a bit of a difference. For example, in that meeting about leg shaving, I said, "I don't think we should do that. I think we should do something else instead".

It is because of the everyday efforts of women such as the one quoted above that more politicised or at least profound discussions and concerns are entering the pages of women's magazines. One *FemaleFirst.co.uk* article celebrates how "feminist opinion and feminist activism is visible and vibrant throughout the country once again", and is accompanied by the cover of the 2015 book *Radical Feminism: Feminist Activism in Movement* by scholar and activist Finn Mackay. Increasingly resembling the level of attention given to feminism by their British counterparts, in 2016 the Spanish publications were producing content to serve as a "reminder of why it is indeed important to vindicate feminism". Reasons given by this *Glamour.es* piece include "denominations like 'feminazi'", "the rise of ultramachist movements" and: "Because the patriarchal system still prevails". Meanwhile *Grazia.es* publishes the work of young feminist writer Adriana Andolini, with her insightful critiques of issues such as fat-shaming, 'the orgasm gap', rape culture, heteronormativity, or 'emotional neoliberalism'; and in the UK the *TheDebrief.co.uk* publishes a long sanctioning report on Sisters Uncut (see above), concluding: "Activism is alive and well in 2016, more than this it's just as necessary as it ever was. We aren't there yet". In another piece the magazine even, without irony, pondered: "As feminism becomes a commodity, who benefits from it? And who loses out?"

## 5. CONCLUSION: REBRANDED AND FLEXIBLE FEMINISM

The new feminism is cool  
—*Glamour Spain*, 2014

Offering new insights into the 'new cultural life of feminism' (*Diffractions*, 2016), this article has reported on extensive fieldwork with young women's magazine producers. In particular, moving on from textual analyses of women's magazines, it has interrogated the ways in which the (mainly) young women who produce these media understand feminism at a time when it is widely understood—at least in the Anglophone context and increasingly in other contexts—as 'becoming popular' (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Drawing on 68 interviews with producers including freelance journalists and editorial staff in two countries, the UK and Spain, the paper has considered the different ways in which industry insiders identified or disidentified themselves and their publications with feminism, explanations for the embrace of a 'new feminism', and how this was defined, defended as well as critiqued. An attempt has also been made to consider changes as well as continuities, to attend to complexity and contradiction and to practice a 'solidary critique' (Favaro, 2017b), rooted in an understanding of the research

participants as simultaneously (re)producing, suffering and contesting sexist media. We have likewise aimed to offer an idea of the multifaceted, multi-causal and often ambiguous character of the (re-)turn to feminism by publications, and the specific form(s) that this takes.

The talk of women's magazine producers constitutes a heterogeneous discursive landscape in which longstanding passionate attachments to the genre and deep investments in its femininities tend to coexist with critical self-reflexivity, ambivalence and ideological dilemmas – often due to an awareness of, even agreement with, feminist perspectives about gender and sexual politics. There is, thus, a multiplicity of opinions within the offices of women's magazines, and this includes *critical* opinions. Many professionals actively work to effect change, having to negotiate opposition from other members of staff, particularly those in more senior positions. More significantly perhaps, all those involved in the production of these media face an important number of restrictions that complicate incorporating new representational practices or approaches, ranging from the very real and serious threat of 'upsetting' advertisers, the publishing house or readers, to the fast pace of the work online (Favaro, 2017c).

A significant difference emerged in the way that magazine staff (including freelancers) related to feminism in the UK and Spain. While the UK context was marked by an enthusiastic embrace of feminism amongst interviewees and in their characterisation of magazine content, in Spain there was far greater ambivalence. At first sight it appeared that the UK magazine landscape was more radical and progressive, espousing a warm sense of the 'obviousness' of a feminist identification (that is mirrored in the content of the publications). By contrast it was suggested by Spanish participants that feminism was too dated or too threatening to be claimed as an identity, with frequent references to the machismo of Spanish culture. However, a closer analysis of what feminism meant to the participants eroded such a straightforward binary. It revealed instead a sense that magazine staff in the two countries were both enabled and constrained by notions of appropriateness and acceptability by reference to popular culture, social media, and advertising and corporate interests.

By asking what feminism *means* to those involved in producing women's magazines the article moved beyond questions of identification/disidentification to ask a more important question: namely, *what is at stake in the new popularity of feminism*, when feminism becomes 'cool' – particularly in the UK context, increasingly too in Spain, and many places beyond? This analysis has mapped a sophisticated recognition on the part of magazine writers that a form of feminism was overdetermined by multiple factors including the publishing success of feminist books, the online presence of feminism, and the need for commercial enterprises to stay abreast of feminism as a current 'trend'. While some interviewees cautioned against seeing magazines' feminism as simply a cynical or opportunistic move, for others—especially in Spain—it was precisely this: 'make-up', or a superficial feminist gloss on an otherwise largely unchanged product.

In concluding we want to argue that the apparent national differences are less significant than the rebranding feminism itself is undergoing in order to be made palatable and promotable within the—particularly digital—content of commercial women's



magazines. This has become even more clear in the two years since the fieldwork was undertaken as we have seen a marked move toward an embrace of 'feminism' within Spanish publications too. We have demonstrated that the core values of the rebranded feminism that the magazines promote centre on individualism, choice and consumerism, paired with a stripped down notion of gender equality. For many journalists in the UK this produced a self-evident truth: 'you should be a feminist', but for others this version of feminism was notable—and problematic—for its emptiness, its hollowed-out quality. It has become, we argue, a floating signifier, with few, if any, implications for action. Indeed, on the contrary, our interviewees reported how much content is geared to a formulation in which 'you can be a feminist and still do X' (shave your legs/wear heels/work as a stripper, etc.). Interestingly the argumentative target of such assertions is not patriarchal society but an imagined variant of feminism that is trying to ruin your fun!

We noted the pervasiveness of an individualistic framing in which feminism was held to be infinite, flexible and infinitely flexible, and in which there are as many versions of feminism as there are individuals. We also observed the pre-eminence of notions of personal choice as guarantors of the 'feminist-ness' of any action. That is, any action can be feminist as long as it can be claimed as freely chosen not coerced. This 'flexible feminism' has proved to be profitable for magazines, which have been able to continue to 'sell' everything from diet and exercise routines to cosmetic surgery through a language of empowered individual choice. As we have shown this version of feminism generated diverse responses among producers: some saw it as a kind of pseudo feminism – a perspective especially marked among Spanish participants; others saw it as opening a space for conversation and dialogue, while, in the process, at least removing the stigma from feminism. Still others saw it as problematic but were committed to 'struggling within' to allow other versions of feminism room to breathe; while another understanding was the perspective that the forces shaping this rebranded feminism were too strong to overturn – sometimes leading to individuals giving up their magazine work in frustration. We understood and respected the diverse ways in which magazine producers negotiated these dilemmas.

From our perspective as analysts, three features of this 'rebranded' feminism are especially noteworthy. First its tendency to systematically depoliticise all issues, taking the politics out of feminism, hollowing it out so it became an empty identification marked only by vague injunctions to 'support' women, celebrate female achievements and even just 'be nice'. As we highlighted, the individualism of this feminism, alongside the defiant exhortation that 'you can do whatever and still be a feminist', works to systematically de-radicalise feminism. It leads us to a thought experiment in which we might ask: is there anything you *cannot* do and still claim to be a feminist – so wide and free-floating does the designation appear. Secondly, and relatedly, we note the ways in which any number of (consumer-friendly and capitalism-friendly) feminisms is allowed to proliferate – except for the figure of the 'angry' feminist. Anger—like the need for radical social transformation—is repudiated in this rebranding, powerfully marking out the affective as well as ideological borders of this designation. As we argue elsewhere (Favaro and Gill, forthcoming) this is part of a wider 'makeover' of feminism that—crucially—extends to emotional life too. Finally, it is worth pointing to the way in

which this new rebranded feminism becomes co-terminous with the ideological work many have argued was effected by postfeminism. While at one moment repudiation of feminism seemed to be a key feature of the postfeminist sensibility (McRobbie, 2009; Tasker and Negra, 2007; Scharff, 2012) today it appears that an embrace of feminism may perform a similar function – abolishing the need for social critique or structural analysis and any action to make a significant change in the world.

In sum, then, the recent interest in feminism by women's magazines is deeply but not only ideological, necessarily but not simply commercially-driven, useful for destigmatising but also for depoliticising the movement. It might open *and* close the horizons of readers. We feel at once heartened to see feminism celebrated in this widely-read media and distressed to see it eviscerated of radicalism. What is more, it is 'put to work' in the service of power. In a move distinctive of 'cool capitalism' (McGuigan, 2009), commercial cultures incorporate the dissent and disaffection with the patriarchal system of (young) women—in this case both the consumers and the workers—so as to debilitate opposition, prevent radicalisation and repair hegemony. With the 'neoliberalisation' of feminism (Rottenberg, 2014) political critique and collective struggle to change *society* are replaced by psychologies of positivity and an entrepreneurial spirit to transform the *self*. Figured as a pro-woman attitude or a simple orientation of validation of (claims to) the exercise of individual choice, where no exclusions or judgements whatsoever are to be made, feminism becomes in the process evacuated of radical impetus, conceptual criteria and collective purpose. While there is, of course, no one 'true feminism' but many feminist perspectives – the stripping back and hollowing out of this movement for radical social transformation within the spaces of commercial magazines, and the ease with which it can then be connected to the economic imperatives of capitalism and the political logics of neoliberalism is troubling, leading us to a deeply ambivalent embrace of what this turn to feminism means and a determination to expand and re-politicise its imaginaries.

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