

The Twisted Fate of Feminism: Unveiling the Paradox of Girlboss and Capitalism in Media Culture

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Abstract

This article explores the convergence of feminism and capitalism as feminist thoughts evolved from the second-wave period to the contemporary era. I propose that feminism has undergone a maneuver to serve capitalist interests through the emergence of girlboss culture. While the girlboss model of empowerment promotes the advancement of women, its convergence with neoliberal ideals overlooks collective struggles, further sustaining inequalities and widening the gaps in the socioeconomic context. I look at the frameworks of Nancy Fraser and Rosalind Gill's postfeminism, highlighting that heavy emphasis on individualism results in unresolved systemic challenges. The analysis applies these frameworks to the case of the girlboss culture, illustrating how it promotes the ideal of women's empowerment analogous to financial and entrepreneurial achievement. By relying on confidence culture and market-driven self-help practices, girlboss feminism commodifies the vision of women's liberation, legitimizing neoliberal logic and overlooking the need for systemic change.

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Introduction

Feminism has undergone massive changes and evolution, and over time, find its way to enter public discourse and mainstream cultural force. The vision of gender equality and empowerment thus has been increasingly pervasive, marking the significant milestone of achieving heightened visibility. This accomplishment should partly be credited to the media, which has served as a vehicle for amplifying feminist messages. From advertisements to campaigns on social platforms, media has played an important role in continually calling for equality. Such a progressive movement undeniably yields positive outcomes, fostering awareness about gender-based issues and injustice.

However, as feminism has been more integrated into the media, the transformative form of women's empowerment appears to be more market-driven. Particularly, in the era of contemporary feminism, which emphasizes individualism and personal choice. Behind the facade of empowerment lies the troubling entanglement with neoliberal ideals, potentially stripping away the essential vision of feminism. In this article thus, I argue that contemporary feminism has maneuvered to serve capitalism by merging the spirit of women empowerment with neoliberal interests. In doing so, I first trace the historical interplay between feminism and capitalism using the framework from Nancy Fraser. I then adopt Rosalind Gill's concept

of postfeminism to explore how feminist discourse has flipped its side to align slowly with neoliberal interest. Finally, I present the girlboss phenomenon as the case study and analyze the role of media in twisting feminism to serve the capitalist system.

Historicizing The Marriage of Feminism and Capitalism

Feminism started as a movement primarily focused on advocating suffrage and property rights for women. Although important figures like Mary Wollstonecraft spoke against class and societal norms that limited women's agency (Gordon, 2009), early feminism's critiques were not immediately directed toward the oppressive system of capitalism. Further, second-wave feminism marked a revolution in how feminism addressed women's struggle. During this period, feminist critiques were expanded to address broader ranges of issues, accommodating more complex socioeconomic challenges and injustices women faced. Second-wave feminist movements, though, were heterogeneous. They differed in their perspective regarding work labor (Ng & McGowan, 2023). Liberal feminists advocated for greater equality for women in the workplace. They emphasized that women should be given the same opportunities as men to participate in the labor market (Coleman, 2011; Marks et al., 2016). On the contrary, socialist feminists focused on advocating equal distribution of work in the household setting. They sought to promote universal childcare as a means to support women's entry into paid employment (Ferguson, 1988).

Second-wave feminism emerged in state-organized capitalism, as Nancy Fraser (2012) noted, exposing androcentrism and advocating for gender and economic equality. Nancy Fraser specifically critiqued the liberal feminist movement. She argues that liberal feminism has prompted a convergence ideal with capitalism, which is problematic. With the advocates for women's participation in the labor market, such a view often legitimizes and sustains capitalist hierarchies instead of confronting them. Fraser (2012) asserts that the alignment of liberal feminism ideals with capitalism masked the fundamentally exploitative system, naming it as the emancipatory facade.

Fraser (2013) details the contributions of liberal feminist thoughts that serve capital interests. First is the liberal feminist critiques of the traditional breadwinner model wherein men serve as the primary earners and providers while women are ascribed key roles in the domestic setting. This notion is central to state-organized capitalism. With the challenging idea from the liberal feminists, though, the notion shifted to generate what Fraser calls "flexible capitalism". In this sense, capitalism relies heavily upon women's paid labor, in particular, promoting low-waged jobs in service and manufacturing. Such jobs are performed by women, both single and married, and not only by ones racialized but also by those from all nationalities and ethnicities. All the while women get into paid labor, neoliberalism builds the facade of empowerment. Further, it uses the vision of women's liberation to fuel the engine of the capital system and sustain exploitation. The underlying problems—unstable job security, lower wages but longer working hours, declining living standards, rising poverty, and more—are thus being ignored.

The second contribution was rooted in the feminist critiques of politics of class that specifically addressed inequalities. For liberal feminists, such a narrow focus overlooks non-

economic struggles, like domestic violence, sexual assault, and bodily oppression. Liberal feminists thus subvert the agenda by politicizing the personal, expanding the vision into challenging cultural hierarchies closely tied to gender difference. Ideally, such a view would have united struggles for justice across both cultural and economic domains. In practice though, it led to an overwhelming focus on individual gender identity at the expense of economic issues. Even more troublesome, this shifted focus on politics of identity aligned seamlessly with the rise of neoliberalism seeking to erode any endeavor for social justice. While at that time critique toward exploitative economic systems should have been amplified, feminists paid attention to cultural sexism instead.

The last contribution, as Nancy Fraser noted, is the critique of welfare-state paternalism. Still in the name of gender difference, feminists targeted welfare policies that were established in the frame of traditional family models. Benefits such as retirement funds, allowances, and more were structured to conform to the ideal of male breadwinners and female housekeepers. As a result, women's domestic unpaid labor was underestimated. While feminist critique was rated progressive, its ideals corresponded to neoliberalism's interest. Promoted as a grassroots alternative, microcredit offered small loans to marginalized women, and with the jargon of empowerment, the program emerged as a salvation of women's property and oppression. Harsh realities were that states escaped their responsibilities of providing welfare. Much like the previous scenario, feminist critique thus served the interest of neoliberalism by justifying the privatization of welfare programs.

Situated Third-Wave Feminism, Postfeminism, and Neoliberal Discourse

The transition from second-wave to third-wave feminism has marked a significant turning point in feminist discourse. Third-wave feminism emerged as a response to the shifted cultural landscape shaped by second-wave feminism, seeking to resolve the limitations of the previous wave. With this, third-wave feminism addresses diversity and intersectionality. In parallel, postfeminism rises as the offshoot of third-wave feminism. In conceptualizing postfeminism, Gill (2007) argues that it is best regarded as a distinctive sensibility characterizing a sheer number of media products. Gill emphasizes double entanglement and contradictory discourse of feminist and anti-feminist, and further, unpacks several themes governing the distinctive sensibility in contemporary media culture. The themes include: (1) femininity as a bodily property, (2) subjectification culture, (3) emphasis on self-surveillance, (4) control on self-disciplines, (5) empowerment through individualism, (6) the existence of the makeover paradigm, and (7) the reassertion of sexual difference.

At the heart of this conceptualization is the notion of choice. Through this lens, postfeminism becomes a movement that focuses on individual agency, romanticizing 'being oneself' or 'pleasing oneself' as salvation and at the same time, as a tool for empowerment. Such a way of thinking subverts what was once criticized as constraints. If back in the day attracting men's attention was the sole reason for women to put makeup on and dress, then, now postfeminist thoughts allow women to indulge in such actions for pleasing themselves. Instead of presenting women as docile subjects, the shifted notion values women as autonomous agents. The heavy emphasis on individual choice bestows women with various

alternatives. Women are no longer boxed into a single, definite concept of femininity. Rather, they act on their own innate desire to look and feel good. They are allowed to celebrate whatever qualities they possess and whatever choices they work on to establish their identities. This idea is pervasive in contemporary media, such as talk shows or advertisements. Even every aspect of life is directed toward the matter of personal choice and self-determination.

Connected with the notion of choice, self-surveillance and discipline also appear to be a prominent feature of postfeminist media culture. As putting on makeup and dressing is no longer deemed traditional, self-care products and makeovers thus quickly develop into a trend. Women are under extensive scrutiny, requiring constant checking and fixing to ensure they perform successful femininity. In an unexpected ideological twist though, this monitoring labor is redefined as a fun and self-indulgent activity. Not only does self-surveillance operate on the bodily surface, but the psychological well-being of women is also subjected to constant vigilance. Whether or not women invest in education, whether or not they pursue romantic relationships, whether or not they have emotional intelligence and are independent, and more self-help discourse continually penetrates public conversation. Again, such a monitoring action emerges in the name of self-improvement.

The Girlboss Paradox and Capitalism in Media Culture

In the era of postfeminism, media products have been the primary key sites in mediating women's movement and capitalism. With the jargon of women empowerment, media has legitimized commodification and consumer culture. From advertisements to popular culture, gender representations have been closely tied to the mobilization of capital interest. In the case of Madonna popularizing Mehndi, for example, commodification has always been the wind vane. Expecting the beauty industry to operate on the sole of aesthetic purpose is too naive. After being used by

Madonna, Mehndi quickly became a trending. Though it was deemed as a new form of aesthetic that supported White women's femininity, it was actually stripped of its meaning. Such an accessory lost its cultural significance, turning into a tool to serve the market instead (Durham, 2001). Another similar case is exemplified by the trend of *Girl Power* popularized by Spice Girls. Although it brought a positive message for girls, the commodification was eventually inevitable. Fans quickly purchase merchandise and various products associated with the idols, further leading to obsession and consumerism (Hains, 2012).

Post feminism has made the distinction between genuine empowerment with neoliberalism agenda even more obscured with the confidence culture (Le Goff, 2023). With the massive promotion that self-care and self-help products are salvation, post feminism is thus bound up with the notion of resilience. According to Gill & Orgad (2015, p.331), resilience is the tougher sister of confidence. Aligned with the ideal of neoliberalism, the concept of resilience demands women to be confident in facing hardship. At the same time, within the paradigm of neoliberalism, women are said to have experienced a deficit of confidence (Gill & Kanai, 2018). This deficit of confidence is what generates gender

inequality. It is deemed as what holds back women from realizing their true potential, and in turn, hinders them from accomplishing their dreams (Gill & Orgad, 2017). To resolve the issue, postfeminism encourages women to engage in self-care and self-help practices through a myriad of manuals: buying beauty products, attending fitness classes, pursuing education, and more (Le Goff, 2023). This so-called confidence culture is even more pervasive with the help of celebrities and social media influencers. While feminist discourse in the past was communicated through independent platforms, contemporary feminist thoughts have made their way into permeating Anglo-Saxon media, such as television, commercial advertising, and even social apps like Instagram and Twitter. This mainstream further makes it possible for the emergence of celebrity culture, presenting prominent figures as the models of ideal confident women (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Gill, 2007).

With the celebrity culture, the girlboss trend has become a cultural phenomenon. It introduces a set of aesthetics, rhetoric, and attitudes in a newly-popularized celebrity-driven feminism. The girlboss phenomenon signifies the intersections of feminism, pop culture, and neoliberal interests encapsulated within the framework of contemporary business extended beyond non-wealth domains. Entrepreneurship is not only defined in the context of the workplace. It now encompasses broader domains to accommodate personal realms—hobbies, social media personal brand, and other aspects of life—and turn them into entrepreneurial ventures. This idea fosters the integration of entrepreneurship into popular culture, which in turn, expands the neoliberal ideologies and allows them to permeate everyday life with the belief of self-responsibility.

The girlboss is somewhat the embodiment of confidence culture. It drives women to present themselves through curated digital personas, celebrating entrepreneurship and individual success. It promotes self-help practices and entrepreneurial brand-building, framing the feminist movement in line with financial achievement, individualized projects of self-improvement, and market competition. By merging feminism with entrepreneurship, the girlboss operates on economies of visibility to continue expanding her brand. While the girlboss phenomenon gives rise to advancement—women are given more opportunities to develop their careers—it reinforces the entanglement of feminism and capital mobilization. The realization of the girlboss ideal often relies upon brand endorsement and engagement. The figure offers women self-help products as a salvation. As such, the girlboss phenomenon encourages consumerism. With the curated digital persona, the girl boss also actively promotes ideal success which is claimed to be an attainable goal for women. Social media platforms further help disseminate such messages to a wider audience, imposing beliefs and standards of being successful women (Mastrangelo, 2021).

As a product of postfeminism, the girlboss culture aligns closely with neoliberal interests by centering women's liberation on individualism. It frames success as a personal achievement and places responsibility solely on individual effort. Such a view thus overlooks socioeconomic status and financial barriers that hinder opportunities for some women. For instance, the girlboss culture encourages women to indulge in self-help practice, often by means of market-based solutions such as buying products or subscribing to self-help coaching. Such exemplifies how postfeminism excludes individuals who cannot afford the

luxuries of self-improvement due to financial constraints. Ignoring this intersectionality, the girlboss culture as the product of postfeminism further widens the gap in socioeconomic contexts and exacerbates systemic inequalities. Instead of acknowledging various barriers and struggles faced by women, postfeminism became capitalism's handmaiden serving to promote consumerism. The narrow focus on individualism also undermines collective struggles, potentially stripping women's movement from its essential meaning. While capitalism has permeated the women's movement long ago, postfeminism marks the pivotal shift from critiquing capitalism to advancing key concepts of the latest neoliberal phase.

Conclusion

In this article, I propose that feminism has been co-opted to serve capitalist interests through the emergence of girlboss culture. While the 'girlboss' model of empowerment promotes the advancement of women, its entanglement with neoliberal ideals overlooks collective struggles, further widening the gaps in the socioeconomic context. Through the frameworks of Nancy Fraser and Rosalind Gill, this article has shown how the troubling alignment between feminism and

capitalism is realized through postfeminist media and girlboss culture, which gives rise to consumerism. While the heightened visibility of feminist messages fosters awareness of gender-based injustice, it is essential to question whose interest this movement serves. How it addresses systemic challenges should also remain under critical examination. To resolve the current crisis, feminists must cut the ties with capitalist mobilization and instead, reaffirm collective movement.

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