Millennial celebrity feminism: creative agents in UK/US film and television and the shaping of feminist subjectivity and discourse, 2013-2023

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Abstract

This thesis aims to understand the specific generational expressions of feminism produced by Millennial celebrities working within the UK and US film and television industries between 2013-2023. This period was characterised by a highly polarised culture that featured heightened visibility of both feminism and antifeminism, during which engagement with political issues increasingly took place on emerging digital platforms. Existing scholarship acknowledges that feminist ideas are largely engaged with by the general public through media and popular culture, but often rejects celebrity articulations of feminism as lacking substance. This thesis asks what kind of Millennial feminist narratives are given representation in film and television, how Millennial celebrities working in the film and television industries leverage their personal brands to further discussions of feminist topics within their work in traditional and digital forms of media and what the importance is of authorship in the progression of popular feminist discourse. In order to answer these questions, this thesis takes the form of five case studies. These do not seek to evaluate the feminist credentials of the celebrities or their work, but instead interrogate the ways in which these celebrities are constructed as feminist through the popular culture texts they create and the paratexts that surround them. This project offers a new perspective on celebrity feminism through the lens of this specific generational cohort and historical period to uncover the differences and similarities of the strategies celebrities operating within film and television used to incorporate feminist themes into their authorship. Demonstrating the importance of celebrities in reaching large audiences, this thesis offers the perspective that engaging with what is popular and trending is necessary and urgent in order to enlist future generations to the cause of feminism.

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Introduction

This project critically analyses articulations of feminism by Millennial Anglo-American celebrities working in the media areas of film and television. It examines this in the context of a period of time (2013-2023) during which a fourth wave of feminism[1] was manifesting against a backdrop of continuing postfeminism[2]. My thesis explores three interconnected key questions: which articulations of feminism are given representation in mainstream film and television narratives, how these articulations of feminism are incorporated into the identities and branding of celebrities working within these industries, and what role authorship plays in this process. In order to answer these questions, this project analyses five celebrity case studies (Emma Watson, Michaela Coel, Jameela Jamil, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, and Greta Gerwig; a full explanation of the rationale for my selection is included in my methodology chapter) across the period in question, chosen specifically for their construction, by themselves and by the media, as *feminist*, and their high-profile careers during this particular cultural moment in which feminist themes gained prominence in mainstream media[3].

Our own introduction to, understanding of, and continued participation in feminism takes place through media[4]. Claire Perkins describes 'the power and influence that contemporary popular screen culture holds in shaping understandings of what it means to be a feminist'[5]. Popular representations and discussions of feminism form the stepping stones into the feminist movement for the majority of people, and celebrities are integral to this[6]. Anthea Taylor suggests that celebrity feminists reach 'large audiences of women who may not have otherwise engaged with feminism'[7]. Taylor argues that these celebrity feminists, whom she terms "blockbuster feminists", have a huge influence on Western

[1] See Claire Nally and Angela Smith, eds., *Twenty-First Century Feminism: Forming and Performing Femininity*; Rosalind Gill, 'Post-Postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times'; and Prudence Chamberlain, *The Feminist Fourth Wave: Affective Temporality*.
[2] Nicola Rivers, *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave: Turning Tides*.
[3] See H Savigny and H Warner, 'Introduction: The Politics of Being a Woman'; Briony Hannell, *Feminist Fandom: Media Fandom, Digital Feminisms, and Tumblr*; and Valerie Estelle Frankel, 'Introduction'.
[4] Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media*.
[5] Claire Perkins et al., 'Doing Film Feminisms in the Age of Popular Feminism: A Roundtable Convened by Claire Perkins and Jodi Brooks', 232.
[6] See Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* and Caitlin E. Lawson, *Just Like Us: Digital Debates on Feminism and Fame*.
[7] Anthea Taylor, *Celebrity and the Feminist Blockbuster*, 2.

feminism and use their celebrity capital to actively shape cultural understanding of this complex social movement. From Beyoncé performing at the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards in front of a giant screen depicting the word FEMINIST, to Jennifer Lawrence speaking out about Hollywood's gender pay gap, feminist politics is increasingly engaged with through popular culture and celebrity. Sarah Projansky argues that it is 'important to identify the particular ways theories and practices of social change, such as feminism, are transformed in popular culture'[8]. Feminism's increased visibility within popular culture necessitates investigation into the role of celebrities. Over the period of study covered by this thesis, feminism has become a movement that is increasingly desirable to be a part of[9], and the influence of celebrities is no small part of its popularisation after its postfeminist nadir[10].

When I began writing my PhD proposal at the beginning of 2017, the pivotal *New York Times* article 'Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades'[11] hadn't yet been released. We were in the midst of what I consider a period of significant evolution for popular feminism, but one in which postfeminism still dominated. During this time, discussions of feminism were at once encouraged and reviled[12]. The period of study of this thesis opened alongside the 'extreme misogyny'[13] of what has become known as the manosphere, and political discourse was polarised. As my research progressed, Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein was publicly accused of sexual misconduct, just months after millions of women across the United States participated in marches protesting against the presidential election of misogynist Donald Trump. Later, "anti-woke" warriors such as Laurence Fox appeared on mainstream media[14], there were calls to remove statues of British imperialists from university campuses[15], and a movement of right-wing tradwives mobilised online[16]. These opposing forces remained antagonistic throughout my period of study and beyond: at the time of

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[8] Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*, 232.
[9] See Gill, 'Post-Postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times' and Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare*.
[10] Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer, 'The Traffic in Feminism: An Introduction to the Commentary and Criticism on Popular Feminism'.
[11] Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, 'Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades'.
[12] Nicola Rivers, *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave: Turning Tides*.
[13] Debbie Ging, 'Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere', 640.
[14] 'Actor Laurence Fox's Question Time Clash over Meghan Markle'.
[15] 'Cecil Rhodes Statue: Explanatory Plaque Placed at Oxford College', *BBC News*.
[16] Annie Kelly, 'The Housewives of White Supremacy'.

writing King's College London had just published a report on the gender divide among younger generations in relation to feminism[17].

The date boundaries that I set for the scope of the research project are linked to both the work of the case studies I have chosen, with significant texts being released between the years of 2013 - 2023, and the context of the visibility of feminism, which increased significantly over this decade[18]. While date choices are inevitably arbitrary to an extent, the key concerns of the project are the shifting political climate I have described above. Not only am I researching a particular cultural moment in which feminism has increased in visibility, I am analysing a particular Millennial expression of feminism – a much-commented on (and reviled) cohort. This generation has come of age alongside the increasing use of social media as the locus of feminist discourse. Millennials, born between 1981 and 2000[19], have grown up as the first generation of digital natives[20] and the celebrities of this generation have been an important part of their coming of age within a digital era. Notable examples of digital engagement with feminism include the Everyday Sexism Project, founded by Laura Bates in 2012, which acknowledges how difficult talking about sexism can be in 'a modern society that perceives itself to have achieved gender equality'[21]. Writer Gina Martin launched a campaign in 2017, which quickly gained traction online, to make 'upskirting' — the act of taking a photograph up a skirt without the wearer's consent — a criminal offence[22].

This fourth wave of feminism not only dominated digital communities, it was also identified by the film and television industries as a trending topic, one which could be capitalised upon. As a result, female authorship became stock that the mainstream media wanted to invest in – providing certain terms and conditions were met. While I have been profiling each of my case studies, not only have I had to keep up with their work, but also the media landscape in which they operate.

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[17] Bobby Duffy, Rosie Campbell, and Gideon Skinner, 'Emerging Tensions? How Younger Generations Are Dividing on Masculinity and Gender Equality'.
[18] See Alison Phipps, *Me Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism*; Koa Beck, *White Feminism: From Suffragettes to Influencers and Who They Leave Behind*; and Mikki Kendall, *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women White Feminists Forgot*.
[19] Megan W. Gerhardt and Deepika Hebbalalu, 'Mind the Gap: Moving from Ethnocentric to Ethnorelative Perspectives of Generational Diversity' and Joy Van Eck Peluchette, *Social Issues, Justice and Status*.
[20] Sandra Maria Correia Loureiro and Deepika Guerreiro, 'Psychological Behavior of Millennials: Living Between Real and Virtual Reality'.
[21] The Everyday Sexism Project, 'About'.
[22] Gina Martin, '#STOPSKIRTINGTHEISSUE'.

Within mainstream media, as well as the proliferation of new streaming services, production companies have looked to include more diverse voices behind the camera and in front of it. While feminism entering mainstream media allows for the wider dissemination of feminist ideas, the commercial nature of the media industries predetermines and complicates the discourse that is prompted[23]. The focus of this thesis is a cohort of celebrities at the meeting point of feminist politics and popular culture. My research documents the role of these celebrities in communicating and popularising feminist ideas and the necessary steps they must take to ensure their own continued commercial success while doing so. Opting out of the neoliberal market of competition and individualism 'is no easy matter'[24] and, although feminist ideas may have been trending during this period, the gendered expectations that women should behave in a way that is "ladylike" remained[25].

Digital and social media have transformed as I have carried out my research. Instagram has continued to grow in popularity, despite younger rival TikTok's birth and subsequent rise to success, while Twitter rose and then very dramatically fell in both relevance and appeal after its rebrand to X. My research makes an intervention by not drawing distinctions between film and television authorship and that of social media. While this thesis examines celebrities who work in traditional screen media of film and television, it is important to acknowledge the work that is done by celebrities across social media. As a presence on these platforms is increasingly a required component of a star's persona, the authorship used across social media profiles and podcasts is also important for this project. While social media provides the appearance of intimacy and a deeper connection with the "real" celebrity, in reality social media platforms have become another area where celebrities must craft their image in order to maintain commercial viability. Alex Symons argues that the power that social media algorithms wield undoubtedly influences the ways in which celebrities choose to share this more informal presentation of themselves and their lives with their audience, including the ways in which they may 'speak out and act on practices which discriminate against individuals'[26]. This very real labour and, in particular, the commercial

[23] Laura Minor, *Reclaiming Female Authorship in Contemporary UK Television Comedy*.
[24] Beverley Clack and Michele Paule, 'Afterword: Advice for a Life Beyond Neoliberalism?', 256.
[25] Anna Bogutskaya, *Unlikeable Female Characters: The Women Pop Culture Wants You to Hate*.
[26] Alex Symons, *Women Comedians in the Digital Age: Media Work and Critical Reputations after Trump*, 12.

nature of celebrities' use of social media platforms is important to include in any analysis of celebrity authorship and key to the intervention of this research.

Celebrity feminists are often criticised for presenting a palatable or de-fanged version of feminism. While this is valuable work that holds celebrities to account in their efforts to introduce elements of feminism into their work, it is my belief that there is potential in all expressions of feminism to contribute to the furthering of the cause. It is this potential, along with the compromises that might be made, that this research seeks to consider. Rather than answer the question of whether celebrity engagement with popular feminism offers a form of radical political activism, this thesis asks what kinds of political acts are possible within the sphere of popular feminism and how the conditions of celebrity limit the types of activism that are available to women working within film, television and other media. In order to answer these questions, I must first define how the terms "popular feminism" and "activism" will be used within the thesis.

I use the term popular feminism to describe the phenomenon of mainstream engagement with feminist politics during the period of study covered by this thesis. During the period of 2013 – 2023, references to feminism were made in mainstream media, and feminist discourse breached the confines of academia and was present across traditional and digital media. Much has been written about popular feminism, including Rosalind Gill's observations on the 'cool-ing' of feminism[27], Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer's 'traffic in feminism'[28] and Anthea Taylor's identification of the 'feminist blockbuster'[29]. Sarah Banet-Weiser defines the *popular* in popular feminism in three ways: its accessibility, due to its circulation in mainstream and commercial media; its shifting nature, as various forms of feminism compete for visibility; and, finally, its likeability[30]. Celebrity engagement with feminism during this time contributed to all three aspects of this popularity. The shifting nature of popular feminism, however, also shapes celebrity engagement with the movement. In this way, my research endeavours to capture the changing form of popular feminism and its expression through celebrities from 2013 – 2023. Popular feminism must be

[27] Rosalind Gill, 'Post-Postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times'.
[28] Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer, 'The Traffic in Feminism: An Introduction to the Commentary and Criticism on Popular Feminism'.
[29] Anthea Taylor, *Celebrity and the Feminist Blockbuster*.
[30] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*.

viewed within the context of an economy of visibility[31] that defines the contemporary moment. With endless content competing for visibility, popular feminism is an iteration of the movement that is given representation by the mainstream media industries, has widespread appeal, and can be commodified. This thesis aims to examine this commercially-driven form of feminism and its expression through celebrity, in order to capture its limitations and explore its political potential. Where there is space for analysis is in the different practices employed by the celebrities involved in this popularisation of feminism. This thesis asks how celebrities maintain their commercial success within an industry that remains very much patriarchal in nature.

I use the term activism within this thesis to refer to a range of creative choices my case studies make as a form of political expression. Here I draw on several scholars' work in order to expand the definition of activism to demonstrate how even commercially-minded political expression is worthy of examination. Taking Laura Portwood-Stacer's legitimation of everyday choices as political expression, or 'lifestyle politics'[32], as inspiration, this thesis contests that popular feminism and activism are not mutually exclusive. Portwood-Stacer argues 'that whether a practice can be considered activism does not depend on the measurable effects of the action, but rather on the meaning people attribute to it'[33]. As my case studies all create works within popular culture, their political expressions contribute to the creation of norms and discourses. This thesis views these contributions as a form of activism that is worthy of consideration. As Graham and Harju note, conversations about popular forms of entertainment often have a political dimension[34]. They also argue that, as individuals increasingly assign political meaning to elements of their lifestyle, we must take a more elastic understanding of activism that 'allows for a more lifestyle-based approach to politics'[35]. Graham and Harju state that ongoing participation in everyday political talk is key to the formation of informed and opinionated citizens and that social media provide platforms for this discussion.

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[31] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*.
[32] Laura Portwood-Stacer, *Lifestyle Politics and Radical Activism*.
[33] Ibid, 5
[34] Todd Graham and Auli Harju, Reality TV as a trigger of everyday political talk in the net-based public sphere.
[35] Ibid, 3

Laura Pottinger also advocates for the consideration of forms of activism that 'exist beyond spectacular, formally organised forms of protest'[36]. Pottinger rejects inflexible definitions of activism that find it incompatible with the everyday. While Pottinger's research considers the 'gentle, quiet ways'[37] in which seed sharers resist commercial gardening practices, I find parallels within the ways my case studies contribute to a political movement. For example, Michaela Coel might share resources with young writers, while Emma Watson might prompt young girls to engage with political education through her book club. Some might dismiss such acts as passive, but I believe they are worthy contributions to the cause of feminism; particularly in the way they provide connection through social media.

I also draw on John Street's classification of celebrities who participate in activism – whom he terms CP2s, in order to differentiate them from politicians who participate in celebrity practices, or CP1s – as celebrities who 'use their status and the medium within which they work to speak out on specific causes'[38]. Street's example of folk singers assuming a political role during the cultural context of the 1960s finds a mirroring with celebrities working within film and media during the cultural context of my period of study. As Mark Wheeler argues, the advent of digital media has made celebrities more conscious of their political influence and brought about alternative forms of political engagement for citizens, 'celebrities can use their fame to draw public attention to a range of causes by acting as patrons, advocates and fundraisers for specific issues, human rights and social movements'[39]. Their mediated personae create a 'parasocial familiarity'[40] that gives them a unique influence over their audiences that has only increased as authenticity has become of growing importance to celebrity self-images.

With this activism expressed through film, television and other media produced by my case studies – either in service of creating narratives separate from, or about themselves as celebrities – authorship is a key area of examination for this study. With female authorship still a rare commodity within the film and television industries, even in this environment of heightened visibility, those that do find commercial success are either held to high standards or immediately dismissed by

[36] Laura Pottinger, Planting the seeds of a quiet activism, 217
[37] Ibid, 219
[38] John Street, Celebrity Politicians: Popular Culture and Political Representation, 438
[39] Mark Wheeler, Human rights, democracy and celebrity, 286
[40] Ibid, 287

critics who instead focus on independent filmmakers who remain unknown by mainstream audiences. Gramsci's concept of hegemony[41], in which political struggles are continually fought in the cultural arena, and the negotiation of cultural resistance is a key framework for understanding the authorship of my case studies. As Claire Perkins and Michele Schreiber describe, the 'struggle to become at once visible and resistant'[42] is something that female practitioners in the film and television industries must negotiate in their authorship of feminist or female-focused creative works.

To explore this negotiation, my research questions are:

- What kind of Millennial feminist narratives are given representation in film and television within an economy of visibility?
- How do Millennial celebrities working in the film and television industries leverage their personal brands to further discussions of feminist topics?
- What is the importance of authorship in the progression of popular feminist discourse?

Taking the idea that celebrities are 'figures formed from collections of texts'[43], the analysis of my case studies considers each celebrity as a collection of not only their own works on screen, but also the discourse that surrounds them and their work. I will be taking this premise and building upon it in this research project. I include not only the work my case studies create in my analysis, but also press coverage and interviews, alongside digital content created by audiences, critics, and the celebrities themselves.

This thesis presents a new perspective on celebrity feminism. The symbiotic relationship between popular culture and popular feminist discourse is undeniable, and was particularly prevalent from 2013-2023. As popular culture sought to commodify feminism for commercial gain during this time, culture wars, popular misogyny and the continuation of postfeminism waged a backlash against feminist progress. This thesis provides an insight into how celebrities who engage with feminism negotiate that identity in relation to their participation within the

[41] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*.
[42] Claire Perkins and Michele Schreiber, 'Independent Women: From Film to Television', 921.
[43] Paul McDonald, *Hollywood Stardom*, 281.

film and television industries. As my case studies will demonstrate, each celebrity undertook a balancing act. My research uncovers the different tactics adopted by them in order to ensure continued commercial appeal and access to a mainstream audience. What follows is a review of the literature that has informed this project. Next I outline the methodological frameworks I use before presenting my case studies in age order: from youngest to oldest.

Literature review

With each of the case studies that make up this thesis, I draw on a range of scholarship to analyse a period of cultural history through celebrity. Drawing on feminist media studies, digital media studies, cultural studies, celebrity and stardom studies, as well as cultural history and feminism more broadly; I analyse the ways in which feminist ideas on screen both shape, and are shaped by, popular feminist discourse. Over the course of my research, thanks in particular to the part-time nature of my studies and therefore longer than usual period of work, I have witnessed a changing political climate that has overlapped partly with my period of study.

While the capitalist, individualist focus of both neoliberalism and postfeminism continues to reign supreme, feminist ideas have gained prominence, been interrogated, co-opted, and repackaged to become part of popular discourse. Celebrities have been key to this, particularly considering movements such as #MeToo and the Time's Up collective. Their involvement can be found in a variety of guises and the work of this thesis is to uncover the different ways in which celebrities participate in political movements such as feminism. As celebrities are inextricably linked to their personal brands as commodities within the media industry, the boundaries between co-opting political movements as a branding tool and genuine activism are blurred.

Scholarship on celebrities, in particular around how they construct authenticity within their personas, has been vital to my research. This constructed authenticity is made all the more fascinating in a digital age where celebrities can take authorship of their own persona through social media. The work detailed in this review of literature has allowed me to interrogate the ways in which my case studies present themselves through frames of authenticity using social media as a tool. Scholarship that focuses on digitally mediated discussions of celebrities and feminism has also been of great importance to my work. Within the contemporary context, all celebrity images are inherently paratextual, regardless of their predominant media work. This will be further discussed in my methodology but it is important to mention in my review of existing scholarship.

My literature review begins with feminism studies; defining postfeminism and how feminist ideas were repudiated and seen as unattractive during the early 2000s. The review goes on to detail the scholars whose work I have drawn on to understand and differentiate between postfeminism, third- and fourth-wave feminism, and the relationship between popular feminism and popular misogyny. Next I move onto the links between popular feminism and celebrity culture and the feminist critiques of the enmeshment of the two. My review then turns to feminist media studies, particularly the ways in which feminism is depicted on screen and how authorship has evolved as a key part of the discourse surrounding feminist media. I go on to review the scholars within star and celebrity studies who have aided my thesis, with a focus on the celebrity construction of authenticity and celebrity activism. Finally, I turn to digital media theory, which I have drawn on to analyse a period in which social and other digital media have dominated popular discourse. The scholars whose work I build on detail the labour that celebrities engage in through social media as part of their branding. This has been particularly useful in understanding the mediating of authenticity that is vital to the analysis of several of my case studies.

Feminism studies

In order to situate my period of study within a political and cultural climate, I must first be careful to understand and differentiate between postfeminism, third- and fourth-wave feminism, popular feminism and popular misogyny. The scholars reviewed below have been key to developing the points of connection and distinction between the different movements, and understanding how the notion of celebrity connects and shifts over these various waves.

Defining postfeminism and identifying third-wave feminism

Tania Modleski discusses a series of texts that proclaimed the advent of "postfeminism". Modleski observes that, despite the assumptions by these texts of a world in which feminism had achieved its aims, the texts themselves were actually part of the undermining of these very goals[44]. Sarah Projanski reflects on the infiltration of feminist concepts into mainstream popular culture in the 1970s

[44] Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a Postfeminist Age*.

and 1980s, particularly around rape. Projanski describes the decades that followed as an era of postfeminism in which it was perceived that feminism had brought about equality and free choice for women and was now surplus to requirements. Projanski argues that the proliferation of media representations of successful women cultivated an image of success that led people to assume that feminism had completed its mission[45].

Kristin J Anderson writes about the ways in which the events of September 11th, 2001 inspired a retreat to traditional ideas of gender roles over the following decade. Anderson describes how feminist progress was pushed back against, with commentators observing single women abandoning their careers in favour of pursuing marriage. Detailing the trend away from a pursuit of equality and a return to patriarchal ideals, Anderson observes that women were increasingly expected to be mothers and housewives. Theorising that a country that is facing external threat has no liberty to prioritise progressive politics, Anderson locates the emergence of postfeminism, and in particular the more conservative components of it, within a framing of a post-9/11 society[46].

At the same time as postfeminism was being conceptualised, feminist scholars were also grappling with defining what was emerging as a third wave of feminism. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford interrogate both third-wave feminism and the wave metaphor itself. They identify a divide between academic feminism and a feminism that saw itself as more active rather than intellectual in its participation in contemporary feminist debates; including identity politics, pornography, popular culture and the white, western nature of feminism[47]. Naomi Zack explores the homogeneous nature of feminism and what she sees as the most promising critique of second-wave feminism by third-wave feminists: the insistence that feminism should not be confined to white, middle-class women. As well as placing consideration of race and class at the forefront when understanding gender and oppression, Zack also calls for the inclusion of women in the Global South. Detailing the limitations of intersectionality in creating a feminism that was inclusive of all women, Zack argues that avoiding essentialism does not necessarily guarantee inclusivity[48].

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[45] Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*.
[46] Kristin J Anderson, *Modern Misogyny: Anti-Feminism in a Post-Feminist Era*.
[47] Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford, 'Introduction'.
[48] Naomi Zack, *Inclusive Feminism: A Third Wave Theory of Women's Commonality*.

Astrid Henry unpicks the generational divide that seemed to correspond to second- and third-wave feminism. This mirroring of postfeminism's rejection of "obsolescent" feminism makes the disentanglement of third-wave feminism and postfeminism all the more complex. Mapping the second wave onto the Baby Boomer generation and ascribing Generation X with third-wave ideals, Henry's work has been useful to my thesis when considering the generational cohort of my case studies. As Henry explores, the historical events that coincide with the maturation of people from the same generation can create a coherence in political affiliation. Henry also acknowledges the function of generational demographics in creating consumer groups that can be more easily targeted by advertisers. This is particularly pertinent to my research, considering the media industries' appeal to audience demographics. With both postfeminists and third-wave feminists rejecting what they saw as an outmoded feminism, Henry observes a refusal of young women to identify with second-wave feminism. Henry cites the differing stances of second- and third-wave feminists on issues such as sex, pleasure and identity as key to her understanding of the generational divide. Second-wave feminists were seen as victims with their focus on rape and women's lack of agency, while third-wave feminists' focus on pleasure aligned them more closely with the empowered (hetero)sexuality of postfeminism[49].

Examining the emergence of postfeminism as the defining mode of the 2000s, Angela McRobbie argues that feminism's framing as redundant was associated with the dominance of the ideas of choice and freedom among popular representations of young women. McRobbie's complication of Susan Faludi's backlash thesis[50] – whereby postfeminism references feminist ideas, rather than arguing against them – demonstrates how popular culture was instrumental in the creation of the illusion that the aims of feminism had been achieved. McRobbie argues that postfeminism was the declaration of feminism as outmoded, while describing a "double entanglement" in which conservative gender values were held alongside liberal ideals of diversity and choice. This double entanglement, for McRobbie, also transforms feminism into something that was both taken for granted and simultaneously rejected[51]. The taken-for-grantedness of feminism coincided with a focus on youth, as Negra and Tasker also observe. While

[49] Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism*.
[50] Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*.
[51] Angela McRobbie, 'Post-feminism and Popular Culture'.

postfeminist media obsessively engaged in makeovers and ways to avoid ageing, feminism itself gained an association with being "old" in comparison to youthful postfeminism[52].

The dominance of postfeminism in feminist cultural analysis of the 2000s led to a growing need for an agreement on what the term represented. Rosalind Gill argues that postfeminism is a "sensibility". This sensibility is comprised of a number of notions: an importance of the body to ideas of femininity; the constant improvement and monitoring of the self, with particular prominence given to the idea of the makeover; the importance of individualism; a focus on women empowering themselves through choice; and a regression towards ideas of inherent differences between the sexes[53]. Gill connects this postfeminist sensibility with neoliberalism, which Angela McRobbie expands on[54]. This promotion of heterosexual conventions and neoliberal politics that encourages individualism is a rejection of the collective action and empowerment that is at the heart of feminism. McRobbie sees postfeminism as manufacturing a cultural climate in which certain aspects of feminism:

> *have been taken into account, and have been absolutely incorporated into political and institutional life. Drawing on a vocabulary that includes words like 'empowerment' and 'choice', these elements are then converted into a much more individualistic discourse, and they are deployed in this new guise, particularly in media and popular culture, but also by agencies of the state, as a kind of substitute for feminism*[55]

Diane Negra expands on how feminists are perceived in a postfeminist world, describing feminists as being perceived as a threat to the traditional family unit. Postfeminists, Negra argues, positioned feminists as killjoys. These women are no fun, they aren't interested in romance, they are anti-sex, and they refuse to be swayed from their extremist views. In contrast, postfeminism is pitched as letting women forget about gender politics and return to the familiar comfort of traditional femininity. Of course, while historically women's roles were confined to the home, in a postfeminist world women are also expected to balance work on top

[52] Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, 'Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture'.
[53] Rosalind Gill, 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility'.
[54] Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*.
[55] Ibid., 1.

of their domestic labour. Luckily, commodities are here to help them achieve this. As Negra describes, postfeminism 'attaches considerable importance to the formulation of an expressive personal lifestyle and the ability to select the right commodities to attain it'[56].

Christina Scharff describes the conventions of postfeminist culture as 'repudiating feminism'[57]. Scharff regards this repudiation as a key tenet of postfeminist expression; women who subscribe to postfeminist ideology either view feminism 'as valuable, but no longer necessary, or as extreme and ideological'[58]. While feminist perspectives do form part of the way that young women navigate issues around gender, Scharff writes that these 'become common sense' or even taken for granted. However, any explicit mention of feminism is met with a negative response. Scharff argues that neoliberalism's individualist ideology means that young women tend to reject ideas of structural inequality in favour of independent navigation of any challenges. This belief that everyone is responsible for their own lives goes against the collective movement of feminism, and is particularly potent for young women, who 'are positioned as ideal neoliberal subjects'[59]. With freedom of choice so highly valued, neoliberalism invites young women to take ownership of the management of their lives with autonomy, through the purchase of the correct commodities, rather than surrender to the collective action of feminism.

Scharff also articulates the *unattractive* image of feminism, echoing Negra and Tasker's observations of feminism's associations with ageing. With stereotypical depictions of feminists as hating men, as lesbians and, crucially, as *unfeminine*, any engagement with feminism is seen as destabilising a woman's femininity. Scharff states the importance of queer theory in analysis of what it means for a woman's apparent sexuality to reject or embrace feminism. In her analysis, women's navigation of feminism is 'structured by reiterations, but also subversions, of heterosexual norms'[60]. It is because of this that women are more or less likely to engage with feminism, depending on their sexuality, race, or class positioning. If a woman already feels like she is in some way outside of

[56] Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*, 4.
[57] Christina Scharff, *Repudiating Feminism: Young Women in a Neoliberal World*.
[58] Ibid., 1.
[59] Ibid., 11.
[60] Ibid, 2.

heteronormative conventions, she may be less inclined to identify as a feminist for fear of associating herself with the unfeminine or masculine.

This is an important point that Scharff makes, and one that I argue remains the case throughout the period of my study. No matter the popularisation of feminism that has occurred throughout the decade covered by this thesis, the negative associations remain. Even for my case studies, who can all be read as heteronormative – despite Jameela Jamil's openness about her bisexuality she is in a relationship with a man and therefore frequently interpreted as straight[61] – associations with feminism remain associations with the masculine. In a society in which a woman's value is weighted on her sexual attractiveness, any rejection of the male gaze in favour of putting the interests of women first devalues her. These unattractive associations are particularly dangerous for celebrities whose employability hinges on how they are received by the mainstream public, and something I will draw out in my case studies.

The fourth wave and popular feminism

The scholars reviewed above have been key to my understanding of the postfeminist climate in which engagement with feminism was either seen as unattractive, unnecessary, or both. When I began thinking about this research project, a fourth wave of feminism was emerging, both online and in popular culture. Feminism was beginning to become more acceptable in the mainstream media, which raised questions around the relationship between feminism and the popular. The rising popularity of feminism was not seen as entirely positive, with Rosalind Gill, Sarah Banet-Weiser, Laura Portwood-Stacer and many other scholars critiquing what they saw as commodity feminism. In this version of feminism, women themselves are the commodity and part of the branding that they are defining themselves around is their articulation of a version of feminism. This is key to my study of celebrity feminism as my case studies are, by the nature of their work, commodities who are constantly working to maintain their branding. Any interaction with feminism must be understood in relation to this.

[61] Melanie R Maimon, 'Bisexual Identity Denial and Health: Exploring the Role of Societal Meta-Perceptions and Belonging Threats among Bisexual Adults'.

While it is vital to critique popular feminism, Joanne Hollows' describes how these endeavours often 'depend on some problematic assumptions'[62] about the relationship between, and the definitions of, feminism and the popular. The idea that there is a more substantial, if less popular, form of feminism that resides in the academy in my view discourages young feminists from wanting to know more. Mirroring Gillis, Howie and Munford's identification of a divide between academic feminism and a third-wave feminism that saw itself as more active rather than intellectual, Chris Bobel argues that 'the most impenetrable barrier to access to feminism is the privileging of so-called academic feminism'[63]. This limited access to an elite few who are deemed to understand this niche discourse risks leaving feminism open only to those who have gained the privileged position of being able to work within the academy. While there is less resistance to the idea that feminism can work alongside the popular, there is still a tendency for academics to hold the idea of feminism as something that exists only for those who study it sufficiently, while 'the popular is still presented as somehow inadequate in itself'[64].

In order to conceptualise an emerging fourth wave of feminism while acknowledging the continued presence of postfeminism, Claire Nally and Angela Smith look to the accessibility of online platforms as key to this new wave. They demonstrate that social media platforms allow for more women to share their voices and also make the scrutiny of women's bodies and misogynist abuse more apparent to the general public. Nally and Smith also describe the ways in which technology renders national borders more permeable[65]. While social media isn't used by all my case studies, popular feminist discourse *surrounding* my case studies frequently took place on social and digital media during my period of study.

Rosalind Gill[66] unpacks the 'bewildering' nature of the feminist political landscape, describing the beginnings of a resurgence of feminist discourse within a postfeminist climate. Gill observes a new visibility gained by feminist ideas, a change in the discourse around feminism, the complicated web of progression and backlash associated with feminism, and the difficulties facing contemporary

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[62] Joanne Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*, 196.
[63] Chris Bobel, *New Blood : Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation*, 18.
[64] Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*, 196.
[65] Claire Nally and Angela Smith, *Twenty-First Century Feminism: Forming and Performing Femininity*.
[66] Rosalind Gill, 'Post-Postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times'.

analysts of feminism. This is something I have certainly struggled with as I have endeavoured to keep up with a shifting landscape while analysing the contemporary. As Gill writes, we were, and still are, 'witnessing a resurgence of feminist discourse and activism as well as a renewed media interest in feminist stories'[67]. But what kind of feminist stories were the media interested in at this time? Gill argues that the broad scope of feminist activism, 'ranging from eco-feminism to socialist-feminist anti-austerity activism, to migrant antideportation campaigns, to sex worker activism, queer and trans engagements, and many others—has generated relatively limited coverage (beyond social media), with some notable exceptions such as SlutWalk'[68].

What Gill suggests 'we might call "the cool-ing of feminism"'[69] entered mainstream media through accessible ways. Gill cites *Elle*'s December 2014 Feminism Issue and, one of my case studies, Emma Watson as one avenue. In a later article entitled 'The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism: A postfeminist sensibility 10 years on', Gill describes the way that this "cool-ing" continued:

> *Feminist books top the best-seller lists; glossy magazines launch 'feminism issues'; musicians, fashion models and other celebrities proudly proclaim their feminist identities; and stories about unequal pay or sexual harassment have become the stuff of newspaper headlines and primetime news broadcasts.*[70]

Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer write that feminist messages to do with the self were the ones that found their way into advertising campaigns of the time that jumped on this "cool-ing" of feminism[71]. This doesn't mean, however, that the only feminist messages that gain visibility are those that can be commodified by brands. As Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer note, we shouldn't discount all iterations of popular feminism as 'aesthetically depoliticized'[72], although within a neoliberal climate that prizes individualism, those forms of

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[67] Rosalind Gill, 'The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On', 615.
[68] Ibid., 616.
[69] Ibid., 618.
[70] Ibid., 618.
[71] Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 'The Traffic in Feminism: An Introduction to the Commentary and Criticism on Popular Feminism'.
[72] Ibid., 885.

feminism that seem to succeed are often those that promote women's engagement with capitalism as a solution to the structural inequality they face.

Nicola Rivers argues that diversity of feminism is positive and that engagement with critique is key to feminism's continued success. Rivers embraces the inconsistencies between feminisms and the places of overlap with previous waves in order to demonstrate the more complex nature of the shifting ideology of feminism. Rivers' illumination of nuance is also a central aim of this thesis – demonstrating the complexity of engaging with feminism for both feminists and their audiences. Rivers acknowledges postfeminism's continued presence in order to analyse feminism's place within popular culture[73]. I have also practised this in my work; framing the forms of feminism that can be found in the various texts created by my case studies against a background of postfeminism. The continued interrogation of postfeminism is crucial to understand the ways in which Fourth Wave feminism interacts with and overlaps with this sensibility[74].

Prudence Chamberlain argues that the fourth wave's identification by journalists and activists as well as academics demonstrates its widespread nature. Echoing Nally and Smith's findings that technology played a key role in the catalysis of the fourth wave, Chamberlain cites that, while this new wave of feminism might not suddenly be more intersectional than previous iterations, as society at large gains a growing understanding about intersecting oppressions, feminism will be compelled to be more inclusive[75]. This is something I bring to the forefront in my case studies – while the feminism that many of them bring to mainstream audiences remains the domain of the white, middle-class woman, the discourse that surrounds these texts often brings issues of intersectionality out into public debate. It is in these opportunities for discussions of nuance that progression of feminism can occur.

My intervention in the study of popular feminisms aims to explore the ways in which celebrities may work within the confines of media industry-friendly palatability in order to mobilise feminist discourse in productive ways. Sarah Banet-Weiser describes how discussions of feminism are no longer confined to academia or activist groups. This circulation of different forms of feminism within

[73] Nicola Rivers, *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave: Turning Tides*.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Prudence Chamberlain, *The Feminist Fourth Wave: Affective Temporality*.

popular culture is facilitated by the wide range of media platforms available, which makes it accessible to more people than ever before[76]. Catherine Rottenberg argues that popular feminism seems 'unsettlingly unmoored from those key terms of equality, justice, and emancipation that have informed women's movements and feminism since their inception'[77]. Banet-Weiser agrees that it is those forms of popular feminism, such as celebrity feminism, 'that resonate within an economy of visibility'[78] and so are most successful. While the examples of highly visible popular feminism, such as those that appear on television or in films, are important, Banet-Weiser argues that viewing feminism on screen does not often translate to the dismantling of patriarchal structures. Indeed, with media industries driven by profit, Banet-Weiser argues that the types of feminism that are visible on screen often do not challenge structural inequity, and often centre white, middle class, cisgender, heterosexual women[79].

While both Banet-Weiser and Rottenburg are of course right that critiques of patriarchy are less visible in popular culture, it is my aim with this project to illuminate the ways in which these more mainstream forms of feminism can still have value. The intervention of this thesis is an investigation of the ways in which popular feminism can work within the confines and push back at the barriers of postfeminism within contemporary media. Where Banet-Weiser positions postfeminism and popular feminism as 'entangled together in contemporary media visibility'[80], with postfeminism bolstered by popular feminism, this thesis aims to demonstrate a more complex interaction.

Banet-Weiser's critique of a popular feminism that 'tinkers on the surface, embracing a palatable feminism, encouraging individual girls and women to just be empowered'[81] is a fair one. Straying too close to the status quo risks a continuation of gender inequality. However, her description of an 'accommodationist strategy'[82] that encourages the involvement of men, is a direct point of contention with this thesis, particularly with reference to Emma Watson. Watson's engagement with feminism absolutely encourages the involvement of

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[76] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*.
[77] Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise Of Neoliberal Feminism*, 11.
[78] Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, 3.
[79] Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*.
[80] Ibid., 20.
[81] Ibid., 21.
[82] Ibid., 14.

men and employs a friendly tone, one that is in contrast to the stereotypical angry feminist. Popular feminism's employment of this technique in order to appeal to a broader audience is one that this thesis aims to show in a more positive manner.

This research project sees the tensions inherent in celebrity feminism as demonstrative of what is at stake for women in society at large. Engagement with feminism within a postfeminist climate requires the use of a variety of strategies that this thesis uncovers through its case studies. In the economy of visibility that Banet-Weiser describes, those that exist outside the category of white, middle class, cisgender, heterosexual women open themselves up to critique and punishment when they speak out about feminist issues. This shaming is seen as the response of popular misogyny to the call of popular feminism, but is significantly more commonly weaponised against women without the privilege of whiteness or a middle-class background. While celebrity and popular iterations and presentations of feminism have the potential to achieve progress, continued interrogation is vital. Particularly when what feminism looks like in the mainstream is white and western. While it may be true that – as more people become aware of intersectionality – feminism will be compelled to adapt to consider inclusivity, this leaves out many women in the present moment. Ruby Hamad writes that it is not enough to fight against male oppression when we also live in a society in which white people continue to enact domination over people of colour. Hamad illuminates the ways the victimhood of white women can further oppress women of colour, how white women can oscillate 'between being the oppressed and the oppressor'[83]. Hamad describes the bind in which women of colour find themselves:

> *If we are angry, it is because we are bullies. If we are crying, it is because we are indulging in the cult of victimhood. If we are poised, it is because we lack emotion. If we are emotional, it is because we are less rational human and more primitive animal.*[84]

This difficult position held by women of colour has informed the analysis of my case studies. While I consider the race and class of all my case studies, for the two

[83] Ruby Hamad, *White Tears/Brown Scars*, 13.
[84] Ibid., 14.

women of colour included in this study – Michaela Coel and Jameela Jamil – this consideration becomes all the more pertinent.

I also draw on Alison Phipps for her valuable critique of popular feminism. Phipps examines the part played by mainstream feminism, in particular the #MeToo movement and the Time's Up collective it spawned, in setting 'the agenda for parliamentary politics, institutional reform and corporate equality work'[85], and its domination by privileged, white women, thanks to the visibility of Western media across the globe. Phipps acknowledges the ways in which '#MeToo reshaped – and continues to reshape – public understanding of sexual violence'[86] through the sharing of stories of everyday sexual violence committed by everyday men, rather than a handful of men positioned as monsters. This sharing of stories in order to 'foster understanding and resistance'[87] is what interested me most in how stories created and shared by women on television and in film could foster understanding of feminist issues and promote discussion of how we can resist patriarchal structures of inequity. Phipps is quick to remind us that conversations such as #MeToo that take place via mainstream media can often appear 'to be a conversation between white people: the privileged white women speaking out and the privileged white men defending themselves against allegations'[88] and that this whiteness is something to be aware of when examining mainstream feminist discourse. However, as my thesis aims to show, there are celebrities who are women of colour who also participate in mainstream feminist discourse. While the domination of whiteness is significant, it is also pertinent to examine the ways in which women of colour can bring new perspectives to popular feminism.

Another author whose work has informed my research has been Mikki Kendall, who demonstrates the power that can be found in not embracing or working within the confines of the status quo. While my research intervention is in discovering the progress that can be found largely within the realms of what can be seen as middle-class respectability, Kendall's work is a vital reminder that this is just one approach. Her "hood" feminism that does not centre those who are comfortable with the status quo is a crucial counterpart to a more mainstream feminism. Kendall writes how young girls are taught that if they are just good they will be safe

[85] Alison Phipps, *Me Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism*, 5.
[86] Ibid., 33.
[87] Ibid., 32.
[88] Ibid., 37.

from violence, racism and sexism, but that this is far from the truth. Kendall also describes how mainstream feminism often ignores the requirement for basic needs in favour of increasing the privilege already gained by middle-class white women. It is important to acknowledge that, while incremental gains made by mainstream feminism are valuable, feminism as a movement is meant to be for all women[89].

Koa Beck provides another vital reminder of the women that mainstream feminism leaves behind. Beck argues that the feminism that finds its way into mainstream media isn't consistent with the lived experience of many women. Individual gains are often extrapolated into collective wins for all women when the reality is far from true[90]. The intervention of my research is to mine the tiny cracks in which feminism enters the mainstream. Here my thesis examines how these moments of resistance to the individualism of neoliberal ideology can shape broader discourse. Authors such as Beck are vital to this research given that I myself am white and middle-class. Any analysis must take into account the privilege I enjoy; of both access to the academy and a job that pays well enough that I have been able to self-fund this project.

Coming from a journalistic background, Beck also provides an informative reminder on the types of feminist issues that can be discussed in mainstream media and those topics that remain too "edgy". Women's access to healthcare, wage gaps and parental leave, rape and sexual harassment are generally acceptable, while anything outside of these areas might be deemed too "niche". The identities that are prioritised within mainstream media are white, cis, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual and young[91]. Beck's experiences of the branding of women's media outlets as feminist, and the struggles she had pitching pieces about issues outside of the mainstream inform my analysis of the work that my case studies create.

The most recent critique of mainstream/white feminism that informs this thesis is from Kim Hong Nguyen, who conceptualises a version of feminism she terms "mean girl feminism". Echoing Hamad's "white tears" in her exploration of how white women can weaponise feminism, Nguyen posits that this version of feminism empowers white, heteronormative women to reject politeness in favour

[89] Mikki Kendall, *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women White Feminists Forgot.*
[90] Koa Beck, *White Feminism: From Suffragettes to Influencers and Who They Leave Behind.*
[91] Ibid.

of “bitchiness”. This enlightening argument demonstrates the ways in which white women perform feminism through “meanness”, while maintaining the patriarchal order that benefits them and ignoring the ways they uphold existing systems of oppression. Working in a way that seems to mirror postfeminism’s positioning of feminism as old-fashioned and unnecessary, mean girl feminism characterises acts of complaint and bitchiness as feminist praxis. Women who engage in mean girl feminism perform a rejection of patriarchy while actively participating in their own advancement within patriarchal society. Nguyen argues that this version of feminism does not set out to dismantle oppression or pursue collective liberation, but rather to advance a select “girl squad”. As a professor, Nguyen observes the way gender studies courses can risk encouraging a kind of feminism that affirms white fragility and deifies the feminine. She sees mean girl feminism as engaging in a rebranding of white women’s collaboration with white men as antagonistic[92]. Nguyen’s work is particularly valuable when considering the work of Phoebe Waller-Bridge, who has built her brand around creating unlikeable female characters. Nguyen’s exploration of the popularity of this particular brand of feminism demonstrates its commercial appeal and my case study of Waller-Bridge will examine the ways in which Waller-Bridge draws on this appeal in her work.

Popular misogyny

Entangled in the cultural moment in which my research resides was the growing popularity of misogyny. Kristin J. Anderson examines the growth of antifeminism and sexism during the postfeminist era, arguing that the postfeminist sentiments that feminism had achieved its goals, and was therefore obsolete, actively contribute to modern misogyny. This rebranding of sexism that encourages empowerment in the workplace and the prioritisation of individual choice, Anderson argues, works against the collective action at the heart of feminism. Antifeminists can point to equality that has been achieved in certain areas of neoliberal society and brand those who are feminists as wanting to be superior to men. Anderson’s description of the belief that feminism has gone too far[93] and become too extreme, resonates today. Understanding the ways in which misogyny utilises postfeminism to manufacture the myth of the man-hating feminist has

[92] Kim Hong Nguyen, *Mean Girl Feminism: How White Feminists Gaslight, Gatekeep, and Girlboss*.
[93] Kristin J. Anderson, *Modern Misogyny: Anti-Feminism in a Post-Feminist Era*.

been crucial to situating my case studies within a period of conflict between popular feminism and popular misogyny.

Annie Kelly examines a period from January 2012 to November 2016, which she considers 'a period of significant evolution for digital antifeminism'[94]. Within this analysis of a digital culture that was 'both highly politicised and popular'[95] Kelly uncovers a wealth of evidence that digital antifeminism experienced a surge in popularity and also identifies the ways in which misogyny and postfeminism can work alongside each other. Kelly categorises discourse that does not explicitly identify itself as opposed to feminism as postfeminist, acknowledging that the distinction between antifeminism and postfeminism requires a nuanced approach that is often difficult to discern in the fast-paced world of social media[96].

Laurie Penny positions antifeminism as informing the alt-right with a view that feminists are destroying the natural order of things. In the narrative of modern misogyny that they describe, straight white men have the most to fear from the emergence of identity politics. Some even give themselves the identity of "beta male". Penny argues that this logic is just an extension of neoliberalism's insistence that men and women are different and that success in the market is the reward of wielding natural dominance. Men who feel they haven't been granted what should naturally be theirs look to the alt-right's blaming of feminist progress in order to find their revenge[97]. A nuanced approach is required when examining a period of history during which popular feminism was at war with the combined forces of popular misogyny, antifeminism and the alt-right. With each of my case studies it has been important to consider the cultural context of their position within the media industries and the influence of such political ideologies on media production.

[94] Annie Kelly, 'Fear, Hate and Countersubversion: American Antifeminism Online', 7.
[95] Ibid., 9.
[96] Kelly, 'Fear, Hate and Countersubversion: American Antifeminism Online'.
[97] Laurie Penny, *Sexual Revolution: Modern Fascism and the Feminist Fightback*.

Feminist media studies

Feminism on screen

With waves of feminism increasingly played out through popular culture, the study of feminism on screen has been another area of scholarship I have drawn on for my research. As Heather Savigny and Helen Warner argue, the media we consume:

> *play an important and significant role in our cultural socialisation, and in the construction of our cultural discourses. The dominance of visual media in our everyday lives has enormous consequences for the way we see the world, the way in which power structures work, are negotiated and re-negotiated, constituted and re-constituted*[98]

Savigny and Warner regard the way that women are portrayed in media as 'an intensely political act'[99] that is closely intertwined with capitalism and neoliberalism. They argue that any instance of feminist discourse portrayed on screen must be viewed through the lens of the cultural context in which it was created. Now, more than ever, with feminism being in turn repudiated, co-opted, repackaged, and the subject of popular misogynist backlash, it is vital to frame any analysis within systems of power. Rosalind Gill describes how 'most feminism in the West now happens in the media, and for the majority of people their experience of feminism is an entirely mediated one'[100]. With the increased visibility of feminist discourses, this can only be more true at the time of writing this thesis. My research project demonstrates the ways in which these discourses are influenced by, and in turn influence, representations of women and feminist ideas on screen. As Gill also notes, 'the media, gender relations and feminist ideas are themselves changing and in flux. There is no stable, unchanging feminist perspective from which to make a cool appraisal of contemporary gender in the media'[101]. Since Gill's observations on the diversity of feminism over a decade ago, its varied iterations have only multiplied.

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[98] Heather Savigny and Helen Warner, 'Introduction: The Politics of Being a Woman', 8.
[99] Ibid., 9.
[100] Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media*, 40.
[101] Ibid., 2.

A particularly interesting piece of scholarship on women's mediated experiences of feminism is Sarah A. Matheson's analysis of the launch of Canada's Women's Television Network (WTN) in the 1990s. Her research uncovers an example of how programming strategies must be in sync with popular discourse in order to find success. Examining the early content of WTN, Matheson finds that programming was informed by second-wave feminism, rather than the issues third-wave feminists of the time were interested in, or the topics that dominated postfeminist culture. This disinterest in second-wave issues also coincided with the rise in popularity of the internet as a place to explore feminist concerns. Matheson documents the corresponding shift in WTN's scheduling to a more varied mix of content to grow their audience. This new programming addressed more traditionally feminine topics such as motherhood and beauty culture that the early programming avoided. Matheson details the critique the channel received, including accusations of abandoning feminism for commercialism. Matheson offers an alternative interpretation; acknowledging that while commercial success was undoubtedly a factor in the change of programming, it was also a productive response to the feminist interests of its viewership[102]. This balance of catering to commercial appeal, the interests of the audience and feminist content is where my thesis finds its focus. How did celebrity feminists working in the media during my period of study manage to appeal to, and engage, a mainstream audience while introducing feminist ideas to their content?

With fourth-wave feminism so centred in popular culture, and popular culture contributing so significantly to the identity formation of those who consume it, Briony Hannell seeks to explore feminist identity formation. Hannell analyses digital feminism's proliferation through media fandoms. Her investigation into the interactions between contemporary feminisms, popular culture, and the digital platform Tumblr examines how the cultural critique of media by young people engaged in digital fan spaces helps to shape their feminist identities. Media fandom was largely overlooked before Hannell's intervention, and her work makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of how young people can use their engagement with popular culture as a tool for feminist identity formation. Not only this, Hannell also demonstrates the feminist pedagogical potential of digital

[102] Sarah A. Matheson, 'Feminist Television or Television for Women? Revisiting the Launch of Canada's Women's Television Network'.

media; with creative content such as memes utilised to teach feminist concepts in accessible and engaging ways[103].

Valerie Estelle Frankel usefully maps the pop culture landscape of a large proportion of my period of study; cataloging the increases in diversity of representation made to science fiction movies such as *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*[104], the all-female *Ghostbusters*[105] and Star Wars: The Last Jedi[106], and the corresponding backlash these films generated. Frankel names the buzzwords of "toxic masculinity" and "rape culture" and, of course, the #MeToo movement, alongside the 2017 Women's March and websites such as *Feministing* and *Everyday Sexism,* where women were beginning to share issues online, in her descriptions of this cultural moment. Noting the widespread application of The Bechdel Test and the raised awareness of the whiteness and maleness of media, alongside feminist commentary sites such as *The Mary Sue* and *Feminist Frequency*, Frankel celebrates the progress that was made in what has historically been a male-dominated genre of a male-dominated industry[107]. My research shares in this celebration of progress, examining the ways in which the stars, writers and directors of media in this thesis have been part of a new wave of storytelling that has the potential to make a difference.

Authorship

Authorship and production of media is another key area of study that informs this thesis. The relationship between the representations of women on screen, and the involvement of women in production is a complex one. As Susan Martin-Márquez writes, 'a boom in women directors does not necessarily produce an explosion of feminist cinema'[108] and Rachel Williams identifies a 'tendency to overemphasise the gender of the director and the accompanying "femininity" and/or "feminism" of her films'[109], especially in the marketing of their work. Amanda D. Lotz writes that it is 'unclear whether the development of multiple female-centered dramas is a progressive feminist gain'[110]. Williams notes that academic discussion of female

[103] Briony Hannell, *Feminist Fandom: Media Fandom, Digital Feminisms, and Tumblr*.
[104] *Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens* (Lucasfilm, 2015).
[105] *Ghostbusters* (Columbia Pictures, 2016).
[106] *Star Wars: Episode VIII - The Last Jedi* (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2017).
[107] Valerie Estelle Frankel, 'Introduction'.
[108] Susan Martin-Márquez, *Feminist Discourse & Spanish Cinema: Sight Unseen*, 280.
[109] Rachel Williams, 'No Job For a Lady: Women Directors in Hollywood', 25.
[110] Amanda D. Lotz, *Redesigning Women: Television after the Network Era*, 20.

filmmakers has largely been confined to those working in independent cinema and that those working within mainstream Hollywood cinema have yet to be given such critical attention. Although women filmmakers are marginalised within the mainstream film industry, it is also possible that those working for big studios are dismissed by feminist film studies. Popular media that appeals to a large audience is viewed as commercially driven, and therefore of little radical impact: rather upholding dominant ideology with no potential for disruption or interrogation[111]. While there is no denying that this is frequently the case, I am interested in the cases where women working within the mainstream media are nonetheless bringing feminist politics into their work and into popular discourse.

These tensions are at the heart of my case study of Greta Gerwig. One of my interventions with this thesis is to demonstrate that, given the rarity of female filmmakers, economic success will be of the utmost importance to female directors, and feminist topics may not appeal to the broadest audience. In this chapter I draw on Deborah Jermyn's analysis of writer and director of romantic comedies Nancy Meyers. Jermyn's work recognises the importance of Meyers' contributions to cinema and legitimises her as an author. Her analysis of Meyers' oeuvre demonstrates a dismissal of her work due to its categorisation as romantic comedy[112]. Meyers' successful Hollywood career makes her a useful comparison to Gerwig with particular regard to the ways in which she engages with feminism within a male-dominated industry.

Karen Hollinger writes that adopting a positive approach to analysis of mainstream cinema may allow for the discovery of 'certain female-oriented film genres where dominant ideas are challenged and shifts in representations of women do occur'[113], even within an industry that largely upholds patriarchal values. As Williams states, 'the idea that for women art and commerce are a poor mix finds a parallel in feminist thinking, with that which is popular and commercial viewed as upholding rather than interrogating patriarchal ideology, and therefore treated with suspicion'[114]. It is my opinion that these mainstream works have a valuable part to play in the shaping of feminist discourse and can be used to progress discussions *as well as* maintaining the status quo.

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[111] Rachel Williams, 'No Job For a Lady: Women Directors in Hollywood'.
[112] Deborah Jermyn, *Nancy Meyers*.
[113] Karen Hollinger, *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films*, 4.
[114] Williams, 'No Job For a Lady: Women Directors in Hollywood', 94.

With celebrity so important in the commercial success of screen works, it is no surprise that 'studios are so eager to hand over the directorial reins to actors who already have well-established and well-known star images which can be built upon in order to market them as directors'[115]. This specifically applies to Greta Gerwig and her evolution from independent actor to director of huge hit *Barbie*[116]. As Williams discusses, much the same as other celebrities, these actors-turned-directors become a brand associated with certain themes, contents, and aesthetics – something I will explore with each of my case studies. As well as Gerwig, this can also be applied to Phoebe Waller-Bridge's transition from British television to Hollywood – writing for Bond film *No Time to Die*[117] and starring in *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny*[118] – thanks to her association with complex female characters. Of course, it is important to critique how progressive mainstream works really are – especially during a time when feminism as an idea is being appropriated for commercial gain – but it is my belief that there is more nuance and complexity that can be explored within these texts. What my research brings to light is the feminist topics that make it into mainstream media, and who is permitted to tell these stories.

As Patricia White writes, authorship 'has been of critical importance to feminist film studies, in large part because women's access to the means of production has been historically restricted'[119]. This relationship is complex as the figure of the author goes in and out of favour in media criticism. While White allows that works authored by women are not excluded from the influence of 'economic and ideological forces both local and global'[120], the involvement of women in shaping narratives is key to furthering ideas of femininity and feminism. Although ideas around authorship are less fashionable today than they were at the time the term *auteur* was first used in French film criticism, the idea of an individual personality that 'can be traced in a thematic and/or stylistic consistency'[121] throughout an author's work remains generally accepted.

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[115] Rachel Williams, 'No Job For a Lady: Women Directors in Hollywood', 116.
[116] *Barbie* (Warner Bros., 2023).
[117] *No Time to Die* (Universal Pictures, 2021).
[118] *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2023).
[119] Patricia White, *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms*, 2.
[120] Ibid., 11.
[121] John Caughie, *Theories of Authorship* (Oxon: Routledge, 1981), 9.

Yvonne Tasker's work on women filmmakers and authorship has been key to the analytical framework of my research, particularly her focus on 'authorship as a discourse, a discourse within which women filmmakers have been marginalized'[122]. As Tasker describes, even as women are increasing in numbers behind the camera, 'the position of women filmmakers is typically both marginal and precarious'[123]. Tasker argues that their *visibility* is significant within what is still a male-dominated industry. This visibility is key to the analysis of my case studies, particularly within the "economy of visibility" as described earlier in this literature review. My research asks how women in the media are discussed in popular discourse, how they are portrayed by the press, and what everyday people think (if anything) about them. While only Gerwig is a filmmaker in the strictest sense of the auteur argument, with this research my intervention augments ideas around authorship to include television, podcasts, digital and social media, and the paratexts that surround these creative projects.

Female authorship is so often understood in literal terms, due to the author's appearance in her own work, or thought of almost as a genre in itself – thanks to women's relative scarcity as authors within screen media. Over thirty years later, Judith Mayne's observations on female authorship remain relevant today:

> *Given the extent to which feminist analysis of the cinema has relied on the distinction between dominant and alternative film, the claims that can be made for an alternative vision that exists within and alongside the dominant cinema will be crucial in gauging the specific ways in which women directors engage with "women's cinema" as divided between representations that perpetuate patriarchal definitions of femininity, and representations that challenge them and offer other modes of identification and pleasure.*[124]

This black and white understanding of 'the notion of films as a political tool and film as entertainment'[125] with no opportunity to find common ground between the two is also challenged by Claire Johnston. This thesis aims to find that common ground through celebrities who are bringing the political into the world of

[122] Yvonne Tasker, 'Vision and Visibility: Women Filmmakers, Contemporary Authorship, and Feminist Film Studies', 214.
[123] Ibid., 213.
[124] Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema*, 99.
[125] Claire Johnston, 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema', 126.

entertainment. Laura Minor delves into the way pleasure has become part of fourth-wave feminism's response to female oppression, with a focus on laughter being critical to representations of women during this period[126]. I draw on Minor's work particularly in my case studies of Michaela Coel and Phoebe Waller-Bridge, as both employ humour in their representations of womanhood.

Minor's work explores the authorship of women in comedy; analysing writers, producers, actors and directors and the subversive characters they create. Minor argues that these characters, while appearing out-of-control on screen, are carefully crafted. Minor also examines the *authorial authority* of these women and the *ambivalence* that surrounds them and their creations. Minor's work makes clear the difficulties in creating feminist comedy 'in an era fraught with cultural tensions'[127] and the inconsistencies and blindspots identified by criticism of these works. In a similar exploration, my work asks how authorship can move beyond film studies into a new usage of the concept that can be applied to a greater variety of media.

Celebrity culture

Star studies

Richard Dyer's work was my entryway into star studies. His analysis of Hollywood's reconstruction of 'the dominant ideology of western society'[128] and his positioning of stars as 'media texts, and as such as products of Hollywood'[129] has been influential in my understanding of stars in relation to the economic structures of the media industry. As discussed previously in this literature review, the branding of stars becomes shorthand for what is to be expected from a film, and also can add value to a project. As Dyer writes, a star can be 'a property on the strength of whose name money can be raised for a film'[130]. Their worth as commodities is determined by the stars themselves, but also their work. Gender is a critical aspect of celebrity studies, particularly when it comes to considerations of agency. As Melanie Williams writes, female celebrities are 'often seen as

[126] Laura Minor, *Reclaiming Female Authorship in Contemporary UK Television Comedy*.
[127] Ibid., 16.
[128] Richard Dyer and P McDonald, *Stars*, 2.
[129] Ibid., 10.
[130] Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, 5.

particularly subject to commodification and manipulation, and being spoken for rather than being at liberty to speak for themselves'[131]. A key intervention of my research is to discover opportunities for agency within commodification. How can stars use their positions as brands that add value to a creative project in a way that can also contribute to feminist discourse? How can celebrities author their own identities in a way that cultivates commercial success while remaining in control of their commodification?

Another key scholar of star studies is Jackie Stacey, whose focus on the audience and how they might read stars within their cultural context offers a new perspective. Writing in 1991, Stacey's argument that female stars are 'an obvious focus for the analysis of the construction of idealised femininities within patriarchal culture'[132] remains relevant today. Stacey describes how 'cinema combines the exchange of looks with the display of commodities, and as such, has been of interest to feminists challenging conventional definitions of femininity'[133]. In *Stars*, Dyer also makes clear the 'determining force in the creation of stars'[134] that is the consumers of media and the way that each star is constructed from a whole host of media texts; across promotion, criticism, and commentary, alongside their work. This focus on the audience will be brought to bear across my case studies, most notably in my chapters on Phoebe Waller-Bridge and Greta Gerwig as I demonstrate the ways in which audiences take texts and evolve them into part of a broader feminist discourse.

Hannah Yelin explores the construction of celebrities, describing the ways in which the meaning of celebrity memoirs 'is shaped by their wider relationship with extra textual material—that is, the wealth of information we "know" about the celebrity's life from other sources'[135]. Yelin terms this model the *celebrity-as-assemblage*, where the 'performance of the celebrity self is always in dialogue with, and so constituted of, its paratexts'[136]. Paratexts are key to the analysis of my case studies. Although their on-screen work is a key medium through which they are furthering feminist discourse, as Jason Mittell writes,

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[131] Rachel Williams, 'No Job For a Lady: Women Directors in Hollywood', 17.
[132] Jackie Stacey, 'Feminine Fascinations: Forms of Identification in Star-Audience Relations.', 142.
[133] Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*, 9.
[134] Richard Dyer and P McDonald, *Stars*, 17.
[135] Hannah Yelin, *Celebrity Memoir: From Ghostwriting to Gender Politics*, 3.
[136] Ibid.

> *we cannot treat a text as a bounded, clearly defined, stable object of study. Especially (though not exclusively) in the digital era, a television program is suffused within and constituted by an intertextual web that pushes textual boundaries outward, blurring the experiential borders between watching a program and engaging with its paratexts*[137]

With much feminist discourse taking place online and in relation to popular culture and digital activism, discussion of a celebrity and/or the work they create greatly informs my research. Interestingly it is the work of my case studies who do not use social media that has mutated into memes and digital trends most widely. It is in the exploration of the authorship of works that spark discussions and sharing of ideas that my research finds its intervention.

Engagement with paratexts is also key to uncovering where stars manufacture a sense of *authenticity*. This illusion of privileged access to the real version of a celebrity is an important part of several of my case studies' appeal, and also where tensions between their "authentic" self and their on screen persona can be found. As Su Holmes and Sean Redmond write, 'the construction of stars and celebrities, has always involved the "search" for the "authentic" person that lies behind the manufactured mask of fame'[138]. This is a key area of intervention for this thesis, particularly in my case study of Jameela Jamil, but across my other chapters as well. My argument builds on the tensions that are created between the portrayal of an "authentic" self and a celebrity's on-screen persona. As I will detail later in this review this is particularly important when examining digital media.

Activist celebrities

The idea, or performance of, authenticity is key to celebrities who engage in activism. In Tessa Perkins' analysis of 'The politics of "Jane Fonda"', she describes the ways in which Fonda was 'the Hollywood star who, in the seventies at least, came closest to being a feminist heroine'[139]. Perkins details how Fonda was repeatedly required to prove her identification with the feminist movement as her 'decision to use her skills as an actress to make films which might be "a weapon for political change" could be read by feminists as being either a capitulation to the

[137] Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, 7.
[138] Su Holmes and Sean Redmond, 'Introduction: Understanding Celebrity Culture', 4.
[139] T Perkins, 'The Politics of "Jane Fonda"', 238.

system or an attempt to use the system'[140]. Perkins' analysis of Fonda's celebrity activism is pertinent to my research due to Fonda's 'insistence on the importance of making films which would reach a mass audience'[141]. This desire to reach a new audience who were not already familiar with and converted to feminist politics is shared by all five of my case studies. A key example of this is Emma Watson, who appealed to men and boys in her 'Be the he for she' speech[142]. In a similar way, Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* not only appeals to Millennials like her, who grew up with Barbie, but young girls who are possibly experiencing their first encounter with patriarchy during their viewing of the movie.

Perkins describes the tension created in Fonda's persona by her decision to create films that weren't obviously feminist, or to not play characters with radical politics: 'the characters Fonda played were frequently hard for feminists to identify with wholeheartedly'[143]. This is a characteristic that is also shared by many of my case studies. Emma Watson's portrayal of commodity-focused Nicki in *The Bling Ring*[144] or Phoebe Waller-Bridge joining forces with secret agent of the patriarchy James Bond, could be easy to dismiss as capitulation to the status quo. Perkins' work helps me navigate these tensions to identify the opportunities these works create. While it may not be radically feminist to make a film about a doll that has for decades embodied female beauty ideals, the audience *Barbie* reached is undeniable. It is the intervention of this thesis to unpack the ways in which reaching a mainstream audience can further feminist discourse.

Sally Totman and P. David Marshall describe the different ways that films and celebrity can intersect, with actors embodying a political position through their roles and also the importance of the paratexts surrounding each piece of work[145]. This is one of the more important aspects of this thesis. Throughout each chapter I explore the inconsistencies and points of tension that are created through both the screen media my case studies feature in, and the paratexts that surround them. Totman and Marshall argue that celebrities must cultivate a certain persona for themselves of engagement and involvement with a cause and that there has been a recent 'conscious effort towards a persona of conviction and sincerity that

[140] T Perkins, 'The Politics of "Jane Fonda"', 246.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Emma Watson, 'Be the He for She'.
[143] Perkins, 'The Politics of "Jane Fonda"', 247.
[144] *The Bling Ring* (A24, 2013).
[145] Sally Totman and P. David Marshall, 'Real/Reel Politics and Popular Culture'.

transcends the artifice of performance'[146]. Their argument posits that certain film stars who engage in activism 'are at least partially using these political film vehicles to express their own agency and the relative autonomy from the rest of the industry. The political cause in the film allows them to construct an "authentic", "ethical" self'[147]. This perception of stars as using activism for their own gain is a common one. As Robert Fletcher writes, 'celebrities are viewed as both authentic and inauthentic at once'[148]. This tension is at the heart of each of my case studies, as my exploration of their commodification and political cause unravels.

Digital media theory

Mediated authenticity

Dyer describes how publicity is a crucial aspect of the star image due to its real or imagined departure from the manufactured image of the film star[149]. This departure is applicable beyond the film star. This perceived access to the true identity of any celebrity gives a sense of authenticity, as well as a glimpse of any tensions between a star's on- and off-screen persona. The advent of social media gives a whole new dimension to the perception of celebrities. Use of social media by stars is another useful vehicle for publicity that this thesis examines in my chapters on Emma Watson and Jameela Jamil.

In addition to using social media to promote their work, these platforms contribute to a star's image. Celebrities sharing insights on these platforms into what their audience might interpret as their everyday lives creates what Kate Crawford describes as 'ambient intimacy'[150]. This disclosure shared on social media allows the appearance of a relationship to develop between the star and their audience that creates a feeling of accessibility that wouldn't otherwise be possible. This self-authorship creates a persona that feels authentic, while remaining carefully controlled, and is absolutely central to my work. This is particularly true when examining the ways my case studies Emma Watson and Jameela Jamil use this

[146] Totman and Marshall, 604.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Robert Fletcher, 'Blinded by the Stars? Celebrity, Fantasy, and Desire in Neoliberal Environmental Governance'.
[149] Richard Dyer and P McDonald, *Stars*.
[150] K Crawford, 'Following You: Disciplines of Listening in Social Media', 528.

accessibility in order to foster a relationship with their audience. The building of a sense of camaraderie with their following is part of their feminist work, as well as their self-branding, and my intervention with these case studies unpacks the tensions that come from drawing on authenticity as a celebrity. I also draw out the specificity of the cultural moment and the ways in which the prominence of digital discourse within fourth-wave feminism plays into the use of social media by celebrity feminists.

The nature of these platforms creates an assumption amongst followers of celebrities, and indeed everyday users, that posts are made as a form of 'self-expression and sociality rather than commercial or explicitly political purposes'[151]. Red Chidgey identifies this curated authorship of the self as a type of 'affective labour'[152] that boosts the brand power of the celebrity and, in turn, their potential for activism. Creating an engaged audience that is more likely to be sympathetic to a celebrity's cause has become an increasingly important aspect of an activist celebrity's labour. Tools such as the appearance of vulnerability, created through means including narratives of personal suffering, are used to mobilise audiences; and are much easier thanks to social media. This is something that I will bring to bear in my chapter on Jameela Jamil, which brings further questions about race to the fore about this kind of labour. Jamil's use of narratives of personal suffering certainly mobilises her audience but has also drawn negative attention, which must be unpacked.

#MeToo and digital celebrity feminism

Caitlin E. Lawson examines celebrity, feminism, and the digital era, exploring the 'discursive omnipresence and longevity'[153] of the #MeToo movement and the importance of celebrity culture and social media in its proliferation. Lawson's work uses as its case studies 'recent celebrity-centered controversies related to gender and the feminist movement'[154] from 2014-2018 to show how these events have contributed to 'collective modes of holding individuals and groups accountable for

[151] Amy Shields Dobson, *Postfeminist Digital Cultures: Femininity, Social Media, and Self-Representation*, 11.
[152] Red Chidgey, 'Postfeminism™: Celebrity Feminism, Branding and the Performance of Activist Capital', 1065.
[153] Lawson, *Just Like Us: Digital Debates on Feminism and Fame*, 2.
[154] Ibid.

their actions'[155]. Lawson's belief that 'celebrity culture and digital platforms form a crucial discursive arena where postfeminist logics can be unsettled, opening up the possibility of more progressive, activist, and intersectional popular feminisms'[156] is one that I share. Lawson examines the visibility of celebrities, and the ways in which this both helped to shape popular feminism, and also problematised their involvement with activism. Lawson argues that this visibility can amplify feminist issues, allowing them to become topics for discussion by wider audiences, and notes 'the increasing integration of feminist language, themes, and action into celebrity brands during the 2010s, and the ways in which that integration shapes public understandings of feminism'[157]. Where Lawson's work analyses specific events, this thesis offers an insight into the celebrities themselves and the work they have done within this moment in history.

Lawson is careful not to ignore the place of celebrities within capitalism, and the homogenous image of feminism that results from their domination of popular discourse. She agrees with Sarah Banet-Weiser that, with media industries dedicated to the pursuit of profit:

> *So much of the role celebrities have played in elevating feminism as a brand over the last decade centers on the cishet attractiveness they lend it. As dominant cultural images of feminism shift away from the angry, braless, man- hating lesbian toward the straight, cis, sophisticated, hip starlet, feminism's cultural cachet has blossomed.*[158]

With 'the hypervisibility afforded to celebrities and, in particular, to white celebrities'[159], Lawson acknowledges that celebrity feminism must be critiqued to ensure that it isn't reduced to mere branding of the individual. Celebrity entanglement with capitalism risks their feminism never achieving truly liberatory heights. Lawson echoes Alison Phipps' critique of the Time's Up movement's domination by 'hyperprivileged white feminism'[160], while seeking to show how the attention given to these celebrities allowed 'more complex discussions of gender and racial injustice, pushing the intersectional imperative' [161]. In a frank appraisal

[155] Lawson, *Just Like Us: Digital Debates on Feminism and Fame*, 2.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid., 8.
[158] Ibid., 18.
[159] Ibid., 120.
[160] Ibid., 123.
[161] Ibid., 136.

of the media, Lawson writes that 'Intersectional language from glamorous stars may filter more easily into mainstream news and commentary, but more radical and transformative intersectional activism that focuses specifically on marginalized communities makes for a less sexy— and more disruptive— media narrative'[162]. Lawson further argues that

> *As more celebrities identify as feminists, and increasingly as they highlight the importance of intersectional feminisms, dominant understandings of feminism have shifted. And the infrastructure of social media platforms and the newsworthiness of celebrities can amplify particular ideas, positions, and understandings, helping them to loom large in our collective consciousness. However, the amplification that helps to promote the popularity of feminism is often shaped by logics that remain tied to traditional power structures. What gets amplified? Overwhelmingly, less radical feminisms rise to the fore of mainstream media conversations. Who gets amplified? Celebrities, and particularly white celebrities, gain attention over and above other activists or policy makers.*[163]

This nuanced approach is one I share when analysing my case studies – unpacking the ways in which more *palatable* media narratives of feminism reach a wider audience and the ways this fails to represent women from marginalised groups. The intervention of my research is to uncover the places where these visible feminisms find opportunities for progression that have perhaps been dismissed or overlooked.

Another scholar whose work analyses the contributions of celebrity feminists is Red Chidgey. Her examination of Amber Rose's commodification of the feminist protest Slut Walk identifies a number of key elements involved in celebrity feminism. The framing of social problems through compelling narratives, media visibility, authenticity, the use of digital media, charisma and inspiration are just a few of the components Chidgey explores in her work. Urging one to consider postfeminism's 'ambivalent effects and mobilisations that increasingly compose, and re-compose, collectivist feminist activist and industry practices alike'[164],

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[162] Lawson, Just Like Us: Digital Debates on Feminism and Fame, 138.
[163] Ibid., 147.
[164] Red Chidgey, 'Postfeminism™: Celebrity Feminism, Branding and the Performance of Activist Capital', 1067.

Chidgey's work encourages us instead to move away from the belief that celebrity feminist activism is 'an oxymoron and a political impossibility'[165].

Chidgey explores the place 'where grassroots activism and capitalist celebrity culture collide'[166] through her concept of "activist capital". In this conceptualisation, the commodification of feminist practices can co-exist with, and indeed be informed by, social justice activism. Chidgey argues that a lack of theorisation of celebrity feminists leads to a generalisation of them as appropriating feminism for commercial gain. The very notion of celebrity's exaltation of individuals places it in direct opposition to the collective activism of social justice movements, when the reality is much more nuanced. Chidgey searches for the points of contact and moments of friction between the two and also seeks to move away from attributing moral value to different expressions of feminism.

This is not to say that all forms of celebrity feminism are created equal; Chidgey's work looks at a particular 'configuration of celebrity feminist activisms that are closely attuned to the work of social justice movements, but which, simultaneously, draw differentiated advantage and capital from the workings of celebrity culture'[167]. These initiatives engage with grassroots organisations as well as well-known charities while working within the confines of postfeminist media culture. Chidgey's work looks beyond the celebrity feminisms that are the most common subjects of scholarly analysis – those of white, middle-class, cisgender, heteronormative female celebrities – to those with lower visibility, and so her work has certainly informed my research as I search for the nuances of celebrity feminism.

Reviewing the scholarly literature within the fields that this thesis encompasses has revealed the symbiotic relationship between popular culture and popular feminist discourse. While the commodification of feminism by neoliberalism for commercial gain has been identified, there has also been backlash against feminist progress. The continued presence of postfeminism and its undermining of feminism cannot be ignored when examining media that is created as part of a

[165] Red Chidgey, 'Postfeminism™: Celebrity Feminism, Branding and the Performance of Activist Capital', 1056.
[166] Ibid.
[167] Ibid., 1058.

commercial industry. While celebrity feminism may be viewed by some as abandoning progress in favour of commercial success, the reality is that celebrities are valuable commodities that must protect their brands in order to maintain continued access to their platform and visibility. While feminist issues can be discussed and even celebrated in mainstream media, it remains true that production companies will still consider some too "niche". One avenue that this literature review shows would be a valuable path of exploration is the potential that can be found in ambivalent reactions to media. This thesis aims to show how popular culture can be an integral part of progressing feminist discourse and offer opportunities for feminism to be shaped by debate. This debate is increasingly taking place online, with a good deal of fourth-wave feminist activism mobilising on digital platforms. The paratextual nature of stars and their use of social media has become all the more important to include in analysis of celebrities. Paratexts can take on new meanings and memes can be created to alter the brands of celebrities, while social media platforms can also be an outlet for a celebrity to take direct authorship of their own persona through performances of authenticity.

Another opportunity this review has shown for research is an investigation into celebrities who aren't white and middle-class and their participation in popular feminism. With the criticism that celebrity feminism receives for its focus on white, middle-class issues, this thesis explores (in part) how two women of colour – one from a working class background – navigate the tensions inherent in celebrity feminism. Narrow representations of women, or restrictions of topics are dictated by the systems of power in which the commercial media industries operate. It is the aim of this thesis to uncover how, through delivery via a commercial package of popular culture, celebrity feminism doesn't necessarily have to be an oxymoron.

Methodology

In order to uncover the different ways that feminism has found its way into popular culture through celebrity during my period of examination, I use five case studies. There are differences and similarities between each celebrity, allowing this thesis to explore how each star draws on their persona to engage with feminism. For example, Emma Watson and Jameela Jamil use social media to create a sense of authenticity. By manufacturing a sense of approachability and camaraderie with their audiences, each has engaged with feminist topics from a place of perceived accessibility and collective action. Conversely, Phoebe Waller-Bridge and Greta Gerwig eschew social media in favour of using their television and film productions as a vehicle for feminist discourse. This study is not one which is concerned with the evaluation of the feminist credentials of various texts. My project is an interrogation into the ways in which *celebrities* are constructed as feminist through popular culture texts and the paratexts that surround them.

Why these case studies?

In order to fully understand this historical period, the case studies I chose are all Millennials; part of the same generation as me, born between 1981 and 2000[168]. Their specific generational expression of feminism is something I have consumed as part of my everyday life as a Millennial woman, as well as for this research project. While this gives me a helpful insight as to why the work of these celebrities resonates so strongly with people of my generation, as Alison Jaggar describes, 'research projects are undertaken for specific reasons by people who are historically and socially situated'[169]. In the tradition of feminist scholars, I must reflect on how my research mirrors my own subjectivities; that what I chose to research, and how I interpret it, is conditioned by my own experiences. I am a Millennial woman, and my use of popular culture as a way to explore feminist debates inspired this project. My personal involvement comes with its own conceptual and practical problems. Much as the "aca-fan" scholar who studies a fandom that they are a part of must consider their place in the structure of

[168] Megan W. Gerhardt and Deepika Hebbalalu, 'Mind the Gap: Moving from Ethnocentric to Ethnorelative Perspectives of Generational Diversity'.
[169] Alison M. Jaggar, *Just Methods: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Reader*, 196.

knowledge of their area of study[170], so must I acknowledge my relationship to my case studies.

In my own consumption of popular culture and digital feminist discourse, I had identified several figures working within film and television who had become known for their engagement with feminist issues. Rather than focus on one particular person's work for this project, I wanted to explore the different ways that celebrities working in popular culture had chosen to incorporate feminist ideas into their work. Choosing five case studies gave me the opportunity to explore several different approaches in depth. Analysing a larger number of stars might have allowed me to organise my findings thematically and draw conclusions based on a bigger data set. On reflection, my rationale for choosing a smaller number is tied to the reasoning for beginning this project. Working with the case studies as individuals, rather than merely data points, allows this thesis the opportunity to demonstrate more fully the relationship that each celebrity creates with their audience. Whether consciously, or unconsciously, I have a parasocial[171] connection with each of my case studies. They have created work that resonates with me on certain levels and I have associations with them and their politics because of this. This is at the heart of this thesis: screen media fosters relationships between audiences and the celebrities we consume, and the stories they create in turn generate ideas within us and discourse around us. Claire Perkins asks how we can acknowledge the progressive possibilities of a feminist conversation popularised through the media, one that opens up feminist politics to a wider audience, while still remaining critical of its expressions[172]. It is this balance that I aim to strike in this project.

When choosing my case studies I wanted to select figures who represented a particular kind of celebrity feminism. While I didn't necessarily conduct value assessments of their work as feminist or non-feminist – rather focusing on the discourse surrounding their celebrity – I was inspired by Cavender and Jurik's analysis of *Prime Suspect*, in which they 'adopt an approach that not only examines but advocates for works that promote hopes for and actions toward

[170] Cécile Cristofari and Matthieu J Guitton, 'Aca-Fans and Fan Communities: An Operative Framework'.
[171] Donald Horton and Richard Wohl, 'Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance'.
[172] Perkins et al., 'Doing Film Feminisms in the Age of Popular Feminism: A Roundtable Convened by Claire Perkins and Jodi Brooks'.

social justice'[173]. The celebrities I have chosen confront feminist issues of equality across a variety of intersectional identities, such as race, class, and sexual orientation either in their on-screen work, in off-screen advocacy, or both. Trying to avoid examples who uphold the neoliberal feminism examined by Catherine Rottenberg[174], I sought to find celebrities who used their visibility to raise awareness of the experiences of marginalised people, who drew attention to structural inequality and who focused on collective rather than individual action in some way.

In order to answer my first research question, I chose female celebrities who enjoy successful careers in the mainstream film and/or television industries, who are regarded as, in some dimension, feminist, and who are generally well-liked (indeed, the matter of likeability and its potential incompatibility with the espousing of feminist views is a recurrent theme in my thesis). As I wanted to understand who is allowed to make work that engages with feminist issues within an economy of visibility, I looked outside the world of independent feminist cinema. Inspired by Jane Fonda's approach (detailed earlier in my literature review) to proliferating feminist ideas by reaching out to a new audience who might not otherwise be familiar with such issues, I wanted to avoid people whose work was aimed at an already converted feminist audience. This discounted filmmakers such as Jane Campion, Céline Sciamma, and Andrea Arnold who, while critically-acclaimed, generally do not reach a mainstream cinema-going audience with their work, don't have the same recognition as celebrities, and aren't Millennials.

I also consider being well-liked integral to the success of celebrities given representation by the mainstream media industries. As Sara Ahmed argues, feminists are often seen as ruining the happiness of others, as killjoys, as causing arguments[175]. Being popular is a sign that their involvement in feminist discourse hasn't positioned them in this way. This excluded Lena Dunham, known for her feminist filmmaking and television work, but who has fallen out of favour and received extensive criticism from feminists and misogynists alike. Angelina Jolie might seem like the perfect example of a feminist film star but, as she was born in

[173] Gray Cavender and Nancy Jurik, *Justice Provocateur: Jane Tennison and Policing in Prime Suspect*, 23.
[174] Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise Of Neoliberal Feminism*.
[175] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*.

1975, she is part of Generation X. Beyoncé's performance against the backdrop of the word FEMINIST also put her in contention but, although she has created visual media such as *Lemonade*[176] and starred in films such as *Dreamgirls*[177], her reach is largely through the medium of music and so less within the scope of this study.

While four out of my five case studies are British and one is American, each shares a transnationalism that means they are all well known on either side of the Atlantic. Emma Watson made her name in the British *Harry Potter* franchise but went on to star in Hollywood productions, most notably Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*[178]. Michaela Coel's *I May Destroy You*[179] was a co-production between the BBC and HBO and was released in both the UK and the US. Jameela Jamil started her career in British television and radio but it was after moving to the US that her fame grew thanks to her role in *The Good Place*[180]. Phoebe Waller-Bridge's series *Fleabag*[181] found success in the US after it was picked up by Amazon Prime Video and her series *Killing Eve*[182] was released by BBC America several months before its UK release. Greta Gerwig is the only American case study in this thesis but, as well as being well-known in the UK, her casting of Irish actress Saoirse Ronan in *Lady Bird*[183] and again alongside British actors James Norton, Florence Pugh and Emma Watson in *Little Women*[184] gives her work an added transatlantic quality. My chapter structure of case studies is as follows:

Chapter 1 analyses **Emma Watson**, the celebrity who inspired this project. In 2014, when I was working for a clothing brand, a student who was interning with the design team came into the office the Monday after Watson's UN Women speech entitled 'Be the He for She'[185] and asked me if I was a feminist. Watson's celebrity had brought the speech to her attention, and she wanted to learn more. This moment has stayed with me throughout this project. Watson's screen roles have worked in tandem with her academic achievements to position her as an ideal

[176] *Lemonade* (Tidal, 2016).
[177] *Dreamgirls* (Dreamworks, 2006).
[178] Bill Condon, *Beauty and the Beast* (USA: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2017).
[179] *I May Destroy You* (BBC, 2020).
[180] *The Good Place* (California: Netflix, 2016-2020).
[181] *Fleabag* (BBC, 2016).
[182] *Killing Eve* (BBC America, 2018).
[183] *Lady Bird* (Scott Rudin Productions, 2017).
[184] *Little Women* (Columbia Pictures, 2019).
[185] Watson, 'Be the He for She'.

of neoliberal, individualised success. It is from this position of upholding dominant ideologies that Watson conducts her feminist activism. Her palatable celebrity persona and status as an acceptable role model for young girls allow her to engage in political activism, without appearing too radical for mainstream audiences.

Watson provides an opportunity to understand how a celebrity can utilise their on-screen work to build a persona that offers them some security to engage in political activism. Watson's maturation over my chosen time period enables me to map Millennials' changing attitudes to feminism and the changing state of criticism that celebrity feminists face from conservatives and feminists alike. Scholars of popular feminism, such as Cabas-Mijares and Jenkins[186], Roxane Gay[187] Keller and Ringrose[188], Randell-Moon[189] and Hamad and Negra[190] have used Watson as a tool to understand and critique popular and celebrity feminism and to analyse the prioritisation of white voices within popular feminism. For example, Randell-Moon's examination of online news articles featuring Emma Watson and other female celebrities during 2014–2015 emphasises how the online communication of feminism was reinforced as white due to the prioritisation of white celebrity feminists by the attention economies that operate online[191].

My work affords a different intervention by deconstructing Watson's persona to understand why she is seen as a successful figure of celebrity feminism and how she has maintained her popularity and commercial success over my period of study. One of the ways in which Watson differentiates herself from my other case studies is her engagement with academic feminism, and her self-reflective authorship of herself and her feminist journey. Watson's early career was forged by playing the idealised student Hermione in the *Harry Potter* film franchise and Watson draws on this studious image in her expressions of feminism. Creating a feminist book club and interacting with members of the feminist canon such as Gloria Steinem and bell hooks further legitimises Watson's engagement with feminism as academic and true to her "authentic" nature. By tracing the ways she

[186] Ayleen Cabas-Mijares and Joy Jenkins, 'Beauty and the Breasts: Constructions of Feminist Sexual Politics in Vanity Fair's 2017 Emma Watson Photoshoot'.
[187] Roxane Gay, 'Emma Watson? Jennifer Lawrence? These Aren't the Feminists You're Looking For'.
[188] Jessalynn Keller and Jessica Ringrose, '"But Then Feminism Goes out the Window!": Exploring Teenage Girls' Critical Response to Celebrity Feminism'.
[189] Holly Randell-Moon, 'Post-Racial Feminism and the Reaffirmation of Whiteness'.
[190] Hannah Hamad and Diane Negra, 'The New Plutocratic (Post)Feminism'.
[191] Holly Randell-Moon, 'Post-Racial Feminism and the Reaffirmation of Whiteness'.

engages her audience across various social media platforms, my analysis uncovers the ways in which creating a sense of authenticity is a fundamental element of celebrity feminism. Press coverage of Watson's activism provides an insight into the complex negotiations undertaken by celebrity feminists during my period of study, in order to speak about feminist issues. Watson is a young woman enjoying a position of cultural privilege via her race and class, and her British national identity also brings with it a certain quality to her persona. Watson's expressions of political activism allow me to demonstrate the shifting cultural climate that is at once receptive to issues of social justice and combative towards them, and how the celebrity feminist navigates them.

Chapter 2 explores **Michaela Coel**'s evolution from writing and starring in a one-woman play to writing flawed female characters for television. Not only does Coel address feminist issues within her work, she also champions equality within the wider media industry. Coel followed in the footsteps of generations of feminists by breaking the silence around her experience of sexual assault, through her television mini series *I May Destroy You*. The drama brought new perspectives of who can be a victim of sexual assault and the impact this can have, and in turn reshaped the discourse around sexual assault by prompting conversations about a subject that is often kept private. Coel uses a variety of tools to explore difficult subjects; including humour, an embrace of nuance over a binary of good and evil and an avoidance of didacticism in her work. Coel's subject position as a Black, working-class woman unavoidably dictates the ways in which she shares her story, alongside the historical context of the release of *I May Destroy You* just one month after the murder of George Floyd, and in the wake of #MeToo.

Coel brings to light the ways in which feminist issues can be explored within film and television work itself rather than, as is the case with Watson, through a platform built upon work within these industries. Coel provides a counterpoint to Watson, not only in the ways she contributes to Millennial feminist discourse but through her race and class. Michaela Coel's works *Chewing Gum*[192] and *I May Destroy You* have been explored by feminist media scholars such as Rebecca

[192] *Chewing Gum* (E4, 2015).

Wanzo[193], Laura Minor[194] and Banet-Weiser and Higgins[195] in relation to her position as a working-class Black woman screenwriter. Where this thesis makes an intervention is in exploring how Coel uses that authorial position to create commercially and critically successful works that generate new perspectives on feminist issues. In order to explore this idea, I analyse Coel's authorship in relation to the trend of unlikeable female characters. This issue is particularly important to look at through Coel's work as these characters have largely been white and middle-class. An analysis of Coel's approach to this as a Black, working-class woman is important to my understanding of her navigation of feminist discourse. My examination of Coel's series *I May Destroy You* will also take into account the opportunities that were created by the #MeToo movement for telling stories of sexual violence aligned with survivors' perspectives.

Coel's engagement with feminism, in contrast to Watson, is not via social media. Instead, during the period of study, Coel utilised public speaking opportunities, interviews with press and her own creative work to contribute to feminist discourse. Within her television oeuvre, the importance of comedy to facilitate ideological work is also apparent. This different articulation of feminist activism is important to understand as Coel is still known as a celebrity feminist, despite not necessarily directly branding herself as such. I analyse how this participation in more traditional forms of media and use of comedy are tools that put distance between Coel as a celebrity and her activism, and how this relates to her class and race. Coel also affords an opportunity for this research to explore how celebrities can perform feminism in different ways, such as by championing equality within their own industry. This combination of approaches makes Coel an important case study to examine within a political moment when Black women authors are both championed and marginalised.

Chapter 3 examines my most controversial case study, **Jameela Jamil**, who receives the most vitriol of all celebrities covered by this research project. The level of abuse Jamil receives cannot be considered without acknowledging her race. It is important to note, as Sara Ahmed writes, the 'relationship between the negativity

[193] Rebecca Wanzo, 'Precarious-Girl Comedy: Issa Rae, Lena Dunham, and Abjection Aesthetics', 30.
[194] Laura Minor, *Reclaiming Female Authorship in Contemporary UK Television Comedy*.
[195] Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins, 'Television and the "Honest" Woman: Mediating the Labor of Believability'.

of certain figures and how certain bodies are encountered as being negative'[196]. Jamil's association with controversy is also part of her celebrity persona, and has garnered her a loyal following. Jamil aligns herself with her audience as a fellow student of feminism, while using her own personal experiences to analyse feminist issues and further the discourse around them. Jamil engages in dialogues with experts that include personal revelations, admissions of a lack of knowledge, and the expression of an openness to learning and being corrected. While Jamil's persona has evolved into one of vulnerability and authenticity, it was her outspoken ventures into feminist digital activism and her participation in "callout culture" that gave her an increased visibility initially. Known for targeting the diet and "wellness" industries in her digital activism within the body positivity or neutrality movement, Jamil has frequently critiqued the very media industries that she works within. It is the tension between Jamil's credibility and believability as a celebrity, and her use of digital media platforms to take ownership, and authorship, of her celebrity brand that I will explore in my analysis of her.

Where Coel is known for writing or creating dislikeable characters, Jamil herself is a character whose persona is defined by a refusal to conform to compliant codes of likable femininity. My case study of Jamil analyses how, rather than the more palatable, consensus-creating approach to feminist work demonstrated by Watson and Coel, taking a more combative approach can also cultivate a public profile and gain traction with a Millennial audience. Jamil's on-screen career and work across podcasts and other digital media outlets afford an opportunity to understand the changing mood of popular Millennial feminist discourse. By mapping how her celebrity persona has adapted over my period of study, Jamil provides a different perspective to that of Watson's parallel personal journey of feminist education. There are interesting overlaps in the ways both of these case studies perform authenticity through their admission of a lack of knowledge. This openness to learn and be corrected could be seen as a hallmark of Millennial feminism.

The study of Jamil allows me to understand a trend in Millennial feminist digital activism that has witnessed a shift from an enforcement of "callout culture" to an approach that is less combative. My intervention into the study of celebrity feminism, through my exploration of Jamil's persona, brings to the forefront how

[196] Sara Ahmed, 'Embodying Diversity: Problems and Paradoxes for Black Feminists', 48.

celebrities utilise the self-disclosure of social media and podcasts. The sense of intimacy afforded by these platforms means that their audiences feel closer to the celebrity. This allows Jamil to create a sense of vulnerability through sharing of negative experiences and her mental health journey that in turn draws her loyal fanbase even closer. My analysis of Jamil demonstrates that, while a controversial, outspoken approach to feminism ensures she will perpetually receive negative press attention, this attention can be utilised to further curate and project an image of authenticity. Jamil's use of other celebrities and prominent cultural commentators to bolster her activist credentials is another significant facet of my case study and evokes the Millennial idea of the girl squad. Her canny utilisation of the reach of other figures within the media is important to examine as an additional pillar of Jamil's platform.

Chapter 4 investigates **Phoebe Waller-Bridge**, with much comparison to Coel due to their similar career trajectories. Also starting out with a one-woman show, Waller-Bridge has become known as a writer of angry, flawed, unlikeable female characters. I position Waller-Bridge's renown for writing these characters within a time when female authorship had become increasingly marketable. Waller-Bridge's authorship of these dislikeable female characters, and how it differs to that of Coel's, is key to my understanding of this particular television trend, and the ways in which certain female writers who are seen as feminist can navigate patriarchal television and film industries. Waller-Bridge has been constructed as a celebrity not just as an actor but as a showrunner, and her authorship, particularly of female characters, has become part of her brand. Much has been written about this cultural moment in which female characters who challenge dominant ideologies of femininity became popular. This case study asks why Waller-Bridge in particular found such success.

Navigating the patriarchal television and film industries while exploring female characters and pushing the boundaries of their representation, Waller Bridge is a leading example of who those within media production might look to when considering diversity and gender equality. With television networks looking to target a female audience, new opportunities for female showrunners have been created. Waller-Bridge has used these opportunities to create female characters who are complex, three-dimensional and unlikeable; challenging dominant ideologies of femininity. Waller-Bridge's childless, carefree, violent creations

transgress expectations of femininity and are largely defined by their relationships with other women, rather than men. These unlikeable characters were so successful that they have become their own trope, and the character of Fleabag inspired a social media aesthetic known as being in one's "Fleabag era", which was linked with the idea of dissociative feminism – a jaded awareness of the slowing progress of gender equality that uses self-destructive behaviour as an escape. This popularity on TikTok allows me to investigate the ways in which social media can be used to bolster a celebrity's feminist credentials – even without the star's participation — and brings a new perspective on Waller-Bridge's work. Her construction as a celebrity feminist is complicated by her portrayal of the character of Fleabag. Her entire oeuvre could be seen as dedicated to unpacking the binary of good or bad women, of good and bad feminism. This association with a particularly negative feminism brings a new dimension to her persona.

As well as analysing Waller-Bridge in comparison to Coel, she also creates an interesting counterpoint to Watson through the different ways the two stars draw upon their whiteness and their middle-class backgrounds to capitalise on the opportunities that are available to them. Where Watson chooses to maintain a demure, palatable and academic approach to feminism that engages established organisations and respected thinkers, Waller-Bridge utilises her position of privilege to create characters that subvert expectations of femininity while, crucially, maintaining a distance from them through the buffer of fictionalisation.

Chapter 5 explores **Greta Gerwig**'s evolution from actor of independent movies to director of female-centred films. Gerwig provides an ideal case study with which to explore the concept of the female screen author. Her work as an actor in independent cinema has both established her as a celebrity and foregrounded her authorial reputation as a creator of female coming of age narratives. Her movie *Barbie* marks the end of the historical period I will examine throughout this thesis and demonstrates how, while feminist themes have found prominence in popular culture, their acceptance within mainstream media is still precarious.

Gerwig is the one American case study selected for this thesis, bringing an element of transatlantic comparison to this discussion of Millennial feminist celebrity. While *Barbie's* place in the popular feminist discourse of the time period is undeniable, it is in the evolution of Gerwig from star of independent movies to

blockbuster director that this case study finds its intervention. My analysis maps the ways in which Gerwig uses her femininity, her acting career built on her portrayals of Millennial women in arrested development, and the cultural capital of arthouse cinema to launch her cinematic career as a writer and director of mainstream cinema. Gerwig provides an important opportunity to explore the ways in which women can utilise the celebrity they have built in front of the camera in order to exercise different kinds of creative control in telling their own stories from behind the camera.

Gerwig also gives an insight into how associations with male authors (Noah Baumbach in this case) can function as a tool for female authors to gain credibility as filmmakers in their own right, as well as the associated risk that they can be seen as mere adjuncts to men. Gerwig's directorial role on *Lady Bird* and *Little Women* provides a lens to explore contemporary feminist sensibilities and the commercially-minded balance that must be struck by female authors working in mainstream cinema. This case study demonstrates how Gerwig uses female coming-of-age narratives to explore feminist themes that have found prominence in popular culture, but also provides an example of the ways in which the work of female authors during this time period was still excluded from industry recognition.

Of course, I must question my own reasons for choosing my case studies. As far as possible, I endeavour to maintain a critical distance from these subjects but it is inevitable that my personal feelings about them, and celebrity feminism in general, will shape this thesis. As Hesse-Biber argues, such feelings 'are an integral part of why a given topic or set of research questions is studied and how it is studied'[197]. While keeping these feelings in mind, my intervention also moves beyond a binary perspective that categorises women as good or bad, as feminist or non-feminist, as popular or unpopular. Williams, writing on the analysis of women filmmakers, observes that such an approach is just as likely 'to uncover the ambiguities and contradictions which are inherent in both their persona (as image and reality) and their work, as often as it will lead us to find evidence to support a "feminist" reading'[198] and encourages us to move beyond snap judgements of value. This is

[197] S Hesse-Biber, 'Feminist Research: Exploring the Interconnections of Epistemology, Methodology, and Method', 9.
[198] Rachel Williams, 'No Job For a Lady: Women Directors in Hollywood', 196.

the driving force of my thesis and so, while completing the analysis of my case studies, I endeavour to include the ambiguities and contradictions. Indeed, this is exactly what my research aims to uncover.

What am I analysing?

My research takes a transmedia approach in order to explore celebrities together with their work. While the case studies I have chosen are all active within the film and television industries, my analysis is not confined to film and television texts; nor is it an examination of whether or not a text is feminist, or if characters portrayed within a text are feminist. Instead, I am interested in how the concept of female authorship extends beyond the screen into a celebrity's persona. This research goes beyond analysis of the meaning and representation of these stars in order to understand the discourse generated by the meaning and representation, and in turn the entanglement with the media industry and commerciality. Rather than asking if a celebrity is feminist, or if their work is feminist, this research asks what discussions of feminism are generated by a star and their works, and how this interacts with their personal brand and their place within the economy of screen media.

Taking the idea that celebrities are 'figures formed from collections of texts'[199], this research finds importance in the ways in which my case studies are engaged with and discussed by the press, critics and the general public. Approaching any content analysis from a feminist perspective must consider any meaning as mediated, and so the text, its production, and its reception and interpretation should be included in the analysis[200]. It is these promotional and reception discourses that construct authors, as well as the works they themselves produce. As Trimmel et al argue, the reception of a text can give the creator an authority over the work they have produced, distinguishing 'between the "author" as a real individual and the author persona constructed discursively. Such extratextual materials have become a crucial part of television consumption in the 21st century'[201]. This discursive construction is the focus of my research; this thesis aims to uncover how each of its

[199] McDonald, *Hollywood Stardom*, 281.
[200] S Reinharz and R Kulick, 'Reading between the Lines: Feminist Content Analysis into the Second Millennium', 259.
[201] Theresa Trimmel et al., 'Women on and Behind Chinese Entertainment Television: De/Constructing the Female Authorship of National Treasure', 397.

case studies is constructed as a celebrity feminist. This involves unpacking how their broader personae shape their entanglement with feminism.

In addition to textual analysis of the work my case studies create, I also conduct an examination of press coverage and interviews, alongside digital content created by audiences, critics, and the celebrities themselves. My research makes an intervention in celebrity studies by not drawing distinctions between film and television authorship and that of social media. Alex Symons, in his examination of female comedians makes a case for framing 'podcasting, making content for TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and performing specials for Netflix'[202] as work that is central to the careers of female celebrities and even the source of the majority of their fame. In the case of Coel, Waller-Bridge, and Gerwig, their authorship is largely tied to the films and television shows they create; but for Jamil and Watson, my analysis focuses on their social media accounts and other media projects including Jamil's podcast and Watson's book club.

I draw on star studies methods that treat screen figures as images existing in films and other media texts to position a star within their contemporary cultural context in order to understand how their image can be 'representative of a period's key social concerns'[203]. In order to answer my research questions effectively, my analysis must consider my case studies not only within the contemporary cultural context, but also within the media production industry. As McDonald writes,

> *stars have cultural significance because through their on-screen performances they represent meanings about human identity. At the same time, stars are signs of economic value, assets deployed in the film market with the aim of raising production financing, capturing revenues and securing profits*[204]

By conceptualising each of my case studies as a media brand whose success relies on mainstream production companies who operate within patriarchal power structures, my methodological approach encompasses a contextual examination of each case study that goes beyond their on-screen or behind-the-camera work. Reinharz and Kulick argue that feminist analysis of media must 'also examine the

[202] Symons, *Women Comedians in the Digital Age: Media Work and Critical Reputations after Trump*, 9.
[203] Dyer and McDonald, *Stars*, 179.
[204] McDonald, *Hollywood Stardom*, 1.

processes that prevent texts from being produced'[205]. Reflecting on what might prevent a text from being produced will be helpful to my analysis of why my chosen case studies manage to maintain successful careers. Reinharz and Kulick also stress the importance of intersectionality, which is all the more pertinent when considering what might prevent a text from being produced. Examining 'such interlocking social forces as sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, religion, ability'[206] will be key to an intersectional analysis of my case studies. As Pillow and Mayo argue, 'the category of "woman" is necessarily complex because of the range of experiences of women'[207]. The varied experiences of women will also be linked to their place as commodities within the media industry and their resulting visibility. McDonald writes that

> *Thinking of the star-as-brand moves analysis beyond the symbolic realm of star image to consider how the mediated identities of stars operate in the film market. With the star image, analysis is confined to questions of meaning. Those questions remain important for studying the symbolic commerce of stardom but now take on a more explicitly commercial focus as they are used to interrogate the star brand.*[208]

The entanglement of stars, their personal brands, and feminism is pertinent to this research project, within the context of fourth-wave feminism. With feminism becoming a popular topic within mainstream media, the question must be raised about how engagement with feminism has become a commodity within the branding of celebrities. What is key to the examination of my case studies is an understanding that any articulations of feminism become part of the celebrity-as-commodity.

How am I analysing it?

My analysis of a multitude of texts considers the increasing convergence of media and the active participation of audiences[209]. A qualitative approach is most appropriate for this research, due to the variance in personality and style of my

[205] Reinharz and Kulick, 'Reading between the Lines: Feminist Content Analysis into the Second Millennium', 259.
[206] Ibid., 260.
[207] W Pillow and C Mayo, 'Towards Understandings of Feminist Ethnography', 155.
[208] McDonald, *Hollywood Stardom*, 41.
[209] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*.

case studies. A qualitative case study approach also allows for the different platforms and texts through which each case study expresses themselves. As well as their own articulations, the stars themselves are mediated through texts created by others and a qualitative approach allows me to examine the nuances in these and the multitude of contexts in which they are located. As Baxter and Jack argue, this approach 'ensures that the issue is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood'[210]. One of the advantages of case study research is the incorporation of multiple data sources[211], which can then be amalgamated in the analysis, rather than studied individually to contribute to a broader understanding. In the case of this research, my sources will be the film and television texts my case studies create or star in; their social media platforms; and academic, critical and audience reception of these works, including reviews, opinion pieces and social media commentary. My research will analyse how these various sources work in tandem with one another to construct my celebrity case studies but also raise potential contradictions and tensions inherent within their personae.

Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller describe how their research on feminist activists 'drew together a range of methodological tools that form a unique "research assemblage" that operate as distinct yet connected case studies to capture a wide range of complex and nuanced practices'[212]. With this in mind, each of my case studies requires a nuanced and tailored approach. In order to fully understand the ways in which each celebrity engaged with feminism and their negotiations of authorship, I use a variety of methodological approaches.

Yvonne Tasker's work on the discourse that is formed concerning the authorship of female filmmakers has been key to the framing of my research, particularly around the *visibility* of female authors. In order to examine how the authorship of each of my case studies is portrayed by the press and discussed by their audiences, I draw on research methods undertaken by Caitlin Lawson – which she describes as 'multiplatform discourse analysis'[213]. Similarly to the ways in which Lawson tracks each chosen 'celebrity incident across platforms, including social media, online

[210] Pamela Baxter and Susan Jack, 'Qualitative Case Study Methodology: Study Design and Implementation for Novice Researchers', 544.
[211] Ibid.
[212] Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller, *Digital Feminist Activism : Girls and Women Fight Back Against Rape Culture*, 33.
[213] Caitlin Lawson, *Just Like Us: Digital Debates on Feminism and Fame*, 19.

news and commentary, and legacy media news and commentary'[214], my analysis of my chosen celebrity case studies includes their social media presence (if they have one), interviews with them in magazines and newspapers, but also think pieces written about them separately from their own involvement and social media commentary by cultural critics and everyday users alike. Lawson describes these as 'networked "issue publics." Issue publics are groups of individuals, from journalists and commentators to everyday social media users, who pay attention to and converse about the events I analyze, and these conversations form the basis of my analysis'[215]. In similarity with Lawson, the conversations that surround each of my case studies are just as important as their creative projects, if not more so.

To assess how each of my case studies were discussed in the popular press during my period of study, I set up Google alerts to monitor general reception of them and their work. These daily emails gave me a sense of both the volume of discourse surrounding each celebrity, and the trends in topics of discussion. This was important to give a verifiable metric to gauge discourse surrounding them and their work. With huge numbers of links generated by these Google alerts, I needed to employ certain criteria to narrow the results: articles or posts must be related to feminism in some way, and either be from mainstream newspapers or magazines, specialist media publications, or a social media post. With each link I engaged in close reading of the article, tweet, or post to undertake an analysis of how the text contributed to the case study's persona.

John Street argues 'that celebrity effects are most pronounced on the least politically engaged'[216]. It is in citizens who do not think of themselves as "political" that my research finds its most interest. While self-identifying feminists might dismiss celebrity engagement with popular feminism, their influence on people who are otherwise disengaged with the movement of feminism is an enlightening area of investigation. Rather than set out to ascribe a level of political efficacy to popular feminism, this research aims to better understand the place of celebrities in the construction of popular feminism and the boundaries that limit their interaction with the feminist movement. Each case study has their own range of limitations, which are decided by structural and personal factors. It was necessary

[214] Lawson, *Just Like Us: Digital Debates on Feminism and Fame*, 19.
[215] Ibid.
[216] John Street, Do Celebrity Politics and Celebrity Politicians Matter?, 354

to establish a set of adaptive analytical frameworks to look at celebrity, popular feminism, the media industries and popular discourse to effectively investigate each case study.

My approach involved several phases: an initial broad survey of films and television within popular culture that engaged with an issue or topic that could be seen as feminist or concerning women. This engagement had to be distinct from the themes found in postfeminist media, identified in my review of literature in this field. This preliminary phase produced a longlist of celebrities who were associated with this new wave of popular feminism. I consulted Google Trends and created Google alerts for each potential case study on this longlist in order to monitor discourse generated by each candidate over the period of study. The final shortlist showed spikes in relevance over the decade of examination. The height of searches for Phoebe Waller-Bridge came in April 2019, around the time of the release of the second season of *Fleabag*; Jameela Jamil searches spiked in February 2020, when she received backlash for coming out as queer[217] after being announced as the host of voguing show *Legendary*[218]; Michaela Coel generated the most searches in July 2020, around the time of the release of *I May Destroy You*; while Greta Gerwig received the most searches in July 2023, just after the release of *Barbie*. Search volumes for all these four celebrities, however, were dwarfed by those of Emma Watson – who had the most reach (in internet terms, at least) of my case studies. Watson's biggest search spike was in March 2017 – the time of her "topless photo"[219], the discourse surrounding which I analyse in my chapter.

This thesis consults 4 books, 23 films, 4 journal articles, 1 play, 11 podcast episodes, 128 press articles, 8 public appearances, 19 social media posts, 12 television programmes, 7 webpages and 5 YouTube videos as primary sources in its construction of the case studies selected for this research. The criteria for selection were altered depending on the source. Film and television texts created by, or acted in by the five case studies were reviewed regardless of their content in order to gain a full understanding of their contribution to the celebrity personae. Different criteria were developed to analyse the paratexts that make up a celebrity's brand image in order to filter down their engagement with popular

[217] Hannah J. Davies, 'Jameela Jamil Comes out as Queer after Voguing Show Backlash'
[218] Glenn Weiss, *Legendary*
[219] Derek Blasberg, 'Emma Watson, Rebel Belle'

feminism. As Graham and Harju note, 'Politics today in the public sphere has become more pervasive, and as such, any concept of what is political must be capable of capturing an increasing number of issues and concerns'[220]. Identifying political talk relevant to this research required a dual approach that monitored both the case studies' engagement with popular feminism, and the shifting construction of popular feminism itself. When reviewing results from my Google alerts, I initially filtered relevant posts by eliminating any content that didn't make a connection between the case study and an issue or topic that could be seen as feminist or concerning women. Results were further filtered to narrow analysis down to those sources that demonstrated a contribution to the construction of popular feminism or the engagement with this phenomenon. In this way, the case studies and the media they create could be deconstructed to understand how discussions of feminism were carried out both in the press and by viewers through social media.

Analysing the discourse around the media texts each case study created and the celebrities themselves allowed me to investigate the roles that media, culture and celebrity play in the construction of popular feminism. As Street, Inthorn and Scott argue, the political meaning created by popular culture 'is to be found both within the texts themselves and in their audience's use and understanding of them'[221]. With this in mind, my approach to analysis of my sources was an adaptive one that depended on the source and the celebrity. However, a series of common considerations were called on when examining each text: how the author positioned the celebrity or their work in relation to ideas of feminism, how the celebrity's subject positioning influenced how they were positioned, how the idea of authenticity and the personal was drawn on to explore political themes and how the text invited audiences to make a connection with their own experiences. These considerations were applied differently, depending on the text being analysed. For example, when examining *I May Destroy You* and *Fleabag*, I explored how direct address was used by Michaela Coel and Phoebe Waller-Bridge respectively to draw on a feeling of intimacy and invite audiences to bring a more personal connection to the work. In contrast, when analysing TikTok videos created by Fleabag audiences I looked at the ways in which creators connected the character of

[220] Todd Graham & Auli Harju, Reality TV as a trigger of everyday political talk in the net-based public sphere
[221] Street, Inthorn & Scott, Researching young people, politics and popular culture, 47

Fleabag with their own lived experiences of womanhood to express a connection with a certain type of popular feminism. While quantitative analysis was not the primary mode of this research, it was useful when comparing the success of texts that seemed to invite engagement. For example, the tweet announcing the launch of Emma Watson's feminist book club, Our Shared Shelf, received 419 replies, 3.7k retweets and 10k favourites. In contrast, Watson's Instagram post in which she shared the latest book choice as part of a selfie received 5,480,859 likes. Chapter 1 explores both of these 'celebrity incidents'[222]. As Street, Inthorn and Scott argue, 'works of fiction, and works of entertainment more generally, are not just telling stories or creating sensations. They may be, in their very different ways, making arguments, and many of these connect directly to the wider world of politics, of how we live and who determines how we live'[223].

My case study of Jameela Jamil required a greater focus on social media, as this is the dominant channel through which she authors her personal brand. With podcasting allowing for the exploration of more diverse topics in an informal style, thanks to the accessible nature of its production, this is a rich area of analysis. Researching Jamil was challenging in other ways as her celebrity persona often harnessed vitriolic responses from social media users. Jamil uses her position as someone who often receives abuse as a tool to build her brand as a celebrity who speaks out against antagonists. Alex Symons writes that these detractors actually help celebrities such as Jamil to forge their reputations, enabling them 'to exhibit their wit, confrontational abilities, all while generating publicity in the press and media – contributing toward their critical reputations and the reputation of their media work culturally and politically' (Symons, 2023, p. 18). This is why, in today's increasingly social media-driven news cycle, an Instagram post, tweet, or TikTok is just as worthy of analysis as more traditional media work. As online publications frequently embed the posts of celebrities in articles, press coverage now comments on social media content as well as a star's work in film or television.

For each case study, an examination of racial and class position was important – but particularly in the case of Waller-Bridge and Coel. Their similar career paths, writing and starring in works that centre unconventional female protagonists, made their racial and class positionings all the more important for my analysis of

[222] Lawson, Just Like Us: Digital Debates on Feminism and Fame, 19.
[223] Street, Inthorn & Scott, Researching young people, politics and popular culture, 69

their work and its reception. In adopting an agile and multimodal methodological framework that adapts according to the nature of the case study, this project not only navigates the shifting ground of contemporary research but the multitude of approaches to celebrity engagement with feminism.

Chapter 1: Emma Watson as the face of acceptable feminism

Born 15.4.1990

Emma Watson provides an ideal case study for investigating the mobilising of popular feminism[224] through screen media, for interrogating which stars can contribute to popular feminist discourse, and how their public personae create a tension between their celebrity and their portrayal of authenticity as advocates for the cause of feminism. In many ways, Watson can be seen as a progenitor of this particular generational wave of celebrity feminism. Scholars of popular feminism have used her as a tool to understand popular constructions of feminist sexual politics[225], to critique celebrity feminism[226], to explore teenage girls' critical response to celebrity feminism[227], to understand the digital construction of popular feminism in relation to whiteness[228] and to demonstrate the concept of the "plutocratic feminist"[229]. This case study affords a different intervention by deconstructing Watson's persona to understand why she is seen as a successful figure of celebrity feminism, how she maintained her popularity and commercial success from 2013-2023 and the negotiations she had to undertake in order to speak about feminist issues during a cultural moment in which feminism was both popular and contested. Watson's evolving stardom is a useful vehicle to examine how a young woman who enjoyed a position of cultural privilege could explore political activism, and how this related to the shifting cultural climate of the time that was at once receptive to issues of social justice and combative towards them.

In this chapter, I analyse how Watson's screen roles worked in tandem with her broader public persona, including her personal academic success, to position her as an ideal of neoliberalism. Her embodiment of hegemonic femininity allowed her to raise issues of feminist politics from a place of privilege, and I also examine her

[224] Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*.
[225] Cabas-Mijares and Jenkins, 'Beauty and the Breasts: Constructions of Feminist Sexual Politics in Vanity Fair's 2017 Emma Watson Photoshoot'.
[226] Gay, 'Emma Watson? Jennifer Lawrence? These Aren't the Feminists You're Looking For'.
[227] Keller and Ringrose, '"But Then Feminism Goes out the Window!": Exploring Teenage Girls' Critical Response to Celebrity Feminism'.
[228] Randell-Moon, 'Post-Racial Feminism and the Reaffirmation of Whiteness'.
[229] Hamad and Negra, 'The New Plutocratic (Post)Feminism'.

reflexivity in relation to this privilege. I perform textual analysis not only of her roles, but of the press coverage that surrounded them, her work as UN Women Goodwill Ambassador, the presence she built across various social media platforms and her feminist book club Our Shared Shelf[230]. I argue that this academic image and her openness about her own growth as a feminist created an approachability that drew in her audience and lent her a sense of accessibility that allowed her to introduce a generation of politically engaged young people to new ideas.

I utilise theoretical frameworks from star studies to examine the continuous construction of Watson's celebrity identity in relation to a shifting cultural context of popular feminism and popular misogyny[231]. My analysis determines how Watson's celebrity can problematise presentations of authenticity and the extent to which her performance of feminism might be understood as a savvy, postfeminist marketing ploy. Watson's association with feminism spans the entirety of the period of examination of this thesis, creating an interesting opportunity to explore how her position within popular feminism shifted over the decade of study.

Hermione Granger and the can-do girl

Watson's on-screen roles are crucial to an understanding of her ideological positioning as a star and the ways in which she has constructed herself as a celebrity feminist. Watson's global stardom originates in her role as Hermione Granger, the talented young witch of the *Harry Potter* franchise. Hermione has been the lens through which Watson's audience have watched her grow from a child into a young woman and is significant in the creation of her star image. Aged just 11 when the first film was released in 2001[232], the *Harry Potter* films were crucial in establishing Watson's bookish image and positioned her as a young girl with a love of learning.

The character of Hermione is serious about her success and has high ambitions for her future, neatly fitting into a category of middle class girls that Anita Harris terms "can-do girl", after a UK research report of the same name[233]. Harris writes

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[230] Emma Watson, 'It's Official - "Our Shared Shelf" Is up and Running. First Book - My Life on the Road.'.
[231] Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*.
[232] *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Warner Bros, 2001).
[233] Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*.

that can-do girls are represented as seizing opportunities available within the new economy, and applying themselves in pursuit of academic success. The accomplishments of girls are held as examples of 'an ideal late modern subject who is self-making, resilient, and flexible'[234]. Hermione's resourcefulness and educational success also reflects Jessica Ringrose's findings on the positioning of girls in contemporary education — where the school achievements of girls are used to speak to their equality. The academic success of girls is leveraged to legitimate the education system and to suggest that feminism has succeeded[235]. In the same way that postfeminism converts feminist elements into an individualistic discourse[236], this success is often simplified and the discourse surrounding it frequently ignores that it is largely dependent on socioeconomic factors that intersect with gender, and is largely confined to white, middle class students.

Watson's own academic success – achieving three A-grade A levels in English literature, geography and art[237] and graduating from Brown University in 2015[238] – has also contributed to the construction of her studious persona. *Harry Potter* producers David Barron and David Heyman have commented that from 'a very early age, she always said that if she really had to make an absolute choice between films or education, she would choose education'[239] and 'Emma was always as bright as a button'[240] respectively. Heyman's assertion that Watson 'could be an academic, she could be a lawyer, she could be a model, an actress, a fashion designer'[241], confirmed Watson's status as Harris' 'Future Girl': embodying the endless potential for success of the neoliberal subject and the resilience and versatility of the can-do girl[242]. Watson was positioned as an achieving girl[243]: a role model for the neoliberal, individualised success that awaits young girls if they work hard to achieve their goals, while the privilege that allows for this success is obscured.

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[234] Anita Harris, Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century, 6.
[235] Jessica Ringrose, *Postfeminist Education? Girls and the Sexual Politics of Schooling*.
[236] McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*.
[237] Radio Times, 'A-Level Results of the Stars: Emma Watson, Benedict Cumberbatch, Matt Smith, Jenna Coleman – and the Doctor…'.
[238] David Stout, 'Emma Watson Graduates From Brown University'.
[239] Michelle Tauber et al., 'All Grown Up', 94.
[240] Ibid.
[241] Ibid.
[242] Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*.
[243] Michele Paule, *Girlhood, Schools, and Media Popular Discourses of the Achieving Girl*.

This studious image has also helped to place Watson in contrast with other child stars, such as Lindsay Lohan or Miley Cyrus, setting her apart from the cliché of the female child star who rebels against her wholesome image through sexualised dress, frequent appearances at parties, or even criminal activity. An American actor who parallels Watson's academic trajectory is Natalie Portman, who made her feature film debut age 13[244] and who went on to attend Harvard[245]. In a similar way to Portman, Watson's academic success and passion for learning transcended her roles and became a key component of her celebrity persona, positioning her as the idealised student that is the expectation of middle class girls' education[246]. The middle-class identity of the character of Hermione is communicated through Watson's neutral received pronunciation. As Melanie Williams writes, an 'account of British traditions of stardom is as much a story of voices as it is of faces and bodies. The speaking voices of British actresses have often been their primary national identifier and sometimes their most distinctive feature'[247]. Watson's accent is a signifier of her middle class background and, along with the intelligence of the character of Hermione, her whiteness and British national identity contributes to the construction of her well-educated star persona.

At a time when princess culture[248] dominated the media available to young girls, the character of Hermione offered an alternative role model who was seen as more concerned with her education than her looks. Intelligent girls are not traditionally seen as attractive or popular, as is reflected in Watson's later role of Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*, in which the townspeople find her peculiar for wanting to read. However Watson and, by extension the character of Hermione, remained within the realm of hegemonic femininity as a white, middle-class, conventionally attractive young woman. Hermione's 'rather large front teeth'[249] described in the original book were conspicuously absent from the films and her 'bushy brown hair'[250] became progressively lighter and sleeker with every cinematic release.

Watson is positioned through Hermione as not just an idealised student but an idealised girl who discovers her natural beauty. That Hermione is not only talented

[244] *Léon: The Professional* (Gaumont, 1994).
[245] Natalie Angier, 'Natalie Portman, Oscar Winner, Was Also a Precocious Scientist'.
[246] Valerie Walkerdine, Helen Lucey, and June Melody, *Growing Up Girl: Psychosocial Explorations of Gender and Class*.
[247] Melanie Williams, *Female Stars of British Cinema*, 19.
[248] Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*.
[249] J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, 79.
[250] Ibid.

and a good student, but also shown as adhering to conventional beauty standards is indicative of the ways in which girlhood becomes a continuous project of self-improvement in a neoliberal postfeminist climate[251]. With an achievement of hegemonic, heteronormative, white femininity, Watson as Hermione performs the role of ideal British middle-class girl[252]. Descending the stairs for the Yule ball in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*[253] Watson takes her place in film history alongside countless female stars, most notably Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*[254], who have acted out this cinematic trope, which was inspired by the staircase tiers of the Ziegfeld Girls of the early 20th century[255]. At just 15, already her character is no longer defined solely by her academic prowess as the camera places her as an object for appraisal.

In many ways Hermione is the embodiment of the neoliberal individualised success of the girl power movement of the 1990s, which celebrated the success of young women. Zaslow described how girl power permeated the media of the 1990s and 2000s to create a culture that 'encourages girls and women to identify both as traditional feminine objects *and* as powerful feminist agents'[256]. Aapola, Gonick, and Harris argued that 'some aspects of the girl power phenomenon can be read as assisting in the production of the new self-inventing, neo-liberal subject'[257]. As such, this neoliberal female adolescent subject is not only happy and successful, but also adheres to dominant cultural standards of beauty and does not greatly diversify from those images of femininity that are proliferated by mainstream media. This ideal of girlhood, which journalist Peggy Orenstein describes as 'a paralyzing pressure to be "perfect"'[258], becomes an unattainable goal that leads girls to view themselves as a continuous project of self-improvement. Watson seems to have been able to navigate this pressure and even mobilise her performance of perfection in dexterous ways to retain a level of likeability. Later in this chapter I will further explore the ways she uses her British national identity

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[251] Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick, and Anita Harris, *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change*.
[252] Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody, *Growing Up Girl: Psychosocial Explorations of Gender and Class*.
[253] Mike Newell, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (London: Warner Bros., 2005).
[254] Billy Wilder, *Double Indemnity* (California: Paramount Pictures, 1944).
[255] Linda Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema*.
[256] E Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc: Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture*, 3.
[257] Aapola, Gonick, and Harris, *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change*, 37.
[258] Peggy. Orenstein, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture*, 17.

and educational achievement to create a sense of approachability, even as she occupies a privileged position.

As Jackie Stacey writes, stars help to shape ideals of femininity as much as they themselves are shaped by them. They are so often read as role models that they contribute to the construction of the norms of femininity and are then circulated through culture[259]. Watson was no exception, even at this early stage of maturity, as she was positioned as an idealised student, she could not be separated from her femininity and to-be-looked-at-ness[260]. This embodiment of Orenstein's "perfect" is significant in relation to the platform Watson uses later in her life to discuss feminist politics, as her conventional beauty and academic and gendered perfection is a large part of her celebrity persona and inextricably linked to the size of her audience. Her ability to share her feminist politics with the public is predicated on her idealised and hegemonic British femininity.

Ballet Shoes

An exploration of Watson's post-Potter career reveals how she drew heavily on her British national identity and middle class background. TV movie *Ballet Shoes*[261], set in 1930s London, was Watson's first step away from the *Harry Potter* franchise. Watson's role of Pauline Fossil, one of three orphans adopted by an eccentric geologist, sees her and two adopted sisters vow to put their unique surname into the history books through their own talents and not because of who their grandfathers were. The film tracks the three girls as they progress through a theatre arts school, excelling in acting and ballet. This very English drama, broadcast by the BBC on Boxing Day, features a cast of familiar British actors and the tagline 'Dreams do come true'. It is a classic Christmas production with a wholesome, nostalgic feel and a happy ending, which ties Watson to a national British identity and reinforces her middle-class status by placing her within a wealthy household.

The success of Watson's character Pauline, who is eventually offered an acting career in Hollywood, continues the positioning of Watson as an accomplished young woman with her achievement of the neoliberal ideal of fame. Anita Harris

[259] Stacey, 'Feminine Fascinations: Forms of Identification in Star-Audience Relations.'
[260] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'.
[261] Sandra Goldbacher, *Ballet Shoes* (UK: BBC, 2007).

describes such an idealised figure as 'celebrated for her "desire, determination and confidence" to take charge of her life, seize chances, and achieve her goals'[262]. The roles that shaped the early part of Watson's career have worked to form her 'Future Girl' star image — one that is full of potential for academic and professional success. Pauline's story is one of individual success – crucially, success in Hollywood – perpetuating the postfeminist narrative of self-improvement over collective struggle.

With an early career playing young women who work hard to achieve their aspirations, Watson's formative roles set her up as an acceptable star: one that does little to challenge norms of neoliberal postfeminism, and reproduces the status quo. These early defining roles also enhance her British national identity and reinforce her middle class status. This establishment of Watson as an idealised neoliberal subject gives her a firm foundation from which to begin pushing boundaries and gently challenging the very norms that have shaped her early career.

Burberry

Aged 19, Watson began modelling for British fashion brand Burberry. The label had been orchestrating its own renaissance, making a conscious decision to return to its British heritage[263] and distance themselves from working class consumption of the brand[264]. As Bev Skeggs observes, respectability is always navigated through class, race, gender and sexuality[265] and Watson's middle-class whiteness and heteronormative presentation of demure femininity facilitates her achievement of respectability. Watson's association with Burberry demonstrates a mutually beneficial relationship where each brand drew on the other's cultural capital[266]. Burberry's casting of Watson for their Autumn/Winter 2009 advertising campaign could be seen as the brand leveraging Watson's image to reassert their sense of tradition and British identity and reposition themselves as a luxury brand. At the same time, Watson strengthened her own national identity and fashionable

[262] Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*, 1.
[263] Angela Ahrendts, 'Burberry's CEO on Turning An Aging British Icon into a Global Luxury Brand'.
[264] Siân Weston, *The Changing Face of Burberry Britishness, Heritage, Labour and Consumption*.
[265] Bev Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*.
[266] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

credentials by associating herself with a British brand with a rich heritage dating back to 1856, serving to broaden her professional portfolio beyond acting.

Creative director Christopher Bailey described Watson as having 'a classic beauty'[267] and cited her 'charm, intellect and brilliant sense of fun'[268] as key to the success of the campaign shoot. The fashion house kept Watson as the face of the brand for a further season following a boost in sales, particularly the trench coats and handbags that Watson wore in advertisements[269]. Watson's appearance in the campaigns, and on the front row at fashion shows, legitimated her celebrity status by giving her a certain kind of cultural capital[270]. Pamela Church Gibson described Watson as one of a group of British stars who, alongside others such as Alexa Chung, 'champion the fashionable ideal and eschew the overly sexual and would-be glamorous look'[271]. Watson's membership of this elite, fashionable group enhanced her stardom, while also ensuring it remained the *right kind* of stardom that was tied to her British identity. The tension between her fashionable image and the bookish side of her celebrity personality further adds to her appeal: she is admired but remains attainable, she is aspirational but works hard for her success, she is fashionable without being overtly glamorous. Her national identity is key here: her Britishness is entwined with her middle class status, but also gives her a level of approachability that might not be the case for an American star.

Prevented from cutting her hair by her *Harry Potter* contract, which likewise forbade her from getting a tan, Watson chose to signify the end of her time as Hermione with a cropped haircut. This moment was key to the formation of a public identity distinct from that of Hermione. In an interview with *Metro*, Watson stated:

> *I'm 20, I'm not a little girl any more. I'd been on Harry Potter for ten years so I needed to mark the end of it in some way. I needed a drastic change and that's what the crop was all about.*[272]

[267] Laura Craik, 'Hermione Charms Burberry', *Evening Standard*, 9 June 2009, 13.
[268] Ibid.
[269] Rosamund Urwin, 'Exemplary My Dear Watson, Says Burberry'.
[270] Bourdieu, *Distinction*.
[271] Pamela Church Gibson, *Fashion and Celebrity Culture*, 23.
[272] Metro, 'Emma Watson: Why I Had to Cut My Hair after Harry Potter'.

The year of Watson's haircut was also that of her first appearance on the cover of UK *Vogue* magazine, alongside the headline 'Emma Watson comes of age'[273]. Watson's appearance is inextricably tied to her star persona and her performance of femininity and this rejection of the long hair associated with Hermione allowed her to bring a new dimension to her star persona that she took with her onto her next roles in two American productions.

Crossing the Atlantic

The character of Sam in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*[274] worked with Watson's new hair to truly differentiate her star persona from the character of Hermione. Director Stephen Chbosky predicted that this role would 'be one of the most important parts'[275] that she would play. Sam is shown to navigate adolescence in a different way to Hermione and allows Watson to grow past the confines of the role that defined her for so many years. Sam and her friends go to parties, drink, take drugs, listen to loud music, and put on performances of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*[276]. Sam screams at football games, dances like nobody is watching at the homecoming dance, and doesn't do well in exams — at least not at first. Sam is not an idealised version of a teenager, in comparison to the perfect student of Hermione. She is, however, allowed to be a true love interest; unlike Hermione's relationship with Ron, which remains implicit throughout the series but is only expressed at the end of the final film[277].

After *The Perks of Being a Wallflower,* Watson's next project was a move into independent cinema. Her role as Nicki in Sofia Coppola's *The Bling Ring* – a film that explores and critiques postfeminist consumer culture – worked to further distance Watson from the character of Hermione, while drawing on Watson's idealised image in order to caricature the character of Nicki. The film is based on true events and chronicles the lives of five celebrity-obsessed Californian teenagers who break into the homes of their favourite Hollywood stars to steal their clothes

[273] Lisa Armstrong, 'Emma Watson Comes of Age'.
[274] Stephen Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Santa Monica: Summit Entertainment, 2012).
[275] Sara Vilkomerson, 'Q + A Emma Watson', 42.
[276] *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1975).
[277] *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2* (Warner Bros., 2011).

and accessories. Watson is the only celebrity in an otherwise unknown main cast, and plays a party girl who models herself on Hollywood stars.

Watson wasn't necessarily actively engaging with feminism at this point in her career, but the role of Nicki is still important for my analysis as it is part of the foundation of her celebrity persona. With Watson's brand of celebrity feminism built on a balance of seriousness and likeability – a good student who works hard but remains humble – the roles that she has taken after the end of her *Harry Potter* contract demonstrate her agency in the authorship of her own image. While the character of Nicki – an American who neglects her studies in favour of partying, drug use, and stealing from celebrities – complicates Watson's demure, English Rose image, the choice to star in a film by Sofia Coppola, who Caitlin Yunuen Lewis suggests 'is both commercially successful and largely admired as a filmmaker of quality and artistic merit'[278], establishes Watson as committed to her acting career. Choosing an independent production, which is seen as having greater cultural value than mainstream blockbusters, signified that Watson was serious about her work and the way she was seen by the film industry as well as her fans. This brought a sense of dedication to her acting career and shows the personal growth that has occurred since leaving the role of Hermione behind.

The character of Nicki has the ambition of Watson's previous characters, stating 'I wanna lead a huge charity organisation. I wanna lead a country one day for all I know', but lacks work ethic. Nicki is homeschooled by her mother, who follows the teachings of self-help book *The Secret*[279], but is portrayed as anything but dedicated to her studies. In contrast to Watson's demure image, Nicki is overtly sexual — leaning seductively against the front door when she lets a water delivery man into her home, causing her mother to zip up the top she is wearing to reduce the amount of skin on show. Later in the film, when the teenagers have broken into the home of Paris Hilton, Nicki pole-dances for the entertainment of the rest of the gang. Watson is presented for consumption as Nicki, with her celebrity used to demonstrate the very ideas that the film critiques. Attention is paid to Nicki's obsession with image, particularly in a scene at a club where the audience observes her applying lip gloss, looking around to see who is looking at her, taking selfies on her phone, dancing and throwing her hair around. This direct engagement with

[278] C Yunuen Lewis, 'Cool Postfeminism: The Stardom of Sofia Coppola', 174.
[279] Byrne, Rhonda. *The Secret*.

behaviour that Watson had so far distanced herself from complicates her relationship with raunch culture. Where Watson's image had in the past remained firmly that of English rose, the role of Nicki nudges Watson towards a more American type of glamour. As I have argued elsewhere, Watson's idealised celebrity persona is put to use by Coppola to critique the character of Nicki[280]. With Watson positioned as a role model for the neoliberal success that awaits girls who work hard at school, Nicki's lack of work ethic is even more stark. Where Watson is associated with the British heritage of luxury fashion brand Burberry and her English Rose image, the overtly glamorous clothing and accessories that Nicki steals from celebrities' homes seem even more excessive.

The character of Nicki embodies what Backman Rogers describes as an 'unthinking allegiance to the central tenets of a postfeminist lifestyle'[281]. The drive and ambition of the teenagers isn't directed towards education or a career, but to material possessions. *The Bling Ring* puts a spotlight on how postfeminism, as Diane Negra describes it, 'attaches considerable importance to the formulation of an expressive personal lifestyle and the ability to select the right commodities to attain it.'[282]. In the same way that *Ballet Shoes* examined the ambition of young women, so too does *The Bling Ring*. It is interesting that, later in her career, this ambition is something that Watson disengages with. This critique of celebrity culture is an intelligent choice for Watson, showing her acting abilities in a role completely removed from that of Hermione, while engaging with her youth. With celebrity such an integral part of contemporary youth culture, *The Bling Ring* helps to further situate Watson as conforming to hegemonic norms, while implicitly critiquing postfeminist lifestyle. This foreshadows some of the reflexivity that we see later on in her career, in which Watson reflects on the kind of life she wants to build for herself later in adulthood.

HeForShe

In the years following *Harry Potter*, while playing characters who rarely strayed from hegemonic norms of femininity, and who portrayed the individualised success that neoliberalism and postfeminism promote, Watson also began to

[280] Siân Hunter, 'Coppola's Postfeminism: Emma Watson and The Bling Ring'.
[281] Anna Backman Rogers, *Sofia Coppola: The Politics of Visual Pleasure*, 149.
[282] Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*, 4.

actively engage with feminist politics off-screen. In fact, I would suggest that it is from her position of hegemonic conformity that she gained the privilege to openly speak on feminist issues. A level of legitimacy is required before a star is deemed worthy of associating themselves with a cause. This has been explored by scholars such as environmental anthropologist Robert Fletcher, whose research into celebrity involvement with environmental causes found that 'celebrities are viewed as both authentic and inauthentic at once'[283]. In Watson's case, especially given her studious, hardworking celebrity persona, it has been important for her to approach her activism in a similar manner. Watson established herself as a celebrity – as a serious actor who pursued roles in adulthood after becoming a child star – and as a woman who did not pose a threat to neoliberal values. From this position of legitimacy, she ventured into expressions of feminist politics while remaining within the strict confines of her celebrity image.

A key example of this engagement with feminism was Watson's appointment as UN Women Goodwill Ambassador[284], which saw her travel the world to encourage gender parity in politics in countries such as Uruguay[285], and speak at the World Economic Forum in Davos[286]. The global status of the UN gave credence to her involvement in feminism, while also marking her as part of the establishment and associating her with authority rather than radical ideas or grassroots activism. Launching the UN's 'HeForShe' campaign in 2014, Watson reached out to men and boys in a speech given at the United Nations Headquarters in New York and asked for their help to end gender inequality[287].

Watson had a difficult line to tread when delivering this speech, with her gender impacting the reception of her political voice. Myra Macdonald has written about the ways in which female speech often 'suggests that women are instinctively deferential and submissive'[288] due to their use of more polite language. Mary Beard has also explored the public voice of women, arguing that little has changed since classical times when the only time women were allowed to participate in public speaking was when they assumed the role of victim or martyr. Beard argued that

[283] Fletcher, 'Blinded by the Stars? Celebrity, Fantasy, and Desire in Neoliberal Environmental Governance', 458.
[284] UN Women, 'UN Women Goodwill Ambassador Emma Watson'.
[285] UN Women, 'On Visit to Uruguay, UN Women Goodwill Ambassador Emma Watson Urges Women's Political Participation'.
[286] Ross Chainey, 'Video: Emma Watson on Gender Equality at Davos'.
[287] Watson, 'Be the He for She'.
[288] Myra Macdonald, *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity in the Popular Media*, 60.

throughout history male voices have been given authority while the female voice is characterised as high-pitched and impossible to take seriously. Women are described as whining, which trivialises their words and removes authority[289]. While this history is being complicated by works such as *Femina*[290] that aim to recover work by women that were written out of history during The Reformation, there remains a contemporary dismissal of women's voices. Researchers found that young women with vocal fry found less success in the job market[291], and radio programme *This American Life* produced a segment on the show to address the angry complaints they had been receiving about the voices of the young women on their staff[292].

Making your voice heard as a woman becomes all the more challenging when the subject you're speaking about is feminism. As Amia Srinivasan writes, 'Women have long been told that feminist progress would be swifter if only they would be less shrill about it'[293]. This is where Watson's engagement with men and boys could be seen as relying upon not only her conventional femininity, but also her likeable and non-confrontational persona. Watson's racial and class positioning contributes to her palatability as an advocate for feminist causes and it is important to examine this. Just as Koa Beck describes the suffragettes rebranding themselves in the image of what is most valued in society, i.e. conventional femininity, whiteness, youth, heterosexuality and the middle class[294], Watson's adherence to these values means she has much more opportunity to speak on issues of feminism without risking backlash. Even so, after the speech, Watson described to the press how she 'was encouraged not to use the word feminism because people felt that it was alienating'[295]. This fear of the very word 'feminism' is symptomatic of what McRobbie describes as a 'forceful non-identity with feminism'[296] and the postfeminist cultural climate described by Christina Scharff, where feminism forms part of the narrative of gender issues but is repudiated. The

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[289] Mary Beard, *Women & Power*.
[290] Janina Ramirez, *Femina: A New History of the Middle Ages, Through the Women Written Out of It*.
[291] Rindy C. Anderson et al., 'Vocal Fry May Undermine the Success of Young Women in the Labor Market'.
[292] 'If You Don't Have Anything Nice to Say, SAY IT IN ALL CAPS'.
[293] Amia Srinivasan, 'The Aptness of Anger', 126.
[294] Beck, *White Feminism: From Suffragettes to Influencers and Who They Leave Behind*.
[295] Eliana Dockterman, 'Emma Watson Says She Was Advised to Not Say the Word Feminism in U.N. Speech'.
[296] McRobbie, 'Post-feminism and Popular Culture', 257.

collective struggle that forms the basis of feminism clashes with the 'individualist imperative'[297] of neoliberalism. Watson wore a white dress, made more serious with lapels more commonly found on formal jackets. Her obvious nerves at speaking at such a prestigious event gave her an air of approachability and relatability and softened her message. Watson's presentation in this speech worked to lend gravitas to her words, while also utilising her youth and friendly persona to mitigate any negative associations with feminism.

While shying away from the word feminism so as not to alienate her audience, when Watson called for men and boys to join the fight against gender inequality she flouted the notion that individuals should work through structural inequalities independently. In advocating for men and boys to join a collective movement, this could be seen as Watson breaking away from her persona's strict adherence to neoliberal values of individualism and moving towards the collective struggle at the core of feminism. This call to arms was indicative of the progress that Watson had made in establishing herself and her star image in the years since Hermione. In contrast to her *Harry Potter* days, where she spent her time on screen as a character who dedicates her skill and friendship as *she for he*, Watson was no longer seen to be bolstering the single, remarkable individual and instead used her celebrity to champion the idea that an entire gender can mobilise in support of another. This was a significant moment for her as a star, which established her allegiance to the feminist cause.

Our Shared Shelf

Two years after her HeForShe speech, Watson went on to launch feminist book club Our Shared Shelf with a tweet[298] encouraging her fans and followers to join. Hosted by Goodreads, a website dedicated to book recommendations and discourse, Watson chose books for the group to read that were shared and then discussed. The website allows for multiple discussion threads so that group members can exchange views on various aspects of the different books. The group's cover photo was a shelf populated with the books that had been read so far, bookended by a pair of Doc Marten boots: a staple footwear choice of the outspoken feminist.

[297] Scharff, *Repudiating Feminism: Young Women in a Neoliberal World*, 1.
[298] Watson, 'It's Official - "Our Shared Shelf" Is up and Running. First Book - My Life on the Road.'

This expression of Watson's feminist persona was in keeping with her studious image and Watson also incorporated self-reflection on her own feminist education into this outlet. Watson's sharing of her journey resonated with other young people who were new to feminism and she made use of Goodreads as an outlet to construct a sense of camaraderie with her fans as well as bolster her feminist credentials. Watson also participated in publicity stunts that involved her leaving feminist books in public places[299]. The list of books chosen included a mix of feminist non-fiction such as *The Vagina Monologues*[300], novels like *The Color Purple*[301] and work by contemporary writers such as Roxane Gay[302]. This carefully-curated list of feminist thinkers allowed Watson to align herself with established names within gender politics and literature – positioning her brand of celebrity feminism within the realm of intellectualism and reading. Her fame gave her a platform with which to publicly engage with these issues and encourage her fans to accompany her on this journey of feminist education, while the status of the authors on her list offered her a way of approaching this without being seen as radical.

For the first book, Watson chose Gloria Steinem's *My Life on the Road*[303] and interviewed Steinem at an event organised as part of the book club[304]. As a key figure of second-wave feminism, Steinem lent feminist legitimacy to Watson – allowing Watson to further establish herself as the kind of feminist who draws on a canon of critical thinkers. Watson's interview with Steinem explored intergenerational feminism, as the pair discussed a range of issues from marriage equality to beauty standards. Steinem expressed her admiration for Watson's dedication to feminism and described how Watson had earned the trust of her audience through her on screen roles, and was putting that trust to use in disseminating information relating to feminist issues.

News coverage around the event demonstrated the shifting cultural climate of the time that Rosalind Gill, writing in the same year, described as 'post-postfeminism'[305]: where feminism gained heightened visibility within a

[299] 'Harry Potter Star Emma Watson Leaves Books on London Underground', *BBC News*.
[300] Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues*.
[301] Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*.
[302] Roxane Gay, *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*.
[303] Gloria Steinem, *My Life on the Road*.
[304] Our Shared Shelf Group, 'Gloria Steinem and Emma Watson in Conversation'.
[305] Gill, 'Post-Postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times'.

postfeminist environment. While some outlets drew out quotes from the event as a way to map the most significant talking points, such as *Red*'s '12 things we learnt when Emma Watson interviewed Gloria Steinem'[306], others ignored the feminist topics of conversation in order to comment on Watson's appearance. This led to other coverage commenting on the discourse being around what women look like, rather than what they say or, as *The Telegraph* put it, 'Emma Watson discusses feminism. Everyone gets excited about her hair'[307]. This media discourse was indicative of a moment in history where both approaches were likely to attract readers. While feminism was becoming a popular talking point – particularly in opinion pieces – and commenting on moments of everyday sexism was a way to signal political allegiance to the "right" side of the debate, people still wanted to see Watson's hair and read about her feelings of insecurity around her eyebrows.

As part of the interview, Watson asked Steinem how she self-defined, given her origins as a writer and commitment to activism, and described how scary she has found speaking as herself rather than a character. The very nature of film stars — that their lives are spent performing identities both on and off-screen — becomes blurry when that star chooses to involve themselves in advocacy or activism as part of a political movement. It is interesting to examine the ways in which Watson negotiates these boundaries. It is important to ask to what extent her reflection on this issue of self-definition is part of the sense of authenticity she is constructing. Is her role as an activist yet another performance, or is this her authentic self that she is portraying? A Guardian article from 2017 asked a similar question: 'Emma Watson: feminist to the core or a carefully polished brand?'[308].

The questioning of celebrity activism has long troubled female actors who have chosen to identify with political causes. Misconceptions plagued actors Julie Christie and Vanessa Redgrave, as described by Nick Davis, who noted that Christie's 'notoriety as a great beauty has the frequent effect of eclipsing her political probity and agency'[309], while Redgrave's allegiances to leftist and radical political movements led to sporadic employment[310]. Similarly, research by Tessa Perkins found Jane Fonda was forced to continually demonstrate her authenticity

[306] Natasha Lunn, '12 Things We Learnt When Emma Watson Interviewed Gloria Steinem'.
[307] Radhika Sanghani, 'Emma Watson Discusses Feminism. Everyone Gets Excited about Her Hair'.
[308] Jean Hannah Edelstein, 'Emma Watson: Feminist to the Core or a Carefully Polished Brand?'.
[309] Nick Davis, 'Julie Christie and Vanessa Redgrave Performance and the Politics of Singularity', 183.
[310] Ibid.

as a feminist even though the views she raised during interviews throughout the 1960s reflected the thinking of the radical left-wing youth of the time. Fonda chose film roles that supported her off-screen rebellious persona, while insisting on the importance of making films that would appeal to a mainstream audience. Fonda was conscious that the characters she portrayed were never overtly feminist or socialist and she was 'not interested in making films which would only be seen or understood by the already converted left-wing elite'[311]. This decision led to some feminists dismissing her films as capitulating to the patriarchal system[312]. Richard Dyer also discussed Fonda's negotiation of politics and celebrity in *Stars*, describing how Fonda worked:

> *to maintain a certain level of star glamour in order to connect with the predominant culture of working people while at the same time gaining credibility for her progressive views by living in an ordinary house in an ordinary working-class neighbourhood.*[313]

Fonda's delicate balance of glamour and the ordinary prefigure Watson and her similar negotiation of feminism and celebrity. Watson's star status grants her a platform from which to engage with issues of feminism, but this can simultaneously hamper her legitimacy as an activist. Celebrity advocates, such as Angelina Jolie, have been discussed in relation to their ability to draw attention to and raise money for issues[314] and the difficult relationship between the stars, their cause, and their audience[315]. While philanthropic contributions are undoubtedly beneficial, there are risks that causes are overshadowed by the celebrity. A star may bring attention to a topic, but will raising consciousness about the issue in question lead to furthering of the cause or just increased news coverage of the celebrity? One of the most common questions about celebrity activism is whether the celebrity is working towards a political or charitable end, or for their own philanthropic image[316]. This tension around authenticity means that well-intentioned activism can result in negative associations with the celebrity. Here, Watson's use of social media is a facet of her activism that is important to

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[311] Perkins, 'The Politics of "Jane Fonda"', 246.
[312] Ibid.
[313] Dyer and McDonald, *Stars*, 35.
[314] Lauren Kogen, 'For the Public Good or Just Good Publicity? Celebrity Diplomacy and the Ethics of Representation'.
[315] Alison Trope, 'Mother Angelina: Hollywood Philanthropy Personified'.
[316] Ibid.

examine. Platforms such as Goodreads or Instagram can both be used as a way to reach a large audience without relying on news coverage. They also give Watson a way to build on her authentic image, as fans get the feeling of accessing the "real" Emma.

An example of the ambivalence shown towards Watson's advocacy for the cause of feminism is a comment piece for *New Statesman*, in which journalist Laurie Penny detailed the ways in which they deemed Watson to have failed feminism, including 'shilling for the beauty industry'[317] by participating in Lancôme advertising. At once encouraging and dismissive, Penny's article asked whether the commodification of feminism was diluting the cause, while admitting that celebrities do have their place in promoting feminism[318]. Penny's ambivalence demonstrates the accusations of inauthenticity that celebrity advocates receive. Watson's performance of a feminist self via social media and other outlets is seen as inauthentic when viewed alongside her participation in advertising for a beauty brand that preys on the insecurities of young women to sell products. This, to Penny (and many other critics of celebrity feminists) cancels out any feminist credentials and renders Watson a failure in the same way as 1960s critiques of Fonda. The struggle remains for celebrities who engage in political movements. Watson's navigation of her own brand shows the difficulty in balancing the world of celebrity and commodification with her expressions of feminism. While beauty and branding is key to her place within the celebrity marketplace, engagement with such practices risked damaging her authenticity as a feminist.

Belle: Disney feminist princess?

Another demonstration of the tension between celebrity-as-commodity and feminist celebrity is the casting of Watson as Belle in Disney's live-action remake of *Beauty and the Beast*. At the time, Disney were attempting to reconfigure the idea of the Disney princess into one who was more self-determined and reflected contemporary values of independence following the success of *Frozen*[319]. The character of Belle at once embodies the bookish, studious, wholesome character of Watson but ultimately remains a Disney princess who ends the film in a

[317] Laurie Penny, 'Fighting Words: I'd like to Apologise for Emma Watson. I Used to See Her Sitting on Her Own at the Bus Stop in Oxford', 23.
[318] Ibid.
[319] *Frozen* (Walt Disney Pictures, 2013).

heterosexual romantic attachment to the prince who imprisoned her while he was a beast. I would argue that the casting of Watson by Disney demonstrates how at the time she represented a corporate-friendly form of feminism that could be marketed to young girls.

The role of Belle perfectly reflected Watson's own celebrity narrative: as a girl navigating growing up with a love of books and independent learning. Released into cinemas the year after Watson started Our Shared Shelf, this correlation between her fairytale persona and celebrity image is a key example of how Watson's wholesome image allowed her to speak about feminism so openly, particularly as the role of Belle has so many similarities with that of Hermione. Peter C. Kunze describes how at the time of *Beauty and the Beast*'s cinematic release, 'Watson was arguably one of the most visible and popular feminist celebrities in Hollywood, at least of her generation. Casting her as Belle created a continuity between Belle and Hermione'[320]. Following the success of the strong, independent female characters of *Frozen*, there was a commercial opportunity for Disney to give the fairytale an update. Casting the popular feminist figure of Watson as the romantic lead gave them the fresh reinterpretation they needed. Kunze argued that Watson's feminism had 'its roots in classical liberal values of choice and individual responsibility, the neoliberal approach'[321] making her an ideal candidate for corporate appropriation of the movement. Clearly, Watson was seen as espousing a form of feminism that felt safe enough for a media conglomerate to align itself with.

In a profile of Watson, *Beauty and the Beast* director Bill Condon is quoted describing the way that 'she seemed to be the person, both on screen and off, who best reflected the qualities that Belle embodied'[322]. Belle's quiet brand of rebellion — reading books despite being called 'peculiar' by the other villagers for doing so, and refusing to marry would-be suitor Gaston — never once crosses into anger. As well as Watson's intelligence being reflected in that of Belle, so Belle's style of dissent parallels Watson's own: a gentle revolt that never quite amounts to full anarchy. Watson's Belle remains poised and dignified throughout the film, but isn't afraid to answer back to the beast. Watson staged her own rebellion when

[320] Peter C. Kunze, 'Revise and Resubmit: Beauty and the Beast (2017), Live-Action Remakes, and the Disney Princess Franchise', 127.
[321] Ibid., 133.
[322] A Breznican, 'Rebel Belle', 28.

agreeing to take the role; working closely with costume designer Jacqueline Durran to ensure that the modern interpretation of Belle wasn't restricted by corsets or high heels[323]. Watson's sartorial defiance is of particular note when compared to the other recent Disney live action remake of *Cinderella*[324], which caused controversy due to the waist size of star Lily James[325]. James described the limitations caused by the restrictive corset she had to wear: 'When I was trying to dance, I didn't have the capacity to breathe to support the physicality, and so I had to keep taking breaks and loosening the corset'[326]. In contrast, throughout *Beauty and the Beast* Watson wears boots instead of delicate shoes and tucks her skirt into her waistband to reveal her practical bloomers — ensuring the character of Belle is not inhibited by her costumes[327]. This references the work of the feminist dress reformers of the 1800s, who rejected corsets and championed bloomers as a functional alternative dress for women[328].

Despite the feminist compromises on clothing, Watson still embodied feminine beauty ideals as Belle, and this is part of her appeal for the audience. As Jackie Stacey writes, 'In a culture saturated with images of desirable femininity, the desire to submerge oneself in an imagined ideal is constantly being reproduced. Hollywood stars offered female spectators such utopian ideals and the fantasy of becoming that ideal'[329]. Stacey's analysis can be applied to *Beauty and the Beast* in the same way as the films of the 1940s and 1950s of her study. The significance of Watson's fresh-faced, earnest beauty is captured in Gaston (Luke Evans)'s line in the opening number of the film: 'Belle is the most beautiful girl in the village. That makes her the best'. This tongue-in-cheek line is delivered seriously as the character of Gaston believes every word. Here it is useful to draw on Yvonne Tasker's analysis of *Enchanted*[330], another Disney production that tells the tale of a princess-to-be who finds herself in Manhattan after being exiled from a magical land. Tasker notes the contradictory nature of *Enchanted* and the ways in which knowing references to Disney are presented alongside seemingly sincere romance.

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[323] Alexa Tietjen, 'Emma Watson Wanted Her "Beauty and the Beast" Costumes to Reflect a Modern Belle'.
[324] Kenneth Branagh, *Cinderella* (California: Walt Disney Pictures, 2015).
[325] Rossalyn Warren, 'Has Disney Edited Cinderella's Waist In The New Movie To Appear Smaller?'.
[326] Sarah Begley, 'Lily James: My Cinderella Glass Slippers Didn't Fit Me'.
[327] Tietjen, 'Emma Watson Wanted Her "Beauty and the Beast" Costumes to Reflect a Modern Belle'.
[328] Lynn Yaeger, 'Dress Reform'.
[329] Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*, 124.
[330] *Enchanted* (Disney, 2007).

This ironic engagement with ideas around sex and gender is 'a quintessential expression of postfeminist ideology'[331].

In the same way that *Enchanted* knowingly mocks Disney conventions, *Beauty and the Beast* self-consciously depicts sexism – as Belle is appraised for marriage and ridiculed for reading – but then places Belle in a position of domesticity and gives her the traditional happy ending of a heteronormative romance. Belle begins the movie searching for 'more than this provincial life'; rejecting village life and marriage to Gaston 'his little wife, UGH', only to give up on her opportunity to escape in order to look after the beast. Belle's choice to stay is presented as an empowered choice and here *Beauty and the Beast* seems to echo Tasker's description of *Enchanted* as offering 'gestures towards feminism while making full use of conservative gender stereotypes'[332]. Transformed into a true Disney princess complete with ballgown, and finding her happy ending married to a prince, Watson's Belle aligns with the postfeminist heroine: one that values autonomy and bodily integrity, and the freedom to make individual choices; but who ultimately chooses to uphold normative femininity[333]. Watson's celebrity could be seen as aligning with these values; encouraging young girls to make individual choices while upholding normative femininity to ensure her message is received positively.

The character of Belle never strays too far from acceptable femininity, just as Watson treads the narrow ground of acceptable feminism. Kunze describes Disney's live action remakes of their previously animated titles as making 'limited, often cosmetic, changes that pay lip service to critics without alienating admirers'[334] in order to appeal to the widest audience possible. In much the same way as celebrities must balance their political and economic priorities, so Disney anticipates potential expensive backlashes to ensure the enduring viability of their intellectual property. Watson was the ideal casting choice for Disney, offering a way for them to position themselves as empowering young girls without any overt expressions of feminism that could be off-putting to their audiences. The second highest grossing movie of 2017[335], *Beauty and the Beast* received several awards

[331] Yvonne Tasker, 'Enchanted (2007) by Postfeminism: Gender, Irony, and the New Romantic Comedy', 58.
[332] Yvonne Tasker, 'Enchanted (2007) by Postfeminism: Gender, Irony, and the New Romantic Comedy', 70.
[333] Gill, *Gender and the Media*.
[334] Kunze, 'Revise and Resubmit: Beauty and the Beast (2017), Live-Actionremakes, and the Disney Princess Franchise', 121.
[335] Box Office Mojo, '2017 Domestic Grosses'.

including best actor in a movie, awarded to Watson by the MTV Movie & TV Awards. Watson praised the genderless nature of the award category in her acceptance speech, describing how 'acting is about the ability to put yourself into someone else's shoes. And that doesn't need to be separated into two categories'[336]. While we cannot dismiss the fact that Watson earnt this award for her part as a Disney princess who ended the film in a heteronormative romance, by taking this moment to highlight a move towards gender equality, Watson leveraged her celebrity to invite her audience to consider how society views gender.

Raunch culture

As part of Watson's engagement with the feminist movement, it is important to interrogate how her celebrity persona interacts with rape culture and raunch culture[337]. Watson has, for the most part, refused to be a part of raunch culture, maintaining a wholesome image that her celebrity persona is built on. As noted by Baer, 'Neoliberal discourse emphasizes the body as a site of empowerment via self-fashioning, personal improvement, and individual choice, but also one in need of constant surveillance, monitoring, and discipline'[338]. Largely, Watson's celebrity image has avoided any sexualised portrayals, both on and off-screen. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, any engagement with raunch culture — such as Watson's role in *The Bling Ring* — creates a tension with her demure British image.

One such engagement was Watson's so-called "topless photo". The photo in question appeared in a *Vanity Fair* editorial that ran alongside an interview with Watson[339]. In the image, Watson is pictured wearing a capelet by Burberry that exposed her bare skin at its opening. In response to the photo, *Daily Mail* columnist Julia Hartley-Brewer posted on what was at the time still Twitter, 'Emma Watson: "Feminism, feminism… gender wage gap… why oh why am I not taken seriously… feminism… oh, and here are my tits!"'[340] alongside a photo of a newspaper article in *The Sun* entitled 'Beauty and the Breasts'. This incident

[336] Julia Emmanuele, 'Emma Watson Celebrates MTV for Genderless Acting Categories'.
[337] Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture.*
[338] Hester Baer, 'Redoing Feminism: Digital Activism, Body Politics, and Neoliberalism'.
[339] Derek Blasberg, 'Emma Watson, Rebel Belle'.
[340] Julia Hartley-Brewer, 'Emma Watson: "Feminism, Feminism… Gender Wage Gap… Why Oh Why Am I Not Taken Seriously… Feminism… Oh, and Here Are My Tits!"'.

demonstrates how even a momentary departure from her demure image creates an area of weakness in Watson's carefully-constructed celebrity persona. Not only has Watson's feminism been called into question by those who align themselves with the feminist movement, those such as Hartley-Brewer who position themselves in opposition to the progressive politics of feminism took advantage of opportunities to belittle the efforts of the movement.

It is important to note that the styling of this image is editorial in nature rather than the more provocative image that might be conjured by the words "topless photo". The photo was taken by Tim Walker, 'one of the world's most inventive photographers'[341], whose work has been exhibited by museums including V&A South Kensington. While this image draws on the specific symbolic language of high fashion, it still complicates Watson's wholesome image and raises questions about how the construction of her image is within her own control.
Hartley-Brewer's derision of Watson demonstrates the double entanglement of postfeminism[342]. At once assuming what Attwood describes as a 'feminist distaste for sex and bodily display'[343], Hartley-Brewer also recognises the sexism inherent in the sexualised image of a young woman. Indeed, even within feminism itself there have been debates surrounding sex positivity and the body, described by Baer as a 'tension between the body as a locus of empowerment and identity formation and the body as a site of control'[344]. As Judith Butler has stated, 'For politics to take place, the body must appear'[345]. In order to speak about feminism, Watson is required to present her body to the public, but this subjects her to criticism about the very presentation of her body.

In an interview with *BBC News* given while promoting *Beauty and the Beast* saying, Watson responded that 'Feminism is about giving women choice. Feminism is not a stick with which to beat other women'[346] before sighing, 'I really don't know what my tits have to do with it'. While she may play love interests, and her beauty is idealised, her sexuality is never overt. This careful consistency keeps Watson's ordinary and wholesome qualities, which are key to her authenticity as a celebrity feminist and role model. As is made clear by the comments of

[341] 'Tim Walker: Wonderful Things'.
[342] McRobbie, 'Post-feminism and Popular Culture'.
[343] Feona Attwood, 'Through the Looking Glass? Sexual Agency and Subjectification Online', 203.
[344] Baer, 'Redoing Feminism: Digital Activism, Body Politics, and Neoliberalism', 23.
[345] Judith Butler, 'Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street'.
[346] BBC News, 'Emma Watson Responds to Vanity Fair Photo Controversy'.

Hartley-Brewer: to stray from her meticulously maintained image is to call into question her politics. As Gill and Scharff note, women are much more heavily regulated in all facets of their conduct and are in a constant state of self-improvement. They ask 'Could it be that neoliberalism *is always already gendered*, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects?'[347]. Even as Watson could be seen to be constructed as an ideal subject of neoliberalism, she faces constant regulation and criticism.

Millennial feminism and interrogating whiteness

Another aspect of Watson's feminism that must be examined is her navigation of race. In 2016, *Paper* posted an interview between Watson and Black feminist activist bell hooks. Throughout the interview they discuss fourth-wave feminism, along with Watson's feminist education. Watson detailed how she read books and essays by hooks while undertaking research into feminism following her appointment as UN Women Goodwill Ambassador. During their conversation, hooks described watching the *Harry Potter* films and the development of Watson's character of Hermione:

> *It was both exciting and at times infuriating to watch the way the character of Hermione developed and to see this vibrant image of a girl who was just so intelligent, who is such a thinker, then to also witness that that intelligence was placed in the service of boy power.*[348]

Watson, as opposed to Hermione, uses the intelligence of her can-do girlhood in the service of girl power. As part of her growth as a feminist, and in keeping with an increased awareness of intersectionality in academia and some parts of popular culture, Watson publicly examined her own privilege with a post in the *Our Shared Shelf* group. The quote below is taken from the post, in which she announced that she had chosen *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* by Reni Eddo-Lodge for the group to read. Watson used the post to detail the 'interrogation of self'[349] that is required of each and every feminist. While this demonstrates reflexivity, this public "admission" of a lack of knowledge also functioned to bolster

[347] Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, 'Introduction', 288.
[348] bell hooks and Emma Watson, 'In Conversation with Bell Hooks and Emma Watson'.
[349] Emma Watson, 'Our Shared Shelf - Announcements: First Book of 2018! Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race by Reni Eddo-Lodge'.

her likeable and relatable image. For established antiracists she was performing allyship, while for those earlier in their journey she created a safe space for people to explore their own mistakes or ignorance.

> *When I heard myself being called a "white feminist" I didn't understand (I suppose I proved their case in point). What was the need to define me — or anyone else for that matter — as a feminist by race? What did this mean? Was I being called racist? Was the feminist movement more fractured than I had understood? I began…panicking.*
>
> *It would have been more useful to spend the time asking myself questions like: What are the ways I have benefited from being white? In what ways do I support and uphold a system that is structurally racist? How do my race, class and gender affect my perspective? There seemed to be many types of feminists and feminism. But instead of seeing these differences as divisive, I could have asked whether defining them was actually empowering and bringing about better understanding. But I didn't know to ask these questions.*

Praise for Watson's introspection was shared by journalists including Lola Okolosie, who wrote a comment piece entitled 'Emma Watson's willingness to face the truth about race is refreshing' for *The Guardian*, calling for Watson to 'be commended for beginning a journey into how her whiteness makes life far easier for her to navigate'[350]. By acknowledging her past shortcomings and writing about the ways in which she increased her understanding of feminism, Watson invited her fans and followers to join her as she learned. While this could also be seen as self promotion, her relationship with bell hooks served to validate her sincerity as an ally. The feminist work Watson undertakes in public invites those in her audience who are willing to take this educational journey with her.

Utilising social media to spread the message of this new reading material and source of self-reflection, Watson took to Instagram to share the book with her followers. Holding the book next to her face, she used her phone's front-facing camera to take a selfie. The photograph acted as a glimpse into Watson's everyday life with the unglamorous background of baskets on shelves, and minimal makeup

[350] Lola Okolosie, 'Emma Watson's Willingness to Face the Truth about Race Is Refreshing'.

creating a feeling that this is a picture of the "authentic" Emma. The immediacy of a selfie, suggest Michele Zappavigna and Sumin Zhao, brings 'an audience closer to the situation represented'[351]. The inclusion of the book as part of a selfie is also a sign of endorsement, which makes a clear and visible connection between Watson and her politics. This performative action shows a deliberate construction of feminist identity by Watson, whose self-authorship of her social media accounts is carefully curated. Her instagram largely only features photos of Watson herself, but each photo is accompanied by captions encouraging engagement with feminist issues such as trans visibility, support services for survivors of sexual assault and International Women's Day. As well as debuting the latest book to be read by Our Shared Shelf, Watson also introduced a new hairstyle: launching countless articles written in lifestyle publications commenting on the change and including the book. This Instagram post can be read as a strategic move by Watson: it is difficult to imagine the same number of articles being written if she had merely posted a photo of the book itself.

Interviewed on the red carpet at the 2018 Golden Globes, at which members of the Time's Up movement brought feminist activists as their guests, Watson described how the movement was created to help women across industries[352]. The gloss of the celebrity association was apparent in the reporting of the awards ceremony, with Watson's hair dominating red carpet coverage alongside her political message. An article with the headline 'Emma Watson Hits the Golden Globes Red Carpet with New Bangs and a Special Guest'[353] introduced readers of *InStyle* to Marai Larasi. Watson's guest for the evening, Larasi is executive director of Imkaan, a Black feminist organisation dedicated to stopping violence against women.

The power hierarchies at play in this situation are inherent in the press coverage of the event. Watson is quoted in the piece describing how Larasi has taught her about intersectionality in feminism. While Larasi is also given the opportunity to speak to the readers of *InStyle*, this is largely confined to talking about the ways in which Watson has been an ally to women of colour. Larasi described how Watson

[351] Sumin Zhao and Michele Zappavigna, 'Beyond the Self:Intersubjectivity and Thesocial Semiotic Interpretation of the Selfie', 1739.
[352] Variety, '#WhyWeWearBlack - 2018 Golden Globes Red Carpet Interviews'.
[353] Brandi Fowler and Isabel Jones, 'Emma Watson Hits the Golden Globes Red Carpet with New Bangs and a Special Guest'.

'really kind of tried to understand what the specific issues are in terms of women of color'[354]. White celebrities providing a platform for women of colour to share their stories is, in theory, what feminism is all about, but will the star quality of the celebrities in question always end up pulling focus? Watson's celebrity allowed *InStyle* readers to learn about the work of an organisation they might not have otherwise heard of. However, with coverage dominated by Watson herself, how impactful this was for Larasi's work is uncertain. Watson had the opportunity to bolster her feminist image and position herself as an intersectional ally but the boost in awareness for Larasi's organisation is potentially small.

Patricia Hill Collins writes that 'accusations of racism in the women's movement may be much less about the racial attitudes of the individual White women than it is about the unwillingness or inability of some Western White feminists to share power'[355]. This sharing of power is key for any western white feminist and is something that Watson seemed to be taking on board. In the same way that postfeminism assumes that feminism should be relegated to the past, so too does a post-racial society believe that 'race and racism are passée relics of a bygone era'[356]. Watson's choice to invite a woman of colour shows an awareness of intersectional feminism and of the platform she has been given that still isn't afforded to other active members of the feminist movement. Not only this but it works to build upon her already likeable persona, and adds to her authenticity as a feminist.

TERF wars and Saturn returns

As well as race, Watson has navigated discussions of trans rights as part of her celebrity feminism. While not taking on any acting roles since *Little Women* in 2019, her involvement in the *Harry Potter* franchise, and consequent associations with author J.K. Rowling, has meant that any comments relating to trans rights have been scrutinised by the press. As I have been undertaking this research, Rowling was repeatedly accused of transphobic views due to her vocal defence of her belief in the importance of biological sex. The clash between trans rights activists and the "gender critical" movement has meant that any comments from Watson about trans women have become important talking points in the press.

[354] Brandi Fowler and Isabel Jones, 'Emma Watson Hits the Golden Globes Red Carpet with New Bangs and a Special Guest'.
[355] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 253.
[356] Michael G. Lacy and Kent A. Ono, 'Introduction'.

Writing on her blog in 2020, Rowling expressed her concerns about how gender and the discussion around trans rights 'is influencing politics, medical practice and safeguarding'[357] and her worries 'about the dangers to young people, gay people and about the erosion of women's and girl's rights'[358]. On the same day as the post was published, Watson tweeted 'Trans people are who they say they are and deserve to live their lives without being constantly questioned or told they aren't who they say they are. I want my trans followers to know that I and so many other people around the world see you, respect you and love you for who you are.'[359]. This series of tweets was interpreted by the press as Watson choosing to take the opposing side to Rowling in the "TERF wars"[360]. "TERF", or Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist, is the acronym assigned to transphobic feminists by trans activists and the debate surrounding trans rights has been characterised by the press as a war of two sides; between those labelled as TERFs and those on the side of trans rights. Clearly this expression of love and support from Watson was interpreted by Rowling as confrontational as, in response to a post by one of her followers about forgiving Watson, she tweeted 'Celebs who cosied up to a movement intent on eroding women's hard-won rights and who used their platforms to cheer on the transitioning of minors can save their apologies for traumatised detransitioners and vulnerable women reliant on single sex spaces'[361].

Rather than addressing Rowling's comments directly, Watson continued to present a composed front. As she has never explicitly participated in any arguments, even seemingly innocuous comments were turned into tabloid headlines. When introduced by actor Rebel Wilson at the BAFTA awards in 2022, who said 'Here to present the next award is Emma Watson. She calls herself a feminist, but we all know she's a witch', Watson replied 'I'm here for all the witches'[362]. This was interpreted by viewers as a veiled retort at Rowling, with some labelling her a

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[357] J. K. Rowling, 'J.K. Rowling Writes about Her Reasons for Speaking out on Sex and Gender Issues'.
[358] Ibid.
[359] Emma Watson, 'Trans People Are Who They Say They Are and Deserve to Live Their Lives without Being Constantly Questioned or Told They Aren't Who They Say They Are.'.
[360] Hugh Breakey, 'Witch Trials, TERF Wars and the Voice of Conscience in a New Podcast about J.K. Rowling'.
[361] J. K. Rowling, 'Not Safe, I'm Afraid. Celebs Who Cosied up to a Movement Intent on Eroding Women's Hard-Won Rights and Who Used Their Platforms to Cheer on the Transitioning of Minors Can Save Their Apologies for Traumatised Detransitioners and Vulnerable Women Reliant on Single Sex Spaces.'.
[362] Martin Robinson and Harry Howard, 'Emma Watson Is Accused of Using the BAFTAs to Take Aim at JK Rowling - the Woman Who "plucked Her from Obscurity" - in "Desperate" Bid to "Please Trans Fans"'.

'woke brat'[363]. When even benign statements are seen as Watson disrespecting her elders and taking sides, it is unsurprising that she has declined to make her views more explicit. Where one might have expected Watson to become more confident or outspoken in her politics as she got older, she has retained a composed and understated approach. This is in keeping with her image but could also be seen as Watson ensuring she remains employable, should she wish to return to acting.

Watson's break from acting was explained in 2023 in an Instagram post to mark her 33rd birthday. The post, which detailed what she described as her 'Saturn Return'[364], explained how she 'stepped away' from her life to embark on a journey of self-improvement out of the limelight. As well as learning new skills and doing therapy, Watson detailed how she founded a gin brand with her brother, started a women's environmental investment fund and directed an advertising campaign for a new fragrance by luxury fashion brand Prada. Watson's retreat from public facing stardom meant that her feminist politics took a backseat in favour of her personal projects. While remaining less hypervisible in the media, Watson continued to embody the neoliberal ideal of the project of the self. Her time away from acting was still incredibly productive, showing the kind of personal development that epitomises a postfeminist sensibility and a focus on luxurious consumerism. However, Watson did make a point of thanking 'the witches in my coven who were so pivotal in helping me arrive at where and who I am now', reminding her followers that community is vital in life.

Conclusion: acceptable feminism in context

Watson's brand of feminist rebellion echoed that of her character of Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*: one that was palatable to a neoliberal postfeminist culture as it only very gently pushed back against gender expectations without abandoning them altogether. This acceptable feminism mobilised Watson's approachability in order to introduce difficult or radical ideas that could be easily rejected if they were raised in a more aggressive manner. While Gill's *post-postfeminism* was being championed by many Millennials, there were still plenty of proponents of

[363] Martin Robinson and Harry Howard, 'Emma Watson Is Accused of Using the BAFTAs to Take Aim at JK Rowling - the Woman Who "plucked Her from Obscurity" - in "Desperate" Bid to "Please Trans Fans"'.
[364] Emma Watson, 'This Is 33.'.

postfeminism who repudiated the notion that there was still work to be done in order to achieve gender equality.

In the same way that Sofia Coppola's '"unthreatening" girlishness'[365], diminishes what could be perceived as a challenge to the male-dominated status quo of film direction, Watson's girl-next-door quality, helped by her British ordinariness, allowed her to hide in plain sight as a politically-engaged woman. Watson and Coppola also share an association with a famous man: Coppola with her father, and Watson with the fictional franchise lead of Harry Potter. This male affiliation could be seen to contribute to their legitimacy while simultaneously relegating their stardom.

Many of the tensions that drive Coppola's celebrity — such as the line she walks between indie and mainstream filmmaking, and the simultaneous help and hindrance of the Coppola name — find parallels in Watson's star persona. At once attainable and unattainable, Watson's star persona, combined with her feminist views, creates an ambiguity that is symptomatic of a postfeminist climate: in which feminist ideas can be taken on board and yet explicit discussions of feminism are often met with a negative response[366]. This has been demonstrated by this chapter in discussions of Watson's HeForShe speech, where she was advised against directly referencing the word feminism; in the ironic engagements with sexism in *Beauty and the Beast* and in the backlash that followed her "topless photo".

Watson differs from Coppola in her willingness to reflect on her own privilege and open reaction to criticism. Where Coppola described the backlash against her decision to remove the only Black character from her adaptation of *The Beguiled* as 'disheartening' [367], Watson publicly embraced opportunities to learn from criticism from other feminists – such as her Goodreads post reflecting on the accusations against her of White Feminism. It is important to consider the social categories that Watson occupies when discussing her feminism, as well as her celebrity. Her whiteness, her middle class background, her able body, her conventional beauty, and her respectability have all contributed to her celebrity status and the platform that Watson is afforded by her fame. Women who are working class, who are queer, or differently abled, women of colour, trans women,

[365] Yunuen Lewis, 'Cool Postfeminism: The Stardom of Sofia Coppola', 196.
[366] Scharff, *Repudiating Feminism: Young Women in a Neoliberal World*.
[367] Emma Stefansky, 'Sofia Coppola Responds to The Beguiled Backlash'.

and women from developing countries are not often given the same stardom as Watson, if at all. Although Watson's adherence to hegemonic femininity has allowed her to speak openly about feminist issues, these issues are always going to be mediated by her own privileged position within society.

Chapter 2: Michaela Coel's personal is political

Born 1.10.1987

In contrast to Watson, Michaela Coel explores feminist issues through her television work, rather than through social media. Through this case study I analyse the ways in which Michaela Coel brings new perspectives to feminist issues through her works *Chewing Gum* and *I May Destroy You*. I situate these works within the trend during this period of study for unlikeable female characters, and the opportunities for telling stories of sexual violence that were created by the #MeToo movement. Coel provides a counterpoint to Watson, not only in the ways she contributes to feminist discourse but through her different socioeconomic background. Coel's position as a working class Black woman is an important part of my analysis of her authorship. I also examine the ways in which Coel utilises public speaking opportunities and interviews with the press to contribute to feminist discourse. My analysis of this participation in more traditional forms of media asks if this is a way to put distance between herself as a celebrity and her activism and how this relates to her class and race. This chapter will also explore the work Coel does within the television industry by enabling opportunities for those from a similar socioeconomic background to her. This combination of approaches to celebrity feminism makes Coel an important case study to examine within a political moment when Black women authors were both championed and marginalised.

Chewing Gum

Coel began writing while she was in her final year of drama school. In 2012, she was searching for someone like her on the page – to no avail[368]. Her frustration with the lack of interesting female characters resulted in her writing a play called 'Chewing Gum Dreams' based on her experiences of working-class life in East London. This one-woman stage show later became the two season television sitcom *Chewing Gum*. The series follows protagonist Tracey (played by Coel), a 24-year-old virgin who lives on a London council estate with her devout Christian

[368] Krishnan Guru-Murthy, *Michaela Coel.*

mother (Shola Adewusi) and sister (Susan Wokoma). *Chewing Gum* first aired on E4, Channel 4's entertainment channel popular with viewers aged 16-34[369].

At the time of release, *Chewing Gum* found itself in the company of several other female-fronted series that were loosely based on the writer or showrunner's own personal experiences. Coel stands out as the only Black woman mentioned in a piece in *The Times* entitled 'The rise of the "selfie" TV series'[370]. It is important to examine how the different race and class identities of Coel and the other stars mentioned in the piece — Phoebe Waller-Bridge, Billie Piper, Sara Pascoe, and Katherine Ryan — inform and impact their participation in the trend for this kind of autobiographical series. Comparisons can most noticeably be drawn between the character of Tracey in *Chewing Gum* and Waller-Bridge's titular Fleabag. While both Fleabag and Tracey address the camera with a 'comic bluntness'[371] as they awkwardly navigate social and sexual encounters, their differing identities change how these raw and intimate moments are experienced by the audience. As Rebecca Wanzo explores in a similar comparison of Lena Dunham's *Girls*[372] and Issa Rae's *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*[373], 'There may be freedom in a middle-class white "girl" associating herself with sexual abjection, dirt, and feces, given traditional representations of pure white womanhood, but perhaps unsurprisingly, a black girl may resist or play with Western constructions of abjection'[374]. Laura Minor has a similar observation of Tracey in *Chewing Gum*, arguing that 'Coel has transformed what it means to be 'unruly' in her deconstruction of pejorative stereotypes that have plagued the portrayal of Black women, who are often denoted as sexually aggressive[375]. The character of Tracey is awkward, innocent and endearing to the audience. It is this undermining of stereotypes of Black women, Minor argues, and in 'Coel's "fastidious" attention to detail in her writing/performance – that has enabled a new version of 'unruliness' to be present in contemporary television'[376].

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[369] Channel 4, 'Channel 4 to Launch E4 on Freeview'.
[370] Franchesca Angelini, 'The Rise of the "Selfie" TV Series'.
[371] Faye Woods, 'Too Close for Comfort: Direct Address and the Affective Pull of the Confessional Comic Woman in Chewing Gum and Fleabag', 201.
[372] *Girls* (HBO, 2012).
[373] *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (YouTube, 2011).
[374] Wanzo, 'Precarious-Girl Comedy: Issa Rae, Lena Dunham, and Abjection Aesthetics', 30.
[375] Minor, *Reclaiming Female Authorship in Contemporary UK Television Comedy*, 102.
[376] Ibid., 113

The awkwardness found in the character of Tracey reflects what Havas and Sulimma term 'the cringe aesthetics of prestige dramedy'[377] – describing a trend within female-centred half-hour dramedies that sits in contrast with the sitcoms about single women that came before them – titles including *30 Rock*[378], *New Girl*[379] and *The Mindy Project*[380] – in their embrace of the abject. Havas and Sulimma examine *Girls*, *Fleabag* and *Insecure*[381] in their investigation of cringe aesthetics, in particular the ways in which these series approach dark subject matter through humour. They argue that the ambiguous reactions that these tragicomic narrative arcs provoke can lead to greater discussion potential across social media and journalism.

As Havas and Sulimma define it, these 'dramedies depict millennial female protagonists who frequently violate social and physical taboos in embarrassing narrative situations, while failing at communication, exhibiting unawareness of expected social behaviors, and having their self-images diverge from the ways others perceive them. In addition, these characters' visual portrayals often break with cinema's and television's aesthetic conventions around the female body'[382]. When looking at *Fleabag* and *Girls*, Havas and Sulimma found that the audience has an 'affective distance'[383] from the characters; cringing *at* them rather than *with* them. When this lens is turned on *Insecure*'s protagonist Issa, her racialised subject positioning changes this "affective distance" and instead the audience become 'cringe collaborators'[384] as Issa encounters the microaggressions and blatant racism of the white characters around her. Havas and Sulimma argue that, while the show may address an audience of colour in these collaborative moments, white viewers may cringe if they recognise their own behaviour or privilege on screen.

In the same ways as *Insecure*, *Chewing Gum* undoubtedly employs cringe comedy to explore uncomfortable truths. As described by Giselle Au-Nhien Nguyen, 'Coel

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[377] Julia Havas and Maria Sulimma, 'Through the Gaps of My Fingers: Genre, Femininity, and Cringe Aesthetics in Dramedy Television'.
[378] *30 Rock* (NBC, 2006).
[379] *New Girl* (Los Angeles: Fox, 2011-2018).
[380] *The Mindy Project* (Los Angeles: Hulu, 2012-2017).
[381] *Insecure* (HBO, 2016).
[382] Havas and Sulimma, 'Through the Gaps of My Fingers: Genre, Femininity, and Cringe Aesthetics in Dramedy Television', 82.
[383] Ibid., 83.
[384] Ibid., 88.

uses absurdist humour and situations to subtly tease out questions about race, class and gender, and at the same time creating an astute observational portrait of a young woman who's figuring it all out'[385]. As Tracey navigates various attempts at sexual encounters, Coel deftly deploys ridicule to untangle the fetishisation of Black women. In season 1, Tracey recruits a white woman for a threesome with her boyfriend Connor. The woman soon tries to turn the ménage à trois into a roleplay where Tracey is an enslaved person from the film *12 Years a Slave*[386], while in the second season Tracey meets a man who asks her to dress up in an amalgamation of different traditional African dress. Each tryst is played for laughs with absurd exaggeration, allowing the audience to consider the objectification of Tracey with the protection of comedy. Coel's ownership of the joke differs from instances of cringe comedy used in series such as *Fleabag,* by placing the audience in a position of collaborative cringe with Tracey, or by experiencing cringe at seeing themselves reflected in the white characters' racism.

Before and after *Chewing Gum*

Alongside roles that she has written herself, Coel has also had a number of parts in other television series and films. One of her first roles was in *Top Boy*[387], which Kehinde Andrews described as having 'an important role in framing how black communities are portrayed on British television'[388] due to the series being one of only a few featuring a majority Black cast. Andrews went on to conclude that 'The relentless image of crime and poverty on the estate discursively bind the black community to the ghetto'[389]. In her last role before *Chewing Gum*, Coel played Lilyhot — an inhabitant of Troy, a segregated zone for aliens who have invaded Earth — in Channel 4 series *The Aliens*[390]. The outrageous comedy of *Chewing Gum* and the large complex canvas that would come later in *I May Destroy You* could be seen, alongside her varied roles in works she has not written herself, as a way for Coel to avoid being reduced to a representational stereotype.

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[385] Giselle Au-Nhien Nguyen, 'Chewing Gum: Nosebleeds and Crises of Faith in Michaela Coel's Hilarious Coming-of-Age Comedy'.
[386] *12 Years a Slave* (Searchlight Pictures, 2013).
[387] *Top Boy* (Channel 4, 2011).
[388] Kehinde Andrews, 'The Iconic Ghetto on British Television:Black Representation and Top Boy', 115.
[389] Ibid., 127.
[390] *The Aliens* (Channel 4, 2016).

As well as comparisons to Waller-Bridge being made around *Chewing Gum* and *Fleabag*, both women were also cast in roles within the *Star Wars* franchise. Coel played an unnamed Resistance Monitor in *Star Wars: Episode VIII - The Last Jedi* and Waller-Bridge provided the voice of droid L3-37 in *Solo: A Star Wars Story*[391]. Waller-Bridge's role as a 'Feminist Droid'[392] was much more prominent than Coel's character, who only says three words. Questions are raised from this around how British film stardom is conceived, and who a fast-track to Hollywood is available to. As Melanie Williams writes, 'the stranglehold of the 'English rose' ideal in relation to British femininity, often connected to a nostalgic vision of the past, has also played a crucial role in the exclusion of BAME women from stardom'[393], describing the 'reiterative white middle-class femininity'[394] that is continually churned out by the British film industry. As Coel herself has reiterated in interviews, Williams notes that 'Class and the class-connected social capital of connections play an important part in deciding who does or doesn't make the grade for potential stardom'[395].

Before *I May Destroy You*, Coel appeared twice in dystopian sci-fi anthology *Black Mirror* — in episodes *Nosedive*[396] and *USS Callister*[397] — and then in musical romantic comedy *Been So Long*[398]. Writer, critic, and self-appointed "romcomoisseur" Bolu Babalola noted the film's conspicuous place in the pop cultural landscape as 'ostensibly the first British rom-com with two black leads'[399]. Babalola described the significance of Coel's performance: 'I can't remember ever seeing a dark-skinned British black woman in a British production have a man so utterly, demonstratively, sweetly, smitten with her'[400]. Coel then landed her first leading role in a BBC drama: as Rwandan genocide survivor Kate Ashby in *Black Earth Rising*[401]. As the protagonist of this emotional drama, in which she plays a legal investigator who was brought from Rwanda to London as a small child, Coel's 'incandescent intensity'[402] shone. Her impressive performance in this

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[391] *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2018).
[392] Olivia Truffaut-Wong, 'There's A Feminist Droid In "Solo" & You're Gonna Be Totally Obsessed'.
[393] Williams, *Female Stars of British Cinema*, 197.
[394] Ibid.
[395] Ibid., 202.
[396] 'Nosedive', *Black Mirror* (Netflix, 2016).
[397] 'USS Callister', *Black Mirror* (Netflix, 2017).
[398] *Been So Long* (Netflix, 2018).
[399] Bolu Babalola, 'Finally, a British Rom-Com about Black People in Love'.
[400] Ibid.
[401] *Black Earth Rising* (BBC, 2018).
[402] '"Black Earth Rising" Is A Fascinating, If Clunky, Take On The Rwandan Genocide', *Fresh Air*.

legal-political thriller, alongside her previous roles, worked to position Coel as a serious dramatic actor. This role also saw her move away from her East London accent and adopt a more neutral, middle class voice — due to her character's upbringing by her international lawyer adoptive mother Eve (Harriet Walter). As I have mentioned in my chapter on Emma Watson, the speaking voice of a British actor accounts for a significant part of their star persona[403].

I May Destroy You

Breaking the silence around sexual assault can be a powerful political and personal act. But it also places the speaker in a position of enormous vulnerability. In *I May Destroy You*, Michaela Coel explores the risk and personal cost of speaking out by drawing on her own experience of sexual assault in a 12 part mini series for the BBC. In this section, I will demonstrate how Coel brought new perspectives of who can be a victim of sexual assault and the impact this can have, and in turn helped to reshape the discourse around sexual assault by prompting conversations. *I May Destroy You* uses humour to soften portrayals of difficult subjects, explores grey areas between good and bad, and portrays multiple and varied experiences of consent violation. Here I will unpack Coel's approach in relation to her subject position and how race, class, and gender contribute to the ways in which she chose to share her story. The historical context of the release of the series is also important to consider — *I May Destroy You* was released during the first British lockdown as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, one month after the murder of George Floyd, and in the wake of #MeToo — giving a unique context during which audiences were prompted to reflect, as they sheltered in place.

I May Destroy You was an important contribution to feminism through its potential to start conversations and shape discourse. Sarah Projansky describes how 'rape discourse is *part of* the fabric of what rape is in contemporary culture'[404]. Coel brought a fresh perspective to rape discourse by centring the Black British experience. Black creators often face difficulties trying to navigate film and television distribution, as Black director and founder of film collective ARRAY, Ava DuVernay described when she was interviewed as part of BFI London Film Festival in 2020. Explaining her decision to release much of her work through Netflix,

[403] Williams, *Female Stars of British Cinema*.
[404] Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*, 2.

DuVernay cited the democratisation of the platform and the broader audience reach it provides[405]. Research has shown that Netflix can help to bring "niche" content into the mainstream[406]. Interestingly, Coel first pitched the idea for *I May Destroy You* to Netflix. When they wouldn't allow her to retain any percentage of the copyright, she withdrew her interest in favour of working with the BBC (with HBO as co-producer). Coel recounted an email from Piers Wenger, controller of BBC drama commissioning, which detailed the BBC's desire that Coel 'make it as near the knuckle, as honest and as true to your creative vision as you desire'[407]. Coel's unrestricted authorship of *I May Destroy You* makes an important contribution to breaking the silence around sexual assault in a way that feels less exploitative than it might had Coel not retained the rights to her own story.

The value of seeing one's own experience reflected back from a screen is something that Weruche Opia, who co-stars alongside Coel in *I May Destroy You,* talked about on an episode of *Woman's Hour*: 'It was nice to know that our stories are being told on a larger scale. We're being part of it. The representation and diversity was on and behind the screen'[408]. Black author Candice Carty-Williams also praised *I May Destroy You* for its representation, comparing scenes in the show to her own experience of publishing. Writing in *The Guardian*, Carty-Williams said that it was the first time she had watched a writer portrayed on screen who she felt any affinity with: 'She skewers the publishing people you encounter who don't at all care about you, only what you can write for them'[409]. The commercial nature of the publishing industry stated by Carty-Williams is referred to directly in *I May Destroy You*, as noted by Banet-Weiser and Higgins:

> *In Arabella's recovery, financial survival takes priority over both psychological wellbeing and creative fulfillment. However, within a broader cultural context of #MeToo and a heightened public awareness of the ubiquity of rape culture, she also finds that her status as a sexual assault survivor is commodified and positioned as marketable.*[410]

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[405] *Spotlight Conversation: Ava DuVernay and the ARRAY Executive Team | BFI London Film Festival 2020*. BFI London Film Festival.
[406] Alex Bryson, 'How Netflix Brings Niche Topics into the Mainstream'.
[407] Helen Daly, 'Michaela Coel Reveals the BBC "took the Reins off" for I May Destroy You's Hard-Hitting Scenes: "They Let Me Do Anything"'.
[408] 'I May Destroy You', *Woman's Hour*.
[409] Candice Carty-Williams, 'Michaela Coel Plays the First On-Screen Writer I Can Relate To'.
[410] Banet-Weiser and Higgins, 'Television and the "Honest" Woman: Mediating the Labor of Believability', 140.

The #MeToo movement, described by Clancy and Yelin as 'a flashpoint for celebrity feminism'[411], had the primary purpose of giving survivors of sexual assault a platform for their voice. This outpouring of women sharing their experiences has in turn shaped the stories being told on screen, with television producer Suzanne Mackie describing #MeToo's influence on the industry as 'a kind of reckoning'[412]. Films such as *Bombshell*[413], *The Assistant*[414], and *Promising Young Woman*[415] explored real and imagined narratives of sexual abuse, while on television, Coel's *I May Destroy You* was a standout example of a very personal experience being dramatised.

As described by *Sight & Sound*'s Kate Stables in her review of the series, with 'her striking, elfin, dark-skinned beauty, our image of a victim was immediately and powerfully subverted'[416]. This is all the more timely following the domination of news coverage at the time by the rape and murder of Sarah Everard by police officer Wayne Couzens[417]. White, middle class, and heteronormatively attractive (slim, blonde and pretty), Everard presented the stereotypical image of a victim, physically fitting with a concept of vulnerability that isn't open to Black women in the same way. Skewed and uneven media coverage prompted conversations around Blessing Olusegun, who was found dead in 2020[418]; and Wenjing Lin, who was murdered in 2021[419]; neither of whom received the same amount of press as Everard.

I May Destroy You also deviated from the typical story of sexual assault by centring not just the experience of Arabella but those of two other Black characters who undergo different incidents of consent violation. Arabella's friend Kwame (Paapa Essiedu) is raped by a Grindr date with whom he had consensual sex only minutes before. Another friend Terry (Weruche Opia) has consensual sex with two men who it is later revealed had pretended to be strangers in order to seduce her. Arabella also experiences *stealthing* – when a man she has consented to sex with

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[411] Laura Clancy and Hannah Yelin, 'Monarchy Is a Feminist Issue: Andrew, Meghan and #MeToo Era Monarchy'.
[412] Vanessa Thorpe, 'Radical, Angry, Creative: British Women Lead a Screen Revolution'.
[413] *Bombshell* (Lions Gate Films, 2019).
[414] *The Assistant* (Bleecker Street, 2019).
[415] *Promising Young Woman* (Focus Features, 2020).
[416] Kate Stables, 'I May Destroy You', 76.
[417] Lucy Manning, 'Sarah Everard Murder: Met PC Wayne Couzens Pleads Guilty'.
[418] Leah Sinclair, 'What Happened to Blessing Olusegun?'.
[419] Press Association, 'Man Charged with Murder of 16-Year-Old Wenjing Lin in South Wales'.

removes the condom he is wearing without telling her. These multiple instances of sexual assault serve to highlight the pervasive and systemic nature of rape culture, and the intersectionality of who it impacts, in a way that a single narrative could never achieve. The variety of experiences portrayed also avoids the idealisation of a victim. These complex characters are neither good nor bad, they are merely shown as people who experience different articulations of the abuse of consent. Tanya Serisier argues that the narratives of sexual assault that we most frequently encounter are told by authors who are 'overwhelmingly a collection of white, heterosexual, educated women telling stories of stranger rape'[420]. This homogenised view of sexual assault, Projansky argues, 'perpetuates a long-standing tradition of excluding women of color, particularly Black women, from rape scenarios in ways that negate rape's complexity and frequency in their lives'[421]. Kimberlé Crenshaw writes:

> *The racism and sexism written into the social construction of rape are merely contemporary manifestations of rape narratives emanating from a historical period when race and sex hierarchies were more explicitly policed. Yet another is the devaluation of Black women and the marginalization of their sexual victimizations.*[422]

As well as showing a wider diversity of victims, *I May Destroy You* also brought a fresh perspective by focusing on the aftereffects of rape, rather than a narrative of criminal investigation and retribution. The series also shifts away from binary notions of victim and oppressor. Caetlin Benson-Allott argues that this blurring of definitions means that the characters 'are never defined by their assaults, moreover, which means that they aren't depicted just as someone's victims'[423]. Through stories told using flashbacks, Coel shows how various traumas and experiences shape different characters and how these events are affected by their gender, race, and sexuality. In a *Sight & Sound* interview with Gaylene Gould, Coel makes a point of noting how she directed Kadiff Kirwan, who plays a police officer to whom Kwame reports his assault, explaining that he was not 'the homophobic police officer. You're trying your best. Everybody is trying their best'[424]. Characters

[420] Tanya Serisier, *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics*, 123.
[421] Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*, 232.
[422] Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color', 1268.
[423] Caetlin Benson-Allott, 'How I May Destroy You Reinvents Rape Television', 100.
[424] Gaylene Gould, 'The Misfit-Education of Michaela Coel', 28.

in the series are not necessarily good or bad, they are all complex, nuanced, with their own history, motivations, and traumas. This approach works in tandem with the comedy that Coel has woven into the show. As Gould goes on to note, 'the tight-packed parcels of plot form a twisty, disturbing, darkly funny narrative arc'[425]. Coel takes advantage of humour in order to explore issues that are rarely seen on screen, such as when Arabella has sex with a man in Italy while on her period. The character of Biagio (Marouane Zotti) removes Arabella's tampon, and with it a blood clot. Gently prodding it with a sense of curiosity, Biagio remarks 'Oh, so soft.' The levity given to this moment brings with it an accessibility that isn't often granted such a topic that is usually kept hidden.

The series prompted multiple *Woman's Hour* episodes. As presenter Jane Garvey described: 'So many conversations, some of them rather difficult, started by the BBC drama series'[426]. One episode featured a discussion on the ethical implications for female friends on a night out. Guests talked about how rape culture has placed the burden of responsibility onto other women to look out for their friends, rather than onto men to not predate intoxicated women. In another episode, presenter Jenni Murray spoke to *VICE* editor Zing Tsjeng and asked whether many viewers would have known about the practice of "stealthing" – the act of removing a condom, without your partner realising, during sex – that is shown during an episode of the series. Tsjeng responds:

> *I actually think not that many. And this is why I really rate Michaela Coel for producing a show that manages to inform and educate as well as entertain. Because there are going to be a lot of women and I hope men as well who are going to watch that and then watch the follow-up episode where Michaela Coel straight up asks a police officer who's investigating her previous rape what that is and whether it's considered sexual assault and she gets told a very very harsh "yes it is and we encourage people to report it".*[427]

Tsjeng goes on to note the gentle way in which Coel approaches these issues: 'it's all done with the lightest touch, you don't feel like it's trying to tell you a moral

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[425] Gaylene Gould, 'The Misfit-Education of Michaela Coel', 28.
[426] 'Leaving Friends on a Night out; Emma Gannon; Black Women and Photography; Asylum Seeking Women in Lockdown', *Woman's Hour*.
[427] 'I May Destroy You'.

fable'[428]. The light touch that Coel employs is key to avoiding the feminist killjoy label[429]. Ideas are presented to the viewer, the impact of actions are shown, and the audience is left to consider what they have seen, without a heavy hand moving them towards a conclusion. Another guest on the show, poet Vanessa Kisuule described how 'This show is not afraid of nuance, it's not afraid of moral conundrums, of acknowledging that there's no such thing as the perfect victim or the wholly evil perpetrator'[430]. Kisuule went on to celebrate the *murkiness* that is explored throughout the show. Rather than tying the series up with a neat conclusion, Coel leaves the audience to sit 'with that confusion and it's so beautiful and honest and radically empathetic to how very confused and sad and resilient we are as humans'[431].

I May Destroy You seemed to be a show that spanned the generations in its appeal. Jenni Murray and Jane Garvey, who are part of the Baby Boomer generation, interviewed Millennial guests. The same blurring of binaries and exploration of grey areas that piqued the interest of the *Woman's Hour* production team and their guests are identified by members of Generation Z such as a YouTuber with the channel Jeanne's Movie Chats[432] and members of Generation X such as journalist Lucy Mangan[433].

The use of screen media within the series adds a new dimension to the authorship portrayed throughout the episodes. *I May Destroy You* shows how digital media, as Hannah Yelin describes, 'open up new means for people to narrate and consume their own and other peoples' lives'[434]. Many of the interactions shown within the series are mediated, with Arabella in particular curating her own persona through social media platforms. The pervasive nature of social media in these characters' lives, particularly when Arabella outs Zain (Karan Gill) – a fellow writer who was helping her with her book, and the perpetrator of her experience of "stealthing" – as a rapist at a literary event and Terry posts a video of the accusation online. The pair are shown glued to their phones after the event as they watch the aftermath unfold over social media.

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[428] 'I May Destroy You'.
[429] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*.
[430] 'I May Destroy You'.
[431] Ibid.
[432] 'I May Destroy You | REVIEW (We Have A LOT to Talk About!)', Jeanne's Movie Chats.
[433] Lucy Mangan, 'I May Destroy You Review – Could This Be the Best Drama of the Year?'.
[434] Yelin, *Celebrity Memoir: From Ghostwriting to Gender Politics*, 165.

Michaela Coel herself has talked about social media as both positive and negative. At the 2018 Edinburgh TV Festival, Coel was invited to give the James MacTaggart lecture. In her speech she described how: 'Social media has done great things for us. It's allowed some of us to feel more loved, encouraged, connected, to make, and share work but it's also raised anxiety, paranoia and loneliness in young people especially'[435]. The character of Arabella is a social media celebrity from the first episode, with her first book commissioned based solely on her online presence. The idea of authorship is woven through the show, both in Arabella's process of writing the book, and also her authorship of her own narrative of sexual assault. She shares her story on social media, and also talks about her experience of sexual assault as part of a support group. The idea of speaking out and sharing stories is prevalent in a post-#MeToo era, where online platforms allow survivors to present, mediate, and narrate their own perspectives. As well as the positive impact that sharing experiences can have, Coel also explores the toll that this can take on those who have shared their stories so publicly, as Arabella is shown as being inundated with messages from fellow survivors. Arabella's online activism, while integral to her own healing, involves receiving multiple messages describing other victims' trauma, which overwhelm her as she tries to come to terms with her experiences of sexual assault. In this way, the series asks how both survivors of sexual assault themselves, and media outlets through which they share their stories, can contribute to the important feminist act of breaking the silence without the risk of being exploitative or causing further harm. This reflects the 'affective digital feminist labour'[436] found by Kaitlynn Mendes in her research on feminist online activists.

A search of what was then the platform Twitter (now X) made clear that the social media discourse around *I May Destroy You* was universally positive, with the only complaints being around the lack of awards the show received. Comparisons between Coel's series and the awards sweep achieved by the film *Promising Young Woman* raised questions about whether awards committees are lagging behind an industry that itself is slow to progress in terms of diversity. *Another Gaze* writer Rebecca Liu speculated as to why *Promising Young Woman* so appealed to the Academy:

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[435] *Michaela Coel | James MacTaggart Lecture | Edinburgh TV Festival 2018* (Edinburgh, 2018).
[436] Kaitlynn Mendes, 'Digital Feminist Labour: The Immaterial, Aspirational and Affective Labour of Feminist Activists and Fempreneurs'.

> *Though the film points to the many links in the chain that diminish women's suffering (complicit universities; nice guys who play along; women who tell other women it's no big deal) it is somehow the most troubling institution of all – the police – who come to the dead Cassie's rescue. We are meant to find her final freedom in the image of a handcuffed man being escorted by detectives away from his wedding, a strange, pasted-together compromise that comes across as ideologically insulting and confused, although ideal for the Academy, which loves to slickly gesture at subversion while leaving the core tenets of the establishment unchallenged.*[437]

It is interesting to consider this conclusion of carceral justice alongside the ambivalence shown towards the outcome of the criminal investigation into Arabella's rape in *I May Destroy You*. As Serisier found: 'The criminal justice system remains the primary, and, for many people, the only imaginable, framework for socially validating the harm of sexual violence and the speech of survivors'[438]. Unlike most other narratives of sexual assault, which are 'structured through discourses that see them reproduce gendered or neoliberal understanding of personal responsibility, carceral assumptions about criminality'[439], *I May Destroy You* instead focuses on Arabella, Terry, and Kwame. As calls to "defund the police" have become far more widespread, this decentring of a carceral outcome is significant.

As Oscar winners were announced in April 2021, the then Twitter account for *Another Gaze* posted a series of tweets that reiterated Liu's statement more blatantly: 'Spoon-feeding phoney feminism to the establishment during an extremely cynical period of neolib feminism will, of course, win you an Oscar. Fennell will be heralded a "first" and the Academy will pat itself on the back and say "job done"'[440]. In her piece, Liu references Virginie Despentes when describing the vulnerability of *Promising Young Woman*'s protagonist Cassie (Carey Mulligan): 'watch out girls: we also find your corpses very hot'[441]. This 'enduring

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[437] Rebecca Liu, '"Yes, Girls, We Love Your Corpses": Emerald Fennell's "Promising Young Woman"'.
[438] Serisier, *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics*, 29.
[439] Ibid., 213.
[440] Another Gaze, 'Another Gaze / Another Screen', 26 April 2021, https://twitter.com/anothergaze/status/1386474731361144835.
[441] Virginie Despentes, *King Kong Theory*, 29.

erotic fascination'[442] with these female victims who look like Mulligan, like Sarah Everard, like Margot Robbie (who plays one of the employees who experienced sexual harassment by Fox News founder Roger Ailes in *Bombshell)* doesn't extend to those victims who don't fit the same mould. Despentes wrote that when men create female characters who have experienced sexual assault, there is rarely an exploration of the emotional impact on them but rather 'you see how men, if they were women, would react to rape. A bloodbath of merciless violence. Their message is clear. "Why don't you defend yourselves more fiercely?"'[443].

It could be argued that *I May Destroy You* avoids the question of fighting back by having Arabella's assault happen while she's drugged. In the final episode, Coel allows the audience to experience multiple endings to explore different ways that Arabella might react to her assault. After returning to the bar in which she was drugged, Arabella's memory of the night comes back to her when she sees her rapist, David (Lewis Reeves). At first, the episode follows convention and we see Arabella enact bloody revenge upon him. However, that isn't where the episode ends. In *Groundhog Day*[444] fashion, the day begins again and we see an alternative conclusion where Terry and Arabella get David to attempt to repeat his crime in order to catch him in the act and have him arrested. But even this other conventional rape-revenge narrative conclusion does not go as we expect. Arabella confronts David and he ends up relaying his own experiences of sexual abuse and crying on her shoulder while Terry calls the police. Rather than watching David get dragged away in handcuffs, Arabella takes him back to her apartment to talk. He confesses to having spent time in prison for different types of rape, which he names, creating an extensive list: 'date rape, spousal rape, prison rape, payback rape, rape by deception, corrective rape'. Arabella's awkward expression during this interaction gives the audience a moment of relief while they are allowed space to contemplate the numerous forms that sexual assault can take. Eventually, the police do indeed drag David away and, as soon as he's gone, Arabella begins furiously scribbling notes for her novel; sticking them to her bedroom wall. Her process for healing is clearly shown as she writes her own story both in these imagined endings and her novel.

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[442] Liu, '"Yes, Girls, We Love Your Corpses": Emerald Fennell's "Promising Young Woman"'.
[443] Despentes, *King Kong Theory*, 24.
[444] *Groundhog Day* (Columbia Pictures, 1993).

In the next iteration of the ending, Arabella approaches David – who introduces himself as Patrick – at the bar, buys him a drink and takes him back to her place to have sex. The next morning, David says he won't leave until Arabella tells him to. When Arabella says "go" he walks out of her room, still naked, and is followed by the bloodied David from the first ending, who emerges from under Arabella's bed. When the day begins for the final time, Arabella decides not to return to the bar at all. These alternate endings could be seen as a comment on, and deliberate subversion of, the rape-revenge thriller, while also retaining the narrative impact of the violent and carceral justice conclusions. Once they are revealed to be hypothetical, the audience is left to sit with their feelings – potentially opening up more space for dialogue around how survivors of sexual assault may best heal from their trauma.

In Coel's reimagining of a tale of sexual assault, her protagonist is liberated from an ending that requires her to enact her own violence on her rapist. The different endings that Arabella lives out not only refer to the history of the rave-revenge narrative, they also explore the emotions that such an experience can manifest and allow her, and the audience, to process them through these hypothetical outcomes. This process gives Arabella the outlet to explore the anger and desire for retribution she feels, while emerging transformed and in a place more at peace. While the switch in focus to the psychological impact on Arabella and the healing that she goes through gives a new interpretation of how to tell stories of sexual assault, the different endings nod to the catharsis that is often sought in a conclusion of violent revenge. While, as Henry argues, the 'rape-revenge genre focuses on a particular type of justice—avenging individual acts of sexual violence through eye-for-an-eye retribution'[445], Coel's reinterpretation instead explores the idea of rape as a systemic problem, one that can affect multiple demographics in society. Although Arabella's drugging and stranger rape is the central event that the series focuses on, by expanding this to include Kwame and Terry's other iterations of sexual assault and consent violation, and indeed Arabella's own additional experience of "stealthing", *I May Destroy You* challenges the notion of sexual assault as isolated acts of violence committed by a few monstrous individuals. In the final conclusion to Arabella's story, she lets go of her desire for confrontation with her assailant. The story is only finished when Arabella finishes

[445] Claire Henry, *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre*, 143.

her book. The audience is left to decide for themselves if this is the real ending to the story, with the ambiguity of the multiple endings leaving the series finale open to interpretation. If the viewer wants to believe that David meets a violent end or is taken away by police, Coel has given them that opportunity. But she also offers something fresh and different – an ending that gives Arabella a productive outcome for her trauma; the book she was trying to write all along.

In the UK, *I May Destroy You* did receive awards recognition: winning best miniseries and best actress for Coel. The differences in national and international critical reputation are stark when you compare Coel's critical recognition to that of Waller-Bridge's nominations and wins for *Fleabag* at the Golden Globes and the Hollywood Foreign Press Association's complete snub of Coel. Even mainstream publications such as *Vogue* wondered if 'Coel might be a better candidate for awards-season plaudits if her story were just a little more, well…white (or, to put it in the coded language that Hollywood execs favor, a little more universal)'[446]. This "universality" is teased apart by the author of the article, who goes on to detail how victims of sexual assault are more likely to be women of colour and how white women are more likely to report rape. Coel's work continues to provoke conversation, even in its conspicuous absence from international awards lists.

Protecting the misfits

In order to fully understand Coel's celebrity feminism, it must be situated within the period of study this thesis covers. As well as the #MeToo movement, the COVID-19 pandemic, the killing of George Floyd and the consequent heightened prominence of racism within popular discourse must also be considered. That Coel is a Black woman who explored very personal experiences throughout her work was significant during a time when many people were interrogating their own participation in systemic racism, and terms such as "diversity" and "inclusion" permeated the popular lexicon. In similarity with the ways in which the Macpherson report on the Stephen Lawrence inquiry[447] influenced social inclusion within the cultural industries[448] around the time of the new millennium, the

[446] Emma Specter, 'I May Destroy You's Golden Globes Snub Raises a Larger Question: Whose Stories Are Seen as Universal?'.
[447] William Macpherson, 'THE STEPHEN LAWRENCE INQUIRY'.
[448] Clive James Nwonka and Sarita Malik, 'Top Boy: Cultural Verisimilitude and the Allure of Black Criminality for UK Public Service Broadcasting Drama'.

discourse surrounding the death of Floyd undoubtedly threw imbalances of representation within these industries under the spotlight once more. Shelley Cobb, Jack Newsinger, and Clive James Nwonka argued that the discourse surrounding "diversity" often denies 'the legacy and presence of discrimination in the film sector in favour of ideas of "under-representation" that entail no relationship between the exclusion of ethnic minorities and the wilful actions of the industry itself'[449]. As Nwonka has argued separately, there is a danger that by seeking to be more inclusive of marginalised groups, the real and important work of antiracism is avoided 'in favour of a hyper-celebration of diverse cultural practices'[450], in which predominantly white institutions profit from the inclusion of more diverse voices but do little to dismantle the systemic exclusion that exists within them.

Coel's *I May Destroy You* was shot on location in East London — giving a real sense of place and identity to the authorship of Coel, who grew up on an East London housing estate. Gould describes how '*I May Destroy You* is proof that the more specific the story, the more universal the reach'[451]. The specificity of Coel's story, and the access given to her personal experience, brings a level of authenticity to both the series and the celebrity text of Coel herself. As Hannah Yelin describes, 'In celebrity culture, access and authenticity are intertwined concepts. Offering sufficient access to the private self is a key means of meeting the demands of the appearance of authenticity'[452]. Yelin described the specific demands of this mandate as the '*gendered authenticity contract*. The gendering of these expectations can be seen in the demands made in particular upon female celebrities' interiority, "properly" managed sexuality and performances of femininity'[453]. This is only enhanced by race, as Sharon Lin Tay writes: 'Ethnic minority filmmakers who reside in the West often bear the burden of authenticity'[454].

In a similar way to Watson, and as I will detail later in relation to Jameela Jamil, a sense of authenticity is important to Coel's feminist activism. Rather than creating

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[449] Shelley Cobb, Jack Newsinger, and Clive James Nwonka, 'Introduction: Diversity in British Film and Television: Policy, Industry and Representation'.
[450] Clive James Nwonka, 'The Black Neoliberal Aesthetic', 7.
[451] Gould, 'The Misfit-Education of Michaela Coel', 26.
[452] Yelin, *Celebrity Memoir: From Ghostwriting to Gender Politics*, 170.
[453] Ibid., 171.
[454] Sharon Lin Tay, *Women on the Edge: Twelve Political Film Practices*, 108.

a sense of this through a social media presence, Coel instead brings authenticity to her feminist contributions by drawing on her own experiences for her television writing. This specificity makes her work all the more relatable and lends agency to characters who might otherwise feel disempowered: victims of sexual assault, those from marginalised communities, those from working class backgrounds, often all three. These imperfect characters are made worthy of attention and their feelings are explored with nuanced consideration. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, *The Times* journalist Francesca Angelini described "The rise of the 'selfie' TV series"[455] in an article that featured *I May Destroy Yo*u alongside Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag*, *I Hate Suzie*[456] and other works written by and starring female television authors. In the piece Angelini interviewed *I May Destroy Yo*u executive producer Roberto Troni, who admitted that it is likely that the show would not have been commissioned five years ago. Angelini also spoke to Lucy Prebble, writer of *I Hate Suzie*, who described how female creators often mine their personal histories for material – seeing this authenticity as a way of gaining entry to male-dominated spaces. The sense of authenticity that Coel brings to her work, combined with the openness to increasing diversity within the creative industries at that particular cultural moment, made her an appealing choice for networks.

While embracing this opportunity to tell her story and encourage a broader discourse of feminist issues, Coel also performed a different kind of feminist activism that is unique among my case studies. During her MacTaggart lecture, Coel described her concept of "misfits": people like her who do not fit the conventional mould of a television writer. Coel avoided directly mentioning race or class but instead discussed the lack of opportunities for "misfits", and the restrictions imposed on those who are given the chance to tell their stories. While Coel didn't express frustration with the industry, she presented her findings for the audience to make up their own minds. What she did describe was an incident at drama school that was shared by her and fellow *I May Destroy You* star Paapa Esseidu, in which a teacher used the N-word in an improvisation[457]. This traumatising event allowed Coel to bring to light the prevalence of casual racism

[455] Angelini, 'The Rise of the "Selfie" TV Series'.
[456] *I Hate Suzie* (Sky, 2020).
[457] *Michaela Coel | James MacTaggart Lecture | Edinburgh TV Festival 2018*

within the industry, while giving the audience the safety of an isolated incident to direct their emotional response towards.

Observing the trend towards finding diverse voices for television writing; Coel noted in her speech that production companies and streaming services have realised the potential for profit of such voices. As argued by Nwonka, "diversity" within the creative industries is fundamentally pursued through the lens of business interest, rather than with the goal of equality through a true challenge to the underrepresentation of certain groups[458]. Even with the pursuit of profit associated with "diverse" voices, writers from marginalised groups are often paired with established writers in order to mitigate the perceived risk of trialling new talent. Coel invited the audience to consider what might happen if, instead, these newer writers were nurtured and given the opportunity to write without interference. Coel demonstrated how "misfits" are restricted by channels:

> *We seem unsure, unknowing of their world and therefore their stories. So maybe we're a little tentative; uploading three or four short scenes; or one full episode but online. The new creator uses social media platforms to tell their followers, the outsiders who don't watch telly, that finally, they've been able to make something for TV – online.*[459]

Coel went on to describe how channels and production companies monitor the social media response to material written by marginalised people. The unasked question Coel seemed to be putting to the audience of industry professionals is how these young writers are supposed to stand up to the pressure and expectations if they are not given full freedom. Once Coel made her case, she put it plainly: 'The lack of varied perspective among producers, the lack of misfits producing telly can have catastrophic consequences'[460]. This concern for the television industry is something that Coel continued to discuss in press coverage of *I May Destroy You*:

> *Sometimes we're giving people commissions whilst they live in a family of six or seven. If we want to foster the greatest stories from the greatest range*

[458] Clive James Nwonka, 'The New Babel: The Language and Practice of Institutionalised Diversity in the UK Film Industry'.
[459] *Michaela Coel | James MacTaggart Lecture | Edinburgh TV Festival 2018.*
[460] Ibid.

of people, then we need to create an environment for them to produce and create[461]

This is demonstrative of the ways in which Clive James Nwonka and Sarita Malik describe how "diversity" work within the cultural industries doesn't actually seek to understand the fundamental inequality and social division that precludes certain groups from success, and instead shifts the conversation 'towards culturally based discourses around inclusion'[462]. Without consideration towards the practical facilitation of this inclusion, the homogeneity of these industries is doomed to continue. Coel understands these difficulties, having grown up on an East London council estate and experienced firsthand how gender, class, and race can intersect to restrict access to institutions and industries that many within these establishments are ignorant of.

When she appeared on Krishnan Guru-Murthy's podcast *Ways to Change the World*, Coel was asked whether she is on a mission to change the television industry. She responded that her cause is the protection of the "misfits". Coel sees herself as an anomaly, and described how she feels like the best way she can fulfil her role as an actor and writer is by giving opportunities to people like her. She detailed an example of this; when she attempted to give six new writers the opportunity to each pen an episode of a third season of her television series *Chewing Gum*, which ultimately failed due to the channel's insistence that Coel lead the writing[463]. These endeavours could be seen to be a kind of grass roots activism, taking direct action in order to make sure less privileged voices are given the help they need to succeed in an industry that can be difficult to navigate as someone who isn't white or middle class. Coel doesn't frame this as activism, merely describing her actions and leaving it for the audience of the interview to interpret. In Laura Minor's analysis of Coel's authorship, she argues that 'Coel demonstrates traits of the 'unruly' woman, for instance, being headstrong in the way she interacts with production companies, but she must also carefully navigate a predominantly white industry. It is in this way, I argue, she demonstrates

[461] Gould, 'The Misfit-Education of Michaela Coel', 31.
[462] James Nwonka and Malik, 'Top Boy: Cultural Verisimilitude and the Allure of Black Criminality for UK Public Service Broadcasting Drama', 440.
[463] Guru-Murthy, *Michaela Coel.*

'fastidiousness', as she 'talks back' to the industry and exercises control in the way she discusses it via the press'[464].

Coel's extremely valuable contributions to redistributing access to privileged industries stand in contrast with the more explicit kind of activism carried out by Emma Watson, such as inviting her fanbase to expand their knowledge of feminism alongside her through her feminist book club[465]; interviewing prominent feminists such as Gloria Steinem[466] and bell hooks[467]; and representing UN Women as their Goodwill Ambassador, through which she publicly called on men and boys to be the 'He for She'[468]. It is also important to note Coel's engagement with feminism through public speaking opportunities, interviews with press and her own creative work. This participation in more traditional forms of media could be seen as a way to put distance between herself as a celebrity and her activism. Questions can be asked about the subject positioning of the two stars and how their celebrity personae allow for different kinds of activism. Watson's position as an ideal of neoliberalism, representative of the individualised success of a very specific type of woman — one who is white, middle class, thin, able-bodied, and conventionally beautiful — provides her with a platform from which to push back at the dominant ideologies that she still embodies, despite her critique of them. Her stardom gives her access to establishment organisations such as the UN but also perhaps keeps her at a distance from more direct forms of activism. Coel's position as a working class, dark-skinned Black woman puts her at risk of being dismissed as the "angry Black woman" whose arguments are based on emotions. By refraining from explicitly stating her position as an activist, such as through social media posts or public activism, Coel can avoid associations with the stereotype of the feminist killjoy.

Conclusion

By directing the focus away from the "universal" and towards the specific, Coel's work prompts a change in the discourse. As Serisier writes, 'stories that are clearly and unambiguously marked as stories of rape play a far greater role in the cultural

[464] Minor, *Reclaiming Female Authorship in Contemporary UK Television Comedy*, 106.
[465] Watson, 'It's Official - "Our Shared Shelf" Is up and Running. First Book - My Life on the Road.'
[466] Our Shared Shelf Group, 'Gloria Steinem and Emma Watson in Conversation'.
[467] hooks and Watson, 'In Conversation with Bell Hooks and Emma Watson'.
[468] Watson, 'Be the He for She'.

process of deciding what rape is, how it is understood and what social responses it calls forth'[469]. *I May Destroy You* is important because of its unique approach to telling stories of rape. As Tanya Horeck writes, the 'black male rapist, the virginal white victim: these are the terms that have pervaded dominant public discourse on rape'[470]. Coel's characters are not white or virginal. They engage in casual sex with multiple partners, they are Black and include a gay man, they consent to one type of sex with their rapists but not another. This works to offset the notion that only "unambiguous" rape is worthy of attention.

As Caetlin Benson-Allott writes, '*I May Destroy You* reveals how bad most television shows about sexual assault are at addressing intersectional oppression, trauma, healing, and even the nature of their own genre'[471]. With the narrative focusing on the victims, rather than the perpetrators, *I May Destroy You* delivers a conclusion based on Arabella's work on herself and her healing, rather than a carceral justice delivered to the man who raped her. While it would be a stretch to argue that Coel is an abolitionist feminist arguing for prison reform, by delivering an ambiguous conclusion that centres Arabella's survival on her personal growth and creative output, Coel does not define her character as a victim of a crime, or in relation to her rapist.

Coel can start conversations with her work, but she can never be in full control of the discourse that surrounds series such as *I May Destroy You*. Although Coel is undoubtedly performing feminist anti-rape praxis in breaking the silence and sharing her story of sexual assault, she does not brand herself as a feminist celebrity in the same way as Watson, who is more explicit about her activism. Along with her work in television, Coel's activism can be found off-screen in her support of younger writers. This collective struggle against white supremecist patriarchal institutions goes against neoliberal and postfeminist ideas of autonomous responsibility and subverts these power structures. However, these structures remain and institutions are slow to change, as demonstrated by the awards snubs of *I May Destroy You* in favour of *Promising Young Woman*. It remains to be seen what the lasting legacy of these works will be. With the rape

[469] Serisier, *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics*, 50.
[470] Tanya Horeck, *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film*, 32.
[471] Benson-Allott, 'How I May Destroy You Reinvents Rape Television', 100.

revenge genre generally film-based, there is the potential for the longer character development time of *I May Destroy You* to have greater impact on rape discourse.

Chapter 3: Jameela Jamil courts controversy

Born 5.2.1986

Jameela Jamil is the most controversial of my case studies, bringing an interesting perspective on the different ways that celebrity feminists found success during my period of study. This case study demonstrates how an outspoken, combative approach to feminist activism, rather than the more palatable or traditional methods demonstrated by Watson and Coel, can cultivate a loyal fanbase and bolster a celebrity's visibility. Throughout this chapter I will examine Jamil's on-screen career and ventures into podcasting and other media outlets to understand the changing mood of popular feminist discourse, particularly within digital feminist activism. I map the ways in which Jamil has adapted her celebrity persona and the ways in which her admission of "mistakes" and lack of knowledge creates a sense of authenticity.

Through my analysis of Jamil I have observed a trend in certain circles of feminist digital activism away from "callout" or "cancel" culture and towards an approach that is less combative. My exploration of Jamil's use of social media and her podcast *I Weigh*[472] demonstrate how she has adapted her approach to activism to match the shifting mood of the contemporary moment. My analysis of the media reception of Jamil shows that, while a controversial, outspoken approach to feminism ensures Jamil will always receive negative press attention, she is able to utilise this to further curate her authentic image. This case study also considers Jamil's use of other celebrities and cultural commentators to bolster her activist credentials. Her canny utilisation of the reach of other figures within the media is important to examine as another way Jamil has built her platform and increased her credibility as an opinion leader.

Pulled between an aspirational and down-to-earth mindset

Starting out as a replacement for model, television presenter, and now fashion designer, Alexa Chung, Jamil's first on-screen job, from 2009 – 2012, was presenting for *T4*, Channel 4's weekend broadcasting slot aimed at

[472] 'I Weigh with Jameela Jamil Trailer', *I Weigh with Jameela Jamil*, 27 March 2020.

16-34-year-olds[473]. Described by trade publication *Broadcast* as 'like Heat magazine with attitude'[474], *T4*'s programming included the music show *Popworld*[475], known for the 'sarcastic, mocking interview style of its presenters indicative of the address T4 cultivated'[476]. Faye Woods describes *T4* as 'pulled between an aspirational and down-to-earth mindset, constructed through its programming and the personas of its presenters'[477], who were 'allowed a great deal of freedom to knock the more ludicrous storylines and characters'[478] featured in the scheduled programming. Woods goes on to argue that the glamour of the presenters, who often came from modelling backgrounds, 'was undercut by their performance of cheeky archness'[479] and that the presenters 'sought to present themselves as an audience substitute through their "ordinary" interaction with the strand's often glamorous and aspirational texts'[480]. This engagement with the programmes 'signalled T4 as transparent and thus "authentic"'[481].

This tension between glamour and authenticity is something that has remained key to Jamil's persona. In 2013, when she had just been announced as the first woman to present The Official Chart show on BBC Radio 1, Jamil described to the *Independent* being 'dealt this bizarre persona of being this sarcastic fashionista 'it girl' who is friends with loads of celebrities. That couldn't be further from the truth'[482]. Jamil's attempts to convince her audience that she lives a normal life could be seen as her drawing on a display of authenticity and relatability as part of her celebrity persona. As James Bennett writes, television celebrities commoditise their authentic self, with this ordinariness creating an intimacy that becomes the 'site of their economic, ideological, textual and cultural importance'[483]. Bennett cites the direct address of television presenters as serving as 'a device of intimacy'[484], which Jamil certainly continued to use later on in her career through her podcast and social media presence.

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[473] Jeremy Lee, 'T4 Updates Identity in Style of Channel 4'.
[474] Broadcast, 'TRADE TALK - Summers' Day.'.
[475] *Popworld* (Channel 4, 2001).
[476] Faye Woods, *British Youth Television: Transnational Teens, Industry, Genre*, 34.
[477] Faye Woods, 'Teen TV Meets T4: Assimilating The O.C. into British Youth Television', 19.
[478] Phelim O'Neill, 'The Weekend Starts Here'.
[479] Woods, 'Teen TV Meets T4: Assimilating The O.C. into British Youth Television', 19.
[480] Ibid.
[481] Ibid.
[482] Ian Burrell, 'Jameela Jamil: The Surprising Rise of Radio 1's next Big Thing'.
[483] James Bennett, *Television Personalities: Stardom and the Small Screen*, 9.
[484] Ibid., 33.

The Good Place and the damage of fame

In 2016, Jamil moved to Los Angeles and was pretty quickly offered the role of Tahani al Jamil in television sitcom *The Good Place*. This role introduced her to an American audience and added a new dimension to her career as her first major acting role. The premise of the show is that the cast have died and ended up in heaven (or The Good Place) but it's not as idyllic as they first think and they soon realise they are actually in The Bad Place due to their poor ethics in life. As Judith Clemens-Smucker writes, when we are first introduced to Jamil's character of Tahani, her on-screen wardrobe consists 'almost solely of formal dresses which highlight her upper-class status'[485]. To embody the role of a wealthy British socialite, Jamil draws on her national heritage and middle-class background through her speaking voice. Not only this, but Tahani's love of fashion, partying and name-dropping celebrities are undoubtedly brought to the screen through Jamil's background as a fashionable television personality who frequently interviewed celebrities; despite her attempts to distance her off-screen persona from these associations. Tahani also has similarities with Jamil's activist endeavours, although the character is a humanitarian who raises money for charity rather than engaging directly in political movements. Where this comparison between on-screen and off-screen persona becomes interesting is when Tahani realises that it was this humanitarian work that earned her an afterlife in The Bad Place. As Tahani comes to discover, her motivation for pursuing these charitable endeavours 'was corrupt—she did these good deeds for attention, fame, and accolades, rather than for the good of others'[486]. This questioning of authenticity is something that will go on to be an area of tension in Jamil's persona.

Looking back at her move to the US, Jamil has since framed this relocation through interviews as a bold and risky venture. In an interview on BBC Radio 5 Live she described how people 'said I was being mad, throwing away an eight-year career, and that I was too old - I was only 29 - too ethnic, and too fat to come over to Los Angeles'[487]. This framing of herself as someone who doesn't conform to the expectations of celebrities in general, but particularly female celebrities, is

[485] Judith Clemens-Smucker, 'The Clothes Make the Woman: How Fashion Informs the Comedic Identity of Schitt's Creek's Moira Rose', 177.
[486] Molly J Brost, *The Anti-Heroine on Contemporary Television: Transgressive Women*, 42.
[487] Jim Taylor, 'Jameela Jamil Was Told She Was "too Ethnic" to Make It in the US'.

something that is key to her celebrity persona. Jamil also utilises the idea of the damage that fame has inflicted upon her in her self-presentation. As Sean Redmond writes, the 'damage of fame not only draws people closer to the injured star or celebrity, but it offers up the potential for resistant behaviour and for a critique of the machinery of fame (and capitalism) to emerge'[488].

I would argue that, as Jamil has moved away from her early career as a British television presenter, the "damage" she experienced by her early fame has offered her a way to critique various systems she has been a part of. That this critique draws on her own personal experiences is key to engaging her fanbase. Clare Hemmings writes about the concept of *affective solidarity,* and argues that a 'sustainable feminist politics of transformation'[489] requires feelings of anger and annoyance and a need to share the experience of these emotions with others. As I will describe later in this chapter, Jamil often shared her own personal experiences on her podcast, and invited her guests to share theirs too. This fostering of an *affective solidarity* could be seen as a way for Jamil to encourage her audience to develop a sense of connection to her.

Jamil's decision to leave the UK in favour of living in North America is shared by fellow celebrity feminist of colour Meghan Markle. Markle's marriage to Prince Harry, Laura Clancy argues, came 'at a particularly pertinent time in British history, and responses to her are entangled in wider socio-political debates about race, nation, imperialism and nostalgia'[490]. Both Markle and Jamil have experienced targeted campaigns from right-wing columnist Piers Morgan. The populist journalist branded Markle as perpetuating a 'tyranny of woke'[491] and accused Jamil of online harassment aimed at television presenter Caroline Flack[492]. As well as navigating racism perpetrated by the British press, both women have navigated reception of their national identities on different sides of the Atlantic. While Markle's position within the British royal family is marked by what

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[488] Sean Redmond, 'Intimate Fame Everywhere', 40.
[489] Clare Hemmings, 'Affective Solidarity: Feminist Reflexivity and Political Transformation', 148.
[490] Laura Clancy, *Running the Family Firm: How the Monarchy Manages Its Image and Our Money*, 199.
[491] Piers Morgan, 'PIERS MORGAN: Writing for the First Time about His Dramatic Exit from GMB after Saying He Didn't Believe Meghan's "truth" on Racism and the Royals, Our Columnist Defends Free Speech - and Says the Silent Majority Hate the Tyranny of Woke'.
[492] Piers Morgan, 'Jameela Jamil Is Having a Lot to Say about Online Harassment, so in the Interests of Balance, Here Is a Message Caroline Flack Sent Me Last October after the Same Jameela Jamil Led an Online Pile-on against Her Regarding a New TV Show She Was Doing.'.

Weidhase describes as 'the American Hollywood glamour she is seen to embody'[493], her association with the royals also affords her an aura of charming Britishness. This is something that has also helped Jamil navigate her move to America. Her well-spoken British persona made her the perfect casting choice for Tahani, who has contributed in large part to her success in the US.

Much like Markle's discussions of her negative experiences with the press, Jamil has spoken openly about her experiences of being hounded by the paparazzi in her twenties:

> *I'd gained weight and they wanted to shame me for gaining weight. And so they would call me, and I'm sorry for this language, but a "fat cunt" to my face constantly, outside my door. They would photograph me if I had to bend over to pick up my keys, because I'd dropped something, they'd take a photograph of my arse, put it on the front cover of a magazine. And so, they would antagonise me and ridicule me, and ridicule my body, and say all these ugly things to me, not because they even necessarily really thought those things, 'cause they were trying to provoke a reaction. They wanted me to cry, cause that's great photograph: it pushes the narrative that I'm fat and therefore I'm miserable, and I'm sad, and I'm lonely, or they wanted me to, like, react — they want you to react and, like, break their camera and attack one of them because that's a huge payout for them.*[494]

Here Jamil drew on topics that are relatable discussion points for Millennial women. The paparazzi celebrity photo of the 2000s and the damage this inflicted on celebrities has been reflected on in recent years. Stars who were tabloid fodder in their teens and early twenties such as Britney Spears, Paris Hilton, Nicole Richie and Linsday Lohan have opened up about the impact this constant invasion of privacy had on their lives[495]. In 2020, Hilton released the documentary about her life *This Is Paris*[496], which was followed a year later by *Framing Britney Spears*[497]. Both documentaries described the toll the constant paparazzi attention had on the

[493] Nathalie Weidhase, '"Prince Harry Has Gone Over to the Dark Side": Race, Royalty and US–UK Romance in Brexit Britain', 284.
[494] Jameela Jamil, 'Britney Spears and Conservatorships with Tess Barker & Babs Gray'.
[495] Daniel Arkin and Kalhan Rosenblatt, 'Their Lives Were Consumed as Entertainment. Years Later, Some Stars See a Reappraisal.'.
[496] *The Real Story of Paris Hilton | This Is Paris Official Documentary | Paris Hilton.*
[497] 'Framing Britney Spears', *The New York Times Presents* (Louisiana: FX, 2021).

two celebrities. A shared disillusionment with what was the height of postfeminism galvanised many Millennial women as feminists in the 2010s and 2020s. The 2000s was described as a 'Misogynistic Wasteland'[498] by Adam Saraswati Rawlings in *The New Feminist*, while Frances Ryan heralded the decade 'the emperor's new clothes era of feminism'[499] in *The Guardian*.

As a Millennial woman myself, I can remember my teenage years in the 2000s. Not only were they dominated by paparazzi coverage of celebrities and the scrutinisation of cellulite, this was also the decade in which Kate Moss was famously quoted in WWD as living by the motto 'nothing tastes as good as skinny feels'[500]. At this time, which *Glamour* writer Michelle Konstanstinovsky describes as 'a perfect storm of body-shaming forces culminating to catch us in the crossfires: the so-called heroin-chic fashion era'[501], teen magazines were widely circulated and influential. A study of teen magazine *Seventeen* by Leslie Winfield Ballentine and Jennifer Paff Ogle of Colorado State University found that the

> *editorial content of Seventeen described a prescribed set of bodily characteristics as remarkably more desirable than others, normalizing certain characteristics as the most valuable, and devaluing bodies void of these features. Invariably, this desirable body was described as smooth, trim, toned, tight, long, lean, flat, strong, young, sexy, healthy, clean, and free of odor and certain types of hair (e.g., arm, nipple)*[502]

The issue of devaluing certain body types has been raised by scholars such as Susie Orbach, who described how, for women, gaining weight is seen as a failure[503]. The scrutiny of the female body has long been an important issue for feminist analysis and criticism. As Natalie Jovanovski describes, 'feminist and psychological researchers come together in their condemnation of the fashion and beauty industries, and argue for the diversification of female bodies in the media as a

[498] Adam Saraswati Rawlings, 'Why the 2000s Was a Misogynistic Wasteland'.
[499] Frances Ryan, '"From Blair's Babes to TV Ladettes, the 2000s Was the Emperor's New Clothes Era of Feminism"'.
[500] Brid Costello, 'Kate Moss: The Waif That Roared'.
[501] Michelle Konstanstinovsky, 'If You Survived the Early 2000s Without Body Issues, Congratulations'.
[502] Leslie Winfield Ballentine and Jennifer Paff Ogle, 'The Making and Unmaking of Body Problems in Seventeen Magazine, 1992–2003'.
[503] Susie Orbach, *Fat Is a Feminist Issue*.

solution'[504]. The self-policing of women's bodies is attributed to the proliferation of images of idealised femininity. The radical feminist perspective, with its focus on structures of male dominance and their subordination of women, looks to the diet industry as the cultural phenomenon 'that reinforces self-objectifying attitudes in women'[505]. While the body positivity movement has been critiqued for the ways it requires 'affirmation from an anonymous, diffused public'[506], its popularisation in the 2010s is an understandable rejection of the normalisation of thin bodies that was proliferated during the preceding decade.

Body positivity and callout culture

Jamil can be seen as one of the frontrunners of the body positivity or anti-diet culture movement, through her activity on social media from the late 2010s and beyond into the early 2020s. As part of her opposition to the diet industry, or more broadly the "wellness" industry as it has become known in recent years, she was not afraid to target individual figures in her pursuit of changing the culture around body image. Jamil called out harmful products and advertisements on Instagram and what was then Twitter (now X). A notable example of this is when Kim Kardashian advertised a new product produced by The Flat Tummy Company. Jamil tweeted in order to publicly shame the reality star for advertising weight loss aids. Jamil has since deleted her account, but evidence of her post can be found in coverage of the incident. Her message to Kardashian was explicit: 'No. F**k off. No. You terrible and toxic influence on young girls'[507]. Jamil also made it part of her self-presentation to consciously reject certain practices associated with diet culture, such as when she posted a video on Instagram of her squirting cream from a can directly into her mouth with the overlaid text 'MY PRE WORK OUT [sic] GAME IS STRONG'[508]. In the caption to the video she described how, as her workouts are no longer in pursuit of weight loss, she sees them as a form of

[504] Natalie Jovanovski, *Digesting Femininities: The Feminist Politics of Contemporary Food Culture*, 24.
[505] Ibid., 31.
[506] Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, 68.
[507] Megan Murray, 'Jameela Jamil Criticises Kim Kardashian for Promoting Appetite Suppressants'.
[508] Jameela Jamil, 'The Sheer BEAUTY of Not Working out for Weight Loss Anymore Is That I Can Treat Myself to Something Fun to Give Me a Burst of Energy before I Do Any Exercise, as I'm Looking at It as Mental Health Care Now, Rather than a Punishment for Not Adhering to Patriarchal Stereotypes! (This Is Soywhip.)'.

self-care for her mental health 'rather than a punishment for not adhering to patriarchal stereotypes'[509].

As bell hooks writes, 'many amazing feminist ideas never reach an audience outside the academic world because the work is simply not accessible'[510]. Through these social media posts, Jamil combined a combative approach to body positive activism and a way of presenting feminist ideas that was accessible, engaging and humorous. Another since-deleted post from Jamil proclaimed:

> *Finally able to INSIST my image, even on billboards isn't ever airbrushed. I get backfat in Every. Single. Bra. And I used to hide/bin so many photos because of 'muffin tops'. Double chins/ 'imperfections' because I never saw them on people on TV.*[511]

Here Jamil brought her own personal experience into her activism in order to make her points. This post encapsulates the tensions inherent in Jamil's celebrity persona, which are the reasons she makes such an interesting case study. Similarly to Watson, Jamil's celebrity status makes her a recognisable figure and gives her a platform from which to critique systems of power that she is a part of. It is arguably Jamil's beauty and charisma that gave her a career in television and she now draws on this to openly question these very systems. This creates a tension with the sense of authenticity she fosters in her persona. After all, she appears on billboards – not the average experience for her audience. She remains a beautiful, slim celebrity who is protesting against diet culture. While Jamil has been open about suffering from an eating disorder and women of all sizes are arguably targeted by the diet and wellness industries, it is fat women who face the real negative effects of fatphobia in society. By being an outspoken part of body positivity digital activism, Jamil risked criticism from fat activists of co-opting a movement for attention and fame – in much the same way as her on-screen persona of Tahani.

In 2021 Jamil was announced as one of The Body Shop's self-love ambassadors. The beauty brand has a history of body positivity, with founder Anita Roddick releasing a doll called Ruby in 1997 designed to challenge beauty stereotypes. Ruby

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[509] Jameela Jamil, 'The Sheer BEAUTY'.
[510] bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, xii.
[511] Jameela Jamil, 'Jameela Jamil 🌈'.

was the centre of a campaign aimed at promoting female self-esteem, and sparked a global discussion around body image[512]. Commenting on her appointment, Jamil told Harper's Bazaar:

> *I strongly feel that editing and airbrushing photographs in advertising should be illegal. It's literally false advertising. You should not be allowed to legally advertise anti-ageing cream, moisturiser, foundation, or mascara using any trickery. I cannot believe that is legal. I think in 10 years' time, we will look back at that and be so horrified by the depths of the sewer that capitalism dragged us into. I think 'heroin chic', photo editing, and the impossible and ever-changing beauty standards [contributed to] my anorexia*[513]

Jamil continued to criticise the diet and weight loss industry at Stylist Live. She described how brands 'target us all the time with bulls**t to make us feel better about ourselves, so that we will buy to fix what was never broken. So the greatest act of rebellion is learning how to embrace yourself'[514]. As Susie Orbach states, rejecting thin beauty ideals can be seen as a feminist act that pushes back against the idea that women should see themselves for men, that their body is not their own, and that it is never satisfactory[515]. Jamil also attacked the capitalist ideologies at the heart of this industry when speaking to *Grazia* on International Women's Day 2021. She told Rebekah Clark that women need to 're-educate themselves about the capitalist system that has been built to destroy their foundation of self-worth. That has been deliberately chipped away at in order to disempower and distract women so that we can't catch up as a gender'[516].

Jamil's arguments are, of course, no different to previous popular feminist figures such as Naomi Wolf, whose breakthrough book *The Beauty Myth*[517] analysed 'how profit and patriarchy conspire to make women feel bad'[518]. Journalist Liza Featherstone, in her examination of Wolf's demise from feminist icon to

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[512] The Body Shop, 'Our Activism: Our History of Fighting for a Fairer, More Beautiful World'.
[513] Roberta Schroeder, 'Jameela Jamil: "We're Underestimating the Damage Caused by Photo Editing".'.
[514] Jameela Jamil, 'Jameela Jamil on Facing down Twitter Abuse: "You Can Decide Whether or Not to 'Cancel' Yourself"'.
[515] Orbach, *Fat Is a Feminist Issue*.
[516] Rebekah Clark, 'Jameela Jamil: "The Patriarchy Does Not Want Us to Find out How Exceptional We Are"'.
[517] Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*.
[518] Liza Featherstone, 'The Madness of Naomi Wolf'.

anti-vaxxer, described how Wolf's conventional beauty meant she 'could not be accused of sour grapes or resentment; a stereotypically "ugly" or even average-looking feminist would not have been able to attack the beauty industry with equal credibility'[519]. There are interesting comparisons to be drawn here between Jamil and Wolf and their respective positions as contemporary vehicles through which feminist ideas enter mainstream discourse. Both of them have negotiated the difficult requirements of celebrity, glamour, and femininity, while engaging in feminist critique. By participating in rituals of beauty, wearing makeup and having an interest in fashion they certainly set themselves apart from the caricatures of "ugly" feminists, but in turn risk undermining their own arguments in the process and opening themselves up to critique.

I Weigh

The I Weigh community was a continuation of Jamil's body positivity activism, and her frustration with society's obsession with weight. In February 2018, in response to an Instagram post that estimated the weight of each woman in the Kardashian–Jenner family, Jamil posted as part of an Instagram story: 'This is how women are taught to value themselves. In kilograms. Grim'[520] and followed it with the first post under the handle @i_weigh. The post was a mirror selfie overlaid with text describing her "weight" measured by positive things in her life[521]. At the time of writing, the I Weigh website described the project as 'a community allyship platform built to share ideas and stories that ultimately mobilize activism'[522]. This activism can be seen in the collective's work 'changing global policies at Facebook and Instagram around diet & detox products being shown to minors'[523]. The platform also claimed that it 'connects, empowers and amplifies diverse voices in an accessible way'[524], which it demonstrated through the stories shared on the website. These included first person narratives describing personal experiences such as experiencing sexual assault while disabled, living with chronic illness and eating disorders; as well as interviews with activists and marginalised

[519] Liza Featherstone, 'The Madness of Naomi Wolf'.
[520] Jameela Jamil, '@JameelaJamilOfficial'.
[521] Jameela Jamil, '@i_weigh'.
[522] Jameela Jamil, 'Mission'.
[523] Ibid.
[524] Ibid.

people, such as members of the LGBTQI+ South Asian community; and poetry and photography.

With the launch of I Weigh, Jamil began to move away from the praxis of calling out celebrities that had characterised her earlier engagements with digital feminist activism. I Weigh described itself as 'adamantly against cancel culture, choosing to teach rather than to punish. Progress over Perfection'[525]. Speaking at the event Stylist Live, Jamil described the double standards that are set for men and women who make mistakes and the perils of cancel culture: 'with a woman we're like, you've made a mistake, that's it, get in the closet and f**king live there for the rest of your life'[526]. With I Weigh, she began a rebrand of herself as someone who has made mistakes and wants to learn from them, and from others. This evolved persona has been especially noticeable in the podcast of the same name that Jamil launched in March 2020. Described as 'a podcast about shame – what causes it, how it feels, and how to grow past it'[527], *I Weigh* episodes were mostly based around interviews between Jamil and various celebrities and experts. Finishing in November 2024, the weekly podcast covered topics around feminism such as menstruation, gender equality, trans rights, diet culture, mental health and wider social justice causes.

I Weigh served as part of Jamil's participation in the feminist movement and as part of her personal branding, as she publicly engaged in a feminist praxis of self-improvement and invited her listeners to join her on this educational journey. This self-education echoes that of Emma Watson's feminist book club *Our Shared Shelf*, but has an important point of difference: Jamil's active use of her own personal experiences to analyse feminist issues and further the discourse around them. While Watson encouraged a self-directed learning in her fanbase and offered academic resources, Jamil engaged in dialogues with experts that included personal revelations, admissions of a lack of knowledge, and an openness to learn and be corrected. The focus on shame is another aspect of the podcast that I believe is important to the educational value of *I Weigh* and the appeal of Jamil in general. Writing on shame in the classroom, bell hooks argues for the importance of students being free to open themselves up to 'vulnerability among a community

[525] Jameela Jamil, 'Mission'.
[526] Jamil, 'Jameela Jamil on Facing down Twitter Abuse: "You Can Decide Whether or Not to 'Cancel' Yourself"'.
[527] 'I Weigh with Jameela Jamil Trailer'.

of learners who will dare to hold them up should they falter or fail when triggered by past scenarios of shame—a community that will constantly give recognition and respect'[528]. Jamil's explorations of shame and encouragement of vulnerability in her guests, as well as the vulnerability she displayed herself, are an important part of her contributions to popular feminist discourse and her celebrity appeal.

The guests who featured on *I Weigh* were largely fellow Millennials who were known within the social justice digital activism community. A couple of years before starting *I Weigh*, Jamil was included in *Feminists Don't Wear Pink: And Other Lies*[529], an anthology of feminist essays curated by writer, and daughter of Richard Curtis and Emma Freud, Scarlett Curtis. Designed to be a friendly introduction to feminism, the pink, white, and red cover reassures readers that this feminism isn't that of the stereotypical ugly feminist killjoy. Including essays by female celebrities such as Zoe Sugg and Keira Knightley, writers including Helen Fielding and Dolly Alderton, and feminist activists such as Chimwemwe Chiweza and Trisha Shetty, each of the incredibly successful women featured in the collection provided their perspective on feminism. Jamil's essay, entitled 'Tell Him', described her belief that 'so many women have the power to tackle misogyny in their own homes'[530].

This approach to feminism is reminiscent of Emma Watson's 'Be the he for she' speech. In fact, the anthology ends with an introduction to Our Shared Shelf by Watson. Both the collection of women curated in *Feminists Don't Wear Pink*, and the contemporary thinkers featured on the *I Weigh* podcast evoke ideas of the salon, and can also be seen as a productive form of education — both for Jamil herself, and her audience. As bell hooks writes, conversation is the 'central location of pedagogy for the democratic educator'[531], and these dialogues allowed Jamil to explore ideas in an accessible way. Of course, such conversation was only with her guest, but Jamil's involvement of her listeners – allowing them to submit questions to her guests, as well as their own descriptions of what they "weigh" – included them in this pedagogical dialogue and bolstered her sense of accessibility as a celebrity.

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[528] hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, 103.
[529] Scarlett Curtis, *Feminists Don't Wear Pink: And Other Lies*.
[530] Jameela Jamil, 'Tell Him', 125.
[531] hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, 46.

Victoria Kannen described Jamil as combining both the 'idea of public intellectual and celebrity feminist because she not only raises feminist awareness but also desires to teach and learn'[532], highlighting the vulnerability Jamil embraced in her openness about her own feminist educational journey and her deference to other minds on various subjects 'as fundamental feminist pedagogical practice'[533]. By being open to learning and changing her opinion based on new information, Jamil built her image as a celebrity feminist educator, while the disclosure of her own personal experiences allowed her to perform authenticity. However, this use of the personal also made her vulnerable to critique; through her participation in the media industry and her proximity to idealised beauty. While the confrontational persona she honed in earlier years made criticism part of her brand, the fashionable image that she has brought with her from her earlier career sometimes hindered the image of authenticity and ordinariness she presented. Given that developing a sense of authenticity is becoming ever more important for contemporary celebrities due to the seemingly accessible nature of social media, this tension is significant.

The performance of access to the "real" Jameela is something that became increasingly important to Jamil's branding over my period of study. As well as a method of constructing herself as an authority on contemporary social justice issues through associating herself with key figures from such movements, the *I Weigh* podcast was another forum through which Jamil presented a raw and authentic version of herself to her audience. Although Jamil was still actively working within screen media in both film and television during my period of study, she was an online personality in a much more significant way than any of the other case studies explored in this thesis. While the maintenance of a social media presence, alongside her podcast, might not be considered "work" in the traditional way we might consider media creation, the posts she created contributed to her celebrity persona and gave her audience an opportunity to see the "real" Jameela.

As Su Holmes and Sean Redmond write, 'the construction of stars and celebrities, has always involved the "search" for the "authentic" person that lies behind the manufactured mask of fame'[534]. Each episode of *I Weigh* opened with an

[532] Victoria Kannen, '"I Want to Delete This Tweet so Much, But…": Jameela Jamil as a Celebrity Feminist Educator', 267.
[533] Ibid.
[534] Holmes and Redmond, 'Introduction: Understanding Celebrity Culture', 4.

introduction by Jamil, where she gave a brief overview of the discussion that was to follow. These introductions feel very intimate — Jamil's voice was unadorned by any soundtrack, her tone was without any hint of artifice, and she often discussed how she had been feeling, or the state of her mental health. Frequently, Jamil confessed her admiration of her guest and her nerves at speaking with them, giving a sense of affinity with her listeners. The interviews themselves also included admissions of these feelings, or references to difficult times Jamil has experienced in her life. In one episode, Jamil opened with a frank description of her current mental health struggles: 'I'm technically fine, but I am depressed. I mean, like, literally depressed'[535] and a confession at her annoyance at seeing everyone's photos from Halloween on Instagram: 'that doesn't mean that it's right for it to annoy me but I'm just being honest with you, because we're kind of weird friends'[536]. Here Jamil reinforced the sense of equality and authenticity created by the podcast. In fact, she even implied the listener was above her: 'if you're feeling the same, I'm so with you. I'm just beneath you, in a gutter, feeling unfair thoughts'[537].

Jamil carried this sense of equality with her audience with her when she assumed the role of guest editor for *Marie Claire* in March 2021. In her editor's letter, she stated that her main priority was to make sure the readers were doing okay while living through the COVID-19 pandemic[538]. She asked the reader 'How are you? Are you ok?', creating a sense of approachability and accessibility. In a similar way to Watson, taking her audience with her on a journey of feminist learning through her book club, Jamil created a sense of camaraderie by positioning herself as just like her audience. She admitted throughout the pandemic 'I barely brushed my teeth some days', fostering a sense of equality with the reader. As part of her role as guest editor, the magazine included content on self love, mental health, and social media abuse. I had to feel a sense of irony, as while I was reading Jamil's editor's letter I was served a link to *Marie Claire*'s explainer of 'The Sirtfood Diet', which is credited for helping singer Adele with her dramatic weight loss[539]. *Marie Claire* is still bound by the culture of critical surveillance over women's bodies that

[535] Jamil, 'Britney Spears and Conservatorships with Tess Barker & Babs Gray'.
[536] Ibid.
[537] Jamil, 'Britney Spears and Conservatorships with Tess Barker & Babs Gray'.
[538] Ally Head, 'Jameela Jamil's Editors Letter: "We've Seen Too Much to Go Back to How Things Were"'.
[539] Jenny Proudfoot, 'Adele Credits the Sirtfood Diet with Her Weight Loss, but What Does It Actually Entail?'.

is pervasive in the media, even while inviting celebrities who actively protest against this to edit the magazine.

Navigating the changing world of mainstream feminism

Jamil's place as a celebrity engaging in feminist discussion is an interesting one. As Lola Olufemi wrote in 2020, during this time there was 'a divide playing out in the mainstream. The emergence of neo-liberal feminism or "boss girl feminism", driving many contemporary discussions, clashes with a radical and critical vision of feminism'[540]. Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer described this kind of popular feminism that found the greatest visibility within the capitalist commodification of women as one dominated by 'messages about self-making, self-love, and selfcare that abound on social media and in corporate campaigns, messages mostly aimed at privileged white women'[541]. They argued that this kind of feminism has the aim not of gender equality, or the destruction of the patriarchal state, but of women's empowerment through equal prominence in the neoliberal marketplace where the self is commodified.

This kind of commodification of the self can be found in the "that girl" wellness trend seen on TikTok. *i-D* journalist Laura Pitcher, in her article 'Girlboss culture isn't dead, it's rebranded as "that girl" now' listed the common themes of the short videos posted to TikTok as part of the "that girl" trend: 'waking up extremely early, taking aesthetically pleasing photos, working out, making your bed and eating healthy'[542]. Pitcher argued that, in the same way that Millennial women were seduced by the empowerment of girlboss culture, Gen Z rejected work in favour of a new kind of productivity — but one that still centred on rituals of self-improvement, and still catered to the male gaze. This aesthetic documentation of their lives reinforced patriarchal social structures that not only encourage self-monitoring in women, but the *enjoyment* of this monitoring[543]. As Susie Orbach wrote, the commodification of women is most often centred on the body, meaning that attention is paid to maintenance of a suitable level of femininity.

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[540] Lola Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power*, 3.
[541] Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 'The Traffic in Feminism: An Introduction to the Commentary and Criticism on Popular Feminism', 884.
[542] Laura Pitcher, 'Girlboss Culture Isn't Dead, It's Rebranded as "That Girl" Now'.
[543] Jovanovski, *Digesting Femininities: The Feminist Politics of Contemporary Food Culture.*

> *A woman's body is one of the few culturally accepted ways a woman has to express herself and yet the scope of this expression is limited by a contradiction: the pressure to look a certain way, to conform to today's slim image.*[544]

Jovanovski writes about how 'when a woman achieves the title of feminist icon, she is allowed mainstream cultural visibility through her implicit (and sometimes explicit) allegiance with patriarchal cultural practices (e.g., self-surveillance)'[545]. Jamil found herself in a difficult position as a successful celebrity, famous for her good looks and association with women's magazines and fashion shows. Jamil's feminism could easily stray into "girl boss" territory, or be interpreted as such. Especially when, as Clare Hemmings argues, popular feminism is so linked to idealised femininity. She writes that women of colour who are outspoken feminists, such as Jamil, risk destabilising their femininity by participating in feminism, as it is so tied to masculinity. Hemmings describes how popular feminism's glossy aesthetic implies that femininity 'has been lurking under the surface waiting to be appreciated as feminism's glasses are whipped off and its hair shaken out to reveal the shining beauty underneath'[546]. While this femininity is centred in whiteness, Hemmings argues that celebrity figures of colour within popular feminism, such as Beyoncé, keep their feminism within traditional feminine spheres such as childcare[547].

While I believe that Jamil's contributions to popular feminist discourse shouldn't be dismissed as adhering to the kind of neoliberal feminism described by Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer and Olufemi, Hemmings' observations on popular feminism's contingency on femininity are important when analysing Jamil, particularly in relation to her race. As Olufemi went on to write, while the critique of a form of feminism that seems to be "on-trend" or "of the moment" is necessary and valuable, 'when used strategically, public narrative and mainstream discussions can be a useful tool to make oppression visible and give people the strategies to combat it'[548]. The value of such mainstream discussions, Olufemi argued, should be whether these conversations challenge the status quo.

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[544] Susie Orbach, *Fat Is a Feminist Issue II*.
[545] Jovanovski, *Digesting Femininities: The Feminist Politics of Contemporary Food Culture*, 140.
[546] Clare Hemmings, 'Resisting Popular Feminisms: Gender, Sexuality and the Lure of the Modern', 969.
[547] Ibid.
[548] Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power*, 6.

Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer also agree that 'significant strands of today's popular feminism cannot be dismissed as aesthetically depoliticized versions of the "real thing."'[549].

While Jamil's participation in the commodification of herself is necessitated by the career she has chosen, I believe she does further conversations about feminism in a meaningful way. Although she is in a seemingly heteronormative relationship with musician James Blake, she came out as bisexual in 2020 and was met with a response that ranged 'from cynical doubt to scathing criticism'[550]. On her podcast and other platforms she often distanced herself from traditional gender roles: 'I love to be dusted in Cheetos and I like to have socks drying on the back of my sofa'[551], rather than identifying as a domestic goddess. Jamil's refusal to emulate the more deferential and palatable approach of other celebrity feminists, such as Emma Watson, exposed her to antifeminist vitriol. That Jamil receives so much negative press and social media hatred to me signifies the impact her influence has, and demonstrates the destabilising effect on her femininity that Hemmings describes. As Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer note, the popularity of 'feminism does not guarantee us the political tools to neutralize the violence that erupts wherever popular feminism gains a foothold'[552] and while Jamil's celebrity gives her a huge fandom, it also puts her in the firing line of the backlash against feminism: 'our popularity will not protect us'[553].

As well as receiving anti-feminist hatred, Jamil has also received criticism from feminists. When tackling issues, particularly those involving body image and diet culture, it was often asked by feminists whether it was Jamil's place to discuss such topics. Journalist Frances Ryan described the 'troubled optics of a slim woman "smashing diet culture"'[554] when discussing Jamil's 2019 appearance on the cover of *Stylist* magazine, where she posed while destroying some scales[555]. Ryan went on to acknowledge that 'women must largely meet the norms of conventional

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[549] Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 'The Traffic in Feminism: An Introduction to the Commentary and Criticism on Popular Feminism', 885.
[550] Nosheen Iqbal, 'Jameela Jamil and Phillip Schofield: Two Tales of Coming Out'.
[551] 'Samantha Bee', *I Weigh with Jameela Jamil*, 1 October 2021.
[552] Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 'The Traffic in Feminism: An Introduction to the Commentary and Criticism on Popular Feminism', 887.
[553] Ibid.
[554] Frances Ryan, 'Jameela Jamil Is Well-Meaning, but Slim, Pretty Women Can't Smash the Diet Culture Alone'.
[555] Jameela Jamil, 'Jameela Jamil Takes over Stylist'.

attractiveness before they are allowed to criticise the demand to be attractive'[556] and the difficulties this causes for those who wish to critique beauty standards. Jamil has discussed the criticism she receives from feminists and how this has resulted in hyper self-aware posting on social media. During an interview with body positivity activist Megan Jayne Crabbe for an episode of *I Weigh* she revealed how she is: 'just constantly thinking about this kind of committee that's policing our every word and it makes it hard to get anything done or anything said'[557].

This constant self-censorship is something that Crabbe and Jamil worried will hold back feminism and other social justice movements, as people feel intimidated by online communities. Jamil described the hierarchical thinking she has witnessed in these spaces: 'We don't like entry-level feminism'[558] and discussed her difficulties being positioned by the media as the face of the body positivity movement. As a prominent member of this movement on Instagram, Crabbe described how 'it feels threatening when someone new comes into a space that you've been in for a long time and they start getting, you know, the attention and the kind of idolisation'[559]. A high-profile person who is conventionally attractive and slim seemingly taking visibility away from those who have built the movement is likely to receive derision from such a community. However, Crabbe asked 'what would I have gained from turning against you, making someone with a huge profile and a huge platform feel like they can never talk about these things?'[560] when thinking about how the body positive community reacted to Jamil's participation in the movement.

Jamil has utilised negative reactions to her activism as a way to further her own presentation as someone who is willing to acknowledge when she is wrong and learn from her mistakes. An example of taking negative attention and turning it into a positive branding opportunity is her *I Weigh* interview with YouTuber Natalie Wynn[561]. Earlier that year Wynn had discussed Jamil in her video *Envy*[562]. Wynn, also known as ContraPoints, is best known for creating longform video

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[556] Ryan, 'Jameela Jamil Is Well-Meaning, but Slim, Pretty Women Can't Smash the Diet Culture Alone'.
[557] 'Megan Jayne Crabbe', *I Weigh with Jameela Jamil*, 28 January 2022.
[558] Ibid.
[559] 'Megan Jayne Crabbe', *I Weigh with Jameela Jamil*, 28 January 2022.
[560] Ibid.
[561] 'Natalie Wynn (ContraPoints)', *I Weigh with Jameela Jamil*, 3 December 2021.
[562] *Envy | ContraPoints*, ContraPoints.

essays dissecting controversial topics of internet discourse, such as incels[563] and the alt-right[564]. As her channel has grown, Wynn has unpicked more nebulous concepts such as beauty[565], shame[566], and cringe[567]. In *Envy*, Wynn dissected the backlash that followed a reply Jamil posted to an Instagram comment from a follower complimenting her skin:

> *My skin is clear because:*
>
> *A) Privileged people have more access to good quality nutrition and also our lives are significantly less stressful than the lives of those with less privilege. I also get to sleep more because of this. All of these things keep my hormones in balance and I'm able to address food intolerances easily.*
>
> *B) I believe that trans rights are human rights.* 🤓
>
> *C) I exfoliate twice a week.*[568]

In her video, Wynn articulated the impossible position Jamil finds herself in:

> *everything Jameela said is true: being privileged does make it easier to spend time and money on cosmetics. But Jameela's acknowledging this, this recitation of all the complex socioeconomic factors that account for why she's prettier than you doesn't take any of the sting out of inequality, does it?*[569]

As part of their discussion, Jamil brought up when Wynn took 'a big pop'[570] at her. Jamil's characterisation of Wynn's analysis of her Instagram comment as a personal attack could be seen as an attempt to draw sympathy from her audience. By inviting Wynn onto her podcast to confront her and learn from her criticism, she not only adds to her persona as an authentic woman who is just as flawed as her listeners, but also as an outspoken feminist who isn't afraid to face her critics. As the pair untangled the reasons why Jamil's comment drew such controversy,

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[563] *Incels | ContraPoints*, ContraPoints.
[564] *Decrypting the Alt-Right: How to Recognize a F@scist | ContraPoints*.
[565] *Beauty | ContraPoints*, ContraPoints.
[566] *Shame | ContraPoints*, ContraPoints.
[567] *Cringe | ContraPoints*, ContraPoints.
[568] Jameela Jamil, 'Getting Ready for the Emmys Later on, Doing Some Make up, Wearing Some Stuff.'.
[569] *Envy | ContraPoints*.
[570] 'Natalie Wynn (ContraPoints)', *I Weigh with Jameela Jamil*.

Wynn concluded that Jamil's being 'fairly close to perfect'[571] makes people *envious*, and that by

> *laying out the reasons why you have an unfair advantage is actually putting a magnifying glass on the unfair advantage, which then causes people to feel stung by the advantages that you have. And so, in a way, your honesty about it is being taken as a provocation by people*[572]

Jamil's frustration during this point of the interview is clear. She described feeling a responsibility as a celebrity to inform her audience that how she looks 'is a part of my job that is fantasy'[573] but that those very looks preclude her from raising such issues. Even as Jamil unpicks the tensions within her own celebrity persona she is, in turn, further entangled. Jamil acknowledged that when people 'who aren't invited onto the cover of *Vogue* or whatever try and have that conversation, they are called bitter'[574]. Here she positioned herself as the celebrity who is invited onto magazine covers and acknowledged the reasons she has the platform she has. However, seconds later, she aligned herself with those who don't meet society's beauty standards: 'I know that, as someone who was considered unattractive by the media and told that I was bitter every time I would try and say that these standards are unacceptable'[575]. Herein lies the tension inherent in Jamil's celebrity persona and the careful balance she has to maintain in order to remain popular. As an outspoken celebrity feminist, her appeal comes from a sense of authenticity and relatability. The way she shares her own experiences on social media and her podcast encourages her audience to feel as though she is building an alliance with them. However, this camaraderie and insistence that Jamil is just like her listeners seems to ring hollow when she refers to it too explicitly. When she appeals for the audience to view her as just like them, as only human, the 'ordinary/extraordinary paradox which has long since structured the circulation of fame'[576] is revealed and the draw on the empathy of her audience seems all too apparent and unbalanced. This difficult coexistence echoes McRobbie's double entanglement of postfeminism: where feminist ideas are at once considered common sense, while also being rejected. 'The taken into accountness permits all the more thorough

[571] 'Natalie Wynn (ContraPoints)', I Weigh with Jameela Jamil.
[572] Ibid.
[573] Ibid.
[574] Ibid.
[575] Ibid.
[576] Holmes and Redmond, 'Introduction: Understanding Celebrity Culture', 290.

dismantling of feminist politics and the discrediting of the occasionally voiced need for its renewal'[577].

Jamil's race is an important factor when examining the negative reaction to her feminist efforts. Sara Ahmed writes about the 'relationship between the negativity of certain figures and how certain bodies are encountered as being negative'[578], particularly within feminism. Ahmed argues that the stereotype of the "feminist killjoy" goes hand in hand with that of the angry Black woman. As a British Asian woman, Jamil's race is complex. While her Indian and Pakistani heritage precludes her from being one of the 'bearers of the promise of happiness; the good white subjects who will offer us their love'[579] described by Ahmed, as Claire Jean Kim writes on Asian Americans, people of colour who are not Black can be 'lifted up by structural anti-Blackness'[580]. The word Black, like the word Asian, is contested, and any model of race that only considers white and non-white people 'cannot fully describe the complex racial matrix that exists'[581]. There are many other factors that intersect within Jamil's identity and celebrity persona. Here is it useful to interrogate the homogeneity of the categories of woman, woman of colour, South-Asian woman, British South-Asian woman and celebrity British South-Asian woman, while also understanding that media discourses have presented these categorisations in particular ways[582].

Stuart Hall has written that individual identities are both complex and always in a state of becoming[583], Heidi Safia Mirza has described Blackness as being a state of becoming racialised[584], while Haw has suggested that British Asian populations are in a state of becoming assimilated within British culture[585]. While political definitions of race fail to make clear the lived experiences and identities of individuals and the ways these individuals may experience racism, I believe it is key to highlight the ways in which Jamil, and Michaela Coel, may navigate feminist expression differently to my other (white) case studies. Jamil's confrontational

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[577] McRobbie, 'Post-feminism and Popular Culture', 256.
[578] Ahmed, 'Embodying Diversity: Problems and Paradoxes for Black Feminists', 48.
[579] Ibid., 51.
[580] Claire Jean Kim, *Asian Americans in an Anti-Black World*, 359.
[581] Angelo N Ancheta, 'Neither Black nor White', 391.
[582] Geeta Ludhra, 'A Black Feminist Exploration of the Cultural Experiences and Identities of Academically "Successful" British South-Asian Girls'.
[583] Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/Decoding'.
[584] Heidi Safia Mirza, ed., *Black British Feminism: A Reader*.
[585] Kaye Haw, 'The "Changing Same" of an "in-between" Generation: Negotiating Identities through Space, Place and Time'.

stance against targets such as the diet and wellness industries make her vulnerable to abuse and this is only heightened by her racial identity. As she uses her platform to critique patriarchal structures, including the media industry she works in, Jamil takes a risk to her future employability.

Conclusion

> *I just know that we don't have time to wait 'til we're perfect and we have perfect understanding. We have to scrap in now. And that's what I'm trying to encourage other people to do, just to be like: if I can learn, you can learn. If I can go from being a slut-shaming arsehole, you can get better. And we can all do this together. We're going to make this a welcoming space, and learning is cool.* [586]

Speaking to Megan Jayne Crabbe, Jamil extolled the virtues of educating ourselves and each other. This vulnerability and openness is key to Jamil's appeal as both celebrity and celebrity feminist. As someone who has built her career on a persona that relies on her audience believing in her authenticity, Jamil continues to build on this sense of camaraderie with her followers and fans in her feminist endeavours. However, this ordinariness wears thin while Jamil is attending red carpet events, dressing in designer clothes, and being friends with other celebrities. This tension is felt in her work in the body positivity/neutrality space. While vociferously rejecting body positivity and insisting she is in pursuit of body neutrality, media coverage of her rejection of diet culture often brands her as a 'body positivity advocate'[587]. As a thin, beautiful, rich woman, this has garnered backlash, with online commenters accusing her of making 'a statement that self-love is liberating, provided you're super hot'[588] and that, on occasion, her participation in these movements has shown 'privilege and lack of self-awareness'[589].

Herein lies the tension in Jamil's participation in these sorts of social justice movements: her celebrity status brings these movements into the public eye, but this is conditional on her fitting the ideals of industries she claims to be trying to

[586] 'Megan Jayne Crabbe'.
[587] E. J. Dickson, 'How Jameela Jamil Built a Brand around Body Positivity'.
[588] Ibid.
[589] Ibid.

dismantle. Even at her most cautious, enacting the caveating and self-censorship that she has been conditioned to perform through social media backlash after social media backlash, she will forever be a "feminist killjoy" to antifeminists, and not "woke" enough for the social justice community. The idolisation of celebrity activists in these spaces will forever cause difficulties, especially while feminism remains an on-trend media topic. As an anti-cancel culture movement, led by figures such as writer Clementine Morrigan and life coach Africa Brooke, grew in popularity towards the end of my period of study, Jamil's focus on imperfection and education positioned her in a favourable light. However, with self-branding so prevalent in the age of girl boss feminism and the commodification of women, Jamil's vulnerability and dedication to a persona that pushes back against perfectionist ideals risks developing just another brand in the fight for visibility. Even with the responsibility Jamil feels to unpack the fantasy of celebrity, whatever she does, she will never be just like us. Her popularity gives her a platform, which in turn opens her up to abuse and critique from both sides of the gender equality fight. This trap of celebrity is particularly important to my thesis – Jamil is a commodity and her selling point is her articulation of a version of feminism. This paradox means that any feminist discourse prompted by Jamil will always be consumed in relation to her celebrity. The parts of her celebrity persona that allow her to engage with feminism and cultivate success also draw her away from meaningful impact due to her necessary interactions with patriarchal systems.

Chapter 4: Phoebe Waller-Bridge has an appetite for transgressive women

Born 14.7.1985

Introduction

Throughout the time period covered by this thesis, Phoebe Waller-Bridge gained renown for writing unlikeable female characters. The question of likeability is key to her contribution to popular feminism and to this thesis. In this chapter I position this quality of likeability in relation to Waller-Bridge's privileged subject position, the market value of female authorship during this particular historical moment and dominant ideologies of femininity. As part of this I analyse the ways in which Waller-Bridge has commodified herself as an author of female characters, particularly those who subvert feminine ideals. While much has been written about this trend for unlikeable female characters, through this case study I will demonstrate the ways in which Waller-Bridge in particular has found success. As well as analysing the work of Waller-Bridge, I also examine the ways in which her series *Fleabag* sparked a TikTok trend and how the titular character became an emblem of a particular brand of popular feminism.

Waller-Bridge creates an interesting counterpoint to Emma Watson through the different ways the two stars drew upon their whiteness and their middle-class backgrounds to capitalise on the opportunities that were available to them. Where Watson chose to maintain a demure, palatable and academic approach to feminism that engaged established organisations and respected thinkers, Waller-Bridge utilised her position of privilege to create characters that subvert expectations of femininity. In this chapter I explore how Waller-Bridge has been constructed not just as an actor but as a showrunner. Alongside this I investigate how authorship, particularly of female characters, has become part of her brand. This authorship is complex: it navigates both the necessity of economic success that is required by television and film productions, and the expectations placed upon women by society at large. While exploring the female character and pushing the boundaries of its representation, this chapter will explore how Waller-Bridge

maintained a distance from her unlikeable creations through the buffer of fictionalisation.

Hierarchies of cultural value in television

The evaluation of television based on 'aesthetic-generic hierarchies'[590] and the idea of "quality television" have established themselves both within popular discourse and academic scholarship since the 1970s, but more significantly in the post-network era[591]. The term "quality television" provokes debates around culture and hierarchies of texts as television has long been viewed as a feminine media form. Quality television's associations with men, and the lack of women writers who have earned industry awards, mark certain television writing as more worthy of recognition than others. Discussions surrounding the idea tend to regard drama as the genre most applicable to the categorisation of quality television, although comedy programmes are also included. Scholars such as Julia Havas[592], Sean Fuller and Catherine Driscoll[593] and Lara Bradshaw[594] have sought to problematise the term by highlighting the classed and gendered implications of assigning cultural value to certain television shows. The debate owes a great debt to an influential generation of feminist media scholars who challenged low opinion of television's mass cultural appeal and took its feminised associations as an important focus for research. The work of Charlotte Brunsdon[595], Christine Geraghty[596] and Mary Ellen Brown[597] in the study of television, particularly soap opera, examined questions of cultural value and their associations with class, gender and race. These theorisations are important in my analysis of Waller-Bridge as associations with quality remain tied to middle-class, white identities.

In contrast to the film industry, which gives top rank to the director, in television writers are given precedence, particularly in the US. Alongside the rise of quality

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[590] Julia Havas, 'Invocations of Feminism : Cultural Value, Gender, and American Quality Television', 1.
[591] Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*.
[592] Julia Havas, *Woman Up: Invoking Feminism in Quality Television*.
[593] Sean Fuller and Catherine Driscoll, 'HBO's Girls: Gender, Generation, and Quality Television'.
[594] Lara Bradshaw, 'The Critical Investigation of HBO's Girls: Feminist Text, Quality, and Happy Womanhood'.
[595] See Charlotte Brunsdon, 'Problems with Quality' and *The Feminist, the Housewife, and the Soap Opera*.
[596] Christine Geraghty, *Women and Soap Opera: A Study of Prime Time Soaps*.
[597] Mary Ellen Brown, ed., *Television and Women's Culture: The Politics of the Popular*.

television came the ascendance of the writer-showrunner: a role that was largely taken by men such as David Chase, David Simon, and Alan Ball. However, there are, and have been, many influential women working in television as well. Lynda La Plante's award-winning crime series explored challenging themes from serial killers to pornography and were viewed by millions both in the UK and around the globe[598]. Amy Sherman-Palladino's distinctive televisual voice is instantly recognisable in her clever, quippy, pop culture reference-filled shows that focus on female characters, and has brought her appreciation from critics and audiences alike[599]. One particular female writer of note is Sally Wainwright, whose work Ruth McElroy uses as an opportunity to analyse how women's work behind the camera can influence the narratives that are broadcast on television. McElroy's research highlights the precarious nature of employment in television production and the importance of cultural capital in making connections within the industry. She argues that commissioners and executive producers, who occupy more stable roles, wield the greatest power over the kinds of stories that are told on screen and that, while female writers are of vital importance to media representations of women, the hierarchical nature of the television industry needs to be considered[600]. This is something I will keep in mind in relation to my analysis of Waller-Bridge. While Waller-Bridge's authorship is visible to the television-watching public, it is important to remember that her programmes can only be made with the approval of commissioners and executive producers.

The majority of series that have been historically categorised as quality television had male writer-showrunners, celebrated male power, explored masculinity, and were dominated by troubled male protagonists, such as *Breaking Bad*[601]'s Walter White, *Mad Men*[602]'s Don Draper, and Tony Soprano. There is, however, also quality television featuring female leads. This programming is, Julia Havas argues, characterised by its 'close ideological connection with postfeminist cultural discourse'[603] and indeed that this engagement with gender politics is a determining factor in its status as quality television. Many early examples of female-fronted quality television programming reaffirm certain hegemonic ideas of femininity –

[598] Julia Hallam, *Lynda La Plante*.
[599] Scott Ryan and David Bushman, *Women of Amy Sherman-Palladino: Gilmore Girls, Bunheads and Mrs. Maisel*.
[600] Ruth McElroy, 'The Feminisation of Contemporary British Television Drama'.
[601] *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008).
[602] *Mad Men* (New York: AMC, 2015 2007).
[603] Havas, 'Invocations of Feminism : Cultural Value, Gender, and American Quality Television', 50.

such as women sacrificing careers and friendships in pursuit of heterosexual romance – even if these ideas are explored with a dose of postfeminist irony. Series such as *Sex and the City*[604], *Desperate Housewives*[605], and *Grey's Anatomy*[606] explore ideas of womanhood 'and their cultural value hinges on whether their politics of representation transgress the boundaries of the gendered status quo'[607] rather than those of generic convention. Female quality television was 'founded on the fusion of domestic melodrama and comedy'[608]. Waller-Bridge was part of a new wave of female authors, referenced in my chapter on Michaela Coel, who in the 2010s were creating a new type of female quality television. These television programmes reflected the themes of the originators of quality television in that they featured troubled protagonists but, this time, they were all women.

Female authorship in the 2010s

Authorship is a concept that has fallen in and out of favour over decades of film criticism, and feminist media scholarship in particular. During the 2010s, female authorship was experiencing a period of heightened significance as representation of women on screen was being increasingly discussed, especially in relation to ideas of feminism. At this time, television in particular was 'being understood as a new site of independent production for women, with amplified connotations of freedom and authorial control'[609]. Joy Press documented the rise of female showrunners and representations of women on screen alongside 'an unexpected resurrection of feminism'[610], citing Barack Obama's presidential reign as contributing to an environment where feminist ideas were mainstreamed and women-centred issues were explored on-screen. Press described how the run of Tina Fey's *30 Rock* 'coincided with the rise of an online feminist blogosphere'[611] and how, as it progressed through its seasons, Fey went from being one of the only female showrunners entrusted by a television network to make a female-centric series, to being one of many. Lena Dunham followed with *Girls*, breaking new ground with representations of femininity never-before-seen on television. Since

[604] *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998).
[605] *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004).
[606] *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005).
[607] Havas, 'Invocations of Feminism : Cultural Value, Gender, and American Quality Television', 51.
[608] Ibid., 92.
[609] Perkins and Schreiber, 'Independent Women: From Film to Television', 922.
[610] Joy Press, *Stealing the Show: How Women Are Revolutionizing Television*, 13.
[611] Ibid., 146.

then, many more series run by and featuring women have appeared on our screens. Laura Minor describes how Waller-Bridge quickly became a major celebrity, thanks to the success of *Fleabag*, and argues that this indicates 'how female authorship, particularly in an Anglo-American context, is now canonised by the media. More broadly, it reveals how television, for women, is becoming an increasingly important site for creative recognition and prestige as the rise of online feminism and online video services have allowed women to exercise control over their work and establish their own singular vision'[612].

Waller-Bridge's place as the orchestrator of characters such as titular Fleabag, and *Killing Eve*'s Villanelle (Jodie Comer) and Eve (Sandra Oh) must be placed within a cultural context in which industries, particularly those within media production, were looking at diversity and gender equality. While popular discourse around social justice movements had increased, media production enterprises such as television networks were also working to create programming aimed at a female audience in order to target advertising to certain demographics. Within television, new opportunities for female showrunners had been created as the industry recognised the importance of appealing to female viewers, allowing for a wider range of female characters to appear on screen – including those who were not necessarily likeable. Shows that centred complex, unlikeable women were a diversion from the traditional programming designed to attract the widest audience, and could be used as a way to segment audiences to better target advertising[613]. As influences converged to give women more ownership over the production of popular culture, 'diverse representations of characters who reflect the complexities of women's real lived experiences'[614] emerged. However, this diversity seemed to largely only include a certain kind of woman; one who was white, middle-class, heterosexual, and conventionally attractive. Opportunities for female showrunners of colour, or from working class backgrounds, or for gender-diverse or queer women were much more limited, as my chapter on Michaela Coel demonstrates.

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[612] Minor, *Reclaiming Female Authorship in Contemporary UK Television Comedy*, 53.
[613] Margaret Tally, *The Rise of the Anti-Heroine in TV's Third Golden Age*.
[614] Melanie Haas, N. A. Pierce, and Gretchen Busl, eds., *Antiheroines of Contemporary Media: Saints, Sinners, and Survivors*, x.

Crashing

As a graduate of RADA, Waller-Bridge struggled to find work as an actor during her early 20s. She was frustrated to find a dearth of female roles upon leaving drama school and decided to create her own. Collaborating with friend Vicky Jones, Waller-Bridge founded the DryWrite theatre company in 2007. One-woman show *Fleabag*[615], which was written and performed by Waller-Bridge and directed by Jones, won the Fringe First award in Edinburgh in 2013 and launched Waller-Bridge's career — leading to a part on *Broadchurch*[616]. Waller-Bridge then wrote and starred in *Crashing*[617] for Channel 4.

Crashing centres on a group of twenty-somethings living as property guardians in a disused hospital. Guy Pewsey of *Evening Standard* described the setting as a 'generational metaphor'[618] as London's crippling rents forced Millennials to get creative with their accommodation in order to live in the city. Waller-Bridge balanced comedy with what critic Toby Earle describes as her 'trademark withering honesty'[619] to write characters who were experiencing arrested development and finding their way as adults. I believe it is important here to underscore the connection between Waller-Bridge's privilege and her ability to perform honesty. Who is allowed to reveal the truly abject parts of their lived experiences on-screen is always filtered through their socioeconomic position, their willingness to take risks, who they know in the media industries and other mitigating factors. Waller-Bridge's affluent position in life gave her the relative safety from which to create characters that push back at standards of respectability and likeability in a way that differs from writers such as Michaela Coel.

In the same way as the 'young women from *Girls* and *Broad City* barely change or mature and seem stuck in a never-ending girlhood'[620], the hospital setting of *Crashing* halts the characters' maturation as the residents organise parties and treasure hunts throughout the abandoned wards and waiting rooms. This ensemble comedy is where Waller-Bridge's sharp, darkly funny writing first began

[615] *Fleabag*, Play (DryWrite, 2013).
[616] *Broadchurch* (ITV, 2013).
[617] *Crashing* (Channel 4, 2016).
[618] Guy Pewsey, 'CATCH UP Crashing All4'.
[619] Toby Earle, 'Sitcom Set in Temporary Digs Leaves a Lasting Impression'.
[620] Aleksandra Kamińska, 'Failing Adulthood, Queering Girlhood: Perpetual Adolescence in Broad City and Girls', 1047.

to show her skill for exploring difficult emotions through comedy. The lack of stability in the lives of this group of Millennials is reflected not only in their precarious living situation, but in the undefined relationships they form with each other. *Crashing* is also where Waller-Bridge honed her subversion of romantic comedy tropes by exploring how a group of deeply flawed but charming characters can find love, despite their trauma.

Waller-Bridge's character Lulu is just as outspoken as Fleabag, and displays other similar characteristics. Lulu is sexually explicit, and flirts with another woman's boyfriend, but hides behind the pretence of a joke when real emotions are discussed. With *Crashing* and *Fleabag*, Waller-Bridge established her 'performative rejection of the aspirational postfeminist glamor'[621] that had permeated popular culture over the previous generation of single girl narratives. This is where Waller-Bridge differs from Emma Watson's approach to consciousness-raising around feminist issues. Where Watson drew upon her embodiment of postfeminist ideals, Waller-Bridge subverted these ideals in order to make her feminist point. Where independence and confidence define successful girls and young women in late modernity[622], Waller-Bridge rejected this for her protagonist Lulu, who relies on others for accommodation and employment. Watson's aspirational status and postfeminist glamour gave her a position of power from which to critique the inequality created by the systems she has successfully navigated. Waller-Bridge, in comparison, used her socioeconomic privilege to create characters who pushed back at participating in such systems. Both used the safety of their relative positions in life in order to explore feminist issues.

Crashing follows in the footsteps of *Girls* in its depiction of the realities of the economic precarities of Millennial life, played out in contrast to the 'promises and aspirations of postfeminism'[623]. Of course, both Waller-Bridge and Dunham's careers have been facilitated by the affluence of their parents so this performance of economic precarity remains only a performance. This is significant as Dunham and Waller-Bridge are protected by their privilege. They can portray the ugly

[621] Woods, 'Too Close for Comfort: Direct Address and the Affective Pull of the Confessional Comic Woman in Chewing Gum and Fleabag', 198.
[622] Shields Dobson, *Postfeminist Digital Cultures: Femininity, Social Media, and Self-Representation*.
[623] Wallis Anne Seaton, 'The Labour of Feminist Performance: Postfeminism, Authenticity, and Celebrity in Contemporary Representations of Girlhood on Screen', 188.

realities of life, safe in the knowledge that they are financially protected from any negative reactions to their work.

Fleabag

Fleabag is a television series adapted from Waller-Bridge's one-woman show of the same name. Written by and starring Waller-Bridge, the series follows the central character, known only as Fleabag, as she deals with grief through self-destructive coping mechanisms. Constantly comparing herself to her 'super high-powered, perfect, anorexic, rich, super sister', *Fleabag* explores female maturation as Waller-Bridge's titular character navigates her twenties. The importance of this binary of female success to the series is key to understanding why it resonated so much with young women. The feminist politics that underpin the series expose the hollow rewards of participation in contemporary neoliberal society, while simultaneously demonstrating the exhaustion that comes from trying to compete under such conditions. Through the dynamic of the two sisters, Waller-Bridge articulated the struggle to succeed faced by young women dealing with the weight of the expectations placed upon them, while also trying to navigate their relationship to feminism.

Orlaith Darling argues that the character of Fleabag's sister Claire (Siân Clifford) is key to confronting the audience with 'with the expectations piled onto women in contemporary neoliberal society'[624], particularly the ways in which female minds and bodies are positioned in a constant state of optimisation and enterprise. While Claire is shown as a successful neoliberal subject – the epitome of self-reliance and individualised achievements, Fleabag is portrayed as a failure. Where Claire's approach to dealing with negative emotions is to 'just bottle them and bury them and they never come out', Fleabag expresses her feelings in a way that exemplifies the "messy Millennial". Of course, the viewer can see that it's much more complicated than this. Anna Bogutskaya writes that the notion of female ambition was at its height of popularity 'in the period between 2014 and 2017, when the term "girlboss" rose to brief pop culture prominence as a millennial take on girl power rhetoric'[625]. Laura Minor argues that the character of Claire and her

[624] Orlaith Darling, '"The Moment You Realise Someone Wants Your Body:" Neoliberalism, Mindfulness and Female Embodiment in Fleabag', 132.
[625] Bogutskaya, *Unlikeable Female Characters: The Women Pop Culture Wants You to Hate*, 76.

constant struggle for perfection 'offers a nuanced portrayal of the overlooked sister, the one who holds everything together despite not having everything together herself'[626]. By writing the two sisters of Claire and Fleabag, Waller-Bridge created a binary around which she could construct her understanding of "girlboss feminism" and the toll it can take on those who achieve it, and those who fail at it.

The drama finds comedy in even its darkest moments but, as the character of Fleabag speaks directly to the camera, joking with the audience, the humour is revealed to be hiding trauma close to the surface. Richard Burbridge writes of this direct address: 'If "House of Cards" diminished our tolerance for archly clever protagonists who break the fourth wall, "Fleabag" and "Chewing Gum" redeem the trope, with jokes so sharp and exacting that they register as a shock'[627]. By using this theatrical technique, both Waller-Bridge and Coel draw their audience into their confidence. They reveal inner truths through these dialogues with the viewer that show the contrast between the character's outer persona and their real thoughts and feelings. Darling suggests that direct address is also a way for *Fleabag* to explore 'the neoliberal doctrine of self-containment'[628], arguing that the series involves the audience as it explores and picks apart neoliberal values, creating a sense of camaraderie between Fleabag and the audience. When Fleabag openly subverts this concept of self-containment, she is giving the audience permission to admit their own struggles within a system that is rigged against them.

Waller-Bridge tackles the complex emotions women experience and their struggles as they try to be good feminists as Fleabag expresses their worst fears: 'I have a horrible feeling that I'm a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, morally bankrupt woman who can't even call herself a feminist'. At a feminist talk, Fleabag and her sister raise their hands to admit they would trade five years off their lives for the perfect body. Fleabag whispers to Claire that they are bad feminists, equating feminism with being immune to the pressures of beauty ideals. Later she confesses to her father that she's worried she can't call herself a feminist. This portrayal of her feelings of guilt and shame provides a way for the viewer to negotiate their own ambivalence towards feminist discourse. While women may

[626] Minor, *Reclaiming Female Authorship in Contemporary UK Television Comedy*, 65.
[627] Richard Burbridge, 'The Rise of the Television-Comedy Auteur'.
[628] Darling, '"The Moment You Realise Someone Wants Your Body:" Neoliberalism, Mindfulness and Female Embodiment in Fleabag', 145.

acknowledge that adhering to beauty standards make them complicit in their enforcement, they are also aware that they benefit from their participation. Watching Fleabag and Claire struggle with their navigation of the same issues allows the viewer to think on their own conflicting feelings. This is an important distinction from postfeminist media. Here feminism is not repudiated but aspirational – or even unattainable.

Minor argues that 'Waller-Bridge draws attention to and breaks down the structures of what it means to be a 'bad' feminist in her work, which she achieves more specifically by breaking the fourth wall: as a character and as a celebrity, intratextually and extratextually. Both are laboriously constructed post feminist personas that she strives to demystify via her comedic use of direct address'[629]. Waller-Bridge's entire oeuvre could be seen as dedicated to unpacking this binary of good or bad women, of good and bad feminism. As such, this is also at the heart of her own construction as a celebrity feminist figure. As Bogutskaya writes, the first season of *Fleabag* 'is a study in unlikeability. All the characters, especially the women, dislike each other and themselves. Fleabag, most of all, doesn't like herself'[630]. The series is an exploration of the pressure to be perfect that women experience, within the cultural moment where a further expectation has been added: that of being a good feminist. The character of Claire is a demonstration of the emptiness that comes from ploughing all one's energy into meeting these expectations. Fleabag is an illustration of what happens when a woman fails to achieve perfection, and the strange jealousy that Claire has of Fleabag's rejection of these expectations. This exploration of good and bad women is further complicated by the fact that Fleabag is played by Waller-Bridge herself. Minor argues that the tension created by this raises 'the question: does Phoebe Waller-Bridge merely adhere to neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies, as she is often criticised for, or does she structurally undercut them by drawing attention to the problems inherent in these concepts, what she is often commended for? The slippages between Phoebe Waller-Bridge (the persona) and Fleabag (the character) have contributed heavily to this'[631]. By casting herself as rejecting society's expectations Waller-Bridge creates a tension between her on-screen character and her off-screen persona. With female-authored work often understood as

[629] Minor, *Reclaiming Female Authorship in Contemporary UK Television Comedy*, 75.
[630] Bogutskaya, *Unlikeable Female Characters: The Women Pop Culture Wants You to Hate*, 203.
[631] Minor, *Reclaiming Female Authorship in Contemporary UK Television Comedy*, 76.

autobiographical[632], Waller-Bridge risks associating herself with failure of neoliberal femininity. However, her privileged position mitigates these risks and allows her to safely subvert expectations.

Both Coel and Waller-Bridge use humour as a way of exploring the difficult feelings and situations that the characters of Tracey and Fleabag encounter. Julia Havas and Maria Sulimma argue that this comic presentation of tragedy invites 'fluctuating viewing positions that alternate between laughter, uneasiness, and frustration, provoking ambiguous reactions and discussions in social media, journalism, and academic commentary'[633], and that "dramadies" such as *Fleabag* are frequently concerned with identity politics; not just in academic scholarship, but also in popular discourse. This provocation of discussion is exactly what makes them so effective at raising issues of identity politics. Fleabag's raw, unfiltered direct address of the audience about her thoughts and feelings around sex, power, and being a woman makes audiences uneasy in its contrast to the usual depictions of single girl life we find in postfeminist media.

As well as portraying the struggles of navigating neoliberal expectations of female success, *Fleabag* also explores female experiences of heterosexuality under patriarchy. By tapping into the anxieties and predicaments of the Millennial woman, Waller-Bridge became an important cultural figure within the contemporary landscape of feminist politics. Fleabag's sensibilities surrounding female heterosexuality reflected a specific cultural moment in which the power of #MeToo urged a move away from postfeminism. Representations of sexuality in Fleabag are shown to be 'vulnerable, complex and at times abject'[634], which Holzberg and Lehtonen argue are part of an "anti-aspirationalism" that permeates the series. They argue that normative heterosexual relationships are critiqued, particularly through Fleabag's direct address that persuades the audience to become complicit in these judgements on heterosexual life in general, but particularly on straight men. Holzberg and Lehtonen suggest that this approach explores 'the heteropessimist paradox: while figures like Fleabag identify the problems of heteronormativity, they remain unwilling (or rather unable) to step

[632] Marie-Alix Thouaille, 'The Single Woman Author on Film: Screening Postfeminism'.
[633] Havas and Sulimma, 'Through the Gaps of My Fingers: Genre, Femininity, and Cringe Aesthetics in Dramedy Television', 2.
[634] Billy Holzberg and Aura Lehtonen, 'The Affective Life of Heterosexuality: Heteropessimism and Postfeminism in Fleabag', 1912.

outside of its gendered and sexual confines'[635]. The appeal of the series lies in this paradox: the expectations placed upon women are subverted by Fleabag and the realities of heterosexuality are laid bare through a humorous, sardonic lens, but the character of Fleabag continues to pursue neoliberal, heteronormative goals, so her sense of agency is also a paradox. Holzberg and Lehtonen 'suggest that heteropessimism marks a new postfeminist sensibility, operating within a pessimistic yet strictly heterosexual imaginary that forecloses any more radical alternatives to the gendered, classed and racial confines of heteronormativity'[636]. This brings to mind Nguyen's "mean girl feminism" that performs hatred of men as an expression of feminism[637].

As Gill and Harvey argue, shows like *Fleabag* began 'to open up the possibility of a more messy, complex female sexuality'[638] that contrasted with the broader narrative in media that women should ensure the fulfilment of sex within their relationships and position their sexuality within the larger narrative of their neoliberal, individualised success. The first episode of *Fleabag* opens with a late-night encounter that includes anal sex and, as the series progresses, it explores the power dynamics within sex during a time of sexual "empowerment", smart phones, and sex toys. Waller-Bridge's character voices her thoughts on sex: 'I'm not obsessed with sex. I just can't stop thinking about it. The performance of it. The awkwardness of it. The drama of it. The moment you realise someone wants your body. Not so much the feeling of it'. This confession to camera demonstrates the power that women can feel through sex with men, while still distancing them from pleasure. As Bogutskaya writes, acceptance of promiscuity is no longer the goal, it's the agency to pursue desire. 'It's the action part that irks audiences. Female characters can enjoy sex, but only if they feel guilty afterward, or are punished, or are using sex as a tool, separating their bodies and sex acts from their desires. If they're sexually active and noncommittal, they're either the butt of the joke or broken'[639]. Female sexuality is something that has historically been portrayed as fearsome on screen, or something that is pathologised, or something that a woman must be punished for[640] – so it's understandable that even a

[635] Billy Holzberg and Aura Lehtonen, 'The Affective Life of Heterosexuality: Heteropessimism and Postfeminism in Fleabag', 1912
[636] Ibid., 1914.
[637] Nguyen, *Mean Girl Feminism: How White Feminists Gaslight, Gatekeep, and Girlboss*.
[638] Rosalind Gill and Laura Harvey, 'Mediated Intimacy: Sex Advice in Media Culture', 1338.
[639] Bogutskaya, *Unlikeable Female Characters: The Women Pop Culture Wants You to Hate*, 173.
[640] Ibid.

seemingly sexually-liberated character such as Fleabag is still not shown as enjoying sex for the pleasure of the act itself.

In her acceptance speech for her Emmy award for Outstanding Writing For A Comedy Series, Waller-Bridge said how it was 'reassuring that a dirty, pervy, angry, messed-up woman can make it to the Emmys'[641]. This categorisation of Fleabag as "dirty" and "pervy" is placed in contrast to the glamorous, middle-class woman who is on stage. Waller-Bridge's privilege allows her to jokingly characterise herself as the persona she adopts on-screen, safe in the knowledge that she is protected from judgement. However, her judgement of her own character as for engaging in casual sex seemed to reinforce dominant discourses of heterosexuality where women are positioned as 'sexual gatekeepers, and as passive recipients of male desire'[642] rather than active participants.

Karina Longworth explored these dominant discourses of heterosexuality in her discussion of the then Motion Picture Association of America (now the Motion Picture Association)'s 'tendency to crack down on what it considers abhorrent sex and to show more leniency when it comes to sex that they believe falls in line with patriarchal values'[643] in relation to the film *Basic Instinct*[644], as well as the press reception of Sharon Stone's character of Catherine. While Stone's revelations of the manipulation she experienced on set in relation to the sex scenes in the movie[645] add a troubling lens with which to view this film, the points Longworth raised remain relevant. Longworth described how Catherine's bisexuality invalidated her femininity for some journalists, whose reviews seemed to say that a 'woman with an omnivorous sexual appetite was not a real woman'[646], while others felt 'that the film's questionable attitude towards queerness was a slippery slope leading to the real problem of male fear of female sexuality'[647]. The fact that Catherine is 'a single woman who likes to have sex with whoever she pleases, and not always for love'[648], seemed to horrify reviewers. This kind of sexual freedom, even three decades later,

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[641] Television Academy, '71st Emmy Awards: Phoebe Waller-Bridge Wins For Outstanding Writing For A Comedy Series'.
[642] Claire Moran, 'Re-Positioning Female Heterosexuality within Postfeminist and Neoliberal Culture', 131.
[643] Karina Longworth, *Basic Instinct (Erotic 90's, Part 6)*.
[644] *Basic Instinct* (TriStar Pictures, 1992).
[645] Sharon Stone, *The Beauty of Living Twice*.
[646] Karina Longworth, *Basic Instinct (Erotic 90's, Part 6)*.
[647] Ibid.
[648] John Weir, 'FILM; Gay-Bashing, Villainy and the Oscars'.

is something that is still so troubling to society, and something that women and feminists still find difficulty in navigating.

As Laina Y. Bay-Cheng writes, popular discourse 'now includes girls and women, perhaps more mythic than realistic, who present as unabashedly desiring and initiating, apparently unbound from and unconcerned by gendered sexual norms'[649]. However, what makes Waller-Bridge's portrayal of Fleabag a notable example is the question of her agency when initiating this activity. Bay-Cheng suggests that young women are today evaluated 'along two intersecting axes: the Virgin-Slut Continuum (i.e., sexual activity) and the Agency Line (i.e., sexual agency)'[650]. Where women were once forced into one of two categories – virgins or sluts, depending on their alleged sexual activity – girls are now also judged according to the degree of agency they seem to have over their sexual activity. Fleabag's pursuit of sex is initially presented as fully autonomous, however as the series unfolds it is revealed that her narration of her behaviour is hiding a traumatic and troubled past. The portrayal of this sexual behaviour by Waller-Bridge, a descendent of baronets[651], demonstrates how – even as she is 'shielded by race and class privilege'[652] and is not subject to 'racist and classist stereotypes of hypersexuality and irresponsibility'[653] – she is simultaneously navigating the management of her own image and distancing herself from the character of Fleabag. Where Fleabag is dirty, pervy, angry, and messed-up, Waller-Bridge is in control.

Unlikeable female characters

> *"Likeability," as a term, is intrinsically linked to the entertainment industry and is quietly gendered.*[654]

Telling stories that not only centre female characters, but centre female characters who are complex, three-dimensional, and relatable, became important over the years that Waller-Bridge emerged as a writer of women; particularly of women that

[649] Laina Y Bay-Cheng, 'The Agency Line: A Neoliberal Metric for Appraising Young Women's Sexuality', 282.
[650] Ibid.
[651] Simon Hattenstone, 'Phoebe Waller-Bridge: "I Have an Appetite for Transgressive Women"'.
[652] Bay-Cheng, 'The Agency Line: A Neoliberal Metric for Appraising Young Women's Sexuality', 285.
[653] Ibid.
[654] Bogutskaya, *Unlikeable Female Characters: The Women Pop Culture Wants You to Hate*, 15.

stood out for their unlikeability, their anger and their grief. Waller-Bridge represented a new era of television by leading a charge of female protagonists who were granted the complexity of the men who went before them. She was not alone: Margaret Tally described the emergence of the "anti-heroine", characterised by unlikeability and personality that, while flawed, ultimately elicited sympathy from audiences[655]. Such representations that challenge dominant ideologies of femininity have the potential to encourage the interrogation of gender by mainstream audiences. With the role of women in dominant Western discourse largely confined to that of domesticity[656], Waller-Bridge's childless, carefree, violent creations were significant in their transgression against mainstream representations of femininity. Her characters are largely defined by their relationships with other women, rather than men, they aren't mothers, and they often neglect or mistreat the men around them.

Isabel Pinedo argues that complex female characters engage audiences around issues such as balancing motherhood with work and violence against women with a distinctly female gaze[657]. Pinedo acknowledged that the direct authorship of women in television is always in tension with the indirect authorship of the network themselves and the wider cultural context within which these shows are created. This wider cultural context was a moment in which postfeminism and neoliberal feminism were entangled and still very much prevalent. Pinedo argued that this cultural context placed limitations on the contribution of television to more progressive ideas of feminism that were more intersectional, hence the prevalence of the white female protagonist. However, Pinedo found that issues raised by second wave feminists were still relevant to women at the time and could be raised by these series to shed new light on them in a contemporary context. This exploration of issues that continue to impact women within fourth-wave feminism makes claims to the contrary of the postfeminist idea of feminism 'taken into account'[658].

The difficult, unlikeable female characters that Pinedo and Tally identified became so successful during the 2010s that they now exist as a trope, and media producers

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[655] Tally, *The Rise of the Anti-Heroine in TV's Third Golden Age*.
[656] Haas, Pierce, and Busl, *Antiheroines of Contemporary Media: Saints, Sinners, and Survivors*.
[657] Isabel Cristina Pinedo, *Difficult Women on Television Drama: The Gender Politics of Complex Women in Serial Narratives*.
[658] McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*.

have used this to cash in on their popularity. *Fleabag* itself has become associated with a certain kind of female character, demonstrated by media commentary surrounding 'Dakota Johnson's Fleabag-esque Anne Elliot'[659] in the 'Fleagency'[660] adaptation of *Persuasion*[661]; whose scriptwriters cited Waller-Bridge as the inspiration for their injection of modern comedy to the adaptation[662]. This trend of "precarious girls"[663] and "messy Millennial women"[664] tick off a checklist of chaotic love lives, difficult relationships with their families, dubious work ethic, under-nourished friendships, mental health issues, and poor coping mechanisms. Journalist Rachel Aroesti laments the way this kind of character has become somewhat of a tired stereotype that now 'powers practically every progressive, female-centric sadcom in existence'[665].

In an interview, Waller-Bridge addressed reviews of *Fleabag* that described the titular character as 'unlikeable', explaining the balance that went into building the act of indifference that Fleabag uses to hide her pain and grief: 'I don't find her unlikeable at all', she stated, before adding 'I think it's the kind of unrelenting smugness at keeping you onside, which can kind of rub people up the wrong way if they're not sensitive to the fact that it's clearly an act'[666]. Holzberg and Lehtonen argue that the immense popularity of the series, despite the character of Fleabag's unlikeability, reflects the status of the show's star. It is their view that Fleabag's (and, by extension, Waller-Bridge's) position within the confines of respectable femininity allows this unlikeable quality to still make for a successful series. They argue that when Fleabag subverts expectations of normative female behaviour, she does so as a white, conventionally attractive, middle class woman – bringing 'the show's class and racial politics into sharp relief'[667]. The subject position of Waller-Bridge has the potential to undermine the risk that may accompany such behaviour for other women with less proximity to privilege. This raises the question of, as Bogutskaya writes,

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[659] Anita Singh, 'Dakota Johnson's Fleabag-Esque Anne Elliot'.
[660] Tori Brazier, 'The New "Fleagency" Adaptation of Persuasion with Dakota Johnson Won't Ruin Jane Austen'.
[661] Jane Austen, *Persuasion*.
[662] Liam Hess, 'Dakota Johnson's Persuasion Is a Stylish, Subversive New Take on Jane Austen'.
[663] Wanzo, 'Precarious-Girl Comedy: Issa Rae, Lena Dunham, and Abjection Aesthetics'.
[664] Rachel Aroesti, 'How Messy Millennial Woman Became TV's Most Tedious Trope'.
[665] Ibid.
[666] BUILD Series, 'Phoebe Waller- Bridge Discusses Her Amazon Show, "Fleabag" | BUILD Series'.
[667] Holzberg and Lehtonen, 'The Affective Life of Heterosexuality: Heteropessimism and Postfeminism in Fleabag', 1907.

> *who's allowed to be perceived as difficult, unruly, or unlikeable and get away with it. With the sheer absence of unlikeable women of color until quite recently, being unlikeable is still mostly the territory of cis, skinny, conventionally attractive white women. The anger or wit of Black women has been routinely transformed into comic relief or used to feed the damaging stereotype of the Angry Black Woman.*[668]

Does this mean that the feminism Waller-Bridge injects into Fleabag is only accessible to women like her? Is it only white, conventionally attractive, middle-class women who can get away with rejecting the norms of respectable femininity? While it is important to acknowledge the importance and power of creating a character such as Fleabag who resonates with audiences, it must be acknowledged that Waller-Bridge has greater freedom than others to create, and embody, unlikeable women on account of her privilege. While Waller-Bridge's persona as a writer of female characters contributes to contemporary feminist discourse, in order for greater progress to be made, there needs to be much more diversity within the female authorship of media itself. There need to be greater opportunities for women of colour, gender diverse people, queer people, and those from working-class backgrounds to create unlikeable characters who compel and engage viewers.

Fleabag era

While there were many unlikeable female characters who paved the way for Fleabag, the cultural moment of its release coincided with broader conversations around expectations placed on women. These conversations were happening in real life, in the press and, crucially, on social media. As Bogutskaya writes, audiences could finally 'understand and articulate what social tensions these characters were tapping into, and we had the access to platforms to voice this'[669]. In the years since *Fleabag* was released, its (anti)heroine has remained in popular discourse around womanhood and feminism. Just as 2014-2017 championed the girl boss, a reaction against this supposed empowerment was been led by young women in their "Fleabag era" in the early 2020s. Sardonic posting on social media – and indeed in letters, zines, and literature before the age of the internet – is

[668] Bogutskaya, *Unlikeable Female Characters: The Women Pop Culture Wants You to Hate*, 48.
[669] Ibid., 27.

nothing new, but this centring of the character of Fleabag in its depictions of a certain kind of woman and feminism is notable. Laura Minor argues that social media has created new ways of participating in the consumption of television: 'The convergence between the internet and television has produced specific online spaces for viewers to deconstruct and discuss their favourite TV shows'[670]. Fleabag's evolution into a shorthand for a complex, often unlikeable, female character with a complicated relationship to feminism has made her a locus for certain young women in the same way as her creator has become known for "authentic" authorship of women.

The brand of feminism associated with Fleabag has become known as "dissociative feminism". Ashley Nguyen theorises that a slowing in the progression of gender equality created a sense of apathy in women, due to 'the persistence of the wage gap, discrimination in workplaces and, most recently, the vulnerability of reproductive rights'[671]. Dissociative feminism revels in the pain and exhaustion of womanhood. Ning Chang writes that this centring of women's pain, where suffering is characterised 'as inherent to the female condition'[672] as finding its expression in season 2 of *Fleabag* where the character of Belinda, a business leader played by Kristen Scott Thomas, states that 'women are born with pain built in. It is our physical destiny'. This scene, and the series in general, resonated with TikTok creators. Two years after the series ended, users began to post compilations of portraits of women from art history in various states of anguish or ennui. Taking inspiration from *Portrait of a Young Woman in White*[673], which was used for the cover of Ottessa Moshfegh's novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*[674] – in which the protagonist attempts to dissociate from her life for an entire year using prescription sedatives – creators overlaid such images with text like 'men will never understand these paintings in the same way i understand them'[675].

Representations of female ennui have been observed throughout history by scholars such as Allison Pease, who studied the phenomenon's modernist phase. Pease suggested that such representations of boredom were 'an acknowledgment of the profound dissatisfaction of a group of people who found themselves on the

[670] Minor, *Reclaiming Female Authorship in Contemporary UK Television Comedy*, 73.
[671] Ashley Nguyen, 'Why I Won't Be Having a "Fleabag" Era'.
[672] Ning Chang, 'It's Time To Grow Out Of Feminism's Fleabag-Era'.
[673] Jacques-Louis David, *Portrait of a Young Woman in White*.
[674] Ottessa Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*.
[675] Camille, 'Part 4 | Lady Jane Grey 😭'.

wrong side of agency, interest, and meaning as the twentieth century began'[676]. At the time, women were struggling to establish a place in public life and Pease argued that 'boredom comes to the fore as both symptom and diagnosis of women's diminished and circumscribed experience'[677].

Similarities can be found almost a century later with the dissociative feminist's exhaustion and frustration caused by the lack of progress in gender equality. As Pease wrote, feminists of the modernist period 'diagnosed female boredom as one of the maladies of modern patriarchal culture'[678]. Women at the time consumed narratives about bored women confined to their sofas, and felt solidarity through this passive form of protest against a prevailing order they felt they could not beat. Boredom, however, is a malady that afflicts only women of a certain privilege. As Nguyen writes, Fleabag seems to live a life entirely free of consequences, the self-destructive tendencies provoked by boredom 'are easily romanticized when portrayed in a white, conventionally attractive, upper-middle class woman. To become disillusioned with mainstream feminism is a luxury those who have no other choice aren't afforded'[679]. Where Michaela Coel's character of Tracey takes shifts at the local convenience store, Fleabag manages to run a café that seemingly never has any customers. In the early 20th century, the most receptive audience of literary representations of boredom were middle-class. Novelist May Sinclair's female protagonists, who were written as wasting their potential, find their reflection in the 21st century antiheroines – such as Fleabag – who compare themselves to their girlboss peers. The process of becoming an individual, which 'was a serious project of the early twentieth century'[680] evokes the culture of self-improvement of postfeminism and the individualism of contemporary neoliberal society.

Writing on representations of dissociative feminism on screen, Michaela Elizabeth Flaherty argued that the character of Fleabag was written to represent modern women's rejection of mainstream feminism, which she described as having a 'happy-go-lucky, sex-positive ideology that does little to recognize the

[676] Allison Pease, *Modernism, Feminism and the Culture of Boredom*, 2.
[677] Ibid., 7.
[678] Ibid., 8.
[679] Nguyen, 'Why I Won't Be Having a "Fleabag" Era'.
[680] Pease, *Modernism, Feminism and the Culture of Boredom*, 89.

omnipresence of the male gaze'[681]. Fleabag's overwhelming awareness of what Flaherty described as 'the gendered panopticon'[682] leads her to engage in casual sex in order to wield power over men and achieve validation. The need to feel desired overtakes her own desire in these encounters. Hilarie Ashton argued for *Ms.* that this is a transgressive act of taking back some of the power that 'men have been exerting on women for centuries by using them just as much as they use her'[683]. As with almost every other character, these men are not referred to by name. Instead, Fleabag uses descriptors including Arsehole Guy (Ben Aldridge), Bus Rodent (Jamie Demetriou), and Hot Misogynist (Ray Fearon). Flaherty argued that Fleabag's dissociation is represented in the frequent breaks of the fourth wall that are synonymous with the series. As journalist Emmeline Clein wrote in her article 'The Smartest Women I Know Are All Dissociating', these breaks in the fourth wall coincide with emotionally-charged moments – allowing Fleabag to escape to comfort and safety by 'turning directly to the audience with snarky commentary on whatever debacle is unfolding'[684]. Frequently during sexual encounters, Fleabag is giving the audience her inner monologue, removing herself entirely from the moment – implying that she doesn't actually want to be present.

As well as depictions of anguish and ennui, TikTok users also posted paragraphs of text describing their female experiences of suffering, set to the *Fleabag* title music. The term "Fleabag Era" soon became ubiquitous with young women who have become disillusioned with mainstream feminism and, all too aware of the pain of being a woman, have chosen the path of dissociative feminism. The online discourse sparked by *Fleabag* created a space for women to grapple with the messiness of becoming a woman in a society that values us for little more than our looks. Dissociative feminism could be seen as a rejection of the kind of popular feminism that has gained visibility through media campaigns that centre self-care and self-love, while retaining a focus on female beauty. This commercially co-opted branding of feminism centres its aims at the commodification of the self, which can be seen expressed elsewhere on TikTok in the "that girl" trend mentioned in my chapter on Jameela Jamil. Content creators in this sphere of TikTok wake up early to work out and make sure their home is aesthetically

[681] Michaela Elizabeth Flaherty, '"And We're Happy, So Happy, to Be Modern Women": Dissociative Feminism on Screen and in Literature', 1.
[682] Ibid., 14.
[683] Hilarie Ashton, 'In Defense of Fleabag Feminism'.
[684] Emmeline Clein, 'The Smartest Women I Know Are All Dissociating'.

pleasing, as well as themselves. This documentation of their daily rituals caters to the male gaze, as these women seem to actively enjoy the work that goes into maintaining these high standards of femininity and domesticity. This new version of perfectionism is just a repackaged version of postfeminism, in which self-improvement allows for the making of a good neoliberal subject. In contrast, Fleabag's messiness and rejection of perfection offers an alternative to the self-discipline seen elsewhere online.

Killing Eve

Based on the *Codename Villanelle*[685] novellas by Luke Jennings, television series *Killing Eve* centres on two female characters: Eve (Sandra Oh), a disillusioned MI5 security officer; and Villanelle (Jodie Comer), a psychopathic trained assassin. Working within the narrative conventions of the spy action thriller, Waller-Bridge is able to subvert this traditionally masculine genre; from small acts of rebellion against stereotypes, such as having a male character sent to get a cup of tea 15 minutes into the first episode, to more significant protests such as insisting on deprioritising on-screen nudity[686]. Julia Havas identifies that this subversion creates a 'cultural unease'[687], particularly when generic convention is disrupted alongside what could be seen as progressive gender politics, which affects the cultural value of television shows that employ such positioning.

Writing on Jane Campion's *In the Cut*[688], Despoina Mantziari notes how mainstream characteristics such as well-known stars and an adherence to generic convention can work to subvert norms if they are used in unexpected ways, and it is through this that 'a feminist reading of female empowerment is made possible'[689]. In *Killing Eve*, Waller-Bridge stays true to spy thriller customs with the inclusion of a car chase, several gun standoffs, and a hostage situation, while the casting of Canadian actor Sandra Oh, famous for her role as Cristina Yang on US medical drama *Grey's Anatomy*, both adds to the mainstream appeal of *Killing Eve* and also subverts norms. Oh's celebrity, gained from nine years as Yang,

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[685] Luke Jennings, *Codename Villanelle*.
[686] Janine Yaqoob, 'Phoebe Waller-Bridge Desperate to Write Herself into next Killing Eve Series'.
[687] Havas, 'Invocations of Feminism : Cultural Value, Gender, and American Quality Television', 14.
[688] *In the Cut* (Pathé Productions, 2003).
[689] Despoina Mantziari, 'Women Directors in "Global" Art Cinema:Negotiating Feminism and Representation', 244.

brings a household name to the series, allowing Waller-Bridge to make the older woman the protagonist of the series, rather than Villanelle.

Audrey Jane Black describes Waller-Bridge's adaptation as a *feminist appropriation* of the novellas, which goes beyond a mere gender-swap of authorship, and cites her interpretation of the source text as the reason for her being hired to improve the script of a James Bond movie[690]. Acknowledging that Waller-Bridge's adaptation must deal with the demands of the production network that is funded by advertising, and therefore that any political content is inevitably going to be curtailed, Black argues that *Killing Eve* still 'takes masculinity to task'[691] through the complex female characters that the show centres on. The creation, or in this case adaptation of, strong female characters adds to Waller-Bridge's persona as an author of complicated women. While the *Codename Villanelle* novellas very much make Villanelle the protagonist, *Killing Eve* shifts the focus to Eve. Aged 46 at the time of *Killing Eve*'s release, Oh was the first actress of Asian descent to be nominated for an Emmy award for lead actress in a drama series for her role[692]. As Imogen West-Knights notes in feminist film journal *Another Gaze*, 'Strikingly, given that Eve is not a mother, it is never explained why she isn't, or implied that she ought to be at her age'[693]. This again bolsters Waller-Bridge's authorship: showing that the women she writes are not bound by the expectations that society places upon them.

Sharing the spotlight with Eve is Jodie Comer's character of Villanelle: an assassin with style, and a dark sense of humour. Villanelle could all too easily become a femme fatale — she's a twenty-something beautiful blonde who isn't afraid to use a gun — but Waller-Bridge instead ramps up the mischievous wit found in Jennings' novellas to refresh the trope of the female assassin. After breaking into prison to murder a witness, Villanelle is to be extricated from solitary confinement that she will be sent to, known within the prison as 'the hole'. After carrying out her hit, Villanelle greets prison guards with a triumphant cry of 'Take me to the hole!'. This sense of fun found in transgressions is key to the success of the show's characters. As Bogutskaya writes, the reception of *Killing Eve* was during a decade in which

[690] Audrey Jane Black, 'Pleasure, Power, and Pathology—between Two Worlds: Killing Eve's Queer/Feminist Post-Cold War Appraisal'.
[691] Ibid., 13.
[692] Meredith Woerner, 'Sandra Oh Is the First Asian Actress Nominated for Lead in a Drama Series'.
[693] Imogen West-Knights, 'On "Killing Eve"'.

the rhetoric of girlboss feminism dominated: 'Perhaps Villanelle struck a chord because she is so deliciously unafraid to move in the world and so unwilling to compromise on her desires, violent as they might be'[694]. Rather than pursuing acceptable feminine ambitions such as success in the world of work or an aesthetic home; Villanelle excels at brutal murder, and enjoys it.

Although Villanelle may cater to a female gaze, her conventional beauty creates tension within her character. As noted by Karen Boyle, with violence and aggression 'intrinsic to our conceptualisation of masculinity'[695], Villanelle's brutal murders transgress gender norms as well as the law. As Belinda Morrissey wrote, 'When women commit murder, their abjection is even more extreme than that of men who do the same'[696]. Boyle argued that 'women's violence is profoundly threatening for patriarchal society because it challenges the naturalness of the gender binarism on which that society depends'[697]. In this way, the character of Villanelle carries the same qualities as the character of Fleabag. Where conventionally attractive, white and middle class Waller-Bridge transgresses the gendered expectations of decorum as Fleabag, the similarly attractive, white Jodie Comer commits violent acts as Villanelle. Even as a queer character, Villanelle is still heteronormatively attractive. While her costuming may cater to a female gaze, it is never made explicitly queer and Comer's femininity is retained through her long blonde hair and heteronormative hair and makeup. She may engage in queer sex, but her character's appearance could easily be read as straight. These capitulations to expectations of femininity are important in order to allow for transgressions against other conventions of womanhood. It is required of the characters of Villanelle and Fleabag to be played by conventionally attractive women otherwise their subversion of femininity might be deemed too much and the feminist discourse prompted by the shows may not reach a mainstream audience. While these may not be the progressive characters that some feminists may yearn for, there is still value in watching Waller-Bridge's creations on screen. As Bogutskaya writes,

> *The pleasure of watching unlikeable female characters is watching them make choices, following their intentions, and using their agency. Even*

[694] Bogutskaya, *Unlikeable Female Characters: The Women Pop Culture Wants You to Hate*, 258.
[695] Karen Boyle, *Media and Violence: Gendering the Debates*, 95.
[696] Belinda Morrissey, *When Women Kill: Questions of Agency and Subjectivity*, 2.
[697] Boyle, *Media and Violence: Gendering the Debates*, 100.

> *when they don't get away with it, they have an intention; they're not passive. We might not always get what we want, but we always want something. And while women are mostly taught to temper their desires, curb their hunger, stop wanting quite so much, watching these characters unleash their wants is such a joy.*[698]

While both characters shine in their own scenes, it is their shared moments on screen that are the most captivating. Playing with the classic cat and mouse format, Waller-Bridge greatly embellished her adaptation of the novellas with an abundance of creative flourishes that deepen the relationship between the two characters in the television series; including a chance meeting between the two women in a hospital toilet. Villanelle, who is preparing to commit several acts of murder, pauses to offer a suggestion as to how Eve should wear her hair. Waller-Bridge told *Variety* 'I just became obsessed with the idea that the power of a compliment between two women can be more seismic than seeing one hold the other at knifepoint'[699]. Stephanie Pomfrett wrote for *The Washington Post* that moments such as this demonstrate that these women 'truly see and understand each other, and that female connection is uncommon in the cat-and-mouse game of international spying'[700]. This moment finds a point of comparison in Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*, where Barbie (Margot Robbie) sits next to a woman at a bus stop (Ann Roth) and they share a moment of connection where Barbie tells the woman that she is beautiful. These simple interactions between women show the power that a compliment can wield, thanks to its expression of female solidarity and admiration.

Pomfrett argued that it is due to 'the force of Waller-Bridge's direction that this is the rare example of a spy drama that has overwhelmingly appealed to female viewers'[701]. Crucially, while Villanelle is conventionally feminine, her womanhood does not soften the violence or sociopathic behaviour. Her horrific kills are not driven by a backstory of trauma and abuse, but a desire to fill her wardrobe with fabulous clothes. As West-Knights wrote, 'Waller-Bridge shows us again that there doesn't have to be a neat chain of events, a past trauma, an unresolved issue. Real

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[698] Bogutskaya, *Unlikeable Female Characters: The Women Pop Culture Wants You to Hate*, 303.
[699] Diane Garrett, 'Emmys: Female Writer-Director Nominees Are Few but Mighty'.
[700] Stephanie Pomfrett, '"Killing Eve" Strayed from the Book. That Was a Smart Move.'.
[701] Ibid.

women, real people, are more complicated than that'[702]. Villanelle's gender merely allows her to subvert the expectations of her targets in order to get close to them and finish the job. She feigns seduction before stabbing one victim, and poses as service staff delivering a tampon in order to poison another. She also uses beauty products as murder weapons, which Siobhan Lyons describes as

> *anchoring murder itself within the "feminine" world of fashion and beauty products. Not only does Villanelle indulge in the material comforts her job affords her, but the weapons she uses to kill people are often beauty products or fashion accessories, including a hairpin plunged into a man's eye and a perfume laced with poison which kills an asthmatic businesswoman.*[703]

Hannah Giorgis argued in *The Atlantic* that labelling Waller-Bridge's work on *Killing Eve* or her other shows as "feminist" risks reducing Villanelle and Eve to members of 'the elusive stratum of Positive Female Representation™'[704], rather than acknowledging the transgressive act of creating female characters who aren't necessarily role models, but who make for compelling viewing:

> *Waller-Bridge saddles neither Eve nor Villanelle with the burden of palatability, and instead fills in the characters' contours with humor, fear, longing, and more. If Mindhunter, Dexter, and Barry are attempts to get inside the psyches of violent men, Killing Eve is an exploration of what delicious, devilishly entertaining chaos can ensue when someone thinks to do the same for women.*[705]

The exploration of the gendered expectations placed upon characters' likeability is something that I believe is key to Waller-Bridge's feminist intervention through her writing for television. As this quote shows, Waller-Bridge's authorship of characters that she herself plays and also those she creates for other actors displays an investment in subverting codes of hegemonic femininity. In this way, Waller-Bridge diverged from the technique of Emma Watson, who very much utilised her position of hegemonic femininity to further her feminist message.

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[702] West-Knights, 'On "Killing Eve"'.
[703] Siobhan Lyons, '"Small-Breasted Psycho" Debunking the Female Psychopath in Killing Eve'.
[704] Hannah Giorgis, 'Killing Eve and the Riddle of Why Women Kill'.
[705] Ibid.

Instead, Waller-Bridge plays with female representations to show the potential of allowing women to be more than just likeable.

Humour is key to Waller-Bridge's explorations of this. Her voice can be distinctly heard in *Killing Eve*'s dialogue, in moments such as when Eve is asked why she is so interested in Villanelle and her accomplice and she replies, 'Because one of them is a little prick, and she's keeping me up at night'. While Jennings' novellas do have a comic undertone, Waller-Bridge picks up the ball of humour and runs with it for the television series. This is an expression of her authorship, with humour a defining feature of her *auteur* persona. As Edward Buscombe writes, 'Instead of merely transferring someone else's work faithfully and self-effacingly, the *auteur* transforms the material into an expression of his own personality'[706]. Fans of *Fleabag* and *Crashing* will recognise the tone of voice of Waller-Bridge, bringing levity and mischief to what could easily be very dark subject matter. In a similar way to Michaela Coel's use of humour to introduce topics of feminist discourse into her work, here Waller-Bridge uses humour as a mechanism to challenge gender ideas. As Chita Ramaswamy wrote for *The Guardian*, 'perhaps the greatest pleasure of this deeply pleasurable series is spotting all the ways in which it uproots the tired old sexist tropes of spy thrillers then repots them as feminist in-jokes'[707], while Comer herself stated that 'What everyone loves is that Phoebe is so unique, and her voice is so distinctive'[708].

Waller-Bridge was quoted in *Elle* enthusing on the experience of writing two female characters in a male-dominated genre:

> *every time Villanelle does something outrageous, it feels sort of glorious. Even though there is violence and darkness and complicated psychology in it, there is still something glorious about a woman existing without fear or the consequences of her actions. She's not bridled with shame in the way female characters often are.*[709]

Describing the difficulties of getting a female-led drama made, Waller-Bridge told *Harper's Bazaar*: 'There was a meeting at one point where someone actually said,

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[706] Edward Buscombe, 'Ideas of Authorship', 23.
[707] Chita Ramaswamy, 'From Fridging to Nagging Husbands: How Killing Eve Upturns Sexist Cliches'.
[708] Naomi Gordon, 'Killing Eve's Jodie Comer Explains Why We're All Rooting for Villanelle'.
[709] Emma Dibdin, 'Sandra Oh Teases Her New Female-Focused Spy Thriller Killing Eve'.

"We can't have too many women," meaning it will look unbelievable'[710]. While there may have been difficulties getting the project made in the first place, the show was renewed for a second series by BBC America before the first had even begun[711]. AMC Networks entertainment president Sarah Barnett commented that the network 'had no idea that the conversation, the culture, around gender was going to be so explosive'[712]. The impact of the #MeToo movement, and its collective raising of female voices, is clear here. Television networks simultaneously tried to increase their gender inclusivity in an attempt to redress imbalances in production teams, while also recognising the commercial potential of "feminist" characters and shows.

These efforts of inclusion are not necessarily applied to a diverse range of voices. Waller-Bridge had already proven herself, with a successful Edinburgh fringe show, *Crashing*, and *Fleabag*, as a writer of interesting female characters. Her adaptation of a book that follows a conventionally successful genre probably seemed like a safe bet. Even when passing on the baton of screenwriting duties for the second season of *Killing Eve*,'it was Waller-Bridge's idea to bring in her friend Emerald Fennell to be the new head writer'[713]. Educated at the same school as the Duchess of Cambridge,[714] Fennell is known for playing Camilla Parker Bowles in television drama *The Crown*[715], which is about the British monarchy. Fennell is also known for writing and directing *Promising Young Woman*. In contrast with Michaela Coel, who actively pursues voices who are not often represented in the television industry, Waller-Bridge furthers the 'exclusivity and nepotism involved in (upper) middle-class media'[716]. Laura Minor argued that this uncovered a tension 'between postfeminism and fourth-wave feminism in the 2010s, between individualism and collectivism, separateness and intersectionality, and pre-social media and digital activism'[717]. Waller-Bridge's feminist interventions remain firmly in her creation of female characters on screen. While she may engage in feminist work by creating characters who subvert expectations of femininity, it is not within

[710] Gordon, 'Killing Eve's Jodie Comer Explains Why We're All Rooting for Villanelle'.
[711] Lesley Goldberg, 'Sandra Oh's "Killing Eve" Renewed at BBC America'.
[712] Kate Aurthur, 'How "Killing Eve" Became The Perfect Show For These Wild Times'a.
[713] Ibid.
[714] Bianca London and Laura Hampson, 'Who Is Emerald Fennell and Why Does She Look so Familiar? Here's Where You Recognise the Oscars' Golden Girl From'.
[715] *The Crown* (Netflix, 2016).
[716] Minor, *Reclaiming Female Authorship in Contemporary UK Television Comedy*, 77.
[717] Ibid.

her celebrity feminist persona to engage directly in activism within her industry. As well as the personal connection, Fennell's authorship of *Promising Young Woman* marked her as being a writer of transgressive women at a time when this was valuable currency within the media industries.

Bond

Waller-Bridge's interpretation of the *Codename Villanelle* novellas has been cited, as mentioned previously, as the reason for her being hired to improve the script of the 25th James Bond movie[718], *No Time to Die*. First helmed by director Danny Boyle, the original script was 'completely thrown away'[719] when new director Cary Joji Fukunaga took on the project. Sibling producers Barbara Broccoli and Michael G. Wilson, alongside the current incarnation of Bond, Daniel Craig, explained their vision to Fukunaga, who then worked with two writers, Neal Purvis and Robert Wade, who have co-written every Bond since *The World Is Not Enough*[720]. Waller-Bridge was brought 'on board for some punch-ups'[721] at the request of Daniel Craig, 'even though they were already halfway through shooting the film at the time'[722].

> *Craig made clear that he's simply a fan of Waller-Bridge's work. "She's just brilliant," he said. "I had my eye on her ever since the first Fleabag [TV series], and then I saw Killing Eve and what she did with that and just wanted her voice. It is so unique—we are very privileged to have her on board."* [723]

Although Fukunaga described working with Waller-Bridge remotely, 'a lot of it was conversation-based, and then she had a bunch of passes on scenes'[724], even without being in the same room she managed to bring 'a feeling for the imperfections of humanity that make us all interesting and unique'[725]. Rather than changing Bond, Waller-Bridge's aim was 'to make sure that the characters, played by actors

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[718] Black, 'Pleasure, Power, and Pathology—between Two Worlds: Killing Eve's Queer/Feminist Post-Cold War Appraisal'.
[719] James Bell, 'Bond Ambition', 10.
[720] *The World Is Not Enough* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1999).
[721] Bell, 'Bond Ambition'.
[722] Olive Pometsey, 'Phoebe Waller-Bridge on Daniel Craig: "Bond Is Very Close to His Heart"'.
[723] Laura Bradley, 'Daniel Craig Slams "F*cking Ridiculous" Bond Question About Phoebe Waller-Bridge'.
[724] Bell, 'Bond Ambition'.
[725] Bell, 'Bond Ambition'.

including Lashana Lynch, Léa Seydoux and Ana de Armas, "felt like real people."'[726]. Lashana Lynch, who plays Bond's replacement as 007 in the film, 'very literally squealed'[727] when she heard about Waller-Bridge's involvement in the script because she knew she was 'going to know how to actually take care of women onscreen'[728].

These flawed characters who still engage the audience have become a calling card of Waller-Bridge – along with her wit, which was cited by Craig as one of the reasons he wanted her input[729]. Early press coverage of Waller-Bridge's appointment 'to help out'[730] with the script had Susannah Butter asking 'Could this be the moment the womanising Bond becomes a feminist? And can we expect a Bond who does more looks to camera?'[731]. Waller-Bridge's association with feminism and the signature direct address to camera of her character of Fleabag are so strong, and the historical lack of female input in the franchise so stark (Waller-Bridge is only the second woman to be credited on a Bond script since Johanna Hardwood), that assumptions were made about her authorial influence on such a well-established character.

As 'the first entry in the series to land in a #MeToo and Time's Up world'[732], questions have been asked about the continued relevance of Bond. While Waller-Bridge described the franchise as 'absolutely relevant now'[733], she did concede that 'the film has to "treat women properly," even if Bond himself doesn't'[734]. Fukunaga and producer Broccoli worked with both Lynch and de Armas to create 'a new type of female Bond character who is much more fully realized than the "Bond girls" of films past'[735]. Lynch in particular wanted her character to be realistic, and even talked with Waller-Bridge

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[726] Peter White, 'Phoebe Waller-Bridge: James Bond Is "Absolutely Relevant Now" But The Film "Has To Treat Women Properly"'.
[727] Rebecca Ford, 'Bond Women: How Rising Stars Lashana Lynch and Ana de Armas Are Helping Modernize 007'.
[728] Ibid.
[729] Susannah Butter, 'License to Thrill — Who Said It, Fleabag or Bond?'.
[730] Rebecca Jones, 'How Phoebe Waller-Bridge Is "spicing up" James Bond'.
[731] Butter, 'License to Thrill — Who Said It, Fleabag or Bond?'
[732] Ford, 'Bond Women: How Rising Stars Lashana Lynch and Ana de Armas Are Helping Modernize 007'.
[733] White, 'Phoebe Waller-Bridge: James Bond Is "Absolutely Relevant Now" But The Film "Has To Treat Women Properly"'.
[734] Ibid.
[735] Ford, 'Bond Women: How Rising Stars Lashana Lynch and Ana de Armas Are Helping Modernize 007'.

> *about her maybe being on her period in one scene, and maybe at the beginning of the scene — and I spoke to Cary about this — throwing her tampon in the thing," says Lynch, making a motion of tossing trash into the bin*[736]

This idea was clearly a little too realistic, as it did not make it into the film. While Waller-Bridge's involvement may have opened up the potential for a more progressive Bond, in reality her name is likely just being used as a feminist token. The Phoebe Waller-Bridge brand is valuable to a franchise like Bond that wants to remain relevant, decades after its first release. Andrea L. Press and Francesca Tripodi describe the concept of a media-ready feminism and the 'processes of domestication'[737] through which feminist ideas must pass. However, they argue that this media adoption of feminism provides 'an opportunity for the public to engage in discussions of the structural gendered inequality that ensures the persistence and reproduction of everyday sexism'[738]. In this way the mainstream masculine text of the James Bond franchise can access the "media-ready" feminism of Phoebe Waller-Bridge. While this may not bring radical changes to the content of the films, the very addition of Waller-Bridge to the writing credits opens up audience discussions on sexism within the franchise and what a "feminist' Bond might look like.

Speaking out

During the period of study of this thesis, discussions of feminism in relation to popular culture were frequent. As Bogutskaya wrote, there was 'a palpable obsession in cultural criticism with labeling a fictional character as a feminist or not, and by extension, with labeling the author as a feminist or a misogynist'[739]. With Waller-Bridge's creations much discussed as feminist, and with Waller-Bridge herself positioned as a feminist author, I want to demonstrate the ways in which her authorship dominated this characterisation. Although Waller-Bridge has spoken openly about the feminist issues she explores in her work in interviews with the press, ultimately her contribution to popular feminist

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[736] Ibid.
[737] Andrea L. Press and Francesca Tripodi, *Media-Ready Feminism and Everyday Sexism: How US Audiences Create Meaning Across Platforms*, 5.
[738] Ibid.
[739] Bogutskaya, *Unlikeable Female Characters: The Women Pop Culture Wants You to Hate*, 232.

discourse is through the texts she has written: *Crashing*, *Fleabag*, *Killing Eve* and *No Time to Die*. Waller-Bridge doesn't have a social media presence[740] and so her celebrity persona is largely constructed through her writing. Waller-Bridge creates characters that subvert expectations of femininity in order to further feminist discourse, rather than directly engaging with issues of feminism off-screen. This buffer of fictionalisation allowed her to maintain a distance from the tarnish of feminism at a period of time in which misogyny was just as popular as feminism.

There are a few instances in which Waller-Bridge did explore feminism in ways that extended beyond her work, such as when she gave the opening speech at the Evening Standard Theatre Awards describing 2017 as 'a year of no apologies'[741], in which 'men and women are no longer apologising for being victims of systemic abuse in this industry. And the abusers are still not apologising despite admitting to it'[742]. Waller-Bridge praised Vicky Featherstone, artistic director of London's Royal Court Theatre, for publishing a theatre industry code of behaviour to prevent sexual harassment and abuses of power. Waller-Bridge ended her speech with a warning: 'A change is coming. And for all you creepy bastards who think you got away with it, you know who you are, and we will find you'[743]. This is a characteristic approach from Waller-Bridge, presenting the serious issue of sexual abuse with a tongue-in-cheek tone.

While Watson used associations with established feminists and organisations to raise feminist issues, and Michaela Coel drew on her own personal experiences to engage audiences, Waller-Bridge used humour. Even those women who hold a privileged position in society, such as Waller-Bridge, risk being labelled a feminist killjoy[744] if they too plainly state their anger at violence against women. Instead, Waller-Bridge mitigated this risk by using humorous language and referring to 'creepy bastards'. She drew attention to the lack of apologies from abusers who have admitted to their crimes in a way that used her signature sardonic wit. Much like her writing in *Fleabag*, she presented feminist issues and the difficulties that women face under patriarchy in a way that an audience can find darkly funny,

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[740] Robbie Griffiths, 'Phoebe Waller-Bridge Explains Why She Avoids the "Madness" of Social Media'.
[741] 'Phoebe Waller-Bridge Stands up for Sexual Harassment Victims in Searing Evening Standard Theatre Awards Speech'.
[742] Ibid.
[743] Ibid.
[744] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*.

without Waller-Bridge being perceived as complaining or being angry. Of course, it is also her privileged position within society that allows her to present such issues in the first place, with her whiteness and middle-class position affording her greater freedom to address sexism from a place of relative safety. With it so often being the case that celebrity feminists uphold dominant ideologies, it is important to examine criticism that surrounds Waller-Bridge and her contributions to feminist discourse.

Criticism of the precarious-girl comedy

As referenced earlier in this chapter, and in my chapter on Michaela Coel, Waller-Bridge's titular character of Fleabag was part of a group of female characters created in the 2010s who struggled to navigate early adulthood. This cohort of characters were in their late twenties to early thirties, and shared the qualities of being self-sabotaging, emotionally unstable, unlikeable, imperfect, and, at times, cruel. Lena Dunham's *Girls*, Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer's *Broad City*[745] and Issa Rae's *Insecure* are some other notable examples of television series written by their stars that tell stories of women navigating life in a city in the first decade or so of adulthood. Rebecca Wanzo termed this genre of narrative the 'Precarious-Girl Comedy'[746], naming Rae and Dunham as leaders of the televisual movement and highlighting how the characters of *Girls* epitomise the trend by their on-screen navigation of 'lives that seem professionally directionless and romantically and sexually wretched'[747]. Wanzo argued that these female characters, trapped in a state of perpetual abjection, subvert the liberal feminist portrayals of successful professional women rejecting domesticity, and that they offer an alternative. Faye Woods posited that these characters have been created 'in response to a generation's post-recessionary economic immobility and social confusion'[748]. Rebecca Liu described the 'Young Millennial Woman'[749] who is characterised by 'drama, self-loathing and downwardly mobile financial precarity'[750], in feminist film journal *Another Gaze*. This economic precarity is

[745] *Broad City* (Comedy Central, 2014).
[746] Wanzo, 'Precarious-Girl Comedy: Issa Rae, Lena Dunham, and Abjection Aesthetics'.
[747] Ibid.
[748] Woods, 'Too Close for Comfort: Direct Address and the Affective Pull of the Confessional Comic Woman in Chewing Gum and Fleabag', 195.
[749] Rebecca Liu, 'The Making of a Millennial Woman'.
[750] Ibid.

familiar to the young Millennial, many of whom (like myself) entered the job market at the time of the financial crisis of 2007. Even though the majority of these characters are women from affluent backgrounds, much like their writers, the feeling of precarity remains.

In contrast to the majority of the authors of the "young Millennial woman", writers from working class backgrounds, and those who are from outside London, have traditionally been excluded from authorship of television series. Here I want to return to the example of Yorkshire television writer and producer Sally Wainwright as a point of comparison to this incumbent wave of female authors. Wainwright has found success writing popular dramas for mainstream terrestrial channels, telling stories of women's lives in relation to shifting cultural attitudes around women and work. Wainwright's prime-time dramas often have working women and their personal lives at the centre of their narratives. In her study of Wainwright, Ruth McElroy argued that Wainwright's success coincided with 'a preoccupation of popular culture'[751] with the lives of women navigating a work/life balance. In this way, the writers of the "young Millennial woman" could be seen as similarly reflecting the worries of young adults who are navigating unstable housing and job markets. While Wainwright started out writing for *The Archers*[752], *Emmerdale*[753] and *Coronation Street*[754] and worked as a bus driver before her writing career took off[755], Waller-Bridge 'grew up in an upper-middle-class family with baronets on both sides'[756]. This removal from the experiences of the majority of Waller-Bridge's television audience has opened her up to criticism. As a visible woman working in film and television, and one who champions female representation in her work, Waller-Bridge is inevitably viewed as a role model. As Rachel Williams writes of female directors working within cinema:

> *visible role models are important if women are to be encouraged in thinking that there is a place for them within the industry, the other side of the coin is that any woman who is held up in this way ceases to be simply a director and becomes instead a symbol of something deeper, such as the triumph of female*

[751] McElroy, 'The Feminisation of Contemporary British Television Drama', 45.
[752] Radio drama, *The Archers* (UK: BBC Radio 4, 1951-present).
[753] *Emmerdale* (Leeds: ITV, 1972-present).
[754] *Coronation Street* (Manchester: ITV, 1960-present).
[755] Andrew Anthony, 'Sally Wainwright: The Titan of Genuine Reality Television'.
[756] Hattenstone, 'Phoebe Waller-Bridge: "I Have an Appetite for Transgressive Women"'.

> *tenacity in a patriarchal arena. The potential result is a situation where every decision she makes is subject to intense feminist scrutiny and possibly censure, and every personal success or failure also becomes the success or failure of women as a whole.*[757]

Waller-Bridge is both celebrated for her female characters and her feminist contribution to television, and simultaneously criticised for not representing every woman in her depictions of female life. In her *Guardian* article entitled 'Fleabag is a work of undeniable genius. But it is for posh girls' journalist Ellen E Jones wrote 'when Fleabag is being celebrated as women's Authentic Experience finally given voice, then it's time to call bullshit.'[758], while Rebecca Liu questioned the praise given to *Fleabag* when western feminism is so 'marked by the elevation of upper middle class white voices to the level of unearned universalism'[759]. Herein lies the delicate balance that each of my case studies must navigate. While utilising the advantages that are at their disposal to bring issues of feminism into their work, each of the stars in this study are restricted by the media systems they operate in. By capitulating to the demands of mainstream media, the work they produce will inevitably be curtailed and so open them to criticism for a lack of inclusivity.

A notable example of Waller-Bridge being seen as flouting her privilege was the social media backlash to a photoshoot Waller-Bridge did with *Vogue*[760]. One user of what was then Twitter (now X) commented on a photo of Waller-Bridge posing in Dries Van Noten on public transport as people of colour sit around her, 'I saw this picture of Phoebe Waller-Bridge in Vogue, and then I read about what her father did for work, then I went and looked up how much all the private schools she attended as a young person cost, and then I looked at this photo some more'[761]. While the confluence of Waller-Bridge's class and race privilege caused tensions at a cultural moment in which issues of inequality were becoming more visible, this kind of addition to Waller-Bridge's persona also demonstrates her confidence to be explicit about not pretending to represent all women in her work.

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[757] Williams, 'No Job For a Lady: Women Directors in Hollywood', 86.
[758] Ellen E. Jones, 'Fleabag Is a Work of Undeniable Genius. But It Is for Posh Girls'.
[759] Liu, 'The Making of a Millennial Woman'.
[760] Lauren Collins, 'The World According to Phoebe Waller-Bridge'.
[761] @QueenHattieJean, 'I Saw This Picture of Phoebe Waller-Bridge in Vogue, and Then I Read about What Her Father Did for Work, Then I Went and Looked up How Much All the Private Schools She Attended as a Young Person Cost, and Then I Looked at This Photo Some More.'.

Laura Minor posits that the reason for criticism being wielded against Waller-Bridge

> *is that she does not fulfil, satisfy or grasp what contemporary feminism – or fourth-wave feminism more specifically – stands for in the second decade of the twenty-first century. She is not perceived as an intersectional feminist or even a feminist more broadly. As a theory, intersectionality has become commonplace within fourth-wave feminism*[762]

Another example of this disregard for hiding her privileged upbringing came in Waller-Bridge's acceptance speech for her BAFTA Television Award for Female Performance in a Comedy, in which she gave an insight into her childhood: 'I just want to say thank you to my mother, who said to me, "darling, you can be whatever you want to be, as long as you're outrageous"'[763]. The question must be asked, of who is allowed to be outrageous? Waller-Bridge's socioeconomic background positions her as someone who has the freedom to push back at accepted norms of on-screen representations of femininity, without the risk of being seen as a feminist killjoy[764]. This is in contrast to Michaela Coel, who is neither white nor middle class. Falguni A Sheth argues that non-white people are 'intuited as threatening to a political order, to a collectively disciplined society'[765]. For people who are in a more precarious place in their employment, presenting unpalatable characteristics can put them at great risk.

What kind of women can be celebrated for rejecting the 'one-dimensional figures of the past – who could only either be adored or reviled by men'[766]? Why does the discourse of genius surround Waller-Bridge and will it continue? Or will it turn into criticism as swiftly as it did for Dunham? Laura Minor argues that 'Waller-Bridge has created a carefully crafted depiction of "unruliness". Ultimately, however, this "unruliness" lies in her ambivalence, as Waller-Bridge's "bad feminism" draws attention to the unequal structures that make her work both critically acclaimed and derided in a digitised feminist landscape concerned with intersectionality'[767]. Minor cites the concern of British TV comedy with issues of

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[762] Minor, *Reclaiming Female Authorship in Contemporary UK Television Comedy*, 72.
[763] 'BAFTA TV Awards 2017', *BAFTA TV Awards*.
[764] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*.
[765] Falguni A Sheth, *Toward a Political Philosophy of Race*, 26.
[766] Liu, 'The Making of a Millennial Woman'.
[767] Minor, *Reclaiming Female Authorship in Contemporary UK Television Comedy*, 6.

class and gender discourses, and its repeated favouring of middle-class narratives[768] as key to the tension between Waller-Bridge's social class and her careful crafting of characters. Like Minor, I believe that potential can be found in ambivalent reactions to media. This thesis has shown how popular culture can be an integral part of progressing feminist discourse. Imperfect celebrities with tension built into their personae provide opportunities for feminism to be shaped by debate. This is even more fruitful when a good deal of fourth-wave feminist activism takes place on digital platforms.

Conclusion – turning the dial of destiny

With media producers increasingly looking to make content for female audiences, it is unsurprising that a universalism, whether earned or not, seems like a quick and easy fix for a male-dominated industry. In contrast to the addition of "misfits" such as Michaela Coel, the kinds of female voices that are most commonly allowed to infiltrate the mainstream media are the ones who have already proven to be successful. Waller-Bridge's CV shows a consistent history of writing female characters who are popular with audiences; who add just the right amount of authenticity, nuance, and unlikeable character traits to make rich and complex models of the female experience; while crucially remaining humorous, charming, and palatable enough not to put off mainstream audiences. Waller-Bridge's ability to navigate the fault lines of critique without being the feminist killjoy is just as much to do with her use of comedy as much as it is to do with her socio-cultural privilege. This proven success has given Waller-Bridge a reputation as a writer of female characters which, at a time of cultural re-examination, has meant that franchises looking to appeal to a female audience saw her as a way to bring them into a post-#MeToo world.

What is also important to these franchises is not alienating existing fans or causing the kind of backlash that followed the all-female reboot of *Ghostbusters* or the so-called "woke" *Star Wars: Episode VIII - The Last Jedi*. Waller-Bridge seemed to achieve the balancing act of largely appealing to a female viewership, without creating work that was so overtly feminist as to be off-putting to mainstream audiences. With *No Time To Die* smashing box office records[769], it was the turn of

[768]Minor, Reclaiming Female Authorship in Contemporary UK Television Comedy, 54.
[769] Mark Sweney, 'No Time to Die: James Bond Film Smashes Box Office Records'.

the *Indiana Jones* franchise to add Waller-Bridge to the mix, for fifth instalment *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny,* in a bid to add longevity. The film missed its opening weekend estimate[770] and the critical and fan response to the movie was somewhat underwhelming. There were a few irritated fans on Reddit. A now suspended user wrote 'the film is trash, and pushes the woke propaganda of recent years, of the strong whamen [sic] sidelining the man and proving she can do things better'[771]. Antifeminist YouTuber Melonie Mac Go Boom opened her video on the subject, 'Phoebe Waller-Bridge continues to curse everything she touches with her feminist hands'[772]. In more traditional media, *The Spectator* published an article entitled 'Phoebe Waller-Bridge is a franchise murderer — and Indiana Jones is her next victim'[773]. This negative attitude to feminist authorship of a franchise would continue later into the year as I will detail in my case study of Greta Gerwig.

These negative responses were drowned out by an otherwise decidedly middling reception, with no real exceptional praise for Waller-Bridge's inclusion or performance. *The Telegraph*'s film critic Tim Robey decided the film 'needed more Fleabag'[774], bemoaning Waller-Bridge's lack of involvement in the writing of the movie's script. This review identifies an important aspect of Waller-Bridge's celebrity feminist persona: her authorship of women is so fundamental to her identity as a celebrity feminist that without it her work is much less impactful. This is not a case of adding Waller-Bridge and stirring to create a well-balanced feminist franchise, it is her *authorship* of women that is key. That Waller-Bridge's creation of the character of Fleabag has taken on a whole new level of fandom and viewer interpretation years after the series was released is a testament to her perceptive mining of an experience shared by young Millennial (and later Generation Z) women. It is not Waller-Bridge herself, but the characters she creates that resonate with the contemporary popular feminist discourse. What began as "precarious girls" and "messy Millennial women" has shaped the trend of the "dissociative feminist" thanks to female characters who are given the chance to express cultural moments.

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[770] Caelyn Pender, '"Indiana Jones" Misses Estimates in Hit to Theaters' Rebound'.
[771] interlope888, 'Phoebe Waller Bridge in Dial of Destiny'.
[772] *Feminism Unalives Indiana Jones in the Dial of Destiny and Tomb Raider Is Next on the Chopping Block*.
[773] Ben Domenech, 'Phoebe Waller-Bridge Is a Franchise Murderer — and Indiana Jones Is Her next Victim'.
[774] Tim Robey, 'Why Indiana Jones 5 Needed More Fleabag'.

Waller-Bridge is a useful case study for this project as she demonstrates a clear link between contemporary feminist discourse that is echoed in the paratexts created around *Fleabag*. This resonance with other Millennials, and younger generations of women, and their experiences navigating feminism, heterosexual relationships, and a career under neoliberal expectations shows that she has tapped into a distinct cultural moment. However, as with all my case studies, her approach to exploring explicitly female and feminist issues requires mitigating the risks associated with these subjects. For Waller-Bridge this meant using humour as a distancing technique, in a similar way to Coel and, to a certain extent, my final case study: Greta Gerwig. What makes Waller-Bridge distinctive is the opacity of her celebrity persona. In a similar way to her own creation of Fleabag, Waller-Bridge tricks her audience into thinking she's letting them into her private thoughts through her oversharing, imperfect characters. Through her direct address as Fleabag, her viewers have the impression that she is sharing her inner monologue. Her writing is all about personal candour, but this allows Waller-Bridge to keep a distance between herself and her creations. Fleabag's expressions of frustration with the expectations thrust upon women and her heteropessimism are Waller-Bridge's device for both engaging her audience and keeping a protective barrier of fiction between the viewer and Waller-Bridge herself. This allows her to explore feminist and female issues through the characters she creates, while protecting her celebrity persona from any negative connotations that a more personal approach to feminist expression might risk attracting.

Chapter 5: Greta Gerwig the female auteur?

Born 4.8.1983

Introduction

For my final case study, I turn from female authorship of female television characters to female authorship of cinema, and its relationship to popular feminism. This chapter takes Greta Gerwig as its case study and explores the idea of the female screen author and the ways in which stories about women in cinema have been both shaped by, and contribute to, popular feminist discourse. While exploring Gerwig's rise to fame in collaboration with writer and director Noah Baumbach, who is now her husband as well as creative collaborator, this chapter asks what happens when the muse finds her voice.

Gerwig is the one American case study selected for this thesis, bringing an element of transatlantic comparison to this discussion of Millennial feminist celebrity. While her movie *Barbie's* place in the popular feminist discourse of the time period is undeniable, it is in the evolution of Gerwig from star of independent movies to blockbuster director that this case study finds its intervention. I examine how her work in front of the camera as an actor contributed to her celebrity, and how this in turn influenced her work behind the camera. The central argument of this chapter is that Gerwig's association with male director Noah Baumbach allowed her to gain credibility as a filmmaker in her own right. Gerwig's directorial role on *Lady Bird* and *Little Women* provides a lens to explore contemporary feminist sensibilities and the commercially-minded balance that must be struck by female authors working in mainstream cinema. This case study demonstrates how Gerwig uses female coming-of-age narratives to explore the feminist themes that have found prominence in popular culture, but also provides an example of the ways in which the work of female authors during this time period was still excluded from industry recognition.

The importance of female authorship

While film is undoubtedly a collaborative art form, the Romantic idea of the singular author is something that has been co-opted by cinema[775]. *Auteur* theory, which posited that certain film directors embody this singular, artistic, authorship in their cinematic work[776] has been applied, challenged, and adapted by film scholars across a variety of film texts since its origins in the 1950s. No matter how auteur theory may be deployed by contemporary academics and film critics, the idea of the singular author remains predominantly attached to the role of the (male) director. Judith Mayne considered feminist literary criticism as a way to evaluate the merit of examining authorship as part of the study of feminist film. Mayne suggested that

> *inquiries into the nature of female authorship have been shaped by responses to two somewhat obvious assumptions: first, that no matter how tenuous, fractured, or complicated, there is a connection between the writer's gender, her personhood, and her texts; and second, that there exists a female tradition in literature, whether defined in terms of models of mutual influence, shared themes, or common distances from the dominant culture*[777]

For these two reasons, Mayne argued that this approach is in danger of resulting in essentialism and also pointed to a lack of female-authored films, a more substantial number of which would be required in order to establish a female tradition of filmmaking. Sue Thornham also described the difficulty of defining a feminist filmmaker and asked whether feminist film theory should move away from narrative to look at a film's authorship. Thornham argued that two issues had not been addressed in discussions of feminist filmmaking: 'the question of women's visual pleasure in film, and that of the difficulties of constructing woman as desiring subject and 'author' within a dominant film-making practice. The first is posed in a difficult discussion of the pleasures women viewers experience in the female image, and the questions this raises about ideological complicity'[778]. Of course, authorship is not just important with regards to what is shown on screen,

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[775] Catherine Grant, 'Secret Agents: Feminist Theories of Women's Film Authorship'.
[776] Caughie, *Theories of Authorship*.
[777] Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema*, 90.
[778] Sue Thornham, *What If I Had Been the Hero? Investigating Women's Cinema*, 40.

but also the very practice of filmmaking. More recently, Patricia White has argued that 'an interrogation of auteurist discourse is essential to any study of how cinematic value is constructed'[779]. Sophie Mayer acknowledges the simultaneous importance of authorship for feminist cinema, and the ways in which it is problematic for the political cause of an avenue of filmmaking that seeks to reject traditional patriarchal approaches[780].

Berys Gaut describes how the 'notion of director-as-author remains powerful to this day'[781]. Despite this, any discussion of female authorship presents, as Susan Martin-Márquez suggested, 'a post-structuralist theoretical dilemma: in an era ushered in by the proclamation of the death of the author and the dispersal of the subject, how is it possible to theorize a female agency within the cinematographic realm?'[782]. Angela Martin argued that authorship 'is the main aspect of film theory that directly affects women filmmakers; however, for historical reasons, it actually contributes to the omission of women's films from circulation and from film theory'[783]. As I will explore later in the chapter, Gerwig is a prominent female author who has found success despite this historic marginalisation.

Since traditional (male) definitions of auteurship require a substantial body of work that isn't afforded to female directors, an alternate view of auteurship must instead be sought. While women do manage to find work in more collaborative roles within the film industry, their access to the positions of real power are restricted. With fewer opportunities than male directors, to measure them against the same criteria would put them at a disadvantage. Of the 100 top-grossing US films of 2023, only 12.1% were directed by women and out of 1769 directors hired to direct popular films from 2007-2023, only 6% were women[784].

Williams noted that 'Auteur theory does not simply refuse to consider female directors but more accurately conceives of directing as a male pursuit, and consequently genders the director as male'[785]. While the male-dominated field of directing seems to be withheld from the grasp of women, their contributions are

[779] White, *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms*, 33.
[780] Sophie Mayer, *Political Animals: The New Feminist Cinema*.
[781] Berys Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*, 92.
[782] Martin-Márquez, *Feminist Discourse & Spanish Cinema: Sight Unseen*, 45.
[783] Angela Martin, 'Refocusing Authorship in Women's Filmmaking', 128.
[784] Stacy L. Smith and Katherine Pieper, 'Inclusion in the Director's Chair: Analysis of Director Gender and Race/Ethnicity Across the 1,700 Top Films from 2007 to 2023'.
[785] Williams, 'No Job For a Lady: Women Directors in Hollywood', 22.

nevertheless made; even if they are not attributed to their leadership or vision in the same way as the director. Williams also argued that women who work alongside male auteurs can also be attributed to the production of their films[786]. Creating a model for a female auteur requires dismantling assumptions of what a director is, but also what a woman working within film is. In this regard, this chapter endeavours to find Gerwig's authorship, not only within the films on which she is credited as director, but also across her previous acting roles. Williams found that women filmmakers have been perceived as a threatening presence and are quickly neutralised by their relegation to woman-as-image, rather than a creator of images: returning them to an acceptable 'feminine' status[787]. Claire Johnston writes 'despite the enormous emphasis placed on woman as spectacle in the cinema, woman as woman is largely absent'[788]. As I will go on to discuss later in this chapter, the visibility of female authors is vital to their inclusion. Gerwig's author image is therefore an important facet of my analysis.

Female authors in cinema

In order to better understand the ways in which Gerwig found and used her voice across my period of study, I look to other female authors in cinema. By unpacking the balance that must be struck in order to achieve the economic success required by the commercial world of film, I can better analyse the opportunities afforded to, and challenges faced by, Gerwig. Looking at the female directors that have paved the way for Gerwig provides an opportunity to then conceptualise Gerwig's authorship within the context of my period of study.

While authorship is seen as a somewhat old fashioned concept that film studies has moved on from, the director remains prominent within the film industry, and visible within film criticism and film discourse more broadly: even more so since 'the rise of the director-as-star (and star-as-director)'[789]. Feminist film studies that attempt to challenge the overriding figure of the male director are all the more important when we consider the ways in which women's contributions to film history have been marginalised. Pam Cook saw this auteurist discourse as 'a double-edged sword, especially when women directors are evaluated according to

[786] Williams, 'No Job For a Lady: Women Directors in Hollywood', 22..
[787] Ibid.
[788] Johnston, 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema', 121.
[789] Williams, 'No Job For a Lady: Women Directors in Hollywood', 45.

the traditional values of the male directors' canon'[790], while it enables those that do find success in Hollywood to gain recognition. Recognition of female authorship, however, does not necessarily bring with it the freedom to tell diverse stories. Women filmmakers have to make compromises with their work in order to continue to make films. Cook noted that female director Kathryn Bigelow's work as demonstrating these compromises, given the masculine-coded subject matter of her films and the powerful male figures that have been present throughout her career[791]. This supposed rejection of femininity has earned Bigelow criticism for insufficiently representing women in her movies, and for abandoning feminist principles to succeed in male-dominated Hollywood[792].

While the concept of authorship itself is important, what is all the more pertinent to my research is the discourse *surrounding* authorship. Both Cook and Yvonne Tasker have analysed Bigelow's self image, in relation to her perceived rejection of femininity, with Tasker noting the 'sultry if not aggressive "femininity"'[793] of promotional images of Bigelow, and Cook ascribing her publicity shots with 'a self-conscious play with gender roles'[794]. Cook notes that a widely circulated image of Bigelow shows her in the fashionably androgynous combination of dark jacket over a white shirt, wearing a camera eyepiece as a necklace. These sartorial choices, particularly the eyepiece, are an ironic comment on Bigelow's femininity and her work as a director[795].

For women filmmakers, interest is frequently taken in their path to success and often fixates on the role that men have played in this[796]. These male mentors are often interpreted as the reason for their success rather than someone who has merely nurtured their existing talent. Katarzyna Paszkiewicz's analysis of the reception of Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker*[797] found many reviews mentioned Bigelow's connection to James Cameron and insinuated that she owed her success

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[790] Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*, 234.
[791] Ibid.
[792] Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, 'Hollywood Transgressor or Hollywood Transvestite? The Reception of Kathryn Bigelow's The Hurt Locker'.
[793] Tasker, 'Vision and Visibility: Women Filmmakers, Contemporary Authorship, and Feminist Film Studies', 219.
[794] Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*, 230.
[795] Ibid.
[796] Tasker, 'Vision and Visibility: Women Filmmakers, Contemporary Authorship, and Feminist Film Studies'.
[797] *The Hurt Locker* (Warner Bros., 2008).

to him[798]. There are several other female filmmakers who made their start in Hollywood in collaboration with a more established male partner or friend. Critical analysis of the work of Sofia Coppola, daughter of producer-director Francis Ford Coppola often references auteurism because of the link to her father. Even with her celebrated lineage, Lane and Richter argue that 'Coppola's career faces constant jeopardy given the gendered dimensions of the Hollywood marketplace'[799], citing the lack of women holding positions of power at studios. Coppola has self-consciously fashioned herself as distinctly feminine in the films she creates in order to distance herself from her father, but because of this has to use creative financing and distribution strategies in order to successfully navigate the space between commercial and independent cinema.

Coppola's films, in contrast to Bigelow's, not only consciously address the feminine, but take femininity seriously. This has earned her criticism as this interest in femininity is dismissed as interest in aesthetics, rather than the thorough exploration of girlhood that can be found following closer inspection of her films. As Fiona Handyside writes, 'Coppola's gender is significant in the accusations of frivolity and nepotism'[800]. Coppola is a particularly significant figure of comparison against Gerwig as she also occupies the position of *celebrity female director*. Handyside argues that Coppola's celebrity draws on 'fashion, music, travel, photography and film to offer a vision of a certain highly desirable, aspirational lifestyle'[801]. In a similar way, Gerwig's star status – established through the hipster cool of the mumblecore movement and arthouse cinema – gave a foundation to her brand that allowed her to pursue her own authorship. This visibility as a director is what makes her a key case study for analysis. As I will detail later in this chapter, similarly to the way Coppola uses a distinctly feminine aesthetic for her films, Gerwig's consciously feminine presentation of herself as a director gives her a distinct branding as a visible feminist working within a male-dominated field.

Writer and director Nora Ephron is another female cinematic figure who has written and directed female-focused narratives. It is Ephron's focus on feminine

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[798] Paszkiewicz, 'Hollywood Transgressor or Hollywood Transvestite? The Reception of Kathryn Bigelow's The Hurt Locker'.
[799] C Lane and N Richter, 'The Feminist Poetics of Sofia Coppola: Spectacle and Self-Consciousness in Marie Antoinette (2006)', 192.
[800] Fiona Handyside, *Sofia Coppola: A Cinema Of Girlhood*, 8.
[801] Ibid., 17.

issues, Betty Kaklamanidou argues, that has contributed to her being overlooked as a filmmaker of substance[802]. What makes Ephron an interesting comparison to Gerwig is her ability to achieve success and gain power in the male-dominated industry of Hollywood. Her box office success, while not necessarily an indicator of cinematic genius, throws the relative dearth of scholarly attention her work has received into stark relief. Working in comedy and romance, genres that are associated with femininity, means that Ephron has not received the same critical notice that a director working in a more masculine or "serious" genre might do. That her work was so commercially successful while being largely concerned with the life and interests of Ephron and other American women highlights the gendered nature of critical attention. In a similar way to Liz Dance's description of Ephron's style of writing, 'with humor and from her own experience'[803], Gerwig's work has made a conscious effort to chronicle the lives of women. Dance describes Ephron's final movie *Julie & Julia*[804] as 'the quintessential Nora Ephron film. It is a Hollywood film with mainstream appeal and it was a financial, commercial and critical success'[805]. Dance asks why her commercially successful romantic comedies, despite her three Oscar nominations, are largely dismissed as inconsequential.

Another example of a critically overlooked yet successful female film auteur is writer and director of romantic comedies Nancy Meyers, who began her directing career by adapting the screenplay for Disney classic *The Parent Trap*[806] with then husband Charles Shyer. This was the first time that Meyers, and not Shyer, directed a script that they had written together[807]. Deborah Jermyn set out to correct the lack of recognition attributed to Meyers' work and argued the case for Meyers as an auteur with a consistent style across her directorial oeuvre. Jermyn stated that her chosen genre of romantic comedy means that Meyers' work is often dismissed as formulaic, rather than demonstrating the singular style of the auteur. This dismissal is demonstrative of the gendered nature of authorship, with definitions of the auteur seeming to only apply to male directors when the work of directors such as Meyers also fits the criteria. Jermyn unpacks the ways in which

[802] Kaklamanidou, Betty. 'Nora Ephron'.
[803] Liz Dance, *Nora Ephron: Everything Is Copy*, 7.
[804] *Julie & Julia* (Columbia Pictures, 2009).
[805] Dance, *Nora Ephron: Everything Is Copy*, 130.
[806] *The Parent Trap* (Walt Disney Pictures, 1998).
[807] Jermyn, *Nancy Meyers*.

Meyers uses the romantic comedy genre to deliver cultural commentary and social critique. I consider Meyers here as one of the few female directors who have maintained a successful career in contemporary Hollywood and find her a useful comparison when thinking about Gerwig and the ways in which her work engages with feminism, while occupying a space within an industry that has largely sidelined female contributions.

Gerwig's coming of age in mumblecore

Gerwig's early independent roles defined her stardom, bringing with them a sense of authenticity that I argue has been key to her pivot to directing. Gerwig's first experiences of writing screenplays were in the male-dominated mumblecore film scene of the 2000s. Described by Claire Perkins as 'ultra low-budget, largely improvised, self-consciously "amateur" films'[808], mumblecore was a cinematic movement that valued authenticity and a sense of realism over the formulaic nature of narrative cinema. Mumblecore films focused on the minutiae of interpersonal relationships — particularly the awkwardness of the white middle class[809]. Working with writer, director and key mumblecore figure Joe Swanberg, Gerwig co-wrote and also starred in a number of such films including *Hannah Takes the Stairs*[810], and *Nights and Weekends*[811], which she also co-directed. These films are largely improvised, and Gerwig's quirky dialogue and natural acting style contributed to her appeal as an indie film star.

As the titular character in *Hannah Takes the Stairs*, Gerwig is shown navigating office romance, and the film focuses largely on the daily interactions between the characters. Hannah drifts between partners, seemingly trying on relationships for size. The dialogue is naturalistic, with authenticity and awkwardness seemingly key to the delivery of lines. A review in *The Guardian* from the time of release described the performances as 'so laid-back they are hardly performances at all, but ultra-casual selfconscious improvisations very different from conventional acting, but also very different from real life'[812].

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[808] Claire Perkins, 'My Effortless Brilliance: Women's Mumblecore', 139.
[809] Ibid.
[810] *Hannah Takes the Stairs* (Film Science, 2007).
[811] *Nights and Weekends* (Film Science, 2008).
[812] Peter Bradshaw, 'Hannah Takes the Stairs'.

Gerwig's embodiment of a twentysomething Millennial woman became a signifier of mumblecore. Even negative reviews of these movies couldn't help but acknowledge the particular quality that Gerwig brought to the screen. A two star review described 'Gerwig's narcissistic little pixie'[813], potentially referencing Nathan Rabin's Manic Pixie Dream Girl[814]. This character trope was coined to define a type of underdeveloped quirky female character who served as a romantic interest in indie films of the 2000s and could be used here to define Gerwig as creating a recognisable role through her depiction of Hannah. A year later, a 1.5 star review of *Nights and Weekends* bemoaned the joyless negotiation of a long-distance relationship by the protagonists and credited expressions of frustration as a 'special province of Gerwig, her character exhibiting the emotional maturity of a particularly disaffected teen'[815]. Gerwig's perfect portrayals of a state of arrested development meant that audiences instantly knew what to expect from a movie starring her, and thus made her an easy casting choice for many of the roles that have shaped her career. What may be less clear to audiences is her creative contribution, not just through her acting style but through her writing credits.

While contemporary critics may not have yet acquired the taste for mumblecore, the BFI, in their Greta Gerwig retrospective of 2023, described *Hannah Takes the Stairs* as key to Gerwig's career, and noted the nuance and authenticity of her acting. Andrew Northrop of the BFI argued the distinctive low budget style of improvised dialogue and HDV aesthetic enhanced the realism of the movie, and mumblecore works in general[816]. Gerwig's films with Noah Baumbach were also included in this retrospective, which undoubtedly feature her influence and signature. Northrop gives as much importance to Gerwig's writing contribution to *Hannah Takes the Stairs* as he does films such as *Frances Ha*[817] and *Mistress America*[818], which he argues 'feel more like Gerwig's vehicles than Noah

[813] Xan Brooks, 'Hannah Takes the Stairs'.
[814] Nathan Rabin, 'The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: Elizabethtown'.
[815] Andrew Schenker, 'Review: Nights and Weekends'.
[816] Andrew Northrop, 'Hannah Takes the Stairs: Looking Back at Greta Gerwig's Mumblecore Breakthrough'.
[817] *Frances Ha* (Scott Rudin Productions, 2013).
[818] *Mistress America* (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2015).

Baumbach's'[819]. Here is another example of where Gerwig's authorship becomes legible through movies for which she is not credited as the director.

In a piece entitled 'No Method to Her Method', *The New York Times* film critic A. O. Scott described Gerwig as 'the definitive screen actress of her generation'[820], albeit with the caveat that she achieves this 'most likely without intending to be anything of the kind'[821]. Scott attributed this success to her seemingly effortless performances, which he interpreted as being devoid of method. This characterisation of her performance as somehow unintentional is not something I have ever seen used to describe a male actor's work, and brings to mind the common assumption that texts authored by women must be autobiographical[822]. While a devaluation of both her acting and her contribution to the authorship of *Greenberg*[823], the film being reviewed by Scott, the piece nevertheless identified Gerwig's significant contribution to the portrayal of the Millennial woman.

Greenberg was Gerwig's first film made in collaboration with Noah Baumbach. The pair's relationship would not only become a significant creative partnership, but later a romantic one. *Greenberg* stars Ben Stiller as Roger Greenberg: a 40-year-old man who has made a conscious decision to do nothing. It is Gerwig's character Florence, however, that the film focuses on. The opening credits follow her through a work day – doing errands, picking up dry-cleaning, trying fruit at a market – and long-running close-up shots of her profile while driving dominate the first few minutes. In *Greenberg*, as in *Hannah Takes the Stairs*, Gerwig's character embodies the directionless feeling of life as a twentysomething: caught somewhere between childhood and adulthood. When Greenberg asks if Florence has a tape measure, all she can offer him is a holographic dinosaur ruler. The two characters drift into a romantic attachment, with Florence seeming to function only to provide Greenberg with a new, sympathetic, direction for his outbursts of anger. Even though Florence is 15 years younger than Greenberg, she effectively babysits him: driving him around Los Angeles and jumping when he calls. Listening to Gerwig's delivery of dialogue, in *Greenberg* and her previous roles, one can see where the genre of mumblecore derived its name. The rushed tumble

[819] Northrop, 'Hannah Takes the Stairs: Looking Back at Greta Gerwig's Mumblecore Breakthrough'.
[820] A. O. Scott, 'No Method to Her Method', *The New York Times*, 24 March 2010.
[821] Ibid.
[822] Thouaille, 'The Single Woman Author on Film: Screening Postfeminism'.
[823] *Greenberg* (Scott Rudin Productions, 2010).

of words, the pauses, stutters and repetitions that are usually absent from the polished lines of cinema add to the authenticity of Gerwig's performances.

Gerwig carries this sense of awkwardness into the role of Frances in *Frances Ha*. Frances is the role that Gerwig is perhaps best known for, and perfectly encapsulates the feelings of uncertainty that can arise in women in their late twenties. Jessica Hannington described *Annie Hall*[824] as 'in many ways a celebration of Keaton-as-Annie's talents as comedian, singer, photographer and actor'[825] and *Frances Ha*, in its homage to *Annie Hall,* is a wholehearted celebration of Gerwig's talents as a performer. There are various moments throughout the film that show the arrested development of Frances. In the opening scene, Frances is shown play-fighting with a friend in the park, later in the film she urinates over the edge of the platform of the metro. Frances is a dancer who feels stuck as an apprentice in a touring company: in one scene she is shown standing at the side while another dancer takes centre stage. At a restaurant, her card is declined and she has to run down the street to find cash. She falls over on her way back and her date performs first aid. As he's putting a plaster on her wound she says 'Sophie makes fun of me because I can't account for my bruises', illustrating that, much like a schoolgirl, falling over and requiring a plaster isn't a one-off occurrence.

The dialogue in the movie explicitly references the immaturity of Frances. Her flatmate tells her 'you don't have your shit together' and, soon after, when talking about another flatmate owning multiple modes of transportation, Frances comments, 'I can't even get out of the house on my feet!'. The transient nature of young adulthood is also shown through Frances' different addresses that are written as if chapters on-screen as she drifts from apartment share to apartment share, and ends in a university dorm room. The most famous scene from the film shows Frances running down the streets of New York City. Hannington described Frances's run as being 'empty of any real purpose, propelled by the fun and thrill of being in New York'[826], cementing Frances as an unmoored and directionless Millennial, but infusing her with a sense of playfulness and freedom. The motif of running is something that Gerwig went on to include in works she directed later in

[824] *Annie Hall* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1977).
[825] Jessica Hannington, 'Dancing and Falling: Annie Hall's Influence on Frances Ha', 217.
[826] Ibid., 223.

her career, with actor Saoirse Ronan shown running in both *Lady Bird* and *Little Women*. The naiveté, awkwardness and indecision that is frequently experienced by women in their twenties is a theme that returns through Gerwig's collaborations with Noah Baumbach. This sense of feeling stuck is present in *Mistress America*, where Gerwig's character Brooke befriends her college freshman soon-to-be-step-sister. Although several years older, Brooke is still trying to figure out her direction in life and flits from project to project while she decides which dream to follow.

While both *Frances Ha* and *Mistress America* were co-written by Gerwig, her influence can also be found within Baumbach's projects that do not star her. This is alluded to in a *New Yorker* profile of Baumbach and Gerwig that references the film *While We're Young*[827], which is written and directed by Baumbach, but does not star or credit Gerwig: 'Gerwig recognizes aspects of herself in the character of the younger woman in "While We're Young"'[828]. John Caughie describes how the writers of *Cahiers du Cinéma* saw the *auteur* as 'the artist whose personality was "written" in the film'[829]. As the *New Yorker* article makes clear, the "charming idiosyncrasy" that A.O. Scott so easily identified as quintessentially Gerwig is present in the quirky dialogue and youthful character of Darby (Amanda Seyfried) in *While We're Young*. If Gerwig's signature can be found in many of Baumbach's films, is she worthy of a share of the authorship? As Caughie describes, the mark of an auteur is that 'personality can be traced in a thematic and /or stylistic consistency over all (or almost all) the director's films'[830]. The question is, whose personality is it that can be traced across Baumbach's films? Gaut notes that actors bring their own creative thinking to the filmmaking process, making them co-creators. While actors can add celebrity value to a film, it is directors who tend to receive the intellectual prestige. In the same way that Diane Keaton can be seen to be the root of the comic style of the films of Woody Allen in which she stars[831], the same can be said of Gerwig's naturalistic performance and dialogue in the films of Noah Baumbach.

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[827] *While We're Young* (Scott Rudin Productions, 2015).
[828] Ian Parker, 'Happiness', *New Yorker*, 29 April 2013.
[829] Caughie, *Theories of Authorship*, 9.
[830] Ibid.
[831] Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*.

As described earlier in this chapter in relation to Kathryn Bigelow and Sofia Coppola, the choice to align with or create distance from masculinity is a central point of conflict for female directors within independent filmmaking. Claire Perkins, when writing about mumblecore, observed that 'the visibility and success of female directors in the sphere of independent filmmaking depends upon their capacity to align with a sensibility and brand that has been gendered as masculine'[832]. Perkins argued that mumblecore has been constructed as male through the films that critics have assigned to the genre, and their focus on male anxiety about meeting social and romantic expectations. She observed that this exclusion of works directed by women can also be found in other areas of independent cinema and noted that 'female practitioners working in the zone between Indiewood, the mainstream chick flick and feminist counter-cinema all struggle to attain credible indie visibility because their work is not ironic, popular or political enough to be readily absorbed into any pre-existing categories'[833].

Perkins described director Lynn Shelton's success framed as being thanks to the help of male figures from the world of mumblecore, Mark Duplass and Joe Swanberg. This association with masculinity allowed Shelton to be more easily accepted under the male branding of mumblecore, but Perkins argued that it 'simultaneously obscured the feminist dimensions of this work that give a blunt and funny perspective on female subjectivity, relationships, desires and ambitions'[834]. In a similar way to Shelton, Gerwig's association with Noah Baumbach remains key to the discourse surrounding her authorship. Her mumblecore beginnings and works in collaboration with Baumbach gave her an association with masculinity that may have contributed to her being taken more seriously as a director later in her career. Before this move, however, Gerwig made several films that were not collaborations with Baumbach, which I argue gave another dimension to her celebrity persona.

Beyond the postfeminist chick flick

At the time when I began thinking about this PhD, women's cinema was beginning to move away from being wholly associated with the postfeminist chick flick.

[832] Perkins, 'My Effortless Brilliance: Women's Mumblecore', 138.
[833] Ibid., 142.
[834] Ibid., 143.

Defined by Ferris and Young as 'one form of a prominent popular cultural phenomenon that can be termed chick culture'[835], films such as *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*[836], *Pretty Woman*[837], *Clueless*[838] and *Legally Blonde*[839] had dominated the 1990s and 2000s. Movies aimed at and about middle-class women in their twenties and thirties put womanhood in the spotlight of popular culture, and this increased visibility of women was often tied to their consumer potential. While second-wave feminists saw associations with the words "chick" and "girl" as demeaning, there was an association with empowerment in the 1990s and 2000s that coincided with the era of postfeminism and a third wave of "girlie feminism". The period of study covered by this thesis coincided with a new generation of films that centred women in a different way to the chick flick. Gillian Robespierre's *Obvious Child*[840] told the story of a single twenty-something woman's unplanned pregnancy. Andrea Arnold's *American Honey*[841] won the Cannes Jury Prize for its depiction of teenager Star (Sasha Lane)'s journey of self-discovery. Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman*[842] was the first blockbuster movie starring a female superhero. Ava DuVernay, known for directing Oscar-nominated *Selma*[843], was chosen as the first Black woman to solo-direct a movie with a budget over $100 million[844]. Not only were these films directed by women, they were also explicitly and deliberately *about* women.

In order to examine the ways in which Gerwig has been able to use her political voice later in her career as a creative, high-profile feminist, I must first understand how Gerwig can be seen to have made the crossover from independent film to mainstream cinema. This move undoubtedly affected her persona – both as a celebrity and specifically a female director – and so requires investigation. When I was putting together my PhD proposal, Rebecca Miller released *Maggie's Plan*[845], starring Gerwig as a woman who decides she wants to have a baby and raise it alone. While this role was in some ways a continuation of Gerwig's earlier roles –

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[835] Suzanne Ferris and Mallory Young, *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies* , 1.
[836] *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* (Columbia Pictures, 2003).
[837] *Pretty Woman* (Touchstone Pictures, 1990).
[838] *Clueless* (Paramount Pictures, 1995).
[839] *Legally Blonde* (MGM, 2001).
[840] *Obvious Child* (A24, 2014).
[841] *American Honey* (A24, 2016).
[842] *Wonder Woman* (Warner Bros., 2017).
[843] *Selma* (Paramount Pictures, 2014).
[844] Eliza Berman, 'Hollywood's Once and Future Classic: Why It Took 54 Years to Turn A Wrinkle in Time into a Movie'.
[845] *Maggie's Plan* (Sony Pictures Classics, 2015).

playing the relatable character of a twenty-something woman navigating the precarity of establishing a creative career in a big city – it also allowed her to escape the confines of her muse status.

Maggie's Plan director Rebecca Miller is yet another female director telling stories of womanhood from under the shadow of a successful man (two, if you count husband Daniel Day-Lewis). Even as the daughter of American playwright Arthur, Miller's debut movie *Personal Velocity*[846] was 'shot quickly on a digital-video shoestring'[847], and Miller has spoken openly about her struggle to make films that don't fit into the Hollywood mainstream. Miller, argues Michele Schreiber, occupies a space that 'has become increasingly populated with women directors much like her'[848]. These women directors make movies that sit somewhere between mainstream and experimental filmmaking, meaning they remain squarely in the independent film space; whether through choice or not. Badley, Perkins, and Schreiber note that independent movies with a female-focused narrative sit somewhere between the chick flick and 'the ideological and experimental radicalism of feminist counter-cinema'[849] and as such can struggle to find their place within American cinema. Female filmmakers' distance from masculinity can preclude them from a certain level of credibility that might be otherwise available to them as filmmakers. The struggle that accompanies a close association with femininity and female-centred stories is something that has historically been experienced by women directors.

In *Maggie's Plan,* Gerwig's performance as Maggie, a careers advisor who plans to have a baby via artificial insemination and raise the child on her own, is the first of a collection of roles that allowed her to find success away from Baumbach and the world of mumblecore. Her previous roles certainly inform her casting as Maggie, however. As *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott wrote, Maggie is 'a New York millennial with vague aspirations and a job at the margins of the city's cultural and intellectual life. She is charmingly idiosyncratic. To put it another way: She's played by Greta Gerwig'[850]. Here Scott demonstrated Gerwig's impact on mumblecore and on the work of Noah Baumbach, and how her acting persona has

[846] *Personal Velocity* (MGM Distribution Co., 2002).
[847] Allison Hope Weiner, 'WOMEN'S Movement.', 87.
[848] Michele Schreiber, 'Their Own Personal Velocity: Women Directors and Contemporary Independent Cinema', 96.
[849] Linda Badley, Claire Perkins, and Michele Schreiber, 'Introduction', 3.
[850] A. O. Scott, 'Review: In "Maggie's Plan," Greta Gerwig Aspires to Motherhood on Her Terms'.

become shorthand for a particular kind of Millennial woman who is at once aspirational and directionless. Her writing and acting work have captured the anxieties and mood of a demographic who see themselves and their worries represented on screen in a way that is both relatable and entertaining. Gerwig was described by Ryan Dorrian as 'one of the most predominant examples of Millennial hipster representation, specifically during the recessionary period'[851]. Dorrian wrote that her stardom worked to expose the economic challenges of life as a Millennial – a demographic who are often derided by older generations[852].

Gerwig went on to have a supporting role in another female-led narrative, as Nancy Tuckerman in *Jackie*[853], before playing avowed feminist Abbie in Mike Mills' *20th Century Women*[854]. In this story about a single mother raising her teenage son with the help of her lodgers and friends, Mills created a narrative around a group of outsiders and their perspectives on the world. Gerwig played a creative who finds meaning through a gender studies class. Her work as a photographer captured objects that offered glimpses into her life, such as a pair of shoes, a Susan Sontag book, makeup, and contraception. As well as reflecting her own experiences of putting parts of herself into film projects, the experience of filming *20th Century Women* also offered an insight into how different directing styles can find their place in the world of film. Offering comment to writer Tad Friend for a profile of Mills in *The New Yorker*, Gerwig described his style of directing as running 'a fluid, non-masculine set, where he'll cry behind the monitor'[855]. Friend used this comment to add to his depiction of Mills as an 'anti-Hollywood' director who makes films about the idea of family – something that Gerwig would later explore in her own movies. While Gerwig may have started out in the masculine-coded mumblecore movement, she has since consciously chosen to work within women's genres as she has expanded her acting portfolio. Establishing her persona through romantic comedies, stories of female coming-of-age, maternal melodrama and period drama sits in stark contrast with a director such as Kathryn Bigelow, who has consistently resisted feminine genres in her work.

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[851] Ryan Dorrian, 'Millennial Disentitlement: Greta Gerwig's Post-Recession Hipster Stardom', 327.
[852] Ibid.
[853] *Jackie* (Searchlight Pictures, 2016).
[854] *20th Century Women* (A24, 2016).
[855] Tad Friend, 'California Dreamin': Mike Mills's Anti-Hollywood Family Films', 32.

The artist muse relationship

In the *New Yorker* profile of Baumbach and Gerwig referenced earlier in this chapter, the pair discuss what would eventually become *Lady Bird*. Gerwig described how Baumbach offered to direct, and even help her finish writing the script, 'He wanted to absorb it'[856]. After considering Baumbach's offer, Gerwig eventually declined in favour of directing the film herself. When asked if Baumbach had been gracious in his rejection, Gerwig replied 'Half-gracious'[857]. Considering Baumbach draws inspiration from Gerwig even when writing and directing films that do not star her, Gerwig's decision to write and direct *Lady Bird* without Baumbach is pertinent. In the same way that *The Parent Trap* announced Nancy Meyers' independence from then husband Charles Shyer, Gerwig directing *Lady Bird* signified the next stage of her career as an author.

With authorship in cinema so frequently assumed to be solely located in the director[858], Gerwig's previous contributions as co-writer, muse, and even star do not give her the same authorial clout as Baumbach. The thematic similarities of Baumbach's films, and their low-budget, independent production, create an authorial discourse around his work that is often attributed to Baumbach alone. Gerwig even 'recalled worrying that if she acted in "Frances Ha" people wouldn't believe that she really co-wrote it; because of the improvisation in her past'[859]. Gerwig's concern that she would be credited for improvised words rather than those written in advance showed how she 'does not want to be mistaken for a director's muse'[860]. Writing and directing *Lady Bird* on her own changes this; giving her independence from Baumbach and showing she can write and direct her own project successfully without his help or mentorship.

Arguably, the celebrity Gerwig gained through her starring roles for Baumbach gave her the platform required to pursue *Lady Bird* as a solo project. As Williams notes, 'studios are so eager to hand over the directorial reins to actors who already have well-established and well-known star images which can be built upon in order to market them as directors'[861]. While Gerwig's authorial contributions may have

[856] Parker, 'Happiness'.
[857] Ibid.
[858] Stephen Crofts, 'Authorship and Hollywood'.
[859] Parker, 'Happiness'.
[860] Ibid.
[861] Williams, 'No Job For a Lady: Women Directors in Hollywood', 116.

been underestimated in many of Baumbach's films and her previous work in mumblecore, her association with these films gave her a legitimacy from which to pursue her own projects. Not only did her roles within independent cinema create a robust body of work where she honed her portrayal of young women coming of age, it established her as a respected name within film production. By drawing on these two resources, Gerwig was then able to move from muse to artist in her own right to create *Lady Bird* and further projects.

Lady Bird

Feminist film studies has historically divided its subject of analysis into 'dominant and alternative film'[862], where the former is seen as perpetuating 'patriarchal definitions of femininity'[863] and the latter works to challenge these with opposing portrayals. I would argue that several female directors, including Gerwig, complicate these binaries. With female directors working in mainstream film largely producing romantic works, Sue Thornham asked whether female directors have been able to challenge gender norms with their cinematic contributions. Thornham argued that 'narrative itself, or at least its dominant – its heroic – forms, is masculine, its function to produce the subject as male'[864], and even female-centred narratives often do not grant the female lead her own agency. In romantic works, even though a female character may be the focus of the narrative, it is often the male lead who enacts the major plot points. As I will detail in my analysis of *Lady Bird* and *Little Women*, it is the female characters who move the plot forward in Gerwig's films.

Gerwig describes the inspiration for *Lady Bird:* 'I had always wanted to make a movie that was basically about home: what does home mean? The way that it's difficult to see it clearly when you're there, and it's not until you're gone that you look back and you understand what it was'[865]. Achieving a perfect critic score of 100 from 169 reviews on aggregator Rotten Tomatoes to become their highest-rated film at the time of writing[866], Gerwig's directorial debut was a

[862] Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema*, 99.
[863] Ibid.
[864] Thornham, *What If I Had Been the Hero? Investigating Women's Cinema*, 12.
[865] Nick Romano, 'These Are the Only 7 Films to Earn a Perfect Score on Rotten Tomatoes This Year'.
[866] Marianne Eloise, 'Greta Gerwig's Lady Bird Is Breaking Film Review Records'.

triumph. Despite such critical acclaim, Gerwig missed out on a nomination for best director for the 2018 Golden Globes: a category solely occupied by men[867]. In another interview, Gerwig commented on the ways in which coming of age stories differ depending on the gender of the protagonist: male coming of age stories focus on their personhood, while stories of young women focus on a male love interest. Gerwig also found that novels written about young people historically had only male protagonists 'who have some sense of bigness that's completely unearned'[868] and that 'Those characters are not usually so present for women. And so I had to write one'[869]. Speaking of the importance of female authors in conversation with writer and director Aaron Sorkin, Gerwig spoke of the ways in which diverse authors bring a variety of perspectives to storytelling[870]. Rob Stone reinforces Gerwig's challenge in creating a coming-of-age movie, when our exposure to this narrative has mostly been from the male perspective. Stone noted the dearth of media representations of 'low-income, smart young women that focus on female relationships and the interaction of working class mothers and daughters'[871]. Gerwig's address of this lack of representation allowed a new generation of young girls and women to see themselves on screen and realise their importance in the world.

Gerwig recounts how it was difficult to get funding for *Lady Bird* as 'It's a female centred film that is not important with a capital I'[872]; describing the storyline as being 'about people's lives in a quotidian way'. Williams noted that the commercial motivations of Hollywood and the high-risk status of film production can limit women filmmakers due to assumptions that women are not 'financially astute by *nature*'[873]. With limited experience working on big budget films, women's access to film production is limited. The kind of films that women directors are most commonly associated with, such as dramas and romantic comedies, tend to have smaller budgets without any special effects. Due to the female association with these genres, it is difficult for female directors to break into other areas of film

[867] HFPA, 'Winners & Nominees 2018'.
[868] *Greta Gerwig Explains the Inspiration Behind "Lady Bird"*, *Vanity Fair*.
[869] Ibid.
[870] Frank Bruni, Greta Gerwig, and Aaron Sorkin, 'Greta Gerwig, Aaron Sorkin: Hollywood Must Change'.
[871] Rob Stone, *Lady Bird: Self-Determination for a New Century*, 15.
[872] Stephen Galloway, 'Director Roundtable: Guillermo Del Toro, Greta Gerwig and More on Creative Fears and Going to a "Deep, Dark Place"'.
[873] Williams, 'No Job For a Lady: Women Directors in Hollywood', 21.

production. In turn, it is the action blockbusters that score promotional activity, marketing budget allowance, and the chance of box office success. Women's restriction from these chances for financial success further marginalises them. The percentage of female directors within the top 100 grossing US films of 2023 did not meaningfully increase from the previous year: only 12.1% of directors were female, compared to 9% in 2022. In fact, a notable increase hasn't occurred since 2018 when the percentage of female directors was 4.5%[874]. This precarity undoubtedly influences the stories that female filmmakers choose to tell through their movies, and puts pressure on the way they perform in their jobs.

Gerwig describes how the burden of responsibility she felt as a female director contributed to heavy preparation for shooting *Lady Bird*. Her worries that any bad experience the crew may have on set might 'make it that much harder for the next woman'[875] meant Gerwig prepared intricate shot lists and even provided name tags for both cast and crew to create a friendly atmosphere on set. As Angela McRobbie argues, with feminism more visible in society, young women experience the pressure to be exceptional in ways that their male counterparts do not. With roles such as film director still so rarely filled by women, there is an expectation of perfection lest such rare opportunities be wasted[876].

Gerwig has plans to start her own production company with a focus on female directors: 'It's something I would actually like to figure out how to do, and also produce young female filmmakers and give them support and guidance and find their voices and be able to get them on their way'. Gerwig's eagerness to help future generations of filmmakers is borne out of her own experiences finding her own way in the industry. Gerwig is clear that she wants to help more women to become authors like her:

> *I'm in this position of privilege, I believe I have an obligation to help other women make their movies. I don't want to be a soloist, I want to be in an orchestra, and there are so many talented people who haven't gotten their first shot.*[877]

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[874] Smith and Pieper, 'Inclusion in the Director's Chair: Analysis of Director Gender and Race/Ethnicity Across the 1,700 Top Films from 2007 to 2023'.
[875] Rebecca Keegan, 'Jordan Peele and Greta Gerwig Flip the Script'.
[876] Angela McRobbie, 'Notes on the Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times'.
[877] Bruni, Gerwig, and Sorkin, 'Greta Gerwig, Aaron Sorkin: Hollywood Must Change'.

In this way, Gerwig's approach to adding more female voices to cinema finds similarities with Michaela Coel's attempts to bring more "misfits" into television writers rooms. The out-of-place feeling is also something that Gerwig described as sharing, despite her career working within cinema. Commenting on the difficulty women often have with speaking up if they don't understand something, Gerwig states:

> *It is such a long process to take something from the page all the way through to it being released. If you can't say, "Wait, I don't understand. What are we doing now?" and you're not in an environment where you feel like that's safe or that will be accepted, that that would prevent certain women from learning what they need to learn or moving forward because they're so scared to say that they don't know 'cause they're so worried they're gonna get kicked off or told that they don't know or, "See, she doesn't know what she's doing."*[878]

Gerwig expresses hope for future female filmmakers. In contrast with her early years in cinema, when the only female directors she knew of were Jane Campion and Sofia Coppola and no other young woman she met had ever expressed a desire to make films, Gerwig believes there are now more opportunities for young women[879]. While this may not be true of major studios, female directors do seem to be gaining prominence within independent cinema with female directors making up 54.6% of the 44 directors at U.S. Dramatic Competition (part of the Sundance Film Festival that showcases rising talent) between 2021-2024[880].

Kathleen Rowe Karlyn wrote about 'the importance for girls and women of stories about female rites of passage, friendships, and the relationship of mother and daughter— stories that are rarely told in other genres but that urgently need telling'[881]. Central to *Lady Bird* is a mother's love, and it is the relationship between Lady Bird (Saoirse Ronan) and her mother Marion (Laurie Metcalf) that provides the tension rather than that of a boy, which might be expected of a movie that centres a teenage girl. Describing the writing process, Gerwig expressed how

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[878] Aisha Harris, *#70: She's Gotta Have It and Filmmaker Greta Gerwig*.
[879] A24, *All the Way Home with Barry Jenkins & Greta Gerwig*.
[880] Smith and Pieper, 'Inclusion in the Director's Chair: Analysis of Director Gender and Race/Ethnicity Across the 1,700 Top Films from 2007 to 2023'.
[881] Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism on Screen*, 174.

she wanted the characters in *Lady Bird*, particularly Lady Bird and Marion, to be genuine: 'Just writing either monsters or people who are perfect, or, writing people who are essentially perfect and just have some adorable flaws, that's not the same thing as having a human being'[882]. By writing a female protagonist who was both likeable and selfish, Gerwig addressed what Teresa de Laurentis defines women's cinema as: not that a film depicts women positively or negatively, but that it addresses female spectators. That it is made not only by a woman, but for women[883]. Gerwig describes how her dedication to creating stories without a traditional romantic central love story has been something that has been important to her throughout her previous films written in collaboration with Noah Baumbach as well as with *Lady Bird*: 'I consider myself a feminist, so I think inherently any movie I make will be reflective of that'[884]. Gerwig expressed her belief that continually telling stories of young women in search of a man is 'a really dangerous thing to tell ladies, that that's where they get their power from or that's where they get their meaning from'[885].

Gerwig describes how she wanted to show the difficulties that often arise within families and that showing love and affection can be hard at times: 'it's these ways that we love each other and can't figure out exactly how to show it to someone. How easy that can be to do with co-workers, but how hard it can be to do with family'[886]. In the film, the character of Lady Bird is in her final year of high school and undergoing the process of self-determination that is common to the teenage experience. Much like Gerwig's previous role of Abbie in *20th Century Women*, who dyes her hair red in homage to David Bowie, Lady Bird also has dyed red hair, which Stone suggests is a performative rejection of patriarchal ideals of youthful femininity, 'while also reclaiming and exaggerating an aspect of girlhood (playing and experimenting with one's appearance and the feelings this provokes) that accords with the postfeminist vindication of girlishness evident in the Riot Grrrl movement'[887]. As Fatmasari and Kanafillah argue, while *Lady Bird* may not explicitly mention feminism, the resistance portrayed in the character of Lady Bird brings an insight into the female teenage experience in an accessible, humorous

[882] Todd Gilchrist, 'Complex Female Characters Have Their Moment On Screen'.
[883] Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*.
[884] Pamela Hutchinson, 'Fly Away Home', 20.
[885] Ibid.
[886] Harris, *#70: She's Gotta Have It and Filmmaker Greta Gerwig*.
[887] Stone, *Lady Bird: Self-Determination for a New Century*, 9.

package. Adults in the audience may see their younger selves in Lady Bird, or their current self in the character of Marion, thanks to the fleshed out characters who do not necessarily conform to stereotypes[888].

Lady Bird's coming of age is shown throughout the movie in relation to Marion, often in scenes of conflict, as the two face the difficulties of Lady Bird discovering who she is and preparing to leave home for college. Due to their low-income status, Lady Bird is frustrated that she can't choose a college freely. *Lady Bird* contrasts with the usual consumer-oriented teen movies and is reminiscent of the 'moody realism'[889] of *My So-Called Life*[890], in which the self isn't necessarily actualised through shopping. Just as the mother in *My So-Called Life,* Marion is the main breadwinner of the household, with Lady Bird's father Larry (Tracy Letts) unemployed after being made redundant, while her university-educated brother (Jordan Rodrigues) is forced to take a low-paying job that has nothing to do with his degree. Hard-working Marion finds parallels with the mothers in the Woman's Films of the 1940s, in which themes of 'joy in pain, of pleasure in sacrifice'[891] are commonplace:

> *MARION: EVERYTHING we do is for you. EVERYTHING! You think I like driving that car around. Do you? You think I like working double shifts at the psych hospital?*

Linda Williams, writing about the maternal melodramas of the 1930s and 1940s described how 'frequently the self-sacrificing mother must make her sacrifice that of the connection to her children-either for her or their own good'[892]. In *Lady Bird*, although the physical connection is broken when Lady Bird leaves for college, Marion's sacrifice of working double shifts is not in vain. The film ends with Lady Bird calling home and leaving a message that starts, 'Dad, this is more for Mom'. The closeness of mother and daughter creates what Stone describes as a "simultaneity"[893]: a mirroring between Lady Bird and Marion that begins with the opening shot of mother and daughter asleep facing each other and continues throughout the movie. This mirroring can also be found in Woman's Films, where

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[888] Yuniar Fatmasari and Aniq Kanafillah, 'Resistance in Lady Bird, a Movie by Greta Gerwig', 12.
[889] Rowe Karlyn, *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism on Screen*, 163.
[890] *My So-Called Life* (Los Angeles: ABC, 1994-1995).
[891] L Williams, '"Something Else besides a Mother": Stella Dallas and the Maternal Melodrama', 2.
[892] Ibid., 3.
[893] Stone, *Lady Bird: Self-Determination for a New Century*, 17.

'in a relationship that is so close, mother and daughter nevertheless seem destined to lose one another through this very closeness'[894].

This focus on very specifically female relationships contrasts *Lady Bird* with several other teen movies released at a similar time. Whitney Monaghan examined the critical reception of three movies: *Blockers*[895], *Dude*[896], and *Booksmart*[897] that, like *Lady Bird*, are directed by women, and have a narrative that focuses on the experiences of young women. Where these films differ from *Lady Bird*, is that the stories they tell

> *are traditionally associated with young men. As such, they represent a gender-swap of familiar male-oriented tropes associated with teen cinema: the sex quest, the stoner comedy, the ultimate party. Moreover, in reviews and commentary about these films, critics have made links and comparisons between them, locating these case studies as a new cycle of teen cinema*[898]

By taking inspiration from traditionally male coming-of-age stories, *Blockers*, *Dude*, and *Booksmart* take what Gill terms a 'taken-for-granted postfeminist sensibility'[899], whereby teenage girls are capable of everything teenage boys are: whether that be a sex quest, getting stoned, or attending the ultimate end-of-highschool party. I argue that *Lady Bird*'s distinction from this group of films and Gerwig's choice to draw on a predominantly *female* history of film and television sets her apart as a unique teller of female narratives.

Visible female directors

The inability 'to fulfil the requirements of being a marketable auteur'[900] has been identified by Melanie Williams as a reason that female directors are perceived as less important than male directors. Gerwig herself describes her own experience of

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[894] Williams, '"Something Else besides a Mother": Stella Dallas and the Maternal Melodrama', 3.
[895] *Blockers* (Universal Pictures, 2018).
[896] *Dude* (Netflix, 2018).
[897] *Booksmart* (United Artists Releasing, 2019).
[898] Whitney Monaghan, 'Feminism at the Movies: Sex, Gender, and Identity in Contemporary American Teen Cinema', 2.
[899] Gill, 'The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On', 609.
[900] Melanie Williams, 'Mamma Mia!'s Female Authorship', 38.

directing *Lady Bird* and the lack of set photographs that were suitable for publicity:

> *there was a whole email chain about, "Do we have any pictures of me looking very serious and, like, pointing at something?" Because that seemed like a "director" photo. But all the pictures of me are just… I never looked in that mould of, I guess, a male director. I'm always crying behind the camera, or laughing – I'm just in it. That was my experience of directing: just being totally emotionally tied to everyone on set.*[901]

An image that was used when promoting *Lady Bird* shows Gerwig behind the camera, wearing a pink prom dress with a sweetheart neckline finished with a bow. Shot during filming of the prom scene of the film, for which the whole crew dressed in prom attire[902], the photograph captured the playful mood Gerwig created on set. Tasker examines the representations of female directors, and how their femininity can sometimes be repressed when they take their place in this male-dominated field. In the same way that female filmmakers play a difficult balancing act with their work — attempting to tell female stories that will still be deemed successful — their representations aim to counteract their femaleness with an air of technical competence. Frequently shown with filmmaking machinery that carries with it an assumed masculinity, female directors must balance this with some mitigating femininity. The image of Gerwig contrasts the femaleness of her prom dress with a pair of headphones and a camera. While these director's tools convey her position as author, Gerwig's pink dress is a wholehearted embrace of femininity that complements the female coming-of-age story of *Lady Bird*.

This incident is just one example of the difficulties of attempting feminist filmmaking within dominant media production. The reception of the work that Gerwig and other female filmmakers create by the mainstream cinema-going public is crucial to their success. This puts even more importance on the visibility of female filmmakers, how they are profiled by journalists, and how their image is circulated and commented on. As Helen Warner wrote in her study of the critical reception of *Lady Bird*:

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[901] Ellie Bate, 'Greta Gerwig Is Breaking The Mould'.
[902] Kristen Yoonsoo Kim, 'Greta Gerwig and Saoirse Ronan Know "Lady Bird" Is Extraordinary'.

> *Stories told by and about Gerwig therefore reveal the industry's assumptions about the relationship between women, professional identity, and potential inequalities within the industry. They are therefore central to a project examining the ways in which (gendered) authorship is constructed within the (post #MeToo) industry.*[903]

As Warner observes in her study of the ways in which Gerwig's authorship is constructed through paratexts such as interviews and reviews, press around *Lady Bird* was preoccupied with Gerwig's femininity 'in relation to the way in which Gerwig runs a set. The affective labour of Gerwig serves as evidence of a more "feminine" directorial style'[904]. While it may be true of Gerwig's care and attention to everyone involved in the making of the film, the prominence this was given in press around *Lady Bird* shows a level of gender essentialism that demonstrates the societally prescribed notions of womanhood. This is particularly striking in later press around Gerwig's adaptation of *Little Women*. Shot by Annie Leibovitz for one of four covers of the January 2020 issue of *Vogue*, Gerwig is pictured lying in the grass in a diaphanous Valentino dress cradling her naked newborn baby. The need for visibility of female filmmakers can be seen through projects such as Girls on Tops: a line of T-shirts emblazoned with the names of female directors and actors. This clothing line aims to bolster the fight for equality in the film industry through simple and eye-catching designs.

The historic restriction of women from the means of production of media makes the visibility of female authorship of great importance to feminist media studies[905]. The lack of female perspective is gradually being acknowledged within popular culture production, thanks to initiatives such as the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative at USC. Female writers and directors such as Gerwig are leading the way by telling stories featuring unique characters with all the complexities and contradictions of real people. The celebrity status of such authors bringing attention to female-focused narratives is an important contribution to popular cultural production.

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[903] Helen Warner, '"An Indie Voice for a Generation of Women"?: Greta Gerwig, and Female Authorship Post #Metoo', 5.
[904] Ibid., 10.
[905] White, *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms*.

Little Women

As Patricia White argues, feminist film scholars are interested in the idea of female authorship because of its potential to bring visibility to the otherwise private female experience of life under patriarchy. White described a history of American cultural influencers 'whose political ambitions are intertwined with financial success'[906] who have made traditional female spheres such as the home and relationships the focus of their creative output in order to cater to a female audience. Gerwig's adaptation of *Little Women*[907], is a story about women, written by a female author, which features a woman's attempt to publish a novel about women's stories. White argued that the film's portrayal of the character of Jo March's negotiations for copyright of her autobiographical novel 'clearly alludes to current efforts to increase the number of women directors and the pay grade of women creatives'[908] – linking the film to the cultural landscape of 2019 and the wake of the #MeToo and Time's Up movements.

In her examination of film adaptations by a female filmmaker that also feature a female author, Shelley Cobb described how this specific character type functions 'as both a representative of female agency and as a vehicle for representing the authorizing of the woman filmmaker, thereby making a claim for the cultural legitimacy of female film authorship'[909]. While the works Cobb examined were made during the height of postfeminism, her analysis is pertinent when considering Gerwig's representations of female authors and female stories during the period of popularised feminism covered by this thesis. Cobb noted that, due to the scarcity of female filmmakers, they cannot be analysed in the same way as male filmmakers; their exceptionalism makes them conspicuous and therefore it is not just the films themselves but the representations of the women who make them that 'contribute to the construction of their authorial identities'[910]. In much the same way, my analysis of Gerwig's adaptation concerns the reception of the film and the discourse that surrounded its contribution to cinema, the creation of female narratives, and its perceived advancement (or lack thereof) of the feminist cause.

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[906] Patricia White, 'Ambidextrous Authorship: Greta Gerwig and the Politics of Women's Genres'.
[907] Alcott, Louisa May. *Little Women*.
[908] White, 'Ambidextrous Authorship: Greta Gerwig and the Politics of Women's Genres'.
[909] Shelley Cobb, *Adaptation, Authorship, and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, 1.
[910] Ibid., 16.

While Cobb analyses a previous adaptation of *Little Women* by Gillian Armstrong[911], it is her examination of Sally Potter's *Orlando*[912] that is most relevant to my discussion of Gerwig's *Little Women*. Cobb noted that the critical reception of Potter's adaptation of *Orlando: A Biography*[913] often referenced Potter's previous films and their significance within feminist filmmaking. Cobb described how critics either used her feminist filmmaking credentials to bolster their positive reviews of *Orlando*, or to express their disappointment that Potter had done away with 'the feminist subtleties'[914] of the novel. Almost three decades later, the same discussions were had around Gerwig's adaptation of *Little Women*. Richard Brody described the film in an article for *The New Yorker* entitled 'The Compromises of Greta Gerwig's "Little Women"' as 'a work of poetic smuggling: a movie made within the norms of the industry that also reflects Gerwig's own personal artistic ideas, ideals, and obsessions'[915]. His comparison between Jo March's (and indeed, Louisa May Alcott's) struggles to publish her novel, and the hostility of Hollywood to women and the telling of their stories, is a sad reflection on the lack of progress that has been made since the novel was first published in 1868, but is key to its resonance with modern audiences. At a time when conversations about diversity of narratives in media are becoming more frequent, a film about a young woman trying to tell her story, and those of the women closest to her, seems all the more pertinent. Jo's precarity within the publishing industry – making a living writing gory short stories she isn't passionate about, rather than telling those stories that she actually wants to write – feels timeless. Brody described the film's dialogue as embodying Gerwig's

> *passionately analytical view of the story's era: women's lack of civil rights, the legal constraints placed on women by marriage, the narrow range of options that American society offered to women at the time, the obstacles faced then (as now) by women in the arts*[916]

In contrast to this read, Georgie Carr wrote for feminist film journal *Another Gaze* that the compromises that Gerwig may have made during the making of the film

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[911] *Little Women* (Columbia Pictures, 1994).
[912] *Orlando* (Sony Pictures Classics, 1992).
[913] Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography*.
[914] Cobb, *Adaptation, Authorship, and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, 28.
[915] Richard Brody, 'The Compromises of Greta Gerwig's "Little Women"'.
[916] Ibid.

meant it missed out on 'the radical potential of adaptation'[917]. Carr argued that the adaptation stayed true to 'the themes of the original – family, morality, marriage and creativity'[918] rather than using the opportunity to create an updated version for modern feminists. Carr described the film as 'a balancing act'[919] that merely repurposed the '19th century proto-feminism'[920] of the novel without saying anything new or engaging with the feminist thought that has been established since the novel was first published. While uninspired by the political message of the film, Carr did acknowledge the importance of authorship throughout – not just the use of Jo as a cipher for Alcott's own professional struggle, but of Gerwig's authorial signature on the movie itself. Carr noted the fast-paced dialogue that signals the modernity of the March sisters as 'a Gerwiggian tweak from the mumblecore tradition'[921].

As frustrated as some feminists were with the balancing act Gerwig may have performed with her adaptation, there were also those who accused Gerwig of attempting to jump on the bandwagon of contemporary feminist discourse in order to profit come awards season. Eileen Jones writes with 'its starchy girl-power message and Meryl Streepish prestige, *Little Women* is bound to be a hot contender for critics' awards, Oscars, and Golden Globes'[922]. In reality, the film was largely overlooked by awards bodies. Adrian Horton describes 'The "Little Man" problem'[923]; male voters dismissing a coming-of-age story that centred young women rather than young men as not for them. While the inclusion of female voices in film and television is an issue that has become more prominent not just in the media industry itself but society more broadly, 'this change is not reflected in the most prominent arbiters of cinematic "taste"'[924]. As Constance Grady noted,

> *As long as awards bodies are dominated by men, men's tastes will dominate which movies we consider awards-worthy and which we don't. And because Oscar nominations can have real effects on people's careers — on which projects get greenlit, on what kind of money gets poured into*

[917] Georgie Carr, '"Little Women", Little Change'.
[918] Ibid.
[919] Georgie Carr, '"Little Women", Little Change'.
[920] Ibid.
[921] Ibid.
[922] Eileen Jones, 'Greta Gerwig's Version of "Little Women" Is for the Lean-In Generation'.
[923] Adrian Horton, 'It's 2020 – Why Do Women Still Need to Prove Their Stories Are Important?'.
[924] Ibid.

> *them — they also have real effects on which kinds of stories get told, sold, and distributed.*[925]

Even when a female director adapts a bestselling classic novel without injecting it with radical feminist politics, the film is still ignored by awards bodies. Life imitates art as Gerwig's scenes of a male editor telling a female author the stories she should be telling are played out by their modern day counterparts. When women's stories are not seen as universal, it is professionally dangerous for their authors to dare to step outside convention when they are granted the opportunity to tell them.

While awards recognition is important, the text's reception by the general public – young feminists in particular – is key to Gerwig's contributions to popular feminist discourse. While Carr may view Gerwig's adaptation as lacking in 'real consistent anger'[926], dismissing any verbal delivery of female rage as 'dissipating into the spectacle, given no object or oxygen to keep it alive'[927], I would argue that moments of dialogue between characters, and Jo's monologue in particular, resonated with audiences. Saoirse Ronan's passionate delivery about the complexities of womanhood was so well-received that a screenshot from this scene became a meme that women used to celebrate themselves online and create a sense of sisterhood in the universality of their shared experiences.

MacDonald and Wiens argue that 'feminist memes perform digital resistance against misogyny through an appeal to collective experiences of humour and rage'[928] and are a way for digital feminists to connect with one another through their shared experiences, as well as a vehicle through which to process and make meaning of the world. With memes an integral part of the contemporary participatory media world, they can provoke an emotional response as well as providing entertainment, and even 'foster a sense of group cohesion and community'[929] and give visibility to political topics. The accessible nature of memes allow for a range of different perspectives and make them a valuable tool that can

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[925] Constance Grady, 'In 2020, Little Women Has a Men Problem. But It Used to Be Seen as a Story for Everyone.'.
[926] Carr, '"Little Women", Little Change'.
[927] Ibid.
[928] Shana MacDonald and Brianna I. Wiens, 'Feminist Memes: Digital Communities, Identity Performance and Resistance from the Shadows', 123.
[929] Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, 'Decoding Memes: Barthes' Punctum, Feminist Standpoint Theory, and the Political Significance of #YesAllWomen', 195.

be used to unite diverse groups of people. Phillips and Milner, in their study of the #YesAllWomen hashtag, argued that this 'is particularly important when the perspectives expressed come from members of historically underrepresented populations'[930]. The #YesAllWomen hashtag allowed participants to share their experiences of sexism, in a similar way to the expressions of sisterhood made using the Jo March meme format. Returning to Cobb, the notion of sisterhood is 'a metaphor for both female solidarity and intimacy that evokes both feminist politics and the affective work of women's intimate public'[931]. By creating such a relatable scene, the meme of Jo allowed everyday women to become authors of their own experiences. As well as the production team of the film, its audience also became a part of the sisterhood of authorship that includes Gerwig, Ronan, and Alcott. As Cobb wrote in her chapter that included analysis of Gillian Armstrong's 1994 adaptation of *Little Women*,

> *There is, in all this sisterliness, the reduction of feminist politics to images of relationships amongst women, but the collaborative nature of their authorial work still stands out in a film industry perpetually dominated by men in all its spaces behind the screen, on the screen, and in the audience.*[932]

Almost three decades later, this collaborative female authorship remained important in the way it 'speaks outside the individualized, masculinized identity of the auteur and speaks in conversation with others'[933]. These conversations with the general public should not be ignored, and are an important part of Gerwig's work. This is particularly notable as Gerwig does not have social media. While she does make public utterances on her work through interviews, it is largely through her films that she enters in feminist discourse.

Conclusion: Frances Ha ran so Barbie could walk on flat feet

Little Women had just been released when the first articles about *Barbie* began to circulate online. The news that Gerwig and Noah Baumbach would be writing the

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[930] Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, 'Decoding Memes: Barthes' Punctum, Feminist Standpoint Theory, and the Political Significance of #YesAllWomen', 198.
[931] Cobb, *Adaptation, Authorship, and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, 112.
[932] Ibid.
[933] Cobb, *Adaptation, Authorship, and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, 147.

script for a new movie about the doll coincided with the predominantly TikTok-based online movement that saw the reclamation of the word "bimbo" and the hyper-feminine aesthetic associated with it. Rather than leaning into hyper-femininity to cater to the male gaze, the modern bimbo recognises the double bind of such an aesthetic as resulting in their objectification and a perception of them as having lower intelligence. Bimbocore is a rejection of male approval; the modern bimbo doesn't need to be taken seriously by men and can embrace femininity[934]. As Morgan Sung writes, each participant of #BimboTok 'takes the male gaze that's been unavoidable since birth and creates a caricature of it by performing vanity and cluelessness'[935]. This wholehearted embrace of femininity is yet another aesthetic iteration of the modern, online feminist. Where once a feminist might have rejected makeup, dresses, and the colour pink, the "bimbocore" feminist subverts 'such patriarchal categorizations by reclaiming femininity without pitting women against each other'[936].

Laura Pitcher describes the word bimbo's historical use as an instrument of patriarchal power as equating 'expressing feminine sexuality, or caring "too much" about one's appearance by, say, wearing makeup, with being unintelligent, all in an effort to keep women in check'[937]. The contemporary reclamation of bimbohood not only finds power in expressions of femininity, it also has a political message. Fashion historian Amber Butchart posits that bimbocore is 'the antidote to mid-2010s #girlboss hustle culture'[938], thanks to its conscious rejection of capitalism. Butchart links the aesthetic movement to the accompanying rise in popularity of 2000s fashion and popular culture, which has inspired proponents of the trend to reframe 'the narrative of women like Paris Hilton and Britney Spears who were denied their own agency in the early 2000s'[939]. *Barbie* was released at just the right moment to tap into this cultural shift. Indeed, where bimbocore left off, Barbiecore took over; subverting traditional feminine ideals. As paparazzi shots from the film's production were released, a girly aesthetic – fuelled by hot pink – continued to increase in popularity. Not only a fashion trend, the aesthetic announced a feminist stance that embodied femininity and playfulness.

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[934] Collette Grimes, 'Why TikTok's Bimbocore Trend Is an Act of Modern Feminism'.
[935] Morgan Sung, 'Bimbos Are Good, Actually'.
[936] Ibid.
[937] Pitcher, 'Girlboss Culture Isn't Dead, It's Rebranded as "That Girl" Now'.
[938] Amber Butchart, 'The Politics of Barbiecore'.
[939] Ibid.

Not everyone was convinced that this girly aesthetic was substantiated by any meaningful politics. With trailers that didn't give away much of the plot, some of the discourse that led up to the release of *Barbie* speculated that Gerwig had "sold out" by creating a movie about a doll that many feminists have seen as contributing to unrealistic expectations for women. Journalist Kate Knibbs posted on social media site X 'i know this is an unpopular opinion but i feel like.... completely repelled by the barbie movie. branded content with a wink and movie stars is still branded content! bring back the concept of selling out!!!!!!'[940]. Knibbs' comment was reposted by writer Tristan Cross, who added 'objectively correct position, bizarre to see this cake and eat it consensus where paying to watch 2 hour long adverts is normal if they get idk fleabag to wink at the camera and say capitalism is bad'[941].

Caetlin Benson-Allott conceptualises *Lady Bird*, *Little Women* and *Barbie* as a trilogy. This classification bestows auteurship upon Gerwig's body of work and 'reveals an artist struggling to make sense of girl culture and the societal paradigms that impact it'[942]. Each movie gives visibility to the gendered and classed difficulties young women face as they navigate their own femininity. Benson-Allott argued that these films allow for a "reparative reading" that 'acknowledges the trauma of trying to figure out what a woman is and how to become one but also offers viewers feminist affirmation and joy'[943]. While *Barbie* may have been 'fundamentally, a very expensive rebranding campaign for a gaudy plastic toy of diminishing cultural relevance'[944], its box office success wasn't predicated on its successful marketing of a children's toy or even the nostalgia of audiences. Rather, its commercial appeal was the story of American girlhood at its heart. The conflation of celebrity feminism and commercialism shown by critics demonstrates the double bind that all of my case studies share: by creating work that is a mainstream commodity, any political content is always going to be shaped by the industry that distributes it. *Barbie* secured its budget through copious

[940] Kate Knibbs, 'I Know This Is an Unpopular Opinion but i Feel like.... Completely Repelled by the Barbie Movie. Branded Content with a Wink and Movie Stars Is Still Branded Content! Bring Back the Concept of Selling Out!!!!!!'.
[941] Tristan Cross, 'Objectively Correct Position, Bizarre to See This Cake and Eat It Consensus Where Paying to Watch 2 Hour Long Adverts Is Normal If They Get Idk Fleabag to Wink at the Camera and Say Capitalism Is Bad'.
[942] Caetlin Benson-Allott, 'Greta Gerwig's Girlhood Trilogy', 67.
[943] Ibid.
[944] Ibid., 71.

brand sponsorship deals which, while allowing Gerwig to realise her vision, also meant that any feminism expressed in the film was shrouded in commodification[945].

Just before *Barbie* was released, an announcement that Gerwig would direct at least two Narnia films for Netflix[946] prompted yet more discourse on Gerwig's position within the film industry. Journalist Hannah Williams posted 'Finding her career trajectory quite sad lol'[947], implying that another adaptation of a classic work of literature for a major streaming platform detracted from Gerwig's earlier career success within independent cinema. I would argue that it is Gerwig's established career working within independent cinema that has allowed her the creative freedom to tell women's stories from behind the camera. While Gerwig's authorship can undoubtedly be found within many of the films she has starred in, the opportunity to reach a mainstream audience through a major production such as *Barbie* cannot be underestimated. This chapter has shown that Gerwig's recognisable acting style and contribution to the scripts of many films that she has worked on, particularly those directed by Noah Baumbach, have given her the authorial clout to succeed as a director of mainstream cinema. Her previous acting and writing work, combined with a contemporary climate in which feminist issues were becoming more prevalent in popular discourse, worked to create a perfect storm in which *Barbie* could happen.

[945] Finola Kerrigan, 'The Need for Responsible Film Marketing'.
[946] Alex Barasch, 'After "Barbie," Mattel Is Raiding Its Entire Toybox'.
[947] Hannah Williams, 'Finding Her Career Trajectory Quite Sad Lol'.

Conclusion: *Barbie* and beyond

This project has offered a new perspective on celebrity feminism by uncovering the different strategies used by celebrities operating within film and television to incorporate feminist themes and standpoints into their identities and authorship. From 2013, when Emma Watson starred in Sofia Coppola's critique of postfeminist consumer culture *The Bling Ring*, until 2023, when Greta Gerwig released *Barbie*, feminism as a genre[948] found prominence in popular culture, while still being perceived as niche or a risk to those working within mainstream media. The five women examined by this thesis deployed different tactics in negotiating the identity of public feminist in order to navigate this transformative and often perilous cultural moment.

While undertaking this research, Claire Perkins convened a roundtable discussion about feminist film study in the age of popular feminism. The discussion with Jodi Brooks, Janice Loreck, Pearl Tan, Jessica Ford and Rebecca J. Sheehan provided an interesting insight into viewers' engagement with popular media in the era of fourth-wave feminism. Loreck described the ways in which 'feminist criticism has grown into an increasingly prominent method for enjoying popular media'[949]. Tan articulated the ambivalence that is often conveyed by the academy at the ways in which feminist criticism has entered popular culture, describing the ways in which feminist film theory is 'reduced to a pop-culture sugar hit of wokeness'[950], while acknowledging that the popularisation of feminism can still be useful to boost equality within the media industries. However, it is Sheehan's comments that resonate most with the findings of this research, describing the reality that the commercial success of a film seen as feminist 'does not mean that feminism is always welcome in a male-dominated commercial film industry or that films by and about women will be judged as meeting expectations of feminist representation'[951]. Sheehan argued that 'women who make movies do so in sexist and racist industrial and cultural contexts. We limit women when we hold them solely responsible for these structural biases and when we hold them and their

[948] Jana Cattien, 'When "Feminism" Becomes a Genre: Alias Grace and "Feminist" Television'.
[949] Perkins et al., 'Doing Film Feminisms in the Age of Popular Feminism: A Roundtable Convened by Claire Perkins and Jodi Brooks', 233.
[950] Ibid., 236.
[951] Ibid., 240.

output to a theoretical feminist ideal'[952]. These statements mirror the findings of this thesis: that women working within an enduringly male-dominated industry face criticism from both sides of the feminist debate and must find a precarious balance in order to retain their places.

When I began writing this conclusion, it was the day after the 81st Golden Globe Awards and host Jo Koy was being ridiculed across social media. The jokes in his opening monologue had fallen flat, including his comparison between *Oppenheimer*[953] and *Barbie*: with one film about an important moment in military history and one 'based on a plastic doll with big boobs'[954]. No matter the reception of these jokes, the fact remains that Koy and the team of writers assembled to put together the monologue must have thought they were funny. A serious male director made a serious film about a serious event in history, while a silly woman made a silly movie about a child's toy. *Barbie* won two Golden Globes at the awards; one for Best Original Song and a new award entitled Cinematic and Box Office Achievement in Motion Pictures, which acknowledges high viewership and box office takings. With jokes of this nature being made at an industry awards show it is clear that, despite the commercial appeal of *Barbie*, female authors are still not awarded the same recognition as men.

This thesis has offered an insight into a Millennial expression of feminism at a time when digital media had become an increasingly important facet of feminist discourse. The locus of fourth-wave feminism is undoubtedly online and this generation's coming-of-age within a shifting environment of social media makes a study of this nature an important intervention. The self-mediation of celebrities through online platforms as well as more traditional creative labours is an area of study that has provided a new perspective on feminist expression and the mainstreaming of feminism. Alongside the popularisation of feminist themes within popular culture; an increase in right-wing ideology, the rise of the manosphere, and a continuation of postfeminism and neoliberalism must be acknowledged. This research engages directly with the negotiations that celebrities must undertake in order to navigate this polarised political climate. It is my hope that, while retaining a critical approach to contemporary popular feminism, the

[952] Perkins et al., 241.
[953] *Oppenheimer* (Universal Pictures, 2023).
[954] '81st Golden Globe Awards'.

intervention of this research moves beyond reductive and dismissive models that are in operation in much work that interrogates the mainstreaming of feminism.

Key findings

Here I will detail the key findings of this research, before drawing these out in further detail in relation to my research questions. There were a variety of strategies that the five case studies employed, depending on their subject positioning and celebrity branding. There are expressions of feminism that are popular and we can learn from these. Even during a time of heightened visibility and popularisation of feminism, being a visible feminist was still a difficult task. While there are varied approaches to creating work that engages with feminism, there were some key themes that emerged: brand consistency, likeability, associations with men and masculinity, relatability and making space for collective authorship. Brand consistency was very important – any straying from perceived authenticity created tension and risk, such as Emma Watson's "topless photo" or Greta Gerwig's move from independent cinema to a high budget collaboration with a huge brand name.

Likeability was an important topic during this time and two approaches seemed to emerge for visible feminists. For Watson, Gerwig and Coel, prioritising likeability and presenting a version of feminism that was welcoming and non-threatening was undertaken using buffers between the celebrity and their feminist work. Examples of these included humour, fictionalisation, academic objectivity, or femininity itself. Unsurprisingly, when working within the movement of popular feminism, aligning with fashion, aspiration and what was trending in that moment brought success. Feminism that was aspirational and cool, and espoused by thin, beautiful women gained the most traction. Upholding dominant ideologies gave my case studies permission to criticise them, without the risk of being accused of being bitter. Being close to idealised (white, middle class, cisgender, heterosexual – or at least heterosexual-presenting, able-bodied, thin) femininity made feminist messages more likely to be well-received, as this helped to avoid the unattractive associations of feminism. As Coel is Black, and therefore perceived as further from idealised femininity, likeability was all the more important. Her exceptional talent and humour allowed her to more safely subvert gendered expectations. Another option, as shown by Jamil and Waller-Bridge, was to embrace the unlikeable. This

choice relied on a few things to be successful: adherence to heteronormative beauty ideals, middle-class British nationality and either a buffer of fictionalisation or of victimhood. While privately-educated British Asian Jamil embraced being outspoken, she also faced a lot of abuse. While she used this to build on her personal brand and win herself a loyal fanbase, she continues to face criticism.

Associations with men and masculinity were found to be useful, provided that a sense of the feminine was maintained in contrast. While this also came with the risk of not being taken seriously as an independent author, it did seem to open up opportunities for authorship. Associations with a male mentor, such as Gerwig's affiliation with mumblecore and Noah Baumbach may have contributed to her being taken seriously as an actor and writer and allowed her to build trust within the industry.

Raising feminist issues that were relatable to a Millennial audience was important to encourage engagement, which is becoming a valuable metric for brands of all kinds. With feminist discourse increasingly taking place online and through consumption and analysis of media, my case studies were well-placed to contribute to and further the conversation. The kind of issues that were successful within popular feminist discourse were those that resonated with the majority – such as Jamil's attacks on a diet industry that found support in Millennial women who came of age during the height of the diet culture of the 2000s. Making space for collective authorship was where these case studies had the most impact. Creating supportive environments, sparking conversations, making audiences feel part of a movement, giving them space to make mistakes without judgement and creating characters who resonated with viewers and inspired them to share their own stories was where each celebrity found the most success. In the same way as any brand wants to create hype around its products, the works that prompted discussion that went beyond the original message of the text were the most successful at tapping into the popular feminist discourse of that moment. Work that inspired memes or TikToks, for example, could be seen as the consciousness-raising of popular feminism during this time period.

Research questions

This research explores the ways in which celebrities working within film and television have used various forms of authorship to contribute to popular feminist discourse between 2013 and 2023. Through five case studies I have explored how celebrities can reach large audiences and shape cultural understandings of feminism. As I reflect on the research questions that have defined my study, I will condense some of the key themes and ideas that have emerged and offer suggestions for continuation of this research.

- What kind of feminist narratives are given representation in film and television within an economy of visibility?

My case studies were chosen in order to explore the different ways in which Millennial celebrities working within the mainstream film and television industries used the authorship available to them in order to contribute to feminist discourse. With any work they produced contingent on commercial success, this thesis has examined the different ways in which these celebrities have operated within the confines of their industry to increase the visibility of feminist issues. This work differed according to the media platform that each celebrity used, with their content tailored to specific audiences and always with the knowledge that texts across all channels work together to construct their personal brand. Each of my case studies created work that wasn't so overtly feminist as to be off-putting to mainstream audiences. This version of feminism that is consumable in popular culture is designed to have broad reach, rather than appeal to established feminists. Even at a moment when feminist issues had become more prominent within mainstream discourse, the stereotype of the angry feminist and the repudiation of feminism by postfeminism loomed large over my case studies.

The desire to be seen as a feminist who isn't angry, or to create a more palatable, acceptable form of feminism is something that each celebrity explored in this thesis has in common. Scholars such as Sarah Banet-Weiser[955] and Catherine Rottenberg[956] have argued that popular feminism does not challenge structural inequity; that it most often centres white, middle class, cisgender, heterosexual women; and that critiques of patriarchy are less visible in popular culture. This

[955] Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*.
[956] Rottenberg, *The Rise Of Neoliberal Feminism*.

project illuminates the ways in which these more mainstream forms of feminism can still have value while employing techniques to appeal to a broader audience and the different approaches that this can take.

Emma Watson's embodiment of the neoliberal values of individualised success, of whiteness, of middle class Britishness, of thinness, and conventional beauty gave her a position of hegemonic femininity from which she was then able to raise issues of feminist politics. From a similar position of middle class whiteness, Phoebe Waller-Bridge created female characters who are subversive and unlikeable while using humour, engaging televisual practices, and established genre conventions to ensure her work had mainstream appeal. When accepting awards for her creation, Waller-Bridge's description of Fleabag as 'dirty, pervy, angry, messed-up'[957] allowed her to reinforce the fictional nature of her work and her position as the author. Even while she found success, Waller-Bridge continued to distance herself from her creations to protect her personal brand.

Avoiding being branded a feminist killjoy is easier for some than others. Unlike Watson and Waller-Bridge, Michaela Coel is not protected by class or whiteness. As a working-class Black woman, Coel must work even harder to navigate the barriers to entering the television industry. Using a generous helping of comedy, Coel brought new perspectives to female issues. Her portrayal of period sex in *I May Destroy You* could easily be seen as feminism going too far, but her use of humour to make a fairly graphic discussion of menstruation something accessible and light allowed her to avoid the label of killjoy. As someone operating within the industry without the privilege of whiteness or middle-class protection, not appearing too "edgy"[958] is vital. Outspoken woman of colour Jameela Jamil knows all too well what it means to be branded a feminist killjoy. Jamil is arguably the most controversial of my five case studies, but the audience she has cultivated are a loyal following who are drawn to her confessional, oversharing persona. Finally, Greta Gerwig used the cinematic credentials of independent filmmaking to give herself the authorial grounding from which to tell female-led stories.

Although differing in their approach to both celebrity and expressions of feminism, my case studies united in their ability to use their visibility to raise awareness of

[957] Television Academy, '71st Emmy Awards: Phoebe Waller-Bridge Wins For Outstanding Writing For A Comedy Series'.
[958] Beck, *White Feminism: From Suffragettes to Influencers and Who They Leave Behind*.

the experiences of marginalised people, to draw attention to structural inequality, and to focus on collective rather than individual action. Their timing is important to their work, and also their success. The cultural and social context of 2013-2023 – where feminist issues were becoming more popular talking points, and different brands and aesthetics of feminism were seemingly on-trend – allowed these celebrities the opportunity to reach a larger audience. The generational specificity of this cohort of case studies and the issues they chose to engage with both on- and off-screen reflected the audience they reached with their work. Jamil's attacks on the diet and wellness industries resonated with a Millennial audience who grew up in the diet culture of the 2000s, while Gerwig's focus on coming-of-age narratives reflected the arrested development experienced by many Millennials.

Of course, creating feminist media content that is commercially successful may not be seen as feminist *enough* for those who see themselves as "true" feminists. Indeed, many academics have argued that celebrity feminists, including some of my case studies, promote a type of feminism that is 'aesthetically depoliticized'[959]. While critiques of popular feminism are valid and important, I argue that arbiters of feminism often operate from a position of privilege that is bound to their class and race. With an academic career, particularly within the field of the humanities, unobtainable to many, this research has aimed to show the positive influence that can come from more accessible feminist expressions.

When examining each of my case studies, the work of each has in turn been critiqued as being both too feminist and not feminist enough. Most recently, America Ferrera's speech from *Barbie* has been called an oversimplification of feminism[960], while Allison P. Davis writes that it would be 'a stretch to search for a radical or subversive feminist manifesto' within the movie[961]. Despite this apparently shallow feminist message, Toby Young wrote of the 'un-apologetic misandry'[962] of the movie and expressed his sympathy for Mattel's CEO for feeling the need to pander to 'a hyper-liberal global elite'[963]. Ben Shapiro released a 43-minute-long YouTube video in which he burned Barbie dolls in protest against

[959] Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 'The Traffic in Feminism: An Introduction to the Commentary and Criticism on Popular Feminism', 885.
[960] Carlos Aguilar, 'America Ferrera and the "Barbie" Monologue We All Talked About'.
[961] Allison P. Davis, 'What Is Greta Gerwig Trying to Tell Us? From Barnard to Barbie, the Director Has Always Been Interested in Female Ambition, Including Her Own.'.
[962] Toby Young, 'Why Barbie Deserves the Backlash'.
[963] Ibid.

what he branded a "woke" movie[964]. These polarised reactions demonstrate the ongoing culture war that permeated 2013-2023. Social media was the locus of much of the conflict with what danah boyd described as 'networked publics'[965] gathering online to share their collective worldviews, particularly through their consumption and discussion of popular culture texts. Online expressions of anti-feminism in particular were hostile towards any content that could be seen as feminist, and were characterised by 'extreme misogyny'[966]. As Sarah Banet Weiser described, 'popular feminism and popular misogyny battle it out on the contemporary cultural landscape, living side by side as warring, constantly moving contexts in an economy of visibility'[967].

This battle has been waging since Emma Watson's UN Speech, which was simultaneously accused of ignoring 'sexist biases against males'[968], and also centring 'men and their well-being in a movement built by women for our survival in a world that degrades and dehumanizes us daily'[969]. Even as feminist themes found prominence in popular culture, they were still perceived as niche or a risk to those working within mainstream media. This can be seen in who the industry chose to honour with awards during this time period. The theme of snubs by awards bodies runs throughout this thesis. While each of my case studies had the celebrity status required to bring issues of feminism into the public eye, the visibility they were granted is through media industries that contribute to oppression of women. By creating work that is a mainstream commodity, any political content is always going to be shaped by the industry that distributes it.

- How do celebrities working in the film and television industries leverage their personal brands to further discussions of feminist topics?

My case studies cover a range of different class, racial, and national backgrounds, in order to explore the different ways that these social and economic factors intersect in navigations of celebrity feminism. A key facet of this is femininity. As

[964] Anders Anglesey, 'Ben Shapiro Sets Fire to Barbie Dolls As He Slams "Woke" Movie'.
[965] danah boyd, 'Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications'.
[966] Debbie Ging and Eugenia Siapera, *Gender Hate Online: Understanding the New Anti-Feminism*, 2.
[967] Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, 2.
[968] Cathy Young, 'Sorry, Emma Watson, but HeForShe Is Rotten for Men'.
[969] Amy McCarthy, 'Sorry Privileged White Ladies, But Emma Watson Isn't a "Game Changer" for Feminism'.

Christina Scharff wrote, feminism has been historically viewed as *unattractive* and *unfeminine*, and any engagement with feminism risks destabilising a woman's femininity. How each of my case studies chose to engage with feminism, was dependent on their racial and class positioning[970]. Those that are further from heteronormative conventions had a greater risk of being seen as unfeminine or masculine. Even the two case studies who are both white and middle class, and so 'shielded by race and class privilege'[971], Emma Watson and Phoebe Waller-Bridge, must work to maintain their carefully-constructed femininity. Watson has curated a fashionable look that never strays into overtly glamorous[972]. Waller-Bridge has created a character who can't stop thinking about sex and enjoys the power that women can feel through sex with men, while distancing herself from her 'dirty, pervy, angry, messed-up'[973] creation. Their British nationality is important here, with both speaking in neutral received pronunciation. Sharing this classed accent is privately-educated Jameela Jamil, whose idealised Britishness – although tempered by her South Asian heritage – arguably contributed to her career as a presenter and certainly her casting in the role of Tahani Al-Jamil in *The Good Place*. Black working class Brit Michaela Coel has neither the security of class nor the protection of whiteness to mitigate any risks that engaging with feminism could have on her femininity. My only American case study, Greta Gerwig, is the celebrity I have researched who is most defined by her femininity or *femaleness*. In the same way that Sofia Coppola's 'embrace of femininity and prettiness'[974] has come to define her as a director, so the 'affective labour of Gerwig serves as evidence of a more "feminine" directorial style'[975] and has become part of the construction of her authorship.

The different *brands* of femininity that each case study embodied dictated their approach to engaging with discussions of feminism as a celebrity. In order to maintain the postfeminist ideal of individualised success, achieved through dedication to her studies, Watson approached feminism as an academic. She

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[970] Scharff, *Repudiating Feminism: Young Women in a Neoliberal World*.
[971] Bay-Cheng, 'The Agency Line: A Neoliberal Metric for Appraising Young Women's Sexuality', 285.
[972] Church Gibson, *Fashion and Celebrity Culture*.
[973] Television Academy, '71st Emmy Awards: Phoebe Waller-Bridge Wins For Outstanding Writing For A Comedy Series'.
[974] Hunter, 'Coppola's Postfeminism', 85.
[975] Warner, '"An Indie Voice for a Generation of Women"?: Greta Gerwig, and Female Authorship Post #Metoo', 10.

created a book club, engaged in discussions with revered feminist thinkers who are established within the canon of literature, and she worked with intergovernmental organisations who are respected around the world. Waller-Bridge found her success in letting the female characters she creates do the talking for her. Revealing little about her personal life, Waller-Bridge wrote complex characters and used well-known stars such as Sandra Oh and Kristin Scott Thomas to engage audiences with feminist issues, while shielding them behind the familiar generic conventions of spy thrillers and her signature wit.

Michaela Coel used a light touch to sprinkle feminist issues throughout her work while concealing them with comic performance and sometimes obscene content. Arguably, her true activism, however, was enacted off-screen; in making sure less privileged voices were given the help they needed to succeed in an industry that can be difficult to navigate as someone who isn't white or middle class. Jameela Jamil is the case study who took the most risks in her engagement with feminism. Using social media to deliver her outspoken opinions made her a target for vitriol, but also contributed to the appearance of authenticity that was a key facet of her celebrity persona. Through her admissions of vulnerability on her podcast and use of Instagram to share the behind-the-scenes "reality" of her life, her audience felt they had access to the "real" Jameela, who is just like them. We cannot ignore the part that race must play in the reception of Jamil's digital activism. Would she be seen as less controversial if she was white?

Greta Gerwig used her authorship as a way to share her coming of age story, particularly with Millennial women like her. Continuing the theme of finding oneself that she explored through her performances in her acting career, the movies she has since directed show the challenges and joys of growing up as a young woman. While her femaleness may be used to pigeonhole her into a *feminine* style of direction, her unapologetic focus on female narratives brought visibility and importance to stories that have traditionally been overlooked by mainstream cinema. In fact, femininity could be seen as a cloak she deployed to hide challenges to male dominance.

Femininity is also linked with fashion and style, something that I believe is also important in the mobilisation of feminist issues. Jamil is the celebrity who engages the most with fashion. While also using her Instagram account to talk about issues

of social justice, Jamil also includes a lot of content that focuses on her wearing fashionable outfits, attending fashion shows and red carpet events. This is another tool that feminists have historically used to make themselves more palatable, and is one of the facets of Jamil's persona that established her as a celebrity when she first started work in television. Presenting a stylish version of feminism creates an aspirational quality that is key to engaging people with political issues. This is particularly important when addressing young women, whose participation in fashion and beauty is most tied to their self-actualisation. Emma Watson is also associated with fashion; modelling for Burberry and Prada[976] and serving on the board of directors for fashion conglomerate Kering since 2020[977]. Phoebe Waller-Bridge is known for her style; with a jumpsuit she wore in an episode of *Fleabag* launching a best selling trend[978].

While not directly associated with fashion in the same way, Michaela Coel and Greta Gerwig are both thin and beautiful – with Coel's 'striking, elfin, dark-skinned beauty'[979] noted in a review of *I May Destroy You*. Association with femininity, fashion and beauty may have allowed my case studies to speak on feminist issues, without fear of being tarnished by the negative associations of feminism, but these issues are always going to be mediated by privilege. These five case studies may be seen as upholding dominant ideologies, but by adhering to certain norms they give themselves a platform from which to raise awareness of feminist issues. This gentle challenging of the status quo, while impactful, is often criticised by those who wish they went further in their critiques of patriarchal structures that maintain inequality. Their beauty can also call their legitimacy as feminists into question; from Jameela Jamil being criticised for the 'troubled optics of a slim woman "smashing diet culture"'[980], to Emma Watson sparking controversy for a "topless" photo[981]. While their beauty is a necessary part of their success within the media industry, it problematises their demonstration of authenticity as celebrity feminists when the very industry that gives them a platform continues to uphold unequal power structures.

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[976] Lindy Segal, 'Emma Watson Directs Herself in the Prada Paradoxe Fragrance Campaign'.
[977] 'Emma Watson', *Kering* (blog).
[978] VanArendonk, Kathryn. 'I Bought the Fleabag Jumpsuit'.
[979] Stables, 'I May Destroy You', 76.
[980] Ryan, 'Jameela Jamil Is Well-Meaning, but Slim, Pretty Women Can't Smash the Diet Culture Alone'.
[981] Adam Boult, 'Emma Watson's "topless" Photo Shoot Sparks Online Row'.

This authenticity is an important component of Jameela Jamil's celebrity persona in particular. Much of her social media following and the subscription base of her podcast is due to her portrayal of a sense of realness and relatability, especially around the idea of education. Jamil invited her audience to accompany her on her own feminist journey of growth and development in order to draw in a fanbase. Education was also a key facet of Emma Watson's celebrity feminist identity – both in terms of her personal academic success and also the medium of a feminist book club, through which she engaged her audience. Michaela Coel also sought to educate, but went about this a little differently. When given the opportunity, rather than explicitly teaching her audience, she presented ideas in the form of personal narratives in order to engage and prompt thoughts. Not only did she do this through the television shows she created, but also through speeches to the media industry, and through a book[982]. Phoebe Waller-Bridge and Greta Gerwig let their characters speak to their audiences, through powerful monologues delivered either by themselves, or by other talented actors.

The prestige and legitimacy lent by well-respected actors can also be bestowed by the men in the lives and careers of my case studies. For Greta Gerwig, collaborating with screenwriter and director Noah Baumbach has been key to the creation of her celebrity, thanks to roles such as Frances in *Frances Ha*. This creative partnership also contributed to her authorship, as the signature she developed through her writing and performances in Baumbach's projects blossomed in her own directorial work. When Gerwig was a guest on BBC Radio 4's Desert Island Discs, she told presenter Lauren Laverne that when she is out in public with Baumbach

> *people stop and say you know, I love* Frances *and it means so much and they'll totally ignore him and then suddenly I'll be like, well, you know, actually he directed it! I didn't direct that one, he directed it! And they kind of look at him like, oh! Good for you*[983]

Gerwig's authorship is now so recognisable that her influence on Baumbach's films has become legible to audiences.

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[982] Coel, Michaela. *Misfits: A Personal Manifesto*.
[983] 'Greta Gerwig, Writer and Director', *Desert Island Discs*.

- What is the importance of authorship in the progression of popular feminist discourse?

From 2013-2023, the raising of marginalised voices was increasingly culturally important, and so the concept of authorship became heightened. Female authorship of female-focused narratives was championed like never before, as the media industry aimed to capitalise on the increased visibility of feminist themes in popular discourse. As female authors worked to expand representations of femininity that went beyond the narrow confines of patriarchal norms, an underlying theme of imperfection emerged. These imperfect female characters could be seen as an expression of how exhausted Millennial women felt due to the constant strive to be 'always optimizing'[984].

My case studies Michaela Coel and Phoebe Waller-Bridge both created series that centred the lives of women who were imperfectly finding themselves as young adults. This imperfection was unusual in its removal of aspiration from its depiction of femininity. These women weren't on paths of self-improvement fuelled by the consumption of fashion or beauty products, they were flawed human beings navigating early adulthood in precarious employment and through awkward sexual encounters. This shift in depictions of femininity towards something more authentic and relatable, but crucially also *unlikeable,* led to their work being labelled as *feminist*. Perkins and Schreiber described how, by 'centring "imperfect" and "vulnerable" women who are openly struggling with the commands of gendered neoliberalism that structure twenty-first century life, these representations push back—to an extent—against the postfeminist expectations for women to be resilient above all else'[985]. Jana Cattien described this phenomenon as 'feminism-as-genre'[986], in which the term "feminist" was applied to television shows that centred female characters in the same way a term like "Scandi noir" might be applied to television shows that feature a serial killer being investigated in a Nordic country. Although there is obviously much more nuance involved in creating television shows that have progressive representations of female characters, the inclusion of more women on screen and in television production can only be beneficial to expanding storytelling. I would also argue that this

[984] Jia Tolentino, *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion*.
[985] Perkins and Schreiber, 'Independent Women: From Film to Television', 920.
[986] Cattien, 'When "Feminism" Becomes a Genre: Alias Grace and "Feminist" Television'.

expansion of storytelling also opened up the potential for popular discourse around feminist issues. Indeed, Coel and Waller-Bridge in particular were part of a group of female creators whose series positioned television as a site for exploration of contemporary feminism.

As well as being the creators of female characters, Coel and Waller-Bridge also made the choice to place themselves in front of the camera. In *I May Destroy You*, Coel played a fictional character but the narrative was based on her own experience of sexual assault. In *Chewing Gum* and *Fleabag*, both Coel and Waller-Bridge used the technique of direct address, giving the audience a sense of authenticity and intimacy with their characters. This could be seen as helping to draw the audience in, particularly as the characters' abject behaviour may otherwise push viewers away. Such engaging portrayals can prompt comparisons between characters and the celebrities themselves, with audiences and critics alike speculating on how much of the creations are fictionalised and how much are based on the writer themselves. This leads to the celebrities needing to manage their own image in relation to the characters they create. This is especially important when they are creating *imperfect* characters, as the celebrities themselves cannot escape the pressures of perfection that pervade their off-screen lives.

While Coel and Waller-Bridge starred in their own works, my other case studies used authorship a little differently. Greta Gerwig's authorship was formed through her acting career, but as she moved behind the camera she used this position to be able to tell a greater variety of female stories through a range of actors – not just the messy Millennials of her mumblecore era. Jameela Jamil and Emma Watson showed how the authorship of one's social media presence is just as important in explorations of contemporary feminism. Although both came to fame on screen, their contributions to popular feminist discourse have been through the social platforms they have maintained in more recent years.

This thesis has demonstrated the importance of authorship when examining celebrity contributions to popular feminist discourse. Through my exploration of each case study, I have shown that the social positioning of different celebrities alters how they approach authorship and how hard they have to work to achieve it. Women who tell stories to a mainstream audience do so within systems of sexist,

racist, and classist oppression – whether that is through Hollywood movies, television shows that can be streamed globally, or through their own social media presence. Even as *feminism-as-genre*[987] has become a trending topic, existing biases remain. This thesis has shown that celebrities who want to remain successful, well-liked, and accessible to a wide audience have to find a balance between political ideals and commercial appeal. I hope this work has shown the potential, however limited, that celebrity feminism can have.

One such promising avenue can be found through collective authorship and memeification. Social media has become a space for cultural discussions to take place. There are few barriers to creating a social media presence, and platforms from Reddit to TikTok bring people together in new ways. Anyone with a smartphone can now make their voice heard on a range of topics and trust that the algorithm will bring that message to like-minded people. This can take the shape of three-hour video essays on YouTube dissecting the layers of meaning behind a piece of popular culture, or a 280-character tweet featuring a screenshot. When a piece of work resonates with an audience, they can in turn take it to their own audiences and give it new life and a new perspective. This phenomenon is true of the work of my case studies. Emma Watson's feminist book club actively encouraged participants to engage in discussion. Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* inspired TikTok users to share their Fleabag Era with the fyp, years after its release. Michaela Coel's *I May Destroy You* sparked discussions about the myriad definitions of rape and opened viewers' eyes to the practice of "stealthing". Jameela Jamil shared her listeners' definitions of what they "weigh" on her podcast. Greta Gerwig's monologue, performed by Saoirse Ronan in *Little Women* became a meme that women used to celebrate themselves online and create a sense of sisterhood in the universality of their shared experiences. This idea of collective authorship is something I believe has great potential for future research. Celebrity feminism gains its value from the ways in which it allows room for the proliferation and discussion of feminist ideas. While digital feminist activism has certainly been studied in relation to its potential to recreate postfeminist and neoliberal attitudes of exceptionalism and self-improvement, I see great opportunities for intervention through research that analyses the knowledge sharing capabilities and community-building power of social media.

[987] Cattien.

As I present my findings, I have been reflecting on how my own feelings have influenced my findings. My personal connection to this project must be acknowledged, given that I am a Millennial whose feminist awakening took place on what was then Twitter. As someone who identifies with finding oneself at a time when employment was (and still is) precarious, this generational study would be impossible to undertake while removing myself from the research. This generational specificity is another opportunity for future research. With media heralding a new culture war between Millennials and Generation Z[988], research into the cultural shift is vital. Consultancy firm EY suggest that relationship to digital technology is a key distinguishing factor, with Millennials coming of age as families adopted computers for the household, while Generation Z grew up with the ubiquity of the smartphone[989]. Generation Z have now entered the workplace and the oldest members of Generation Alpha are reaching their teenage years. How do celebrities appeal to these younger demographics and might their strategies need to change in order to remain relevant to audiences with different priorities and values?

This thesis has demonstrated the different expressions of feminism that celebrities employ both in their work in both traditional and digital media. The self-mediation work that these celebrities engage in is vitally important to the cause of feminism. If we as feminists are to enlist future generations and reach beyond the already converted academy, engaging with what is popular and trending is necessary and urgent. This is not to blithely exalt anything branded as feminist – critical engagement with popular feminism continues to be an important method to evolve the political movement. What this research has shown is how important popular culture can be in engaging audiences in discussions of feminism, equality and misogyny. The period of 2013-2023 was characterised by a highly polarised culture where engagement with political issues took place on emerging digital platforms. *Barbie*'s reception has been an illustration of this fraught moment. While many learned members of the feminist movement may dismiss its contribution to the discourse as "commodity" or "entry-level" feminism, its reach cannot be denied. It would also be a mistake to dismiss the backlash against it as insignificant. Even a

[988] Arwa Mahdawi, 'The Culture War between Gen Z and Millennials Is on. The First Battle? Side Partings'.
[989] Marcie Merriman, 'EY Research Uncovers Five Distinct Gen Z Segments That Employers and Business Leaders Need to Know.'.

lighthearted critique of patriarchy has the potential to spark the vitriol of significant reactionary subcultures that are thriving thanks to the affordances of platforms such as X. As this thesis has demonstrated repeatedly, the potential of celebrity figures is by no means restricted to gaining views or follows. Popular feminism is just one articulation of the wider feminist movement that is vital to its continued progress.

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